Teasing Twenty

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Teasing Twenty

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The walk from my car to the night club isn't far, but a bunch of street lights are out and my breath is freezing almost before I exhale. I'm meeting friends here but I'm less than thrilled. It's one of those "Black Hole," 18-and-over bars that suck in just about anyone and anything, and I'm walking right into it."

Cover Page Footnote
GRANDMA

by Bobbie Dillon

"How much longer?" she asked in a quiet, frail voice.

For eighty-four years she had answered the questions, and now she was asking me how much longer she would have to hold on, how much longer her life would last.

It was not asked in fear, or in a desire for the agony her life had become to continue. It was asked in strength and dignity, a quiet and frail dignity to be sure, but with honor and bravery seldom seen.

My grandmother was dying. She had found out less than two months before that she had an inoperable tumor in her esophagus. The tumor was cancerous and without treatment, terminal. The doctors gave her six to eight weeks to live and she had decided to forgo heroic
d treatment.

Her life was a full and healthy one. Married to the same man for 45 years until his death, she had raised two sons and had lived to see five grandchildren, twelve great-grandchildren, and one great-great-granddaughter.

Up until four weeks before her death she had lived by herself in the farmhouse she had come to as a young bride in 1923. Although she had never learned to drive, she was very independent, counting only on a ride to town once every two weeks to shop for her groceries.

Grandma had always enjoyed gardening, and the two large flower beds that enclosed her country home were always ablaze with a spectrum of perennial color from spring through autumn. She enjoyed reading and watching documentaries and was in constant touch with contemporary issues, always ready for a politically charged conversation peppered with her strong, traditional, yet surprisingly liberal opinions.

Of Irish descent, tea-time was strictly observed at her house. A hold-over from the days when she and Grandpa had a working farm, each afternoon everyone would stop working and gather for a cup of tea and a cookie. By far the most important element of this ritual was the conversation. A lost art, rekindled, carried out with ease and generosity to be relished and enjoyed.

But as her last days passed, the once strong and healthy body deteriorated and weakened. The woman I had always known and looked to for wisdom was slipping away, succumbing to the clutches of the disease that now filled her body.

Throughout it all, one thing remained unchanged: Grandma's dignity. She knew instinctively that she would not leave us until she had fulfilled her purpose. And before she would die she would teach us all one final lesson.

Death did not scathe Grandma. In fact, it was us, her family, that were frightened by the prospect of her
death. She was the fabric that held our family together, the constant to our changing lives.

Grandma had the ability to smooth over the rough times and make us see clearly just how important we were to each other, even when we would rather not admit it. Many of our relationships had been strained through the years, at times with one member of the family not speaking to another. Not Grandma. No matter how great or how small the mistakes we made, she found it in her heart to forgive us. And the one thing she wished above all was that we all would be happy; with our own lives and with each other.

In the end her wish came true, with our whole family rallying together to be at her side and offering support to one another. In her dying she taught us all just how invaluable family is and how much we need and depend in each other through the bond of our blood.

Hannah Bovill Young died on April 16, 1990, six weeks from the day her doctors had diagnosed her cancer. She left behind a family who loved her and will miss her deeply, but she also left us a precious gift—each other.

The walk from my car to the night club isn't far, but a bunch of street lights are out and my breath is freezing almost before I exhale. I'm meeting friends here but I'm less than thrilled. It's one of those 'Black Hole,' 18-and-over bars that stick in just about anyone and anything, and I'm walking right into it.

I'm at this age I like to call 'teasing twenty.' You know how it is. All your legal friends go out to real bars and ask you along as the designated driver. Or some lethally gorgeous man tells you that your eyes set him on fire until he learns that you can't slug down a tall cold one with him.

Anyway that's why we're here—for my sake. So my legal friends can hang out with me. Sure. Me and a hundred-plus other under-agers. Only on the ladder of legality they're on the first rung and I'm on the "WARNING: DO NOT SET OR STAND ON THIS STEP" spot.

The music sounds loud before I even reach the door. My hopes rise by degrees as I pull it open. The beat pulls me in, strong and steady. I am almost afraid I'll start dancing in line. As far as I know there is no legal dancing age.

The line is long and comprised of about what I expected. A group of gigglers in black spandex and bad perms made wore by bleach and hair spray are flitting with the bouncer. There is a cute boy in ripped jeans and cowboy boots in front of me looking real nervous. I bet myself he is 17 and has chucked his license for 18. My face turns the color of my Crimsonberry lipstick as I clutch my own license which indisputably states that I am 20. I can't bear to be so casually thrown into a category that begins with suckling infants and ends with myself. But the cold fact is, we're all under-agers.

The line moves up steadily until I am almost at the point of humiliation—the bouncer's chair.

