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Days on Dixie Drive

Mariesa LaRosa

I loved her shaggy orange carpet. Her shaggy orange carpet that was out of style before it was even installed. Her shaggy orange carpet that reeked of mildew and water damage but was somehow strangely inviting. Her shaggy orange carpet that became lava as my brother and I danced around, hitting a balloon across the room, careful not to let our precious cargo (or our feet) touch the floor. Her shaggy orange carpet where my cousin and I used to retreat to avoid the boring talk of adults during family gatherings and instead get lost in our own imaginary world of pirate ships and mermaid tales. Deep within those hideous fibers, her shaggy orange carpet was my favorite place in the whole world.

“Hi, Sugar Bump,” she said to me as I leapt into her aged arms to give her a “bone-crushing” hug. At last, it was Friday.

Like every other second grader, my Friday nights were strictly reserved for sleepover parties. I counted down the days until I could sleep in a bed less comfortable than my own, stay up until the wee hours of 10 P.M., and waste the night away with countless hours of giggling. But unlike every other second grader, I didn’t spend these Friday nights at Heather’s house, nor Sarah’s house, and not even at Maddie’s house; instead, Friday nights were spent at Shirley’s house.

There was something magical about my grandmother’s house, and I never could resist spending a weekend on Dixie Drive. Maybe the magic came from her “magically” unending supply of marshmallows. Maybe it was my “magic” superpower to win every game of Old Maid when she crossed her heart that she didn’t let me win. Maybe it was her “magic” ability to burn every single batch of cookies she ever made. Or maybe, the true “magic” came from the overflowing. We sandwiched my hand in between the pieces to make sure the puppet was a perfect fit.

With a silent nod of agreement, Grandma and I moved on to Phase Three of our operation: the surgical stitching. As her official crafting assistant, Grandma put me in charge of threading the

needle, a responsibility she deemed the “hardest task of all.” I felt like VIP personnel as I pridefully used my young and spry eyesight to complete the essential duty Grandma claimed she couldn’t. And now, it was time to bring our creation to life.

Grandma plopped me on her lap as she wrapped her wrinkled arms around me to guide my hands behind her green sewing machine. My feet gently swayed above hers as she used her right foot to step on the machine’s pedal. Slowly, we pushed the shaggy pieces under the bobbing needle. In the past, I often feared I would make a mistake or hurt myself with the deadly needle, and I refused to put my hands near the treacherous monster. Instead, I sat on the floor and pushed the pedal with my hand as my grandmother did the “dirty work.” This time, though, I feared no evil and faced the demon head-on (with my grandmother’s assistance, of course). In a matter of minutes, a little baby bear was born.

We fired up the glue-gun and slapped on some googly eyes, a fuzzy puffball for a snout, a baby blue bow-tie, and a tiny fedora from Grandma’s collection of doll clothes. After a long day of work at the office, our masterpiece was finally complete.

“Bruno,” I declared. “His name is Bruno.”

I went home that day giddy with excitement. Bruno became the newest star of my collection of puppets, stealing the show with his bluesy jazz music. His cockeyed wink instantly stole my heart. While his brown shaggy fur didn’t make him my prettiest puppet, he quickly became my favorite. We “toured” our shows all around the house and shared countless songs, laughs, and smiles together. He was a great friend, and he was even more special because he was my own creation.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I said to my whopping audience of six family members, “thank you for attending tonight’s performance of Puppet Theater. We ask that you please silence all cell phones and refrain from eating or drinking inside the theater. The use of flash photography and video recording is strictly prohibited. Please take a moment and locate the nearest exits for your safety in the case of an emergency. And now... sit back, relax, and enjoy, as Mariesa LaRosa Productions proudly presents.... “Puppet Theater.”

Then I made my brother become my “technical director” as I slid our Fisher Price flashlight in his direction. My puppets obviously deserved a “spotlight,” and clearly, my hands were much too occupied to perform and run the light board.

I dimmed the “house lights” (i.e. two lamps in our basement) and began the opening act. One by one, each of my puppets emerged to perform a variety of acts, from poetry, to musical performances, to the high-quality standup comedy of a seven-year-old. But I always saved the best for last: Bruno.

Probably due to his fedora, I pictured Bruno thriving in a smoky jazz bar set in the 1940s plucking a stand-up bass. His suave exterior required a deep, raspy voice to accompany his outward appearance. Without wanting to disappoint my audience, I had to commit to the part and decided to do what any second grader would do: I sang like a sixty-year-old man who smoked for several years. Groveling my voice and deepening it two octaves, Bruno and I did our best Louis Armstrong impersonation, singing his famous “What a Wonderful World.”

I couldn’t take myself seriously, though, and I kept giggling between each line. I desperately wanted to remain in character, but I inadvertently found myself switching back to my normal voice after practically every word. The broken character, giggles, and rollercoaster of pitches made the scene even better, like a Saturday Night Live skit where the actors can’t control their laughter. We were dedicated to finishing the song to ensure our audience “got what they paid for.” Despite our inability to remain in character, Bruno and I were a crowd favorite. We entertained our faithful fans like this for weeks—months, even—and I fantasized the crowds would scream our names for an encore.

