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U N K

Memoir by Cynthia D. Blakeley

Childless, cranky, and indulgent, my great-uncle Clyde lived alone in a cinderblock home in Ashland,

Massachusetts, a cement and tarpaper eyesore he stopped working on the day his second wife, Persis, died of colon cancer in 1964.

"She'd be alive today if it wasn't for the damn doctor," Clyde wrote me 20 years later. "When I got his bill, I took it to his office and told him where he could shove it." With the letter, Clyde enclosed a photo of my aunt, a pigeon perched on her head and a shy smile on her face.

Losing the heart of his home, Clyde strung up sheets in place of doors, left the cinderblock uncovered, the windows untrimmed. Sheets of plastic covered insulation stuffed between two-by-fours in the guest bedroom. No one used the front door facing the street; there was a four-foot drop between the threshold and the ground. For two decades, sheetrocked walls stood primed and waiting.

When my sisters and I were young, the first thing Uncle Clyde did after arriving on one of his many unannounced visits was to ferry us to the First National Grocery on Route 6. He'd let us load up on bags of potato chips, pretzels, and six packs of Coke, treats seldom found in mom's shopping cart. Then he'd drive us to Wellfleet Harbor and, if it was tourist season, buy us ice cream cones at the Harbor Freeze, where I later spent two summers mixing frappes and watching boat traffic. We adored him.

Clyde was a cab driver in Lowell during the Depression, a streetcar conductor, and later owned a gas station in Detroit, carting boxes of contraband candy bars to my mother, his niece, in Tewksbury. The last and longest job he held was as a machinist at Dennison Manufacturing, a paper products company in Framingham.

When my great-uncle visited Wellfleet, he'd bring an endless store of Dennison paper products, such as donut-shaped stickies to go over torn notebook paper holes, gummed shipping labels with bright red bor-

ders, tabs we used to organize our school work, and all manner of stationery and folders. During the summer, he never walked through our door without grocery bags filled with zucchini, tomatoes, cucumbers, or carrots from his garden. During mom's 15 years hostessing at the Wellfleet Oyster House, Clyde often visited her at work, sipping blackberry brandies until mom knocked off around 11 pm. He was a favorite among the waitresses, who laughed at his corny repartees and caught flashes of his gruff appreciation.

After I graduated from high school in 1976, Clyde wrote me letters wherever I went. He'd tell me the garden news, share bits of family gossip, complain about his sister Bertha, my grandmother. "The farther away I stay from her the better," he typed. "She's always so goddamn right."

When I was sick, my great-uncle would send me things like "Ten Healthful Foods" typed on the back of a scrap of pink and white wrapping paper. Although he lived on a tiny Social Security check, Uncle Clyde sent money for Thanksgiving, birthdays, Christmas, and travel home. He often scrawled "SWAK" along the edge of the envelope flap. It took me years to figure out the initials meant "Sealed With A Kiss." When he heard my sister wanted a divorce but couldn't afford the lawyer fees, he wrote a check "to get rid of the lousy bum."

Clyde always wore the same clothes: a flannel plaid shirt, a nubly gray cardigan, and green twill pants most of the year,

changing to a short-sleeved polyester blend when the heat hit. He loved gadgets, and was a fool for mail-away offers of any bit of plastic or metal promising trouble-free efficiency. He immediately set to fixing things whenever he stayed with us. He replaced windowpanes my half-brother David shot out with his bb gun, rebuilt stairs and fiddled with faucets, sorted my mother's embroidery threads.

When he had nothing to tinker with, Clyde sat at our kitchen table and twiddled his thumbs. I'd sometimes walk in on him there, light falling and Clyde's small, blue eyes gazing into the distance, thumbs tumbling over each other in endless chase.

When a child, I liked to climb onto my great-uncle's lap and walk my fingers over

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his face. He had a nose as large as Jimmy Durante's and a mimic's humor. I'd prod his cheeks and gray stubble until he made a sudden snap toward a finger that ventured too close to his mouth, frightening me into a laugh. I hated to kiss Uncle Clyde, though. His thin lips were pink and wet. They quivered, as if they had no outer skin. It was like kissing a scallop.

Clyde long smoked the most powerful stick of all: filterless Camels. They were as stubborn a fixture of his life as the two soft-boiled eggs he ate every morning. Although he growled until the end that "cigarettes never did me any harm," Clyde survived a stroke and was diagnosed with lung cancer in his mid-80s. Death notice in hand, he looked toward my mother in Wellfleet. She invited him home.

It was the winter and spring of 1987, when I was 28 and living at home for the first time since graduating from high school. My mother gave Uncle Clyde her bedroom on the ground floor, and she moved upstairs to the large pine room, displacing Ted, a long-term boarder. Ted, who survived on odd, menial jobs demanding what he called "Chase Manhattan hours," hunkered down in my old bedroom in

the cellar. It was a dank, dark space crawling with earwigs, but it was the only sleeping spot left in the house and Ted, who rumor had it had walked to Wellfleet from who-knows-where off Cape, had no place else to go.

Clyde hated Ted. "I can't stand that son-of-a-bitch," he'd mutter when Ted walked in for his eighth or ninth cup of coffee.

One morning Clyde yelled, "Ted, get over there and empty the rubbish!"

