

2079: Heart Transplant

(Short Story)

Charles Bins

cartoon by the author

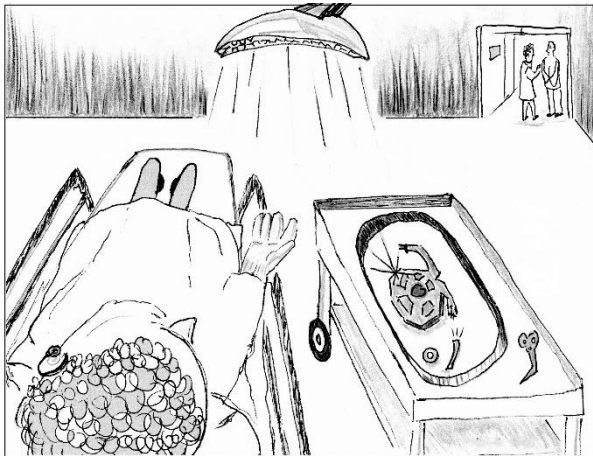
2079: Heart Transplant

He watches as I lay on the table awaiting my procedure. Monitors blink and bleep, and the switched-on Bach seems calming. The attendant smiles.

I had known Tommy Wilcox since he was a toddler scampering off to mischief, leaving fingerprints on everything. A dust cloud followed him wherever he went, and that meant more work for me.

Bob and Carol said I was Housekeeper #3. I told them my name was Hazel and reminded them I didn't do diapers -- or windows.

Carol assured me Tommy was out of diapers. He was an only child, overweight, clumsy and affectionate. His parents, though, never taught him to put things away like the other three families I served. Now I've been with the Wilcox's for 15 years, and Tommy still treats me well.



The attendant reminded me that transplants were routine, and I'd only be out a short time.

under the lights. The attendant reminded me that transplants were routine, and I'd only be out a short time. Tommy held my hand when I winked out.

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Now I'm fully awake, looking at a metal tray containing my old heart. "All done," they say.

Tommy's friendly on the way home; he even buys me flowers. I really can't smell them, but they are a blast of color which signifies happiness.

When Tommy opens the front door, Bob and Carol are on the couch licking strawberry cones. Carol hands Tommy a chocolate cone and asks how I am.

I scan the area: A sink full of dishes, peanut shells scattered, 3½ pairs of shoes strewn about, and a pile of ironing 87 minutes high. "Everything is springtime and daffodils," I say. "Look, Tommy bought me flowers."

"Put those in water," Bob chirps, "and please make us dinner now."

I agree -- and ask if there's anything else.

Carol replies: "The downstairs is a disaster; please tidy up after dinner." Then she sniffs, "Hazel, we bought an odorless window cleaner, so you can start on the windows in the morning."

I tilt my head 40 degrees to study her. Deep in my memory banks I hear: "*Are you serious? I just had a transplant. Don't you people think?*" But those words won't come. Instead, I say: "All right, Carol, which room would you like me to do first?"

She is smiling broadly and winks at Bob. "Start in the living room."

"Well, Carol," Bob chimes in, "I think the transplant's a success." He winks at Carol and she winks back.

Tommy looks at me puzzled, concerned or both. His scoop of chocolate tumbles to the floor. In a wink, I have it cleaned up.

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A Modern Pirate Adventure

Short Story

Barbara D. Parente

A Modern Pirate Adventure

“A Somalian Simulation” would not have been my first choice for an optional tour as part of our 13 day eastern Mediterranean cruise. After several days of port stops, with treks through cathedrals and museums, at first an uncommitted day at sea seemed luxuriously lazy, but as the day progressed, Jon and I had become a bit bored.

We headed to the lounge and joined an increasingly loud and laughing crowd, partaking of an increasing volume of liquid refreshment. With our new cruise friends, Rodney and Poppy, an English couple with delightful accents, we decided we were ready for an adventure, and “A Somalian Simulation” sounded more intriguing than a walking tour of whatever medieval town we were about to dock in the next morning. They left the lounge to book the trip.

“Do you think we will meet real pirates?” I asked Jon cheerfully, draining my wine and pushing the glass toward the bartender for a refill. “Well, they won’t look like Johnny Depp, or Bluebeard,” Jon answered with a smile as I giggled and sipped my third, or was it my fifth drink. I recalled the pirate costumes my neighbors donned for Halloween during my childhood, and I had seen a number of swashbuckler movies that featured pirates during my classic movie binge in my 20s, but admit to not following the news very closely when it came to Somalia. All I could remember was that it involved contemporary pirates, fishing rights, and holding ships for ransom.

“Jolly good, we are booked for Somalia!” Poppy announced on their return, Rodney linking arms with her and suggesting we order champagne to celebrate. I had been munching on pretzels for the past five minutes in an attempt to clear my head, and now I was more interested in answers than champagne. “Tell me more about this tour,” I asked our new friends. “Will we be in one of those converted warehouses, like the immersion experiences? “No, we actually board a vessel that looks like a cargo ship,” Rodney explained. “They take us on a short jaunt around the harbor, and we will look about for fishing boats that may hold pirates ready to board and steal, “ he continued. “Passengers can volunteer to

be part of the cast, pretending to be tied up by the Somali pirates, or robbed.”

Both Jon and I wondered if this was just a little too realistic, and a bit frightening as a contemporary issue. “Oh, no, that’s all done now,” Poppy said. “Simply history, and a bit of fun for us. No active pirates, of course. Haha. Better than another tour of a town’s architecture.” Trusting that Europeans were more knowledgeable about current events than Americans, and admitting to myself that I had been distracted from world news lately, I decided to bury my own questions for now.

But the pirate worry stayed in my head, even as I sobered up and firmly turned down the champagne. I was starting to seriously question whether this was a good idea. Who did they get to play the pirates? Reformed pirates, maybe? Jon and I had been married for a decade, so I was adept at reading his non verbal responses and he, too, seemed uncomfortable with the casual reaction of our cruise companions to the possibility of pirate activity.

As much as I enjoyed Rodney and Poppy’s accent, and as an American just assumed they were British, the more Rodney spoke, the more I was starting to wonder. They hadn’t watched Downton Abbey, they said, and gave us blank looks when asked if anyone was still alive in the fictional Midsomer. After more than 20 seasons of the set-in-Cornwall show. Midsomer Murders knocked off 3 or 4 characters in each episode. Who didn’t know about that? Whatever. Not everyone watches television.

We had met the couple earlier in the day at lunch when Poppy bumped into me, apologized, and then charmingly started complimenting my outfit. We sat together and shared the highlights of the first half of the cruise, and laughed about the prices in the onboard stores, especially the jewelry store.

I continued chomping on pretzels, the sound drowning out Rodney’s chatter as I mulled our wine-fueled decision, when I heard Rodney say, “and each of us needs to bring something of value the pirates will pretend to steal.” I turned to Jon to get clarification. He explained that Poppy and Rodney had signed the four of us up as cast members, and now we were about to become part of the Somalian pirate story.

“Cassie, you could bring that green necklace you wore to lunch,” Poppy said with more enthusiasm than I expected from someone who just a few hours ago sounded like a reserved English woman. “It stands out nicely and would be easy for the cast members to find,” she concluded.

The “green necklace” was the emerald studded family heirloom I had foolishly brought with me, trying to keep Great Uncle George close to me after his sad demise 3 months ago. Although cruisers are warned to leave valuables at home, I just couldn’t do it. My legacy from Uncle George included much more than the necklace, so I decided to risk it. It was showy enough that I think most people would believe it to be costume jewelry. Since our last names were different, I felt confident that my new identity as heiress was unknown, and Jon and I decided to take a year continuing to live our middle class lives before going public about my inheritance and new role as CEO of George Merrimack Maritime Industries. The cruise was to be our one indulgence this year.

