

## THE BURDEN OF BERNIE

Dr. Bernadette Samuelson was taking deep breaths. She did not remember beginning deep breathing, nor could she recall anything after the hike. That *STUPID* hike. She told Wendall she did not enjoy hiking, and would much rather go to the museum and lunch on Sunday. But he INSISTED that it would be wonderful. Like he ALWAYS did. And like always, it was not. It was dry, dirty, with plenty of bugs. Who could *like* such an activity? And as usual, Wendall trekked ahead of her, leaving her in just the company of the weeds, bugs and dirt, and HATING it. Her shoelace was untied, and she stopped to retie it. Then suddenly the rocks and dirt began to shift below her. Instant fear overcame her. She was sliding, she was sinking, she was... fucked.

“Oh yes, that is when I began deep breathing.” She recalled. “I was trying not to panic and using my own advise I give my patients when anxiety and panic begin to set in.”

She opened her eyes. Looking around, she immediately recognized that she was sitting in the back pew of the non denominational church around the corner from her condo. But why? The pews in front were filled with people she knew. Colleagues, neighbors, friends, her father, and Wendall.(Asshole) *Why was she back here?* she wondered. When she finally fixed her gaze on the front she saw it. An open casket. And who in it? Why, HER of course.

“Shit, this is **my** goddamned funeral.” She let out a loud groan. When

nobody turned to see, it was confirmed. “I *never* had good taste in guys.” she said out loud. “Geez, the nerve of that jerk, actually coming to the funeral of the woman he pretty much is responsible for killing.” she went on. But although she was sounding angry, she didn’t FEEL angry. She didn’t feel much of anything, really. Mostly just removed, mixed with fragments of emotions like confusion and even relief.

She thought, “Well, might as well see how this show goes.”

She heard someone clear their throat to her right. She looked over. There was a small group of people sitting in the end pew on that side. They were all wearing what looked like costumes. Older people mostly, the women had on attire from different time periods. Two women who resembled each other (*they must be twins*) were wearing frilly house-dresses from the 1950’s. A much younger man probably in his early twenties wore military fatigues, complete with helmet. Then there was a man who she vaguely recognized from somewhere that was wearing early colonial attire, and even adorned a powdered wig on his head. She squinted to try to see the last two people on the bench. They were her paternal grandparents Francis and Grant Samuelson. Everyone of them was smiling sympathetically at her. She looked away.

“Okay, this *must* be a dream,” she rationed, “No way would there be all these other ghosts or spirits or whatever at my...”

Right then, her thought was cut off by one of the twins who had come and sat down next to her. “Hello, Bernadette. You don’t remember me, but I am your great aunt Maude. On your mother’s side.” she said. “I am so sorry we had to meet like this.”

“Oh, yes, of course, great grandmother Elsa’s sister.” Bernadette said, trying not to seem as freaked out as she was. “Do you know am I really, um...”she quieted her voice to a whisper. “Dead?”

“Why, yes dear. Terrible fall you had off the side of that mountain. Tragic.” Maude answered.

“Yes, so tragic.” sitting now on her other side was the identical twin of Maude. “How rude of Maude to not introduce me, I am your *other* great aunt, Mildred.” She said, lowering her eyes at Maude.

“I **just** sat down, Millie!” Maude defended, “If you gave me ANY space at all, I would have had the chance.”

“Oh, no you would not, you always want all the attention on YOU. Greedy. Greedy. Always have been.” Mildred countered.

Bernadette sat between these two dead women wondering what was happening. Then suddenly, they quieted down, and turned to her with great

curiosity.

“Bernadette, you were a head doctor, right?” Mildred asked. Then before she could answer, Maude interrupted, “Not a HEAD doctor, a “Psychic” it is called.”

“Well yes, I am a..I mean I guess I WAS a Psychiatrist.” That kinda stung to say. Was.

“Okay, than maybe you can tell me what is wrong Maude.” said Mildred.

