

Frenchy's Great Escape!

Designer dog: \$2,500, check ... "Juicy" dog sweater: \$45, check ... Leather collar with matching leash from Muttropolis: \$130, check ... Dog tag to identify your dog in case she gets lost: \$5, but wait...ummm, can't find it.

I was shopping with my family at The Spectrum one night and we eyed this adorable teacup Yorkie sniffing a potted palm. She was dragging her designer leash as she walked stiff and slow due to the thick pink hoodie "Juicy" sweater she was wearing. She was all by her lonesome.

"Where is her mommy?" asked my dog-crazed daughter.

Everyone passing by the fancy dog looked at her, then we all looked at one another. I went right over and picked up the two-pound pooch and fumbled around for her tag. Yes, of course, I wanted to find her "mommy," but more importantly, I secretly couldn't WAIT to find out what her name was: Frenchy? Muffin buns? Couture?

Feeling around her neck...no...that's a necklace. No...that's her rhinestone charm. Incredible, she wasn't wearing an ID tag. The whole package – dog and accessories – hovering around the three grand mark and she didn't have on a five-buck tag? Now I was getting peeved.

This is exactly what's wrong with the whole Paris Hilton & Tinkerbell dog thing. Dogs are looked at as accessories, not wet-nosed, bacon stealers that come with a load of responsibility. Adding to the potential of further feckless behavior, would-be owners can finance their pup purchase, really! Wells Fargo offers financing according to the sign in the window of Russo's. Wonder if they have a fore(paws)closures problem? "Repo-Pet?" Totally pitching that as a reality show.

I felt like putting poor Frenchy (that's the name I chose) in

my pocket and taking her home with me. True, I have an upgraded "King Charles Spaniel" and she has been known to get dolled-up in a spring dress, but she has her tag, her shots, her daily vitamin and... um, okay, her own stroller. It's not the pampering that is in question here, it's the capricious, slave-to-fashion attitude some take when purchasing a trendy dog.

Looking around for her "mommy," I spotted a gal casually peering out from the doorway of a nearby store. Surely this couldn't be her dog. She looked as concerned as someone who misplaced their used tissue.

"Is she yours?" I asked. "Oh, yes. I didn't see her slip away," said the not-even-attempting-to-act-concerned owner. She had price tags sticking out of her shirt and pants.

Obviously clever Frenchy saw her chance at freedom while her mom was slipping on a pair of jeans and ran as fast as her four-inch legs would take her.

"You might want to get her an ID tag..." I said, oh-so indignantly as I reluctantly handed her over.

No answer came. No "thank you" either, now that I think about it. She simply scooped Frenchy up and walked back to her dressing room to continue her business, most likely stuffing the dog into her handbag.

Attention Frenchy! If you read Smartly OC (and who doesn't?), I will be sitting outside The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf at The Spectrum at 4:00 p.m. on Sunday waiting for you. Try to make another run for it...I have bacon....

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Corey Perry Fights Robots



(Photo by me.)

Yikes! Almost a week since posting. I've been busy and as you can see from the picture above there's another Anaheim Ducks story coming your way. But, it's a good one I think and even if you're not a hockey fan, which odds are, you're probably not, you might enjoy this.

On Friday night I slipped on a sequins top and headed down to the Honda Center for The Anaheim Ducks "Center Ice Disco" Casino night.

I've never been to any of these "meet the players" type events (though accosting players in the dinning rooms of chain restaurants, I've done to death), so I was excited to go with my friend Sara. Yes, I was there to work—so I had my Flip, my notepad and my camera—but I also wanted to tell the notoriously indifferent Corey Perry the following story and so, while in the V.I.P lounge I did tell him and his sweet girlfriend the robot story and this is how it went.

Me: "Hi Corey." (Blah. Blah. Introduction. Blah.)

Perry: "Hi."

Me: "My 5-year-old son has that HUGE 6 ft poster of you from the Kids Club Kit in his room and every night he says he's not afraid because he knows you (Corey Perry) will protect him from the bad guys and monsters."

Perry: (Forcing half smile.)

Girlfriend: "That's so cute!"

Me: "Anyways, (deep breath and now talking at breakneck

speed because I can tell I'm losing him) for Christmas he got these two robots—Mike and Gib—and we put them up in his room right under your poster. Then, on Christmas night my son asked me to move his robots into the laundry room because he was scared of them and thought they might come to life at night."

