

## It's Time

There were probably clues I'd refused to acknowledge. Feelings I'd pushed away, afraid that speaking them might cause them to become true.

Joanie chose the ottoman; my husband Scott and I were on the sofa. When Joanie had gathered us I thought she wanted to talk about her nineteenth birthday which was not far away. Instead, she told us that after COVID and when the hospitals get back to normal, she's going to start the process to have her body changed to male. And, instead of Jo, she'll be Joe.

Scott had started discussions that I'd cut short. Joanie too, which might be why she collected us almost formally in the living room.

"Have you really thought about this?" I asked. "What about the cost?" and, "What about having children?" I tried to worry her by asking, "Remember when you wanted to be a vegetarian; what if you change your mind? You can't just change back again."

Joanie's a practical child. She had answers for my cross examination but her face was becoming flushed, her voice tighter and she rubbed her thumb against the short hair behind her ear.

I wasn't convinced. I still needed proof. "Why don't you try being a lesbian first? Then, after a couple of years, you can think about it again."

Joanie shut her eyes. She wiped her hands on her Seahawks T-shirt and when she opened her eyes she said, "It's ... not ... about ... having ... sex," she said. A glance toward Scott, whose eyebrows twitched, and she left the room.

Saturday morning I called my brother Zach for the umpteenth time looking for sympathy. What did I do wrong, I asked. What did we do wrong? Am I not a good role model, a good mother? Did we let her play too much sports? Or did I not force her to wear enough pink, enough frills? Did we not play enough dress-up or tea party? How can she do this to me, to us, to herself?

After letting me cry a while Zach said, "Remember, after you finished college? You brought your boyfriend to meet us?"

"Yeah?" I sniffled. "What's that got to do with it?"

"You're reacting just like Grandma."

"Fuck you," I said and hung up.

I lay on the bed and cried into my pillow. My mind rambled on. Does she not like men? Is that where the problem lies? Is Scott not masculine enough? Is that my fault for marrying someone who is not tough, aggressive, manly enough? Or did Scott do something to her as a child? No, he wouldn't, would he? Or Zach? Or one of her teachers? Should I ask her? I have to ask her in case it's true. It's probably not true, but on the slim chance that it is, I have to find out. No matter how tiny the possibility, if that will save her, I have to ask. It's a mother's duty.

With that charge and obligation in my back pocket I felt the sudden need to clean out the utility room.

Scott found me in the basement after his bike ride. We had racks of plastic bins full of keepsakes: photo albums, nearly every report card and achievement certificate and pages and pages of notebooks of Joanie's.

Still wearing his black bike shorts and blue Giro jersey, Scott scanned the mess I'd made. The footstool I sat on was an island, surrounded by stacks of paper and a black plastic garbage

bag.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“We don’t need all this crap,” I threw a handful of swim lesson evaluations into the recycling.

“Maybe not. But why now? Why are you sorting them now?”

“Because it’s a lie,” I said, tossing aside a photo of Scott and Joanie at the beach. Joanie in a one-piece bathing suit, tossing a Frisbee to Scott.

“What do you mean a lie?” He bent down to pick up the photo and I had a waft of the tang of fresh sweat that held his ginger hair flat against his head where the straps of his helmet had been.

“It was all a lie. Look,” I said, nodding toward the photo. “You’re not wearing a top. Apparently Joanie shouldn’t have been either.”

Scott might have done the biking but my heart was bam bam bam hammering as if I’d climbed three flights of stairs. It had been doing this for days. I’m too young for a heart attack, I thought.

“Cath,” he chided, “that’s unfair.”

“Unfair? You want to talk about unfair? What about what Joanie’s planning to do to herself? That’s unfair, to herself as well as us.”

“Listen, while I was out, your brother called, said you were upset,” he said, leaning against the shelf. “Cath, we need to sit down and talk about this.”

My face began to heat. “Zach? What does he care? He thinks I’m acting like my fricking grandmother.”

Scott tapped the photo on the rack. He released breath through his nose before saying,

“Well, maybe he’s right.”

I stood up and stared at him, waiting for him to stop drumming the goddamn photo on the shelf.

When he finally stopped, I said, “Did he tell you what I told him?”

“What?”

“Same thing I’m gonna tell you right now. Fuck you.” I shoved him aside and went upstairs.

