Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Funny, What We Treasure

Cynthia Ferrell · Wednesday, February 17th, 2021

This pandemic rang a crushed-velvet curtain down on our local, pint-size theater house. The owner posted on the box office window, “Lease This Charming Space!” Nobody bit, and it may be another eight months before neighbors mount the next enthusiastic production and belt away to tinny orchestras. I won’t be with them – I had my pre-virus fill of the prop man fluffing my Glinda gown, and of Charlie the Anvil Salesman, whose acting choices yanked my ice cream social dress open to my waist and launched my Marian wig five feet to plop on the stage like a dead terrier.

Not that I’m prudish. I mean, there was that day on Melrose Avenue when all of Los Angeles ogled my chest.

Cleavage versus clothing?

No, something much more eye-catching: an old wooden toy. That day I juggled against my bosom a rickety antique doll carriage thirty-six inches stem to stern and ungainly as heck to tote.

The toy already qualified as ancient when I scored it as a kindergartener from the rafters of my grandfather’s Fresno garage.

I remember my Papa’s eyes laughing. He said, “You don’t play with dolls.”

Okay, but I wanted that horse-drawn carriage anyway. He fetched the buggy down and brushed off cobwebs.

New, the low-slung, four-wheeled buggy must have glowed. Forelegs of twin buckskin horses stretch down to two eight-inch bentwood front wheels. Tiny hand-hewn nails anchor each spoke. Rear wheels measure ten inches tall and sport tin hubcaps. Painted blinkers and bridles adorn the galloping steeds. Small holes tell of real leather reins that once reached from each black harness to a red box seat decorated with gold swirls. From that seat, slender bars arch a full two feet up to the turned push handle.

Just an antique doll carriage

On Melrose Avenue, the faded doll carriage bore scuffs and chips from a century and a half. The reins were missing and part of a floorboard, too. Add a freshly snapped push bar – I’d tripped over the thing in the dark – and “firewood” seemed an apt descriptor. But I loved the toy once. So now I was on my way to an antique fix-it shop and, Los Angeles parking scarce, I lugged the busted

buggy a good three city blocks on foot.

Pedestrians gawked. Some pointed and waved. Drivers actually slowed down. I clutched the thing tighter and tighter.

Funny, what we forget to treasure

1877, a small midwestern girl locked eyes on this carriage, tucked under the town Christmas tree. The bright, painted buggy had to be hers, but couldn't be hers. Just one gift per child sat there, no holiday trees with gifts at home, no coddled dairy farmers' kids in Waverly, Iowa. Still, the little girl clung to the Methodists' wooden pew and barely breathed and the floor under boughs cleared and finally only she and the carriage remained.

Some ninety years later my great-grandmother Mary told me, "I just could not believe it was mine."

How her buggy landed in my hands is a study in industrial revolution, but also social evolution. Flip the carriage over and you'll find the name of the artist – her father – penciled on the bottom side.

Back to that no coddling

Mary was a middle child with six siblings. But unlike the rest, she woke in the night with whole poems in her head. She taught herself to play a small orchestra's worth of instruments. She painted and painted and painted, and her father funded her stay at a school for the arts and set her large oils in gilded frames. All of this ticked off her four sisters – when their father died, they deducted the frames' cost from Mary's inheritance share.

If teenage Mary thought all men doted, that shoe dropped at sixteen. Her spouse was cut from starchy religious cloth: No dancing, no card playing, no makeup, no socializing outside church. And maybe Mary grew starchy, too. Nine years passed before she birthed her first, my Papa, and ten more years before daughter Eliza arrived and that was the end of procreation, a statistical break from the past. When the entire clan and their herds decamped to California in 1900, Mary took her childhood painter's palette and doll buggy with her. She milked cows and decapitated chickens in Fresno, and made do when wells went dry. She rode sidesaddle – but when her husband bought one of the very first Fords, she taught herself to drive it while he was away.

After he died, Mary bought bright red lipstick and wore it every day from then on.

DNA, Cars and Discards

Internal combustion engines fueled destiny: My Papa forsook cows for cars. He chased mechanic jobs, married, replicated the two-child limit. When his tiny wife nearly died giving birth, he announced he would be using condoms, and if those failed, they'd head to the abortion clinic south of town.

DNA bullies through, of course. My mother, their eldest, majored in design and married my father, a writer/artist who played the stand-up bass. Together they created an artist, a writer and two musicians. As for Mary, she lived well into her nineties. I remember her little dark parlor filled with sheet music, and her painter's palette dotted with colors gone to concrete.

Funny, what we treasure. What we repair or don't. What we discard.

Mary discarded a grandson, Lawrence.

World War II approached, my young mother and her sister fretted the draft would take their cousin Lawrence. their father told them, "No, the military takes only take men" – which left the girls mystified. Eliza's piano-playing second son himself had no idea what "homosexual" meant as he left for college, met a girl and proposed.

The bride, though, caught on. No wedding happened, Mary turned her back, and though years later Mary and Lawrence reconnected to a degree, Lawrence's beloved elder brother never spoke to him again and Lawrence attempted suicide.

Oh, what garages hide

I turned forty before I met Lawrence. I'd heard rumors: A 60-something dazzling pianist who shacked up with some unnamed male music professor. But one December a chance glimpse at an aunt's worn phone book showed Lawrence once lived – and maybe still did – in all the world two miles from me.

Family down the road? Beyond comprehension. The street address all I had, I drove over, climbed out of my car and knocked on a teal door.

The man who called out from the garage/record album vault was skinny-legged, pot-bellied, bald and fey, and his eyes looked just as I remembered Papa's. I stuck out my hand and declared our relationship.

He stuttered.

I asked him to a family dinner.

He said no.

I made him take my phone number. I never once considered he might not want to meet me.

What is it like to hide from family for two-thirds of a life? To have rock-bottom expectations, to see in relations only starch, pews and backs, and then a blundering cousin shows up on the doorstep? I'm lucky he took a chance at all.

The man came to dinner

He did find courage, he did come over. He chain-smoked, jumpy through dinner, stayed until midnight and came back the next morning for bagels. Later, he said he'd telephoned the aunt, checking first if I knew he was gay, and would I think that okay.

A year later, I got a call to audition at our little local theater house. I had no suitable sheet music, but, hang on, I did have somebody with artistic DNA. I drove down the street and found Lawrence in his cobwebby garage, eyes like my Papa's, puffing on cigarettes, nearly entombed by a hundred-thousand record albums. He clambered onto my passenger seat and ten minutes later, we burst into the audition room.

I declared, “This is my Cousin Lawrence.”

The rehearsal pianist moved aside, Lawrence rippled through a Gershwin introduction from memory, I sang. Producer, director, music director, they watched me, they watched me, they – watched Lawrence. Before I even finished, the three turned fully sideways to the piano.

The music director said, “I don’t know about her, but he’s in.”

And the producer said, “I need a Cousin Lawrence.”

COVID rampant, Lawrence and I don’t visit each other now – his old cigarette habit left his lungs in scary enough shape. His home, though, is bright with Mary’s paintings and despite all that wounded, he treasures them. They hang on his walls in the gilded frames her sisters envied. One oil is of a perfect pink rose. Another: three dogs on the scent in an Iowa field.

Two miles up the road? That’s where the antique doll carriage stands – a rickety heirloom, sure, but then again, I scored treasure from a garage and gilt’s not my style.

[Lewis family doll buggy. Photo by Cynthia Lewis Ferrell.]