Perry: (Totally and understandably checked out of the conversation at this point.)

Girlfriend: "Awww!"

Me: (Relentlessly forging ahead) "So I asked him, 'What about Corey Perry? Can't he take care of them for you? You know, can't he fight them off?' Then my son said without a hitch and with total confidence, "Corey Perry doesn't fight robots."

Girlfriend, Sara and I: (laugh. laugh. laugh.)

Perry: (Joining back in the conversation for a moment.)

Me: "So, do you?"

Perry: (With knitted-brow) "Do I what?"

Me: "Do you fight robots?"

Perry: (Smirking) "I'll fight anyone."

And that's why Corey Perry is my favorite hockey player. The end.

Here's my video from the night.

Originally published January 10, 2010

Friday Five: 5 Things You Must Do/Eat/See at the OC Fair This Year



We are a fair family. At least ONCE every summer since my kids

were born we hit the OC Fair. We have built years of memories and now we have added new ones with our new family – including my stepkids and their dad into our tradition.

We got to the OC Fair the first day it was open this year and spent the day doing all of our favorite things. Here is my list of things you simply must do this year at The OC Fair.

1.) **The pig races.** This was the first time my stepkids had seen the famous OC Fair pig races. I have to say when you try to talk someone into seeing pigs race it does sound kinda silly but rest assured – they loved it! It's a MUST when visiting The Fair. TIP: Check the schedule for race times and get there early for shading spot.



2.) **Your favorite ride.** For my daughter Emily and me, this is it, The Sky Ride. Everyone has their ride of choice, but this is a crowd pleaser and on a hot day, a welcome way to cool down.





3.) The OC Fair corn dog. We like the dogs that are sold from the smaller trucks throughout the fair. The larger ones from Chicken Charlie's are a bit too big for us. These little jewels are just perfect!



4.) **The exhibits at The Fair.** We love Centennial Farms the best! Emily has to see the OC Beekeeper exhibit every year and

the garden there is a great way to remind kids where all those yummy veggies come from. Check out their daily schedule, [here](#).

5.) Hit the Sky Way. This is by far the best view of The Fair.



Ten Tips for Staying at the

Crystal Cove Cottages



Our family has been trying to snag a coveted cottage at Crystal Cove for over two years. Booking one of these historic homes turns out to be a mix of planning, persistence and dumb luck. Over the Christmas break we were able to stay at Cottage #19A with friends staying in two other cottages. Now that we have our first vacation there in the books I feel obligated to share some tips on how to get a cottage and then how to make the best of your stay.

1.) **Booking the cottage** Because the cottages are state owned you need to book yours through Reserve America six months in advanced. If you miss that window try to keep your eye out for cancellations (72 hrs in advance) by checking the website or better yet, set a request on the Reserve America's website that will notify you when a cottage becomes available during the preset times you select. Also, when the forecast says rain, you're more than likely to find 1-2 cancellations. Keep in mind in California, the rain never lasts more than a few hours.

2.) **Ruby's Shake Shack offers packed lunches "To Go."** The Shake Shack is perched right above the cottages and offers a specular view if you want to eat there, but we took our lunch "To Go." The nice people at Ruby's pack up our lunches into individual lunch bags for easy dining on the beach.



3.) **Bring games.** There is no Wi-Fi at the cottages and no TVs in the rooms. It's the perfect place to unplug and play some old-fashioned board games or beach games like corn hole or smash ball. Don't forget your football!



4.) **Rent a bonfire from the Beachcomber.** The only way to have a fire on the beach at Crystal Cove is to rent one from the Beachcomber. They will set it up – even the chairs for up to 12 people– and get it roaring for your group. For more info on the go to their website ->> [here](#).



5.) **The coffee situation in the morning.** If you're like my husband and me, you need to know in advance the coffee situation on any trip. There is a small coffee maker in the room but you can go to the check-in counter in the morning and get a carafe filled with coffee – free of charge – to take to your room or if you're lucky enough to have a patio, enjoy your java there. You can also grab a coffee from Ruby's or the Tiki Bar at Beachcomber. Lots of options so you're good.