And then one day, it all just stopped.

Puppet shows were no longer cool. I couldn’t be seen playing with puppets anymore. No matter how much fun I had with Bruno, it was so easy for me to toss him to the side as I moved on to my next “phase.” And there Bruno remained, cold and lifeless in a dusty corner, waiting for me to sing one more jazz song with him. And he stayed like that for years. But I didn’t care. I had already moved on. “Little Miss Reesie” suddenly wasn’t so little. In fact, she wasn’t even “Reesie” anymore. Now I had started using my full name, Mariesa, wiping away any remnants of the person I

used to be. This cute little second grader had grown up in an instant. I became consumed in the outside world, obsessing over how to fit in with the rest of society. I started drowning myself in extracurriculars, schoolwork, and friendships, and I did my best to ensure I was keeping up with all the trending fads. And just like that, my childhood had ended.

I didn't have time to sing and dance with puppets; now I had to spend my time burying my face in homework and deciphering the petty drama of middle and high school. Little by little, my carefree seven-year-old spirit started to drift away. I was bogged down by my own egocentric problems, and my worries swallowed me whole, blinding me from the bigger problems of the outside world. I didn't care if I was fading away from the things I used to love; I only cared if I was fitting in.

Twelve years later, in the middle of my freshman year of college, I found myself cleaning out some of my old toy boxes from my youth. A big smile came across my face as Bruno surfaced, and a flood of nostalgia rushed to my memory. I remembered our five-star sell-out shows, the complex scripts I had written, and that wonderful day with my grandmother in the musty old basement.

As I looked at this ratty old puppet, I started to wonder, "How many things became my 'Bruno?'" Pondering the question further, I thought to myself, "How many people became my 'Bruno?'" How many people did I love so dearly that I left so unexpectedly? How many "phases" did I have to go through to realize the treasures I had in my life? When was it "no longer cool" to be with the people I loved the most? When did the shaggy orange carpet go out of style? Because it's all still there: the green sewing machine, the Secrets box, and that hideously shaggy orange carpet. And instead of Bruno, now it's my grandmother who sits there waiting for just one more jazz song. But I haven't come. I've been too selfishly wrapped in my new "phases" of life. Somewhere along the lines, Shirley's house lost its magic. And I didn't stick around to find it again. Silently, I stared at Bruno. These thoughts burned in my mind, and for a long while, I didn't even move; I just stared. I looked at Bruno's shaggy fur, his cockeyed wink, and his tiny fedora. And I just stared. I was disgusted with myself for letting such a special person slip away from my life. I dropped Shirley just as easily as I dropped a ratty old puppet.

Within a few weeks of finding Bruno, I had gone back to my college campus and carried on with life, business as usual, except now, the guilt of leaving my grandmother behind had been marinating in my mind for several days. Of course, I knew our relationship would never quite be the same as it was back in the good ole days of my childhood; there would be no more puppet shows, no more Shrinky Dinks, and no more bottomless pits of marshmallows, but there had to be something I could do to make up for twelve years of lost time with my grandmother. I just couldn't let the growing gap between us become a hopeless abyss.

As I tried to stay awake in my 8:00 A.M. statistics class, the answer came to me. Instead of plotting the geometric distribution of a null hypothesis, I started plotting how I could slowly start to amend the broken relationship with my grandmother. I decided I would start calling her on a weekly basis just to chat and catch up about life. True, it was a simple action, but I thought even this small act was a step in the right direction. I pictured my phone call to be like the story of the prodigal son: the lost granddaughter finally returning home and receiving praise from the entire family, even after such a long absence, and all I had to do was dial seven simple little digits.

Leaving class, I headed back to my dorm room, excited to catch up with my old friend. I plopped myself into the sitting chair in my room and dangled my toes over the armrest, just as I had done when I was little, and I called the landline of my favorite place on Dixie Drive. The phone rang once... silence. The phone rang twice... still no answer. The phone rang a third time, and finally, a confused, "Hello?" answered on the other end.

"Grandma!" I chimed in, enthusiastically, "It's Reesie!" There was a pause.

"Uh, no..." the voice answered, "This is your Aunt Lisa..."

"Oh..." I replied, a little taken aback, "Is Grandma there?"

Another painstakingly long pause.

"Um..." my aunt hesitated, "No..." her voice trembled.

I waited for my aunt to finish her thought or tell me when I could call back, but she gave me nothing but dead air on the phone. Finally, I broke the awkward silence and prompted her,

"Do you know when she'll be back home?"

"Well..." my aunt said sheepishly, "I don't think Grandma will be home for a while..."

More dead air.

“H-Have you not heard what happened?” my aunt asked with a tone of surprise. She was picking up on my cluelessness, and I was picking up on her concern.

“Uh...No...” I answered, cautious to hear what “what happened” entailed.

“Grandma’s in the hospital.”

Both ends of the phone fell silent for a while. My heart sunk to the pit of my stomach.

