

I've Got You Covered

by Sharman Ober-Reynolds

When I turned five, I won the Bozo the Clown Home Birthday Prize. A girl in a red shirtwaist dress and Cat-Eye glasses picked my name out of a barrel spun by one of the show's participants on TV, and I felt like a star. KTLA-TV must have notified my mother when the truck was scheduled to deliver my toys because, somehow, I knew. That's why I faked a stomach ache. I wanted to be home when they arrived.

Mom settled me in bed with a dinner tray, crayons, and drawing paper and went off to sell magazines over the phone. She was a natural salesperson, likable, trustworthy, lively, and forbearing, listening more than she spoke. My dad used to say, "Your mother could sell bikinis in Alaska." I heard her voice rise and fall in a reassuring sales pitch, so I slipped out of bed, crept into the living room, and kept a lookout for the Bozo the Clown truck. Before long, boredom, dull, and self-imposed enveloped me. So, in my pink chenille bathrobe, I wandered the house and poked through the kitchen junk drawer until I found a box of matches. Pushing open the small square box, I picked out a broken, slender piece of wood tipped with a perfect green bulb. In my bedroom, I struck the broken match against the wall, and it sputtered to life. I dropped the broken match in the trash when the flame reached my fingers. Within seconds, a fire blazed, incinerating the discarded pictures of horses and ballerinas I'd drawn that morning.

Darting into my mother's bedroom, I yelled, "I need to show you something!" as if I'd done something remarkable instead of setting the contents of my wastepaper can ablaze. Mom held up her hand, indicating she was not to be disturbed while completing an order for the *Saturday Evening Post*. But then, seeing my panicked face, she made some excuse, slammed down the receiver, and followed me to the trashcan inferno, where the greedy flames reached for my sheer yellow curtains. She heroically smothered the fire with my bedspread. I schlepped a bowl of water from the kitchen, which I dumped unceremoniously onto the sooty mess.

My five-year-old's sense of justice told me I deserved to be punished. I was rarely spanked, but then again, I'd never started a fire in my bedroom before. Instead, my mother enfolded me in a crushing embrace. Luckily, the aluminum trash can had contained the flames. When the metal can cooled, my mother carried it outside and heaved it into the trash can at the back of the house. Black charred paper flew up like insects, escaping the bin before my mother clamped the lid firmly in place.

We surveyed the damage in the bedroom I shared with my older sister. A perfect black oval was seared in the gold nylon carpet. Hiccupping between sobs, my face smeared with tears and snot, I pleaded with her not to tell my father and sister. My father would have forgiven me, but my sister would have tortured me. My mother looked at the soggy, burnt carpet, then at pathetic me and said, "We'll buy a bigger trash can." Her willingness to cover for my crime astonished me. It was more remarkable, even, than winning the Bozo the Clown birthday prize.

What was it about this incident that has stayed with me all these years: my first experience with hubris, wrongdoing, dangerous consequences, guilt, and unearned forgiveness? It was about family.

No matter our intentions, sooner or later, we'll find we have fallen into a ditch as a result of carelessness, wrong directions, or an imbalance in the insecure, displaced, and transitory universe. Despite well-managed lives and proud schemes, sooner or later, everyone goes through this inevitable humbling. If we're lucky, a mother, brother, sister, father, or friend jumps into the ditch with us and covers our wounds with a kiss.

My family and I tumbled headfirst into that ditch when we were told our son had autism and years later when my husband was diagnosed with Parkinson's. Both times, we roused ourselves from our sad stupor, climbed up the damp and rocky incline, poked our heads over the side of the abyss, and checked out this chilly new neck of the woods where a wind of fear was blowing. There was a barrage of new tests, new doctors, new possibilities, new hopes, and new anxieties; we read memoirs, scientific tomes, and self-help books. We spoke with fellow travelers. Finally, we took a deep breath and recognized this was who we were going forward. Sinking into a chair, I contemplated our troubles for a long time. "I'm not sure I can do this?" I wondered aloud." Hermoine's voice whispered

in my head, "You can. 'It's in your blood.'" Yes, I'd seen this drama before and knew what to do. It was almost an instinct.