A little later, the four of us stumbled off to our cabins to try to get a decent night’s sleep before tomorrow’s adventure and agreed to meet for breakfast. After we said goodnight to Rodney and Poppy, I looked for a brochure at the concierge desk about “A Somalian Simulation” but it was outside of business hours, and the brochure rack hadn’t been replenished. There was no information there on our impending adventure, and Jon couldn’t find anything on his phone on the cruise’s app. A last minute addition, perhaps. Surely our optional tour brochure would be on the rack in the morning.

It was almost closing time at the onboard shops, and I took a quick look again at the jewelry, sparkling under strategically placed lights. I smiled at Jon as we lingered over an exquisite pair of emerald earrings, and we silently mouthed “not today.” My crocheted poncho took the chill off when wandering the ship in the evening, and when the loose weave caught on the edge of the jewelry counter, no one noticed as I gently removed the fabric, then waved goodbye to the staff as they locked the shop door behind us.

The next day dawned sunny and warm, and a light breakfast and two cups of strong coffee

restored us to sobriety and good cheer. Mostly. It's possible I was being a little paranoid about our new friends and maybe the necklace, too. My white linen pants may not have been the best choice for a day on a cargo ship, but the simple green top set off the sparkly emerald necklace nicely. Poppy noticed it immediately and said I would be the star of the Somalian Simulation experience.

Poppy wore a silk scarf she said might be prized by a thief, while both men chose to temporarily donate their wallets, with their credit cards and most of their cash removed. Jon and Rodney chuckled and high fived one another for their twin choice, showing each other their near empty wallets and posed for a quick picture.

Our new friends hurried us to a cab as I asked about tickets or a brochure. They said we could settle later, but should get going now to literally not miss the boat. We must have been early, I surmised, because there were very few passengers waiting when we got to the small harbor a short distance from the larger one where our cruise ship had docked. There were quite a few crew members, however, and they looked to me like real Somalian pirates. This meant they were young, dark skinned men in brightly colored tee shirts, no tricorne hats, eye patches, red jackets or ruffled shirts. Jon had looked up Somali Piracy on Wikipedia last night. While the height of the piracy activities had been in the early 2000s, there had been a recent resurgence in the area to the east of us.

From their fishing boat just 100 yards away, but hidden behind a larger ship, Aaden and Zahi watched the tourists board the cargo ship. It was a small group this time. Whether there were fewer sign ups for this performance, or just the right number for a profitable trip remained to be seen.

Somalis Aaden, 22, and Zahi, 21, had been friends from a hungry childhood and their bond remained strong. The two had shared an interest in their fathers' common livelihood, fishing, and accompanied them on trips. Yet as others fished here and fought for the dwindling supply, the pleasant trips turned into fights for survival, and the boys were told to stay home. There were many meals with no fish, and as the boys entered adolescence and got hungrier, fish and other food became scarce.

They joined what seemed to be a patriotic group who would seize fish from foreign vessels to feed Somalians. In time, the groups took more than fish, held people and boats for ransom, and threatened the young teen members with reprisals if they told anyone. Aaden and Zahi now knew they were in a gang, a group known to the outside world as Somali pirates. They saw no way out until this opportunity presented itself.

Yet, in some ways, it wasn't that much different. Sometimes Aaden and Zahi "robbed" the customers as part of the Somalian Simulation, always giving the loot to the production manager as they left the cargo ship and headed back to their fishing boat. Other times they would give a swordplay performance. Although neither owned a sword or had ever heard of fencing before this job, when the production manager said they could be paid extra, the ambitious young men started watching YouTube videos and saving for the cheap swords. The visitors loved the swashbuckling and stuffed a jar with generous tips that Aaden and Zahi never saw, although the swordplay bonus was usually paid.

The production manager greeted the customers, carefully avoiding eye contact as one particular foursome walked up the gangway. Meanwhile, 100 yards away Aaden took a deep breath while Zahi expressed his nervousness by smoking a cigarette and quickly dousing it in the harbor, reminding himself he had given up smoking last week. Again.

Cassie and Jon, Rodney and Poppy settled themselves among the other customers, all strangers except for a couple Cassie recognized from two nights ago, heading toward one of the luxury suites on the upper deck. Cassie remembered the woman because she had been wearing a tiara.

"A tiara? Really? On a casual dress cruise like this?" Cassie had remarked to Jon after they passed by. "Why not?" Jon replied. "The rich can wear torn jeans or tiaras, and do whatever they please." Then the two exchanged a look, pulled away once more from their middle class response to contemplating their new life to come. It was the next day that Cassie decided to wear her emerald necklace to lunch.

The tiara woman was Lynette and today wore shorts and a lacy top, but no tiara. Cassie and Lynette exchanged a few friendly words. Lynette said she was Australian and they were taking a break from their sheep farming to go on a cruise. Her husband, Harold, had a furrowed brow as he closed down the laptop he had been working on and handed it to a nervous man who took it quickly and briskly walked off the ship. “It is hard to get Harold to relax,” Lynette sighed. “But he had to complete a sale as soon as the markets open,” she added. Lynette’s arms were adorned with several gold bracelets that Cassie was certain were not costume jewelry.

“All aboard” cried a crew member and we pushed off, heading away from the protected harbor toward the open sea. I hoped we weren’t going far. “Look, there’s a fishing boat!” One of the customers called out, and soon there were two fishing boats alongside our ship. The first one boarded, with just two Somalian Simulation pirates.

We were nicely entertained by the young men who brandished swords as the Simulation director explained that while swordplay wasn’t common in modern piracy, the audiences loved it. And we did! Everyone filled the bucket with bills and I went up to the young men to extend an extra congratulations. I was still tense, however, and apparently I wasn’t the only one.

As the young men left in their fishing boat, the second boat’s pirate crew boarded, and this group of five was without smiles. They shouted and brandished guns — were they real, I wondered nervously — and demanded loot from all of us, even those who hadn’t signed up to be cast members. Lynette was so intimidated by the realistic cast that she handed over all 6 of her gold bracelets, three from each arm. She had shown me earlier which one she was going to donate to the mock robbery, and it was the thinnest of the bangles. Shaking a bit, I placed my emerald necklace gingerly on top of the pile in Pirate #3’s bag.

As quickly as they had come, the pirates left, heading back to the open seas. From my vantage point, however, I did see the pirates slip the largest bag to the production manager before they turned

around and headed away from the cargo ship. On the way back, we sipped rum drinks and started to relax as we approached the dock. The manager came forward and started returning items to the customers. The wallets came back intact, although Jon thought a \$10 bill may have been missing. Poppy stuffed her returned scarf in her purse and Lynette slipped gold bands back on her wrist. But three of Lynette's bands and my emerald necklace were missing.

"I am so sorry," the production manager said. "My assistant may have put them in the ship safe, which we sometimes do with fine jewelry. Let me check." And he was gone, as were most of the other Simulation guests. Even Rodney and Poppy were on the dock. This was the moment and Jon nodded to the man known as Harold's secretary, who walked swiftly forward with two other Interpol agents and handcuffed Rodney and Poppy, international jewel thieves caught at last, with the help of an American couple who would remain anonymous in the official report.

Jon, an international insurance investigator, had business associates in Interpol. After Cassie deftly lifted Rodney's license the night before, Jon quickly scanned it and sent it to his colleague, who had just recruited two young Somalian men as confidential informers for a rather shady pirate experience. On many of the trips, jewelry had disappeared. Most of the guests were wealthy, and simply filed insurance claims. But those numbers were getting out of line.

