

SEND IN THE CLOWNS

By
Cathi McLain

Lou surveys his paltry start at sorting and selecting the furniture, knickknacks, and art that he wants to take with him to his new apartment at Springridge Retirement Community for Active Seniors (with Continuing Care). No easy task. The house he shared with Hannah for 48 years, where they raised their two children, and lived a good life until cancer took over and she slowly faded away into death, is large and filled with their lifetime of belongings. He was six years older than Hannah and still can't understand how he has outlived her. He picks up a book, still sitting next to her side of the bed, the last book she read before she no longer had the strength. A folded sheet of paper falls out. It's a poem by Roger Fanning that he's unfamiliar with, but Hannah has underlined, *Who and what will I outlive? There's more here than one body's rocket ride and one hope for more life.*

He wonders what she was thinking when she noted that single line. Maybe she was leaving him a message, to keep on living. Without her to share it, it's hard to hope for more life, but he knows Hannah would have wanted him to keep up the effort, and he's trying. Mostly it's the memories that sidetrack his progress. So far, he's only managed to pull a few paintings from the living room wall and set them next to the furniture he will take with him.

He always refers to the new place as "The Home," knowing it will cause his daughter Julie, to retort, "It's not a home, Dad, it's a community of active seniors with continuing care. You'll have your own apartment and all your own belongings."

"I know, I know," he usually replies, knowing Julie is defensive about sticking him in an old folks' home. Lord knows they looked at enough of those country clubs for old people to know what all it offers. He chose Springridge because at least there seemed to be a few more men than at the other places, and his friend Hank is there, so their regular pinochle games can continue in the "nicely appointed game room." And the golf course at Charbonneau might entice him to pick up a golf club again. Hank's wife is still alive, so he's spared the inevitable onslaught of widows and divorcees who populate these communities and who seem to have built-in radar systems for single men over 75. Even during the walk-throughs the flirting was blatant and made Lou's skin crawl. He's already become adept at deflection. It started even before Hannah was cold in her grave. First it was the women from the Senior Center with their casseroles and

invitations to dinner, then the women from Hannah's church, which they only attended a few times in the past decade. He politely accepted the casseroles that he could heat up and eat in front of the TV—by himself—but resisted the invitations to dinner. “No sense getting their hopes up,” he always thought, unable to imagine being with another woman so soon after losing Hannah, or ever, if truth be told.

He shakes his head and laughs to himself when he thinks about Julie and her effort to fix things she can't fix by taking charge and trying to change his world. Hannah always joked about Julie and her know-it-all, “maven” mode. “Do you really think you can win this fight?” she always said, no matter what the topic. Unlike her brother Chuck, who lives in California and doesn't care to return to Oregon except in an emergency, Julie lives nearby, and they have Sunday dinner on a regular basis. She can't stand the thought of him rattling around this big house, missing Hannah. “You need to get out more, Dad. And we worry about you having to deal with all the maintenance, and what if you were to fall, blah, blah, blah...”

He had managed to humor her for the past year and a half by nodding his head and saying he'd think about it. But it soon became a broken record and he realized there was no winning this one. And besides, it *was* getting kind of silly to maintain this big house when he mostly lived in the kitchen and den, falling asleep in his recliner more often than in his own bed. The grandkids have outgrown their interest in sleepovers at Grandpa's, and it isn't as much fun to visit without Grandma here.

Now that the decision has been made, Julie and her husband Mike will manage the heavy lifting and packing, but they're leaving it to Lou to decide what he wants to take. Then they'll add a new coat of paint, re-arrange what's left and put the house on the market. Julie says it needs to be “staged,” so it'll be more appealing to buyers, whatever that means.

Back in the living room, he looks down at the largest of the paintings he has selected, their pride and joy, inherited from Hannah's parents and the first original they ever owned. It's a clown painting by comedian Red Skelton, worth a lot now, but less pricy back in the early 60s when Hanna's parents bought it. Its depiction of a smiling clown, holding a giant candy cane, caught their eye at a gallery and they ate casseroles and hot dogs for months to afford it.

Lou and Hannah loved clowns. They met when she came into the jewelry store where he was assistant manager, to buy a china clown figurine the store had advertised on sale. She was wearing a royal blue scarf that highlighted her blue eyes and set off her blonde hair. To his eye,

she radiated light, and he rushed to wait on her before the other salesman could even look up. They struck up a conversation and he admitted that going to the circus wasn't part of growing up Jewish in Brooklyn, but that he had been drawn to the bright colors and whimsical styles of clown art when he started ordering for the store. They got together later for coffee and discovered they had a few mutual friends and more than clowns in common. She invited him to attend the Ringling Brothers Circus when it came to town, and he was hooked—on the circus, and most certainly on Hannah. She introduced him to grits and other Southern style foods from her mother's Georgia childhood, and he took her to the only Kosher-style restaurant in Portland to experience matzo ball soup and kosher corned beef. They delighted in the differences in their upbringing and agreed it would just make life interesting. They were inseparable from the start and married three months after they met.