This place is run tight. A man in a rented tux who looks like a model for Mellow Mail is walking down the line checking ID's and handing out "Last-responsible-for-my-own-actions-and-this-club-is-not" papers for the under 21's to sign. I feel like I should be sucking my thumb but I bite my nail instead. Cowboy boots in front of me gets his sheet.

As I reach the end of the narrow runway I try to inconspicuously hike up my black stockings. I hate elephant ankles. I am dressed all in black because I think it makes me look older. Apparently, so does Rent-a-Tux. He asks me how old I am and I don't lie. In fact, I tell him, "Just under 21." And maybe I bit my eyelashes.

At any rate the paper passes over me and to the short girl behind me with hair that gives her an easy extra four inches. She is dressed all in black too but I guess she doesn't look older.

Next I move toward the bouncer whose maximum lifting capacity I am convinced far exceeds his I.Q., and order a whiskey sour straight. The music sounds loud and the crowd, and am almost overwhelmed. I smell sweaty bodies and stale beer forever soaked into cheap carpeting. The music is so loud and strong I feel like it is pulsing within my own body.

I learn to adjust my eyes to the lighting and scan the crowd staring flashes from the strobe lights. I spot my friends on the fourth or fifth strobe and wonder why I'm not excited to show them my stamp. I want to stride right up to the bar and order a whiskey sour straight up in a loud voice. But I can't shake the nagging fear that my loud voice will be drowned out by the hearty sound of the bartender's laughter and the strident stanzas of the legal night life surrounding me.

I feel my imagination running away with me, and I feel like I will certainly run away with me, and I feel like I will certainly be caught in my foolish charade. Slowly I convince myself that Rent-a-Tux is an undercover cop who's setting me up.

My friends spot me and call me over and I join them. I am resigned to the fact that my stamp does not give me psychological security and I decide to resort to my old habit: give money to friend 'e' who gives

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it to bartender "y" who gives drink to friend "x" who passes it on to his illegal friend, me. It turns out even this is unnecessary, because I run into a really hot guy who is over 21 and doesn’t care that I’m not. I can only tear my gaze from his smile long enough to notice his great blue eyes. The strobes are intensifying them until it seems they will leap right off his face. As I sip the drink he buys me I wonder at the miracle of mutual attraction. All this time I was sure it only happened for every single other girl I’ve ever known. Suddenly I am jerked backwards and one of my inebriated friends catches me before I fall to the floor and risk death by trampling. He is half dragging, half carrying me to the dance floor, and all I can do is scream to Blue-eyes I’ll be back. I convince my friend to let me walk like a normal person, but when I reach the stairs leading to the dance floor I trip anyway. I have a bad feeling about this. My fears are confirmed as I survey the dance floor. A hundred or more sweating bodies are meshing together doing dance moves even Patrick Swayze would blush at. As my friend pushes me into the throng I immediately become just another sweaty body, and I imagine that all of my clothes have become see-through. I catch a whiff of Polo cologne so strong I actually feel faint. My friend has disappeared and as I turn to leave my escape is blocked by a group of three guys, and the one closest to me is wearing the bottle of Polo. His hair is greasy and curly and he flashes a toothy smile beneath a patch of carefully groomed peach fuzz. His breath smells like smoke and the combination is not appealing. He moves around me in a circle in a dance I’m sure he thinks is exotic, but his grinding hips and flailing arms make him look more like a drowning man than a sexy dancer. The strobes on the dance floor keep illuminating my forced partner like a bad dream, and suddenly I have a headache. I push through the crowd and down the stairs and take a good, deep breath. I find my friends again and search again between flashes of light—but this time I am searching for Blue Eyes. The back of my neck is damp and I realize the stamp on my hand is virtually “sweated” off. I feel like Cinderella in that when my stamp disappears a sign on my forehead will prominently display: ‘UNDERAGE DRINKER’ for all the club to see. I decide it’s time to leave. On my way out I spot one of Blue Eyes’ friends and try to sound casual when I ask for him. I find out that Blue Eyes had a lot of good things to say about me. I also find out that that was before he got thrown through the front window after a little disagreement at the bar. So much for mutual attraction. I hurry towards the door and Rent-a-Tux smiles at me. I try to smile back but all I can manage is a wild-eyed stare. As I speedwalk to my car I listen for sirens and of course hear none. The upper portion of the “V” and “R” still glow bright green on my hand. I wait for my car to warm up and wonder what it will be like to go out and just enjoy myself without worrying about what I am and am not old enough to do. I dream of the day when paranoid fears of undercover cops dressed in tuxedos will be a thing of the past, and I can hear “Bud Lite, please?” in my own voice—even if I don’t take a single sip. I notice with horror that now I smell like sweat and smoke and traces of Polo, and as I motor softly down the street, I think of two things: my warm bed waiting for me at home, and what good things Blue Eyes said about me before he made the Black Hole bigger.
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