

Susan Robinson

THE YEAR THAT EVERYTHING DIED

It was August 25th of the Year That Everything Died. Clare Roberts didn't know it yet, but the Grey Ghost would not be taking her to Burning Man 2008. No, it would not be painted in rainbow colors, nor would it be dubbed the "Unicycle Clown Car" as tribute to its role in transporting two bad unicyclists to the legendary festival in the desert.

Yes, she knew about the other dead things—Big Mac, the oak tree; Fatty Brown, her cat of 12 years; Michael...well, not Michael himself, but their relationship; then there was Mr. P; and of course, Pam—yes, Pam herself.

Clare had been having quite a year. The way she remembered it, things started dying off back in March, on the very day that Clare put on stockings, heels, a black trench coat and nothing else, and drove two hours to Pine Knob intending to surprise Michael for his 30th birthday. It was a day full of anticipation and sweet thoughts. That is until the brakes gave out just two blocks from Michael's apartment, but exactly in the same spot as the shiny rear end of Governor Bronson's new Escalade.

"Lemon!" screamed Clare, but the Grey Ghost just sat there with its hood in the Governor's rear and its red brakelight beaconing a now-pointless warning. I'll have to call Pam, thought Clare. "Pam! You better get here quick because I just trunked the Governor, the cops are coming, and I don't have any clothes on!" Pam never missed her Friday night meeting, but as soon as it was over, she was there. Unlike the Grey Ghost, Pam could always be counted on for a ride.

After the tickets were written and the tow truck had hauled the wrinkled Grey Ghost and the not-so-shiny Escalade away, Pam even drove Clare to Michael's place. As it turned out, Michael really was surprised. He didn't have any clothes on either, and the woman beside him, on Clare's side of the bed, looked genuinely surprised as well. "Let's get out of here, Pam," Clare said as she tightened the belt on her trench coat. And that was the last time Clare ever saw Michael in less than a fully dressed condition.

A couple weeks later, with the help of a 500-dollar brake job, a junkyard fender, and some duct tape, the Grey Ghost was back on the road. And it was a fortunate thing too, because that very night, Fatty Brown choked on a hairball and had to be rushed to the veterinary hospital. Even though it was 3 o'clock in the morning, Clare didn't hesitate to dial Pam's number, "Fatty's

got a fur-ball!, ...meet me at the vet!” Clare croaked groggily into the phone. But the Grey Ghost had other plans, as Clare found out when she put the key in the passenger-side door and could not turn the lock open. “Son of a Bitch!” cried Clare as she listened helplessly to poor sweet, fat, Fatty’s raspy breathing. Yes, it was the Grey Ghost’s annual early spring “lock freeze.” From previous experience, Clare knew it was hopeless to try the other locks. She got on the phone, “Pam, the Son of a Bitch won’t open, can you come over and get us?” cursed Clare. “Tell Fatty I’m on my way!” Pam yelled into the phone. Pam was happy to help, and it didn’t hurt that she was a chain-smoking insomniac who liked late night trips to anywhere.

Clare was relieved and happy when Dr. Pratt pulled a wet, hairy mass of fur out of Fatty and pronounced him very much alive and with five of his nine lives still intact (the other three having been used up on previous mishaps.)

With Fatty safely back in his cat-box and the Grey Ghost’s door locks W-D 40’d, Clare’s thoughts began to turn to spring. The weather was warming up now and the recent weeks had been especially rainy. Clare began to notice the lawn of Mr. P’s house looking more shaggy than normal. Up ’til now, Mr. P had always been known in the neighborhood as a “cross-hatch” mower, which for all practical purposes meant he was anal-retentive and mowed his lawn in a perfectly straight, cross-cut fashion every six days whether it needed it or not.

As the grass grew higher and higher, Clare became more and more concerned. Mr. P lived at the opposite end of Dandelion Way, so it was not so easy for her to monitor the situation.

Even though Mr. P was generally thought of as a “pain-in-the-ass,” the neighborhood still tried to look out for him because he was old and didn’t have a car or a dog or a wife. Clare began to make a habit of driving past his lawn on her way to the auto-repair shop or the grocery store. One day in the middle of April, Clare gassed up the Grey Ghost and headed down Dandelion.