6.) **Bring extra blankets.** There are extra blankets in the rooms but it gets chilly at night at the beach. Each of us brought our own throw blanket to take outside and cuddle in and then use on top of the bed. We ALL used them.



7.) **Heaven for sea glass collectors.** Crystal Cove offers some of the most beautiful sea glass in SoCal. You ARE allowed to

collect: sea glass, driftwood (up to 50lbs.) but keep in mind you ARE NOT allowed to collect shells, sand, rocks, any living creatures, or anything out of the tide pools.



8.) **Hit Trader Joe's before checking in.** The Crystal Cove Trader Joe's is just minutes from the Crystal Cove Cottages.

Some of the cottages have kitchens – a few have stoves – but all have refrigerators. Grab pre-made salads, supplies for sandwiches and healthy snacks at TJ's. But keep in mind whatever you bring you'll have to carry to your cottage (or load on a cart).

9.) **Pack simply.** I can't stress this enough. You should not only embrace the laid-back vibe at the cottages but for practical reasons: simplicity is the key to packing for a stay at the cottages. Wear jeans more than once. Wear your hair in a ponytail. Don't bring a massive amounts of makeup. Pack small meals and snacks. Also, don't have a lot of loose items. Pack everything into bags or suitcases. You'll either need to transfer them onto the cart that takes you to your cabin or walk your things down from the parking lot. Either way, you want it all to be concise and secured.

10.) **Become an advocate for The Crystal Cove Alliance.** Their mission is to renovate and preserve for future generations the Historic District's unique cultural, natural and historic resources and to make these values available for the enjoyment and education of all. There is a wealth of information on their website ->> [here](#). This is a must-read before your trip!







FYI: iPhones don't float



It was just a quick exchange. I was at a restaurant on the border of Nevada and California dropping off my kids with my parents, who live in the Silver State. They were taking them and my brother's son for a week to do whatever grandparents do with their grandkids when their parents aren't around.

I just needed to use the restroom "real fast" before we had lunch and ditched the kids. I checked my email on my iPhone quickly as I made my way through the lobby and then shoved it in my back pocket. My daughter and sister-in-law followed me and we split ways at the stall doors – that's when it happened. I will never, ever forget that dreadful sound.

"Kurrr-Plop."

I turned my head and looked down to see my iPhone in the bowl, slowly sliding down deeper and deeper. It reminded me of that last scene with Jack in "Titanic" when he lets go and sinks into the abyss of the Atlantic Ocean, at least to me it was just as traumatic. At that moment, instinct kicked in and I fearlessly reached in and rescued it.

My scream startled my daughter and we met at the sinks, where I was already frantically pounding out the water from what now seemed like massive openings in my phone – cups of water poured all over the counter. My daughter quickly ripped off

the cover and grabbed some towels. Then my sister-in-law came out of her stall and asked what had happened. When she heard the news she rightly struck an “eww” face and instructed me not to turn it on.

“I read that somewhere, don’t turn it on and put it in a bag of rice to soak up the water.”

Stunned and visibly shaking, I headed to our table to have lunch. My mom talked to me about bedtimes, helmets and something about a restaurant in Reno with a parrot that flies over diners dropping dollar bills to the kids, but I couldn’t think of anything but my iPhone. I had just bought it a week before; I’d had the original iPhone for over three years and decided to take the leap when it stopped taking a full charge.

Could it be saved? Why am I so upset? The parrot does what?

The six-hour ride home was brutal: no phone, no Twitter, no email. At about Newhall, my iPhone started turning on and off on its own in a haunting poltergeist way. It was weird; screens I had never seen would pop up and then the phone would go black again. When I got home I put it in a bag of uncooked white rice as instructed by my sister-in-law and the results of the Google search for “Dropped iPhone in toilet.” The rice glowed blue and red as my possessed phone turned on and off as it nestled deep in a Ziploc bag.

That night I dreamed a tidal wave hit me in my office.

The next day I took my phone out of the rice and to the Apple Store. I played it cool with the Genius assigned to help me and as I handed it to him I said, “I dropped it in water.” He looked exactly like a younger, shorter version of Russell Crowe, which was reassuring for some reason. He took it in his certifiably-Genius hands and without looking up at me asked, “Did you drop it in the toilet?” Busted, I fessed up, “Yeah, but I wiped it down with a handy wipe. I haven’t turned it on and it’s been living in rice since last night.” He smiled as

he looked up to me, "It happens all the time." Forcing a smile back I asked casually, "Can it be saved?"

