Three of a Kind

The Kind family was known for anything but their kindness. We were known for being wild, maybe, free-spirited, probably, but most of all we were known for a kind of smart that is often underappreciated in women in the foothills of Appalachia. Our bright red curly hair added to our aura of wildness. Our emerald-green eyes lent an air of mystery to us as well. We all looked like we could have just stepped off the shores of Ireland and our ancestors probably did, but we were born from the hills of Russell County. It had been home to the Kind family for generations.

Granny Kind was our matriarch and never let us forget it. Her three daughters, my momma and two aunts, each had a daughter giving birth to the nickname for both generations, “Three of a Kind.” The daughters all bore out the nickname more like jokers wild, but my generation, the granddaughters, turned out to be a bit tamer. We all had the same last name as our grandmother because one thing the Kind girls could never hold on to, or seemed to want, was a man who would share his last name with them.

In fact, my own father had left my mother immediately upon learning she was pregnant with me, Julie Ann, the firstborn granddaughter. My cousin Samantha, Aunt Priscilla’s daughter, was the result of a one-night stand, no names exchanged, during a high school beach trip. And my cousin Toni’s father was killed in a mining accident before Aunt Maxine had a chance to tell him she was pregnant. His family had a long, turbulent history with the local sheriff’s department, so Aunt Maxine decided to keep Toni’s connection to them quiet.

Although unconventional, our lives were happy and were filled with a strong feminine energy. Unfortunately, it all came to a screeching halt one stormy afternoon during my college years. I try not to think about that day in the fall of 1983. I had just started my junior year at Emory and Henry College working my way toward a teaching degree in biology. I had always loved science. Surprisingly, I loved the structure that science afforded me in a life that had not always had many boundaries.

Growing up in Jackson Creek, Virginia had been hard for my aunts, cousins, and me beginning with the stigma my mother and her two sisters faced after my Granny Kind popped out three baby daughters within three years during World War II with not a man in sight. No wise men lined up bringing exotic gifts either so the idea of a virgin birth, much less three in a row, was not one the people of Jackson Creek bought into. Granny persevered though, raising my mother Valerie, and her younger sisters, Maxine, and Priscilla, as if nothing was amiss. Granny showed us that we were as good of a family as the rest and eventually even the neighbors accepted her choices no matter how odd they seemed, especially when they saw how well Granny took care of her girls.

Granny grew her own food, canned her own vegetables, raised a hog to kill every year for meat, and sold eggs and butter for extra money. She also read palms on the back porch for a dollar apiece. It was virtually unheard of in the mountains of southwest Virginia during the 1950s, but people swore Granny had a gift. A few people even invoked the Bible saying according to the Book of Job that some people were granted the gift of seeing into the future. I was never quite sure it was correct, but it seemed to soothe the neighbors who were suspicious of Granny, so I let it pass. I was never sure how Granny got started reading palms or why, I just know as one of the Kind girls I got my share of odd looks and stares in school, at church, and at the Piggly Wiggly.

Unfortunately, Granny Kind's palm reading, and other endeavors were gone in an instant that blustery fall day in 1983. It seemed had she read her own palm she might not have taken off to Abingdon to buy a new dress. Of course, maybe she had read it and saw her time on this planet was fading, because on the way back home her car hit a puddle of water on Route 19 that flung it off course causing her to overcorrect and crash into a concrete barrier. The state trooper assured my mother and her sisters that Granny did not suffer. However, that was little comfort to them having lost the only parent they had ever known.

The one thing that gave a small measure of consolation to my mother and her sisters is that now they would not have to decide what to bury Granny in. She would wear the dress from her final shopping trip on her journey to the great beyond. This seemed to bring solace to my mother and my aunts. My cousins and I thought it was a bit on the creepy side, but knowing how volatile people's feelings can be in situations such as these, we kept our mouths shut.

As that long sad day progressed into the evening, the entire Kind clan of women gathered at Granny's little house on Avon Road. Even though she was no longer there, it seemed the appropriate place to be for all the Kinds on the chilly autumn evening Granny died. One of Granny’s best friends and neighbor, Hugh Pleasant, built a fire in the living room fireplace and one by one we gathered around with plates loaded with the requisite condolence meal of the mountain people. Friends and neighbors had brought fried chicken, ham biscuits, potato salad, in addition to several casseroles made with a can of Campbell’s cream of mushroom soup and assorted meats and vegetables topped with Ritz crackers and baked at 350 degrees for 45 minutes. I mean, what says we're sorry for your loss any clearer. Well, caramel cake for dessert surely dulled our grief with its high dose of coma-inducing brown sugar.