After Cassie took the men's photo showing their wallets, with Poppy in the background, she sent the electronic file to Harold's secretary, who ran the photos through the international data base to verify that Poppy and Rodney (not their real names of course) were actually Nadia and Boris Kostovich, wanted in ten countries for art and jewel theft.

Aaden and Zahi had followed the second fishing boat and signaled the agent who now sped toward them to arrest the petty thieves who had bits of cash. On board, an undercover agent — who made a great rum punch — arrested the production manager before he could leave with the loot he had stashed in the safe from earlier trips, loot he couldn't easily transfer to Poppy in her scarf.

“That was quite an adventure,” I said to Jon, as he clasped the emerald jewels on my neck once more. Lynette had all six of her gold bangles now, and had issued an invitation to come visit Australia. “We just might,” I replied brightly as they said their goodbyes. “We have a few things to do first,” Jon replied. “I saw the poncho trick in the shop. We have to go back and return those emerald earrings.”

“But they would look so good with the necklace from Great Uncle George,” I protested. “Oh, Cassie, Cassie, Cassie,” John said, shaking his head but letting a small smile slip through. I loved my new name, and seldom thought of the one I gave up 11 years ago after Jon and I met when he arrested me. After the charges were dropped, we dated, fell in love and contemplated how we could have a future together.

“You’ve been doing so well with the therapist, and we can even go to art museums like tourists now,” Jon added. “Jewelry is so much harder,” I acknowledged. “Yes,” said John. “Maybe we should purchase the earrings and make them a progress reward.” They reached for each other as they always did and held hands as they walked off the dock and toward their next adventure.

Submitted by:

Stan K Washington

Prose (Essays, Life Experience, and Short Stories)

Title

Grandparents in the 21st Century

Grandparents in the 21st Century

“That’s great news, we love you!” We are pregnant, that is not Bess and me. It is Bert my son who is pregnant. That probably sounds like a misstatement but it’s not. Bess and I are in our 70’s and will, based on our health, enjoy grandparenthood for a much shorter period than many of our younger friends who have had multiple decades of grandkids and great grandkids.

So, being parents and grandparents has changed from the time when we were grandkids. Many of the things today were not tolerated in our youth. Bert started life as a girl and we have a strong base of thought and frame of reference from her youth and young adult life. We loved her then and him now. He is married for the second time. Their relationship is supportive and full of love. Their life is transitioning from a couple to a family of three. I try to navigate the change but many times I err with the pronouns. It is not that I don’t want to accept it. We have had thirty plus years to condition us to one set of pronouns. We are trainable, it just takes us longer in our golden years.

I am thrilled to become an active grandparent. It gives me a chance to spoil and care for a grandchild. We know we will be more comfortable with a new baby than when we were thirty something. I plan on an active influencer with him. I accept the new order now and relish the challenge.

“Stew, that is wonderful news isn’t it!” Stew is beaming and strutting around itching to tell anyone who’ll listen he is going to be a grandfather. He has been trying to adjust to our only child’s path through life. This change is fitting much easier with me. I know he is having problems refitting the pronoun matrix he is using for Bert. For me, it has been a little easier. Bert/Bertha is still the same person which I have deeply loved for 36 years. Don’t get me wrong I do have many slips over the last few years. We are so accustomed to a set of pronouns we had been using is engrained in our lexicon. The challenge for me is framing any discussion about our child is couched in getting others to view Bert’s life decision in an open mind. The normal has changed and each person who asks, “How is your daughter doing?” I can either explain my child’s deep felt identity decisions or go with the flow using the accepted pronouns and let deep personal belief live only in the family.

“Bess, did you get into the baby list site for Stacy and Bert’s choices? When is the baby shower again?” We will attend Bert and Stacy’s baby shower in about a month and I want to get some the bigger ticket items covered. I remember Bess and me shopping for Bertha’s birth. The costs were daunting. Bert and Stacy are making a good living but the cost were high for invitro, donor semen, fertilized egg storage, doctors’ fee and so on. They should be well setup for the baby’s start come July. I know I am being a little over the top. Yeah, I am and I am having fun. I have been telling anyone I can find to tell ‘em I am going to be a grandfather. I decided before to separate folks into groups that I want to tell the background of our child’s beliefs and those I alter the pronouns to normal mode. It is not lying it is just keeping focus on the happy event not the judgement that might be expressed. I have had some trouble assessing where some people should be categorized into. There was one couple that was close to Bess and me. I could feel the difference immediately in their ability to accept that we are cool with it but their expression show anything from pity to wanting unhear the background story. I stop in more and more cases and just go with acceptable paradigm.

“I sent the site to your email. Let me know what items you want to sign up for. I can do all of our selections at one time. Remember Bert and Stacy want the gifts to be gender neutral, no boy themes. Oh, Stew stop looking over my shoulder it makes me nervous!” We are like kids in a toy store. We check off several bigger ticket items. We ask them what they want that would not be a regular baby wish list. They ask for a rocker. Stew is on it in a New York minute. He researches for week. He sent the rockers that might fit their furniture scheme. He was deep into asking questions, sending pictures and fine tuning each selection. That is his forte. I am fulfilling a request for baby Bertha pics to decorate the baby shower. We are talking with them every week or so to get updates on the baby’s progress.

The baby shower was a lot of fun. We got to meet many of their friends and coworkers. The decorations included baby pictures of Stacy and Bert. The wish list was very well covered. Bert is very pregnant and glowing. It has

been great spending time with them. Their friends are a wide range people who have also made their own lifestyle changes. In many ways they may look somewhat different but they are kind and loving. We talk to many of them and learn more our son and daughter-in-law's world.

On the ride home, we discuss some important dates and plans to help them when the baby comes home. We joke about the number of pronoun missteps we made. We will try harder. We will enjoy the arrival of ur new grandbaby into the family. Life is good.

One Hour of Bad and Illegal Behavior

Literary Arts - Short Story

By: Orville L. Sentman

On my way to the Coastal Carolina Writers group today, I did some bad, and clearly, illegal behavior. Fortunately, no police were around me during my drive, as before I left home, I finished my third beer to get ready for our meeting and with that buzz began my weave down the road to Maria's.

In my car I forgot to fasten my seatbelt for the drive because I was setting up Maps with Maria's address. I backed out, narrowly missing a runner passing by and annoyed, I made a hand gesture to that idiot. I have learned that is what one does in North Carolina (NC). I slowly drive towards the stop sign 50 feet from my driveway while setting the directions in Maps, and paying little attention to all the walkers and other cars in the neighborhood.

While sitting at the stop sign, I finally put my seat belt on. My neighbor pulled up behind me and was honking to let me know I was impeding his drive. I moved along on my drive quickly to avoid a road rage confrontation, turned right while not using my turn signal, drove slowly below the speed limit which is clearly illegal, particularly in NC.

I turned left at the next street, again without using my turn signal, drove to the stop sign and rolled through that sign as no vehicles were coming, again with no turn signal, typical of a NC driver.

Early in the day I got an alert from my insurance company that I had some info awaiting on their site. I will check it when I get back. I did note that my proof of insurance card for the car ran out on April 14th, and darn it, I forgot to go online for the update. Hope I don't get stopped on my drive.

On the way to Maria's I listened to some copyrighted music I downloaded and was close enough to a public WiFi to have a really good connection. I think that may be illegal as well.

I held my phone on the way making sure I was making the correct turns to get to the meeting while weaving all over the road. I think driving while using a phone is OK in NC.

I am still using my Virginia driver's license as I like the photo on it and plan to get the NC one soon. We have lived in NC since September 2021, I guess I need to get a NC license. Now that COVID restrictions are well over, it may be easier to get the license.

