

The Old Lady of Hoover Street

Minnie Guthrey had the bad fortune to live a long life. At ninety-four years, she had outlasted everyone her age, including her husband of more than six decades. Even members of the generation that followed, the hippies with their bushy hair and leather strap sandals, were dying faster than she could keep track--like they were hardly trying. Minnie was the last original homeowner of a community built when tract developments were the newest thing. Everyone else had long been replaced by young families pushing new dreams. She didn't know them, didn't know their names to say hello to. No fence-side conversations, no borrowing cups of sugar, no invitations to Saturday night dinners, no neighborhood poker games. Funerals and Sunday church became the mainstays of Minnie's social life, that and her daily drop-off from Meals on Wheels.

Weekday mornings found Minnie seated in an aluminum lawn chair on her front porch awaiting lunch. On clear days she raised her face to the sun taking in the warmth like manna. On overcast days she watched the clouds roil around, imagining them into wild creatures that ebbed and flowed with the wind. She pretended the noise of the new freeway behind her house was a babbling brook. Her environment had been nearly wild once upon a time, her very road culminating in a draw, beyond which torpid chaparral and bush scrub winced and shivered at the behest of Santa Ana winds or baked in the summer sun. Alas, time moved on. That once open land had molted into a soss of neighborhoods, supported by a spiderweb of roads hustling busses, delivery trucks and car poolers in every direction. Still, she clung to her weedy patch of earth as her last grasp at a meaningful life, her final step before the old folk's home. She had seen friends sent to such places as if tossed on a trash heap, only to wither and die within months.

Minnie's daily delivery of food kept that wolf at bay. Each morning different people pulled up in their SUVs and hatchbacks to set her lunch on the little maple end table she kept near the front door. Unfortunately, they never had time for a chat, squeezing their good intentions into otherwise busy schedules. Still, they were a blessing, and she appreciated them. The only volunteer who stopped to talk for a decent breath was Guy. "Tuesday Guy," she called him. She kept a lawn chair ready for Tuesday Guy. He would settle in, stretch his long legs full out and fold his manicured hands in his lap, ready to rattle away about whatever came to mind. He had the time, he said, because he had recently retired from his career as a podiatrist and his wife wasn't used to having him under foot. "Pun intended," he said.

"I get that," Minnie said. "Thought I'd go crazy when my husband, Benny, retired. Forever asking, 'what are we going to do today,' like it was my job to entertain him."

One blustery March morning Tuesday Guy made himself comfortable as per usual. Minnie served him a Rice Krispy treat hoping to prolong his visit. Over the next hour they analyzed the weather in all its many configurations. They anticipated baseball's spring training—Minnie watched her hometown boys whenever they were on television, hooting and hollering loud enough for the neighbors to come running. She lamented the number of "jalopies" crammed onto a neighbor's front lawn and wondered at the high price of flapjacks at Pancake House.

Guy nodded at each observation, full of gooey treats. He admired the beauty of the purple iris in Minnie's flower bed and the sweet sound of birds in the pecan trees next door.

At the mention of birds, Minnie cupped her ear with a skeletal hand to listen. "I'll take your word for it," she said, "I can't hear worth nothin' these days."

Guy offered that he kept parakeets as a hobby.

“Parakeets, you say?” That tidbit set Minnie off on one of her memory tramps. Way back, she told him, she had a parakeet of her own. “Talked as clear as you or me. ‘My name is Corky,’ he told every visitor that walked through that front door, clear as a bell. And then he’d say, ‘If I get lost, call Hopkins 9-1066. Beat anything you ever saw. I loved that bird like it was my own child.’” Minnie twitched a little as she remembered. “One day my husband, rest his ornery soul, left the back door open and Corky flew away. Right off my shoulder and out the door. Wanted to see what the world outside looked like, I guess. I waited and waited by the telephone for someone to call ‘Hopkins 9-1066.’”

A tear wound its way down a fold in Minnie’s cheek. She swiped at it.

Guy touched her shoulder, acknowledging her pain.

She shook her old gray head. “I miss that bird to this day.”

The following Tuesday, when Guy arrived with her lunch, he carried a large cardboard box. Minnie pushed up from her lawn chair as he set the box at her feet.

“I have something to show you,” Guy said. With that, he reached in and pulled out a wire cage. Inside, a small bird the color of lime Jello sat perched on a plastic tree branch, cocking his little head back and forth. Minnie leaned in close to see.

Guy waited, his hands clasped behind his back. He looked pleased with himself. “I thought you could teach him to talk. Like Corky.”

Minnie slumped back in her chair. She patted her concave chest. “Like I don’t have enough trouble taking care of my own self.” Just that morning she had almost knocked herself out banging her head on a cabinet door left open.