Like I was good either way. Just wondering.

Little Russell assured me there's always hope and took it into the back room to laugh at me with the other Geniuses, or as he put it, "run some tests on your phone." When he came out through the white unmarked door after about five minutes he was shaking his head as he walked toward me. Like a doctor he delivered the news, "We did everything we could; we couldn't save it."

My heart sank. In a manic monologue I told him how long I had my first phone, the very first iPhone! I took it out of my purse and showed it to him, he seemed very impressed for an Apple employee. I finished up with how long I waited to get a new one, and now all the patience and restraint was for nothing. I really laid it on, but I meant it, I was truly and disproportionately upset, afraid I was going to burst into tears right there next to the external hard drives.

"Well," Little Russell started, "since you had your first iPhone for so long, and you seem a little upset, we do have phones for these sorts of situations." Ah, being a Genius and all, he realized he had a possible crier on his hands and Apple doesn't do crying. Think about it, with its massive crush of people, its prices and the technical catastrophes being schlepped in and discussed daily, have you ever seen anyone crying at an Apple store? No.

Little Russell beelined it over to the bar and came back holding a small, black, unmarked CIA-type case. Not a white and grey, cheerful iPhone box, but a covert, lean and shiny box with an iPhone laying unceremoniously inside. He never once verbally said, "I'm giving you a new iPhone." Never said the words "free" or "replacement," he just brought it over, took it out of its CIA case, had me sign a form and handed it

to me.

I stood there a long time holding my new phone and waited for him to say something – he didn't. He just looked at me. Then I said, "Would it be weird if I hugged you? I mean, would you get in trouble or anything?" He shrugged and put his tattooed arms out. Isn't that a nice picture? I was hugging a Genius with my new iPhone in hand in the middle of the Apple Store. I was happy. Really happy. Like wedding-day happy. Like when you were in eighth grade and the bell rang on the last day of school and you ran outside and threw your notebook up on the roof and ran wildly with your friends through the schoolyard kind of happy. It's really kind of sad how happy I was over an iPhone. Little Russell understood.

Thanks for the memories, Ruby

I was saddened to hear the news yesterday that Ruby's Diner namesake and heart & soul "Ruby" had passed away.

This was posted on the Ruby's Diner's Facebook page:

It is with heavy hearts that we share this sad news. Ruby Cavanaugh, our beloved inspiration, passed away Sunday, December 27th at the age of 93. Ruby lived her life with a beautiful spirit of warmth, joy and kindness. She will continue to live on in our hearts and be the ever-youthful icon of our restaurants.



Many people didn't know that Ruby's was actually a real person (the mother of Ruby's Diner Founder Doug Cavanaugh), but I knew very well. I was a Ruby's girl years ago when I was in college. I work at the Ruby's Diner in Crystal Court, Costa Mesa. Ruby was a regular visitor during those days. She would come in often and sit at the counter and shower us with compliments. Ruby would say things like, "You girls are just lovely!" and "Aren't you cute with your saddle shoes." She loved to chat with us and just hang out like she was just one of the girls.



She never made a big deal that she was the "headliner" or the

star. Ruby was always gracious and friendly. We weren't like "OMG! Everyone straighten up, Ruby is here!" It was more like "Ruby is here!" and we'd all run out to greet her.

I had the opportunity to interview her for OC Family TV a few years back when they redesigned Ruby's Crystal Court. You can watch that video below. She even sat down with a group of our rambunctious kids to have a bite.

Ruby's Diner will always hold a special place in my heart and I think much of the reason why is because of Ruby. Thanks for the memories, Ruby.

Read some of my other posts about Ruby's:

Ruby's Sky Ranch has something for everyone.

Ruby's Carhop in Anaheim (Includes another interview with Ruby)

Where have all the cowboys gone?



I noticed these “fellas” years ago at a friend’s party. These compadres truly adored their smartphones. They shined them. They held them up to the light. They showed them off to each other and wore them on their hip like a trusted six- shooter.