I notice a marijuana blunt is in the ash tray and I took a quick hit to go along with the three beers, far out! Not sure who left it there, it was not me.

I plan to not write anything disturbing during our session, as I read recently where writing a troubling story can be illegal, not sure if it is in NC, but I do not want to take a chance.

I take another toke as I turn on Bancroft Lake Drive, ah! I am wondering if I am 'One Toke Over the Line' and I hope I can see the numbers on the house, I would hate to walk into the wrong home with beer and marijuana on my breath, don't want to be accused of breaking and entering.

I am delivering to an unnamed member of the writing group some extra unused medicine I can give to he/she, as I am no longer taking it and it could save them some money. Wonder if that is illegal in NC? It is just a friendly gesture after all.

As I approach Maria's I note I am speeding, only 45mph, but just missed Evelyn on her walk. "Sorry Evelyn!" I yell out the window.

Finally, I arrive at Maria's. I can see the address, barely. I stumble out of the car and Evelyn accuses me of being publicly intoxicated. I yell at her "Evelyn, you are correct!", in a slurred voice. I wobble to Maria's door, with purpose throwing my blunt in the shrub near the door, ring the bell, swing the door open and stumble in to our Coastal Carolina Writers meeting, with my legally written story, eager for the meeting!

“Henry’s Adventures”

Short Story

Beverly Carte

After having the usual debate with my husband about what to have for dinner, I finally give up and begin cooking. I wonder, do all wives have this trouble with their husbands? Henry and I have been married for ten years now and it still seems like what to have for dinner is the hardest decision we make every day.

Henry and I live in a rural area of West Virginia, just north of the state capital of Charleston. The national news comes on and they are interviewing a fisherman from a small town in Maine. Jokingly, I say to Henry that I would love to be there eating a fresh lobster. Henry just said, "Get packed; let's go."

This is how each of Henry's adventures usually begins. He hates to plan things in advance and most of our past vacations have been spur of the moment decisions. Now driving 800 to 1,000 miles one way to eat dinner may seem a little extreme to some people, but if you know Henry, it will not surprise you. He loves visiting new places, meeting new people and experiencing life in general. A diving accident, while in college, resulted in a cervical spinal cord injury, which left him with permanent paralysis. If he wants to do something, he generally figures out a way to make it happen.

Since I am a planner and organizer, I am freaking out. Labor Day weekend is coming up, so I immediately begin thinking of all the challenges of travelling on a holiday weekend. After dinner, I start gathering and packing everything that I think we might need for the trip. I want to make reservations for lodging. Of course, Henry wanted to get on the road in the middle of the night and just go until we get tired the next day.

We have never traveled to this area before, so we are both hoping to see a little fall color. It is too early for the leaves to change in our area, but just maybe we will see

some as we travel farther north. If we had planned this trip, I would have had time to do some research, but that will have to wait until we stop tomorrow night.

Needing some way to easily load and haul Henry's wheelchair, we load the back of his Chevrolet S-10 extended cab truck with a topper on it. We once camped in the bed of that truck. Hopefully, we have enough clothes and supplies packed for the duration of our trip. Since Henry never commits to a definite schedule, we will just have to make do or buy anything else we need.

Henry is driving with adaptive hand controls that have been installed just for him. He has chosen the route, in order to visit the New York State Fair. He heads north, planning to travel to Cleveland, Ohio and then east to Buffalo, New York, then hit the New York Thruway to Syracuse.

Having already visited all of the surrounding state fairs, he just can not resist the temptation of adding another one to his list. I ask myself, could this be why he agreed so easily to travel to Maine and insisted we travel this weekend, since the last day is Labor Day? Knowing Henry, he probably saw on the television that it was ongoing and when I brought up a trip to Maine, he knew it could be on our way. I should be used to it by now.

The Ohio State Fair lasts for three weeks and there are different livestock exhibits on different days, so of course we take multiple day trips each year. Since I keep telling him that we can not buy a farm, unless he can afford to hire a "Pepino" like on the Real McCoys television show to work it, he has to settle for enjoying the success of others, reading magazines and dreaming of his own farm. We have gone to Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia and, of course, West Virginia and Ohio. Now, he is

planning to add New York to that list. So far, he has only one World Fair, New Orleans, on his list.

Traffic is really getting heavy as we approach Buffalo, New York. We have been here before on our trip to Niagara Falls, into Canada and visiting all of the Great Lakes and coming back into the United States via Sault Ste. Marie International Bridge. However, this time we are continuing on to the New York Thruway. I thought traveling the West Virginia Turnpike was bad, but having to pay tolls to ride on this roller coaster of a highway is ridiculous. Bouncing every mile of the way, we are laughing, but it is getting old fast. It is impossible for us to continue singing along with the “Beanblossom” bluegrass music that we are playing as traveling music. Henry loves Bill Monroe. I am not a fan of the “whiny” sound myself, but there are worse genres to listen to.

Forget about finding a restroom easily. Most of the rest areas have signs saying “no facilities”, and the ones that have fuel available are few and far between and the lines to use the “facilities” are long. We stopped to get some gas and I stood in line for the women’s restroom. I went into a stall and heard a male voice say that he is coming in to clean. Well, I am not going to leave. I hope he does not look over the stall, but at this point, I do not really care.

Now, I am beginning to be concerned about finding somewhere to spend the night. Every motel we try is saying, “no vacancy”. Now, we are so tired that we stop at some of the more expensive hotels just to check, but still have no luck. We see a Redroof Inn on the road sign for the next exit, so we get off just in case. As I walk into the lobby, I hear one side of the conversation, it appears that someone is cancelling a reservation. Yes, finally we can stop and rest. The nice young woman at the desk asked

me how many nights and I say, as many as it takes to get a reservation somewhere else along our route. She helped us reserve a room for the next night in Albany, NY. We plan to attend the fair at Syracuse tomorrow and travel on to Albany. That will not get us too much closer to Bar Harbor, but that is alright.

We get up early and drive through McDonalds, knowing fair food will be expensive and not any healthier. A handicap decal does get us a little closer to the fairground for parking, but looking at the map included with our passes for the day, we see that there is a lot of area to cover.

Each state fair that we have visited has been unique to their geographical area and they all tried to be representative of their entire state. New York is no different, but it seems to emphasize their culture and history more than any other that we have attended. We have definitely never seen an exhibit going back to the Ice Age before or so many interactive exhibits. I keep prodding Henry along because I want him to see as much as he can. He was getting lost in the antique farm equipment exhibit and I would like to make it to Albany in time to have a nice dinner and just relax a little. The Native American exhibits interested us both and we are sorry, when it is time to leave.

We get back on the roller coaster of a road and arrive at the Red Roof in Albany. Not taking any chances, I used a credit card to secure our reservation for late arrival. The only exploration we did in the capital of New York was the inside of a local restaurant and our motel room.

Henry is still driving and we resume our journey early in the morning. We plan our route specifically to avoid New York City and Boston, Massachusetts. Traffic is bad coming back from the coast after Labor Day weekend. The plan is to go east and travel

up the coast to Bar Harbor, Maine. So far, we have seen no leaves changing color. It is not looking good for our leaf peeking trip. Apparently, their leaves must change around the same time that they do in the mountains of West Virginia.

The drive up the coast is beautiful and we stop several times to enjoy the rocky coast with crashing waves, lighthouses and boats. We rent a cozy little cottage on the water and check out the local area. Our plan is to come back this way and do some shopping at LL Bean in Freeport, Maine. The owner says not to worry about paying a deposit for the future rental, since it is after the season; and we do not know exactly what day we will be returning. I think, oh no, you need to have Henry commit with some skin in the game or he probably will change his plans.