He tries to remember when their love of the circus turned into a bit of an obsession, turning their collections into a decorating style. It started with their honeymoon, in 1963. They didn't have much money, and just the weekend off for their honeymoon. They drove his old Plymouth to Seaside, 60 miles from their new little house in Oregon City and splurged on two nights at a low-end but clean motel. On their way back to Oregon City, they spotted posters advertising the Jensen Brothers Circus, a fundraiser for the Rotary Club in McMinnville.

“Oh, do you think we could go?” Hannah had asked.

“Sure, why not?” Lou replied.

It was a small circus company compared to Ringling Brothers, but it had the requisite trapeze artists, a few wild animals, and clowns. As they left the big top, they purchased one of the show's posters, showing a carload of clowns, for \$1.00. They had it framed and it became the nucleus for their collection. He has already added it to the small stack of things he wants to take.

Over the years Hanna became the perfect partner, scrimping and saving, always upbeat, and urging him to take the risk when he had a chance to buy into the jewelry store. It all generated the success that allowed them to buy this house and live a comfortable life together for 58 years. They must've had their ups and downs like every other couple, but as he sorts and reflects, he can't think of a single “down,” except for the last years when Hannah was plagued by a bad back that made her a little cranky, and of course the pancreatic cancer that overwhelmed their last year together.

He moves over to the curio cabinet, filled with their collection of circus and clown pieces. Music boxes shaped like circus tents, ceramic clowns piling out of tiny cars, clown heads, clown hats. He and Julie have agreed he'll select a few favorites and she'll sell the rest on eBay. "Brave new world," he thinks, wondering if anyone even collects clowns and circus memorabilia anymore.

He locates the clown Hannah bought the day they met. He reaches for it carefully. *Made in Japan* is printed on the bottom. He sets it on the end table near the other items he's taking to "The Home," marveling at how the world has changed since the clown was made, when *Made in Japan* often meant "cheap" and the store could afford to advertise this nicely made piece at a bargain price. He goes back to the cabinet, wondering what else he can take that means as much as that first one. He picks out two more ceramic clowns, ones the kids saved up to buy them for an anniversary or Christmas. He sighs, heads down to the basement, always referred to as the "Circus Room" by family and friends.

Flipping on the lights, he notices that the neon sign behind the bar advertising "Lou's Bar and Grill" is flickering and the "R" in grill has burnt out, so it reads "Lou's Bar and G ill." He looks at the rest of the room, decorated over the top in circus motif. Red shag carpeting, red and white stripes on the bar, with a circus tent canopy over it. The end tables are circular, painted with red, white and blue stars and stripes, originally part of the animal act in a circus that closed down. Circus posters line the walls. He closes his eyes and can almost hear the laughter and clinking of glasses from long-ago cocktail parties and kids' sleepovers. When he opens his eyes he realizes it all looks faded and tired now, and frankly ridiculous. But it seemed perfect at the time.

He surveys the space, realizing there's nothing down here that will fit into his new place, and turns to head back upstairs to face more sorting and more memories. As he reaches the top of the stairs, he hears Julie coming through the kitchen.

"Dad? Where are you? I brought more boxes. Is this all you're going to take?"

"Down here, Julie." Just seeing if there's anything down here that I want to take. I don't think any of this will fit." He slogs up the stairs, where Julie is looking at his paltry pile with dismay.

“Jeez, Dad! Is this all you’ve pulled? We’ll never get done at this rate. Do you want me to help you with this?” Lou is sure she’s itching to put it all in the donation box, but he appreciates her restraint.

“Sure, honey. I could use some help. I keep tripping down memory lane and can’t seem to get going. At least I’ve made a stab at it. You can try to sell the rest of the stuff in the curio cabinet on EBay and whatever doesn’t sell we’ll just find a place for at the “Home.”

“Dad, don’t call it that. It’ll be your home, but it isn’t a rest home.”

“I know, I know. I’m just messing with you. Give an old man a break. If I can’t have a sense of humor about this, I’ll slit my throat.”

