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Clown Fool

by Sidney Stevens

The last time we spoke, she hardly remembered me. I imagined her across the miles, crocheting in her special recliner by the fireplace with the TV on, her hair still blonde and perfectly coiffed, meticulously attired in a silk blouse, skirt and high-heel pumps, as if she were going somewhere fancy. She knew I was her granddaughter, but not much more. Her voice sounded thin, and sadness drifted behind the usual cheer. She'd forgotten again that my grandfather was no longer alive—passed on more than a year before. “He'll be home any minute,” she assured me. “I know he'll be thrilled you called.”

The script was the same—same theme, same words, words she obviously needed to believe. In her mind, he was still with her. “Oh, we had our little problems,” she confided. “But he was a wonderful husband. Sometimes you just have to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear.”

Same theme, same words. I took them in, as always, and let them go, eager to move on, get off the phone. I'd heard it all before. Sixty-three years together, but only by the grace of her blind eyes and deaf ears. Not his.

“You can't know the good times,” she continued, “unless you've known the bad ones, too.” Ninety years of wisdom boiled down and rehashed so often it almost didn't register anymore, like the everyday tick-tock of a kitchen clock. Was it really wisdom? Or merely reconfigured recollections, simplified and sanitized to give her life the glow and magic it lacked? Wasn't her fading memory just another way to round off the painful edges?

Certainly I thought so....until she was gone. Only then did I begin to see the depth of her wisdom. Buried in her simple mantras was a truth that's lingered since her passing and seems to grow. An endurance of hope—hope that people might change after all, that life can still take a turn for the better.

I'm ashamed to admit it now, but I never imagined she had anything to teach me. She'd lived a remarkable life, but had never fully formed herself. Like so many women of her generation, she moved in my grandfather's shadow. He was the accomplished one, the one with the important career and high-powered friends.

She danced in a chorus line when they met in New York in the 1930s—beautiful and blonde

with blue eyes bigger than any china doll's. She might've gone on with her stage career. Who knows? But when a friend pointed out my grandfather, tall and cocky with a wild, wavy head of dark hair, there was no doubt which way her life would flow. She knew right then that she'd marry him, give up her star dreams and devote herself to his career and their children. She'd be the light and hope and stability behind his moody creativity. At least that's how she liked to tell it.

She never changed her story. Never complained when he interrupted her occasional tales with his own more dazzling narratives. If his life was a full-length feature film, hers was a made-for-TV movie—certainly interesting, but not the stuff of the Silver Screen. He was all Technicolor and drama, someone you couldn't help but listen to. He talked right over her, seizing attention with a sweep of his relentless blue eyes. By comparison, she seemed drawn from fewer colors, muted. Her eyes searched yours, unsure of your attention. Her voice was steadier and louder than his, but somehow less clear, like a shot that rings out then instantly dissolves over still, winter fields. At least that's how it seemed.

She smiled through it all. Hoping for harmony and love. Hoping that her children and grandchildren, scattered by divorce and discord, wouldn't forget to call or visit. Hoping we'd all get together someday and just love one another.

“What happened to the Golden Years?” she'd sigh every now and then. “Family is everything to me. This isn't how I was raised.”

She was right, but the lament lost its sting over time. I discounted her complaints. Still taking my grandfather's cue, I filtered the family mythology through him, leaving little room for another perspective. Her voice simply didn't count as much. Maybe he hadn't meant to overshadow her and wrap the world around himself. Maybe he couldn't help it. I loved him too, but he was tough. I knew his version of life wasn't accurate, saw that the family's fractures were mostly the result of his divisive need for total adoration. Still, I bought into his vision of her second-class role as mom and nurturer, believed that she'd never contribute anything lasting other than love (we all did). After all, what's love next to fame's immortality? I reminded myself that it was her choice to stay with him and thanked my stars her life wasn't mine.

My father called with news of her passing. She'd died peacefully in her sleep. A fitting death, he said, for such a tirelessly loving woman, and I agreed. She deserved a good death.

