

Miss You, Johnny

John Kelly

Twirling the remote like a well-oiled six shooter, I scan the airwaves for something interesting. It's Friday night, the gem of the week for me since I was seven. However, this Friday, my wife is away; I'm feeling lonely and I'm hoping for a little familiar late night companionship on television. I see Godzilla is being tag-teamed by Rodan and a prehistoric saddle-pal. There's a MASH episode and I giggle a little, hearing Alan Alda's infectious laugh. Continuing through the channels, I see JR conniving deliciously, a made-for-TV movie from the early seventies with Bradford Dillman, a Nova special on Crocodiles, Mr. Peabody patiently advising Sherman and Dr. Who transporting to me through that strange early BBC video.

Sigh. Nothing is hitting the spot. I flip over to Dave and although I appreciate his brand of humor, I don't ever get the feeling he really wants to be there. Jay's funny, and I've always liked him, but it's just not the same. I sit back feeling...I don't know...empty. A wave of heavy nostalgia washes over me and I suddenly realize why I feel such emptiness.

I miss him. I genuinely miss him.

I miss the way the music always pulled me into the family room, announcing his arrival...the way the multi-colored curtain pulled back in anticipation...his smile as he entered his domain, so comfortable, like a second home...his nod to Doc or Tommy and Ed...the conductor-like sweep of his arm with the crescendo of his theme commencing the show; another late night adventure was about to begin.

I miss Johnny Carson.

Oh, I understand his reasons for leaving. He had a good run. Sorry—gross understatement—he had a great run. Unmatched and likely to remain so. He left on a wonderful and classy note. There's more time with his wife to be considered, his children, perhaps even time to reflect, to appreciate life away from the Hollywood fish bowl. But, I'm feeling selfish. You see, like most everyone else, Johnny was a constant in my life. He was always there. I could count on him. In the best sense, he was like that old plaid flannel shirt you just can't throw away, despite your wife's best effort. It's warm, fits your particular body mold and is always there, through thick and thin.

Johnny Carson was like that for me. When I was just entering the fifth grade, I latched onto the Marx Brothers, Burns and Allen and the beloved Jack Benny. Oh sure, I still had my GI Joe and my matchbox cars, but the

great comedians roused my funny bone. I got their jokes. Johnny knew these great comedians and often told little stories about encounters with them. But most of all, Johnny told jokes with cracker-jack timing, like his forefathers in comedy. And I got his jokes, too, even at a young age. My dad wouldn't let me stay up late enough to catch him during the week, but he let me on Friday nights. I'd have sleepovers with friends and we'd watch Johnny give Ed a hard time about his libation indulging or try to break up Tommy Newsome from his perpetual stoic expression.

As I entered junior high, I became interested in magic via a friend who had wonderful slight-of-hand technique. Johnny had been an adept magician too, at one time. I can vividly remember hauling out my old Samsonite briefcase, which I'd converted into a secret gallery stowing all my wonderful magic secrets, to practice with Johnny on Friday nights between 11:30 p.m. and 1:00 a.m., while I ate chocolate chip cookies and laughed as Jim Fowler let a marmoset roost on Johnny's head.

In high school, girls, movies, dances and homecoming football games took up a lot of Friday nights, but I would catch the Tonight Show whenever I could. And when a girl would turn me down for a date (routinely), I'd commiserate with Johnny. If his monologue didn't stir me out of the funk, then either Ed's guttural laughter or Johnny's quick ad-libbing with his guests would. If I were really lucky, I'd get a repeat of Ed Ames and his infallible tomahawk. That usually put me on the floor for a good five minutes. Yes, I could count on Johnny...even in times of tragedy.

One Friday night during my junior year in high school, I came home from a rally dance feeling puffed up and exhilarated because I had danced with a certain girl three times—a sure sign she liked me. Doc had just struck up the Tonight Show band, when, I was about to snag myself some milk and cookies, I saw a note on the counter. Mom wanted me to wake her up when I got in. My stomach dropped a little. My father had gone into what we thought was routine surgery that day. I didn't like the short, cryptic tone of the note. Waking Mom, she told me Dad had terminal cancer, was in fact, not expected to live for more than a month. Compassionately but firmly, Mom told me that I had better prepare to face this tortuous reality. Numb, I walked back into the family room and sat on the couch, staring at the TV. Johnny was going through his monologue, obviously on a roll by the sound of the studio crowd. My head spun. A sense of surrealness swarmed around me. I couldn't breathe very well. I knew at that moment life would never be the same. I began to cry. A little at first, as if I didn't want to feel the pain, and then much harder as it began to overwhelm me. I would look up every so often through tears and see Johnny talking with his first guest, Michael Landon. Watching him interview Pa Ingalls, their friendship obvious, their good-natured kidding

of each other warm and affectionate, I started to settle down a little. I knew the next few months were going to be plenty tough. But seeing Johnny behind his desk...his ashtray there (this was before Don Rickles broke it)...seeing how his shoulders jostled up and down as he laughed at Michael's ribbing...feeling the warm and welcoming atmosphere, I guess I knew everything would ultimately be alright.

So here I sit again, on a different couch, seemingly a lifetime later, missing Johnny all the more. I wonder how he's doing. I wonder if he has any idea of the million of appreciators who laughed along with him through the red eye of the studio camera. I wonder how history will record him. I wonder what will become of late night television.

I wonder what I'm going to watch.

Miss you, Johnny.