

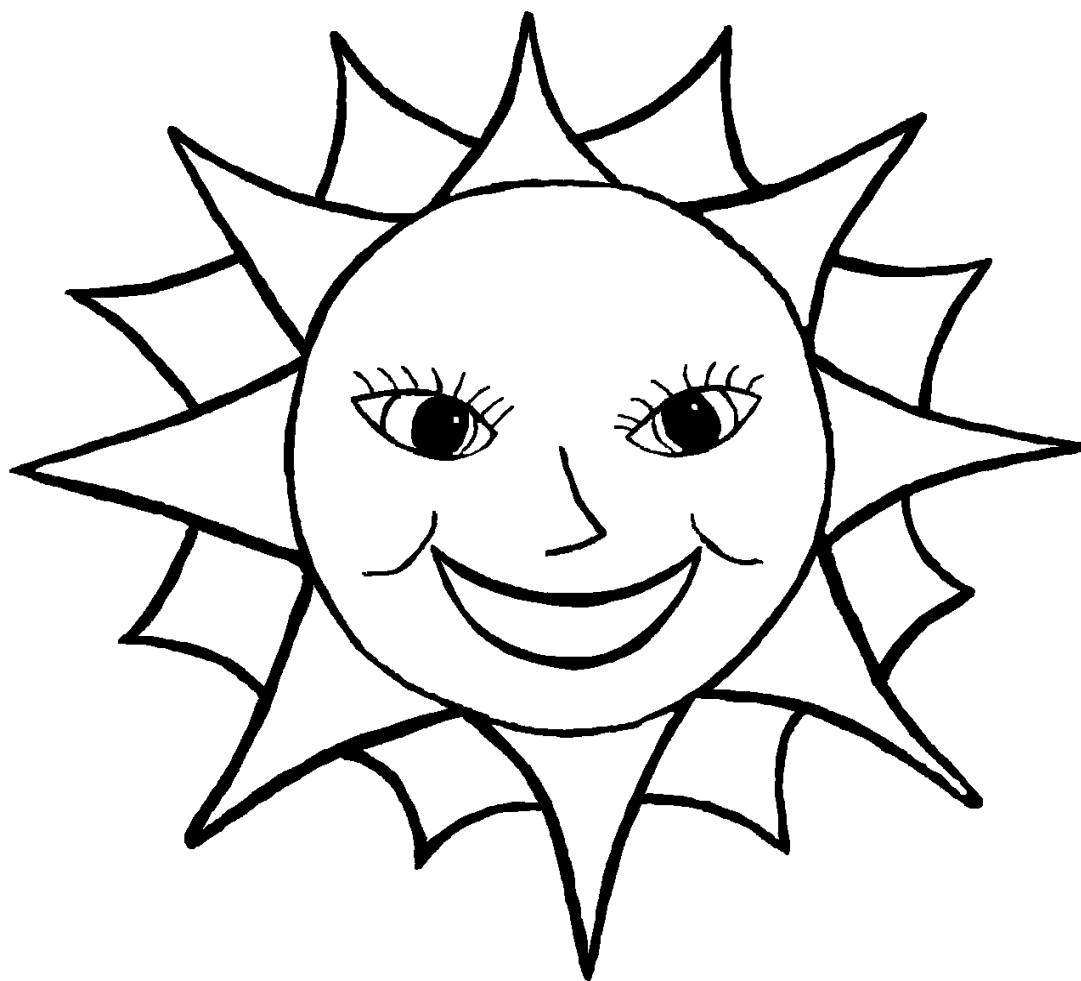
Volume Two

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Emerald Tales

A Bimonthly Journal of Short Fiction



It was a Bright and Sunny Day

Contents

<i>Chunky Coffee and Sunny Days</i>	<i>Jason Flum</i>	1
<i>The Forever Poem</i>	<i>John Hayes</i>	6
<i>The Old Man and the Hill</i>	<i>Justin Whitney</i>	7
<i>Heir Error</i>	<i>Guy Belleranti</i>	12
<i>One of Those Addicting Games</i>	<i>Laurie Dalzell</i>	13
<i>Grave Mistakes</i>	<i>Cherie Reich</i>	19
<i>New Day</i>	<i>Matthew Byer</i>	25
<i>These Things Take Time</i>	<i>Abra Staffin-Wiebe</i>	26
<i>Under the End</i>	<i>Amanda C. Davis</i>	32
<i>The Pirate's Lord</i>	<i>Jenny Morientes</i>	33
<i>Northern Beach</i>	<i>Marge Simon</i>	42
<i>How the Owl Learned That Being Wise Isn't Everything</i>	<i>Mario Milosevic</i>	43
<i>Global Swarming</i>	<i>B. M. Kezar</i>	51
<i>Good Night, Sunlight</i>	<i>Lauren McBride</i>	58
<i>Love, True Love</i>	<i>Lisa Clark</i>	59
<i>It was a Bright...</i>	<i>Darrell Lindsey</i>	66
<i>Kilko</i>	<i>Michael McGlade</i>	67
<i>Fashion of Denial</i>	<i>Michelle Mead</i>	71
<i>Down From a Duck</i>	<i>Jennifer Schwabach</i>	72
<i>Emerald Tales</i>		
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Chunky Coffee and Sunny Days

by

Jason Flum

“It was a bright and sunny day,” Professor Jones said as he peered at us over his glasses, “is a terrible way to begin a story.” He slapped the papers in his hands and waved them in the air as though he could forcibly remove the very words that tarnished the otherwise sterile paper. “How about some creativity, people? A little more depth, a little more *life* in your writing? How about this one: ‘I woke up and it was a brand new day.’ I’ll just take a moment to let that little nugget seep into your brains.”

As Professor Jones took his moment, which lasted nearly thirty seconds, the ten of us in the room squirmed in our seats. I looked around quickly: the five guys were all looking at the floor or their desks; the rest of us were busily studying each other.

“How about this one,” he said flipping to a paper in the middle of the pile, “Today was a day like none other! Have I been teaching you all semester to revel in the banal and cliché? Is there not a single, solitary creative idea in any of your heads?” Professor Jones held the papers aloft, looking like a five-foot-two, bewhiskered and bespectacled Statue of Liberty mocking the huddled masses before him. “Your challenge, my good people,” he always called us that, though his tone dripped with condescension, “is to write me something, anything for God’s sake, that doesn’t make the lines in my forehead any deeper. Write me something that shows me there is more than years of collected crappy movie script dust rattling around in those brains somewhere. Write me something to give me hope that amongst you there might sit the promised future Hemmingway or Faulkner or even, for the love of Dickens’ pen, a Twain to raise me from my own personal level of Dante’s hell.”

With that, he dropped his hands and let the papers scatter where they may. He took one last look at us, began to sigh and then decided we weren’t worth the effort. “You have forty minutes. If you have nothing for me, don’t bother being here when I return.”

A moment later, we were alone in the classroom: ten freshmen with no professor and forty minutes left in the period.

We all sat and looked at each other in silence for a moment, and then each of us became what we truly are. The moment of change was instant and palpable, as the shift from “students” to “lost eighteen-year-olds” overtook the room.

Forgive the indulgence, but if this paper is the one found two thousand years from now, it seems only right to let our descendents see the truth of what they’ve replaced as represented by the microcosm of college life as found in a freshman seminar early in the third millennium (that was kind of poetic, right? Or maybe I’m losing my touch).

Anyway, eight of the ten denizens of Room 19B in McCarter Hall from 1:10-1:50pm, spring semester, in no particular order:

The Three Princesses in the back started popping their gum and gabbing. I'd transcribe who said what, but in the end, it really doesn't matter very much, and I can't tell them apart anyway. I'll just give you a sample:

Princess 1: "What a wacko!"

Princess 2: "I mean, for real, like, what was that about Fuckner and the Dick-ins?"

Princess 3: "Yah, can he say that to us?"

Princess 2: "I know the Dickens you'd like to Fuckner."

Princess 1 & 2: "Will!"

Princess 3: "Didja see Will yesterday in the quad? I mean, like really. Oh. My God. . ."

Princess 1: "For real, yo, like, so yummy in the. . ."

Princess 3: "Hey, shut up!"

And that's where I tuned them out.

Steve, whose name I only know because he was in my "Cattle" group during orientation, pulled out his phone and started texting. I wish I could report more, but watching his fingers flying over his phone was hypnotic, and I swear I'd have written nothing if I watched him for more than three seconds. He could type eighty words a minute on that phone probably, but in forty minutes didn't get a word down on paper. Sometimes, I'm ashamed of my generation.

Not giving us any more hope is that weird kid with the glasses, greasy pony tail, and green flannel shirt who always sits in the back of the room and smells like incense. As soon as Professor Jones left, he got up out of his seat and down on the floor, sitting with his legs crossed and arms folded across his chest. He closed his eyes, and, for all I know, is still sitting there.

Alice, she of the Gucci purse and Donna Karan blouses, got a panicked look on her face and stared intently at her paper through her Dolce and Gabana glasses (which I'm convinced had no lenses, since I'm sure I saw her scratch her eyelid once through the frames). Mommy and Daddy would be furious if she failed any class, seeing as they were footing her entire bill and giving her a bonus allowance for high grades, as she told us with her nose in the clouds on that first day of class when we went around introducing ourselves. She kept scratching at the paper with her pen, as though words would suddenly appear of their own accord. Panic crept into her eyes, and I was just too embarrassed to watch the meltdown.

Darren and Chuck shrugged their letterman jackets up on their shoulders, dropped their hats down over their eyes, and slouched down in their chairs. They were only in class because it was a requirement, and their coach would make sure a vindictive professor wouldn't stand in the way of his championship season.

Crazy, isn't it? Not one of them was doing what they should, not one of them was making the most of the opportunity given to them. Okay, maybe Alice was trying, but does it count if she never got further than scratches? I didn't think so.

There were ten of us there that afternoon. I've given you eight. There were two more.

Last, there was Tommy, and there was me. Maybe we were the nerds of the class, the outcasts, call it what you will, but if I'm telling you the truth, we both scrunched down and began to write. I'm not saying this to suck up or anything, it's just what happened. There's not

much interesting there. Just a pair of strangers sitting side by side, trying to keep their heads above water in a world where everyone else seemed to be drowning.

There you have it: Professor Jones's saviors of writing.

Okay, okay, confession time. Tommy is just the kind of guy I could go for. The only reason I wrote that drivel I turned in the first time around was I wasn't listening to a word Professor Jones was saying to us last class. I was too busy picturing Tommy and I running towards each other in a sprawling, butterfly-flecked field with our hair streaming behind us as "So Happy Together" swirled around our heads.

I tried writing about that for the assignment. I did. I dug deep and poured my guts onto the paper, just like I was taught. I let my heart bleed and Tommy and I danced through meadows. We swung on rope swings, hand in hand. We were in a tree K-I-S-S-I-N-G, and then, two hours before class, as I sat in the dining hall sipping my chunky coffee (not really, but it might as well have been,) a tidal wave of embarrassment overcame me. I crumpled the paper and let it absorb the remains of the wretched caffeine injection that slopped on the bottom of my yellow mug.

Panic overtook me then. Just two hours to class, not much time really, and I had nothing. Would you believe I tried to rescue my coffee-stained paper, smoothed it out on the table there and thought, *it's not that bad, it can be saved*. I began rewriting from the smudges, thinking somehow that maybe I had just thrown away my masterpiece and the world would never know my genius. It's a fear that sometimes creeps on me as I write: what if this is the story that changes my life, changes the world even, and if I don't get it *just* right then I'll have totally screwed it up? Like, what if there's a formula, and if you're the one to crack it, the one to string the letters together just so, that you would unlock the mystery of great writing. One letter off, and the whole thing would be carp.

See?

I know it's irrational, but it haunts me and makes me consider every word I write as though putting in the wrong modifier could crumble a mountain.

Back to my caffeinated paper: by the third line of blurry blue ink I gave it up as useless. I crumpled the original back up and hook-shot it into the trash bin near my table. I never make those shots, but go figure, hole in one.

I'm also terrible at sports metaphors.

Of course, me turning into Magic Jordan didn't help me write my story. I contemplated another mug of sludge, but couldn't seem to make my legs function well enough to make it back to the counter.

I let the time tick down. I work best under pressure, or at least that's what I, like all procrastinators, insist on telling myself. Ninety minutes to class and the two boys at the table next to me were in an intense debate over which was worse: after a night of partying, waking up in bed with someone you didn't know, or waking up with someone you did. I covertly watched them: a thin blonde boy with acne and a good-looking, dark-haired guy who resembled a young Alec Baldwin. I listened in on the conversation for about five minutes before I realized I knew Alec. He was at that party last weekend where I passed out drunk in a stranger's bedroom....

That got my ass up pretty fast, and I hurried out to the quad. One of those Russian writers--Tolstoy, I think but I could be wrong--used to say the faces of the people in the square inspired

him. Or at least I heard something like that on an episode of *Seinfeld* once. At any rate, it was as good an idea as any, so I parked it on a bench just outside the student center.

I tried watching the faces as they passed. I did. But after the third stoner and seventh nervous freshman, I found myself more interested in the sweeping hand of my watch as it neared the hour mark before class started. I needed to think of something, and fast.

Starved for inspiration, I looked around again. Faces I didn't know streamed by. The two boys from the dining hall walked past, and I ducked my head inside my sweatshirt. They didn't see me, though I swear I heard Alec say, "I think her name was Kendra? Kenley? Kelly? Something like that." Carly, but close. Better he didn't remember. And I'm pretty sure he farted as he walked by me, so even better if he didn't.

All right, Carly, concentrate! I opened my mind and tried to let the universe talk to me. I even closed my eyes and "ohm"ed a couple of times. I did. I figured it couldn't hurt. Didn't help much, either. All I got was sunbeams bouncing off my eyelids, sparking red and orange on a black field.

Maybe that was it. The sun....

I blinked my eyes open and shuffled through my bag for my notebook. I took a Bic from my bag and began to scribble my opening lines:

"It was a bright and sunny day," Professor Jones said as he peered at us over his glasses, "is a terrible way to begin a story..."

Tommy clicked his pen and shoved it behind his ear. Three minutes to spare before Professor Jones came back. Carly was still writing furiously at the desk next to him. Today would be the day he would get up the courage to ask her out, he would do it. He scanned his work once more, cupping his hand over the paper lest Carly glance over and see her name in his writing. It wasn't his best work, by any means, but it held some profound truths. If nothing else, it was wonderful to live in Carly's head for a little while, as it was the closest he felt he would ever get to her.

"All right, my good people," Professor Jones blustered as he stormed in to the sun-strewn room, "turn them in, and pray to whatever God you believe in that you've managed to please me for once."

Tommy shuffled to the front of the room and placed his paper on the desk. He was careful not to trip on the kid with the ponytail, who it seemed had either reached a state of nirvana or fallen asleep. Carly was right behind him, and he could tell she was nervous, though he doubted it was related to his imminent question.

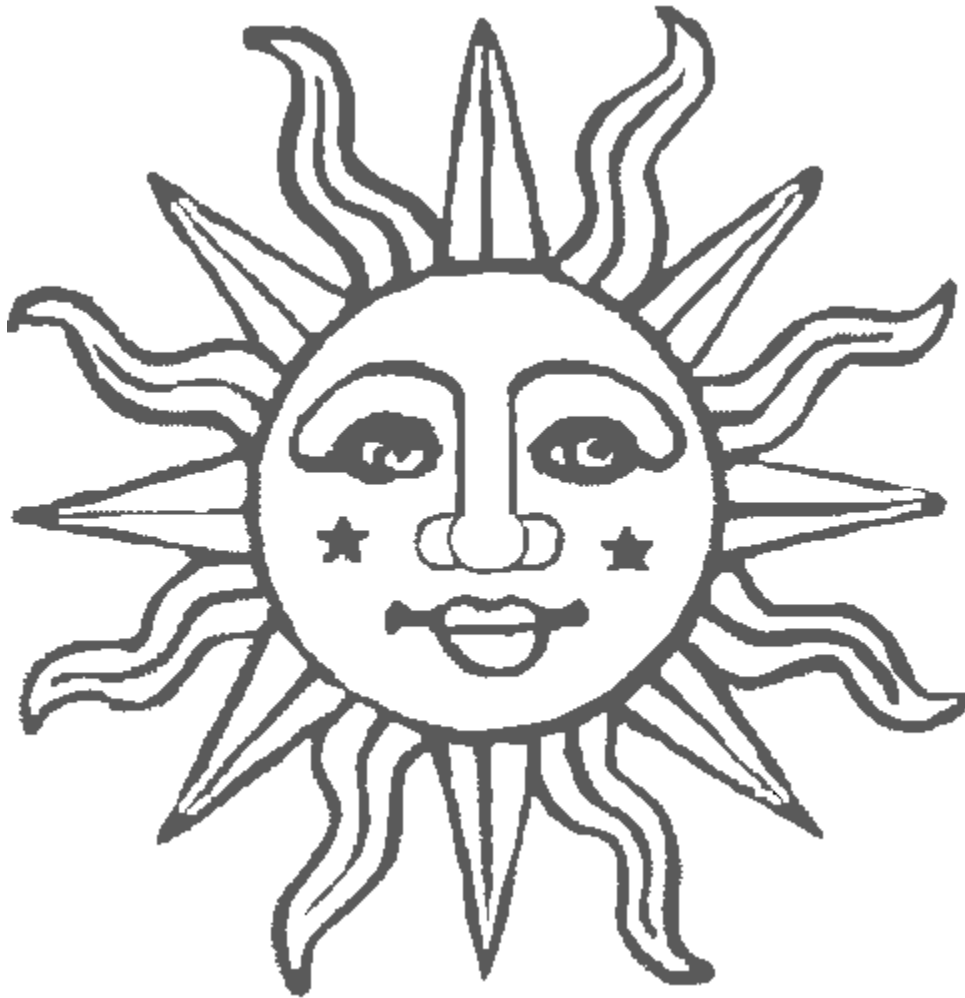
As he made his way down the hall, he made sure not to walk too quickly, ensuring he wouldn't lose her. He knew her so well – had watched her write, had listened with rapt attention as she shared her stories in class. There could be something there, if only he could get up the courage. *Before I leave the building, I'll just turn around and talk to her. That's all....*

"Hey babe," a voice said from behind him. Tommy snapped his head around, and his shoulders drooped when he realized who had spoken: a good-looking kid who vaguely resembled Alec Baldwin, and his arm was wrapped around Carly's waist. Her boyfriend, of

course. Tommy knew it. He had even included him in his story. Who was he kidding thinking he'd be able to steal away a girl like that? Useless fantasies.

Without saying a word, he opened the front door of the English building and shielded his eyes from the harsh light. It was a bright and sunny day, after all.

END



The Forever Poem

by

John Hayes

It was a bright and sunny day
damp sand stuck to my feet
as I watched my retriever
scamper on the early-morning beach.

A poem wandered in my head
I had no pen or paper
and sought to hold the words
until our walk was ended.

A shell washed from the sea
bounced against my foot.
I stooped and cradled it in my hand
brushed wet grains away
and scribed the poem in the sand.

When I was finished
a gentle wave
carried the words away
to live forever in the sea.

The Old Man and the Hill

by

Justin Whitney

It was a bright and sunny day. Harold pulled his attention from the horizon and focused on the girl stooped over him, saying something.

“Papaw, you feeling okay?”

“I’m fine, fine. Thank you, Claire. Just a little tired is all.”

Harold’s granddaughter felt his forehead. Her other hand squeezed his shoulder. She bent over to whisper in his ear, “I’m Rebecca, but that’s okay. I know there’s a lot of us.”

He winced. “I’m so sorry, love. I’m so--I hate it when I do that!” He reached up to pat her hand with his gnarled and clumsy mitt. She squeezed again and slipped away.

He looked out across his lawn. Where had they all come from? His tiny house perched on top of the hill like a sassy hat cocked to one side. Watching them scurry over the grass, he counted thirty, no thirty-five, no too many to count anymore, daughters and sons and their husbands and wives and what all. And then there was all of their sons and daughters and some of them were getting married now and a couple even had kids of their own. And now, once again, after all these years, little feet stumbled over the grass while chubby cherubs squealed and chased each other. One of the bigger ones climbed up the shade tree he sat under and hung upside down from one of the branches.

“Look Papaw! Hi! Hiiii!”

He couldn’t keep them all straight anymore. Hell, he had a hard enough time with his own name some days.

One of his sons (his wife, may the Good Lord keep her, had blessed him with three boys and four daughters) came up and gave him a big hug around the neck. Big, strapping boy, God bless him. “Hey, dad. You need anything?”

“Naw, I’m good. Thank you, though.”

“Say, listen,” said Neil. Jacob? Damn. He knelt on one knee next to the lawn chair and leaned up close so only Harold could hear. “I heard about the, uh... the thing. With your feet. It’s okay, I’m sure they’ll come up with something.”

“Well, it’s fine if they don’t. I got a pretty lady waitin’ for me.”

“No, dad, don’t. Just don’t talk like...” He cleared his throat hard a couple of times. Was it the pollen out? A lot of people were getting allergies lately.

“I’m just looking on the positive side, boy. You gotta stay positive.”

“I know. I know.”

“Ain’t it the craziest thing, though? No idea what it is. Some sort of calcification they say, whatever that means. They never seen nothing like it.”

“Yeah, well... you’ll be fine, dad. It’ll be fine. Can I get you some lemonade?”

