

Getting it Over With

by Nancy Martz

Breathless, and then trying my best to stifle an audible pant, my shoulders shaking, my legs stiff, I plunged from the back of the room, knocking chairs left and right as I made a path toward the podium to give the first speech of my life. Reaching the front of the room, I bumped my thigh rounding the table and two of my note cards slipped out of my hand. As I kneeled down for them, my elbow struck the chalk trough of the blackboard behind me. I looked over at the professor, but mercifully, he wasn't looking back. Peering down to arrange my 3 by 5 cards, I saw that the ink had transferred to my sweaty fingers and palms, and much of my writing was no longer legible. I could feel my burning face drain to chalky white as I realized that my mind was blank and that the note cards would give me no clues. This was the worst day of my life; the day I had dreaded for years since I first figured I'd try to get a college degree. "Get it out of the way," my advisor had said. "Take it your first semester," and without giving me a chance to protest, he took that advice and wrote it down on my registration card, and I was too shy and overwhelmed to contradict such an educated man .

I had worked on the speech as if it were my obituary, making sure every word contributed essential information with just a small touch of humor to stir attention from the audience of other white faced trembling students in the class. My mouth was totally dry, but open, and suddenly the words rushed into my head, and in a trance, I spoke the whole thing from memory, sparing a sort of

grimace when the humorous part spilled out. I started by staring above heads but then noticed the other students were all busy looking at their own note cards. It felt to me as if the speech lasted several hours before I could take my seat again, but it had been only 4 minutes.

When I was finally able to collapse into my desk at the back of the room, I heard nothing else the rest of the period, just my heart banging in my throat. I could not imagine spending an entire semester this way in this class with my fear so thick and palpable in the air that dogs could be gathering to snarl outside the window where I sat.

Finally, the class was over and I could launch myself out of the room and scurry to my history class across campus. Impossible that one day I would make a living speaking to thousands of college students over 34 years, or that it would be near the top of my list of things I loved doing most in my life.