We came from around the country and gathered for the funeral, all the loose ends and scattered souls of her life. We spoke of the example she'd set, the love she espoused, the devotion she embodied, her simple faith that things would always work out.

I was touched that day by the memories and tributes, yet at the tight edges of my heart I still doubted that her life had really amounted to much. She was too simple. Surely, my grandfather was right: her plain love and pat aphorisms just weren't weighty enough to linger beyond death

or change lives. They hadn't held us together, after all. She was simply a sheltered woman, naïve to the true nature of the world, its cruelties and mean streets. Her simple philosophies had grown from modest observations about life's injustices and imperfections, but had never expanded beyond the tidy lines of her small world—daily trips to the market, lunch with friends, an afternoon at the hairdresser. She was the giver of small treasures, crocheted afghans, a piece of candy from her special dish, not the creator of lasting art or a mover and shaker among power agents.

Her most remarkable trait: making emotions visible. She lived without inhibition, throwing herself at you with the boundless abandon of a puppy when you entered the front door, strong hugs and powerful kisses. This full capacity for unfettered love fascinated me, like watching up close while wild monkeys groom one another. I was compelled to watch, but never wanted to emulate her. After all, I was too complicated, too sophisticated, to open myself so wide. Life pulsed with too many shades of gray to live like it was black and white. The world has never loved an open book or easy prey. Only fools expose themselves to scoundrel hearts.

Shortly after the funeral, I took a new look at one of her oil paintings, a long-ago gift. Pictured is a clown standing alone in an empty, blue world. A red balloon floats off behind him, obviously slipped from his grasp. Sadness pulls at his white face, dragging down his painted eyes and giant red lips—the perpetual fool, ever open to love and possibility...or the cheer of a red balloon. But forever thwarted by life's grimmer vicissitudes. We know he'll go on hoping for better times in his floppy-shoe, baggy-pants sort of way, willing to take yet another stab at joy. Fools always do.

I'd always seen this painting as cartoonish, rendered by a child-like woman who loved kittens and little girls. This time, though, I saw something more: she was that clown, the painting, a self portrait. Maybe she hadn't meant it as such, but it was suddenly clear to me. Like him, she'd offered and expected love over and over, even when it was rejected. Only in our last conversation did she finally admit that she'd had enough. I knew she was letting go, without fanfare and as gracefully and quietly as she'd lived. Maybe even clowns lose hope, I thought, and fools finally shield themselves from pain.

I knew I'd miss her, but life goes on. I'd remember the little dips and kicks she did across her living room, proof that she'd once danced her dreams. I'd remember the light in her pale, clear eyes when anyone she loved sat nearby. I planned to dust off these memories now and again, smile at the pictures in my head, then put them away for another time. Isn't that the way of all love gone?

Yet it hasn't happened like that at all. In the months since her death, my memories haven't faded. They've grown, poking into my mind at odd moments, almost as though she's still here. They've entwined with memories of other family members, too, and become something bigger. Suddenly, we're reconnecting, communicating in ways we never did before, getting to know one another as people, not just wounded sons and daughters, sisters and brothers. We e-mail and speak by phone and remember what we loved about her. And in the process, we let loose

our inside wounds and tell of who we are. Her spirit seems to hang around us, freeing us and transforming us into the family we never were, but might still become.

The world may never see how her plain love and bid for harmony have endured. They're not written in any book or captured on film. But endured they have—in us. I can't deny anymore their power to change everything, move worlds. I've seen it for myself and felt my heart open in places I never believed could be opened.

Maybe clowns keep trying after all. Maybe they don't lose hope, but wait patiently until another bright balloon drifts by. What my grandmother couldn't do in life, she's doing now in death—blooming into fullness, sprouting love. She's grasped the next balloon. And who knows where her example will spread—down through the generations of our family, across time and into every soul we touch along the way. It's how love and hope have always spread. And it matters most of all.

The End.

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