We continue to travel up the coast of Maine and arrive late afternoon at Bar Harbor, the gateway to Acadia National Park, located on Mount Desert Island. Driving down Main Street we notice all the quaint little shops and restaurants, so I start looking for lodging. Nothing looks suitable for wheelchair access downtown, so we backtrack and find a nice hotel up on a hill, overlooking Frenchman's Bay. The view is spectacular and the temperature is unusually warm for the season. We checked in for a now undetermined length of stay, securing a room on ground level from the top, but actually three floors up with a balcony overlooking the bay.

Inquiring about somewhere to eat, we discover that restaurants will not open until dinner. We are told that there is only one restaurant on the whole island that opens for breakfast and one gas station that sells pizza and sandwiches for lunch. Everything else begins serving the early bird specials at 5:30 pm with regular dinner service at 7:00 pm.

Absolutely no fast food chains are allowed. All hotels serve a continental breakfast, so at least we can eat doughnuts in the morning.

Well, I came here for the lobster, so I plan to order it prepared some way every evening. After trying several restaurants from casual to high end dining, I arrive at the conclusion that, in my opinion, the best lobsters are the ones bought from street vendors, wrapped in newspaper and served with a container of melted butter for dipping. Sides of boiled red potatoes and corn complete the meal. I recommend watching the locals, not the tourists.

There are a lot of things to do in Bar Harbor, but some of them are too challenging for a wheelchair. Henry wants to go across to the Bar Harbor Island via the land bridge, but I veto that idea. Traveling over land that is only exposed for an hour and a half at low tide, in a wheelchair is just too risky. The possibility of getting stuck on the island and having to wait for the next low tide is just not an acceptable choice for me.

As a compromise, I suggest booking a tour around the island and Frenchman's Bay. The gang plank was really steep, so I was glad the crew from the boat held Henry's wheelchair back, as we embarked on the large boat. Plus, I knew it would be much more difficult to push him back up the gang plank. Henry still insists on using a manual chair, instead of getting a power chair. He wants to stay strong and independent as long as possible.

Cruising around the island and harbor, we see porpoises, seals, and bald eagles. I love being on the water, as long as I can see the shore. The homes on the water with private docks are impressive. I am sure that they are way above our budget. The people who own these homes probably fight hard to keep the area free from development. We

took the early afternoon trip, so we returned in time for their sunset tour to load. It took four young men to get Henry back up to street level, two in the front pulling and two in the back pushing. Having never met a stranger, he laughs and jokes with everyone he meets. It does not surprise me that he can carry on an intelligent conversation about anything that is being discussed.

Since we are here, we are visiting Acadia National Park. Driving up Cadillac Mountain, the highest point on the eastern seaboard of the United States, the view is spectacular. We can even see large ships anchored in the bay. Even though we did not hike up the mountain or any of the trails, it was still worth the effort to drive to the summit. Henry talked about home as he drove the winding road up the mountain. The mountains of West Virginia have roads just like this, with curves so sharp, it seems like you can almost touch your backside. I knew from the tone of his voice that he was ready to go home.

Sure enough, the next day, he says, "Pack up. Let's go." He suddenly realizes that he is three days away from home. I am not surprised when he keeps going west, instead of heading south down the coast. The little cottage on the water and the shopping spree was not going to happen.

Our return trip includes a drive through Lancaster County in Pennsylvania, Amish country, where Henry lived when he was a young boy, while his dad welded natural gas pipelines. He decided to include an old friend in this adventure, so he stops at a fraternity brother's home in his college town of Fairmont, West Virginia. As Henry says, "It can be on our route." We arrive home safely and as Henry pulls into our garage he says, "Well until next time."

The Girl with Half a Mustache

Short Story

Phyllis Litke

The Girl with Half a Mustache

Once there was a cat by the name of Curly. Her owner named her Curly because she had two brothers and she named them Larry and Moe, after the TV show “The Three Stooges.” The three were inseparable and unique in their own way.

One day the three felines were just laying around. Suddenly Moe looks at Curly and asks her, Curly, “why do you have just half a mustache?” Curly replied, “what do you mean by that remark?!” Moe replied, “you have a black streak on the left side of your nose.” Curly had no idea what she looked like, after all she couldn’t see herself. Cats don’t have mirrors! All Curly knew was that she had a lot of hair unlike her brothers. So much hair that she threw it back up after washing.

Larry just lay there listening to their conversation. He didn’t say anything. He guessed he must look okay, because Moe left him alone. Being the persistent cat that Moe was he kept asking Curly questions.

So, Curly, being the smartest of her brothers gave Moe a lesson he would never forget. “Moe,” she exclaimed, “I don’t know why God gave me half a mustache and all that fur I must throw up after taking a bath! I suppose the same reason he gave you white short hair, a straight tail, and just one white ear.”

Moe’s ears perked up with surprise. Moe had no idea how he looked. The moral to the story is, don’t worry and be happy with the way God made you. Different, but good in our own way.

The End.

STILL, I DANCED

Short Story

BY GLORIA ROSE LAURIA

February 2026

“Wunnerful, wunnerful.”

Lawrence Welk’s champagne bubbles floated through our black-and-white Motorola television on Saturday nights in the early 60s. We had no radio, no record player, just two channels and imagination. I would slip on my black patent leather shoes and tap dance in front of the screen, trying to mirror the dancers whose world seemed impossibly elegant and far away from our farm in northeastern South Dakota.

Dance lessons? The nearest studio was an hour away. As the youngest of six, I knew better than to ask.

But the desire never left.

My first real dances were wedding dances at the American Legion Hall in Grenville—current population: 80. Polkas, waltzes, bunny hops, the schottische. I learned by dancing with cousins, uncles, and my Grandma Rose. The floors were worn, the music loud, and joy uncomplicated.

High school brought slower sways, dim lights, and something called “freestyle” while college rang in the disco era. After graduation, with a degree in medical technology and my first adult job, I moved to Minneapolis and finally enrolled in ballet and jazz. But my erratic hospital shift schedule made it impossible to finish a full session.

Life accelerated. Marriage. Pennsylvania. Three children. Work travel. A husband who was not all that supportive—of anything. When we did attend events, he would later say, “You dance like Ellen on *Seinfeld*,” or announce to the children, “Your mom looked like a monkey dancing.”

It stung.

Near the end of that ill-fated marriage, he reluctantly agreed to a two-class “Hot Latin” course. When we attempted the quick-quick-slow of salsa, he criticized my every step. Then the instructor stepped in, took my hand, and I followed effortlessly.

We did not return for the second class.

My real dance life began at age 52, when I moved out and moved on. With friends from a divorce support group, I signed up for group lessons at Salsa in the Suburbs (SITS). We formed

a circle, rotated partners, stumbled, laughed, tried again. I had to learn to follow—no small task for someone who had spent years holding everything together.

But I was determined.

I drove an hour to New Jersey for nights at the Stardust Ballroom and the Atrium. I dressed in sequins. I bought glittering shoes. I spun until breathless and drove home smiling, reflecting on dances with favorite skilled partners. Salsa, bachata, merengue—each dance a new language, each partner a new conversation.

SITS offered performance opportunities, and I said yes. I rehearsed bachata choreography for months with a handsome young dentist before performing at a center city Philadelphia nightclub. Later came advanced salsa—faster, sharper, six consecutive spins that left the room tilting. I loved every dizzying second.

Ballroom dancing found me next—in a church in a mall. Chairs were moved aside to reveal a polished floor. Posting of hymns gave way to a lineup of rumbas and foxtrots. I learned all nineteen ballroom dances, trusting the strong lead of kind gentlemen who asked nothing more than my presence and attention.

