

honorable mention, non-fiction

Making My Day

by Kathleen Muldoon

Summers in Texas are brutal. I don't know why that came as a shock to me, seeing as I had moved here to escape the harsh winters in the northeast and to revel in the warmth of the southwest. I guess up until then I just had never really experienced hot! But as one triple digit day followed the next that first summer, I bemoaned the fact that I couldn't—wouldn't—wear shorts to help me deal with the heat.

Silly as it sounds, I continued wearing full length heavy slacks to mask my artificial right leg and deformed, brace-encased left leg to discourage what I believed would be the unwanted stares of strangers. I hid inside my burdensome layer of clothes, all the while praying for the courage to endure. Little did I know that the answer to that prayer would come in the form of a tiny, twisted lady named Clarabelle Sadler.

I heard of Clarabelle before actually meeting her. I'd found a small church where I felt comfortable and formally joined on Labor Day weekend. The service was followed by a potluck lunch in the parish hall.

"Where's Clarabelle?" I heard more than one person ask.

"I think she's visiting her cousin," someone volunteered.

"Have you met Clarabelle yet?" asked the lady behind me in the food line.

"I don't think so," I replied. "I've met so many people that I can't say for sure."

"You'd remember if you had," the woman assured me. "Hopefully she'll be back next week. You'll love her! She's quite a character."

'Character' didn't adequately describe the woman I met the following Sunday as she awkwardly walked behind the child-sized wheelchair she pushed up the center aisle. She stopped at each pew, smiling and waving at everyone. Clarabelle stood no higher than my shoulder. Her limbs and joints seemed frozen at impossible angles, a lifelong effect of cerebral palsy. When she reached my pew, the woman beside me introduced us.

Other than Clarabelle's initial "hello," I couldn't understand a word of the garbled sentence that followed, which she punctuated with a hearty laugh.

My pew mate laughed too. "Clarabelle says 'welcome to the sweatbox.' She said she'd be glad to race you after the service."

Clarabelle and I began to grow a friendship that fall. It took several weeks for me to "tune in" to her speech, but as time passed I no longer needed an interpreter.

"I know I don't talk so good," she told me early on. "If you don't understand something I say, just ask me to repeat it."

Clarabelle's obvious physical challenges made mine pale by comparison. The more I learned about her, the more my admiration for her grew. She lived quite close to me, and soon I was visiting her at the home her parents had left to her, where she now lived alone. What a life she'd carved for herself!

An only child, Clarabelle was taught independence at an early age. Since mainstreaming of handicapped children into the public schools had not yet occurred, she attended the Eloise Japhet School for Crippled Children in San Antonio. Career opportunities were limited for young physically challenged people before the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. After graduation, many simply lived at home to be cared for by family. Others were institutionalized.

Not Clarabelle! She held onto her quest for independence by establishing her own greeting card sales business which she ran from her home. I'm sure my jaw dropped as she told me how she approached businesses to establish her clientele. By the time I met her, she had amassed an impressive list.

Fall was her busy season, when she got holiday card orders and engraving instructions from her clients, prepared and forwarded those to her suppliers, and then personally delivered the cards once they arrived. I accompanied her on one such trip (riding with Clarabelle driving was an adventure in itself!).

Her total lack of self-consciousness among these business professionals was awe-inspiring. She accepted herself just the way she was and expected others to do the same. I longed to be like her. As the next summer approached, I tried to steel myself for the inevitable blisters that the heat would produce on my stump inside the rubber socket of my prosthesis and on my shin from the plastic leg brace. Reason told me that wearing shorts outdoors would help ventilate my orthopedic appliances and let my skin breathe. I couldn't help but notice that women of all ages and body shapes in my neighborhood were already wearing shorts. But I still could not bring myself to put on the Bermudas I'd resolutely purchased at the end of the previous summer.

The first triple digit day of the season coincided with a lunch I'd planned with Clarabelle. When she opened her door, I gawked. She wore a pink and turquoise one-piece shorts jumpsuit.

"Rompers," she said with a giggle. "Dig these crazy legs."

Clarabelle's knees came together like the center of an 'X', permanently contorted by her spasmodic muscles.

"Doesn't it bother you when people stare?" I blurted out. "I want to wear shorts so badly, but I don't think I can stand all the people staring at me."

It felt good finally putting my thoughts into words, although spoken aloud they sounded ridiculous and superficial.

Clarabelle laughed. "Girl, if you're gonna survive down here, you'd better get over that. You know what I say? If folks have such pitiful lives that they get their jollies staring at me, let 'em stare. Wear your shorts, and if someone stares, tell yourself, 'Go ahead, make their day.' Give 'em a pose while you're at it."

She struck a cheesy model pose and we both laughed. After we arrived at our favorite taco joint, I paid particular attention to the other patrons. Yes, many did stare at Clarabelle, but when she looked right at them and smiled, most smiled back and then went about their business. One fellow sitting at the table across from us actually came over, said hello, and told us to have a nice day.

As he walked away, Clarabelle leaned close to me and whispered, "I still got it!"

I decided to make my shorts debut the next day. Sunday was my laundry day, and the trek from my second floor apartment to the un-air-conditioned laundry would be long and hot. As I peeled off my church clothes and slipped on the shorts, I whispered, God, I feel like an idiot praying about a pair of shorts!

But it's more than that. I know you look not at my exterior but what's in my heart. Please let me love myself just the way I am. I looked in the mirror.

My prosthesis gleamed back at me, clunky and robotic. If someone else had been wearing it, I probably would have stared too.

That trip to the laundromat was uneventful. The slight breeze felt delightfully cool on my newly bared legs. As I passed the gleaming row of mailboxes, some people congregating there stopped their conversation and stared. I smiled and kept going. "I'm making their day," I told myself. But in truth, I was making my day. As I continued my journey, I felt God's presence and encouragement. I couldn't wait to tell Clarabelle of my triumph.

Today, Clarabelle lives in an assisted living facility, one she chose for herself after she sold her home and closed her business. She is a blessing and inspiration to the staff and residents there as she continues to make their day.'