“She *has* to have some mental problem, the way she is always telling lies and gossiping. What disorder does that mean she has?”

“**ME?!**” Maude replied loudly.”Are you joking, woman? **You** are the one who is always lying, and cheating. You used to *steal* things from my house whenever you visited. Don’t think I didn’t know. Burt and I BOTH knew. And I also know that there is a name for that. Tell her what that is called dear.”  
Once again with her attention on Bernadette.

“I would NEVER steal from you!” hollered Mildred “Your taste was worse than a blind bag lady! I felt *sorry* for you every time we went out together, because you thought people were staring because of how good you looked, but *I* knew it was because they were shocked at your distaste.”

Maude’s mouth was agape with shock. Then she said, “I was GLAD you

died first, Millie. It was the best 4 years of my life. For once I had some peace!”

“I was glad I died too! I too had quiet and solitude not having to deal with *you*. Then you had to go and have a stroke and die. And **who** did you run right to during your transition? Me, of course.” said Millie.

Then both of them turned and faced Bernadette. “What is **wrong** with **her**, and how do I fix it?” They pointed at each other and said simultaneously.

Bernadette took in a deep breath.

“Well, ladies, there is nothing **wrong** with either of you. Basically, you see so much of yourselves in each other, that you tend to project your disappointments about yourself onto each other.” she went on explaining. “But what you both really want from each other is acceptance and unconditional love, so that you can finally accept YOURSELVES.”

The twins both had tears streaming down their cheeks. They looked at each other. “I’m Sorry! I love you! I’m sorry!” again simultaneously. They embraced (right over Bernadette.)

“You are amazing!” Mildred said to Bernadette

“Yes, just like Sigmund Freud!” added Maude

*(No, I just watch too much Dr. Phil.)* Bernadette thought.

The twins exited the church together, chattering excitedly.

Once again, Bernadette tried to focus on her funeral.

“Hey, cousin Bernie?” Now the man in the fatigues was sitting next to her.

“You are?” she asked him

“Oh yeah, I’m your second cousin, Herbert. From your dad’s side.”

“I’m sorry I don’t remember you, Herbert.”

“That’s okay, I actually died right before you were born. In Nam.”

“That is terrible. I’m sorry. Did you get killed in combat?”

“No, not *exactly*.”

“What happened to you?”

“It’s a bit embarrassing. But I am dead, so whatever. I got drunk at a bar in Saigon, passed out in the street outside and got run over by a rickshaw.”

Bernadette began to laugh, trying not too. “Oh, I am sorry...” she started.

“Don’t be. Even my folks found it ridiculous. It is pretty funny.” he smiled at her. “Anyways I was wondering if I could ask you something?”

“Sure. What is it Herbert?”

“I only had relations with one person before I got drafted, and it was a...well, a he-she.” he was getting embarrassed. “You mean a transvestite?”

“Yeah, I guess that is what they are called. Anyways, I didn’t know until right before we you know...did IT, but even when I knew I didn’t call it off, and afterward, kept thinking about her...I mean him...I mean, shit.”

“Okay?”

“Well, does this mean I am gay? Cause I thought I liked girls...”

“No, Herbert, it is completely NORMAL to reminisce and fantasize about your first experience. No matter who it was with, because it was your first, it is the most memorable. And unfortunately, you never got to have OTHER

experiences.” Bernadette explained.

“Well, there was some times with my dog, Nicky. She was such a good dog, had such a gentle touch, and boy, did she LOVE peanut butter.”

Herbert went on. “I think that is why I fell so hard for the he-she or um, transvestite. He kinda *felt* like her, Nicky I mean.”

Bernadette was visibly uncomfortable now. “Listen, Herbert, I really just want to see the rest of my funeral.”

“Oh sure, of course, sorry cousin. I will just be on my way. Thanks for the advise. I feel better.” He began to get up. “See you around.”