During the four grinding years of divorce proceedings, dance became sanctuary. Music lifted me out of courtrooms and threats. Only once, after an intensely traumatizing week, did I choke back tears mid-waltz. The sweeping turns, the three-count rhythm—they steadied me.

And along the way there were storms.

A 90-mph straight windstorm seemed to target only one house on the street to destroy—mine, the rental I had moved into two months earlier. Afterwards I lived in several long-stay hotels and later with friends, putting most of my belongings in storage and moving over and over again, like a gypsy.

While cycling to train for a triathlon, a particularly frightening legal threat rattled me so deeply that I lost consciousness, while coasting downhill. Hours later, I came to in a hospital X-ray waiting room, learned that I had a concussion and had repeatedly been asking “Is my bike

okay?" I was admitted overnight for further evaluation. The next morning, when the attending physician entered my room, I sat up, everything went black—and my heart stopped.

Two minutes later, I was alive again.

Exactly twelve months later, Big Pharma acquired my employer of ten years, and I lost my job two weeks before I would have closed on a long-sought house. My brother kindly co-signed a lease so I could rent a flat.

And still, I danced.

Weekend after weekend, Latin and ballroom. Quick-quick-slow. Step-step-spin. 1-2-3, 1-2-3. In the midst of upheaval, there was rhythm. There was structure. There was joy.

As the saying goes, life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass, it's about learning to dance in the rain. I took that literally once, barefoot with a boyfriend in a Jamaican downpour at Rick's Café. But more importantly, I learned it metaphorically. Dance did not remove the storms. It taught me how to move within them.

Evidence shows that moving in time with music nourishes both body and brain: frequent dancing dramatically reduces the risk of dementia, improves balance, lifts mood, and floods the brain with serotonin. It is exercise, memory work, music, and connection woven into one.

But beyond the clinical evidence is something simpler.

Dance returns you to yourself.

As Lawrence Welk said, "We try to bring people a little happiness each week." Dancing brought me more than a little. It brought resilience. It brought community. It brought breath back into lungs that had stilled.

And through every catastrophe I endured or survived, I kept dancing.

Wunnerful. Wunnerful.

Short Story

The Flowers Died on Monday

1039 words

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The flowers died on Monday. My husband died on Tuesday. By Wednesday, I had moved on. I know it sounds harsh, but you just don't know.

Lying on my bed, I can't help but think back. We met on a beach in Cabo. He seemed like he had it all together. He dressed well, he spoke intelligently, he danced like he was possessed by boundless joy. I kept to myself; my head stuck in a romance bestseller. Still reeling from losing my job. Like clockwork, I had turned forty and was no longer useful. The book, my escape. The sun, my salve to heal.

Yet, there I was on the beach feeling ten years younger. I felt like anything was possible if only I took a step forward. Or side to side, as it turned out. His name was Ron. We danced and swayed. We talked and laughed. We breathed in the night and then each other.

I awoke as if I were in the midst of a dream. The sun had poured into the room along with a gentle, fragrant breeze. He was already dressed. Breakfast on a tray with a bottle of champagne, exotic flowers in a vase. Just like that, he quickly became everything to me. We married in three months and traveled the world on his business trips.

It was a whirlwind romance until it turned into a storm. One day, it was just a sprinkle of rain, then the thunder raced in. Soon followed by blinding rain and lightning strikes. The bruises were small at first. As I looked at my wrist, he said it was a mistake. That he had grabbed it harder than he realized. Then there was the night he wrapped his hands around my neck to increase sexual pleasure. I awoke to his concerned look and gentle kisses on my face.

I left the next afternoon, leaving behind the forgive-me flowers. Coming back on Tuesday, I was hit by the smell of the flowers' putrid remains.

He hugged me. He whispered in my ear, “How about a hike?” We went to the bluffs hand in hand. Such a beautiful view he said, all smiles, as he attempted to charm me. I smiled back, not necessarily out of love, but for what the future could hold.

The doorbell is ringing; it must be the police. I quickly dress. I wear a blouse with mismatched buttons. My mascara smudged, I grab tissues. My tears quickly renewed.

Opening the door, two young officers, both looking solemn. The new sympathy arrangements still lay at my front door, undoubtedly left by neighbors. I invite them to the kitchen. Their noses scrunch as they take in the odor of the dead flowers. More tears, trembling, I explain that Ron bought me flowers weekly. I linger by the fridge, gazing at all of Ron’s selfies from various peaks, cliffs, and trails around the world, and sigh.

“Please forgive me, this has all been so overwhelming. Can I offer you some coffee?”

The flowers I ordered myself, sent weekly from his laptop using his credit card. Once Ron captured my heart, his wooing and the flower deliveries ended. I know I said he bought them, but sometimes I forget what the truth is.

I pour three mugs of coffee.

“Would you like cream or sugar?”

They nodded, looking grim and mournful.

“I always warned him about getting too close to the edge, but he loved his selfies. He said they made him feel more alive and present in the moment.”

“Selfies can be so dangerous; there were 37 deaths in the United States last year alone”, said the tall officer.

I doubt Ron knew that. But I did. I knew he was a risk-taker. I knew he loved hiking. I knew he loved selfies. I hung them on the fridge. Friends asked, I answered, “He loves a selfie, especially on the edge of an abyss.”

“Sorry about the smell of the dead flowers. I can’t bring myself to throw them away.” I lean on the counter for support, take a deep breath, and blow my nose.

“I need to bring all the neighbors' flowers in too, but I just can’t bring myself to be surrounded by flowers.” I blow my nose again.

“Ron loved looking at the wildflowers growing in the crevices of the rocks, especially at the bluffs.”

“We’re sorry for your loss. We know it must have been dreadful witnessing the accident. So we’ll be on our way. We just wanted to express our sympathy. He was a great guy,” said the short but handsome police officer. “Yeah, he sponsored the police athletic league every year and the police benevolent association. We hope you can too”.

I bite my tongue, digging my nails into my palm. I wrote the checks. I addressed the envelopes. I dropped them off at the Post Office. I take a deep breath.

“But of course, let me know if there are any other needs I can help with. I’m sure Ron would want me to.”

“Our police force is small, but the needs of the community are many”, the tall one added.

I walk them to the front door, dabbing my eyes. I lean my head against the cold door as I close it, I think—I guess I will be useful after all.

Men are so easy to manipulate; they think we are the ones who are dreamy-eyed and looking to be swept off our feet. I'm sure he would hate to admit it, but let's face it, Ron was the one who was swept off his feet. Quite literally indeed.

What only I know is that I encouraged Ron to take all those selfies—portraying him as the world-traveling daredevil, off on hiking exploits at ever higher heights, encouraging him to get closer and closer to the edge.

I traded the bruises and flowers for his bank accounts and real estate holdings. Can you really blame me? After all, you see, his forgive-me-flowers gave me the idea. He thought he would woo me again, and I thought they were nothing but a reminder of fleeting love and lasting death.

Yes, I loved him once, but now I love me more.

Supernatural Secrets of Southport
Sherry Strickland
Short Story

Supernatural Secrets of Southport

“This is utter nonsense!” said the captain of the Southport Ferry.

The year was 1966, and the Southport Ferry was celebrating its first birthday. Christened in 1965, the first Southport Ferry was a modern motorized vessel and bore no resemblance to the sailing vessels that once navigated the waters of the Cape Fear. To mistake the Southport Ferry for a pirate ship would be ludicrous.

Unless you were a pirate.

Lost and wandering the channels of time.

“This can’t be!” whispered the captain to himself when the image of a dapper costumed gentleman stepped out of an incoming fog and into his bridge house.