“W-...Wh-...What?”

I managed to spit out in my complete state of shock.

“She called this morning,” my aunt replied wearily. “She thought she was having a heart attack.”

The words lingered in the air and surrounded my mind in a haze. They cut like a knife. My grandmother had a deformed heart. After many heart problems, my family discussed the possibility of correcting her deformity with major surgery, but with her age, we decided the process was too risky. By opting out of surgery, we knew that ultimately, her heart would be her killer. Would today be that day?

The thought was morbid, but it was the only one that raged in my mind.

“Is-Is she gonna be okay?” I stuttered, both my heart and mind racing.

“We think so, but we’re not entirely sure. She started to stabilize a little after we got her to the hospital. But things are under control. Just go back to worrying about being a college kid. Your sister Francesca was here earlier, and your brother Lucas is on his way down right now. It’s going to be alright,” my aunt said, trying to assure me. I knew she was just telling me what I wanted to hear. Dejectedly, I hung up the phone, trying to process the tornado of emotions I had just experienced.

I started to pace the small, confined floorspace of my dorm like a maniac. The news about my grandmother was the main culprit for my anxiety, but as I was letting my aunt’s words sink in, I became furious. At least two of my four siblings were aware of our family emergency and were already rushing over to be by my grandmother’s side. What was worse was that my brother Lucas and I attended the same college, and he had already left with our shared car on campus without any contact with me. For all I knew, my grandmother could be dead, and no one even bothered to give me a phone call. I was left completely in the dark, totally blindsided, but no one seemed to think I

was important enough to know the news. I was left to find out the truth about my grandmother second-hand, frantically pacing around the confinement of a college dorm room.

Even though I was weary about my aunt's response regarding my grandmother's health, her predictions proved true: my grandmother was alright. The whole situation was a mere scare, and my grandmother was released from the hospital a few days afterward. Still, I was pretty shaken up about the entire experience. I realized how quickly my grandmother could have left my life. I wasn't ready for the last game of Aggravation. I wasn't ready for the final bow of my puppet shows. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to the shaggy orange carpet.

This scare should have prompted me to capitalize on any and all opportunities to reconvene with my grandmother. Strangely, though, I still have not yet found the courage to redial those seven little digits. I guess I'm too afraid someone else will pick up Shirley's phone again and give me an even worse response than what I received the first time. So I just don't call. I realized it was always my cowardice that kept me away from Dixie Drive for so many years. I may have convinced myself I was bombarded with homework, or I had practice, or I was too busy with friends. But the truth is, I had the time. I always had the time. I still have the time. But I just can't go.

As my grandparents are now in their mid-eighties, their health has been on an exponential decline. My grandfather suffers from a severe case of dementia, and his legs are so bad he can barely stand, let alone walk. He never knows what year it is, and I consider it a good day when he guesses my name correctly the first time. My grandmother is now feeble, but she refuses to use her cane in public because she doesn't want the rest of the world to perceive her as weak and elderly (even though she is eighty-three). Her house is lined with a tube of oxygen connected to her machine that snakes around the doorframes and walls, so she can use her oxygen tank whenever and wherever she needs it.

Whenever I go over to visit, our favorite activity is still the same as it used to be twelve years ago. I scavenge through her closet filled with every type of board game and pull out the classic Aggravation board. But now, instead of a cane, my grandpa comes sliding in very slowly, hunched over his walker. His much-too-long toenails still poke out of his favorite pair of blue,

plastic sandals, and his snow-white chest hair still manages to stick out of his beloved droopy white t-shirt. Now it's my grandmother who comes teetering into the dining room with her cane, struggling to walk across the room without getting physically winded.

We still keep the marbles in that ancient Sucrets container, and I am always green, Grandma blue, and Grandpa red. Our games remain in silence, but the ticking of the old grandfather clock is no longer soothing; it's a reminder that this time together is running out. Its daunting ticks have become louder and louder, and at times, it has become so distracting that I no longer want to play. And so I don't.

But I didn't stop playing because I grew tired of the game. I stopped playing because my grandparents are dying. And I was slowly witnessing it all occur. It breaks my heart to see my grandfather gradually withdraw from life, his eyes trapped in a gaze somewhere far off in the distance. It breaks my heart to see my grandmother huff and puff to do the simplest tasks, like walk to her refrigerator, teetering and tottering around like a top that's about to stop spinning. It breaks my heart that I hear the grandfather clock ticking, but I choose instead to stay away. How selfish can I be? They are the ones that are dying, but I am too uncomfortable to be with them when they need me most. Each day, they sit alone on Dixie Drive, waiting for someone, anyone, to come and keep them company. But most days, no one does. And I am no exception.

Just like Bruno, I have left them cold and lifeless in a dusty corner. For years. And I've been too selfish to realize it until now. When did Little Miss Reesie become so cold-hearted? When did a ticking grandfather clock become so menacing? When did the shaggy orange carpet go out of style? But maybe it's finally time to make the phone call. Maybe it's time find all the "Brunos" I left behind. Maybe it's time for just one more puppet show.