“Naw, I’m good.” He hated that--scared people trying to talk themselves out of being scared. Putting on a show more for themselves than the person they were talking to.

“How about some iced tea? Kathy just made up a batch.”

“Well now, that sounds all right. Not too sweet, though. Makes my teeth hurt.”

“Sure thing.”

“Oh, and not too much ice, neither. The cold does a number on me, too.”

“All righty. Be right back.”

Harold beamed with pride. No reason, really. That was his son.

They’d helped him outside just a few minutes ago, when the sun was coming up. He loved being outside in the sunrise, in the coolness, the fresh day. So many possibilities when the day started. He had a hard time getting around anymore with his feet the way they were. The bones had begun fusing together somehow, and growing. Not a cancer, but the doctors had no idea what.

Some of the town kids at the base of the hill had begun calling him “The Petrified Man” when they found out, but most people were kind, bringing up casseroles and the like. They didn’t stay too long and while they were there, tried to look everywhere but at the lumpy stumps he walked on now. They looked a little like feet, still. And a lot like Yule logs. He thought about putting a bow on them for Christmas. Or was it holly?

In any case, there’d be time for Christmas decorations later. This was still Thanksgiving and his family was in town. He shaded his eyes to look up at the sun, now halfway overhead. He wondered how it’d gotten all the way up there so fast, but that seemed to happen more and more these days. Someone called out, and someone else rounded up the little ones and scooted them toward a set of tables. Mountains of turkey and dressing and butter-soaked vegetables and homemade rolls and pitchers of iced tea had appeared. They held down white linens that flapped in the breeze. “Dad, you haven’t even touched your tea. Is it too sweet for you?”

An attractive older woman smiled down at him. Rebecca? No, that was the granddaughter. Better play it safe. “It’s pretty sweet, girl. Did you slip a finger in it?” He looked around. A full glass of watery tea sat in the grass next to him. How long had that been sitting there?

The woman smiled and wrapped a gentle hand around his elbow. “C’mon, then, let’s get you up. Dinner’s on the table.”

“All right, all right. Don’t rush me. I move a bit slow these days.”

It was no time at all and the Thanksgiving dinner had been eaten, cleared away, tucked into little plastic tubs, labeled, and stacked in the fridge for later. Everybody had gone as quickly as they came, and he missed them already. One of the kids, Roger, he couldn’t forget Roger’s name after seeing him so much, came to visit him near every day, God bless him. He still lived in town. Went away to the army just yesterday, it seemed, then came back and settled down with a

pretty girl. What's her name? They had two young ones, boy and a girl, but they were already off at college down there at Austin.

Between Roger and the neighbors, he hardly got any peace. He got up in the mornings, sat at the edge of the bed in his jammies, and all of the sudden someone was letting himself in saying, "You're still in bed? C'mon, let's get you up." And they rushed him; oh, how they rushed around. Young people moved so fast. They'd get him up, rush him to the table, then put a cold plate of eggs in front of him. He never understood why they served cold eggs and cold coffee or why they were gone before he barely started eating. By the time he was finished, someone else was swooping in to take the plate away and help him to the little boy's room. Then he was tucked into bed again, just like that.

Every day got shorter and shorter. One morning, Roger came in with someone dressed like a doctor. Some old geezer. They talked so damn fast.

"Hey dad, Doc Andrews's here."

"Coming. Just hang on."

Harold sounded like furniture being dragged across the hardwood floor. Soon as he fell into his easy chair, the doctor was huffing and reaching over to tap his feet. Roger turned away, must have been something going on outside. The doctor just whistled.

"I'll be dadgum," he said, tapping on Harold's feet with his little rubber mallet. "They's hard as a damn rock, Harold."

"What'cha sayin, doc? What's the verdict?"

"I wish you'd come to the city with me. They got some doctors there'd be happy as a pig on slop t'see something like this."

"I done been down there. 'Member? They wanted me to go see the mayonnaise."

"Mayon--? Oh, you talkin about that Mayo Clinic. Well, what'd you tell 'em?"

"I'm too old to get on a damn plane. I'm fine right here."

"Dad, you're not fine, dammit!"

Harold looked up at his son, shocked at the language. What's gotten into him? He hadn't seen him cross like that since the time he told him not to hang out with those boys because they were up to no good. When was that? Not that long ago. "Now, son."

The doctor kept tapping. "It's gone all the way up to your knees, Harold. Try to bend your left knee for me. No, other left. There you go." It took awhile for Harold's knee to get around to it. "How's that for you?"

"Little stiff."

"I'd imagine. Listen, why don't you take some of these. They're for arthritis." He handed Harold a stack of small, flat boxes, each holding a couple of blue pills encased in a plastic bubble. "I'll write you a prescription for 'em."

"Here, let me have it. I'll make sure he gets the pills."

"Oh, okay. You do that. Now, Harold, you mind your boy here."

Harold laughed and said, “He better mind me! I’ll spank his fanny! I can still lift my stick here.”

“Dad, I’m 53. C’mon, let’s get you back to bed. You look tired.”

“Outside. Just prop me up outside. Wanna watch the grass grow. You ain’t too big to whup, by the way.”

With Roger’s and the good doctor’s help, Harold hobbled outside. They sat him under his big shade tree, in his new lawn chair. The other one had worn thin and patchy. After they left, he took a deep breath and watched the sun go down.

Harold never did take the pills. It wasn’t arthritis. Didn’t matter what it was. It seemed to him that sometimes the body just slowed down, and some made a show of it more than others. He didn’t mind so much, so long as he could sit outside under his shade tree. The big sprawling oak had been there longer than he had. In the summer, it spread over him to keep off sun and rain. In the winter, it scattered beautiful red leaves at his feet. It was better than anything on TV. Harold sometimes said so, “You showin out for me again, oakie?” when a fat leaf dropped on his lap.

His boy came and went, came and went. Sometimes the grandkids would be with him, sometimes his wife. Sometimes the whole family would come in and there’d be all that commotion on the lawn. He loved each and every one of them, but glory! Wore him out.

And all the while, he sat outside more and more and in his house less and less. Sometimes the kids would come around wearing black, and they’d be sad and hug him and cry. Harold would nod and pat their hands because it was easier than asking questions. And the next time, there’d be fewer of them. Eventually, Jesse, or was it Roger, stopped coming around. His wife brought a casserole that day, but he didn’t see her after that. Then someone else started coming, but Harold never quite got her name.

Everything moved so fast after awhile. Harold could sit down, take two or three good, deep breaths, and follow the sun clear across the sky. Sometimes he didn’t bother getting back up. He’d watch the moon follow suit and think about those old stories about Diana, lady of the moon, chasing her brother across the sky.

“Great-papaw, you still out here?” Harold looked up. Some lady had snuck up on him. He didn’t recognize her, someone in her 30s, maybe.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. Beautiful day, ain’t it?”

“Yes, it is. Hey, I just wanted to let you know.” She sat down on the bench next to him. They’d made a little wooden bench for him and set it under the tree. “I won’t be able to come around much more. I’m moving to France next month. But we talked, me and the rest of the family, and we’re going to have someone check on you every day, ok? Every single day.”

“Don’t know why all the fuss. I’m jess fine.”

She looked at Harold with big, moist eyes. They held admiration, respect, a touch of awe. “Great-papaw, you just amaze me. You keep going and going. It’s like you’re never going to die. Not that--I’m sorry, that was rude.”

“Ain’t rude. I’ll go when I’m ready, I guess. Got a pretty lady waitin’ for me.”

“Great-mamaw. I wish I’d met her.”

“You ain’t met? She ain’t been gone all that long, now.” The young woman smiled with crinkly eyes. What was she, 40s, early 50s? She kissed him on the forehead and walked down the hill. He imagined all sorts of people ought to be pooling down there like rainwater, since they sure didn’t make it up anymore. Even that one with the nurse’s get-up stopped after a day or two.

But that was fine. Such a beautiful day. That one, too. And that one. They kept coming faster and faster. He could look out over the horizon, see the hills in the distance, and watch clouds slip by like cream gravy. They’d go from white to pink to dark before he finished one good breath. One of the hills looked a little like a face. He remembered when he was a little boy, back when days took awhile to work themselves out, when he and the other boys would call that hill “The Old Man.”

Eventually, he stopped going inside altogether. Too much trouble. His legs were all stiff, anyway. Whatever it was that got ahold of them way back had worked halfway up his body. Funny thing was, he couldn’t feel a thing. He thought about that turkey and wondered if there was any left in the fridge. When he looked back over his shoulder, the house, which had been tilting a bit, sort of leaned over and laid down finally. Well, he wasn’t that hungry anyway.

The sun came up. It went down. Sometimes the moon followed suit. Sometimes Diana stopped to chat with her brother, then race on ahead. He couldn’t keep up with all that commotion, anyhow. Eventually, they got to moving so fast that it hurt his eyes to see the flashing, like one of them kids flipping the lights on and off again. So he shut his eyes and stopped watching and just enjoyed the breeze. A little sprinkle, was it raining? Then the heat dried it off. Then the wind kicked up a chill and old oakie dumped a load of leaves on his head. Then a tingle and it got all warm again and he could smell flowers.

When he got around to opening his eyes, everything stopped moving so fast. The flashing was gone. In fact, the sky was just sort of grey. He looked back at his house and saw that the lawn had reached up to swallow it. He could see a little of the rotted wood peeking through the grass but it melted down and was gone. Damn cheap house, nothing lasts anymore. He noticed some scrub growing up near the tree. It stretched up as he watched, then split into little branches that filled out and squirted bushy fingers of leaves from its tips. They reached over and tickled his feet, crawled right over them and up his legs.

It took him awhile to turn his head back around. He was moving a bit slow these days. That whatever-it-was had gotten all the way up his neck. It should be done soon. But that was fine. Such a beautiful day. He looked out over the horizon. No clouds today, just a swirl, a grey swirl.

He looked over at The Old Man again. Old Man in the mountain, watching the world. Harold wondered how he came to be. And if he was waiting for someone, or just enjoying the day.

END

Heir Error

by

Guy Belleranti

It was a bright and sunny day
For Tom Sylvester Hollingsted.
He oozed with supreme confidence
He'd be rich now that Gram was dead.

Tom had gotten on Gram's good side
Over the last months of her life.
Then he'd tampered with her heart meds—
Less risky than a gun or knife.

And now, at last, he'd have it all--
Fancy sports cars, women and more.
He'd hire on a whole new staff
And show the old servants the door.

But then a cop from homicide
Said Gram's death was a bit too pat.
And Gram's lawyer said all her wealth
Went not to Tom, but to her cat.

One of Those Addicting Games...

by

Laurie Dalzell

“It was a bright and sunny day...” Jessica tossed the paper to the desk and rubbed her hands over her face. If she had to read one more story that started with, “It was a bright and sunny day,” or worse, “It was a dark and stormy night,” she’d rip her hair out. Now wouldn’t that be a fine sight for her sixth graders to see when they came back from lunch?

She glanced at the clock. Just enough time before her class trooped back in to check her Friends in My Computer, or FiMyC, profile.

Missy from high school was pregnant. Again. Seemed like all that girl did was pop out kids. Jessica didn’t think she’d seen Missy not pregnant since senior prom. She shook her head and continued to scroll down the page.

Matt was being deployed overseas.

Tanya’s son had made the varsity basketball team.

Christa’s divorce was now finalized.

Jacob was on a political rant and Sheila a religious one.

Mindy, Tina, and Jennifer were playing something called Inca Treasure. Her page was rife with post after post of their high scores.

How nice that you guys have time to play games all day, Jessica thought. The INVITES tab blinked at her and she clicked it.

Five invites to play Inca Treasure.

The clock at the bottom of the monitor told her she still had a few minutes.

Why not?

Intricately designed stones, golden coins, and sparkling gems lay scattered in an ancient-looking stone temple. Puzzles to solve, traps and mazes to negotiate, the game absorbed all of Jessica’s attention.

Suddenly, her avatar was grabbed from behind, a blade pressed against its throat.

“Damn!” She slapped her hand on her desk as the Incas swarmed and eliminated her expedition party.

The room around her filled with the mingled sound of surprised gasps and giggles.

Surprised, she looked up.

Her students were back, though instead of sitting quietly in their seats, as they knew she expected, they were gathered into the separate groups they sorted themselves into during lunch and free time.

Jessica got to her feet, pushing the laptop closed. “Anyone interested in detention?”

The boys and girls scurried to their assigned seats then sat, looking at her expectantly.

“That’s what I thought.” She turned to the blackboard and began writing out the science assignment.

The bell rang, loudly interrupting the beginning of her explanation of the chapter. Jessica was so startled she dropped the science book. “What in the world?” She looked up at the clock, shocked to see that it was indeed the end of the day.

She collected the book as the last of her students filed out, the open door exposing the river of chaos in the hallway as the student body collectively rushed to freedom.

Jessica set the book on the corner of her desk and sat back down, flipping up the monitor of her laptop. Confused at how rapidly the afternoon had passed, she pulled up the profile page of her FiMyC account.

Post after post of new high scores for Inca Treasure filled the screen. An hour and a half of posts. All of them hers.

Impossible. There’s no way I spent that much time playing a video game.

But there was no arguing with the time stamp on each post.

Jessica gathered her things to leave, disturbed at how long she’d spent apparently glued to the computer, oblivious to her students. She turned off the lights before turning to look back at the empty classroom for a moment. With a shake of her head, she pulled the door closed.

Late that night, after grading papers and preparing for the next day’s lesson, Jessica checked her email. Four new messages, all from FiMyC – Tina and Mindy had reached new high scores playing Inca Treasure, and the others were invites from two other FiMyC friends to play the game.

It was kind of fun...

Jessica glanced at the clock.

Well, maybe just for a little while.

Hours later, her neck stiff and sore, Jessica rolled her head on her shoulders. Her gaze fell on the clock at her bedside. Midnight. As great as the temptation was to keep playing, Jessica knew she’d pay for it all the next day if she did. She reluctantly saved her progress then turned off the computer.

Sleep claimed her within minutes of crawling under the covers; the flickering lights of Inca Treasure continuing to play against the dark of her closed eyes.

Flames from torches lit her way through the maze of the temple, their smoke choking her until she started breathing through her mouth. The temple itself seemed to be holding its breath.

There, what was that?

A thick web covered the center of a wall, creating the illusion of an opaque window. Framed by straight lines, the web had to be covering an intentional opening in the wall.

Jessica gingerly touched it. The web was old yet strong, its surface dry, almost cool to her hesitant touch. Not wanting the web on her skin, she picked up a rock near her feet and threw it through the web.

To her surprise, the web fell to the ground in pieces instead of merely tearing. Jessica stepped through the opening into the room beyond.

The flickering light of the torches slowly filled the room as her companions followed her. Stars twinkled at her from within the dark space. Not stars, she realized. Gems. The sparkle of diamonds and gleam of gold, the dark glimmer of rubies and sapphires. Excitement at her find sent an electric current rushing through her.

She delved her hands into chests, finding loose stones, ropes of pearls, rings and bracelets of gold and silver. Her companions came to her aid, gathering the treasure into bags to be transported back to camp for cataloging and proper packing in crates.

An ominous clanging like that of a large gong being struck repeatedly sounded, its reverberations ringing through the stone, echoing...

She was pulled out of sleep all too soon by the familiar disc jockey banter of her favorite radio station. Today, though, they were more irritating than amusing. She felt for the off switch, silencing one of the disc jockeys midway through his report of a jewelry store break-in downtown.

Exhaustion pulled at her muscles, made her feet stiff and sore, as she slowly made her way to the bathroom. She adjusted the temperature of the water then stepped into the shower's spray.

Burning, stinging pain seared up from the soles of her feet. She hurried out of the tub, her movements clumsy in her rush. She dropped to the bathmat and pulled her foot into her lap to examine the bottom.

What she'd mistaken for early morning aches proved to be lacerations and punctures crisscrossing the sole of her foot. A whimper of confusion escaped her when she found the same on the opposite foot.

Carefully, she eased back into the shower, her breath escaping through clenched teeth as the hot water came into contact with her wounded feet. She washed her hair and body as quickly as she could, small cries escaping her every now and again when soapy water rinsed off her body and swirled in the pool of water at her feet.

The texture of the bathmat beneath her feet issued another facet of pain as she stepped out of the tub. There was no way she could stand on her feet all day and teach.

After making her excuses to the secretary in the school office, Jessica grabbed her laptop and a bottle of water and hobbled back to bed.

The NEWS feed on her home screen was littered with updates from several of her friends – Jim had countered Jacob's political rant with one of his own; Sheila was still on her religious tirade, though it seemed everyone was ignoring her; and there were several Inca Treasure high score posts from Jennifer and Mindy.

Jessica started the game. Her eyes were soon darting back and forth across the game board as she searched through the labyrinth of the ancient temple for treasure.

The day outside her window grew brighter, then dimmed as day turned to evening, evening to night.

Jessica's eyes grew heavy, her lids impossible to hold open. Despite her efforts to stay awake, to finish the pillaging of one more native temple, fatigue wrapped her in its fuzzy embrace, claiming her.

She'd lost her companions, was alone wandering through a labyrinth of stone. The torch in her hand sputtered, went out, leaving her in darkness. Fear chilled her blood, turning it to ice in her veins. Her eyes searched the darkness.

There--a faint lightening of the dark to her right. Jessica slowly made her way toward the area of lighter dark, her hands stretched out, reaching ahead of her.

Stone, cold and rough against her hands, stopped her. She groped along its surface, finding a corner and then more stone as far as she could reach. The lighter shade of dark faded here, became gray. The source of the pale light stood in the center of the room, a glowing stone resting on a pedestal.

Desire burned in her chest, made her hands itch.

She had to have it.

She crossed the large room, barely noting the intricate and beautiful designs on the floor, the walls, the pedestal itself. She stepped closer, close enough to look down onto the gem.

The stone shimmered; shades of blue, green, and red swam beneath lustrous pearly white. She ran her fingertip over the surface, feeling gentle ripples, currents of texture against her skin.

From the darkness came a cry of alarm, a shout. The pallid light revealed a man, elderly, clothed in rich, elaborate garments. Around his feet; a monkey scampered its chattering voice harsh on Jessica's nerves.

The man's gestures were urgent, his words harsh, angry sounding to her ears.

"He won't let you have it without killing him." The thought came from nowhere, had a voice she did not know.

A flash of light in the man's hand caught her eye. He carried a knife. Jessica rushed forward, twisting his wrist and freeing the blade before shoving it up and into the man's chest. Blood flowed hot and wet onto her arms and chest as she clutched the man close to her, withdrawing the blade to stab him again. His voice gurgled in his throat as he clutched the wounds in his chest. His weight heavy as he fell against her before sliding down to the ground, where he lay still.

The monkey shrieked, leaping and dancing over the man's body before attacking Jessica. Without a thought, she slashed the knife through the air, catching the monkey across the throat. It flew through the air briefly before landing a few feet from the dead man.

Jessica grabbed the stone in her fist and ran back the way she had come, again into the shadows.

"... morning, Lakeland! We're expecting a high today of 75 and at 7:30 it's 63 degrees."

7:30? What? Jessica lifted her head from her pillow to look at the alarm clock through bleary eyes. The digital numbers glowed red. 7:31. Her alarm had been going off for an hour?

“... and his dog were murdered last night. The opal, valued at over half a million dollars, is missing. Fingerprints found on a knife at the scene...”

Jessica rolled over and swatted at the alarm clock until she was able to shut it off. She felt like hell. Then she remembered.

The game.

She rummaged through the bedding, not noticing the dried blood on her arms and hands, the way her T-shirt briefly clung to her chest before falling free in a crusty curtain over her front.

Her search became more desperate; her hands looked like claws as she tore through the tousled blankets, her eyes searching, her fingers probing for the laptop. But it was nowhere to be found.

Her breath short, her eyes bulging, she leapt to her feet, not noticing the pain as she ripped the scabs off her soles, the smears of blood on the pale cream carpet.

Blankets, sheets, pillows were shoved and pushed about, tossed to the floor. Panic grew to anger when the laptop, the only point of access to her game, her realm, was not anywhere to be found.

Someone had taken it. That’s what happened. Someone who didn’t want her to top the score board, to claim her rightful place of honor.

She snatched the last thing off the bed, a large decorative pillow. She lifted it over her head to throw it across the room.

Wait, there.

Oh, yes, thank God, there.

Relief extinguished her rage, bringing a smile to her face. She logged back on.

No new high scores from Jennifer or Tina, but Mindy had been busy since early this morning. Jessica’s home page was littered with Mindy’s high score progress, far surpassing Jessica’s attempts from the night before.

Not for long, Jessica thought as she started the game.

The numbers on the bedside clock flicked by unheeded, marking minutes, then hours lost to the addicting game.

Her throat painfully parched, Jessica groped for her water bottle, her eyes leaving the screen to upend the bottle before tossing it aside and returning to the game.

But something was different now.

The Incas were gathering, rebelling against her pillaging of their temple.

Animated, half-naked figures swarmed over the screen. Armed with spears, they moved stealthily through the jungle periphery that surrounded the temple.

The view changed again, showing Jessica’s avatar and her expedition crew checking their supplies and then their surroundings for weapons. A new set of directions filled the screen. No longer searching for jewels and treasure, she was now to search for ways to defend herself and defeat the natives gathering outside.

Clues popped up here and there as she began a new search of the present screen, the bubbled messages pointing out ways to connect various items in the temple to create deadly traps and crude weapons.

