

Katherine May Corbin

Katherine was a strong, intelligent, persistent and imaginative person with an ironic sense of humor. And it was a good thing because from the start, our lives were steeped in irony.

I met her at a meeting of Formerly Married Catholics, in Medford.

I'm not a Catholic. She was. I was there on invitation from my weekend Tennis partner, a tall beautiful red-headed French woman named Nichole. She and I were just friends but Katherine didn't know it yet.

Kay later told me that she turned to her friends and said, "He's the one I want." She said that the competition looked formidable, but somehow she would get her way. She said that she wanted three things especially in a man: someone smarter than herself, with a good sense of humor, and hair on his chest!

When she told me this months later, I said "Well, at least you got the last one right." To which she replied, "I'm always right." Over the years, that became an accepted fact.

After a couple more weekly meetings, Kay discovered that the French woman had an exclusive romantic interest in someone else and we were just friends. I found myself asking her for a date. I had no idea she was a ventriloquist and had put the words in my mouth!

I asked her to dinner but on that afternoon I had some junk in my car to deposit at the land fill. I thought we'd just do that on the way to dinner. She told her friends for years afterward that I took her to the dump on our first date! They were always surprised there was a second one.

We went to dinner at a place called the “Inland Warf” which had waterways built into the dining room floor by the tables. We thought that was rather innovative for Medford, and looked forward to another dinner there. But they went out of business, immediately after our visit.

In the next few months, we went to two other restaurants which went out of business immediately after we were there. We never opened a restaurant but we closed a few. Kay told me we should stop going to dinner because it was damaging the economy.

I thought it would be a good idea if I cooked my favorite food for her and for her young children: home-made tacos. I wanted to make a good impression, and Kay wanted her kids to be especially polite to me. She told them no matter how it tasted, they needed to eat some and pretend it was good even if it wasn't.

I got the corn tortillas, lean hamburger, lettuce, onions, tomatoes, cheese and my favorite El Paso taco sauce. But I was in a hurry and I picked up the wrong variety. Instead of MEDIUM, I accidentally picked up the EXTRA HOT sauce.

I didn't notice, and proceeded to cook up a fiery hot blend of meat and sauteed onions, and served a mouth scorching meal.

To their great credit, the kids had a polite bite and didn't spit it on the floor or rush off to quench the flames. They were quiet, and I assumed that a little hotter wasn't hurting anything. For years, though, the mere mention of me making tacos brought laughs and protests from Kay. Some of our kids don't like Mexican food to this day!

At the time we were dating, I had a house on Alameda street where my brother Richard and I were running a little manufacturing business in the garage. It was crowded and barely adequate. When I married Kay in 1979, my brother only half-jokingly said I married her for her garage, which was twice as large.

All the mills and lathes and hones were moved in. We hired more people, Kay saw her utility room taken over as an office, and cartons of supplies and inventory stacked in the living room and under the pool table. Sometimes the kids had to wait to use the bathroom because an employee beat them to it. We were running as frugal an operation as possible.

When the kids were late to school one too many times because the bathroom was occupied, Kay didn't object at all to the idea of buying a couple of lots in White City and putting up a building there. But she told me that she didn't sleep much for five years out of worry about what would happen if it failed. Our homes and all our belongings were pledged as collateral for what at the time seemed an astronomical loan.

The night we symbolically "burned" the mortgage, I asked her if she was going to sleep tonight. She said she would sleep better, but there is always something else to worry about and she'd find it.

Over our 42 years together, she worked side by side with me nearly every day except when she was managing various girls' softball teams. She was a baseball fan and loved to follow the fortunes of the Atlanta Braves, criticizing and coaching through the TV screen, telling Bobby Cox what he should be doing.

When we were first married, I was a classic nerd too busy with technical ideas to put much interest into sports, but I gave it some effort in order to share with Kay.. Eventually, our years of watching games together brought my sports IQ to slightly above moron and I rooted for the Braves too.

We travelled a lot before we could really afford to do it. She insisted that we should have the experiences now, while we could, so that we would have the memories when we were not able to travel. She foresaw what might happen and nudged me into taking at least a couple of one week trips every year .

She would plan and study and arrange so that we maximized our tight budget to get far more than anyone would suspect was possible. She got trades for vacation condos all over the country, in Canada and the Carribean islands. It was amazing how well she was able to stretch the budget so we could have nice accomodations in interesting locations and still afford to eat. And she always took pride in paying credit cards on time.