As we all tucked into our plates of food, someone asked if anyone knew of Granny's last wishes or final request for her burial. It was then my mother's head snapped to attention as if the fog of grief had suddenly lifted.

“The blue box,” my mother shouted. “Maxine, Priscilla, the blue box. We must find it!” All at once my mother and my aunts began chattering about a blue box and where it was last seen.

Aunt Priscilla exclaimed, “In her closet! In her closet! I think, or maybe one of the chests.”

For some bizarre reason the memory of the blue box was making my mom and her sisters repeat things twice and squeal like 13-year-old girls. My cousins and I rolled our eyes and followed the search party upstairs to our grandmother's bedroom. As we clambered up the steps, my cousins and I gave each other questioning looks. Who knew what Granny had in store for us now?

As we all tumbled into Granny’s bedroom my mother and my two aunts darted off in different directions. Aunt Priscilla headed toward the closet while Mom and Aunt Maxine each started searching through the twin chests of drawers which stood like sentinels on either side of Granny’s bed. My cousins and I stood watching, not sure whether to help or observe. It seemed the sisters were on a mission only they understood. The three of us decided that watching might be our best option until advised otherwise.

Suddenly, Aunt Maxine proclaimed, “I’ve got it! It’s right here in momma’s underwear drawer. Oh, sisters. I’ve found it.”

Mom and Aunt Priscilla ran to their sister to see what she had found. My cousins and I, as confused as ever, finally asked the question on each of our minds, “What is in the blue box?”

Aunt Maxine looked at her sisters as if to ask permission to answer our question.

“Go ahead,” said my mother.

“It’s time,” said Aunt Priscilla.

Aunt Maxine settled herself onto Grandma’s bed and motioned for the rest of us to do the same. She gently opened the blue box and let out a sigh as she looked around the bed at each one sitting there.

“This is something I’ve both looked forward to and dreaded since momma told us about this box. It seems there is a letter in this box that will explain the mystery surrounding our father. That’s all Momma ever told us. She would never tell us who he was, but she did tell us that we all have the same father, but his identity had to be a secret until she passed. I think Priscilla and Valerie would agree, we’ve always wanted to know who our daddy is but we’ve all dreaded thinking about the day we would finally know because it would mean Momma was gone. Well, sisters, I guess this is it,” Aunt Maxine said as she tore open the envelope. The room fell silent as she began to read.

*My darling girls,*

*If you are reading this letter, then it means I have left this world. Please know that no matter how much time I had with you, my precious daughters and granddaughters, it was not enough. You beautiful girls are the reason my life was the happiest it could have possibly been. I know our life wasn’t like the other people in town, but I hope it was happy for you girls, too. I did my best.*

*Your daddy was the best man I could ever hope for, but he was not able to be with me. If you haven’t found out by now, Hugh Pleasant is the father to all three of you girls. Hugh is a good man and I hope you all will give him the chance to be a real daddy to you now that I’m gone. He wanted to be my husband but after Lizzie died, it just didn’t seem like a good idea to me to create upheaval in your lives. And, yes, I was scared, too. I was afraid you all would get mad at me for keeping him from you and although that might have been selfish, you three were all I had.*

*I couldn’t have stood losing you. So please forgive me now and don’t hold anything against Hugh. He has always been there for me and you girls even if you didn’t know it. He loved me and he loves you. Let him have your love now, girls. If you get mad at anybody, get mad at me. At least I won’t know it. Ha. And as far as arrangements for my burial are concerned, do whatever you girls want. Looks like I’m finished here on this earth. Just remember, laugh a little, love a lot, and hold onto each other. You are my Three of a Kind. No one else could take your place.*

*Love you for always,*

*Momma*

“Ahem.” We looked up to see Granny’s neighbor Hugh standing in the doorway of her bedroom. Mom and my aunts stared at Hugh as if they were struck speechless. My cousins and I exchanged befuddled glances trying to absorb what we had just heard.

My mother recovered enough to look at Hugh and say, “I think you’d better explain.”

Hugh slowly walked across the room and turned the dresser chair around to face the six women who sat looking at him mouths agog.