Time again slipped away unnoticed as she explored deeper into the temple, leaving a path of impending destruction for anyone who followed.

Again, she was unaware of her surroundings. Her ears were deaf to the quiet tinkle of glass, the stealthy footsteps in the hall, the quiet breathing at her door.

She was blind to the dying of the day outside her window, the birth of the night, the man slipping into her room.

Blind too was she to the single glint of light reflecting the meager glow from her screen.

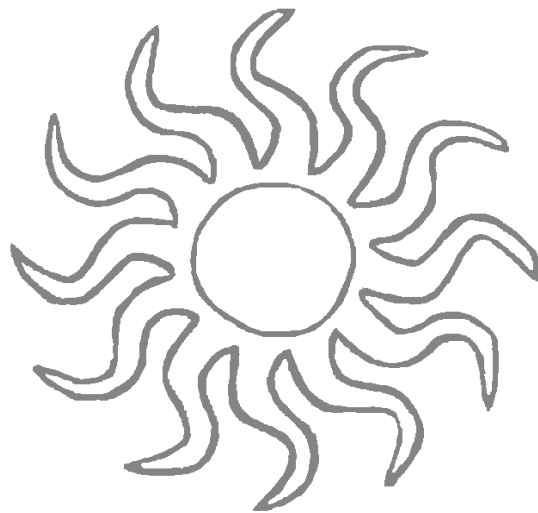
Closer.

Nearer.

There.

This night, without sleeping, she dreamed of blood.

END



Grave Mistakes

by

Cherie Reich

It was a bright and sunny day. Beams of light filtered through the budding tree branches, creating geometric patterns on the forest floor. In the distance, two birds tweeted and flitted through the leaves. A warm, gentle breeze brushed against them, declaring that spring was in full bloom. Only one thing marred the idyllic forest scenery: an almost completely buried body.

The woman's face peeked out at them through her dirt blanket. Her flesh was pale and slack: her eyelids closed. Her blond hair splayed out around her head like a fan. Dirt smudged her cheeks. The dark brown soil discolored the golden blond of the woman's hair, making several strands seem dull brown. She appeared young, no more than twenty-five. It fit the profile.

Eight. This young woman was the eighth victim of a serial killer known by the media as the Grave Digger. Despite all semblances to death, this woman was lucky. The tell-tale signs of life flitted through the shallow, barely discernable breaths that tickled the dirt, alerting the FBI agents at the scene that she was alive.

Special Agent Alexandra "Alex" Reynolds shook the vision of the nearly buried woman from this morning away from her. Her blond tendrils of hair floated in the air like wisps of smoke. Alex was a member of the proverbial alphabet soup, the BAU of the FBI (Behavioral Analysis Unit of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.) Basically, she was a criminal profiler. She and her team of five other FBI agents were hunting down the serial killer, and they were closer to catching him now than they had been three weeks and two victims ago.

The sound of a zipper startled Alex as she fastened the bullet proof vest over her navy button-down shirt. The quiet of the forest was intense, and it put her on edge. Her blue eyes gleamed with excitement as if she had a fever. She pulled her blond hair back, tying it in a ponytail. She glanced over to her partner and pulled out her 9mm pistol, keeping the safety on. "Let's circle around through the trees."

Special Agent Ryan Delos removed his pistol, as well, feeling the cool metal in his hands. "You hug the trees. I'll go around lakeside." With his wavy dark hair, sky blue eyes, and lean but muscular physique, the six-foot agent could be compared to a Greek deity. Yet his chiseled jaw, firm thin lips, and the calculating stare would raise shivers of fear before desire.

"There isn't as much cover on that side," Alex protested as she glanced toward the main road. Ryan and she had arrived before their backup. Their BAU team was on their way, as well as several deputies and the sheriff of Forest Grove.

Ryan shrugged his broad shoulders. "We could wait for backup."

His taunt goaded Alex. Before the Grave Digger case, the BAU had been tracking an unsub, or unknown subject, in Atlanta, Georgia. She had gone ahead of the team and almost broke her ankle and lost her life in the process. Although she was cleared for duty, that ankle still smarted,

and the team hadn't quite let her live it down. "I suppose we could wait for backup." She shifted her weight, ignoring the crack of her ankle popping.

The agents' rented black Hummer hugged the side of the gravel road. To the left, trees ran along the road as far as the eye could see. To the right, the trees broke off to give view of sparkling Meade Lake. Dead ahead, a single-story log cabin nestled against the forest. In front of the cabin, a dark blue Ford F-150 truck rested upon the road. It was the same blue truck that a witness saw fleeing the scene of another woman's abduction, which occurred moments after hikers discovered the eighth victim. A major mistake made by the killer that worked in the FBI's favor.

Alex squinted toward the tiny license plate, comparing it to the information on her Blackberry. AJX-5555. The license plate belonged to Henry Saddler, Jr., who was their unsub. Henry Jr. was the son of the funeral director in Forest Grove. The FBI team had attended the funerals of Maryanne Besinger and Janelle Dubois at Saddler Mortuary. The thought of their killer being involved in such a solemn ceremony as a funeral churned her stomach.

Ryan shifted his position as Alex placed her Blackberry in her black trouser's pocket. "It's not too far from the Forest Grove Memorial Hospital, is it?"

Once they discovered Amanda Hutchinson in the forest that morning, the ambulance took her to the hospital. Traces of tetrodotoxin, a toxin resulting in temporary paralysis, was discovered in her blood, just like the other seven preceding victims. Two members of their BAU team had been at the hospital waiting for Amanda to awaken until they received news of the recent abduction.

"No, I don't think so. Thirty minutes tops." Ryan and she had been checking out Saddler Mortuary when their computer analyst, Marion Derrick, discovered the cabin in Henry Saddler, Sr.'s name. Ten minutes later, they were here, waiting rather impatiently on their backup.

Alex leaned against the door of the Hummer, and Ryan did the same on the other side. They were poised for action, but they had learned to be patient.

Ryan's lips parted as if he was going to speak when a high pitched scream shattered the quiet of the forest. On the lake, a flock of geese honked and took flight. The two agents exchanged looks. "I'll go this way," he said as he pointed toward the lake.

"I'll take the back," Alex agreed as the agents split up.

Alex lost sight of Ryan almost immediately as she jogged toward the cabin: her gun pointed toward the ground. She ran low, darting from tree to tree, as she neared the building. A deafening silence descended upon the area surrounding Meade Lake. Were they too late? Had Junior already escalated the timeline and succeeded in killing his eighth woman?

The back of the cabin came into view. There were two windows and a propane tank visible. The only entrance was in the front, so the killer and victim would be trapped inside when the rest of law enforcement arrived.

She breathed slowly through her nose and out her mouth. Her heart pounded in her chest. Her entire body coiled into action like a cobra's. The vibrating in her pocket startled her, and she was glad that she hadn't taken the safety off her pistol yet as her finger had reflexively pressed the trigger. Alex dug into her pocket, pulling out her cell phone. "What is it?" she hissed.

"Good afternoon to you, too, sweetheart," the cheerful, baritone voice of Marion Derrick rang in her ear.

"Derrick, what is it? We're at the cabin. I don't have time for this."

"I just thought you would want to know that I did some digging of my own." He chuckled at his own joke aimed at the Grave Digger. "Twenty years ago, three blond-haired women disappeared in Raven Creek. It's a town about thirty miles from Forest Grove. One of those women was Junior's mother. Not long after that, Henry Senior and son moved to Forest Grove and set up the funeral home."

Her blue eyes settled upon the log cabin. "What are you implying, Derrick?" Her tone was soft. Her heart seemed to stop beating.

"Henry, Sr. was a person of interest for a while until the other women disappeared. It seems that he had the opportunity and motive," the computer analyst stated.

"I believe I got the idea. Thanks, Derrick."

"Anytime, love." There was an audible click on the other line as he hung up on Alex.

She pressed the "End" button and peered through the trees. A witness had placed Henry Junior at the scene of the abduction at the Stop-N-Go. Now his father might be involved in the murders. Were father and son a serial killer duo? Her thumb moved over the buttons as she searched for Ryan's cell phone number. She had to notify him that they might be dealing with two killers instead of one.

A rifle shot blasted and echoed around her. Alex froze as the Blackberry slid from her grasp, falling unharmed upon the forest floor. Despite her training, her heart jumped to her throat. Yet she remained in place, assessing the situation.

Alex was unharmed. The rifle shot came from the front of the cabin, not behind. She peered behind a tree, resting her left hand upon the rough bark while her other hand slipped off the safety of her 9mm. No movement came from the two windows. She lowered herself to a crouching position, ignoring the stiffness in her ankle as she did so. As much as she tried, she couldn't see the front yard, and she knew that she had to move closer.

With a deep, silent breath, Alex left the safety of the trees. She scurried toward the back corner of the cabin, coming along the dark logs. Her hands were before her upon the cool metal of the pistol. Her head ducked around the side of the building. She scanned the ground before her, spotting a leg and shoe. Ryan! It took all her training not to rush toward her fallen partner.

Her gaze flickered between behind and in front of her. She listened. A faint buzzing sound of a bee, the lapping of lake waters against the sandy shore, the rustling of leaves from the trees behind her were all she distinguished.

Alex edged forward around the side of the log cabin. Her shoulder brushed against it as she moved. Her raised pistol still pointed toward the ground; the safety was off. Her foot paused at the edge of the front yard.

Ryan lay face down upon the verdant grass. Her gaze ran across the front of the cabin up to the lake. No one else was in sight. "Ryan," she whispered, the sound as harsh and brittle as dead leaves. Her foot hovered in the air as a soft crunch of grass alerted her.

As Alex turned, the needle jabbed into her neck. Strong arms squeezed her like a boa constrictor. Her pistol fell to the ground as her hand went to her neck. She pushed back, shoving the man into the cabin's sturdy wall. The needle shifted, punching through the side of her neck like an ear piercing. Most of the tetrodotoxin leaked down the side of her neck, mingling with the crimson blood. She rammed her head backward, catching the taller man's chin as she swung an elbow behind her into his ribcage. The arms released her, and she fell forward.

She ripped the syringe from her neck and scrambled on hands and knees toward her pistol. Her vision doubled as a trickle of the toxin entered her bloodstream. Her fingers clutched the earth, fumbling for the dark gray metal. She grabbed the gun, but her arms were too heavy to lift its weight.

A foot connected with the gun, kicking it away from her outstretched arms. The same appendage met her stomach, and a whoosh of air left her lungs. Her limbs turned to jelly, and she collapsed like a ragdoll upon the grass.

Alex stared upward at the man before her. It was definitely Henry Saddler, Jr. with his lean yet solid build, the brown hair with the receding forehead, and the dark eyes. His reached down, picking up a green baseball cap, just like the witness at the Stop-N-Go described.

After Junior placed the cap upon his head, he reached toward Alex. "I found the other one, dad." He touched her blond hair, ripping the ponytail holder out. "She's very pretty."

Her vision swam in and out of focus as Henry, Sr. stepped forward with a shotgun in his hands. "Carry her inside, son."

Junior reached down and lifted Alex as if she weighed nothing. He slung her over his shoulder like a sack and carried her inside.

Before the door shut, Alex stared at her partner. *Don't be dead*, she pleaded in her mind.

The cabin's inside was stark. An old, ratty sofa sat center in the room. A coffee table rested before it. To the left, there was a kitchen with an icebox and counter. An electric hotplate was positioned upon the counter. A wooden table with four chairs completed the room. It creaked under her weight but held.

In the chair opposite from Alex sat their current victim. The woman was perhaps a few years younger than Alex, twenty-one, maybe twenty-two. The two women had nearly identical blond hair and blue eyes. Her wide eyes stared straight ahead in perpetual fright. Yet, the woman was frozen in place by the tetrodotoxin.

A gaze of sympathy passed through Alex's eyes. She wanted to speak to the woman, reach out and touch her, let her know that help was on its way. The toxin kept Alex in place. She could barely twitch a finger, much less attempt to comfort the girl before her.

Junior plopped down into the chair between them. He reached out and grabbed their hands, holding them in his. His fingers brushed gently over the top of their hands. His gaze was more of a young child's than a ruthless killer's. "They are mighty pretty, dad. Can we keep them this time?"

Senior glanced around. For a man in his sixties, he was spry. He paced back and forth like a caged lion. "We have to leave, son. It's not safe here. Other police will be coming." He

clutched the rifle in his hands. Then he went over to the window, searching for police cruisers. "Go get the man. Drag his body into the lake. Then, we'll take the girls away from here."

"But I want to stay with them." He brought their hands up to his lips, and Alex inwardly shuddered, despite being unable to feel his touch because of the toxin. Her entire body was numb.

The butt of the rifle cracked against Junior's head. "Get going."

"Alright, alright." He dropped their hands upon the table and rubbed the back of his head as he stood up. Within seconds, he had left the cabin.

The older man moved toward the table. "Don't worry about her partner." He jammed the shotgun against Alex's cheek, digging it in. "He'll die much quicker than you will."

She could smell the scent of gunpowder, and she felt her blood run cold and hot simultaneously. Her heart pounded in her chest, despite the toxin. With great effort, her finger rose. Tingling sensations ran up and down her arms, and she could only hope and pray that the toxin was leaving her system.

Senior took up his pacing again. Alex studied his face: the cold, beady eyes, the gray stubble over his jaw, the white hair upon his head. This Henry Saddler, Sr. was completely different from the kind, genteel funeral director that held the mothers' hands of those poor dead girls.

Alex's jaw tensed in furious anger. Her teeth clenched. The blood coursed more rapidly through her veins, dispelling the last of the poison. Her hand rose from the table. Her vision solidified into one vision instead of two as she plotted a way to stop the man before her.

"What's taking him so long?" Senior's voice boomed in the small room. He went to the window and frowned. "Damn it to hell!" His mumblings became incoherent as he yanked the door open to leave.

The slamming door was Alex's clue to move. "I'll get us out of here," she vowed to the girl across from her. Her voice slurred as if she'd had a bottle of whiskey. She shifted in her seat and stood. Her legs trembled beneath her and gave out. She sprawled on the wooden floor.

Alex wasn't giving up. She crawled toward the counter, and after three tries, she managed to pull herself up. She searched for a weapon, but there was none, not a knife in sight. She stumbled and then crawled to the front door, yanking it open. "I'll be back," she promised to the girl as she fell forward down the stoop.

She blinked, clearing her vision. Ryan's body was gone. Where were the Henrys? Like a baby's first awkward steps, Alex walked toward the side of the cabin. Her pistol was out there, somewhere.

"Alex, get down!"

She whirled around, losing her balance and falling to the ground as a bullet whizzed over her head and struck a log. The rifle shot echoed after it. "Ryan!" She had never been so glad to see Ryan as he tackled Henry, Sr. The two wrestled for the rifle when it went off again. Blood and gray matter gushed upward, spraying the air as the two fell over. "Ryan," she screamed.

Ryan stumbled away, his face covered in blood. "I'm alright," he called out as he ran his sleeve over his face. "Are you okay?" He walked toward her and flashed a pearly white grin despite the chaos splattered upon him.

Alex sat on the soft grass. Her limbs trembled as she took stock of what happened to her. With the numbness from the tetrodotoxin and adrenaline, she felt good, although she remembered her wounds. Her hand touched the side of her neck, and her fingers came away with damp blood. She looked down at her right side, and her shirt and bullet-proof vest were spotted by the dark liquid. Her neck was tender to the touch, and she knew it would be a pain in the morning. "I'm okay, I think."

"Good." He stared toward the road. "The cavalry is coming."

The crunch of gravel was audible. Alex grabbed her gun. "I think I lost my phone. We should call the others. What happened to Junior?"

"I knocked him out. Senior is dead." Ryan wiped some more blood off his cheek. "I wasn't expecting him." He rubbed his chest. "The bullet knocked the wind out of me."

Alex spotted the bullet hole in the vest, and she shivered. The tiny bullet gleamed in the black fabric as a star of death. She glanced away from the horror to the rich blue sky. The celestial golden orb shone in her eyes as it edged closer to the water. A man's shadow eclipsed the sun. She gasped and yelled, "Ryan, duck!"

Ryan rolled forward as Junior picked up the shotgun and pointed it at him.

Alex fired her gun. The bullet struck Junior in the chest. Junior stumbled backward as he fired the rifle. The bullet struck the ground, kicking up dirt, right beside Ryan's leg. She fired again, and the metal found its mark in the center of his head. The shotgun dropped to the ground before Junior did. Father and son were dead. Seven young women were murdered. Three might have died twenty years ago by Henry, Sr.'s hands. Two girls were saved.

Ryan came over and sat beside her. He placed a hand upon her arm, and Alex gave him a tired smile. The deputies, sheriff, and their fellow FBI agents were running toward them. Sirens blazed, disturbing the quiet scenery. Despite the fact that the unsubs were dead, the case wouldn't be finished for a few days. There were still more questions than answers that they must discover.

The sun cast golden rays across the lake as sunset approached. A gentle breeze lifted her hair. Blond strands stuck to the side of her face. The geese returned to Meade Lake, skimming the water before settling in. Heaviness struck Alex's limbs as if she had taken over the world from Atlas. Two corpses marred the spring green grass. Crimson puddles pooled around father and son. She closed her eyes, blocking the tragedy from her gaze and soaking in the last warmth of the bright sun. She considered Amanda Hutchinson and the young woman inside the cabin. *It was a beautiful day.* Her thought was as soft as a feather floating upon a puff of air. They had saved lives today.

END

New Day

by

Matthew Byer

The mist rises from the ground,
The morning dew has just started to form,
Sunlight penetrates through the closed drape,
The day has begun awakening me from my slumber.

A shrilling sound pierces the air,
Which then breaks into a tune of beauty and complexity.
The sunshine now shines across my face,
Its spectrum shifting from violet to a golden orange.

My blood starts to pulse, then settles into a comfortable rhythm.
A breeze starts to pick up,
Which brings the scent of a rose to enthrall me.

My passions are roused once more, as my heart sings to my soul.
Muscles relax and then tighten again,
In the random pattern which is the symmetry of life.

It is a new day with unlimited possibilities,
and a time to hope and dream.
So now it is time to fulfil myself,
And to expand my heart upon this new aurora.

These Things Take Time

by

Abra Staffin-Wiebe

It was a bright and sunny day. The kitchen gleamed in the sunlight, immaculate.

"The coffee's weak," Mark said. It came out more accusatory than he'd intended, but Lily had become quite inconsiderate recently. On top of the smaller things, like making the coffee the wrong strength, she no longer asked about his day, complaining about her work problems instead.

Of course, if she had asked about his day, he would have lied. She still believed he was working extra hours at the office. He didn't dare tell her about the project that was truly taking up his time.

Lily took her time answering. "I prefer it this way."

She set down her half-eaten croissant, looked away from the newsfeeder she had been browsing, and met his eyes. He studied her. Was this how it began? It hadn't been this way with his ex-wife, Evelyn. Evelyn had always made the coffee perfectly, though she drank tea herself. He frowned. Had she always drunk tea? He seemed to recall meeting her for coffee when they began seeing each other.

Even though Lily was still looking at him, he felt she was thinking about the scrolling headlines of the newsfeeder.

"I'm going into the office early," he said, giving up. The chilling of his marriage made his project more urgent. He had to check on it; he had to hope that *this* experiment wouldn't fail.

He set down the cup of weak coffee and went to gather his coat and briefcase. Behind him, Lily returned to her perusal of the news. He paused before heading out the door, hoping for an affectionate farewell, but she only took a sip of coffee and toggled to another news story.

Before turning on the car, Mark took a moment to collect himself. He rested his forehead on the steering wheel. The silence of the garage accused him. Would he let his marriage to Lily fail just like his marriage to Evelyn?

No.

He straightened and pushed the key button with his thumb, letting it rest long enough for his print to be recognized.

The car started up and he drove it out of the garage, pausing in the driveway to check the map screen for slow traffic. He noticed there was still construction on his favorite route. The city council had been promising for months that it would be finished soon. Some things never changed.

He thought of Lily. It would be different this time. He would find a way to get past that look in her eyes, that look so familiar to him from the last months of his marriage to Evelyn. If he could only fix that one thing, everything would change.

The road skimmed quietly under the wheels of the car as Mark drove towards his office. When had Lily started making the coffee too weak? Mark tried to remember when he'd first noticed, but he couldn't. He was sure that it hadn't always been that way. If he could pinpoint the start of their problems, he would be one step closer. He glanced at his briefcase sitting lonely on the seat next to him.

Lily used to like going for drives with him. In the summer, they would go out to a park and grill hot dogs. In the fall, they would cruise down residential streets and enjoy the changing colors of the leaves. When people decorated their homes for Christmas, they would laugh together about how tacky some of the displays were. Yes, he definitely remembered them laughing together.

Evelyn had never laughed as freely as Lily did, but she had always smiled when he made a joke.

Evelyn was blonde, Lily brunette. Lily worked outside the home, as Evelyn had not. Evelyn came from money. Lily had worked her way up and was proud of it. Evelyn had followed his lead in everything, claiming no preference when he asked her. Handing him the divorce papers was the most decisive thing she had done in her life.

Lily would never be so passive. If she had an opinion, she let him know... or at least, she had. And, he admitted to himself with a smile, she was often right. His smile faded.

The two women didn't have much in common, but they both had gained that chilling distance in their eyes.