I recall a party I attended when all the men greeted each other with hugs and slaps on the back, then they all sat down at a big round table on the patio next to a freshly remodeled pool. The flagstone fireplace lit up their faces and in unison the men slid their phones out of their pockets and laid them on the table directly in front of them.

One guy pointed at another man’s phone and asked, “May I?” Getting the nod from him to examine his phone, he picked it up and tossed it lightly from hand to hand. He then quickly slipped it into his ~~holster~~ short’s pocket, quickly taking it in and out a few times. “Smooth,” he complimented, pursing his lips. “iPhone?... nice,” he nodded his approval. Next came the questions: “How’s the reception? Easy to use the keypad? How is it with a Bluetooth?”

Here, at the very mention of the word “Bluetooth,” all the men perked up even more. “Yes, it works great, but I still pre-ordered – *fill in whatever the latest release was back then* –

just in case I like the camera better.” All the men “Ahh’d” their approval at the very idea of having two smartphones at once and then simply choosing the one they prefer. The phone with the better camera, or the best keyboard, or the easiest screen to see in the scorching sun while riding your horse out on the open range, ur, um, I mean waiting for your margarita out on the patio of Javier’s.

I got the impression that these men, if left in the wilds of Orange County without their trusted smartphones by their sides, would be rendered helpless, unable to mosey their way through traffic without their GPS app or decide which watering hole to go to without being able to check Yelp’s recommendations.

They would surely perish in the harsh wilderness of disconnection. Cell phone cowboys needed their ~~guns~~ phones to survive in their frontier.

But do these men know how to use a Thomas Guide to find their way? Probably not. My dad still has his in the back of his car. It’s like his own version of Custard’s Last Stand. He’s doesn’t have a smartphone and promises he never will. He’s a real man afterall! To my dad, the idea of GPS is downright disgraceful.

You might think that having access to all the conveniences and pampering that technology provides has changed what it means to be a man? Are these men who are constantly checking their basketball bracket apps while picking the right filter for their Instagram photo of their lunch and updating their status on Facebook really still “real” men? Yes. You know why I can say that with stanch confidence? Because I’m raising a young man.

My 10-year-old son is a classic nerd. A geek. A technology junkie! He has pictures of the creators of Minecraft taped on his bedroom door, not an athlete or rock star. His best

friend, a fellow geek, dressed as Steve Jobs for his historical character book report, complete with black turtleneck, jeans and white tennis shoes. He got the “coolest costume” nod of approval from all the boys. And though Markus Persson and Jens Bergensten (the creators of Minecraft) and Steve Jobs might not have the swagger of Steve McQueen or the grit of John Wayne, they are idols to these young boys. They’re pioneers, rebels, hard-workers and smart on top of it all.

When I told my son I was going to write this column I asked him (as I always do when I write about my kids) if it was okay to for me to call him a nerd and geek. “Oh, yeah!” he replied instantly. “I’m a geek! That’s cool.”

We’re going to be okay. These young men know who they are and I believe so do their dads, uncles and teachers. They’re not Googling “How to be manly” (though that is a thing I found online and I would pay money – cold hard cash – to know someone who has looked that up), they have just replaced their spurs, lassos and sweaty bandanas with convenience.

Back to the cellphone cowboys at the party. After these men had finished admiring each other’s phones, they all sat back deeply in their chairs and looked up at the stars, clear and bright in the San Juan Capistrano sky. The night was quiet and still. Only the crackling of the fire and a random ringtone every so often broke the silence.



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Hometown Stay at the Hyatt Huntington Beach



You've probably heard the famous quote about traveling attributed to St. Augustine: "The world is a book, and those who do not travel only read one page." I then suppose that my kids and I traveling 17 miles from Orange to my hometown of Huntington Beach to stay at the Hyatt Regency would be like reading a book's "About the author" page.

I live for years behind the Hyatt – long before it was there – so I'm well versed in area around the resort. I remember

watching it go up, hoping for a spot that locals could enjoy with our families. I believe they have achieved it!

My daughter, age 13 and son, age 11, and I stayed two nights and spent three activity-filled days at the resort. The casual Spanish architecture with a piazza-like courtyard has kid-friendly restaurants, shops, a market that serves fresh sandwiches, salads and Starbucks coffee and, in the middle, a fire pit lit at night for s'mores time.

