

Gather Round

by Todd Maupin

When they first brought me home, I was their pride and joy. That phrase is overused, trite, but it was still true in this case. They could not get enough of me, their prized possession. It was like they were glued to me. Not a sticky situation, just sweet and warm euphoria. Others visited and were in awe of me as well.

Everyone wanted to peer at me closely, to touch me, to savor how I felt upon their fingers, to feel the warmth I emanated. I had that newborn glow that could even be perceived in a dark room.

Some time passed and my newness seemed to be wearing off. While I was still the center of attention, the excitement had wavered. Maybe they felt some resentment for the sleep they had lost while attending to me, or the time they devoted to me while other commitments in their lives started to lag behind. Callousness, selfishness, call my attitude about this what you like, but I felt no guilt about it. They could have just ignored me, left the room, and spent their time elsewhere. I was not asking for their attention. I was not craving it. So long as they continued to satisfy my meager needs. And they always did.

Okay, I took them for granted. I admit that. No one had taught me anything yet, least of all how to appreciate others.

One day, they put me in this wooden box. Don't worry, I was not asphyxiated or smothered. There was still airflow and I could still see out, if that is any consolation for you. It was for me. They had just as easy access to me as before, just now I was more protected and I had been granted a little independence. They adorned my box with some decorative things but I was still the centerpiece.

More time passed, and we had adapted to each other. I had my routine and they had theirs. We spent our time together, mostly in the mornings and the evenings, then they let me sleep and I let them sleep. We had a routine and it worked. We had our moments and we worked it out.

We grew together. We advanced. I was discovering things about life in this vast world, and they learned from me too. I was a source of contentment, pleasure, exasperation, irritation, sadness, delight, bewilderment, humor, and sometimes disgust. None of this was my fault or to my credit. I had no filter, no morals. All they got from me was non-negotiable, a package deal.

Sometimes they would talk to me as though they expected an answer from me that I could not provide. Or they would talk about me like I was not even there, like I could not hear them. Just because I could not articulate my feelings did not mean I was bereft of these. I was always paying attention to the information being exchanged, even if they were not. I learned all about people, animals, weather, other places, even outer space. The world was a fascinating place.

One day, they moved me into another room. Just like that. Without any fanfare, nor apologies. Not even a signal. Lucky me, I had my own room now. The walls were different, as was the furniture, but the location was not as central. I felt separated from the major events happening in the house. I no longer witnessed everyone who came to visit, unless they came specifically to my room. For the others, and maybe even my own family, my novelty had waned. More notably this time.

None of this bothered me, or affected me all that much. I had a carefree actuality. There were still flashes of quality time. I had not been completely abandoned. This was just the part of evolving in a

family. What really hurt was the day they replaced me with a newer specimen.

Suddenly, I was no longer cute and charming, or my quirks - abruptly - were not as endearing. For a while, not much changed for me. The new iteration, the new blood - my nemesis - had my old room. It usurped me to become the focal point, the everything - their everything - the piece de resistance. For me, resistance was futile. All I could do was tolerate and hope for any precious time I could get. These were occasional moments of pity when someone would remember me and what I had to offer, what I could still offer.

As much as it may hurt, I might have welcomed a candid explanation as to why they had sought fulfillment elsewhere. No one ever took me aside for this. I had merely been set aside, tuned out. They had switched to another wavelength.

Perhaps what they wanted was more control, more room to manipulate, and this is what my replacement could offer them. I refuse to refer to this interloper as the new me or the next me. However, I knew. I could sense it; the hurt was palpable. This new addition was not a surrogate, not a consolation prize, not a Macguffin. This was the real McCoy, and if I was not just a decoy, I had become a passing distraction, at best.

Sometimes, when they left open the door to my room, and the rest of the house was silent, I could hear it carrying on, as I used to, the noises it made, attracting their attention, their compassion, even their aggravation. All as I had once provided for them, back when they still attended to me.

Maybe, reading this, you knew it was coming, but I did not. How could I have known? There is a first time for everything and this was all uncharted territory for me. So, when I was demoted - again - to a new room, it was a surprise to me. Let's call it a shock. Surprise

denotes something positive and this was not. Out with the old, in with the new. Down I went. Really.

They put me in the basement. They hardly ever went down there. It was too cold. Too damp. Too dark. Too dank. And there were too many spiders. So I learned. If you had been a fly on the wall you would have learned about the spiders too. The hard way.

So there I was. Detached from the household, forgotten, stashed away like a shameful secret. I was the analogy that no one used. No one even came to see me, to humor me, to patronize me. I would have even accepted some antagonism, but I was not even granted that.

I told myself that it was not that they did not want me anymore. Then they just would have pulled the plug, right? It was just that I was not as plugged into their lives as I had once been. They had found a new outlet to expend their energy, other channels to arrive at satisfaction.

I do not know how much time passed. When I still had been part of the family, upstairs and among the living, there had been at least some indications of what day or time it was. I could mark the seasons if I paid attention. Down in the basement, there was no news, no weather, no family drama, no special events, nothing to laugh about, nothing to cry about. Not even a sporting chance. A chance for what? Down there, it was just me and the spiders. I don't know how long spiders live but not as long as me.

It's astounding. Time is fleeting. Madness takes its toll. But listen closely. I used my time, warped as it was, the existence that had become mine, to think. What else could I do, if not watch the spiders, and hope they did not climb on me? I remembered my quality time with the family, people coming and going, the sounds of animals, traffic, stories being told, holidays, the happy occasions and

even the sad moments. We had shared so much. If only someone would have paid rapt attention to me again. No, not the spiders. They do not count. I suppose they could count to eight, but this did not help me.

And then, one day, something happened. Verily something happened the day before, but that was just someone looking for a misplaced photo album. They found it. No thanks to me, or the spiders. Anyway, the next day was when things changed. Unceremoniously, I was moved back upstairs, to a new room.

New to me at least. The room had probably been around for a while but I had never been inside of it. This room was more colorful and kind of a mess, if I am being honest. It was lacking spiders though so that was a plus. There was a slight period of adjustment but then I was enjoying attention and a return to bonding. I was a renewed fixture in the family's life.

Together, we navigated mazes, solved intricate puzzles, chased mushrooms, rescued princesses - so many of these! - we fought off thugs with furious kicks and punches, battled and slayed dragons, fired lasers at aliens and spaceships, drove fast and crashed, or drove fast in circles. We played sports - all kinds of sports. There was frustration, there was failure, there was trial and error, but there was never a dull moment.

It was not quite like it was before, but it was still magical. The rabbit was out of the hat and my rabbit ears were no longer necessary. My role had changed but the channel never did. Channel 3 and the RF switch from here on out. I was set for life.

Copyright 2021 by Todd Maupin