“Bye.” Bernadette waved half heartedly.

“Good Morning.” The man in the colonial getup said as soon as she turned back around. “OH! You startled me.”

“My apologies. I am your Great Great Great Grandfather Joseph Haring. Pleased to make your acquaintance. ” He lifted her hand politely, causing her to blush a little.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Haring?”

“I would be much obliged if I may offer you a confession.” He spoke



formally.

“Uh, Okay?” Bernadette said, bewildered.

“I attempted to murder my wife. Several times in fact. I attempted to poison her, but instead poisoned our pig whom she fed her meal to.” He kept explaining. “Then I tried to smother her in her sleep after having her drink much alcohol. But after I was sure she had been smothered, and I lay down next to her and drifted off to sleep, I was shocked in the morning when I awakened to her making breakfast. I even tried to convince townspeople she was a witch so they would kill her *for* me, but I could not produce enough evidence.”

Bernadette just stared.

“It was not that she *deserved* to die, really. I just was so irritated by the sound of her voice, plus the fact that she was a terrible cook and housekeeper, I felt as if I would go mad if I had to listen to her or eat many more of her meals.” He said.

“What happened? Did you kill her eventually?” Bernadette asked in disbelief.

“No actually. It was her that killed me. Typhoid, from her unsanitary cooking

habits.” he said sadly. “She was immune to it you see.”

“Serves you right.” Bernadette scolded.

“Yes, it does. Mary, that’s my wife, went on to live a long, prosperous life. Well, thank you so much for letting me confess. I’ve never spoken of this to anyone and I am feeling unburdened already.” then he turned with a “good day” and was gone.

Bernadette was speechless. Not a moment passed before it was her grandparents that now sat next to her.

“Hello, dear. We are so sorry about your unfortunate fall. But it is nice to see you again.” Her grandmother said.

“Yes, nice to see you again Nana.”she answered. Then looked at her grandfather, whom had never said more than 3 words to her a child, and said, “You too Papa.”

He smiled at her warmly, and said, “I embezzled 750000\$ from the employees of my textile warehouse over the course of 30 years.” he finished, still smiling.

“What? Why...” Bernadette’s head was swimming.

“And I was addicted to opium and was stoned out of my mind the entire time I was raising your father and his brothers.” Grandmother chimed in. “I *knew* about the money and was okay with it. I had to sustain my habit. What is it you kids say- “feed the monkey?” You understand, dear.” Now she also was smiling that same warm smile at Bernadette.

“LEAVE HER ALONE!” Screamed a familiar voice. Bernadette looked in that direction. Mom. Her mother was there now, everything was going to be alright.

“You retched people should be ashamed of yourselves! Taking advantage of my wonderful girl, and right after such a horrible accident! She hasn’t even had a chance to accept her *situation* yet!” She pointed at the door. “Go on, get out of here! Leave her be! Selfish, selfish people, both of you!” She hollered at them as they scampered out quickly. “Thanks, mom.” Bernadette sighed in relief.

“Of course, honey.” her mom said, sitting down beside her. “I was sad to hear you had passed, and had to rush to get here, otherwise I would have been here earlier. I am am sorry about that. Did you have any other trouble?”

“Well, *yeah*, actually.” Bernadette answered. “I learned that I come from a long line of pretty despicable people.”

“Yes, I know. But *most* people have the same bad apples in their own

heritage.” Mother said. “We just have a bit *more*.”

“I’m so glad to see you, mom. I’ve missed you.” Bernadette said, crying.

“Me too, sweetheart, me too.” hugging her tightly.

They both faced forward and saw that her dad was at the podium, speaking about what a wonderful daughter she had been. After his eulogy, Bernadette glanced over at her mother who, looked at her lovingly directly in the eyes and softly said, “You know, your father and I were swingers. I had many different partners of all shapes, sizes and colors when you were growing up.”

“Jesus.” Bernadette mumbled with her hand over her face.