He was so lost in thought that he drove right past his turn and didn't notice for two miles. He swore and pulled the car to the curb. He couldn't think. He had to figure out what was causing the problems in his marriage. He usually waited until after work to check on the experiment, but today he felt he couldn't wait. Today might be the day. He might finally figure it out.

Of course, he had thought that yesterday, too.

On his command, the viewscreen cleared into focus. He recited the code for his office's receptionist and left a message telling her that he'd be coming in late today. Then he left the curb and drove away from both his home and his work. He didn't bother checking the route; he knew it by heart.

He'd set up the first experiment right after Evelyn had asked for a divorce. It hadn't worked, and he'd given it no further thought or money until he saw that same distance creeping into Lily's lovely blue eyes.

He parked the car outside a large building. He walked across the neatly-trimmed lawn and pushed open a pair of tinted glass doors that sparkled in the morning light. Inside, the walls were painted neutral shades of green and brown. There were no identifying signs except one directing visitors to the front desk, but Mark knew his way.

The door he stopped in front of bore a narrow, brass-framed viewscreen, which warned that an experiment was in progress. Mark opened the door. A white-coated man looked up from his

notes in irritation, but his brow smoothed when he realized the identity of the intruder.

"Good morning, Dr. Armon," Mark said.

"Hello," answered Dr. Armon. "You came earlier than usual."

"I couldn't stay away any longer, Doctor," Mark told him. "I think this one's going to work."

Dr. Armon frowned. "Hmm, well, so far it's progressed well. The subject is following all the rules we've come up with over the course of the previous experiments." He gestured to a large screen on the wall that held a numbered list of rules, followed by an experiment number:

Do not give her yellow roses: experiment #1.

Do not ask for steak when she made lasagna: experiment #1.

Do not try to control the household budget: experiment #2.

Do not leave the toilet seat up: experiment #3.

Do not insist on visiting your own family every Christmas: experiment #4.

Do not buy her clothing for her: experiment #4.

Do not forbid her to dance with other people at social gatherings: experiment #5.

Do not... the list went on, and so did the experiment numbers. Mark looked away from the screen. He had followed the new rules, but the look in Lily's eyes hadn't changed.

"Can I see them?" he asked Dr. Armon.

Dr. Armon nodded and pressed a button that transformed one wall of the room into a one-way window looking onto a peaceful, domestic scene. Through the window, Mark saw a pleasant dining room. A man and a woman sat drinking their morning coffee. The woman was blonde and wore a blue dressing-gown. She had a tired but pleasant-looking face. The man's back was to the window, but Mark could see a small bald spot beginning to form on his scalp.

"They've got another week of life left before the flaws inherent in the incomplete cloning will lead to their... termination," Dr. Armon said.

"Before they die." Mark turned from the window and met his eyes.

"Well, yes... before they die." Dr. Armon's eyebrows beetled. "Without a much higher budget, we do not have the resources to do a full and proper cloning." He paused. "Perhaps if you..."

"I've put everything I can towards this," Mark said. Everything he could without Lily noticing, he amended mentally. It was fortunate that she had no interest in their investments. "Your fees are outrageous."

"Our fees are commensurate with the unique service we offer," the doctor reminded him, a slight smile curving his lips. He turned back to face the window. "If you cannot afford to continue the experiments, it is your loss, not ours. We have other clients. You are not the only one who values the unique insights that can be gained through this process, Mark."

Mark squirmed inside when Dr. Armon addressed him by his first name. It reminded him too much of the marriage counselors he'd tried while his first marriage was disintegrating. "Mark, tell us your view." "Mark, why do you think your wife feels this way?"

All they had done was ask questions. They hadn't given him any answers. They couldn't tell him the reason for the expression in Evelyn's eyes. If he went to them now, they wouldn't be able to tell him why it had infected Lily as well.

Through the one-way glass, Mark watched the couple in the dining room. He studied the woman's eyes. Was there-- yes. He saw the detachment in her gaze as she watched the man sitting across the table from her. The man was oblivious, reading a magazine years out of date. Mark remembered that magazine. There was a particularly good article about dealing with troublesome neighbors, but what neighbors did this man have to worry about?

Mark studied the man and then self-consciously touched the small bald spot on the back of his own head. Studying his younger self always made him self-conscious.

The man in the dining room was younger, with more hair, believing himself still married to Evelyn, carefully instructed in what not to do... but it was Mark. He was listed in the doctor's notes as Mark Nine: the ninth experiment, the ninth clone, and judging by the look in Evelyn Nine's eyes, the ninth failure.

"Did you find the origin of the problem with the eighth experiment?" Mark asked.

"Yes, yes," Dr. Armon said. "It was a seemingly insignificant argument, but we have wiped the memory record from that point forward. They only have the memories of the previous experiments up to the point right before the trial failed."

"And my memories," Mark murmured.

"Of course. If there was any memory contamination, it would negate the validity of the study. Would you like to listen to them?"

"Yes." Mark leaned forward, intent on the scene unfolding before him.

Evelyn Nine said, "Tell me about the article you're reading."

Mark Nine only grunted and shifted so that his side was towards her.

Mark groaned. Couldn't his clone see that Evelyn Nine was trying to break through the distance to reach him?

Mark Nine sipped his coffee but then put it down and looked at Evelyn Nine.

"Evelyn," he said with obviously feigned patience, "I've asked you before to make the coffee just a little bit stronger." Evelyn Nine slumped back in her seat. "This is barely stronger than water. It tastes like you just made it out of old grinds."

Evelyn Nine turned her head aside, away from the clone and towards Mark. He leaned closer to the window until his nose was almost touching it, his eyes intent on her.

"Well, I prefer tea anyway," she said quietly, her head still turned away. Mark's breath fogged the window, and he wiped the condensation away with a quick sweep of his hand.

Had he missed a spot? Evelyn Nine's eyes seemed clouded. Mark squinted. No, he hadn't missed a spot. Those were tears in her eyes.

Mark hated it when women cried. Evelyn had frequently used her tears as blackmail when she wanted to get her way. He gritted his teeth in anticipation. Any minute now, she would turn to face his clone and those fat teardrops would roll down her cheeks.

Then he frowned. He remembered a similar incident to this. It hadn't happened this way. Evelyn hadn't sobbed at him; she'd just said that she preferred tea. He hadn't noticed the distance in her eyes until later.

He waited.

Slowly, the tears receded from Evelyn Nine's eyes. She stood up from the breakfast table and went to prepare more coffee, stronger, the way he liked it. When she returned, she had a teacup in her hand and distance in her eyes. Mark Nine didn't notice. He hardly looked up, only grunting his approval when he tasted the fresh coffee.

Mark leaned away from the window. He felt numb, as if he were floating. Had he been that much of an idiot? Had he been that oblivious?

Was he that oblivious?

Lily certainly hadn't knuckled under to him when he'd complained about the coffee she made. But Lily was not Evelyn. They shared the distance in their eyes, but nothing else. They shared nothing else... except for him.

Mark sat down in a chair before his legs gave way. He rested his forehead against the heels of his hands, burying his fingers in his hair while his mind churned over the history of his marriages. He tried to imagine what he would have done in Evelyn's place. He would have yelled, stormed, refused to concede. He would have acted like a spoiled brat.

His fingers ached where they dug into his scalp. Mark pulled his hands away from his face and consciously relaxed them. He stood up.

"Thank you, Doctor," he said. "The experiment is a success. I know what went wrong."

"So soon? Well, perhaps another experiment, just to confirm your theory...." Dr. Armon eyed Mark.

"No. I know the cause well enough." Mark brushed past the doctor without proffering an explanation. He paused next to the list of rules. He stared at it for a moment, his lip curling, and then stabbed the 'clear' button. The screen blinked and went blank.

Mark did not even think of going to work. He left the clinic and drove back home to Lily, making only one stop along the way.

When Lily opened the door and saw Mark standing there holding a large box in front of him, she frowned.

"Mark," she said, "didn't you have an important meeting this morning? What are you doing back here?" He pressed the box into her arms without answering, watching her eyes.

Bewildered, she stared at the box in her arms.

"This is more important than work," he said. "It's for you."

A shy half-smile curved her lips. She glanced up at him and then looked back at the box in her arms. Pink crept up the edges of her ears. "It's been a while since you got me a gift," Lily said quietly.

"I know." Mark closed his eyes against a pang of guilt.

"Well, what is it?" Lily set the box on the floor and knelt beside it.

"It's, uh..." An awkward smile forced its way onto his face. "I hope it will be useful."

Lily threw him a suspicious look and tore open the box. She sank back onto her heels. "A coffeemaker?" she demanded, the seeds of anger in her voice.

"No! No, you don't understand," Mark said, his words trampling each other in their haste. "I thought, this way, you could make your coffee the way you like it, and I could make my coffee the way I want to. So we could both have our coffee." He trailed off.

She just sat there, looking down at the coffeemaker nestled happily in its box.

He had been a fool to think that this could change anything. It was as useless as the list of prohibitions he'd followed so carefully. This should be added to the list:

No stupid gifts: experiment #10.

"Mark," Lily said, looking up at him. Tears ran down her cheeks.

For once, Mark didn't cringe at the sight of a woman's tears. The distance in Lily's eyes was gone, replaced by hope, relief, and bittersweet amusement.

"It's okay? You understand? I mean, the coffeemaker is just a start. I want to fix, um"--he waved his hand helplessly--"everything."

"Of course I understand," she answered. Mark exhaled in relief. "And I'll hold you to it."

"No more temper tantrums over how strong the coffee is," Mark vowed.

"Among other things." Lily's face hardened for a moment and then relaxed. "A coffeemaker. You get me my own coffeemaker, and I end up bawling." She shook her head, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand.

She smiled. "I think I would like a cup of coffee. You?"



Back in the clinic, a woman with blonde hair peered intently through a one-way window. She watched a woman who could have been her younger sister carefully measuring out coffee grounds. A man who was just beginning to go bald sat beside the coffeemaker, reading a magazine.

"Do you think this one will work?" the blonde woman asked the man beside her.

"Now, Evelyn," Dr. Armon said. "This is only the fifteenth experiment. These things take time."

END

Under the End

by

Amanda C. Davis

It was a bright and sunny day
And the breezes swirled the dust away
And the mountains howled and their mouths were gray
And the sky burned red.

Dry the flat of the northern field;
Slim the stalks of its withered yield;
Tight the cellar door all sealed
Above my head.

"Open the cellar door," I said,
"I want to see the sky burn red."
My wife said, "Not until I'm dead."
"I liked it blue."

I stroked her shoulder and replied,
"All right, 'til then we'll stay inside."
We didn't have long 'til she died
As both we knew.

Up on the surface, monsters scurried;
Underground we sat and worried.
"Tell me how you'll have me buried,"
Said my bride.

"Not far off," I said, "they say
"The fields are green instead of gray.
"I'll lay you in the grass and stay
"There by your side."

"I don't think I can breathe," she said.
I said, "I thought that when we wed."
I held her hand 'til she was dead
And breathed no more.

There are no grassy fields, you know;
Just death above, and death below.
I squeezed her fingers, said, "Let's go,"
And raised the door.

The Pirate's Lord

by

Jenny Morientes

It was a bright and sunny day at Ightmam Mote Tudor House, one that Melody had hoped would be educational for her class. But that hope was shattered into fear and panic the moment Davy Hopkins fell into the moat.

The other children rushed to the wooden rail in a mixture of fear and nervous laughter to see Davy thrashing in the black, deep water, yelling for help.

She started to take off her jacket but realised it was pointless; she'd never learned to swim, always too busy swotting.

"Miss!" shouted one of the kids. "He's drowning!"

Melody saw an orange life belt bolted to the manor house wall. Pushing the children aside, she reached for the strap holding it.

Damn! Why wouldn't it come undone?

Behind her, the kids' shouts turned to excitement, followed by a loud splash from below.

She ran to the rail to see a man's head and shoulders break through the water next to Davy. Her heart pumped hard in relief as the man put his right arm around the boy's chest then struck out for the edge of the moat, the kids cheering him on.

Melody ran with the class to the grassy bank, reaching for Davy as the man passed him up to her. The boy's face was pale, but his lungs heaved in the air, and he looked otherwise unhurt.

She covered him with her jacket then looked up at his rescuer.

She wasn't sure what made her gasp-- the flat shadows of his muscled physique showing against the soaked white cotton shirt or his strong face and bright, black eyes that for some reason stared at her with fury.

"Are you the mistress of these charges?" he said.

Annoyed to find herself flushing at the accusation in his tone, she stood, straightened her skirt and tried to meet his gaze.

"If you mean, am I their teacher, then yes. I really must thank you--"

He waved away her words and moved closer, wet black hair plastering his head and cheeks. "What is your name?" he said, looking down at her, too close.

"Melody Stevens," she said, dismayed at herself for not taking him to task over his harsh tone, even if he had saved Davy's life.

"Well, Melody Stevens, you must use more discipline on these children if they are to survive long enough to benefit from whatever nonsense you women teach them."

She had her mouth open, ready to defend herself against such sexist presumption but glanced at the children around them. Realising they were already distraught at Davy's accident, she decided not to upset them further by arguing with this rude man.

"Well, thank you again, Mr--?"

He continued to stare at her for a few seconds; then his expression softened slightly.

"My name is Edward Blaque," he said. "What do you teach, Melody Stevens?"

"History is my main subject. I specialise in the Elizabethan period."

He snorted. "You know nothing about it. I can tell by the quiver in your lips that you do not understand the needs of those times."

"And you do, I suppose. What are you: Doctor Who in leather pants?"

The sniggers of the children reminded her where she was.

He grinned. "I know no doctor by such a strange name. However, if you desire to learn some truth about the period you say you know, come to my house this Saturday-- Blandford Manor. I suspect you know of it."

He didn't wait for her reply, just picked up his jacket and walked briskly off through the park, distinctly not looking back. As some of the kids went, "Ooooh, *miss!*" at his invitation, Melody attended to Davy, deeply irritated by the fact Blaque must be a Lord if he owned such a large estate as Blandford.

Well, he was crazy as well as arrogant if he thought she'd drop everything to go visit him just because he commanded her to.



Melody spent the rest of the week furious both with Blaque and herself. But she did stay in every night, reading up on the Elizabethan period, telling herself it was just her job, trying to ignore the dark thrill she felt every so often at the thought of showing him he was wrong.

If she went to Blandford.

Which she wasn't going to.

Friday evening and the door bell ringing made her start. She'd been standing on the tiny balcony of her apartment, looking at the Thames sliding past, bearing brightly lit restaurant boats and the occasional brown-sailed tourist yacht. Her eyes itched from all the studying, but it would be worth it--

"Mel?"

She turned. "Oh, Brian. Hi; I didn't expect you."

He frowned, kissed her lightly on the lips. "Didn't you hear the doorbell? I used my key when you didn't open it; could see light under the door, so figured you were in."

"Sorry. I was miles away."

Brian sat on the sofa, clearly expecting her to join him, but she remained standing. They'd been an item for nearly a year now, but she'd never noticed before how scruffily he liked to dress.

She knew he had to wear a suit at work, so he must dress down deliberately before meeting her; probably helped him to relax. But still.

"How's things?" he said.

"You didn't tell me you were coming over tonight."

"Do I have to? I thought I'd surprise you."

"That's nice," she said. "I'm lucky to have you."



On Saturday morning, she tried to mark her pupil's homework but just could not focus. She filled the washing machine and checked her emails. Then around midday, she found herself in front of the bedroom mirror, trying on dresses, like the long, black number she hadn't worn since the uni ball, the one which showed a useful amount of cleavage which she could always partially disguise with a black cardigan--

What *was* she doing?

She took a shower, put on a bathrobe, sat on the balcony, tried to read a history of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, gave up, watched the river but didn't really see anything. Then she put on the black dress and drove south-east, out of London.

Blandford Manor was a huge castle-like house sitting on a green rise surrounded by a wide moat dotted with swans and ducks. She drove slowly up the gravel drive, through the well-tended trees and parkland. She had the phone number of the house on her mobile but hadn't wanted to call ahead, just in case she changed her mind at the last moment.

She pulled into a small car park, holding a half dozen or so vehicles, probably belonging to the staff. None of the cars looked opulent enough for a lord, but then he probably had a separate garage for his Bentley or whatever.

Annoyed with herself for speculating like a schoolgirl on Blaque's wealth, she stood by her car, arms folded, unsure of what to do next.

A tall figure emerged from French doors and strode across the stone terrace bordered by roses, undoubtedly heading for her. Damn, there must have been a camera at the gate. He knew she'd come.

But there was no sign of triumph on his face, just a wide smile with no attempt to hide his pleasure at seeing her.

"Miss Stevens," he said, taking her hand and kissing it. "You look beautiful."

She frowned, trying to dismiss such blatant sexism. "Well," she said, "I could hardly turn down the challenge of proving you wrong."

He wore a navy silk shirt open at the neck and with old-fashioned billowing sleeves. Under this were tight olive breeches which disappeared into black calf-length leather boots. His hair was tied back in a short pony tail.

"Let me show you around the house," he said.

He led her directly into a long room with high ceilings. Everywhere were oak chairs, chests, stepped buffets, and tables, clearly representing Tudor-style wealth.

She inspected a settle chair, feeling the deep, rich smoothness of its polished surface with her fingertips.

"A really good reproduction of a Tudor settle," she said.

"Actually, it's an original."

She looked up quickly, surprised not to see a cynical smile on his face. "It looks new. You must have had it re-conditioned at least."

He shook his head and gestured around. "Everything here is original and untouched."

"Oh, come on. You can't expect me to believe that."

He said nothing, just led her out of the room into a huge lobby with a curving white marble staircase.

"Magnificent, isn't it," he said. It wasn't a question.

Suddenly, all the research she'd crammed in the past week rushed into her mind.

"You really think you're lord of the Tudor manor, don't you?" she said. "I suspect you'd probably approve if we went back to those days, when women were expected to do the sewing and be uneducated."

He smiled. "Tudor women were not uneducated. They knew how to raise families and cook. Lowly though these duties might seem to you, they required a degree of knowledge and skill to perform adequately."

"But hardly any women could even read or write. How could they possibly ever fulfil their potential?"

"Why would they need to read or write? Books were written by men for men. Their subject matter would have been of little interest to women."

"I don't believe it-- do you really have such little respect for us?"

He looked a little uncertain for once. "I am beginning to find modern women interesting. One of them, at least."

"Oh, and what exactly do you want a modern woman for-- socks need darning, do they? Because to be honest, Lord Blaque, I think you'd find most modern women too much to handle."

He moved closer, touched her sleeve. "I would never handle a woman unless I believed she wanted me to."

"You know that's not what I meant... "

And then he was looking direct into her eyes again, and she was angry with herself for not dismissing him for being so obvious.

"In fact," he said, "I'm looking for a modern woman to marry."

She laughed. "That sounds so... Well, all right-- but there are millions of us to choose from."

He didn't reply but put his arm around her waist, pulling her closer. She'd have yelled in protest if he'd kissed her immediately, but he held back for a second, still reading her eyes. So that when his lips finally touched hers, she let herself fall into them.

Whenever she kissed Brian, she always felt as if part of her stayed at a distance, making sure she did the right things but not fully lost in the moment.

With Blaque, she all but fainted as her body tried to push its way into his and he pulled her cardigan from her shoulders to bury his lips in her neck.

She wanted to let her body continue giving itself to him but managed to regain her caution in time. Breaking his hold, she stepped back, chest heaving, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"What are you *doing*?" she said.

"I thought it's what you wanted. What a modern woman would want."

"Well, you thought wrong."

"Melody-- I don't have much time..."

She pushed past him, ran outside to her car. Furious for having let him nearly take her, she nevertheless glanced up before driving off to see if he'd followed her. He hadn't.

She drove back along the gravel drive, heart thumping, then on to the road outside, determined to get back home as quickly as possible.

But a mile down the hedge-lined road, she pulled onto a dirt track, got out of the car, and leaned against it, thinking.

Back in London, she had a nice apartment overlooking the Thames, a boyfriend who loved her, a job she enjoyed, great restaurants and museums, and theatres within walking distance. A comfortable, fulfilling life.

"Oh, bloody hell... "

It wasn't just Blaque's magnetism--that was mostly the unearned aura of wealth and power--there were mysteries about him that needed answering.

She took out her phone and dialled.

"Brian? It's me. I'm going to be a little late getting back... No, I'm just visiting an old school friend in Canterbury... No, you don't know her... Okay, see you later."

She drove back along the road but stopped a few hundred yards short of the main gate. She climbed over a fence into the grounds of Blandford Manor. Low-lying light from the setting sun through the trees made her blink.

She paused at the edge of the wood, studying the darkening bulk of the house a hundred metres up the long, grassy slope. By the time she reached the back of the house, lights had appeared in some of its windows.

She found an open door and stepped inside. Then following her instinct, she slipped along a ground-floor, oak-panelled corridor to a study room in the middle of the house.

The door was ajar and cautiously she peered around it. In the middle of what looked like a library, a wooden stand about the height of a man held a copper sphere. Next to it stood Blaque, a knife in his right hand.

He pricked the end of a finger with the knife, then let blood drip on to the copper ball. Immediately, green mist swirled from the sphere and formed into a curtain of light. Blaque, holding his finger, walked through the curtain then disappeared.

Terrified, she entered the room and closed the door. She looked behind the sphere for signs of a trapdoor but found only solid floor supporting shelves of books looking authentically Elizabethan but, like the furniture, too new. She pushed against the shelves, hoping to find a secret door in them, but knew deep down he'd been too far away from them to have gone by such a route.