She took pleasure in finding the best deals. It was a game for her, like Blackjack, her favorite casino game. She played Blackjack and always won over the long run, which is exactly the opposite of what logic and math tell us. The casino management would offer her free rooms for her next trip to give them another shot at taking back her winnings.

She set aside a certain amount for entertainment, considered it spent before she even sat down, and then enjoyed the experience shared with the other players. She loved the jokes and the groans and shouts of joy. "But," she would say, "it IS more fun when I'm winning!"

I remember the time we were sitting beside each other at home, just having a casual conversation, and she said “You know, I didn’t even worry about buying that sweater today.”

I said “What do you mean?”

She replied “I used to spend days trying to decide if I needed something or not. After all these years, I finally feel like it’s ok if I don’t always get a bargain so long as I get something I like.”

I said “You deserve to have what you want. We worked hard so you could.”

She replied “I still look for good deals. I can like something just as much even if it IS on sale.”

Her favorite time of year was Christmas. Following her least favorite, Halloween. Halloween was too close to her birthday, October 24th. It was depressing to share the spotlight with a pumpkin. But Christmas was beautiful to her. Colorful, cheerful, a time for happy secrets.

She would write long lists so that each person in the immediate family would get the same number of gifts, and about the same total amount so no one would feel less appreciated.

She said the equal number of gifts means everyone gets to spend the same time unwrapping and having people watch them enjoy it. It’s not about just numbers. It’s about sharing time and anticipating what might be in them.

Another of her great joys was breeding AKC Scottish Terriers. She loved the little critters and wanted to make sure they all went to the best possible homes.

The most touching thing I recall is when we had a tiny runt out of a litter of six, and I was almost certain it wasn't going to survive more than a few hours. Kay said that she was going to be OK and named her Daisy.

She wrapped it in a soft cloth and took it to her recliner with a bottle of puppy milk, and tried to feed it by hand. When it managed to eat a little she was elated. She sat holding it for hours, keeping it warm and trying to coax it to eat. All night long and most of the next day she would make sure it got a little nourishment before putting it back beside its mother. This went on for at least a week.

One morning I woke up, went to the family room, and saw her holding it and crying. "What's wrong with Daisy?" I asked her. "She scratched her eye! I tried so hard to save her and now she's going to be blind!"

I looked at her and there was a little corneal abrasion. "Well, let's take her to the vet and see what she says," I said.

We did, and the vet referred us to a specialist in animal eye care. The eye cured just fine with some special eye drops and ointments, and little Daisy could soon see as well as any Scotty. The little runt of the litter grew faster than the others in fact. It had learned how to get to the food against bigger competition. She taught it to survive against all odds.

Little Daisy lives in California now and is doing fine, because Kay just wouldn't give up. She had said the puppy would be OK, and then she made sure she was right...as always.

Katherine used to pull off the most amazing surprises when planning gifts for me for birthdays, Christmas or our anniversary.

At least twice customers came to our shop and had some interesting firearm to show me while Kay was sitting at the reception desk, observing. If I made comments that she took as admiration, she would find out who the visitor was, get his address, go see him, arrange to buy that gun, and hide it away until the next gift giving occasion, and I would have no idea she had gone to all that effort until I unwrapped it.

I once waited too long to get a limited reproduction 1903 Colt replica. She got the distributor on the phone. She got him to agree to set one aside as soon as it was available and send it to a local dealer. Through a long, round-about process, I opened a box that Christmas that had the rare replica in it. I treasure it not so much for what it is, but for what she put into obtaining it for me.

She delighted in pulling off this kind of plot, no matter how long it took to get the pieces of the puzzle figured out and put together. She did it repeatedly for decades and I was always surprised.

While at Weatherly Court memory facility, she was worried that she had no way to buy me a gift for my birthday. She had no way to go shopping. She had lost the ability to use a telephone or a computer. Numbers and words were confusing and didn't always mean anything to her at that stage of the disease. She was worried about how to accomplish a birthday gift surprise under such impossible circumstances. But she knew she wanted above all else to surprise me again.

She asked one of her care takers to show her Amazon pictures on a cell phone. She asked me to provide a little cash to cover something the care taker had done in her behalf. And she asked the care taker to order, receive and gift wrap her present and to find a card which she signed herself with difficulty.