#

The fall of ‘92. Grandma and I were sitting on a bench at the far end of the park but even so we could hear the thrum of Michael Jackson mixed with screams from the fair. I pulled my single tail of long hair that I’d recently colored orange in front of one eye and then the other. The Ferris wheel, the roller coaster, the tents looked the same.

Grandma put her black leather purse between us. She reached in, rummaged around, then pulled out a tissue and dabbed at her eyes. The skin on her face was so hard the ridges and creases could have been porcelain or carved from marble. I hoped I wasn’t going to look like that in fifty years.

“Okay?” I asked. This likely annoyed her since it was not very polite. The impropriety was not intentional, it was a by-product. I was limited in the number of words I bring myself to say to the old biddy. My ears were ringing and plugged as if I were driving down a mountainside.

She dabbed at her eyes again before scrunching the tissue in her fist and stuffing it in the pocket of her coat.

“I am an old woman,” she said.

She didn't continue.

"I know," I said softly.

"I have no time to waste on foolishness. I don't understand why Emmy sent me out here."

And yet she sat, not speaking.

Emmy—Emily—is her daughter, my mother. The keeper of the peace. We all know that's her role so we give her slack. She could order me and Zach to apologize to each other or order me and Grandma out to the park to meet.

She couldn't force Grandma to apologize, though.

The music changed to "Girls Just Want to Have Fun", the theme song of our high school graduating class years back.

"Zach drove me out here," Grandma said, either making conversation or trying to make me feel guilty. My brother, two years younger and working on his Master's, still lived with Mom and Grandma.

The last time Grandma took such a long circuitous route was before I started college, when she admitted she had thrown out my acceptance to San Diego State. She'd assumed I was going to the one of universities in state and thought the envelope was junk mail from one of those private colleges. Or so she claimed. I couldn't afford to move to San Diego anyway but it would have been nice to have the letter.

"It used to be everyone kept to their own," she said finally, staring in the direction of the roller coaster. "Everyone got along perfectly fine. There weren't any colored people in our part of town but there was one colored boy who packed bags at the grocery store. I always thanked him and smiled. He'd smile and say thank you. My mother caught me once and gave me what for but I thought it was important to be polite. He was nice. We got along perfectly fine."

“That’s not ‘getting along’, Grandma. That’s still discrimination. That’s still being an ignorant racist.”

“Catherine Joy Harrison, that’s enough out of you,” she snapped, still not looking at me. “I am simply telling you what the world was like when I was your age. Right after the war, that’s the way things were. I had no qualms with colored folk and they had none with me or mine. Everyone was perfectly happy keeping to their own.” Her lips were pressed tight. Her sunken cheeks looked like old village women I’d seen in National Geographic.

I rubbed the side of my head. I’d shaved it a few days earlier and it had started to itch. “How do you know they were happy? Did you ask them?”

She turned toward me, her shoulders lifting and her breath coming quicker. “How on earth would I have done that? I just told you, we all kept to our own. We had our schools, the colored kids had their schools.”

“So, you don’t know that they were happy.”

“Well, they didn’t go and march in the streets. Not like they do these days.”

“Warren didn’t march in the streets.” A week earlier I had taken Warren to the house to meet my family. Grandma’s attitude and her comments were the reason I hadn’t spoken to her since.

“Hmph.” She frowned and turned toward the park again. “Anyway, that’s how I was raised. That’s why I said what I said.” She blinked. “Your mother thinks that was not the right thing to do.”

“And you?” I growled.

“And me, what?”

“And do you agree with Mom?”

She stared in the direction of the fair. Her jaw moved very slightly as if preparing to respond.

Finally, she said, “He seemed a decent sort.”

“He is.”

“But you know, your children will be halfies. They won’t fit in anywhere,” she cried.

“Grandma!” I slammed my fist on my leg. “We’re dating, we’re not married. We’re not about to have kids.”

“I’m just warning you. Mark my words, you have children with a colored boy and the children will be shunned everywhere they go.”

I got up and left.

Zach had brought her here, he could take her home.

#

After storming past Scott I went upstairs, grabbed my jacket, and went to the park.

When Scott and I had moved back to the neighborhood the park was one of my first visits. The fairgrounds were not much different from when I was a kid but the park was my favorite. Wide, open greenspace bordered by the ocean on one side, trees on the opposite, and the fairgrounds at the far end. The park had always felt like the center of the universe from which you could watch everything else.