Just as she rounded the curve that lead to Mr. P’s lawn, the Grey Ghost gave a lurch and a sputter and Clare heard a loud “Screeeeek!” coming from where the left front tire used to be. It was coming from where the tire used to be, because the tire wasn’t there anymore—it was now rolling into Mr. P’s un-cross-hatched, foot-high grass. “You No Good Rust Bucket!” wept the exasperated, concerned neighbor named Clare. It would be fair to say that Clare was pissed. But she was also astute enough to recognize this as an opportunity to get closer to Mr. P’s overgrown lawn.

Clare decided to leave the Grey Ghost in the middle of the street, right where it was, which was an easy decision to make, since the front tire was gone and the axle was sitting on the pavement. She went to retrieve the tire, but took a quick peek in Mr. P's front window on her way past.

What she saw inside distressed her, but also quickly solved the mystery of the overgrown lawn. Poor Mr. P was sitting in his chair slumped over the kitchen table. He didn't look so good. In fact, he looked dead—and he was. Clare became panicked and didn't know what to do. She called the only person she could think of: “Pam, you won't believe what has happened! Come and get me over at the foot-high lawn, right away!”

And of course, Pam did, because she was that kind of friend—the kind that drove you crazy with her chain-smoking and her coffee-drinking and her late night panic attacks, but who came when you called her. Because 14 years ago, on a cold December evening, someone had bothered to answer when she dialed the hotline number off the back of the matchbook cover. In so doing, Pam had reached past the full syringe and the little baggie on the night stand and out into the abyss where an outstretched hand was waiting. Yes, it was safe to say that Pam understood about the hard things.

She knew Clare had a Dodge and man troubles and an overweight cat. And now she understood that Clare also had an old, dead neighbor on her hands. A stiff and smelly Mr. P, who had passed away alone at his kitchen table and who was probably not such a bad guy, if anyone had taken the time to really get to know him.

Well, after Pam and the police and the tow-truck driver arrived and then left, and Clare got her Grey Ghost out of the repair shop with new ball joints and a new front axle, she took a couple weeks off to relax. The Grey Ghost seemed happy, or at least somewhat contented, and so was Clare, considering all that had happened to her in recent months.

She sat by the window and daydreamed about the great adventures she would have at Burning Man, compliments of the Grey Ghost. She took daily naps with Fatty under Big Mac, the 50-year-old oak tree that had stood watch over her backyard, and the neighborhood, for the whole 10 years Clare had lived in the house on Dandelion Way.

That is until one evening in July, the 4th of July, to be exact. The Jones boys were shooting off fireworks across the street and Fatty Brown was sitting under Big Mac. Suddenly one of the firecrackers went the wrong way and ended up at the top of Big Mac. Shortly thereafter, smoke, and then flame began coming out. Clare screamed at Fatty to get out of the way; the smoke and flame were becoming thicker and more out-of-control and

Clare was afraid. She ran for the phone and dialed 911, but when she got back, she heard a sickening sound of breaking branches and then a weak, half-hearted “meeeeooooowww” coming from underneath them.

Clare ran back to the yard and grabbed Fatty, who was gasping for breath, but not moving. Clare got the phone and called Pam, “Meet me at the vet, Fatty got hit by a tree!” Clare put herself and Fatty into the Grey Ghost and took off for Dr. Pratt’s, but Fatty was failing fast. Clare phoned Pam again, “Pam! Help.” was all she could manage. But that night Clare found out that there are some things even a nicotine-addicted best friend can’t fix, and this was turning out to be one of those things. Fatty Brown died in the passenger seat of the Grey Ghost, before it even got to the hospital. Clare cried. Pam was there to meet her, of course. And even though Pam had never really been a cat person, she listened patiently to a story about how a 12-year-old cat that was supposed to have had five lives left, turned out to have only one, and about how there would never be another cat like Fatty.

