

The Bowl

*“Hey, hey, hey,
I’m here, I’m here
Don’t ignore me
I want to play...”*

There he was, as large... well, no actually, small as life, sitting on the edge of the bowl perched upon the bureau. Small, well-proportioned, human-like and white. A very poor imitation of Casper. Where Casper appeared to be white, somewhat chubby and only vaguely human, this figment of my imagination was skinny to the point of emaciation, misty rather than solid and very small. Oh and light-weight as well. He couldn’t weigh more than a few ounces otherwise the bowl would tip. It tipped over when I accidentally dropped my hat onto one side of the bowl. Over it went. Good thing it was empty.

It was always empty when I went to see Great-Aunt Ella-Jane. She would regale me with tales of the bowl’s past, and handmade sweets she used to buy from uptown specialty shops. Back in the ‘50’s, whenever plays opened at the Alexandra Theatre, select members of the cast always wound up at Aunt Ella’s, and the bowl would sit within a magnificent wreath of flowers, filled with individually crafted chocolates and unique miniature pastries set in gold and silver foil.

The bowl was amazing – pale yellow porcelain, lined with elegant green stems and flowing purple irises. It spread to a diameter of 18 inches at the lip, rising about 5 inches from its narrow base. It was hand-crafted, specifically designed to sit atop flowers and mirrors.

Over the years it had come to represent the grandest moments of Aunt Ella’s life. When her hands caressed the edge of the bowl and she got lost in one of her memories it was as if the bowl now gave out stories instead of sweets. I suspect it was the power of those memories that first created the ghost and he gradually acquired a life of his own, filling in and embroidering the magic of times gone by.

I first saw the ghost when I was about twelve. I remember listening in awe to one of Aunt Ella’s tales about a renowned director and his leading lady, when I became distracted by a chubby chuckling white figure, mimicking her words and hopping around the dish like it was a dance floor. Aunt Ella was oblivious to him but I sensed the connection as soon as I heard him continuing on with the story after Aunt Ella left the room. It was as if Aunt Ella was telling the story from a sideways viewpoint.

“...there were dozens of chocolates and a huge bed of yellow roses ordered for that September opening of “The Flowers of Venice”. That was in 1953, because it was the year Elizabeth got crowned. Randolph was in England for the coronation and full of stories about London. He was such a dear, but of course all his talk about the British meant that the crème de la crème – the perfect centerpiece – just had to be a facsimile of the British crown. All created, of course, from that wonderful dark Belgian chocolate.

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The crown was surrounded by dozens of gold foil medallions, each imprinted with detailed images of the gondolas, canals and bridges of Venice, to celebrate the play...”

The faint chortling voice would chatter a duet with her, sometime audibly and sometimes not, eliciting overlapping images of people bustling around a table draped in heavy cream linen, with an extraordinary overflowing centerpiece cradled in yellow roses and baby’s breath.

When Aunt Ella was transported into the web-work of her stories, I could actually see the ghost growing fatter while cavorting happily around the dish. I somehow knew she had created him from the rich potency and intricacy of her memory world.

Aunt Ella-Jane always looked regal with her carefully applied make-up and silver-white hair. Whenever I visited her and the stories would begin, I could feel the faded apartment room transform – pulsing in swirling colours, aromas and sounds reflecting personalities and parties long gone.

She grew frail and gradually more forgetful when she reached her nineties. So did the ghost grow thinner and quieter. Aunt Ella still welcomed my visits with a hug and a smile, and I still watched and loved the way her fingers traced the edge of that special bowl as she passed into the kitchen to make tea. Every time she touched the bowl, the ghost would pop his head up and rub his eyes as if he had been sleeping. Then he would grin at me, chanting softly,

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My last visit, on what turned out to be her last Christmas, I had purchased two dozen specialty Chocolates on my way over to visit her. They caught my eye because of the ornate medallion images embossed into each carefully wrapped piece. When Aunt Ella shuffled her way to the kitchen to make tea, as usual her fingers lightly brushed the bowl and I saw the ghost pop up as she disappeared through the door. He watched with huge, luminescent eyes, as I quickly pulled out and arranged the chocolates in the centre of the dish. Then I hurried into the kitchen to give Aunt Ella a hand.

When we returned to the dining room, Aunt Ella in front, and me carrying the tea tray, she turned towards me with a radiant smile, and spoke with a grace of times gone by, “...and DO help yourself to the chocolates – they are wonderful works of art, and have the most DIVINE flavour.” She had not even glanced at the bowl, but she knew.

As she gestured for me to partake, I could see the ghost dancing an Irish jig all around the edge of the dish – looking perkier and chubbier than he had for years. He danced throughout the whole visit, while I listened to Aunt Ella’s chatter recapturing a monologue of recollection and half-reality.

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She died in her sleep the following week, and the bowl came to live with me – ghost included. But the ghost has never quite become my ghost. I often watch him sitting on the edge of the dish, whispering, as if trying to get my attention, yet never quite acknowledging me. Without Aunt Ella to enervate him, he is truly gaunt and faded. Every so often I can hear him chanting softly –

*“Hey, hey, hey –
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But I don’t have the right kind of memories to make him dance, or fatten him up. I suspect it’s only my memories of Aunt Ella Jane that are keeping him alive at all.