On a table lay a paper knife. Hand trembling, she picked it up, tested the point: it was sharp enough. Taking a deep breath, she pricked a finger and held it above the copper sphere. The moment blood hit the shiny surface, the same green mist formed into a curtain.

Melody stepped through... to find herself in the same library. Or was it? She couldn't be sure but the books on the shelves looked different.

Tentatively, she made for the door. Something definitely wasn't the same, but what exactly?

She walked to the end of the corridor to a window formed of oddly shaped glass. Through the distorted panes, she saw people on the lawn outside. They were all dressed like well-to-do Elizabethans, standing in clumps talking, drinking from goblets topped up by servants. Strange that they hadn't been there only ten minutes earlier, but perhaps Blaque was holding a party and simply let his guests, clearly in fancy dress, out to enjoy the last of the sunset.

Then she heard Blaque's deep voice rumbling from a room behind her. She crept along the corridor to listen through the slight gap between door and frame. On the wooden floor, amber waves of light quivered, indicating candle light. Also odd, but not too unusual.

She concentrated on what Blaque was saying.

"... so, with what I've told you, I believe we now have sufficient knowledge of the Spanish fleet to ensure our victory when they attack, Sir Francis."

Sir Francis? *Drake*? It seemed as if Blaque and a friend were taking the fancy dress theme into role play.

A slow, deliberate voice replied to Blaque. "Edward, I don't know how you came upon such detailed information. But I'm a practical man and care not for your source. The important thing is I can now get the Queen to sanction raids on Cadiz and La Caruna. If we hit fast, we can destroy enough of the Spanish fleet to crush their invasion plan or at least delay it for several years."

Shaking her head, she moved away, determined to explore the party further, before exposing Blaque's obviously sketchy grasp on Elizabethan political history. For the fact was that Drake's attack on the Spanish navy delayed the Armada for only a year.

She moved through the lobby into another corridor, this time following the sounds of female voices. Pausing outside another door, she listened to women talking.

"... be a good marriage?" said one.

"Lord Blaque is a respected adviser to Sir Francis," said another, "and Lady Boxford will be fortunate to have him as a husband."

Suddenly, reality ripped into Melody's mind.

Now she noticed the absence of electric lights, of telephones, of wiring, and realised the voices she'd been listening to weren't jaunty with make-believe but easy with natural tones.

She really was in Tudor England.

And that bastard Blaque, who'd kissed her--kissed her *and* wanted more--was going to marry someone else.

She ran to the library. Fumbling, she pricked her finger again and rushed through the green curtain, back to her own time.

Falling into a chair, she tried to calm her streaming thoughts. But before she succeeded, the green curtain appeared again, and Blaque stood before her, expression contrite.

"Melody Stevens, I--"

"You lied to me!" she said, standing. "Why did you kiss me like that if you're getting married?"

What kind of question was that? Why wasn't she asking the important things, like how did he travel through time and why?

He looked tired. "I am being encouraged to marry Lady Boxford, but she is too young and stupid for me."

"Aren't *all* Elizabethan women stupid?"

He smiled. "Clearly, you've never met our Queen."

"But, how--I mean, why--?"

"I go to court regularly. The Queen knew my father well and has taken a maternal interest in my development. Years ago, she introduced me to her chief mathematician, John Dee."

"The magician and occultist?"

He shook his head. "I still cannot get used to the freedom of these times, to use such terms with no fear of punishment. Yes, the magician. When I discussed my lord's concerns about the inevitable forthcoming armada, he thought of a way I could help."

"Your master is Drake, the pirate?"

His face darkened. "Sir Francis is entitled to compensation for the selfless service he has given the country."

"I'm sorry. I was just expressing the modern view."

"I prefer it when you express your own views."

Her groin tingled at that direct look again.

"So," she said, "you travelled into our time to get information on what happened in the past."

"Yes, but Dee assured me the past is not written, once the future arrives. I do not fully understand this, only that if I did not return to Sir Francis with the information your age possesses, the Spanish armada might succeed."

"So, you brought all this furniture with you, to make money?"

"To a degree. I needed enough to buy off the owners of this manor house and create enough time for me to use the profits from selling this quality 'reproduction' furniture to get me around the country, to study your records, to learn what I needed to know."

"And where do I fit into all this?"

"You were not part of my original plans."

Her heart thudded, making her next words difficult.

"And now?" she said.

He stood, held out his hand. She stood, too, and took it.

He led her through the darkening house, up the stairs, to his master bedroom. He switched on two side lamps, then strode to her. She breathed hard, wondering briefly if she should leave right now. But then he'd taken off her cardigan, thrown it aside, pulled down the straps of her dress, exposing her black lace bra.

His hunger was obvious as he kissed her neck and shoulders. She reached behind and unzipped her dress, let it fall to the floor. She pushed him away, let him see her body, shook out her hair, then moved to the bed.

He tore off his shirt, boots, and breeches, then fell on her, kissing and feeling her. He pulled down her bra and kissed her nipples erect. Then breathing hard, he kneeled, pulled down her panties.

She wanted him to take her fast but sensed that under all that Elizabethan bravado that was not what he really wanted. So she put her hands on his chest, holding him off, smiled, bent her head to him; took him into her mouth. She thrilled at his sinful moans; took him close to the edge. Then she leaned back against the pillows, drawing his head down.

"I have never--" he started to say but then delighted her by eagerly following her guidance. His tongue was a little rough but enthusiastic, and quickly she drew close to the edge, too. She pulled up his head and said, "Now," and he took her as if she was his first, their bodies bucking and bouncing on the bed, ripples of ecstasy firing her every nerve.

When they'd finished, he turned his head away.

"Edward, are you crying?"

"I have never known such joy," he said. "In my time, we are not allowed... that is, we are taught that women should not be so generous with their bodies. I am greatly moved, madam; you have shown me much tonight."

She did not reply, reflecting upon his honest tone and what it might mean for them.



She woke before him the next morning, dressed quietly, and walked out to the car. She needed to return home and think about all the incredible things she'd seen, about how her body had felt when he'd made love to her.

He was advisor to the most famous pirate in history, yet showed signs that he could learn from a woman.

After showering and pouring a cup of coffee, she switched on the computer, thinking she might look for more information on Blandford Manor. First, she checked her emails and felt dizzy when she saw a new one from 'edward.blaque.' He'd said nothing about modern devices, so she'd assumed he didn't know how to use them. She'd underestimated him, of course.

Dear Melody Stevens,

I am trusting that you are the same Melody Stevens - a teacher in South London - who shows on my search information screen.

My heart is too sore at finding you gone this morning, Miss Stevens. I hope to God I have not offended you. For your burning spirit has infected my soul with more hope and grandeur than I scarce believed a man could bear. Please forgive my bold expression of love, but the fact is I must return to my time soon. John Dee's sphere works for just one year, and that year is over at noon today. I wanted to tell you last night, but did not want to influence your feelings unfairly.

I burn with desire to stay here with you, but my duty is to my master and my Queen. The country, as you well know, is in grave danger from the Catholic threat, and I would be less than a man if I did not protect her.

If we never meet again, please remember that I loved you with every drop of blood in my veins.

Your servant,

Edward Blaque

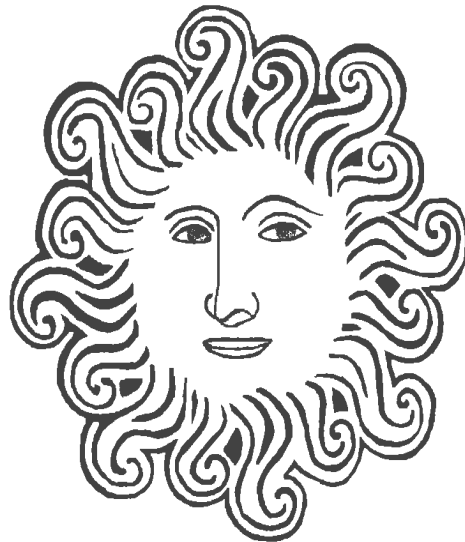
The computer clock read 10.15. Blandford Manor was a one-hour drive away.

Her *computer*--and her television, mobile phone, washing machine, the kids at the school, her parents, her car...

All that against a man with black eyes and a duty.

She stood, went into the bedroom and opened a bag. The first items she threw into it were all her laciest, flimsiest underwear.

END



Northern Beach

by

Marge Simon

On a bright and sunny day,
I find her on the northern beach,
all silver-tangled in a net.
I slap away the flies
& bring her home.

What is this? says my wife.
She squints her eyes, sniffs.
Half dead, I know by the smell.
Why did you bring it here?

I beg my wife
for her forbearance,
caring for a needful thing --
a thing beyond her eyes,
Aemoi, maiden of the sea.

Let it rest with us and heal.
When it's well, I'll take it back, I say.
Her mouth tracks down,
but she agrees.

I fill a tub with salty water,
our creature nestles in, laughs
up at me, with wondrous eyes.

When she is strong and well,
I return her to the northern beach.
She shakes the tangles from her hair

& leaves a love note in the sand
but not without a kiss good-bye
that sends me reeling.

How the Owl Learned That Being Wise Isn't Everything

by

Mario Milosevic

It was a bright and sunny day. The forest creatures, all except for owl, met to decide what they were going to do about owl and her know-it-all ways.

"It's not like we can make her shut up," said porcupine. "Everyone has a right to an opinion, however sharply we may disagree with that opinion."

"An opinion, yes," said coyote, "but owl thinks her opinion is the only possible right opinion."

Owl constantly lectured every creature in the forest. Owl would tell fox how to hunt and deer how to run. She would explain the fine points of trapping bugs to spider and chatter endlessly to squirrel on the optimum methods for storing nuts. She even corrected bear on his technique for swatting salmon out of the river.

"Only last week," said mouse, "she was explaining to me how to take a piece of cheese off a trap without getting killed. Well, I don't need her to tell me how to do something I've been doing rather successfully my whole life!"

"Owl is a pain in the neck," said crow. "It's always, 'I know best because I'm the wise owl.' I hate that. All she does is talk. She doesn't ever *do* any of the things she supposedly knows so much about."

"Too true," said elk. "I've never seen *her* grow a pair of antlers, even though she tried to 'help' me with mine."

"I have an idea," said coyote. "The next time she tries to tell one of us how to live our lives, we pretend we don't understand what she's talking about and make her do the thing instead. She will be so terrible at it that she won't ever try to tell us how to do anything again."

The animals liked that idea. They clapped coyote on the back, and all of them wanted to shake his paw. Coyote raised his head and pricked up his ears tall and straight, like he was sitting on a throne. It *was* a good idea. One of his better ones, if he did say so himself.

The animals, in complete agreement as to how to deal with owl, adjourned their meeting.

Not a half hour later, raccoon and her family began preparing for their nightly prowling for food. Raccoon's children lined up obediently behind her and she set out on her route. She intended to stop first at the garbage can at that house on the edge of the forest where the family always put out such nice table scraps.

No sooner had she gone ten paces when owl silently swooped down and landed in front of her. She folded up her wings, looked at raccoon, and shook her head. "Tsk tsK tsK," said owl.

Annoyed by the interruption, raccoon tried going around owl, but owl stepped to the side to keep her from continuing. Raccoon sighed and stopped. Her children all stopped behind her. “What is it, owl?” said raccoon.

“I don’t want to tell you how to scavenge for food,” said owl, “but I do know a little something about the subject.”

“Is that right?” asked raccoon.

“Yes. I have knowledge and much wisdom, and I would like to help. First of all, I can tell you that you are doing it completely wrong.”

Raccoon was about to tell owl where she could put her “help,” when she remembered what the animals had decided earlier.

“I see,” said raccoon. “Please enlighten me, owl. Show me how I can do better.”

Owl cleared her throat and tipped her head slightly in the direction of raccoon. “I would be delighted,” she said. “In the first place, you shouldn’t take your children with you. They will only slow you down. You should get food and bring it back to them at your nest.”

Raccoon was ready to argue with owl on the spot. That might be the way owl did things with her children, but raccoons were different. The sooner a raccoon learned how to scavenge for herself, the better off she would be. But raccoon did not argue with owl. Instead, she said, “Owl, I don’t know what you mean. Please show me.”

“I mean,” said owl, in as patient and condescending a voice as she could muster, “that you need to leave your children at home while you hunt for food.”

Raccoon made the mask of her face indent at the center, right between her eyes, like she was thinking hard about owl’s words. “Forgive me, owl,” she said, “but my little raccoon brain does not understand. You’re saying I need to have my children leave home? Is that it?”

Owl barely maintained her legendary composure. “That’s not what I mean at all,” she said. “I’m saying your children need to stay at home.”

“Oh, my children at home. Of course. After we scavenge, we will be going straight home.” Raccoon smiled.

Owl, now thoroughly exasperated, flapped her wings in frustration. “No, no, no,” she said. “Leave the children at home now. NOW! Don’t you get it?”

Raccoon scratched her head. “I can hear what you’re saying, oh wise owl, but your ideas and concepts are beyond my understanding. Perhaps if you demonstrated...”

“Oh, for river’s sake,” said Owl. “Never mind.” She spread her wings and flew away.

Raccoon could not help laughing. She continued on her way with her children waddling behind her like beads on a string.

Owl’s blood practically boiled from the frustration of trying to teach raccoon a simple lesson. She soared high in the sky, flapping her wings rapidly to work off some of her irritation. As she rode the warm air above the forest, her sharp eyesight--owl hated the term “eagle-eyed”--picked out pika scampering around a lava bed. Maybe pika would understand her better than raccoon did. Owl angled her wings to spill air off her feathers and descended to the lava bed where pika saw her land.

“Oh,” he said. “It’s you.”

“Yes,” said owl as she folded her wings. “Your lucky day. I see you can use some of my help.”

“Is that right?” said pika.

“Absolutely,” said owl. “I couldn’t help noticing that one of your shelters is a little off.”

“Do tell,” said pika.

Owl nodded vigorously. “Indeed. Perhaps you cannot see it because you do not have the wisdom that I do.”

“That must be it,” said pika.

“Do not worry, though,” said Owl. “I’ll tell you exactly what you need to do. You see that piece of lava over there?” Owl pointed to a slab of black rock flecked with green moss.

“Yeah,” said pika.

“It’s all wrong. It doesn’t match the décor of the rest of the condos here, and, what’s worse, it is so askew that it might fall over at any minute. You need to correct it for the sake of everyone’s safety.”

Pika knew full well that even though that rock had more moss on it than most of the other rocks, it had been solidly in its place for at least a hundred years. He had personally stood on top of it and knew without a doubt that it was completely sound. But he didn’t need to tell owl any of this.

“I don’t know how to correct it,” said pika.

“You need to nudge it over a little.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“So it’s in a more solid configuration.”

“What?”

“So the roof is in a better place! So it doesn’t fall on anyone!”

“Oh wise one,” said pika, “I am merely a humble and ignorant little creature. Can you fix the rock for me, please? Can you save me from certain danger?”

“Oh, for cedar’s sake,” said owl. “Has every creature of the forest gone completely ignorant all of a sudden?” She stepped forward and put her talon on the rock and tried to move it. It would not budge. She put her beak down on its surface and pushed as hard as she could. The rock remained in place.

She pushed and pushed and pushed but the rock would not move. It was as though it had been bolted into place. She felt herself growing more disheveled with the effort with each passing second. This would not do. She could not let herself look this ridiculous.

She stepped back from the rock and surveyed its placement.

“There,” she said. “That’s much better.”

Pika examined the rock. “It hasn’t moved,” he said.

“Sure it has,” said owl.

“You moved that rock?” said pika.

“Yup,” said owl.

“Don’t think so,” said pika.

Owl turned around and lifted her wings. “I don’t have time to argue with you,” she said. “The rock is in a much safer place now.” She took off and was soon gone from view.

Pika waved at owl. “Thank you for your help,” he said. Then he laughed uproariously.

Owl began to wonder if something had gotten into the water to make all the forest creatures ignore her incredibly sound and sage advice. She pondered the issue for some time while she soared above the tops of the trees.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a flock of bats pouring out of a cave. They were on the hunt for mosquitoes, which they ate on the fly. This was all well and good as far as owl was concerned, since mosquitoes could be very irritating to any number of animals. However, the bats were going about their business all wrong. Owl happened to know that a very large concentration of mosquitoes lived over the marsh to the north. None of the bats were going in that direction. All she had to do was point them there, and they would all have a good dinner.

She swooped down toward a bat. The bat swerved to avoid owl. “Oops,” said bat as she flapped her wings. “Didn’t echo you there until the last second.”

“That’s okay,” said owl.

“What can I do you for?” said bat, gulping mosquitoes as she flew.

“I thought you might need some help,” said owl.

“Is that so?” said bat.

“Yes. Did you know many, many mosquitoes fly over the marsh?”

“There’s mosquitoes everywhere,” said bat.

“Yes, but at the marsh, you don’t have to hunt for them. They practically fly into your mouth.”

“That’s hard to believe,” said bat. “Mosquitoes don’t fly into my mouth all by themselves.”

“It’s true,” said owl. “Let me show you the way.”

“Can you draw me a map?” said bat.

“A map?”

“Yeah. I work best when I have a map.”

“No, I can’t draw you a map. Just follow me. All of you bats should follow me. I’ll show you.”

“I’d rather have a map,” said bat. “That way, when you are gone, I will still know the way to the marsh.”

“Oh, for lichen’s sake,” said owl. “Okay. I’ll draw you a map.”

“Let’s go back to the cave,” said bat. “I’ve got a pencil and some paper there.”

Owl sighed long and loud. “Fine,” she said. “Let’s go to your cave.”

Bat zigged and zagged through the air, snatching up mosquitoes as she went. Owl followed leisurely behind, wishing bat would untwist her path and fly straight for once. Was that too much to ask?

“Here we are,” said bat as they approached the cave.

“Looks kind of dark in there,” said owl.

“That’s the way we like it,” said bat. “Come on. I can’t wait to see what kind of map you’re going to draw for me.”

Bat flew into the cave. Owl followed. She felt the walls of the cave around her. The rock seemed awfully close. And it was wet. Slimy.

Bat flew around a corner, down a dip, over some stalagmites, then around a couple of more corners. Owl followed, keeping an eye on bat, but the cave quickly grew dimmer and dimmer. Owl, even with her strong eyesight, was not at all sure she could find her way out of the cave if she had to.

“You doing okay?” said bat.

“Yes,” said owl. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“No reason. Except at this point, I can never see a thing. I have to use my radar.”

Maybe bats needed radar, but owl certainly did not. She was perfectly able to get along fine with plain old-fashioned *vision*, thank you very much.

Finally, after several more bends and turns, they stopped. Owl, by this time, was flying completely blind. She oriented herself by listening for the sound of bat’s squeaks as she pulled out drawers and muttered under her breath, “Now I know that paper is here somewhere.”

Owl would never have admitted this to anyone, but she was more than a little bit scared in the cave.

“Ha-have you found it yet?” she asked in a high pitched voice.

“Still looking,” said bat cheerfully.

“I need to be getting back soon,” said owl. “Lots of important things to get done, you know.”

“Oh, sure,” said bat. “I’m looking as fast as I can. Ah! Here it is.”

Owl let out a long breath. “Thank goodness,” she said.

“Now the pencil,” said bat.

Owl groaned.

Bat pulled out more drawers. “Ah,” she said. “Here it is. Now you can make me that map.”

Owl felt the pencil press against her wing. She tried to grab it, but it was no good. The pencil fell to the cave floor.

“Oops,” said bat. “Clumsy! Well, don’t worry about it. It’s just a pencil.” She flew down to the cave floor. Owl waited for her to come back. She waited and waited.

“Bat?” she said.

No answer.

“Bat? Are you there?”

Still no answer. Owl looked down. She saw nothing but blackness.

“Bat?”

Owl listened to her own breathing. It came in erratic puffs.

She couldn't let herself panic. She needed to keep calm and find her way out of the cave. She was a wise owl, after all. She had the brains and the wisdom to do this.

How did bat get around? With radar, wasn't it?

Owl opened her mouth and let out a call. She listened for the echo. It came, but she could not tell where the wall was from her echo. It sounded like the walls were everywhere.

She called again, straining her ears for some sign that would orient her. She heard only a cacophony of echos. They seemed to fall all over her, rustling her feathers and making her tremble with fear.

She moved and her wing brushed a wall. Cold and clammy. She pulled her wing back instinctively. Oh, this was terrible. She was so lost and had no way to find a path out.

Owl began walking. She hit another wall. She stepped aside and slipped on a slick rock. She tried to catch herself, but her talons couldn't grab on. Her legs windmilled for a moment, and then she fell on her back and hit her head on the rock.

“Ouch,” she said. “I hurt myself.”

“Well, why didn't you stay where you were?” said bat.

“Bat? Are you there? Bat?”

“Of course I'm here. The pencil rolled down a crevice. I had to go down and get it.”

“Crevice?”

“They're everywhere in here. Part of the cave living experience.”

“Oh,” said owl. “I didn't know that.”

“Sure,” said bat. “Now, about that map.”

“Can we take it outside?” said owl.

“No problem,” said bat. “I'll carry the paper and pencil. All you have to do is listen to the sound of the paper rustling and follow the sound. I'll get you out in no time.”

