

Carolyn

Bí Thusa 'mo Shúile

(Be Thou My Vision)

In home movies, she runs across the grass like a blithe spirit, vamping for the camera, twirling like a dancer, a young girl rapidly becoming a woman. As with all young women, the metamorphosis begins in the eyes. And the camera never misses it.

A face will show emotions, a smile or a frown. The eyes hold the soul, that part of us that speaks to those who are willing to listen to our fears, or take the time to sit and hear about our hopes.

It's that part we keep to ourselves until the day we meet a special one through whom we will learn to breathe. And it's the only part of us we can will to live, or will to die.

My father's camera recorded the antics of his children and nieces and nephews. And it followed the journey of my cousin Carolyn's soul, no matter if by happenstance. The photos and films tell her story in short summary, but they also form a bridge that goes part of the way to wherever she has gone, somewhere beyond our understanding.

How strange to know her now only as a memory, to hear her heart beat through the recollections of the man who married her so long ago. And to suddenly recognize her glow in the smiles of her daughters. To be reminded of her edge when I watch an old eight millimeter film and a smirk steals across her

face, lifting the corner of an eye as we see the transformation from angel to 12 year old devil girl. After all the years, I still recall the promise her life brought into bloom, as well as the sorrows that proved too many for her short life to hold.

Carolyn was a beautiful young woman whose life was touched by remarkable waves of fortune and tragedy. Blessed with brains and good looks, she contracted polio in early adolescence and forever carried herself with a limp that disturbed the symmetry that marks a lovely woman. Married at a young age to a wonderful man with education and promise, she gave him four bright and beautiful daughters in quick succession. But Carolyn's physical history and personal demons rushed her to an early grave in her forties, the victim of poor health and worse habits, too soon gone from us who miss her still.

I remember her at age sixteen, during the summer she spent working as a doctor's receptionist. In the 1950's, every woman in a medical office wore a white uniform. Invited by my mother to lunch with us at our home, Carolyn swept through our front door, a vision in white, an angel incarnate. I was eleven years old and if it matters, this was the first time I fell in love.

I may have been an easy mark, but I wasn't the first little man to fall for a starched white dress and a winning smile. What a change they made to the girl who had a year before chased me through her house, ready to scratch my eyes out when I made an unkind comment about her pimples. She caught me, and beat me up before her mother could intervene, thereby earning my eternal enmity and my fervent wish that she would collide with a train the next time her father gave her a driving lesson. But the white dress and a radiant smile caused what a modern might call a paradigm shift of my feelings. A poet would call it something better.

A few more years brought her wedding. I could not know the fate awaiting her on that cold sunny morning inside the small church as the organ began to thunder out the Bridal Chorus. The music swelled out across the congregation

and rolled up against the walls, rattling the thin stained glass windows. Her father turned to her with his huge smile, squeezed her hand and led them down the aisle to where I waited with the man she would marry. On that morning, Carolyn carried with her the promise of a full life with children and grandchildren, accomplishment and eventually happy memories to spare, when far off in the future she might die peacefully of old age. Now at age 21 she came down the aisle to her beloved, the man who had swept her off her feet. I waited with him at the altar. I was the altar boy, an arrangement I had been able to make the day before, hoping to pleasantly surprise the couple. Although they would later deny it, I think neither recognized me, so nervous were they during the ceremony.

Shortly after Carolyn and her husband began to build a family, I started my own adult life. We lost track of one another, except for news passed back and forth by the older generation about all us kids, our comings and goings, and odds and ends of lives begun and some cut short. But our Irish family was secretive, and especially so about problems. I never knew what Carolyn was dealing with. And she never knew of my trials.

When I visited home, my father would have photos of Carolyn and her babies, snapshots with her husband, in the yard, at the beach.

The pictures showed Carolyn growing to be a mature woman, the mother of four girls. But I could see changes in her eyes, too. I'd be lying to say I sensed trouble, I just noticed she was different. The camera may have caught a reflection of her suffering.

And then came her funeral, at which I learned very little. My Irish uncles and even my father were reticent to speak of her torments. My most vivid memory of that day was of four young daughters standing near the casket, a lost look about them.

Decades would pass before I saw Carolyn's family again, this time at the funeral of her brother. He had been a man of special gifts, and yet I know she worried about him and with her husband's help had been protective of him.

I walked into his wake that evening and as I made my way forward through the crowd of visitors, there sat Carolyn near the casket of her brother, seemingly still watching over him. I stopped and took a breath, waiting for the vision to evaporate, but it refused to do so.

In a moment, I realized it must be a daughter, and in fact it was the eldest, very much a look-alike, although prettier than her mother.

I was almost ready to believe that Carolyn had come back to sit with her brother, and maybe to annoy us. I half expected her to look up at me and again announce that I was an ugly child, as she had done a half century before. But there was a serenity about the woman that was palpable. I became almost convinced that in some way or another I was looking at Carolyn.

I went up to her and could not stop myself from asking, "Is everything all right now?" No doubt thinking it a silly question to be asked, she replied, "I am just fine." I believed her. Her eyes were at peace.

And I believe that somewhere Carolyn's soul has the will to live again. And somewhere it breathes again. Somewhere she runs across a field of grass and sits by a stream. And now she holds all of creation in her eyes, and her soul is at peace.

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