

THE GIFT

by Robbin Thompson

If you run into my Aunt Lucille, put your head down and keep walking. If she starts talking to you, hum, or get in touch with your inner mantra.

Lucille has a big head. It bobs when she talks and those hooded blue eyes, mostly covered by pink eyelids now, they see something the rest of us, even the most famous diagnosticians, can't see. She knows when a person is going to die. She knows when a fatal disease is heading your way and when a deadly recurrence is just around the corner. And she doesn't keep it to herself.

She told my best friend, Mary Lou Pierce, told her point blank, don't bother taking Muffin to the vet. This cat won't last 24 hours. Don't waste your money. And sure enough, that night, during Double Jeopardy, Muffin died peacefully in Mary Lou's arms.

I go to great lengths to avoid Aunt Lucille. My health has been iffy lately, and if there's a sad scenario in my future, I'd rather not know about it. So when I saw her in the A&P, I pretended to study the rows and rows of healthy breads, as her walker thumped my way. She tapped me on the shoulder and said, "How are you, Patty?"

I reminded myself to say little and look perky. While her head bobbed and her eyes looked me over, I saw them sweep over my innards, my spleen, my heart, my lipoids.

"I'm terrific. Just wonderful. Full of energy. Oh, dear. There's my phone. You can't hear it ring; it just vibrates," I said, while her eyes bored through me.

"Excuse me," I said, as I bent over my dead phone, turning away from her.

"Oh hi Polly. Yes, he signed the contract? I don't believe it."

Ok, I overdid it a bit, and I suspect Lucille knew the phone was dead. But I was determined to go on, however long it took, until I heard her thump her way down the aisle.

As a kid, I didn't take her, or what our relatives call her gift, I didn't take it seriously. I thought it was a joke, an exaggeration or a weird coincidence. But in my junior year, home for Thanksgiving, watching my Dad, my brothers, my cousins, play touch football on the lawn, I overheard Aunt Lucille tell Aunt Betsy, "Marvin will be dead in six months. Maybe less."

Now Marvin is, was, my dad. My dad was in perfect health, an athletic guy, not yet fifty. He died five months later of a heart attack in the arms of a Marine. But that's another story.

"Look at it this way," my Lithuanian lover said to me, as we dressed for the annual dinner of the clan at Aunt Lucille's home. That big gabled affair with the mansard roof on Franklin Avenue. "Cancer isn't fatal anymore. It's a chronic disease. You're going to be fine and the way you're dressed is ridiculous."

"Easy for you to say," I said as I evaluated my outfit in the floor length mirror. I hoped it would come off as a kind of Annie Hall look, but my floor length skirt, my man's shirt and large vest was designed to protect me from Aunt Lucille's gift.

He looked at me looking at myself in the mirror and sighed. "You're crazy if you let Lucille get to you. She's an old hag who craves power."

That night, during dessert, Aunt Lucille asked Uncle Bill when was the last time he had a colonoscopy. The poor man died from a cancerous polyp four months later.

I don't know what, if anything, Aunt Lucille said to the Lit about my health, but two weeks later, he left me. Moved to L.A. Said he was offered the opportunity he'd worked for his whole life, to be the road manager for the come-back tour of The Captain and Tennille. But I knew it was my cancer that booked the transcontinental flight-flight. "How did this happened to me?" I asked Mary Lou. "I used to Xerox my face at work when I was bored. As a kid, I'd put my feet into those shoe store x-ray machines and wiggle my toes. Everyday on the way home from school. Once, in a fit of despair, I ate my whole birthday cake before the party. Next day, not a tummy ache, not a

pimple, just cancer three years later.”

Mary Lou said, “Honey, it wasn't the birthday cake, the x-rayed feet, the Xeroxed face, or that disgusting raw cookie batter you eat: it's a gene thing.” She reassured me until her eyes glazed over.

“Patty,” she said to me one day, “talk about something else.”

But I couldn't turn it off. For months I couldn't stop wondering, will it spread? Are those tiny red juju beads mutating, doing their circle dance inside one of my favorite organs right this minute. Mary Lou couldn't take it anymore; no one could.

“Get over it,” she said and she meant it and eventually I did. And knowing myself as I do, it's not surprising I went a bit in the other direction, determined not to think about health, defying the Gods, looking mortality right in the face, lighting up a Marlboro. It goes so well with a dry martini and a little cookie batter before bedtime.

There's a time of year when it's easy to forget the horrors of the winter past. It's the time of year when the yellow tail butterfly flies into impossibly green branches. About two weeks before the Monarchs make their debut. The time when the patio is alive with the sounds of crinkling leafy rubbings, a light breeze, branches brushing tall hedges, the persistent twit of a frantic mother robin is heard in the distance. A poet would go on about the dappled morning light, and indeed the white dots of sun light were playing around my half-shaded knees. OK, I'd been drinking that morning on the patio, but so what, I thought, these are days you live for, before the first angry red leafed branch flags you down, way down, on the highway. It was the kind of morning when you put cancer, the lying Lithuanian, and all concerns over your carbon footprint on the back burner that runs on vegetable oil.

“It's a bit early to be drinking don't you think?”

I looked up and saw Aunt Lucille thumping her way up to the flagstone patio.

“It's bit early to making unannounced calls,” I said, “would you like to join me in a drink?”

I never heard her old Mercedes drive up, never heard James open her door and help her out—yes, her chauffeur is named James, you

can't make this up.

"My Lord, it's 8:30 in the morning and yes, today I could use a drink, a G & T if you have it and I like lots of lime. It's the lime that makes it. I came over today because I have something important to say to you."

My hands were shaking as I brought out the drinks, and some chocolate croissants on my Grandmother's silver tray. My fingers were covered with little red slits, cutting up that lime was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I knew why Lucille was here. And me, in my pink bikini. Never more exposed.

She said nothing; I said nothing. It was hard to breath. I felt clots forming in my veins. I felt my carotid artery sputtering. I took a long drink. I mean a long, long drink of my vodka with just enough organic Omega 3 cranberry juice to add color.

She sipped her drink. I stamped out my Marlboro, lit another and filled my lungs with comforting smoke.

Her drink was almost gone when she said, "I like this neighborhood. Gated communities, brilliant idea, how else will you keep the riff-raff out?"

"Actually, this is Mary Lou's house, I'm just renting until...would you like another drink?"

"Patty?"

"Yes?"

"Don't expect any money from me."

"Sure. Fine."

"Don't be smart."

"I'm not. I don't expect anything. Honestly."

"I'm leaving it all to the Lucille Benner Boreal Foundation."

"Good choice," I said, watching the smoke curl out of my mouth.

"Now listen to me, Patty."

She pulled herself out of the rocker and grabbed on the arm of my chair for support. Lucille put her face right into my face. Nose to nose. Something I hate.

Then she poked me in the ribs. Something I really hate.

"Are you listening to me, Patty?"

"Yes, m'am."

"Good. You are one healthy lady and don't you forget it. If you don't self-destruct, you'll live for a long time, probably longer than you want to. Of course accidents are out of my jurisdiction, so drive carefully, and for God's sake smarten up. It's unseemly. There isn't a thing in the world wrong with you. Well, I've got a lot to do today." She looked around my patio. "Beautiful. Just beautiful, I really hate to leave on a day like this, but it can't be helped."

I stood up, a bit wobbly and called after her, "God Bless you, Aunt Lucille."

"Well, we'll soon know about that won't we?"

And she lowered her hooded eyelids and disappeared into her Mercedes.