By the time my sister and I were teenagers, we were experienced in testing our parents' limits. This was especially true of my sister, who recently confided to me with some pride that her counselor told her she has oppositional defiant disorder. I wasn't better behaved, but I was less stubborn and sensibly didn't flaunt my misbehavior. My sister's rebelliousness was pretty tame; she wore white lipstick and rolled her skirt up to mid-thigh. Sometimes, she met boys behind the bandstand at the park. She got drunk with friends and snuck back into the house late at night. This was not unusual adolescent behavior. Still, we were raised in a hybrid Mormon home, and my mother, a five-generation adherent, was hoping we would adhere as well.

I could have continued to tag along after my sister during her defiant adolescence, but when I was twelve my grandmother, who sometimes lived with us, suffered a massive stroke, and my parents no longer had the time or energy to care about our escapades. This was a tricky time; my mother was in menopause, my sister and I were in puberty, and our hormonal fluctuations buffeted my older father. My sister and I experienced a forced early entry to adult responsibilities.

Luckily, if one can say that about a debilitating brain attack, Grandma's speech center was unaffected, so she could talk and read. At eighty-two, she still found putting sentences together tremendous fun and cherished conversation. She talked her way into, out of, and through everything with fluency and panache. When she needed help getting into her wheelchair, Grandma rang a little bell. She wasn't willful or abusive in her requests but affectionate. We could smell the baby powder she dusted herself with every morning when she gave us a quick hug and said something like, "I'll stand on my good leg. You move my dead one." By the time she was eighty-seven, she was tired of being an invalid. Her left hand was contracted, and so was her life, so to test fate, she ate even more sweets in spite of her diabetes. My grandmother was a bold, unpredictable lady who possessed a revolutionary spirit, which may explain my sister's impulse for opposition. When she inhaled a few crumbs of chocolate cake at my aunt's home, her "sugar problem" proved dangerous. At first, the resulting pneumonia made her chest hurt. A few

days later, she was confused and developed a fever and shaking chills. Then, her respiratory rate accelerated, and her body temperature dropped. We all wept. My mom and aunt embraced their mother, comforted her, and held her when the light of her life went out. Her shuddering body was finally still, completely different, and yet barely changed. I became aware that a moment is all that stands between life and death. Time was the only distance, and her life felt close by.

My dad wasn't with us when my grandmother died because a few months before, he'd also suffered a massive stroke, and my sister was caring for him at home. How could life be so unfair? Working from the age of fifteen, he'd finally retired and ceremoniously thrown away his alarm clock. Months later, a blood clot traveled to the left side of his brain, obliterating his speech center and motor control of the right side of his body.

It felt as if something had left our house, some measure of hope. I could feel my father's weariness and resignation after months of therapy provided slight improvement. There were a few things I could do to help. I could settle a blanket on his lap when he was cold, prepare soft, bland meals, unzip his pants, transfer him so he could use the bathroom, and zip them back up when he was done. Our eyes would meet briefly in shared embarrassment. Sometimes, I would exercise my dad's lifeless right side while he reclined on the couch, gently moving his tight, spasming leg. We'd been told this would help circulation and maybe muscle tone, and there was some small hope of restoring use. Words would come out of his mouth, indecipherable words, and with frantic gestures, he communicated his pain. Gradually, it became clear that nothing in his leg would change. Sometimes, we sat together on the living room couch and watched cartoons, my arm around his increasingly frail shoulder.

In the midst of all this, my father was also being treated for cancer, which appeared on the inside of his cheeks and tongue as lacy white patches, like curdled milk. Chemotherapy, which made him ill, and surgery, which mutilated his tongue, gave us another five years together. When his cancer recurred, my mom covered for the nurses and became his hospital caregiver as well.

I watched my parents through the window in his hospital room. My mother looked bereft, lovely, and unimaginably calm. When my father was distraught, in pain, and afraid, she would comfort him, covering his vulnerability with her presence. She laid her hand on

his arm and held it there, not saying a word. His face changed when he looked at her, a shy look of gratitude. At the same time, he dabbed at the saliva that had collected at the corner of his mouth with a white handkerchief. All the while, my mother was there, her hand the lightest thing you can imagine, so light it was like a bird on his arm, so light that I'm sure he barely felt her touching him. Still, he knew she was there, and somehow, I felt her hand on my arm too and was comforted, and that, as it would be so many times after, made all the difference.

The oncologist had placed radium implants in the tumor, and they slowed the weedlike cancer rooted under the remnant of my father's tongue but also decimated his immune system. His nurses wore radiation dosimeters and limited their time in his presence. My mother ignored the danger. He was in shambles. The night before he died, his breathing was labored. When I embraced him, he was sharp-boned, so different from his muscular, solid, responsible self.