It was empty. Dark blue clouds roamed the skies. Winter was just beginning so the fair wouldn’t have been operating anyway but the last two summers it didn’t open at all because of the pandemic. The Ferris wheel was still there. I wondered what special maintenance they had to do to keep it ready to run. One day. We were all waiting for that day when things would get back to normal.

Grandma passed away before Scott and I met. He thinks I'm like her, based on stories he's heard. My belief in my opinions. My willingness to voice said opinions. The way I stick my nose into my family's affairs. I'm not so sure. I will admit to using Olay Sculpting Cream to slow the wrinkles.

Back in '92 when I had that argument with my grandmother it was after the death of Rodney King and the riots in California. Now, in November of 2020 the death of George Floyd proves that the world really hasn't changed. Grandma never changed either. We just never talked about it again.

Warren and I didn't have babies. In fact, we broke up not long after. I kept the breakup a secret for a while because I didn't want Grandma to think I had taken her advice. Beyond a shared taste for the Ramones and the Pixies, Warren and I didn't have much in common: he was into them for the music, I liked their attitude. I would have marched in the protests if we'd lived in California. Warren wouldn't have. He wasn't the protest type.

Joanie, Joe, is not, either. Never was. Never objected or questioned us or pushed back much at all. But that means that she is not doing this to challenge me or my values. And the fact that she isn't doing this as a challenge makes it worse. It means she's serious, or, she thinks she is, and that makes it even scarier.

"Hey." It's Zach. He comes around from behind me and sits on far end of the bench, Mariners ball cap on his head, the lower part of his face covered with a blue disposable mask.

I dig my mask out of my pocket and put it on. "How'd you know I was here?"

He shrugs. "I took a shot." He kicks a rock away. "Switzerland."

"Switzerland?"

"Yeah. You know, neutral territory."

I snort. "Is that what you call this place?"

"Sometimes."

There's a screw in my brain that is one quarter turn too tight and my heart is as deflated as a can of soda run over by a car. "Do you really think I'm the same as Grandma?"

He turns and looks out at the water. It's choppy, meaning there are winds out there but here in the park the air is calm. The clouds are dark and thick and I can't tell if they're moving. "I never butted heads with her," he says. "Not the way you did. Mom told me it was because you two were so alike. When we were kids I didn't see it, but as we got older ..."

"And the fights got bigger," I added.

"Yeah. Did Grandma ever tell you, before Grandpa, she dated a Communist?"

"She what?"

"Well, I don't know if 'dated' is the right word. But they were close. He was a member of the Commonwealth Federation and active in the union."

"Huh."

"I was doing research on labor history for my thesis and I asked her what she remembered from those days. I don't know if Mom even knows. Still, Mom really had to work on her to get her to meet you here. And Grandma still wouldn't go until I told her I'd drive her. I was wondering if I was going to have to do the same with you."

"You mean drive me?"

"That, plus maybe have the same kind of arguments with you that Mom had with Grandma." He waits for a while before he says, "It has nothing to do with you, you know. Or anything you've done."

"What doesn't?"

Zach turns to me. “Joe. Joe’s an adult. You know him. You know he has thought this through. Talk to him, listen to him. You’ve got to open yourself up and listen. It has nothing to do with what you’ve done or haven’t done. And it doesn’t change anything, really. You know he’s still your kid. You know he still loves you and needs you.”

A seagull calls as it passes overhead, its cry lonely and hollow. I reach out and lay my hand on the sleeve of Zach’s jacket.

“Keep telling me that,” I say, squeezing my eyes shut briefly. “Maybe it’ll sink in.”

“But that’s just it. It doesn’t need to sink in.” As he speaks his mask is barely moving but his eyes are moist. “It’s already there, inside you. You just need to give it room to breathe, room to grow.” He puts his hand over mine. “Give it time, give it space. But support it. Let it grow.”

The pain in my head is gone but my brain is thick, like the honey was the time someone put it in the fridge. Maybe if I microwave my brain for a few seconds it’ll soften too.

“I don’t know. I don’t know that I’ve got it in me.”

“Give it time,” he says, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “And, hey, these days, we’re not supposed to do anything, we’re not supposed to go anywhere. We’ve got nothing but time.”

I thought I felt a small drop on my forehead but I wasn’t sure until another lands on my sleeve. Then a light patter begins, like fingertips tapping at a window.