“Oh, come on. Won’t it be good to get away from all the memories and start something new? You know Mom would want you to move on and be happy. And that’s all any of us want, right?”

“Sure, honey. I’m sure I’ll like it once all this sorting and packing is done and I’m moved in. Let’s work on the kitchen. I won’t be doing much cooking, but you can help me decide what I might need and what you want from Mom’s stuff.”

Together they finish sorting and packing, and Julie carefully boxes up the rejected clown and circus figurines to prepare them to sell on EBay. They fill boxes and bags with items to go to the Salvation Army, who will send a truck to pick up the excess furniture and boxes of stuff he can’t use in his small apartment. “Whole House Clean-out,” they call it, and he grits his teeth as he contemplates their removal of the remains of his life in this house.

By the end of the week, the house is emptied to the basics, and the movers come a few days later. Before he knows what’s hit him, he is ensconced in his new apartment. Julie has left him with the last boxes of his unsold figurines, which he has insisted on unpacking and arranging himself.

“Knock, knock!”

“Just a sec,” Lou says, kicking away the last of the boxes as he makes his way to the door, which is propped partly open with a box filled with newsprint from the ones he’s already unpacked. He pulls the door open, girding himself for yet another widow bearing food.

“Sorry to bother you, but I just wanted to bring you a little welcome gift. I haven’t been here that long myself and I know what a hassle it is to move. They’re oatmeal chocolate chip.

Oatmeal is healthier, and who doesn't need a chocolate fix, right? I'm Laura Grant, from apartment 321, across the hall."

"Oh, thanks. I guess I'm about ready for a break and oatmeal chocolate chip is just the ticket. I'm Lou Gordon," he says, offering his hand.

She sidles around the box, placing the dish of cookies on the kitchen counter and returning his handshake firmly. "Your apartment is shaping up nicely. Just a few boxes left, huh?"

"Yeah, my daughter and her husband were here all weekend hanging pictures and helping me get organized, but I wanted to save these last boxes of knickknacks for myself."

"Oh, my gosh! Is that an original Red Skelton clown painting?" she asks, sidestepping the last box to reach the wall where Lou's pride and joy hangs in the place of honor over the mantle of the little fireplace. "I have a signed print of this same painting! I can't believe you have the original!"

"Yeah, this was a big splurge for my late wife's parents. They found it in a gallery and couldn't resist it. They said they ate a lot of casseroles and beans to be able to afford it. Someone offered me \$20 grand for it when I had it appraised before I moved. My in-laws paid a couple of thousand, which seemed like a fortune back then."

"I know...we could never afford an original, but thought we'd really scored when we found our signed and numbered lithograph. It looks like you and your wife were into clowns," she says, eyeing the ceramic clown Lou was in the process of unwrapping when she knocked. "Me too! My husband mostly tolerated my fascination with clowns, but I think he got into it after a while. At least it made it easy for him to pick out gifts, right? He loved to find clown music boxes for me and I have at least a dozen. Small world, yes?"

"Yeah, Hannah and I were into clowns. We met when she came into the store I worked at to buy this piece on sale. She took me to my first circus and got me hooked... She had that effect on people."

"How long has she been gone?"

"A year last February. She died of pancreatic cancer. You?"

"Two years. Bob had Alzheimer's and was in memory care for a couple of years before that. Hell to watch someone you knew and loved for over 50 years forget who you are."

“Yeah, thank God Hannah never had dementia, but it was a bitch to watch her waste away. It’s hard no matter how they go, if you had a happy marriage ...” Wanda notices Lou’s eyes tearing up and moves over to the curio cabinet he’s almost finished filling with clown figurines.

“You have a nice collection. Each one different. I always loved that about the old-fashioned circus clowns. Each had his own distinctive make-up style and personality. No two alike. Some smiling, some frowning, some fat, some thin. Just like your paintings and knickknacks. I hate the way Steven King and his ilk turned clowns into something for horror stories, to be feared instead of bringing joy and laughter.”

“I know. The younger generations don’t seem to get it at all. My daughter tried to sell some of my collection on eBay and barely got a nibble on most of them. I had her pull them from the site, didn’t want to just give them away. I’m looking for a circus museum that might want them after I die.”

Lou leans over to pick up the last of the newsprint and stuffs it into the box, which he drags out to the hall for pick-up. Wanda starts toward the door and he notices for the first time how attractive she is, with dark eyes and olive skin, so different from Hannah’s blue eyes and fair skin. “Say, I think I still have some coffee left in the pot. Would you like to join me for a cup to go with these cookies?”

“Hey, that’d be great. I’d love to hear more about your circus collection.”