He was a modest man, and the fuss of illness embarrassed him. It was summer in Los Angeles, and the air conditioning chilled us all to the bone, so my dad draped the blanket from the foot of his bed around my mom's shoulders, making sure she was well covered. This was so like him, surrounding his wife of fifty years with warmth and affection. The body may change, but the mind does not. When we got up to leave, he held her hand tightly and locked into her gaze. His eyes communicated so much. It was his "hello" and "goodbye," his "thank you" and "I'm only teasing," his "I'm sorry" and "You're beautiful," the vocabulary of his new language.

The next day was the bicentennial, July 4, 1976, and we were distractedly watching an international fleet of tall-masted sailing ships gather in New York Harbor when my dad went into respiratory arrest. Unlike my grandmother's quiet demise five years before, everything about my father's last few minutes seemed dramatic: the fireworks on TV, the alarms and flashing lights, the nurses and doctors running into his room and replacing us around his bed. As we let go of his hands, we were overcome with grief as he struggled and then stopped breathing. His dying was inevitable and shocking, but it never robbed him of his sweetness.

I've mourned my grandmother, father, and now my mother, who died uneventfully at ninety-four, only haplessly, accidentally, by surviving them. Their absence is not absolute but insidious. In some ways, I mourn them by becoming them, especially my mother, whether I want to or not. My sorrow in losing her has been a farewell but also my destination.

I am now older than she was during the eleven years she was a caregiver for my father and grandmother. I often think of her while I care for my oldest son, who copes with autism, and my husband, who struggles with Parkinson's. Over the years, they have had no choice but to be brave. We miss the future we thought would unfold, and we all experience an anticipation of grief. Since my son's diagnosis thirty-three years ago, we've come to realize there are things he may never do, like have a career instead of a job. He loves his job as a supermarket courtesy clerk, so who cares? He may never have children of his own, but he will be the most devoted uncle ever. Since my husband developed a tremor in his right hand fifteen years ago, there are things he will never do again, like hike Havasupai, write another book about skepticism, or be our family's designated grocery shopper. This is grief in stages, terraced grief.

Sometimes, in this unexpected but familiar role, I feel a mixture of rebellion and connection. Rebellion, for all the obvious reasons. Connection because it's natural to resemble our parents, not just physically but sometimes in our experiences as well. This is a rerun with a new cast. Like my mother, I've got my family covered. I've become the cook, the driver, the shopper, the banker, the gardener, the person who relights the pilot on our gas fireplace, the keeper of passwords, the dog washer, and the person who locks up at night.

Not only am I a caretaker like my mom, but I embody her eccentricities and physical traits, not intentionally but by design. When my hay fever is acting up, I sneeze the same way she did, with a kind of theatrical whooshing sound. I hear myself speaking to my grown children, just as she spoke to me, in precisely the same tone with the exact phrases and with the same mothering melody. I am both comforted and dismayed by the inevitability of inheritance. How unoriginal can one be? Just the other day, I recognized a pattern of purplish spider veins on the inside of my right thigh that, when I was a girl, I found alarming on my mother's pale leg. I can be surprisingly calm at times of crisis, as

she was when smothering the fire in my bedroom when I was five. I'm not as religious as she was, but I go to church hoping to find something good during a time of anger and despair. When her picture pops up on my skyframe, an image from beyond the grave, I see her round face with its pointed chin, creased in all the same places as mine. She is wreathed in smiles, cheerful as an elf, and I hear her say, "We're all in this together."

Like my mother, I make plans, come what may. Having been in and out of hospitals when I was a girl during my father's nery fight against cancer, it seemed, somehow, that I belonged in a hospital. So, I became a nurse. When I discovered I didn't like hospitals because I wasn't caring for *my* sick people, my career shifted to autism research. I joined the efforts to fill in the ditch before more kids fell in.

Of course, there are other differences between my mom and me, too; I am less decent, less generous, less plump, and never lived through the Depression, so I have accumulated less stuff. There is no junk drawer in our kitchen. But I've got the mahogany desk my mother sat at when she sold magazines over the phone for the Curtis Publishing Company, the very desk I ran to when I burned a hole in the carpet in my bedroom, and my mother covered my childish guilt with a bigger trashcan.



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