“It’s like this,” he began, “Cora, your Granny Kind, was as beautiful and mysterious of a woman as I ever saw. She took my breath away. When my wife Lizzie and I moved next door here, we had already fallen out. I only married her because she said she was in the family way. Well, she was not. Lizzie lied to me just to get me to marry her. Lord help me, I could never quite forgive her for that transgression.

I didn’t have it in me because I had given up a lot to make an honest woman of Lizzie. I was all set to move to Norfolk and work in the shipyard with my daddy’s brother. It was a good job and would have gotten me out of Russell County, which was something I had wanted my whole life. I tried to get in the military, but they wouldn’t take me because I had broken my leg when I was a kid and old Doc Nichols set it wrong and caused this limp I have. They said I wouldn’t be able to keep up with the other soldiers when they were marching. It was hard on me because I wanted to help in the war like all the other men. Then my momma died, and Lizzie said she was in the family way, and I had to marry her. It just felt like nothing in my life had gone the way I had planned.

When we moved into our house next door, Cora stopped by the first afternoon we were there. By then, Lizzie stayed bulled up and wouldn’t even talk to me most of the time. Cora swirled in that afternoon with a loaf of her fresh baked self-risen bread and a bouquet of flowers for Lizzie. She was just the prettiest thing I’d ever set eyes on.

It didn’t take long for me to find my way here in the evening after working all day at the mill and coming home to a surly wife. I couldn’t help myself. Cora felt it, too. We fell in love and before we realized what was happening, she was pregnant with you, Valerie. I wanted to divorce Lizzie and marry your momma right there and then, but she would have none of that. How crazy is that? I was married to a woman I didn’t want to be married to and wanted to marry a woman who didn’t want to marry me.

Things just kept growing from there. Once she had delivered you, Valerie, your momma more than anything wanted to give you siblings so you wouldn’t feel like an outcast. Built-in friends she called it. And, when she had two more girls she was over the moon. She knew the three of you, her “Three of a Kind” would take care of each other no matter what happened to her. She knew it’d be hard. Three little girls and no man that anybody knew of, but you see, she knew. Cora always knew I’d take care of her and you girls. I always have. I made sure there was food on the table, and clothes on your back. I paid for your books for school every year and your school pictures and for all the activities you wanted to participate in. I tried extra hard because the one thing I wanted to give you, my presence, was the one thing that Cora forbade.

As unconventional as Cora was, she was a big believer in keeping vows. I would have left Lizzie in a minute but by the time you girls were big enough to know there wasn’t a daddy around, it had become apparent that Lizzie needed someone as a caretaker. She was sick in the head and Cora felt strongly that it was my job to be beside her in sickness just like I promised.”

All of us sat looking at Hugh with utter amazement. So many questions came tumbling out of our mouths. Hugh finally held up a hand and asked for quiet.

“Let me answer your questions one at a time,” Hugh implored.

My mother took the lead and asked the question on all our minds, “Why? Why keep this a secret? Lizzie has been dead for 25 years. You and Momma could have gotten married, or at least been truthful with us about your relationship. Why, Hugh? Why?”

“Valerie, you know how ornery your momma was. After all the years she spent making a life for you and the girls on her own, she didn’t want to give up her independence. Plus, she was afraid after all the years we kept everything hid that people would be even more judgmental toward her than they already were. She figured for all your all’s sake that doing what we’d been doing would be easier. I’da married your momma in a heartbeat. I wanted everything to be out in the open and the neighbors be damned. Your momma just wouldn’t have any of it. And ultimately, I went along with her decision.”

“Momma was a stubborn woman,” said Aunt Priscilla, “I guess it would have been awfully hard to push her to change after all those years.” She then looked at her sisters and said with more emotion than I had ever seen from her, “Hugh, if it’s all right with you, and Valerie and Maxine agree, I think we’d like to get to know you as our daddy and not just Momma’s neighbor. I want everyone to know you’re our father and that you didn’t desert us. You stood by us even when we didn’t know it.”

Aunt Maxine and my mother both nodded their heads in agreement. None of us said a word.

“I reckon that would be the best thing that ever happened in my life,” said Hugh. Tears began to stream down his face as he looked from daughter to daughter with so much love in his eyes.

My mother and my aunts stood up and slowly walked over to their father. The three of them embraced him as their sobs filled the air. My cousins and I looked at each other with tears in our eyes as we quietly left the room.

Our grandfather and his daughters . . . together at last.