

CLUTCH

When Grammy was finally declared legally dead after going missing for over seven years – I’m guessing because her remaining relatives had grown tired of footing the bill for my living in her house all this time – it had inexplicitly fallen upon me to do the final clean, including dispensing with what was left of her belongings that hadn’t already been sponged up by said relatives. Which left me the not-so-proud owner of a grand total of one particularly decrepit-looking steamer trunk.

I knew it had been there all the time, had seen it many times during my safaris into her attic as a kid. I just happened to be preoccupied with keeping a job, going to school, sifting through boyfriends in hopes of finding one man semi-human enough to love, support, respect me, blah blah blah. But no such luck. So, before I knew it, seven years had gone by and the ultimatum was delivered – not in person, of course; no one had the you-know-whats to tell me to my face at that point; therefore, registered mail. Thirty days. No excuses. The next day I heard a knock at the door and when I peeked out the front window, a real estate agent’s for sale sign had already gone up, a tacky one at that, consistent with the cheapos I was unfortunately related to.

No decent paying job, no decent boy-o, no current prospects for either, and a crusty old trunk to go through, all while packing up my own crap, most of it I was tempted to leave just to piss everyone off. Color me ungrateful. Guilty as charged. Not that I expected to find anything worth keeping.

I dragged the trunk out of the attic by a cracked leather side handle, scratching up the hardwood finish in her (then mine, soon to be someone else's) bedroom. Sitting up against my bed's footboard, legs spread eagle, I was able to free the two opposing, yucky-green brass clasps pretty quickly. But after rustling through every nook and cranny in the house, and finding no key, I tried busting the locked middle clasp free, first with the palm of my hand then with one of my dress shoes. Suspected that was why no one else had bothered; let the mooch deal with it. I went outside to Granny's gardening shed, certain there had to be a hammer in there somewhere.

Yep, I didn't have a high opinion of myself but then I felt I had the best relationship with Grammy, as far as I could recall. She did seem to dote on me more and more over the years, at least before I went off to college the first time. So, it came as a genuine shock when, in the middle of my junior year, my one aunt decided maybe she should let me know Grammy had gone missing and had been for over three months. I wanted to scream, and perhaps should have, but as it turned out, the best revenge was sneaking back into Grammy's house in the dark of night then refusing to move out while there was still even a small chance she was still alive.

I banged hard on that trunk's clasp. Again and again and again.

Besides, what could they do? They knew I was Grammy's favorite, and it would be uncouth in the least to kick me out. Yes, at first, they harassed the crap out of me with frequent, unannounced visits to procure items they claimed to cherish, but eventually I grew wise and with

what little money I scrounged together from odd jobs at the time, I changed the locks – several times if memory serves me right – before finally installing a security system. The one time it was triggered, they never came back.

The clasp loosened. I kept pounding.

Over six years. No calls, no visits, but no bills, no responsibilities. I had admittedly allowed that ease of existence to spoil me. But now, so very close to completing my nursing degree, financial aid had dried up so no funds to put me over the top.

As I sat here, legs splayed, butt growing numb, banging banging banging away on this decrepit trunk, self-pity tears I'd been fighting for the longest time now threatening, the lock suddenly gave way, the trunk's lid popping free in a burst of musty air. In my glee, I almost didn't notice what was neatly resting dead center upon a pile of faded linens.

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It was like Granny wanted me to find this first. The black satin, vintage clutch was the size of my outstretched hand, and quite ornate, studded with a multitude of dark blue beads, sequins and sapphire-colored crystals, wrapped in gold chain, all arranged in a curtained, half-moon, starburst pattern, the entire design emitting from a raised, oval-shaped opal. Mounted above the opal was a flared gold clasp encrusted with diamond-like jewels. It was, quite simply, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

Why hadn't I ever seen this before? And where did Granny get this?

Even though the clutch still held most of my attention, I tore myself away long enough, gently putting it aside so I could rifle through the rest of the trunk's contents: the aforementioned yellowed linens, a badly frayed afghan, a tapestry blanket depicting a colorful garden; and at the

very bottom, stacks and stacks of seed packets containing every imaginable variety of flower and herb, all neatly arranged and in alphabetical order, held together with rubber bands and paperclips. I had forgotten her love of gardening, but why hadn't she planted these? I returned everything to the trunk – well, everything except the clutch – and closed the lid, my mind wandering: how much could I get for this trunk on eBay if I cleaned it up, even with the faded gold-flaked "3s" monogrammed on its lid (remembered Grammy did have a thing for that number)? I quickly banished the thought, admonishing myself for my selfishness. And yet ...

I hopped on the bed, carefully cradling the clutch. Propping pillows up behind me, I placed my thumb and forefinger on the clasp, expecting it to pop right open. But, just like the trunk it came in, this too was no easy task. Fearing the clasp would snap off from too much force, I absently rubbed my fingers over its glimmering gaudiness, my thumb still fondling the embedded crystals there. I imagined out loud if this was what only Grammy wanted for me all along, knowing I would eventually find: a gift from beyond?