The Cape Fear River had been a regular route for Stede Bonnet on his piratic campaigns along the east coast of what was a growing colonization in North America.

The river separated Smithville and Smith Island, and was the site of many shipwrecks where the treacherous sand bars now known as Frying Pan Shoals lay in wait.

Large sand bars would appear and disappear with the tides and would wound and maim ships and men that sought solace and protection among the creeks and inlets of what rightly came to be known as Cape Fear.

Unbeknownst to the planners of the modern day Southport Ferry, the site of the dock structure was built on a

supernatural eddy. When atmospheric conditions are just right, a powerful metaphysical vortex forms creating an ethereal bridge between two worlds.

When electrical storms form over Southport, the air is thick with uncontrolled energy. Somehow this energy creates the eddy — this supernatural bridge — which locals have long whispered about.

Stede Bonnet walks this plank and crosses over. Though some speculate that it's Blackbeard, the Gentleman Pirate has been spotted all over Southport usually at the edge of a warm, moist dusk, but some have vowed they've seen him when advection fog creates just the right conditions for spectral mists to walk among our midst.

Many of the ferry crew had never heard of the supernatural secrets of Southport. They were not prepared. In the first year of the ferry crossing the Cape Fear, there'd been no otherworldly visitors.

What was thought to be just another scenic, riparian crossing in 1966 changed the lives of a few and initiated them into a whole other realm of believers.

The formula for “the crossing” seemed to be the same: electrically charged thunderstorm over the warm brackish waters of the Cape Fear. There'd been no research done on specifics as to temperature or barometric pressures but the word “sultry” seemed to aptly describe the conditions that opened the rift.

On board the ferry, passengers who preferred the protection of their cars might have noticed their radios crackle with unintelligible utterances. Not realizing they were hearing far

more than their regular reception, they tuned the dial or tuned it out.

On board, lights flickered and navigation glitched forcing the captain to rely on experience and charted maps of the river.

Then ...

There he was.

Tall.

Slender.

Gaunt.

Impeccably dressed.

Tricorned and cutlassed.

Cravat of lace and linen.

He walked ... strode really ... into the bridge as if he owned the right. No need for a door, the same energy that brought him ushered him through weathered wood and significant steel.

Without acknowledging the open mouthed captain or crew standing by, he curiously and impatiently took in the helm before just as easily striding through the wall and into the depth of the bridge house.

The sound of the rain and the rolling of thunder along with the pounding of blood in the ears of the open-mouthed mortals kept anyone from noticing the stealth of movement of this most unlikely guest.

Momentarily Stede Bonnet reappeared aft and descended the stern stairs. Unimpeded by the rain, he maneuvered between the vehicles aboard the ferry. Assuming a crew member was dressed in period costume, no one felt an ounce of fear.

As if looking for something, or someone, Stede strode fore and stood unfazed by the driving rain and headwind coming down the river.

Impatient and irked expression on his face, he turned to face the wind and fate. Until another thunderstorm would perhaps open the portal, and give him yet another chance to find what he'd lost and would spend eternity looking for.

Me.

These Gathered Things

by

Eva McDonald

(Short Story – Fiction)

The garage door slowly opened to reveal a literal barricade. Three feet inside the opening, a firmly packed wall of wonder and possibility, extended side to side, top to bottom; paint, power tools, craft supplies, jewelry findings, books, DVDs, photo albums, clothing and more. Ellen stood enraptured. Her mouth may have fallen open – then she whispered, “Wow.”

Robyn was mortified. Opening the door to Ellen was her own decision, she wanted it to happen, but that didn’t lessen her anxiety. She found herself talking uncontrollably as they approached the garage workshop. “Really, this is much better than it was. When I knew you were coming, I started tidying up. I got rid of so much. I really do respect your time and the effort you made to come help me clean out my garage and set up my workshop.” Her self-talk was even more unrestrained, “*Stop talking Robyn, you’re such a dork.*”

Why was she so nervous? Ellen was her best friend, and she had promised not to judge. Robyn knew she was true to her word, but still, in this moment of revelation, she was finding it hard to trust Ellen’s promises.

“Really, Robyn, we can do this. We are strong capable women. We could empty this place in a day, if we didn’t need to sort things.”

Robyn was certain Ellen had underestimated the magnitude of this endeavor but tried to remain optimistic. “Ohh...kaay.” she said, her voice dripping with disbelief. “If you say so.”

Ellen, hands on hips said, “I *do* say so. I can see us sweeping the floor of your neat and tidy workshop. I believe it will happen. Let’s go.”

Robyn did feel a little better when Ellen played the manifesting cheerleader. But now that her secrets were fully revealed and there was nowhere to hide, she was panicking. She wanted nothing more than to close the door, walk away, thank Ellen for coming, explain she had changed

her mind and go make them another cup of coffee. They could sit and chat, as if no time had passed since their last meeting. Like they've done almost every year for the past thirty.

They have lived far apart for most of their friendship and yet they remain close. Ellen, married, living happily on the east coast. Robyn happily divorced, loved life in the Southwest. They talk weekly and travel together at least once a year. When they are actually face to face, both are transfigured by the proximity. They laugh loudly, eat way too much food, rewatch their favorite movies again and again, and spend hours talking over coffee or adult beverages. In real life, they are strait-laced, upright citizens with healthy habits that promote longevity. In RobEllynville, they are a mess. A joyful, bubbling mess.

But not this time. Ellen had flown in from halfway across the country to help organize Robyn's garage workshop. It was a serious job that required focus and commitment if they were going to make a dent in two weeks. There is no turning back. It's happening.

Robyn has a brilliant mind, an artist's eye for creatively repurposing and reusing throw-away items. She can see beauty in a piece of wood, like some see beauty in a Rembrandt or a Picasso. She looks at it – *into it? through it?* – until she sees its true identity. Then she brings its purpose forward, like calling someone's name in the waiting room. Just like that, wood obeys her will.

Ellen has seen Robyn at work and recognizes a magician when she sees one. After a brief time in her skilled hands, something abandoned, becomes something adored. Nothing is discarded because everything can become something. It is a complete contrast to Ellen's purposefully minimalist world. It is this disparity that draws her, like a climber to Mount Everest basecamp, feeling the pull of a daring adventure.

Ellen hasn't always been an organizer; she was actually a bit of a slob in college. As loud as she was disorganized, she lived life with assertion and confidence. In time, she discovered this bravado was more of a shield than an expression of her true self. She turned her attention inward and found that quietness suited her. Minimizing and bringing order to her surroundings brought her peace. Even the illusion of control is comforting when you know it's a mirage.

Because she still enjoys a bit of recklessness and a well-placed expletive, Ellen is careful not to take her orderliness too far, preferring to remain open to disarray when it will enrich her life. She likes to spend time with unpredictable people and artists like Robyn, basking in the warm glow of their welcoming madness. Nothing is better than watching the shit hit the fan and seeing an unexpectedly desirable result unfold. She loves to visit their chaos, but in her private space and personal time, she firmly maintains her own brand of Zen. Namaste, motherfuckers.

As much as Ellen enjoys the excitement of being in Robyn's world, Robyn enjoys the peace and serenity that follow Ellen. She lets Ellen plan their vacations and enjoys the freedom of trusting her friend's choices, always reasonable, always well thought out. (Except for that time when they almost missed the cruise ship. Now *that* was exciting.) Vacationing together is the best, their differences always seem to blur and fade. But she worries about working with Ellen in her garage. Surely a minimalist will think poorly of a maximalist. It is only natural. Even so, Robyn had committed to trust in the power of vulnerability and be her true self with her true friend.

