



By Margaret Evans

It may (or may not) surprise you to learn that your humble scribe here, while admittedly a rank amateur – okay, borderline ignoramus – about many of the topics upon which she regularly expounds, is an expert of the highest order when it comes to Beaufort's current obsession: American Idol.

I've been watching the show since its inception, back when my almost-12-year-old was a mere babe in arms. I remember a time before Simon Cowell had white Chiclet teeth . . . before Randy Jackson got skinny. . . before Paula Abdul went crazy. (Actually, I don't remember back quite that far.) I remember Kelly Clarkson's tear-inducing "Moment Like This" and Justin Guarini's 15 minutes of fame. I knew Carrie Underwood before she was "Carrie Underwood" and Jennifer Hudson before she was a Dream Girl. I was watching Idol before Katharine McPhee became a "Smash," before Daughtry dropped his "Chris," and way before Steven Tyler showed up just long enough to revive his career.

My daughter grew up with Idol. For years, it was our "family show." The only one, really. (It's sad how few of those there are anymore. I told Amelia that once there were many such shows – programs like Carol Burnett, Sonny and Cher, Laugh-In, etc. – and that families would gather to watch them together, without smart phones, laptops or Kindles to divide our attention. She just stared at me incredulously, as if I'd just told her we used to churn our own butter while dinosaurs roamed in the backyard.)

Our Idol routine has changed along the way. About six years ago, I started going to choir practice on Wednesday nights, so that put a crimp in our viewing schedule. I typically arrive home a good half hour into the show now, and Amelia has to bring me up to speed. Last year, my husband decided he was done with Idol – "I just don't care anymore," quoth he – so our

"family tradition" became a mother/daughter thing. Jeff's defection was ill-timed, to say the least, an irony not lost on Amelia and me as we sit watching our first-ever hometown Idol, wowing the world with her gigantic talent, on my small, decrepit bedroom TV.

Nevertheless – small screen or large – the magic is still there for Idol and me. The honeymoon may be over – we're more like an old married couple now – but I've never really lost that lovin' feelin'. When January rolls around, and I'm sunk deep in the post-holiday doldrums, Idol reliably arrives like a ray of warm midwinter sunshine – something light and frivolous to lift my weary spirit. How many fame-seeking wackos will show up for the auditions? Will I like the new judges? What contestants will be my early favorites? Who will make it to Hollywood? Who will make the top 10? The top 3? As someone who tends to get too caught up in the world of 24-hour breaking news and agitated political discourse, I like Idol because it gives my brain a break.

But we thinky, broody types sometimes suffer for our Idol worship. Apparently, people "like us" aren't supposed to watch shows "like that." As a writer friend and fellow Idol-er said to me the other day, "I have borne the ridicule of musically more sophisticated friends for 11 years because I love watching kids sing . . . and now my wisdom is rewarded." Yes! I know exactly how she feels. After years of being teased about my "lowbrow" Idol habit, it's validating (and even vindicating!) that Beaufort's first Idol finalist – the one who's got even my scoffer friends watching – turns out to be an elegant, sophisticated jazz singer a la Ella Fitzgerald or Billie Holiday. I'm not one to gloat – not really – but who's lowbrow now, pallies?

Oh, Candice... such class you've brought to the show! And this is a show not known for its class. (Some of the guest "artists" they bring on to perform? Ugh. And don't even get me started on the fact that one of the most successful long-running TV shows in history expects little towns across the country to foot the bill when they grace us with their presence! Fifty grand is nothing for a show like Idol. It's a hefty chunk for a town like Beaufort. But I digress...)

I'm writing this on the morning of your big day, Candice (if I may continue to address you directly, just one of many strangers who now feel they know you). Actually, it's Beaufort's big day. You've been having a string of big days for several months now, and we've all been basking in your glow. Today is our chance to get closer . . . to step into the intimate circle of your radiance. We will fete you in a parade downtown, then you will gift us with a concert. They've been predicting anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000 people will show up to see you. One source has bumped up that estimate to 35,000. I shudder at the thought of 35,000 souls in quaint little downtown Beaufort. It seems mathematically impossible. Outside my window, it's chilly and damp – not at all like May in Beaufort – and I'm sad at the thought that this is what

America will see on their TV sets next week. A gray, soggy Beaufort. Most of all, I'm sad that you had to come home to a gray, soggy Beaufort. You're probably just glad to be home, period. I hope they're letting you sleep in.

I scroll through the online pictures from your homecoming last night, and I feel tears welling up. You are such a beautiful young woman, Candice. There is a light inside you, and it glows like a slow, steady fire. It looks and feels like love, and it is that love-light that has drawn America to your side. Well, that and your supernatural gift of a voice. Music, as they say, is the universal language, and your fluency allows you to communicate with people – all people – on the most profound level... a level *beyond* language. Never underestimate that power. It's yours, and no one can take it from you. . . though many will try to use it to their own ends. Don't let them.

I just read that Governor Nikki Haley will be riding in your parade today. See, Candice . . . your magnetism has transcended the boundaries of Beaufort County. The whole state is laying claim to you now. Everybody wants a piece of your action! You'd better get used to it.

Whether or not you become the next American Idol is really immaterial at this point. You've made the top 3, and what that means is that your life will never be the same again. You're on your way, my dear. Launched into the stratosphere. The country has fallen in love with you, the music industry smells money, and your success is assured. Want some advice from someone old enough to be your . . . much older sister? Don't take any of it too seriously.

The people I'm looking at in these pictures . . . the ones who greeted you at the airport? Your sisters and brothers, teachers and friends? These are the people who love you. Not the music industry . . . not the fans of American Idol . . . not even Governor Nikki Haley. Oh, the fans love the way you make them feel, and the music industry loves the dollar signs you engender in their eyes. The governor loves it that you're representing South Carolina, and we Beaufortonians love it that you're drawing the eyes of the nation to our lovely (albeit gray and soggy) Lowcountry. But the *real* love? The love you can count on to catch you when you fall, to dry your tears when you hurt, to make you that mac and cheese and fried chicken you've been craving? You know where *that* love lives. Let it be your compass. Carry it with you through this extraordinary journey you're embarking on, and you'll be just fine.

And Candice, please don't listen to a word Nicki Minaj says.

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