The clasp released, the clutch springing open without a sound.

Without a thought in my head, I peered inside, and into total blackness. I plunged my index finger into the clutch, rooting around for a moment. Nothing. I started to close it when a tiny but intense burst of light sprang from the emptiness, startling me. With my finger still inside, the clutch bulged outward, shoving my extended finger up and outwards.

I felt something scratching against my fingernail. When I reached in again, this time with one hand, I felt a presence on my palm. When I pulled my hand back, a charcoal-black book the size and thickness of a matchbox rested there. It took a moment's moment to realize this was just not possible; I knew there was nothing in that clutch before. Yet, there this was.

I flipped and twirled the tiny, featureless book over and over, trying to imagine what it could possibly contain: an abridged version of *The Crucible* (remembered it from high school English, inexplicably Grammy's favorite book); a garden cookbook; an amended will deeding me the house? One's mind went to strange places when one couldn't explain the unexplainable. There were no discernible markings, simply a tiny screw and c-hinge holding the book closed. Getting some real use out of one meticulously manicured fingernail, I expertly turned the screw until the hinge loosened then fell away.

The book expanded in my palm like an accordion, seemingly adding pages as it grew, finally opening in full, like a hardback book resting on a table. On the first page was a hand-printed green dollar sign, followed by pages and pages of script written in an unfamiliar font, so tiny I could not decipher. I found myself touching each page, finally losing count as they feathered past, seemingly infinite. But on the final page, where acknowledgement would typically reside, I found a note written in Granny's familiar scrawl.

Here contained is all I know of the world. Now sleep, and when you wake, and only when you are ready, shall you know as well.

Those words could have only been intended for me. Frantically, I back flip back through the pages, back to the beginning. But as I do, I felt myself fading, the pages passing before me in dizzying fashion, my eyelids growing heavy, until with no memory of head hitting pillow, I drifted away.

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I awoke and could not see. Panicking, I flung my arms up until the room reappeared. I sat up straight, struggling to regain my bearings. I glanced down at the pieces of paper that now covered me.

Dollar bills. I was buried in dollar bills.

I would have said I was imagining all this *except* ... you don't realize how heavy so much money was until you were under it all, so pushing myself free was a struggle. Stumbling towards the bathroom, slipping and sliding on the pristine, uncrumpled bills, I scrubbed my face in freezing cold water, hard, trying to coax myself back to reality. But when I returned to the bedroom, nothing had changed; the money still there, in fact, everywhere, piled into two heaps on either side of where I had fallen asleep, some of the bills coating the floor by one side of the bed, even trailing my path to the bathroom.

I scooped up the cash by the handfuls, placing as much as I could on the vanity across from my bed. But the sheer number quickly overwhelmed the space, so I stacked the rest on the floor in front. When I had collected every last bill, I sat down cross-legged and began to count. And count, and count, and count. It was exhausting and seemingly never ending, but eventually the counting did end.

Thirty thousand dollars.

I recounted, not trusting myself that the final number would end up on the nose. But it did. Thirty thousand, in ones. Exactly thirty thousand dollars.

Only when I had finished did I decide to survey the bed. The book was nowhere to be found, and the clutch was now on the floor, still open.

My mind raced, brimming with more questions than answers. I found myself thanking Grammy over and over again, a million times over. And I kept asking myself: how did she know I would need this in my life, at this exact moment? Why did I deserve this? What had I done special for her, exceptexcept, maybe to serve as her favorite?

I stood gazing out my (her) bedroom window and my thoughts flew backwards through time, seeing myself with Grammy, participating in her one great love: gardening. The vision was so vivid, I even saw in my mind's eye her treasured turquoise ring, a ring she never took off, even when digging in the dirt. And just like that, a memory I had apparently suppressed until just then burst forward like a lightning bolt. In fact, it was a lightning bolt from an approaching storm. I had looked up at that exact moment, as time slowed to nothing, and watched in terror as lightning struck a tree limb hovering just above the garden, in the exact spot Granny sat on her stool, troweling in the fresh loam, planting impatiens, my springing forth, knocking her aside, my body serving as shield, willing to sacrifice myself for her, the limb snapping, falling, missing us both by inches.

She went on and on about that day, blessed me over and over, made me promise if there was anything I ever needed, I had only to ask. I never did. Never got the chance.

So quaint sounding when I thought about the memory. But I had saved her life, or I had convinced myself I had. *Had I?*

A new thought slammed into my head so hard I staggered backwards. My aunt had called those many years ago, told me when Granny went missing. I started to count back the days, then counted again. I cried out.

Granny had gone missing one day after my last visit, the day after the garden, and the lightning---

There was a rattle behind me. I turned.

The clutch on the floor was wide open, shivering across the hardwood towards me. Emerging from the clutch was a familiar hand, holding the book. And on the ring finger of that hand was Granny's treasured turquoise.

To this day, I don't know why I wasn't shocked, but I found myself reaching out to grasp that hand I knew by heart, that hand I now held tight, tighter than I had ever held anything in my life.

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