

Cliff & Clara

*A little story to remind us not to overlook the one right in front of us...*

Clara Bicker's eyes sprang open moments before the alarm jangled. She'd rarely changed her waking hour these past seventy-odd years and didn't really need the clock at all. She reached around to pat the warm backside still nestled against her own, cleared her throat and muttered, "Wake up, Cliff. Day's awastin'." When her feet hit the floor, she could still hear the undisturbed snuffle of his familiar snore.

By the time her husband of fifty-five years shuffled into the small, warm kitchen Clara was dressed and putting the finishing touches on a full breakfast. Her long, mostly-gray hair was twisted into a knot high on her head and she wore a loose, faded shift she reserved strictly for working around the house. Bacon drained on a paper towel and strong, dark coffee perked on the stove. Cliff and Clara had done without a new-fangled coffee machine - it didn't make the coffee hot enough for their taste.

Cliff put his arm around his soft, round, aproned wife and pressed his stubbly face into her neck. "Mornin', my little yellow bird." Clara twisted out of his embrace and snapped him with her cup towel. "Sit down, Mr. Charm, and eat while it's hot. Let those eggs get cold and see if I cook again today!"

Cliff slipped into his place at the oil-clothed table while Clara served the coffee into thick café cups the two bought when they were newly-wed. He poured the steaming hot liquid into his saucer to cool and lifted it to his lips for a sip. Clara shook her head, still disliking his slurping after all these years, but completely oblivious to the smacking noise she made with every chew.

"Delicious, as always, Sweetie. How did I ever manage to snag the best cook in the county?" he teased before he took a big bite of sourdough biscuit.

After breakfast, Cliff set about some chores. He moved slowly and stiffly from too many years of hard work as the middle school janitor. His glasses made his eyes appear a little too large, but they were kind eyes and his smile was easy to return. His perennial cheery disposition had made him a favorite around the campus. He always enjoyed working around the kids and sorely missed them after he retired. Every year one or two of them somehow worked their way into his heart and became his favorites. Retirement was only hard in that he missed those young ones so.

Cliff whistled while he worked, which rankled Clara's nerves. No matter how fast Cliff worked, it was never quite fast enough for Clara. She never knew how badly Cliff's arthritis had pained him the last few years because he never complained, and Clara didn't want to imagine.

"What in the world could he be talking to himself about now," she grumbled as she watched him with worried curiosity from the window. Cliff was puttering around outside by some fruit trees, pointing now and then and muttering to himself. Clara strained to make out his words but, unable to discern his utterances, went back to her dishes with a huff.

"Now, this is what they call a choke cherry tree. No, it doesn't mean the cherries make you choke. How about we google it when we go inside, okay?"

You see, Cliff liked to pretend he had one of the children in tow when he was outside alone. He never let on to Clara about this little game he liked to play. She might think his mind was going or he was a stone's throw away from the loony bin. He wouldn't ever worry his Clara on purpose. No, he would keep this little diversion to himself.

When he came inside around ten o'clock Clara had already cleared away the breakfast dishes, done several loads of laundry and scrubbed both bathrooms clean as a whistle, the whole while stewing over the imaginary circles she'd worked around her husband.

"I cleaned out all the bird feeders and filled them with fresh seed, Hon. Want to sit outside with our coffee and bird-watch?"

"Sounds right nice, Clifford, but I've got work to do around here. We're not retired from housework, after all."

"I'll help you, Clara, my belle. Just make me a list." But Clara didn't, as she couldn't stop long enough to make one out and couldn't understand why Cliff needed one anyway.

"Have you seen the sunflowers out back, Hon?" Cliff and Clara were back at the little kitchen table having lunch. "They sure did come up plentiful this year. I'd like to see one in your hair."

But Clara didn't much enjoy being outdoors, and the scorching summer sun was not the reason why. This wasn't the house they had started out in as a young family. That home had spacious rooms and an ample yard, perfect for raising the children Cliff and Clara had hoped to have. When it became obvious their wish was not going to come true, they had moved to something smaller and easier to maintain.

Clara pushed her chair away from the table, gathered up dishes, and clanked them down in the sink. "Oh, nonsense. They're as big as usual, no more or less. And you know yellow's not my color. It would look terrible on me. The Dress Smart lady says I'm a winter, not a summer. No, yellow isn't good on me at all."

"Winter, schminter. You're lovely in every color in my book, especially yellow," and he reached for her from his chair. Clara swatted him away and plunged her hands into the soapy water. She never let Cliff buy her a dishwasher. Taking care of the kitchen and everything in it was what she did, part of who she was, and she saw no sense in giving any of her responsibilities up to anyone or anything. Besides, it seemed like a waste to get such a contraption for just the two of them.

In the afternoon Cliff and Clara hid from the sweltering heat in their cool, dark living room on matching recliners. Cliff channel-surfed, lingering only a wink on one station before clicking up or down again.

"Puh-leese, Cliff, give me the remote! You're driving me crazy with that thing," Clara pleaded. Cliff stopped at the home shopping channel.

"You just want to tune in your boyfriend, Bob Barker," he joked. "Look at that beautiful yellow sweater they're selling today, Sweetie. I'd be tickled to buy it for you. You know you have a birthday coming up."

Clara didn't respond, only rolled her eyes, feeling neither pretty nor like a summer complexion.

That night Clara dreamt of youth and first love. She relived the first night she and Cliff met at the Saturday night dance, how handsome he'd looked in his crisp white shirt and slicked-back hair. He had been so shy when he asked her to dance that his cheeks flushed crimson with excitement. In her recollection, Clara wore a yellow sundress and felt Cliff's hand on her back just above the sash tied in a bow. She didn't want the dream to end, and in her sleep state, willed the waltz to go on and on. Clara was filled with a joy she had set aside during her waking hours for far too long. *When my time comes, I want to die dancing this dance.* This was her last thought before her eyes popped open, as always only seconds before the clock went off.

That morning Clara swished around the kitchen with a spring in her step, still thinking about dancing in her dream. She was filled with a peaceful contentment and, for once, didn't struggle against the loneliness that constantly played out in her critical nature.

She made oatmeal, fried an egg and scrambled another so she could give Cliff his choice without making him wait. She set out the coffee cups and smiled, remembering the day they

brought them home and paused for a moment, amazed at how they'd lasted so long. She called once, twice and after the third time walked into the bedroom to find he hadn't even rolled over. When she went to call the ambulance, she had already kissed his cheek and held his hand and knew he would not wake up.

A little while later, when they needed Cliff's social security number, Clara went to his top dresser drawer and noticed a flat, square box. Inside she found a bright yellow scarf with sweet peas around the border. There was no card, only a folded-up piece of paper with directions showing how to wear it in several different ways.

That afternoon, through her tears, Clara tried them all.