Our suite was a good size for our family, complete with large soaking tub and a king-size bed for us to cuddle up in and watch a movie after a day at the beach or pool.

So let's talk about that. The kid pool area is called Slyder's Waterpark. It has three slides and a long pool down the middle with lots of spots to set up for a day of soaking up the sun. We scored a cabana and spent an entire day at the pool playing cards, eating lunch and enjoying our time together.

The next day we spent down on the beach. It was a short walk over the bridge to collect our complimentary beach chairs, towels and umbrella. We first hit Surf City Grocers and they packed up a nice picnic lunch in a cooler for us (with wheels!).



The unique advantage of staying in town for vacation is that you can rendezvous with local friends and family while you're "away." We all met down at the beach, and when our friends packed up to go home, we packed up and headed back to our room – but not before hitting the Jacuzzi – and showered up before having a nice dinner at Pete's Sunset Grill while watching the sunset.

A few things for the kids that make the Hyatt a great family spot:

- * Hyatt HB does offer a kids club. So if you want to spend some time in the resort's world-class spa, Pacific Waters, or head to the well-equipped on-site gym (choices, choices), the kids won't mind.

- * You can purchase s'more kits at Surf City Grocers and use them at one of the many fire pits around the property.
- * Enjoy Cosmic Sliding; Saturday nights at Sylder's Water Playground features a laser light show.
- * Rent bikes at Toes to the Nose in the courtyard piazza and take a ride down the path next to the beach.
- * Enjoy Dive in Movies at Sylder's Water Playground, Friday night at 7 p.m.
- * On Tuesday nights in the summer, Main Street hosts Surf City Nights. It's fun to check out the Farmers Market, and be sure to take advantage of dinner specials in the local restaurants then. They offer a kids zone, too!

If you're planning a stay-cation this summer, The Hyatt Regency should be on your short list of options. It sits on miles and miles of family-friendly beaches, and guests with kids get the feeling they are welcome there – which makes a parent's stay all the more enjoyable.



Basking in the beauty at the Beachcomber Cafe in Crystal Cove

I don't know how it is that I've never eaten at The Beachcomber Cafe. It's so quintessential Orange County that it seems like every citizen of this county has had to have dined

there, at least once. With fresh food and unique cocktails the cafe has quickly become one of my favorite haunts. The open-air patio offers sweeping views of the coastline and if it gets too chilly, the friendly staff will offer diners a warm blanket for their laps.

The cafe was once one of the many quaint cottages that pepper the intimate coastline of Crystal Cove State Beach. It was transformed into The Beachcomber Cafe in 2006 by restaurateur Doug Cavanaugh, of Ruby's Cafe fame. (See my interview with Doug [here](#).) In the short time since it opened it has been acclaimed by Gayot and Open Table as "Top Outdoor Dining Experiences in the United States." Not bad and right here in our own county.

It takes a little work to get down to the cafe – either by shuttle or hoofing it – but it's well-worth the time. Get there early as the waiting lists begins to grow starting at 10 a.m. You can book a table online at Thebeachcombercafe.com.



My boyfriend, Tim, and I had loads of luck on our last visit. It was a warm and crispy clear November morning in Crystal Cove. We only waited about 15 minutes for our tiny table.

When I mentioned I had never had a Bloody Mary Tim ordered me one promptly at the Bootlegger Bar that's located directly behind the restaurant. It immediately became my favorite cocktail and I have not had its equal since – though I have tried them on several occasions since Beachcomber.



The menu for breakfast isn't as expansive as most breakfast establishments, but what is offered is fresh, simple and fantastic! The menu rotates seasonally and always offers one omelet, scramble and frittata.

For me the specialty breakfasts are the show stealers. Apple Pecan or Coconut Macadamia Pancakes look delicious but for me, The Florentine Benedict is the clear choice for best on menu. They also offer a Traditional and Crab Cake Benedict. You can go to the Beachcomber website to see what is being served right now.



The lowdown on The Beachcomber Cafe

Time

Breakfast is served from 7 to 11:30 a.m. Lunch from 11:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Dinner (yes dinner!) is served from 4:30 to 9:30 p.m.

Parking

Park in the Los Trancos parking lot off PCH. The shuttle cost is \$1, one way. Kids under 12 are free.