After what seemed like hours, Clare remembered her backyard and yelled to Pam, “Big Mac is burning! Can you meet me there?” Pam had been looking more tired than usual, and Clare thought she detected something odd about the look in her eyes, but Pam agreed to meet her at the house. The Grey Ghost had some trouble along the way—a stall in the left-turn-only lane at Grand Ave., a headlight that suddenly went out, and a flat tire, but in spite of these setbacks, Clare made it back to her driveway. When she arrived, the fire trucks were already there, but Big Mac wasn’t anymore, unless you count the smoking stump and the pile of ashes in the backyard. “I’ve had a long day, guess I’ll see you on Saturday,” Clare said weakly as she waved goodbye to her friend.

But Clare would not be seeing Pam on Saturday, or on any other day for that matter. It seems that Pam was having a few problems of her own and the Friday night call from Pam’s distraught husband, Mitch, informed Clare of this fact. “It’s Pam! You better get here as soon as you can.” Pam had been found face down in the bathtub with an open container of sleeping pills and an empty bottle of Jack Daniels next to her. Clare grabbed the keys and sped to the hospital. The Grey Ghost nearly ran out of gas along the way, but surprisingly enough, made the trip in record time. It didn’t really matter though. Pam was already dead by the time Clare arrived. Clare hugged Pam and then Mitch. “She was my friend,” choked Clare. Mitch said that he already knew that. Clare took Mitch for a ride in the Grey Ghost, where Mitch explained that he and Pam had been going through a “rough patch” and that he blamed himself for what had happened.

After the funeral, Clare went home and cried for a long time. She went over and over things in her head. Had she missed something? Why hadn't Pam called her? She went for long rides around the lake; she packed jumper cables and a picnic basket and took the Grey Ghost on a weekend trip to the ocean; she ate French fries. When she was finished, Clare decided that there are just some things even a best friend can't fix, and that for Pam, falling off the wagon had been one of those things.

Yes, it had been the Year That Everything Died, but new, alive things began to emerge in their places. Pam was buried, the summer moved on, and Clare tried to move on as well. She planted a new maple tree in the back yard. She started dating again and met a cute guy named Zack, from New Zealand. Zack owned four Irish Wolfhounds and a broken heart, but his eyes lit up the moment he saw Clare and suddenly it seemed ok for him to try love just one more time. She found an orange kitten at the SPCA that looked just like Fatty, only smaller.

A late afternoon drive to the repair shop took Clare down the opposite end of Dandelion Way, and confirmed that a new family, who would soon be known as the "Crabgrass People," had moved into Mr. P's house. The day Clare drove by, there were six kids and a jungle gym in the front yard. They didn't appear to be cross-hatch mowers. In fact, from the looks of the lawn, they didn't even own a mower, but the kids seemed happy to have a yard to play in and Clare was happy for them. And of course, she still had her Grey Ghost.

But that last part wasn't quite true, as Clare found out when Dave, from the repair shop, called on the afternoon of August 25th, with the news that there were "a few problems" with the Grey Ghost. The struts were rotting, the entire muffler system needed replacing and there was water where the oil was supposed to be. There were a few more things, but Clare didn't want to hear about them.

Even though Dave had a water-pump and valve job waiting in the shop that he had to get finished by 5 o'clock, he tried to sound patient as he explained to her that there were some things even an \$80 dollar-per-hour-labor-rate repair shop couldn't fix, without a major credit card and at least two forms of I.D. "I understand," said Clare, and she did.

Over the next few months of what was left of the Year That Everything Died, Clare tried to keep busy. She planted a tulip garden in the shape of the word "P-A-I-N." She watered the sapling in her back yard. She checked the classifieds for a new Grey Ghost, but there weren't any, so she bought a motorcycle instead. She really enjoyed riding it.

Still Clare thought about Pam. One day she even dialed her number just to see if someone would answer. But nobody did. She began to see that there might never be a day that she wouldn't miss Pam. Even a great guy like Zack and four funny-looking dogs couldn't fix that.

And yet, Clare could also see that even though she would sorely miss the Grey Ghost and Dave and all her friends from the tow truck place, she might still make it to Burning Man on her new, slightly used, pink Harley.

And so, in August of the year after the Year That Everything Died, Clare did go to Burning Man, But she didn't go on the Harley, she went with those funny-looking dogs—and with Zack. She had a pretty good time.☞