

The Lucky One

BY JILL MCCORKLE

The next to the last time I saw my friend, Jean, she was waving her arm and blowing her car horn from the driveway of the dismantled, near empty house I was leaving behind me. The night before—messy movers long gone—she had been there, too, rummaging my refrigerator and cabinets, filling bag after bag. “I’ll take this. You keep that...” Her limp was noticeable then, more so as it got late. “Sit, drink a beer,” she ordered. “Sort through all this junk and keep *nothing* you can live without.” She had been saying that to me for almost twenty years but now—her in the final stages of recurring breast cancer, me post-divorce and about to move to a new life 700 miles away—it carried new weight. By then she had had extensive chemo and radiation, all that she could have. She had had a kidney removed and a hip replacement. She was already way beyond the medical prediction of her life expectancy.

I first met Jean in 1987. We were both married to residents at Massachusetts General Hospital. Originally from Kentucky, she had just left St. Louis which she loved and missed and I had left my native North Carolina. Our finding each other was easy—bonding over a love of southern food and an overwhelming sense of displacement. She was the kind of person—gregarious would be an understatement—I sometimes shied away from because of all the attention she drew by calling out and speaking to any and everyone. My first impression of her was one larger than life. I thought of Debbie Reynolds Yee Hawing and bustling around as *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*—or maybe a cross between Auntie Mame and Annie Oakley. Not only was she someone who looked good in the limelight but she absorbed and was fueled by it. She had a

party early on that year complete with games designed to force people to get to know one another and establish relationships quickly. “If you were an animal, what would you be and why?” When some poor shy soul whispered “cat,” she pounced. “And why is that? What exactly were you thinking when you said that?” Of course this is the same woman not even a year later who would ask with great curiosity upon discovering I was pregnant: “But what will you do with it when you go out of town?”

Over the years I learned that when she called and said: “What are you doing?” the correct response was “why?” Years of saying “nothing” had left me to the mercy of her scavenger hunt errands and road trips, impromptu parties and gatherings where I would likely know no one. On my fortieth birthday she tricked me into getting into a car only to be whisked away to what was the most “southern” barbecue serving juke joint she could find in the Boston area. About once a month or so I’d have to remind her that I am someone who needs to plan my spontaneity, how we needed to go over my boundary issues again: no showing up at the door without at least five minutes notice, no more April Fools jokes designed to terrify (she once screamed over the phone that her deck had fallen and kids were under it), and no calls in the middle of the night. Early on, I answered these calls to find her belting lyrics to this or that song. A very talented pianist with a beautiful singing voice, she was trying her hand at writing songs and wanted to try them out. The most memorable one late one night was about a pilot who crashed but lived. He was a quadriplegic but considered himself “The Lucky One.” It was not one of her better attempts. In fact it was the very worst by a long shot, but by then the friendship was a solid one.

I was still married when she came over with another friend to tell me that she was “a breast cancer survivor.” Even before treatment began, she described herself this way. She was

a survivor, complete with a champagne dessert party for about fifty people the night before her surgery. Famous for surprising and treating others on her own birthday, a group of us crept over in the middle of the night not long after to surprise her. It was early February and we wore our pajamas and plastic groundhog noses. We were all hoping for that winter to end quickly, for spring to return the lively healthy woman so many of us depended on.

Spring came and she did get better. In fact you would never have guessed that she had even been sick.

And then two Februarys later it was back. By then, I was divorcing and in the process of leaving the house my children—and hers—had grown up in. Right before my movers were scheduled to come, I hit a wall, suddenly overwhelmed by all I had NOT done, and all that I was leaving behind—a messy basement where the kids had a little makeshift theatre, the concrete walls filled with their painted names and handprints and rules of this or that club. I needed another few days and the truck was due in a couple of hours. I called her, not even able to speak and within fifteen minutes she was there, armed with mops and brooms and trash bags and a troop of friends ready to work. She moved heavy objects single handedly. She bellowed orders we all followed.

“What is that?” she asked and pointed to the corner of my drive where there were already bags and boxes of trash almost up to the roof.

“A metaphor” I said, but she was already inside directing people where to go and what to do. “Trash,” she would bark and hand one of the kids a big bag to carry outside. “You’re too sentimental,” she kept saying to me. “Let it go. Give it up.” If I wanted something, I had to scramble fast to claim and make it look very important. If I ever hesitated over an item, it was in her hand and gone. We weren’t through when the movers came but we were close enough and then she was with me across town

at the new house, again telling the kids what to do and starting a garbage pile there.

We were so hopeful then. The cancer had reared its head but she was getting the best treatment available and was fully immersed in her will and determination to get well. She was back full force, enough so that I got mad and told her she needed to stop being such a bully. She stood, hands on those sturdy hips. Her wispy blonde hair had returned gray and curly; otherwise she looked just as she always had, those blue green eyes usually slanted in laughter, opened wide with serious intent, jaw tight. Her silence seemed to say: *Fine, I’ll just go*, but instead she kept working. She would never have left me alone to deal with such a mess.