Bat began flying. The paper crackled in the air, like it was made of firecrackers. Owl followed its sounds unerringly. Soon she saw the silvery light of the moon ahead. She was so relieved she almost flew past bat, but thought better of it and lagged behind her at a respectful distance.

Bat and owl emerged from the cave and lighted on a tree stump. Bat put down the paper and handed the pencil to owl.

Owl had trouble with the pencil. She tried to hold it in her wing, but it slipped out. She grabbed it with her beak and put the point down on the paper. That didn't work, either. She wrapped a talon around the pencil, but the angle was completely wrong.

Bat was so absorbed in watching the paper that she didn't notice owl's body bent at a particularly painful angle.

Owl tried to move the pencil on the paper, but it wouldn't work. It skipped across the page and made incoherent marks.

"Can you give me a hand with this pencil?" said owl.

Bat jumped up and grabbed the pencil in her feet. "Sure, sure," said bat. "I'm smaller than you so I can work these things better sometimes."

Owl watched as bat gripped the pencil and held it poised above the paper.

"That's pretty good," said owl. "You know quite a bit about pencils."

Bat shrugged her shoulders. "It's nothing," she said.

"Make a circle at the top of the page," said owl.

Bat moved the pencil tip in a circle, leaving a gray ring on the page.

"Very good," said owl. "You don't need my help with that. This is the marsh. Now we'll draw the path to it. Ready?"

Bat looked up at owl and laughed. "Ready," she said.

Bat continued to draw the map with owl's help. When they were finished, bat looked at the map. "Now I see," said bat. "This map will help me a lot. Thank you so much!"

"You're very welcome," said owl, finally happy that a creature of the forest appreciated her wisdom and deep need to assist others to a better life.

Bat immediately told her friends about the mosquitoes over the marsh, and how she had a terrific map that would tell them exactly how to get there. Bat and her friends flew off towards the marsh. Owl watched them go.

Then she began to feel hunger pangs. It was time for her to go hunting. She flew up into the night sky and turned her attention to the forest floor, looking for any sign of motion in the moonlight. Before long, she saw a bear lumbering along the river. No doubt bear was looking for berries in his clumsy way. She tipped her wing and was about to drop out of the sky when she paused and took another look at bear.

He was not so clumsy as she had thought. Indeed, bear moved in a kind of grace, almost dancing from side to side as he shuffled through the woods.

You know, said owl to herself, bear has been doing this berry searching thing for a long time. Maybe he isn't so clumsy as I think.

Owl swooped down and lighted directly in front of bear.

"Hello bear," said owl.

"Hi owl," said bear.

“Are you hunting this fine evening?”

“I’m on my way to an apple grove,” said bear.

“Apples?” said owl. “You don’t say?”

“Yes. I pick them from the trees. I suppose you’re going to tell me I do it wrong.”

“On the contrary,” said owl, “if you could tell me a little bit about how you go about browsing for apples, I would find that most fascinating indeed.”

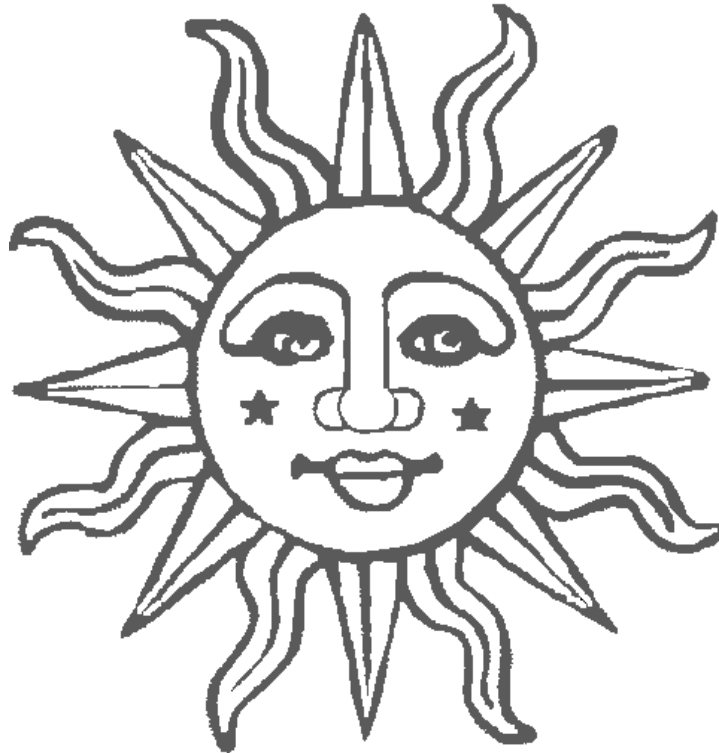
“You want to know how I pick apples?” said bear.

Owl nodded. “You have a lot of knowledge,” she said. “I’d like to learn from you.”

Bear could hardly believe his ears, but he explained all the fine points of apple eating to owl. He told her about which trees had the best apples, the ongoing debate in the bear community about whether or not to eat the cores, and the relative sugar content of different varieties of apples.

Owl nodded sagely as bear talked. She listened carefully and did not interrupt bear the whole time.

END



Global Swarming

by

B.M. Kezar

It was a bright and sunny day. Again. And it really pissed Lonny Hawkins off. Even in the shade of the woods, the heat was intolerable. He wiped his brow and shook his head at his dog, Jake. “If the heat don’t break soon, the whole damn county is going to dry up and blow away.”

Jake panted and wagged his tail listlessly in agreement.

But it wasn’t just the heat that had Lonnie mad, there was also that plume of black smoke drifting over his woods. The fire--if that’s what it was--probably wasn’t intentional. The burning ban in Jericho County was in its third straight year, and it was forcing the local teens to hide their bonfires and beer drinking deeper and deeper in the woods. And now they had moved onto his land. Even worse, the smoke drifted from the very spot where he had shot a sixteen-point buck two years ago.

Lonnie readjusted the rifle slung across his back as they stepped out of the woods and into the clearing. A long, shallow trench scarred the field where there had been smooth meadow before. Black stubble rimmed the trench. On the far side, smoke curled from the end of the trench beside trees burned shining black. The blackened grass crunched beneath his feet and stained his jeans with soot.

“It’s lucky the damn fools didn’t burn the whole forest down,” he said. Lonnie hawked and spat to clear the sour taste of creosote. He turned to Jake, but Jake had stopped twenty feet back.

“Come on, dog.”

Jake sat and wagged his tail half-heartedly, stirring up small storms of ash.

“What’s the matter?” Lonnie said. “Smoke got you spooked?” Jake whined and dropped to his belly. Lonnie shrugged and went on without him.

The trench ended in a smoke-filled hole rimmed with loose dirt. It looked like a giant, smoking gopher hole. Though he had never seen anything like it, the whole thing did have a familiar ring: the burning, the trench, the up-thrust earth on the back side of the hole. He watched a lot of satellite television--what else was there to do out in the piney hills?--mostly the Discovery channel. Not too long ago, he saw an episode on meteor strikes, and his meadow looked a lot like some of those strike zones. There *was* a meteor shower two nights earlier, but if one had hit, why hadn’t he heard anything? A hit should have rattled the walls of his cabin, just down the hill. Didn’t they feel earthquakes for hundreds of miles? A man couldn’t sleep through that, could he?

“Jesus, I must be getting old.” When he was younger, he’d snap awake at a cricket fart. Now an earthquake apparently couldn’t rouse him.

He wanted to see what the meteor looked like, but the smoke was a sure sign it would be too hot to touch. He also knew simply being around it could be dangerous: it had traveled millions

of miles and come into contact with who knows what. The TV program said some scientists thought more than a meteor impact killed the dinosaurs; they thought the meteor might have had germs on it, and those germs might have finished off the dinosaurs.

Jake barked and Lonnie nearly jumped out of his skin. “Damn, dog. You scared the Be-jeezus out of me.” Jake didn’t wag this time--he growled, throaty and deep. “What the hell is your problem?”

Jake barked again-- a high, staccato yip Lonnie had never heard him make before. The dog shuffled its feet, its tail between his legs, and yipped again. Lonnie’s eyes scanned the woods for whatever was making Jake so upset. He turned back in time to see Jake slink into the woods toward the house, head down, body almost scraping the ground, tail tucked firmly between his legs.

“Jake,” Lonnie yelled. “Get your ass back here!” The hair on the back of his neck prickled. A couple of years ago, they had run into a bear while squirrel hunting, and Jake had held the bear off until it decided to look for food elsewhere. Whatever had him so upset had to be worse than a bear.

Lonnie unslung his rifle and flicked the safety off. He scanned the woods for any sign of movement. He decided maybe Jake had the right idea--he’d better leave the meteor investigating to the experts.



Back at his cabin, he called the only place he could think of that might deal with germs: the Public Health department. At first, the woman on the line kept insisting “space-germs” were not her department. But when Lonnie told her about the TV program and the possible real reason behind the demise of the dinosaurs, she finally agreed it was worth checking out. She didn’t want Jericho County to be ground zero for a pandemic that wiped out the world. She took his name and number and told him she’d call around and get back to him. Nearly a week later, four men and a young woman showed up at Lonnie’s door. Like so many other mornings, he’d been watching the weather and hoping for a break in the heat.

“So you folks are from the CDC?” Lonnie eyed them suspiciously. Four of the five didn’t look like government researchers--they looked more the sort to burn up a man’s woods partying.

“No. We’re from the University at Browery. We’ve come to collect specimens from the impact site.” The man introduced himself as Dr. Marlow. He didn’t bother introducing his team of students.

“But what about the germs? Don’t y’all think the CDC should be checking this out?”

Marlow smirked. “It’s unlikely any microbes would have survived the heat of the atmospheric entry.” He pulled a thin paper surgical mask from the bag at his side. “But we’re taking precautions. Just in case.” He paused. “We’d appreciate it if you could take us to the impact site.”

Lonnie hesitated and eyed the mask warily. It was the same kind of cheap mask he’d used while spray-painting his mower. Not exactly high-tech, confidence-instilling equipment. But he really *did* want to see that meteor. He reached out and snatched the mask from Dr. Marlow’s hands.



As they approached the edge of the woods, Lonnie stopped and held up his hand. Everyone froze.

“What is it?” one of the students whispered, his eyes wide, his gaze darting around the shadow-filled woods.

“Hush.” Lonnie cocked his head to the side and listened. A high-pitched, warbling trill echoed through the woods, followed by a rush of metallic clangs and scrapes, like pie tins banging together. The sound became a series of metallic ticks, like hundreds of knitting needles clicking together. Then silence.

“What was that?” Marlow asked, and everyone jumped at the loudness of his voice in the stillness.

“I don’t know,” Lonnie whispered. “Ain’t never heard nothing like it before. Maybe someone else saw the smoke and came up here to have a look.” He pulled his rifle off his shoulder, just in case, before they moved on again.

Lonnie led the way, his eyes scanning the woods around them. Ahead, something blocked the path, half hidden in the grass, lying in ambush. Lonnie stopped short and brought up his gun, then lowered it again. It was only a dead deer. Or what was left of a deer: mostly bones, a few clinging scraps of meat and hair. The grass around the bones was black and sticky.

“Whew. What did that?” Marlow asked.

“I don’t know.” Lonnie scrutinized the woods. He wished he hadn’t left Jake tied up in the yard. Although after the way the dog acted last time, he wasn’t sure how much support Jake would be, anyway.

“Probably a mountain lion,” Marlow sniffed self-importantly. He glanced toward the meadow and his eyes lit up. “This is it? This is the location?”

Lonnie nodded without looking up from the carcass. “Yeah. This is it.”

“Excellent! Follow me!” Marlow rushed into the clearing. The students exchanged worried glances and dutifully followed Marlow.

Lonnie stayed, bent over the bones. The deer hadn’t been there during his last visit to the clearing, and there weren’t any animals in his woods that would reduce a carcass to picked-clean bones without scattering it. Wolves and coyotes would fight and fuss over a carcass. Mountain lions usually dragged the carcass--or parts of it--away to snack on later. But the bones were all there: the deer had been devoured on the spot. He thought back to Jake’s reaction on their last visit to the meadow and wondered if whatever had killed the deer had spooked Jake that day. In spite of the heat, his arms broke into goose bumps. He glanced up uneasily. The university crew was already unpacking their gear by the hole. He glanced back at the carcass one last time and then joined them.

While three of the students took samples of everything they could get their hands on, the other student stood at the edge of the hole next to Marlow. Three fire extinguishers sat in a neat row by their feet.

“Do you want me to hit it a few times, just in case?” The student gestured at the extinguishers.

Marlow considered a moment, and then shook his head. “No, I think it’ll be all right. But let’s get some pictures first.”

Lonnie peered into the hole. He saw dirt and burned leaves--nothing worth taking pictures of. The student squatted and snapped pictures, and Lonnie followed the angle of the camera and finally saw it: a rough, dark gray bowling ball half buried in the end wall of the trench.

“I’ll be damned.” Lonnie whistled. “I’ve never seen a real meteor before.”

“Meteorite,” Marlow chuckled. “Once they hit the ground, they’re called meteorites.”

Lonnie bristled at the pompous tone in Marlow’s voice. “Well, whatever you call it, it burned up one of my best deer hunting spots.”

Marlow opened his mouth to say something, but the female student interrupted. “We’re ready.” Her cheeks were flushed with excitement. “Samples are all collected.”

Dr. Marlow nodded. “All right. Start digging it out.”

The three sample-collectors jumped into the hole and swept the meteorite with tiny brushes. The other student picked up his camera and began snapping pictures again. Even with three of them working on it, it took half an hour to dig it out.

Lonnie glanced around nervously every few minutes. Once, when he was a boy, he’d been stalked by a mountain lion while collecting firewood for his pop’s old wood stove. That feeling of being watched--being watched by *something hungry*--was exactly what he was feeling now.

Finally, they had the meteorite cleared. It was a tiny version of the moon, complete with craters.

“Okay, now what?” the picture-taking student asked, his voice trembling.

“This is your baby, Mike. Go ahead and crate it.” Marlow said.

Mike grabbed fire-proof gloves and jumped into the hole. Very carefully, almost theatrically, he lifted the meteorite. Red sand poured from the bottom. Mike yelped and quickly lowered the meteorite back into the hole.

“What do I do?” Mike wailed.

“Just let it run out,” Marlow said, calmly.

“What the hell is that?” Lonnie asked.

Marlow shrugged. “Some type of mineral. It’s not uncommon for meteorites to have layers, like a hailstone. The inside mineral must be softer than the shell, and it scrambled on impact. We’ll collect as much as we can for further examination.”

“Okay. I think it’s done,” Mike said.

“Bring it up,” Marlow said.

Mike lifted the meteorite and placed it gently in a crate at the edge of the trench. While he shook red dust from his shirt, one of the other students used a trowel to shovel the sand into a specimen bag. Mike and Marlow put a lid on the crate and fastened it into place.

Mike stood and tried to shake more red dust from his shirt. “Geez. I think this shirt is ruined.”

“All for a good cause,” Marlow said.

Lonnie shifted his weight from one foot to the other, glad the operation was finally wrapping up. He glanced into the woods and saw a metallic flash high up in the trees. There was another flash, and then another, like mirrors swinging in the wind. The knitting needle noise was back.

“What the hell--?” Lonnie began. The air filled with a shimmering, clicking rain of silver dollars. And the silver dollars seemed to have one goal in mind: Mike. In seconds, he was completely engulfed in a cloud of shivering silver coins. Before the rest of them could react, the silver cloud around Mike broke up. What was left of Mike-- red-smearred bone--laid in a crumpled heap next to the trench.

The female student clutched at Lonnie, her fingers digging into his arms. “They ate him standing up!” she screamed.

The air around them filled with silver again. Lonnie swatted at the air. The knitting needle noise roared in his ears. One of the things--a beetle--landed on his arm, and he went cross-eyed with pain. It plunged its mandibles into his arm again and again. He slapped it away and was nearly knocked down as Marlow pushed past him, his entire body shimmering with an undulating wave of silver.

Marlow made it three more steps and tripped over one of the extinguishers. The nozzle broke off with a clang and a hiss, and he was enveloped in a dusty white cloud. A sudden high-pitched shriek seemed to come from every direction at once, and the knitting needle noise rose to a frenzy.

And then silence. The beetles were gone. A fire extinguisher lay tangled in Marlow’s feet. The spent extinguisher chemical was streaked with red dust. Just like in the meteorite.

Lonnie gaped at the carnage. Most of the flesh was gone from Marlow’s upper body. He was a meat sack wearing a pair of khakis. Two of the students lay nearby, not reduced to bone but chewed well enough Lonnie couldn’t tell which was which. And all that was left of Mike was bones. There was no sign of the fourth student. Lonnie could only hope he (or she--the bodies were too chewed to tell if the female student was one of the dead ones) had run into the woods and made it safely away.

Two beetles crawled from beneath Marlow’s legs and moved sluggishly toward Lonnie. They were no longer silver, but red. Smoke rose from the back of the nearest beetle, where a drop of white extinguisher chemical shimmered in the sunlight. Impulsively, Lonnie grabbed one of the other extinguishers and pulled the pin. He shot a quick spray at the closest beetle. It shrieked and puffed into red dust. Lonnie shot the second beetle twice. When the cloud of white smoke cleared, there was only a pile of red dust left. He studied the extinguisher. It was cold in his hands, the sides condensed with fine, white frost. They must not be able to stand the cold, he thought, and broke into a grin. But then the knitting needle noise started again.

Lonnie shook the extinguisher. Almost full. He grabbed the other one, too, and hoped they held enough to get him back to his house. He set off at a loping run, keeping a watchful eye out for flashes of movement.

He made it out of the woods and started down the hill toward his house. A shadow passed over him and he crouched, extinguishers ready, expecting beetles to rain down on him. But it was only a buzzard. Back up the hill, two more buzzards circled above the meadow. He shook

his head. Circling what? There wasn't a whole lot left up there for them. As he turned away, a metal wave rose out of the trees, split into three shimmering silver clouds, and met the buzzards. Seconds later, the clouds broke up and something--bones?--plummeted to the ground in the distance. The three clouds regrouped into one giant silver cloud, and Lonnie began to run.

As he neared the yard, he could hear Jake barking wildly. The dog yanked against his chain, nearly hanging himself, trying to break free and run to the house. Lonnie cast a glance over his shoulder--he still had a good head start on the beetles. He dropped the fire extinguishers and slid in next to Jake. He tried to work the clip, but Jake wouldn't let the chain go slack.

"Damn it, Jake, hold still." But the dog was frantic. Every time he almost had the clip loose, Jake would jump and the clip would slide out of Lonnie's sweaty grasp. A beetle landed on Lonnie's shoulder and the bolt of pain caused him to drop the clip. At the same time, a silver beetle buzzed past his nose and landed on Jake's rump. The dog screamed, a blood-curdling noise that turned Lonnie's stomach. He remembered the female student's words: *they ate him standing up*. He grimaced and slapped the beetle off Jake, then yanked the beetle from his own back and flung it away. The pain stunned Jake, and he stopped struggling. Lonnie was finally able to free the clip. He sprang to his feet and ducked as three more beetles dive-bombed his head. The main swarm was almost to them. "Come on!" Lonnie yelled, and grabbed the closest fire extinguisher. Lonnie's voice snapped Jake out of his daze and they ran for the house.

Fifty feet from the house, the knitting needle noise increased. The beetles were gaining on them. He pumped his legs as fast as he could, not daring to look back. Jake rushed past him, reached the door first, and flung himself against it. Lonnie reached the door just ahead of the beetles. They rushed through the door and slammed it behind them. Jake kept running and disappeared into the bedroom.

Lonnie peered through the window in the door. The swarm of beetles circled in the yard. Several had broken from the swarm and were crawling over the end of Jake's leash. Not knowing what else to do, he grabbed the phone and punched 9-1-1.

A nasal voice answered. "What is the nature of your emergency?"

"You've gotta get someone out here right away. They're all dead." Lonnie watched the swarm of beetles outside circle lazily, like pigeons looking for a roost.

"Sir, slow down. Who's dead?"

"The college kids and their professor. The beetles got them."

There was a pause. "Beetles?"

"The beetles from outer space. They must have been in the meteor."

Another pause. "Sir, making a false 9-1-1 call is a serious offense. You--"

"This ain't no prank! They were out here about the meteor and the space beetles killed them."

"If you don't hang up right now, I'm sending the police."

"And the fire department--and all that cold fire stuff they can get their hands on!"

The line went dead. At first, he thought beetles had chewed through the lines, but then the dial tone clicked in. She had hung up on him.

He replaced the phone in its cradle and looked out the window again. More beetles had broken away from the main swarm. Fifty or so were crawling on his porch. He grabbed the extinguisher, gritted his teeth, and pushed the door open just enough to stick the nozzle out. He opened up on the beetles.

When the stream failed, he yanked the nozzle back inside and slammed the door. As the cloud cleared, he was delighted to see he'd reduced the group on the porch by half. There was a thick drift of red dust piled on the porch. He ran to the stove and grabbed his own extinguisher. He pulled the pin and gave it a test squeeze, but only air hissed out. He checked the expiration date: it expired five years ago.

Motion at the kitchen window caught his eye. A beetle strolled across the sun-streaked glass, leaving a trail of brown specks behind it. It paused, rubbed one leg across its mouth parts, and flew off. But something other than heat waves still moved on the window. Lonnie leaned closer, a sinking feeling in his stomach. Each one of the brown specks was squirming. He watched as a tiny silver fleck pushed its way out of one of the specks.