Boozy fact

Full bar

Show stealer

The Florentine Benedict

Insider tip

The cafe offers rentals of beach essentials like beach chairs and umbrella rentals during the summer months.

Ruff-rules

No dogs on the patio

Instagram must

Shot of your cocktail from the Bootlegger Bar

Good Morning, Gertrude.



Every morning I see her. She is as consistent as Al Roker's silly jokes and my son's breakfast choice (always oatmeal). When I moved into my neighborhood in Orange two and a half years ago she was the first person I met. Her name is Gertrude* and she is in her nineties. Her constant partner is named Tulia Pie, a white and brown Shih Tzu dog.

Gertrude introduced herself one afternoon as I swept out my garage. "Hello!" she called out to me from the sidewalk. I honestly didn't want to chat. I was busy. A single mom who just moved her two kids; two dogs and rabbit into a new house had a lot to do. Motivated solely by guilt, I put down my broom and walked over to meet her.

At a rapid pace – impressive for a woman of her age – she told me her life story. She is one of the "originals owners." That's one of three categories of people in our neighborhood: original owners, Chapman students or young families. She said she had moved here with her husband, who died many years ago. She talked about him with a broad smile and big animated motions. Then she told me her daughter and son-in-law lived with her. Her daughter has to use a cane to walk, but she is a wonderful daughter and gets around pretty well despite her handicap.

Her son-in-law, who has cancer and was in hospice, he too is wonderful, and the nurses and staff where he is are just wonderful and take good care of him.

As she spoke to me that morning one prevailing sentiment was repeated over and over – wonderful.

Life is wonderful according to Gertrude.

It's obviously not perfect. She knows that, having experienced loss and disappointment, but it is still wonderful.

Every story she told, no matter the outcome, she always ended on a positive note.

Thinking she might be getting tired of standing out in the hot sun, and Tulia Pie pulling on her leash, I asked the "time to end this chat" question. But she didn't bite and asked about me.

"I just moved here with my two kids," I told her. "I'm divorced." Oh she thought this was the perfect neighborhood for a divorcee – safe and friendly, with two former sheriff's deputies on the street. "I work at the O.C. Register," I continued. That is usually met with mixed reactions, but Gertrude thought that was ... you guessed it, "Just wonderful!"

We said our goodbyes and I watched her walk away, she continue chatting, but now it was directed at Tulia Pie.

I've seen her most mornings since then. She has her routine. She is always dressed well, in pastel blue elastic-waist pants, a crisp cotton shirt with little flowers and white nurse-type shoes. If she needs it, she wears a light white sweater across her tiny shoulders like a shawl, clinging to her by one button. She walks confidently, but with grace and caution. She told me she used to walk miles every day, but after she fell a few years ago, her family will now only let her walk our cul-de-sac. So that's what she does and it's

“wonderful” (naturally).

My Facebook feed is filled with pictures of sunsets or oceans with inspirational sayings splashed across them. Friends comment with things like, “So true” or “Good to remember” to even the most basic platitudes. Life coaching has become a \$1 billion a year industry. One can download apps that send you daily affirmations, or that track your workout, or enable you to listen to podcasts of a favorite self-help book.

But I’m beginning to suspect that sweet Gertrude has the key to what we are all striving for, a happy life. It’s simple really; get out and exercise every day, have a positive attitude and a grateful heart, connect with your neighbors and community and, of course, own a dog.

I often find myself humming the song made popular when she was a young girl called “Look for the Silver Lining” when I see her.

“Look for the silver lining

When e’er a cloud appears in the blue

Remember somewhere the sun is shining,

And so the right thing to do,

Is make it shine for you”

She’s a constant reminder to me to check my attitude. As I’m hurrying my kids along in the morning, she passes my kitchen window and it makes me think of how quickly this time in my life will pass. As I pile the kids into the car, a mess of lunch boxes, unbrushed hair (we’ll brush it in the car) and backpacks I stop and say, “Good morning, Gertrude” and it instantly grounds me. I remember. Isn’t life wonderful?

“A heart, full of joy and gladness,

Will always banish sadness and strife

So always look for the silver lining,

And try to find the sunny side of life”

*Name changed to protect her privacy

Contact the writer: sbroughton@ocregister.com From my column in the Orange County Register. All rights belong to Orange County Register