Just a little over a year in the new house, I was offered a job in North Carolina too good to turn down. I would finally, after all those years, be heading back home. And that is where she was waving me out of my own driveway; that is where she was on her hands and knees scrubbing the toilet and bathroom floor the morning I left. When I told her to please stop, she said. “Well, if you won’t let me, just tell me who you WILL let clean your toilet?” as if my permission to do such a job was the ultimate test of friendship. And so it was.

When I left that day with her waving and blowing her horn, I feared it might be the last time I would see her. I know she thought so, too, but refused to discuss it. Instead she said how it would be ridiculous for me to come back, that she was planning a trip to North Carolina, that she couldn’t wait to see my house, that she wanted me to keep throwing stuff away because I still had a lot of junk I didn’t need. I could not wait to tell her how my movers (let’s call them Larry, Moe and Curly) said, when I told them a friend was stopping by, *she ain’t gonna work us like that friend up yonder is she?* And all I could think was, *I wish like hell she would.*

~

The last time I saw her, I flew up for the day. By then she was not moving around a lot but still insisting that she get up and walk downstairs.

“Why are you coming?” she asked on the phone and I made something up that sounded official and legitimate about the selling of my house, but eye to eye when she asked me, I had to tell the truth.

“I told you I’m coming *there*,” she said. “You didn’t need to come back for me.”

When I asked what she wanted to do, she said she wanted to watch Andy Griffith reruns. I had given her a set of DVDs the Christmas before and so we settled in with a couple of favorite episodes: “Barney’s First Car,” “The Loaded Goat.” Then we just sat there, laughing, holding hands and dozing in and out for the next hour or so. When I got home late that same day, there was an email waiting that said it was more relaxing than any time we had ever spent together. She told me how happy she was that I had a new life.

The Thursday before she died, I left work and went to sit in my car to call her. Lately it was hard to call at a time when she was up and feeling like talking. Her brother and sister-in-law were with her, her brother describing the beautiful autumn view from her window which I knew well. I knew from a friend that the day before her brother had been telling her stories about herself as a girl on her horse, Trigger. She lay there with eyes closed to see her young self heading off to visit friends, galloping down the drive of her childhood home in Kentucky, a place I knew from an aerial photo she had always had hanging on her wall. When they put the receiver to her ear, she said, “Where are you? What are you doing?” She repeated the questions several times and it was all I could do with *what are you doing* not to involuntarily respond “Why?” and when she asked where I was, I felt those long miles between us and the

terrible feeling that I had abandoned her. Then in the midst of her questions, there was this sudden clarity, where she asked by name about my children, my mother, the new person in my life. She asked all about my house and new job. *Are you happy?*

Then, as blunt and sharp as I’d always known her to be, she said, “Some think I can’t make it. What do you think?”

I said I thought if anyone could make it it was her.

“That’s what I think,” she said.

Then she told me that people said she was hallucinating but it all seemed so real. “Like right now I see our children over there playing,” she said. “They’re little and they’re about to do a show.”

“They love those shows,” I said, picturing them down in that messy basement.

“And there’s all this black and white, what is that?” she asked.

“My old floor,” I said and she said yes and there are dogs barking. *We’re at your house*, she said, and it seemed in just that drowsy second, the sun baking through my windshield, that we *were* there as we had been hundreds of times before, waiting for the show to begin.

“Ooops! Gotta go” she said quickly. “Call you later.” Click.

And that’s it, I thought. That’s the last time I will hear her voice. And I pulled myself together to go back to work only to have my cell phone ring fifteen minutes later and there she was again, not quite as clear, telling me her sister-in-law had said she needed to call back because she had hung up on me.

“I do that all the time right?” she asked. “That’s what I do. That’s just me.”

“Yes.”

“If I say I’ll call you back, you know I will, right?”

“Right.”

“Okay then. I’ll call you later.”

I was told that was her last really clear day.

I've dreamed of her several times. In one dream she asked if I missed her and was delighted—laughing and clapping her hands—when I told her how much everyone missed her, what a hard time everyone was having without her. In another dream she called to tell me that there was a mistake and she wasn't supposed to die and that I needed to get busy. Make phone calls. Write letters. "Stop crying and talking," she yelled. "We'll do that when we've done the work."

~

And what's the point of this essay? She would likely ask me. And I would say, just remembering—six months have passed and I need to remember. Perhaps it's just my way of saying you never know when or where you'll meet those people who become so important in your everyday life. You never know when you'll need to let go of something or someone very important to you, to say a quick good-bye. You never know when you might wish you could lift all the rules you once issued and as a result see an old friend come barreling down your driveway unannounced or that your phone might ring in the middle of the night and you answer to a beautiful soprano singing one of the worst songs ever written. "But he IS lucky," she screams with laughter. I look at the clock and it is 2:00 am. My infant daughter is due to wake in another hour. Her son is still safely housed inside her strong healthy body. I have known this boisterous woman from Kentucky for only a little over a year. We talk everyday and in just a few years we will be in the suburbs still just minutes from each other, a place where she will know everyone in town and the surrounding areas. We have many summers and holidays, birthday parties and school functions and basement shows ahead of us. "Do you get why he's so lucky?" she asks, still laughing. "Or do you need to hear it again?"