"Oh, hell no!" he shouted, and backpedaled so fast he nearly tripped over his own feet.

He caught sight of the shed through the kitchen window. There were two more extinguishers in the shed, if he could get to them. But they might be just as dead as the one in the kitchen. There was also one out in the yard, where Jake had been tied, though he wasn't sure how much was left in it.

Jake whined and peeked around the bedroom door.

"I know, boy. I gotta do something." Lonnie ran his hands through his hair.

Jake disappeared into the bedroom again. His soft whimpers lilting from the bedroom sounded like someone sobbing into their pillow. Lonnie held his breath. He realized he could hear Jake's whimpers because the knitting needle noise was gone. He rushed to the door and peered out. The beetles on the porch were gone. He steeled himself and threw the door open. The swarm, now an indistinct gray cloud in the distance, soared in the direction of town.

Now what, he thought. Who could he call? The police? They wouldn't believe him. The fire department? The television station?

In the silence, he heard the television in the other room:

"... The hottest year on record! Some are blaming global warming and predicting it will only get worse. Get used to the heat, folks."

Another sound started in the fireplace, barely audible over the television: the clicking of hundreds of teeny, tiny knitting needles.

END

Goodnight, Sunlight

by

Lauren McBride

It was a bright
and sunny day
once black of night
went on its way,
taking moonlight
far away,
leaving sunlight
alone all day -
a warming site
happy to stay
merry and bright,
but yielding to gray
when black of night
overshadowed day,
calling to moonlight,
“Our turn to play.”

Love, True Love

by

Lisa Clark

It was a bright and sunny day. A collection of trilling birds at the feeder outside the Hanson's kitchen window lifted the corners of Betty's mouth even before the phone rang. After she jostled the sixties model black handset back into its cradle, she chirped, "Tim's coming to visit!" She repeated the announcement twice as she shuffled through the kitchen door, her voice losing a little excitement with each repetition.

Betty's once-blue scuffs swished on the tile floor until they met the matted brown nap of the living room carpet. Eighty-nine year-old Roger's head turned her way before his eyes did. His fine white hair shot out to create a halo that swayed when he moved. The television, only four feet away from Roger's chair, blared the assets of a revolutionary new exercise machine. The fit and firm young bodies of the hawkers as they tried to sell their wares riveted him.

"Oh Roger, turn that blasted TV down! I can't hear myself think!" Betty yelled. His ears, larger now than in his youth, sprouted a forest of white hairs. Though the otologist had assured her that the bushiness of Roger's ears didn't affect his hearing significantly, Betty remained unconvinced. Her own ears, two years younger than his, had not deteriorated to the same extent. The pair engaged in a daily battle over the volume control.

"Put your hearing aid in!" Betty would shout. "We didn't spend good money for you to decorate your night table with it."

"I don't like it, Bet!" he'd snap back. "I pick up noises I'm not supposed to hear. The thing's a nuisance!"

Dressed in the pink satin bathrobe she wore instead of a blouse, Betty would sigh and shamle off to another room in search of silence. "I'm the one should've lost my hearing," she'd mumble. "Then at least I could have some peace in this place!"

Today, Betty needed to roust Roger from the La-Z-Boy, his favorite and nearly constant perch. The arms, seat, and footrest of the ancient chair were threadbare. Its faint unwashed body odor preserved it as the sole property of its present occupant.

Though it had been many years since anyone urged Betty to slow down, Roger was still several speeds behind her. Retrieving the television remote, which had fallen between Roger's chair and the end table, took five minutes and their combined effort. They wasted another minute in a grabbing match to win possession of it. Betty, the ultimate victor, aimed the remote and turned off the noisy infomercial.

"Why'd ya do that?" Roger barked. "I was watching, ya know."

"Yes, I know." Then, in a voice a trifle too quiet for Roger to hear, she added, "Just like you do sixteen hours a day, every day."

"What'd ya say?" he bellowed.

“I said Tim’s coming to visit.” This time, she belted out her response a few levels below a shout.

“Heeeey,” Roger said. His mouth turned into a smile. “That’s great news. What time’s he coming round?”

“He said he’d be here at two o’clock.”

“Good, good. Now give me that remote.”

“No! We’ve got to get ready for Tim.”

“What’s to get ready?”

She stuck her hand out to pull him from the chair. It took considerable effort to extract Roger and plant him upright. When they married over sixty years earlier, he’d stood a full five inches taller than her. Though Betty had shrunk as well, milk and hormone therapy had prevented profound bone loss. They now stood eye-to-eye.

“Come on,” she instructed, “we have to get to the grocery store.”

Roger sighed and let his head drop. “You went last week, Bet! We’ve got enough food around the house.”

“No, no,” she answered in exasperation. “I don’t have to go for regular shopping. I want to make that chocolate cake Tim loves. The one with cherries inside and piled up with mounds of whip cream.”

“Oh yeah. That one.” Roger’s eyes brightened. “We haven’t had that for a *long* time. Why’d we have to wait for a visit from Tim for you to make it?”

“Because,” she said, jabbing the bulge that sagged over his belt, “you don’t need to be eating that kind of stuff.”

Roger’s face crunched. “Fine,” he said. “Let’s go. But put on some clothes, wouldya? I’m not going out with a woman in her bathrobe!”

Fifteen minutes later, Roger bellowed as he once again fixed his eyes on the TV, “Ain’t you ready yet?”

“Yes, I am,” Betty said from an arm’s length away, dressed and ready to depart in a blue floral housedress she’d bought twenty-two years earlier. She’d succeeded in pulling back her crown of gentle curls into a bun, taming stray strands with bobby pins and a generous application of hair spray. “You old coot.”

Roger jerked backwards. “Sneaking up on me now, huh? What are you trying to do, old lady? Give me a heart attack?”

After several more verbal parries and a slow walk to the garage, they settled into their black 1998 Ford Falcon. Roger pursed his lips. “You put me in a bad mood, Bet. And I don’t want to be in a bad mood when my firstborn great-grandson comes for a visit.”

Betty sighed. “I’m sorry, Pap. I’m excited, too. I’m just worried I won’t get that cake made in time.”

“Okay, okay, I’m going.”

Their regular grocery store wasn't far away. Roger usually drove the route with the speedometer hovering between twenty and twenty-five miles per hour. Lines of five, six, or seven cars behind him did nothing to alter his speed. Today, though, urgency forced his foot to press the gas a little more aggressively.

As usual, Betty was Roger's extra set of eyes, alerting him to pedestrians, lights, and other vehicles. When they reached the first traffic light, though, Betty's gaze was on her husband instead of the road. She grabbed his arm and, with a grin, said, "Oh, it's going to be so good to see Tim, isn't it?" A gentle smile remained on her face as her mind wandered to memories of Tim.

"What's wrong with this blasted car?" Roger grumped several minutes later.

"What do you mean, 'What's wrong?' Everything seems fine to me."

"That's because you don't drive. You have no idea how the car's supposed to feel."

Betty's chin lifted as she sniffed out a quick breath. "Now don't you start in on me about not driving. As though you have anything better to do than drive me around."

An impatient expression dashed across Roger's face. "Old woman—"

"And don't call me old. You're older than I am, old man. Besides, I think I should know how a car's supposed to feel when I'm riding in it. I've been doing it for enough years."

"Yeah. You're old. Just like I said."

By the time they reached the parking lot, the flat tires made parking even more difficult than usual for Roger.

They managed to scooch their bodies to the edge of their seats before stepping tentatively onto the pavement. Betty shoved her door shut then turned to the back of the car, clutching her ancient patent leather purse to her stomach as though it provided invisible support.

"Ha! I knew it!" Roger crowed several seconds later.

"What? What'd ya know?"

"We got a flat."

Betty shuffled to Roger's side.

"No. We got two flats," she said, pointing to the rear tire.

"Musta driven over glass or something," Roger mused.

Betty felt suddenly queasy, remembering a crunching sound as they drove through the first large intersection. She was the one who was supposed to notice those kinds of hazards. At least Roger wasn't blaming her.

Instead, he sighed and turned to look at her with a sick, confused gaze.

Blank eyes stared back at him for a long moment until Betty emitted a sudden, "Aha!" A light from behind her eyes animated her. "We'll call AAA! Remember, Sam and Lydia gave us a membership for Christmas."

Roger's face screwed up and he shook his head impatiently. "I know all about that. What d'ya think? I'm stupid?"

“Well, *fine*, Mr. Know-it-all. Then what are you standing there for?”

“How’m I s’posed to get them here? That’s what I’m standing here for. Or are you going to lift your hem to entice some handsome young man to come over with one of them cell phones and call Triple A for us?”

With her forefinger, Betty tapped her temple. “We go inside the store. If they don’t have a pay phone, we’ll just ask at the desk. We’re regular customers. They’ll take care of us.”

“Hmph,” Roger squinched his face to the side. “All right, then.”

Betty left Roger to deal with Triple A while she hunted down the ingredients for her *pièce de résistance*.

“I know my wallet’s in here somewhere,” she mumbled a few minutes later, rummaging through her purse at the cash register.

“Come on, lady,” Betty heard a customer behind her complain. Frantic, she dug around more quickly, her tear-filled eyes seeing none of the contents her fingers swiped through.

“Ma’am,” the teenage cashier said, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to step aside. I need to cancel your order unless—”

“No!” Betty answered more loudly than she intended. “I need these things. My great-grandson is coming to visit. I’m not leaving without them.”

“But—”

This time, Roger, who seemed to appear from nowhere, interrupted. “What’s wrong?” His question was aimed at anyone who’d answer.

“I can’t find my wallet,” Betty said, her voice quavering.

“Never fear!” Roger said with a smile, reaching into his back pocket to pull out his wallet. “I’m ready to rescue you, fair maiden.” The cashier and three customers in line laughed lightly while Betty, smiling, fingered tears from her eyes.

Finally, they scuffled out of the store with Betty’s arm looped around Roger’s at the elbow, each carrying a grocery bag. When they reached the sidewalk outside the door, Roger veered right while Betty slewed left, pulling their arms apart.

“Where you going?” they both asked.

“The car’s over there.” Betty pointed, swinging her bag in the general direction.

“No, it’s not. I just came from the car.” This time he was the one to poke at his temple. “Remember?”

“I don’t care if you did just come from there. You forgot where you were. Just like the umpteen other times you forgot.”

At last, almost convinced that Betty knew what she was talking about, Roger agreed to let her lead.

Only the car wasn’t where she thought.

It wasn’t where Roger thought, either. The couple wandered around the parking lot for the next twenty minutes before finally locating the car: the red mini-van they had parked next to had left.

Without a word, Roger unlocked Betty's door, then pulled it open for her. In the time it took him to circle the car, she managed to slide over, reach his door, and unlock it—a habit that had begun on their first date and continued for nearly seventy years.

After they were back on the road, Betty turned to her husband. "Roger?"

"Yeah?"

"I think maybe we got those flats because of me. I wasn't watching the road careful enough."

Although she was looking at her clasped hands in her lap, she managed to catch the turn of Roger's head. He patted her leg. "That's okay, Bet. We need a little adventure in our lives now and then."

Pushing against him lightly with her shoulder, she smiled.



At home, Betty rattled and buzzed in the kitchen; her signature cake was a demanding culinary venture. The cherries, two kinds of cream, rich chocolate cake, and thick chocolate shavings had to be prepared to exact specifications before Betty was content to build the towering six-tiered sensation. She secured the layers with long skewers.

After nearly two hours, Betty entered the living room, rubbing wet hands on her apron. "You're going to turn that infernal noise off when Tim's here, aren't you?" she said close to Roger's ear.

"Oh, Bet, you know I will. You go and doll yourself up. He'll be here any minute now."

"Put your hearing aid in!" she yelled as she bustled from the room.

Just after two, Tim pulled into the driveway of the blue ranch house.

Roger and Betty were waiting at the door. When Tim entered the living room, Betty threw up her hands then clasped them on her own cheeks, bunched up in a beaming smile.

"Hi, Grandmam," Tim said, bending his six-foot-two frame low to hug her and peck her cheek. Betty glowed.

"Good to see you, boy," Roger said as he grasped Tim's arm. He felt up and down, then around the bicep. "Hey, it feels like someone's been working out." Turning to Betty, he said, "Feel Tim's muscle. Samson, that's who he is."

"He's a university athlete," Betty fussed, "of course he's strong. Come in, Tim, come in. Have a seat on the davenport. I have a surprise for you." She fluttered from the room, leaving Roger and Tim to chat.

Several moments later, her grand entrance silenced the men. Mincing her steps, she carried her magnificent creation, enrobed in rich, liquor-laced whipped cream and garnished with maraschino cherries, to the coffee table.

"Oh, Grandmam, you shouldn't have."

The words brought a glow to Betty's face.

When she reached the center of the room, the chocolate-y layers began a slow but steady slide. This was the dessert's single flaw, and exceedingly difficult to avert. A crack formed on one side as each layer unstuck itself from the one below. Betty tried to compensate by jerking the cake in the opposite direction. The tactic retarded the slippage. If only the toe of her pump hadn't caught on a large wrinkle in the carpet.

She bolted forward. Cherries, whipped cream, chocolate filling, and dark cake landed on Tim's lap. When it finally settled, the concoction was mashed and mushed on his jeans, his shoes, and the couch and floor between his legs. Betty herself nearly fell on top of Tim, avoiding the catastrophe only because her shins slammed into the coffee table.

She crumpled on the floor in a heap and began to bawl. Tim and Roger spent the next forty-five minutes alternately comforting Betty and cleaning up the mess. "The carpet," Betty lamented, "will never be the same again." She gingerly examined her shins, where pink lumps marked their point of collision with the low table.

"Don't worry. I can't eat that kind of stuff anyway," Tim said. "I have to keep my weight down for my next wrestling match."

Betty's eyes instantly reshaped, preparing to weep.

Apparently realizing his faux pas, Tim dropped his chin to his chest, closed his eyes, and slowly shook his head.

They sat in glum silence for several minutes. Along with Betty, Roger and Tim seemed to be scouring their brains for words that might somehow reverse the mood.

After a long silence, Roger blurted out, "So Tim, would you like to watch something on TV?"

"Roger! You promised!" Betty protested.

"No, I didn't," he muttered. "You just wanted me to."

Tim's glance settled on one, then the other of them. "I can't really stay that long."

Betty whimpered.

"No, no. *This time. Today.* What I mean is that I'm going to have to come around more often."

Betty fixed questioning eyes on this boy she loved, trying to understand what he was getting at. Roger's face mirrored hers.

"You see, I'm taking this Cultural Dynamics course."

Their stares were blank.

"Right now, we're learning about how our culture has changed over the past hundred years. I have to write a paper on it."

Comprehension seemed to be settling in.

"And I was thinking the best way to research it would be to interview you two. You've seen incredible changes over the course of your lifetime."

Roger and Betty were nodding now. Small smiles erased their confusion.

“Oh, we can tell you things,” Roger said.

“A lot. You wouldn’t believe the things we’ve seen,” Betty added.

Tim laughed. His great-grandparents joined in. “You two are like gems. I’m looking forward to this.”

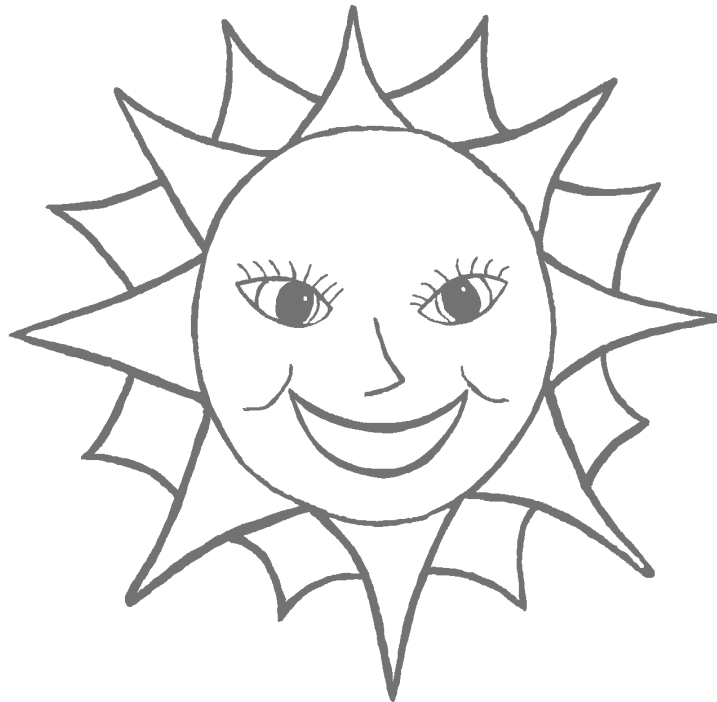
Roger reached for Betty’s hand and held it tight. “Yeah. We are, too, Tim.”

After Tim left, Betty felt Roger slide up behind her, setting his hands on her shoulders as she stood at the sink. “You’re a gem, you know, old woman.”

She turned so that she could look at him, reaching her hands to his shoulders as his dropped to her waist. “The same thing could be said of you, you know.”

Roger nodded. “And don’t you forget it.”

END



It was a bright...

by

Darrell Lindsey

It was a bright and sunny day,
and gulls floated in silence
as if they would be content
to meditate with us
for a thousand years,
or until all sorrow
sank into the sea.
In that suspended state of being
we began to sense
that even dusk
would never again
appear on our horizon
in quite the way
it always had.

Kilko

by

Michael McGlade

It was a bright and sunny day. 8:43 am. Bright and sunny and normal save for one important detail: a magnetic fissure on the sun's surface sent a solar flare to earth which, after eight minutes, caused an unparalleled destructive event. I, same as everyone else on the planet, was unaware of this grave issue at the time, because even the latest scientific methods of detection provided no warning until it was too late.

My name is Professor Jeffery Monroe, and I lectured at the world's greatest seat of learning, Cambridge University, teaching The Art of Thatcherism in all her preternatural glory and with enough zeal, vigor, and pomp to do justice to the Iron Lady of British politics. Thatcherism, of course, was a mandatory subject for all students in every university on earth. We professors of the Thatcherism Guild had a choice between wearing full-length black robes or suit jackets with eighties-style padded shoulder pads, and a brown wig modeled on Baroness Thatcher's hair.

As Maggie said, *Nobody gets into the business of politics to make friends*. My job was to mould the greatest of the developing minds of our times in the subtleties of Thatcher's teachings so that the New World Order (NWO) of peace and prosperity flourished in this new millennium. Politics finally worked for the greater good; it became the first world religion, and everyone worshiped at the altar of the Iron Lady's timeless brilliance.

Thatcher quote #1

"If you set out to be liked, you would be prepared to compromise on anything at any time, and you would achieve nothing."

Thatcherism changed the world. The general consensus is that the Baroness was largely ignored and derided by the rest of the free world in her lifetime, but due in part to the catastrophic Phase Wars, scholars scoured history for a fresh dogma fronted by a suitable figurehead capable of ushering the world into a rehabilitated and more stable era. Enter the British bulldog: powerful, statuesque, lipstick and teeth.

Fat citizens were banned. Thatcherism outlawed the overweight because it was a drain on the National Health Service (NHS.) Back in the twentieth century, everyone received free medical treatment under the NHS, which under Thatcherism then became the World Health Service, available to everyone who contributed to the betterment of society. I was aged sixty-three with a body mass fat index of fourteen per cent, due in no part to a brief spell in the work camps during my teens which kept me on the straight and narrow.

I was the perfect example of a dedicated professional. Each day, I undertook my NWO-approved regimen: I debated a current topic with a fellow facility member for campus broadcast at five am; I ran six miles to work, same as everyone else; and then taught lessons for sixteen

hours. In my spare time, I worked on my latest novel: *Thatcherism - Politics is the New Rock 'N Roll*.

Thatcherites outlawed many drugs which were once deemed suitable for mass consumption. Caffeine was illegal and so was tea. We drank a caffeine-free tea-substitute, which was scientifically engineered to promote health and well-being. Can't say I enjoyed the taste much. However, the drug-awareness infomercials contained graphic documentary evidence of brain aneurisms, apoplexy, and asphyxiation occurring in the average caffeine addict by age twenty and the average non-caffeine-free-tea-substitute drinker by age twenty-five. Everyone drank Kilko Tea: "*Drink it down down down, so delicious and brown, Kilko caffeine-free tea-substitute for you.*" – especially with a catchy jingle like that.

Kilko outsold the next best-selling beverage, I Can't Believe It's Not Cola, by a ratio of one hundred to one, with a superb advertising campaign with such memorable lines as: *Taste the difference, suckers; You're lovin' it or else you're lovin' it wrong!; Take a walk on the Kilko side of life; and Happiness is a cup of Kilko.*

At 8:43am, I added a double gram lozenge into the drink-matic 3000 and in fifteen seconds received my super-heated liquid suspension.

Just as MT said, *You want an omelet, then break some eggs*. Interestingly, Thatcherism solved the world food shortages by synthesizing food under laboratory conditions: egg-substitute, bread-substitute, we ate only the finest substitute-foods; flus and colds were irradiated; people lived longer. There were still a few cafés where a citizen could place a side order of retro food additives with their Kilko, but most people avoided them because of the harm artificial additives caused to the central nervous system.

Thatcher quote #2

"Being powerful is like being a lady. If you have to tell people you are, you aren't."