We had a little birthday party in the dining room at Weatherly. Cynthia, Chris, Kay and I sat down and she gave me the gift-wrapped present. It was a set of ceramic owl salt and pepper shakers, a little ceramic owl toothpick holder, and a matching ceramic owl spoon rest for the stove top: Pale blue owls with big daisy-like eyes. She chose owls because I drew cartoon owls for her for more than four decades.

Of all the surprises she had planned throughout our lives, this required the most heroic effort. Her intense desire to do this one thing for me kept her focused for weeks.

It was extremely difficult for her to hold onto recent memories. It might be hard to grasp the intensity of her perseverance. It might be difficult to understand how much effort it took to conceive and maintain her plan in the face of so many obstacles. You'd have to have been with her for the previous two years to see the difficulty in accomplishing something most of us would take for granted.

But she did it. When I saw those daisy-like owl eyes, the memory of that little runt of a Scottish Terrier she named "Daisy" flashed back to me. I immediately saw the connection to the tiny puppy she saved with her perseverance, pushing ahead when anyone else would have said "give up". I saw the connection to her whole life.

Her implied message: *All obstacles are overcome by persistent applied imagination.*

It's not enough to imagine something. You have to act, to apply it. It's not enough to act once and stop. You have to be persistent in spite of difficulties. But she didn't need to say it. She just did it. All her life.

When she was infected by Covid, I was able to be with her in her room because a zoom conference with a doctor in Portland showed that she was responding to my presence. He said "She lights up when she sees you." Eventually I was allowed to stay without limit if I confined myself to the room with a gown, gloves and mask.

One of her favorite treats was the white chocolate Lindor Truffle, which comes in a gold foil wrapper and is about half the size of a golf ball. She never refused one. On the morning of November 29th, I brought one with me. Her eyes were closed but I said "Honey, I brought a Lindor Truffle! Would you like a Lindor Truffle?"

Her eyes opened a little and she looked at me, and said "Sure". I didn't know it then, but "Sure." was going to be her final word.

I was encouraged because she had not been talking for days. I placed the truffle in her hand and she tried to lift her arm, but couldn't. I took the round white candy and pinched off a piece, and put it in her mouth. She let some of it dissolve, and barely made the slightest hint of a smile. Then it fell out of her mouth. She closed her eyes and went back to sleep. But she had tasted her favorite treat one last time.

I arranged for hospice care at home and spent part of that night and the next morning fixing up a bedroom with adjustable bed and supplies. When I came to visit on November 30th, she was still sleeping. I said “Honey, I’ve got a bed fixed up for you at home. We’re gong home tomorrow!”

When I said “We’re going home” her eyes flickered open just enough so I could see them move as I leaned closer. She was following me with her eyes. “I promise! We are going home tomorrow! You know I always keep my promises. We are going home.”

She tried to move her lips a little. Her eyes stared intently at mine for a few seconds. She looked very peaceful and without any grimace lines around her eyes or wrinkles in her forehead to show pain. But she didn’t speak. She closed her eyes and went to sleep again. I stayed for hours talking to her, moistening her lips and shifting her a little in the bed. I thought, “You heard me! Maybe you heard the things I said before. I think you must have heard me tell you how much I loved you. “

For the year and a half that she was in memory care facilities, her main desire each night when I finally went home was “Can I go home with you? Can I go home?”. I always told her yes, we can go tomorrow.

I was able to take her home many times while she was in different memory care facilities. She was always glad to go other than getting in the car and back to her wheel chair which was sometimes painful. With past falls and broken bones, some level of pain was a periodic companion.

In her mind, “going home” meant not just the physical place, but back to health and freedom. She had the hope that if she went back to her house, everything would be better again. It was a metaphysical move that she desired, back into a realm free of pain and with her mind back to full capacity again.

Going home gave her some pleasure but after a few hours she was tired and ready to go back again. She petted the dogs, and I would fix some dinner or stop to pick up her favorite sandwich at Squeeze-Inn but she wasn't home in the way she had hoped.. Still, by the next day, she would be anxious to go home again, and would search my eyes for assurance that we would do it.

That is why she found the strength to open her eyes in response to hearing “Going home.” It was affirmation. It was the possibility of freedom from pain. Maybe, I came to realize, it was also permission.

Early the next morning, I got a call from the nurse saying I should get there as soon as possible. Her breathing pattern had changed. I got to the room and saw Ciindy sitting by her bed. I sat down and held her still warm hand and spoke to her until it grew cool.

She looked very peaceful. Without a trace of pain, not a wrinkle on her brow. Eyes closed, and at last, no worry.

She had gone home.