Nodding, Guy slid the cage between their chairs, nearly out of sight. "I can take him back if you don't want him." He sat down, as unconcerned as you please.

Minnie felt bad at her sour reaction, but she wasn't one for apologizing. She changed the subject. "Seeing as you're a foot doc, I got this toenail that's been bothering me. Thought since you're here you could take a look."

Such a request was nothing new to Guy. Hazard of being a podiatrist--everyone had feet. Without waiting for a reply, she took off a J.C. Penney sneaker and white ankle sock. Her toenails had grown so long they had started to curl under, and one in particular was causing discomfort. Guy examined the toe carefully, giving it all the serious attention Minnie could ask for.

"Next time I come I'll bring my good clippers," he said, "and we'll fix you right up." He patted her foot.

Minnie sniffed and put her sock and shoe back on. "Well, don't forget."

The bird jumped from perch to swing, fluttering his wings, disturbing the air.

"Pretty warm today," Minnie said. "I'll get the bird a drink." She went in the house and returned with a plastic measuring cup of water. Opening the cage, she set it inside. "What's his name?"

"Griff," Guy said solemnly. "But you can call him anything you want."

"Silly name."

When Guy rose to leave, he picked up the cage. Casual like.

Minnie humphed as she brought herself to standing. "I guess you might as well leave him for now," she said, "since you went to all this trouble."

Guy didn't smile. "If you're sure." He set the cage back down.

Minnie placed the bird on a TV tray near her recliner in the living room. She was surprised to him company. Another breathing soul, anyway. As she could never remember his name, she called him Corky. Got to talking to him. Mostly she complained about goings on in the neighborhood, how people drove their cars up and down her street like maniacs. Her neighbor's cactus was growing over her fence, into her air space, not to mention the gopher holes springing up like a crazy game of whack-a-mole. Corky took in the complaints with equanimity, fluttering his wings in acknowledgment of her frustrations. She decided it wouldn't do any harm to teach him to talk, like her other Corky. It became her focus. During the day, she paused when she walked past his cage. "My name is Corky," she said and stared him down. In the evening, during television commercials, she would bend in from her Barcalounger, making sure she had his attention. "My name is Corky," she would say over and over, her voice rising with each utterance. He might chirp, might hop around a bit, but he never said what she wanted to hear. If she jammed her knobby finger in the door, he scooted away. Once he flew from the cage while she refilled his seed cup. Took her thirty minutes or more to grab his little body and get him back in the cage.

On one of Guy's visits, Minnie complained. "Something wrong with that bird. Won't talk. Won't climb on my finger. I guess you might as well take him back." She looked miffed.

Guy wasn't affronted. "Be patient," he said as he settled in. "He's still young. It takes time to teach a bird to talk."

"I'm 94. My time is about up."

“I had a dog once. Had him since he was a pup. We did everything together. Eventually he got old. Didn’t want to play anymore. He’d lay there like a sack of bones. Made me frustrated. When I adjusted my attitude about him we got along better. That dog gave me permission to just be, to lift my face and feel the breeze. No worries or expectations. Somehow I breathed easier when I was around Blue, slowed my breath in rhythm with his.”

“What happened to him?”

“He got sick. I could tell he was in pain. Had to Put him down.”

Late in August, Minnie and Guy were holed up in the living room, due to a monumental heat wave. A floor fan was aimed at their faces. Handing him a gigantic glass of iced sun tea and a plate of refrigerator fudge, she nodded toward the bird.

She pointed. “I give up on that bird.” Perched on the edge of Benny’s old recliner, she leaned in close to the cage to prove her point. “My name is Corky,” she all-but yelled. She sounded mad as hell. She turned back to Tom. “This time I mean it. He’s never going to talk. You take him when you leave.”

She fell back into the chair. She shook her head as if disgusted at the nature of life itself.

“My name is Corky,” the bird said in a high, singsong voice. Clear as a church bell. Clear as lake water. He said it again, “My name is Corky.”

“Minnie!” Guy leapt up with excitement. “He said it. He said, ‘My name is Corky.’ Didn’t you hear?”

She looked at Guy like he was making stuff up. She stared at the bird, who stared right back. “You’re pulling my leg,” she said to Guy. She squinted her eyes.

“I’m not.” Guy bent over and hugged Minnie. “You did it. You taught him to talk.”

“Well, I’ll be darned.” Minnie kneeled in front of the cage. “My name is Corky.” She waited. “My name is Corky.” Louder this time. Nothing. “My name is Corky, darn you.”

Evidently, Corky was finished talking for the time being.

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