8:50am and a news bulletin cut into the usual classical music program, something along the lines of:

"Remain vigilant... best to stay indoors... powerful solar flare... magnetic field... creating strange phenomena..."

... but I never paid attention to the news bulletins, because they were more often than not exaggerated and sensationalized.

I often found myself imagining how wonderful it must have been to be alive in the twentieth century, to be free back then in that lawless and wild period of history. The Iron Lady ruled a lot differently to what we are accustomed today; it was a time when government-owned and run businesses, such as railways and schools, were sold off because they were underperforming. When the government needed to demonstrate a failure as a success, they simply changed the way statistics were gathered, so the statistics proved their point, such as in these newspaper clippings: *Unemployment At Lowest Level Since Records Began; Economy Grew By Whopping 12% This Year Alone; Exam Results Reveal High School Students Smartest Ever.*

Thatcher quote #3

“A world without nuclear weapons would be less stable and more dangerous for us all.”

Had Mrs T’s advice been followed before the catastrophic Phase Wars of 2022, which wiped out most of the peace-loving unarmed nations of the world, then the present might have been quite different indeed. Thankfully, now it’s against the law for a country to have an economy based on anything other than weapons technologies. The Phase Wars lasted fifteen seconds, all the time it took to vaporize a continent. I went to see the impact craters on a safari vacation to North America. The radiation level is still so intense a special protective suit must be worn, which is bloody awful considering how hot and stuffy they are.

8:51am and the faculty stirred, time for our daily performances. I finished my Kilko, which tasted of molasses and burned nuts with a hint of freshly mown grass. The mecha-bees circled the faculty pot plants searching for nectar. I caught one with a straight Martian judo chop, which caused Professor Colt JFK Eastwood to smile wanly and his cohort Professor Jackie O’ MLK-Patton from the Americana Department to pine for lost glories, no doubt. The Americana Department sheltered a morose bunch, and rightly too, considering it was the weakest subject on the syllabus. It should most likely have been called: *A Brief History Of Failed Hopes, Aspirations And Ambitions In The Twentieth Century – Death Of The American Dream*. However, I found it best not to gloat about such things, even if I often enjoyed rubbing history in their wrinkleless, over-nourished, anti-aging-cream-pampered faces. There were much more worthwhile endeavors than wearing Levis jeans and collecting baseball cards while constructing Platonisms of bubblegum and cheap gasoline and the advertising jingle. Thatcherism was in the ascendancy, and there was nothing anyone could do about that.

Thatcher quote #4

“I always cheer up immensely if an attack is particularly wounding because I think, well, if they attack one personally, it means they have not a single political argument left.”

My breath rasped, caught in my throat, and my limbs spasmed, moving in directions against their normal paths. I thought of apoplexy, of caffeine, of aneurism. Then I watched the others do the same as I.

Thatcher quote #5

“You do not tell deliberate lies, but sometimes you have to be evasive.”

White flakes as if of marble floated through the sky, swirling in eddies and billowing. The sun became a violent purple rose which sank into a radiating, scorching darkness. Invisible rays struck my body, invisible stinging cuts and blinding white-hot heat.

Thatcher quote #6

“You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it.”

And then, I died. Not much of an end, you say. But then again, almost everyone died. The magnetic radiation of the solar flare interacted with the human nervous system overloading it, shorting it out like a burned fuse. People dropped dead. Electronic devices stopped working. Those few individuals that survived rebuilt the human race.

Thatcher quote #7

“Disciplining yourself to do what you know is right is the highroad to pride, self-esteem, and personal satisfaction.”

History is something which one can never outrun, never escape, and never forget, unless you wish to be doomed to repeat past mistakes. This was the story of the last moments of my life, the sum worth of my culture, and yours, too.

Thatcher quote #8

“Truth usually is the same old story.”

VOCAL SEQUENCE ENDED

Those words flashed up on the 3D display.

“This was a firsthand dramatization of historical events brought to you by the Smithsonian Museum. Set in the year 2086 during the Solar-Kilko Event, which accounted for the loss of 3.24 billion lives in a one minute period.”

A man in a long black robe, with horn-rimmed glasses resting on the tip of his thin, pointed nose, of a gray, bookish pallor, and wearing a female wig appeared onscreen. He smiled, beckoning the group of school children closer.

“Listen to my firsthand account of history and learn from the past. It was a bright and sunny day. 8:43 am. Bright and sunny and normal save for one important detail: a magnetic fissure on the sun’s surface...”

END

Fashion of Denial

by

Michelle Mead

It was a bright and sunny day
But they never told her that
So she wore a pink fur coat
And a flowered crochet hat

She stuffed her closets full
Of gowns of lace in black
And velvets thick and blue
With small buttons on the back

And she was so very sure
That winter was all the rage
That she stole her doctor's news
To tear out the fashion page

But all that she found there
Was swimsuits and the like
People basking in the sun
And two lovers on one bike

No, no one ever told her
It was a bright and sunny day
So she kept all her plush parkas
Not caring what they'd say

Down From a Duck

by

Jennifer Schwabach

It was a bright and sunny day. High Chancellor Vorta didn't care. She stared morosely at the pasture that had once contained His Majesty's top breeding stock. The Stablemaster, Jonas, stood beside her, wringing his hands.

"So where are the horses?" Vorta wasn't much of a rider. Horses, in her opinion, existed to get one from Point A to Point B. A necessity, but not a pleasant one. She traveled by coach whenever possible, so she could minimize her contact with the huge, smelly, and frankly, dangerous beasts.

"I don't know!" Jonas wailed.

"They were stolen," Vorta said.

"No, ma'am." Jonas' assistant, Levis, walked around the corner of the paddock, having just completed his circuit of the enclosure. "The fences are intact, and there's no sign of a hoof print anywhere on this side. I even looked to see if they'd all somehow managed to jump both fences. Nothing."

Staring at the pasture again, Vorta asked, "And the ducks?"

Some two dozen ducks were pecking at the ground, eating whatever it was ducks ate.

Levis shrugged. "They landed here from some nearby pond?"

Vorta nodded. That was a nice, sensible, logical explanation. It kept her from wondering why the ducks numbered the same as the King's breeding mares, and whether ducks usually wandered around pastures eating grass.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a scream from the direction of the dairy. Vorta and Levis turned as one and ran towards the sound. After a moment, Jonas shook himself and followed.

They arrived at the entrance to the dairy barn to find the Dairy Mistress, Dolma, standing in the doorway, staring into the barn in horror. Even as she shouldered past her, Vorta had a feeling she knew what she'd see. Sure enough, in every stall, instead of a cow awaiting the attentions of a dairy maid, there was a duck.

Levis had an arm around Dolma and was speaking to her quietly, asking questions.

Tearing her eyes away from the duck-cows at last, Vorta asked, "When did you leave the barn?"

"Two hours after sunset," Dolma said.

"And I suppose everything was normal then?"

Dolma nodded, blotting her tears with Levis' handkerchief. "Just like always. The evening milking was done, the cows had their hay and were bedding down..." She sobbed. "It was just like always."

Vorta nodded. The Stablemaster had gone to bed an hour later than Dolma. Whatever had happened had happened somewhere between three hours after sunset and dawn.

"Well, check on your cheeses, or whatever other duties you have today. We'll get your bessies back." Vorta patted her shoulder awkwardly. "There, there. Don't cry. We know it wasn't your..." She was interrupted by a cry from the other end of the barns.

All of them ran, including Dolma, but Jonas veered off toward another barn. They reached the draft barn at the same time as half a dozen other people who were already stirring.

Faris, the head plowman, stood in front of the draft barn, surrounded by his underlings. "Who did this?" Faris was demanding. "Which one of you jokers..." All five of the underlings were shaking their heads.

"They did nothing," Vorta said as she strode up.

"How do you know what they did, ma'am?" Faris asked.

"Let me guess," Vorta said. "Your oxen are gone. Instead, you have ducks."

"Yes, ma'am!" Faris blinked. "But how..."

"All the riding horses have been replaced by ducks," Levis said.

"And the milk cows," Dolma said.

"And the carriage horses," Jonas added grimly, having just returned from checking on that.

"And the chickens," a little girl added, holding up her egg basket. "Do you think Cook can use duck eggs?"

"I'm sure she can," Vorta said absently. Her mind was racing. Why would anyone do something like this? Horses and cows and oxen were useful. So were chickens, but ducks provided eggs, as well, and they could be eaten, as surely as chickens. They provided a higher quality of feathers, too. Why replace the chickens with ducks? An hour later, she asked that same question of the King's Privy Council.

"It's clearly an act of war," Battlemaster Cornis said.

"A joke," Mentis the Jester said.

"There is nothing in the library like it," Sage Velma said, shaking her head and sending her long white braid flipping about.

"Well," the King asked, "is it sorcery?" He directed this to the last member of the Council, the short, round woman whose presence the others had been trying to ignore.

Chalma the Magician frowned. Her duties tended more toward fireworks at the King's birthday and predicting the destinies of newborn infants. Though she was a full graduate of the Academy, she had never been called upon to practice serious sorcery. She nodded slowly. "It must be, mustn't it? There are no tracks leading from the pastures or the barns."

She murmured on, but Vorta missed most of it because she turned to receive a message from a page. Reading it, she stood. "I am sorry to interrupt, Magician, but runners have just returned from the high pastures. All the sheep have been replaced with ducks. So have the goats."

There was a moment's silence, then the King himself stood. "Magician Chalma, this is surely sorcery and therefore your province. I want you to examine every place that was hit. Vorta, you will assist her." When they stood, he said, "Stay."

"Cornis, send your knights out to the neighboring farms and villages. I want to know if it's the entire kingdom or just us. Leave a messenger in each village, in case it happens again." The knight nodded, bowed and left.

"Mentis, people talk to you. Go out and listen. Find out if anyone saw or heard anything." The Jester stood and gave a rude salute before backflipping out of the room.

"Velma, gather all your scholars. Send for others if you need to."

"I already checked the library, Sire."

"Check again. If it's not under 'ducks,' look under 'waterfowl.' Just find me something!"

"Yes, Sire." She rose, curtsied, and left, calling for her scholars.

Looking at Vorta and Chalma, the King said, "I don't need to tell you how serious this is. We can't plow the fields. Sir Cornis and his knights will have to travel on foot. We won't be able to make new blankets for the babies when they're born or coats for the children. We still have eggs and ducks. Things could be worse, but not much. I want you to get to the bottom of this."

"Yes, Sire," Chalma said.

"We'll do what we can," Vorta added.

The King dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

"Show me the stables," Chalma said as they left.

Vorta led her to the riding stables, where a very annoyed Cornis was just learning that he and his knights would have to walk. "You don't have anything?" he was demanding of Jonas. "Not even donkeys? I could ride a donkey cart. It wouldn't be too far beneath knightly dignity, not in a situation like this."

"No, Sir Cornis," Jonas said, wringing his hands again, "all the donkeys have..."

"Turned into ducks," Vorta finished smoothly for him. She was rather surprised at how quickly she was adapting to what was, after all, a very bizarre situation.

"Yes, Ma'am," Jonas said.

Cornis frowned, but obviously realized that yelling at Jonas, or giving him a thrashing, wasn't going to get him anywhere. "I guess my men will walk. They won't like it, though."

"Just tell them it's the fortunes of war," Vorta said.

Cornis stomped off. Jonas said, "Thank you, ma'am. Did the Magician want to see the stables?"

"And the pastures and the other barns," Chalma said.

For the next several hours, Vorta followed Chalma around, watching as she bent to examine specific patches of ground, muttered, wandered around, tossed pinches of some sort of colored

powder into the air, muttered some more, and occasionally picked up ducks to examine them. Staring one in the eyes, she said, "They are the same."

"Who?" Vorta asked.

"The ducks. The animals were indeed turned into ducks."

"Can you reverse it?"

"I would need to know exactly how it was done, and only the caster knows that."

"Maybe the Sage will have found something."

"I doubt it," Chalma said, putting down the duck she was holding. "I think that one was Firestorm." Firestorm was the King's favorite mare.

When they returned to the castle, they found that the first of the knights had returned.

The nearest village and several farms had been affected. Sage Velma was drawing a map. The duck plague seemed to spread out in a rough circle from the pasture where Firestorm resided.

"It's definitely a spell," Chalma said.

"Who would cast such a spell?" Velma asked.

"An enemy," Vorta said. She was as certain of that as Sir Cornis.

"There are only a handful of people who *could* cast it," Chalma said. "The nearest is a sorceress named Linma. That's where we should start."

"Who is Linma?" Vorta asked.

"A student who was expelled from the Academy in my first year. The official story was that she refused to take the Oath, but from what I heard, she was an excellent student in all other respects. The Masters had her pegged for an instructor some day, but something happened. There was some kind of trouble..." she sighed. "They said in the dormitories that the Masters wouldn't *let* Linma take the Oath. That she had done something forbidden."

"Is she more powerful than you?" asked the King.

"Probably, Sire. But finding her is our only chance."

"Take Vorta with you. And Sir Cornis."

"Cornis isn't back yet, Sire," Vorta said.

"This isn't the largest kingdom in the world. How long can it take him to ride to... oh, right. No horses. Can we commandeer some?" The King tapped the map about three miles south of the circle.

"We could, Sire," Vorta began, but was interrupted by a gasping page who rushed into the room.

"Sire!" the boy abandoned propriety. "We've just had a messenger from Boltly Farm! It happened there, too!"

Velma reached over with her pen and drew an irregular line, extending her rough circle to cover Boltly Farm.

"It's spreading," said Chalma.

"There's no time to waste," the King said. "If the planting doesn't get done soon, we'll all starve. The warehouses only hold enough to feed the castle and the village for three months. If we have to spread it even thinner, we won't last one month, let alone three."

"We'll leave at first light," Vorta said.

"You'll leave now," the King said. "We still have several hours of light left."

"Yes, Sire." Vorta bowed.

An hour later, she and Chalma were on the road, carrying small packs with little more than food and a blanket. "How far is it?" Vorta asked, hitching her sword, Sidewinder, higher against her shoulder.

"Not far," Chalma said. "Only two day's ride, if we had horses."

But they didn't. It might take a week, it might take longer.

They walked until sunset, then stopped at a farmhouse. All the animals had been replaced by ducks. They ate at the table with the family and slept on the floor in front of the fire. When they left, Vorta instructed them to send someone to the castle with the news.

The next several days were a repeat of the first. Everywhere they went, sheep, horses, cows, sometimes even dogs, had been replaced by ducks. Watching a duck bound across a yard to fetch a stick was too strange for Vorta, and she pulled Chalma to walk by that farm. They spent the night in the open. Finally, on the eighth night, they came to a farm where all the animals were as they should be. Vorta hoped it would stay that way. But they were nearing Linma's home. Surely she wouldn't deprive herself the way she did others?

But when they approached the large stone house that Linma was said to live in, they were still seeing ducks everywhere.

Stopping by the waist-high wall around the property, Vorta said, "What do you suggest?"

"Knock on the door," Chalma said.

It didn't sound like the way to approach an evil sorceress. Certainly not in any story Vorta had ever heard. But Chalma was the expert here. With a shrug, she pushed open the gate, holding it for Chalma before following her up the stone walkway. The house didn't look much like an evil sorceress' house, either. A riot of pink roses swarmed up the wall to the left of the door, covering one window and partially obscuring the one above it. Irises bloomed along the base of the wall. The door was painted a cheerful shade of blue.

Approaching cautiously, Vorta lifted the brass knocker. On her second knock, the door was opened by a tall woman in her mid-fifties.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Um." Vorta said articulately. She looked more like the late Queen than an evil sorceress. "I'm High Chancellor Vorta, and this is Royal Magician Chalma. Are you Linma?"

"I am. Come in," she said. She stepped aside to let them pass.

They entered a hallway with wide wooden boards on the floor. A staircase led up. And doors led off the hall to the left, the right and straight ahead. Everything was clean and neat.

"We're here about the ducks," Chalma said.

Linma nodded. "Upstairs." She waved for the others to precede her. At the top of the stairs, Vorta hesitated, and Linma said, "To the left."

Vorta stepped into a room that finally looked like it belonged to an evil sorceress. Various signs and sigils were sketched on the walls and floor. Vorta didn't recognize any of them, of course, but it was apparent that Chalma did. She glanced around the room and shivered.

In the center of the room was a table, covered with a map of the kingdom. And in the center of the map was a duck. It was so lifelike that at first Vorta thought it *was* alive, then she thought it was stuffed. It wasn't until she got closer that she realized it was simply a very cunningly carved and painted decoy. She'd seen them used in hunting often enough. She reached out to pick it up, but was stopped when the others both said, "No!"

"I've worked hard on this, and I won't let you spoil it!" Linma said.

"It's very dangerous to disturb a spell," Chalma said.

Vorta turned to look at Linma. "Why did you do it?" she asked.

"Have you ever tried to find a realistic carving of a rat?" Linma asked. "Duck decoys are much easier to come by."

"I meant why turn the animals into anything?" Vorta had the feeling that Linma had understood her the first time, but she thought it might be good policy to humor an evil sorceress when you were standing in her workroom.

"I should have been the greatest magician of my generation," Linma said. "I should be Royal Magician, not Chalma. Instead, I was rejected, cast out, ignored, forgotten. Well, everyone notices me now, don't they?"

"Yes," Vorta agreed. "Everyone can see you're a very powerful magician. A true force to be reckoned with. Now, can you turn it back?" She tried not to look at Chalma, who was edging away from the wall, toward the table, which Vorta now had her back to.

"Why should I?" Linma asked. "What has the King ever done for me?"

"It's the right thing to do," Vorta said. "You'd have the King's eternal gratitude."

"Why would I want that?" Linma said. "I want the power and place that was stolen from me. Until I get that, the King gets ducks and more ducks. Hey--!"

Vorta turned to see Chalma throwing a handful of pink powder over the duck as she chanted something. She followed it with a handful of blue powder, still chanting.

Linma rushed her. Vorta decided that she'd humored her long enough and tackled Linma, tumbling her roughly to the floor. Linma struggled, managing to free one hand enough to deliver a strong punch to Vorta's jaw. Vorta shook her head to clear it, and Linma wormed free of her grasp. She didn't bother to stand, simply scabbled close enough to grab Chalma's ankles and pulled her down. Chalma barely paused in her chanting. As Linma shoved Chalma's face down into the floor and sat on her back, Chalma tossed a final handful of powder, this time green, up over the edge of the table.

Rubbing her face, Vorta managed to get to her knees in time to see the duck blacken and shrivel until there was nothing left of it.

"No!" Linma reached out to her creation. Turning her attention to Chalma, she said, "You ruined it! Just like before! You ruined my life, now you're ruining my chances of getting it all back!" As she spoke, she pummeled Chalma with her fists. Vorta had just experienced firsthand how much those fists could hurt.

She stood, drawing Sidewinder. "Step back, Linma."

The hiss of the blade being drawn distracted Linma long enough for Chalma to dodge out of her grasp. Linma turned to Vorta, hand scrabbling at her belt... for something that wasn't there.

"Few people carry their supplies around the house with them," Chalma said, rubbing her right elbow and muttering a phrase. Linma froze.

"You can let her go now," Chalma said.

Vorta did. She didn't move.

"How long will that last?"

"Long enough for me to take her magic, I hope." Chalma started rummaging in the drawers under the table. Occasionally, she'd take something out and set it on the table. Finally, she seemed satisfied. Facing Linma, she said, "You have twice misused your gift. The first time, you were expelled from the Academy and forbidden the practice of magic. It is obvious, both from this room and the fact that every farm animal in the Kingdom has turned into ducks, that you have not given up the practice of magic. Had you contained yourself to small, harmless magic, I might have been able to look the other way. But you have cast magic that is both large and far from harmless. Therefore, it is my duty as Royal Magician to strip you of your magic."

Linma started weeping, but she neither moved nor made a sound as Chalma circled her clockwise, dribbling orange and yellow powders and chanting. Chalma turned counterclockwise, dribbling a handful of purple powder and one of red, still chanting. When she was done, a rainbow-hued glow sprang up around Linma. It seemed to emanate from a narrow strand attached to her forehead.

Linma had gone deathly pale.

When Chalma picked up a pair of little golden scissors from the table, Linma began to tremble in spite of the spell holding her motionless.

Chalma reached out and snipped the scissors closed over the narrow band of light. The rainbow-hued light burst outward, filling the air of the room with multi-colored sparkles for a moment before passing on, through the walls and out into the surrounding countryside. Linma crumpled to the floor, sobbing.

"Come on," Chalma said. "Let's go." She tucked her arm in Vorta's and pulled her from the room.

"What about..."

"She'll be fine. She'll recover."

"But shouldn't we, you know, arrest her?"

"And do what?" Linma asked. "It's not specifically illegal to turn cows into ducks."

"Only because no one's thought of it before!" Vorta found they were already halfway down the stairs and still walking.

"She's been punished more severely than the King would punish her," Chalma said. "What would he do? A month in the dungeons?"

Vorta shrugged. "Probably."

"Well, now we've ensured that she can't do it again, and no one's been seriously hurt."

Vorta rubbed her bruised jaw. She imagined Chalma must have a few bruises, as well. But they were both still walking. They left Linma's house, carefully closing the door behind them.

"We'll stop at the first village," Vorta said. "I think we can have an early night tonight... we've earned it."

Chalma nodded. "I agree."

And so, they did. But best of all, Vorta commandeered a pair of horses for their journey home. For once, she didn't mind riding.

END