Ted, peering into the closet, said, "Clyde, it's only half-full."

My uncle struggled out of his chair, hobbled around the house and emptied every trash basket he could find into the closet. Fifteen minutes later, Clyde hollered, "Ted, that god-damn rubbish is overflowing!"

One morning early in his stay, Uncle Clyde walked into the kitchen where my mother, who never saw the sunrise side of nine if she could help it, was fixing a pot of coffee and slicing a Portuguese muffin.

"You've got a ghost in this house," barked Clyde.

"I know that, Unk," answered Mom, rubbing her nose. "But I've never seen it. I wish I would."

Clyde sat at the kitchen table and waited to be served. "I woke up in the night and it was standing at the foot of the bed."

"What'd you do?"

"I yelled, 'Get out of here!' Then I closed my eyes."

Mom popped a laugh.

"A few minutes later I opened my eyes and the damn ghost was still there. So I said, 'Get *the hell* out of here!' I closed my eyes again, and when I opened them, it was gone."

I don't know how Uncle Clyde felt about his encounter, but I do know he spent his last days and hours retracing the one ghost he cared about: Aunt Persis. "You know what love is?" he asked me, lifting his trembling, gray head off his pillow. "It's an itch on your heart you can never reach."

"Roll over, Unk, and let me rub your back," I said. I reached for a gadget he'd ordered through the mail, a hand-held heat massager I could plug in and slide over his dry, emaciated back. Murmurs of relief and comfort seeped into his pillow. After a few minutes he turned toward me and said, "You know what I'd really like?"

"What?"

"Pork chops."

I laughed, and a few days later picked up a couple of center-cut chops after work in Orleans. I got home and yanked a cookbook off mom's messy bookshelf.

This can't be right, I thought. Fry them at high heat first? I didn't know about searing, so I kept the heat low and dished up the toughest pork my great-uncle's false teeth had ever attacked.

"Too sick to eat this," he muttered, pushing the meat

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around with his fork. Too kind to tell me my cooking was abysmal.

Clyde was more direct with mom. "I wish to hell I could get something decent to eat in this house," he snapped one afternoon.

"Unk, I've been driving myself crazy trying to think of things you might eat," said mom. "What would you like?"

"Liver and a can of wax beans."

Mom held her nose and dished it up with a side of boiled potatoes. Clyde, stomach shriveled, took two bites, shook his head, and left the table.

"How about making me a batch of California chicken?" he asked a month before he died. Uncle Clyde gave mom the recipe: tuna fish, noodles, and cream of mushroom soup. Soft and comforting. Mom baked a huge dish, planning to freeze smaller portions for nights she'd be hostessing at the Oyster House and Clyde would need a quick meal.

She set the dish on the table and called Clyde. Shuffling in, he took a look at the oversized casserole and said, "You've got another thing coming if you think I'm going to eat that until the day I die."

Clyde's doctor on the Cape had warned us that my great-uncle's last moments would be ugly, drowning on his own fluids. But it was life Clyde railed against, not death. "Goddamn it, if I had a gun, I'd kill myself now," he'd say. When mom set up a portable commode next to his bed, Clyde barked, "Take the damn thing away. I'll never use it." Spectral but determined, he shambled to the bathroom and took care of business until the day he died.

It was early July 1987, and although he was weak, we didn't expect Clyde to pass when he did. Six of us happened to be at home: my mother, yet to leave for her day job with the Meals on Wheels program; my sister Thelma, normally behind a machine in a leather goods fac-

tory; Nana, who had hopped off a puddle jumper in Provincetown two months earlier to help nurse her brother; my sister-in-law; Clyde's hospice worker; and myself. I'd called in sick when I heard Clyde's guttural, gasping breaths, knowing the end was suddenly upon us.

We fastened an oxygen mask over Clyde's over-sized nose and thin, cracked lips, streaked with white. We propped his sunken, translucent body onto pillows piled high. Clyde began to breathe more calmly. We six women circled his bed, touching Clyde's wasted shoulders, holding his earnest hands, massaging his bony feet. In urgent, tender tones, one of us said, "It's all right to let go, Clyde."

Another, "You can quit fighting."

A third, "We love you, we're all here, you can go."

My sister-in-law, undaunted by Clyde's atheism, said loudly and clearly, "Move toward the light, Clyde. Persis is there."

Clyde nodded, hearing us

but unable to speak. We held on, suspended with him during the long, still pauses between exhalations. In his last minute, my uncle's pale blue eyes brightened and focused on a spot through and beyond us. We caught the shift in an instant, recognizing his foot at the threshold, the anticipation coursing his wrecked frame.

Bitterness evaporated. Clyde's connections shifted, as if we were falling away and something else streaming in. Were his unwavering eyes on the form of the woman he loved? Clyde lifted his head slightly, almost smiling, and stopped.

How is it a death can feel like a birthing? None of us had expected the passing of our cantankerous uncle to unfold in such a sacred manner. We looked down at his

motionless form in wonder.

I hopped on my bike and pedaled to the beach, keenly alive. I sat on a dune, cried, looked out over the water. Clyde's spirit expanded to fill the sky, from the horizon to endless blue. For half an hour it filled me, then whooshed in a last goodbye towards and beyond bursts of clean cloud. ▼

