

MISS SUNSHINE TAKES ANOTHER BOW

By Michael Ventura

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Well, here it is, Miss Sunshine.

It's been about a year. Not something I'll get over, but something I've gotten used to: You're dead and you'll stay dead.

Not long before your death, you attended a funeral. Furious as hell, you called me right after: "A lot of lies, that's all it fucking was. When it's my turn, I fucking don't want lies."

All right, then. You won't get any from me.

Didn't go to your funeral. Didn't want to lie or tell the truth.

But, hey, Miss Sunshine – you're one to talk about lies, right? Master liar that you were, did you ever get through a single conversation without a lie? You were good at it, really good. You mixed lies with truth so seamlessly and prettily, performing conversations with such disarming vivacity and humor. Spoke freely about your drug abuse; medical polysyllables rolled musically off your tongue. You omitted only one word: heroin.

No one who loved you suspected heroin.

Toward the end, I suspected felonies, and I was too right. (Oh, Miss Sunshine, you crossed so many lines.) But, having never done drugs, I was an easy mark for your drug lies.

Also, I had a kind of pact with you: I resolved to take you at your word.

Why take a proven liar at her word? I believed in you. I didn't always believe you, but I believed in you. I knew what I saw in you was really there. Others who met you saw what I saw – tough customers like Hannah, George, Debbie, Jack, Jazmin, Spider. Debbie told me, when she first met you, "Nothing in this world can stop that girl but herself."

Well, kid, you died stupid. Heroin is stupid. An OD on heroin two weeks after your 27th birthday: stupid.

(You said no lies, right?)

I sometimes called you "Miss Sunshine." You sort of liked that. But I remember how your eyes flashed hatred when I'd call you on your shit. Just a flash. But hatred, unmistakably. I looked right at it and didn't want to see it. I remembered it, but pretended it didn't count. It was a "tell," and it should have told me what part of you was really running the show.

I think of the first time I saw you -- lanky, pretty, age 15. You bounded up to me and said sparkingly, "I'm gonna be in your poetry class!"

We recognized each other instantly for what we shared: familial insanity, childhood poverty, parental abuse, rape, violence, abandonment, foster care -- lifelong, card-carrying members of the same club. Like they say: Two thieves don't need an introduction.

You soon told me the highlights of your history; I shared some of my mine. I told you then: People like us, with that kind of history, must never do drugs. You were such a good actress I didn't know I was already too late.

Other teachers disliked how played them -- lied, charmed, and hustled. Students were wary of you; you were utterly self-involved, and you could be cruel. I didn't approve, of

course, but I'd say, "All she wants is Hollywood, and, for Hollywood, her skill set is perfect."

You shined in my classes. (Well, not in 12th grade Russian Lit.) "Great poetry remains restless on the page." "Art, at its best, interrogates you." Gems like that in many an essay. A wild card of a mind, but quite a mind.

My God, you could act, write, direct, produce, and even sing. Loosed on the world, you finessed your way through the doors of the powerful. Hollywood liked you. Later, in trouble, in handcuffs, about to be booked, you talked an LAPD cop into letting you go scot-free. Some people just can.

At 21, you were making more per week than I ever did. You told me you'd be very rich, and in my dotage you'd buy me a house overlooking Silver Lake reservoir (you'd already picked it out). You'd staff it with sexy nurses.

Funny, how there was nothing romantic in our connection. We'd flirt, we'd spar, but that was just style. You asked how it would have been if we were the same age. I said, "You think we'd've been lovers? I don't. We'd have been the kind of friends who are on call for coming to each other's rescue over and over. We could never have trusted each other as lovers."

"You trust me as a friend, though?"

"Miss Sunshine, I trust you to be Miss Sunshine."

You threw that back at me more than once: "But, Michael, this is just me being Miss Sunshine."

It was my job to believe in you no matter what. Believe in you in the faith that maybe, someday, no matter how low you fell, you might use my belief in you to help pull yourself back up.

Sappy? I agree. But I'm not sorry for it.

I used to talk to you about "people like us" – meaning: greatly gifted and severely damaged. People with the loony bin on their left and the hoosegow on their right, whose any misstep might land them in one, the other, or both. (I don't seem that way on the outside now because my demons were pretty well herded some years back, but they still bite to get out in the pits of me.)

What I tried to teach you, Miss Sunshine, is that people like us – really gifted, and really, really damaged – must be loyal, first and foremost, to our gifts. We'll always be kind of fucked up; that's to be lived with. But through our gifts we can have life and give life – and it's worth it, as I promised you.

Our gifts, first. Then come friends and partners, because they choose you, and you choose them. And then comes whatever comes third – our families, perhaps, or whatever comes third.

Because people like us must make a choice deep down: We are devoted to our gifts or we are devoted to our pain. You can't long be devoted to both. In the end, it's one or other.

At first, they seem to blend. We use our gifts to express our pain. But our gifts are larger than our pain, and our gifts want more than our pain. If our gifts continue only to serve our pain, they diminish.

See, our gifts are exactly that: gifts. We don't create our abilities. We just develop them. If you're loyal to your gifts, tend them and offer their fruits to the world; if your devotion is to become the instrument of your gifts -- then it is as Ezra Pound said, "What

thou lovest well remains,/ the rest is dross/ What thou lov'st well shall not be reft them
thee/ What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage.”

The task is to make a heritage for yourself that trumps the drama and pain you found in
the family of your childhood.

Fat chance of my teaching you that. Be true to your gifts, not to your pain. It pissed you
off when I'd speak of it.

Now, Miss Sunshine, you often show up in conversation and in memory to take another
bow. And I still talk to you, goddamnit. Like right now.

And no, Miss Sunshine, we didn't waste our time. It was real life. As for how it turned
out: Sometimes you get the bear; sometimes the bear gets you.

During the awfulness of your descent, those last months, I called you every day. You
mostly didn't pick up, but you knew I'd called. One time you spat into the phone, “Why
are you fucking calling me every day? Why do you still fucking care?”

“I'd call you every day even if you were dead.”

That got a laugh. You didn't want to laugh, but you laughed.

Well, you're dead. And, in my way, I call you every day, just like I said. I look over at
that photo on the wall, pause to really see it, and whisper, “Go well, Miss Sunshine.”

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