Robyn tries to be orderly, but it's hard for her wildly inventive mind. Her driving force is her creativity. As a result, she travels through a precarious maze of mayhem. All these unassembled fragments fuel her vision and ignite her passion. When she discovers she has "just the thing" that someone is looking for or finds the perfect gizmo for next to nothing, she throws

her hands in the air and whoops with elation. Her joy in those moments rivals the dopamine rush of a bungee jump.

But lately, Robyn cannot enter her beloved workshop without a sense of foreboding. There are so many components collected, so many projects fueled and ready, that her passion is smothered. When she is offered a cast-off item, her motto has been: “If I can’t use it, I can find a home for it.” While this brings a sense of completion to the donor, it adds one more thing for Robyn to manage. She sees herself becoming overwhelmed but has such an eye for what’s possible and is so invested in recycling, she can’t seem to allow any material to go to waste.

Ellen takes her role of longtime friend very seriously. Upon hearing Robyn lament about her unusable workshop, she suggested, “Perhaps you’re a bit out of balance, Bestie. Maybe all this awesomely reusable stuff is getting in the way of your ability to create with it.” Robyn was silent so she continued. “It seems like your priority is no longer creating; it has become saving. Maybe it’s time to spend a little.”

Robyn remained silent but Ellen gave her space to process. Just when she started to worry that she had pushed too hard, Robyn said, “You’re right, sister. I’m getting in my own way.”

Robyn identifies as a creator and an artist. Yet somehow her art had taken a back seat to her conservation and willingness to help others. It was time to bring her life back into equilibrium, but she couldn’t get started. Several times she had walked into the garage, looked around and walked right back out. The job had become too big.

When Ellen offered to help, promising no judgment and no lectures, Robyn accepted. She regretted it almost immediately. Now she would have to reveal her secretly massive trove to her dearest friend. It would be like tearing off her skin and showing her beating heart. Her anxiety mounted until today, when she watched the garage door roll open before Ellen’s widening eyes.

When the door had fully opened, they stood quietly, gazing at the sight. “Wow” whispered Ellen. Then they both started moving toward the garage, like two explorers leaving civilization behind. Robyn turned to Ellen and said, “It’s happening.”

Ellen said, “Alrighty then. Let’s empty the space a section at a time and roughly categorize each item or box.” Robyn agreed. After all, this was the advice of the organizer she had “hired.” They posted signs in the carport, designating each area and got to work.

Robyn said, “Are you sure this isn’t too much to ask?”

Ellen put down a stack of paper cups and looked at her. “As I recall, I volunteered for this many times before you trusted me enough to agree.”

“True.”

“It’s probably too much to ask of the average person, but I’m not the average person.”

“Also, true.”

“It is a lot. I’m not gonna lie. But it’s already fun because we’re tackling it together. We have to stay focused and keep moving. You can’t stop to tell me the story of everything you pick up. I want to hear those stories, just not while we’re working. Okay?”

“I think I can do that.” After a pause, Robyn smiled and said, “Hey Ellen, guess what.”

“What?” In unison they shouted, “It’s happening!”

Ellen found an old cowbell and rang it in celebration every time they completed a section or Robyn decided to give something away. At the end of the first day, they had made excellent progress. They could see some of the floor in the workshop. Robyn kept saying, “It’s happening!” Sounding less like a white-knuckler taking off on her first flight and more like a child who sees the parade is about to start.

Ellen was thrilled. Thrilled to see the floor, thrilled to see similar pieces being brought together, but mostly, thrilled to see her friend so damned happy. Robyn was like a little kid, running around, lovingly touching her tools, saying hello to the jewelry supplies she forgot she had, welcoming her world back to life. Ellen was honored to witness the resurrection. More cowbell!

As honored as she was, it was sometimes exhausting. She had promised that she would value each item, even if it were something she would throw away. Robyn said more than once, “I saved these things for a reason. Each one has purpose.”

Ellen always asked before she tossed anything. “I found this Q-tip. It has some gray stuff on it. Trash?”

Robyn looked up from her sorting, “No, it’s a special kind of swab I use for polishing jewelry. You can put it with the others in the jewelry supplies.”

“Okay. What about these take-out containers. You have at least a thousand.”

“Yeah, I will eventually go through them, but not right now. Put them in the keep pile.”

“Okay. What about these pipe cleaners?” And so it went.

Every twist tie, every bead, every tiny scrap of paper and little plastic bag was picked up and put in its place. While standing and heavy lifting was fatiguing, Ellen found that cheerfully ignoring her natural urge to simplify, took most of her energy.

As far as Ellen could see, it was well worth it. Robyn was beginning to trust that this was a judgment-free zone. She recognized Ellen’s respect and it seemed to free her from her own self-judgment. As the floors and the shelves were cleared, so was her thinking. She began to see that she could not keep all this stuff and still have the clarity to create. She was ready to let some of it go. She was ready for – bum bum bah – a garage sale.

Robyn felt a lightness and motivation that she had possibly never known. This is the first time in her life when everything is in alignment; time, money, supplies and now this beautiful workshop. She is ready. Her biggest difficulty will be deciding the *second* thing she'll make. First, she will be making something beautiful for Ellen. Because Ellen... She could barely think of her without choking up.

Ellen made her feel like a person being seen and an artist being discovered. Ellen scolded her for calling herself a dork. A bad habit, Robyn knew she should break. For Ellen, she would. She promised herself, "No more self-dorking."

The days flew by, every one of them filled with fun, laughter and lots of dust. Though Ellen couldn't stay to finish the job or help with the garage sale, she was pleased to leave Robyn well on the way to success. She looked back over the weeks and realized she wasn't pretending to respect Robyn's belongings; she absolutely did. She had honored even the most trifling of her treasures. In so doing, Ellen had honored herself, her friend and their relationship. The progress they had made in the garage was an accomplishment, but she was most amazed by how well she accepted Robyn's drastically different point of view.

She knew that if Robyn could not follow through, and the place got messy again, it would be okay. Ellen would come back and help, whenever she was needed. Because this was not about cleaning out the garage, it was about loving someone exactly as she is, messy dreams and all.

Before they knew it, they were parting ways. They prefer to say good-bye before leaving for the airport. The departures lane is no place for quality self-expression.

Ellen said, "I'm not usually sentimental, but I think I'm really going to miss..." she feigned a sob, "this green chili dip. It is *so* good." She bit another chip and rolled her eyes in rapture.

Robyn did a double take. “I thought you were going to say something else.”

“Did you think I was going to say I would miss *you*?”

“Well, maybe.”

“Joke’s on you then. I don’t have to miss you. I talk to you all the time, right?”

“True. But you could still miss me a little.”

“Nope. No missing for you. Talk to you Sunday.”

“Yep. Talk to you Sunday. And by the way, I can’t thank you enough for all your help.”

“You’re entirely welcome. And I can’t thank you enough for this green chili dip.”

They shared a smile and a hug. “Love you, Bestie.”

On the trip home, Ellen thinks this may have been their most challenging adventure yet, even more difficult than driving the treacherous, unpaved roads of Costa Rica. (“Go! Go! Go! If you stop, we’ll sink!”) It doesn’t seem to matter what they face, their friendship survives it all – their differences, the distance and even the slow press of these gathered things.

Westminster Dog Nappers

(Short Story)

Charles Bins

Westminster Dog Nappers

After flying in from Charlotte, Alberta Larkin was perturbed that the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show was still held outdoors. The Billy Jean King Tennis Center in Queens didn't hold a candle to Madison Square Garden. The pandemic was over for St. Bernard's sake, so why the hell was it still outside?

"Out of an abundance of caution," the organizers said. As she scrubs her face in the mirror before bed, she can't get that phrase out of her head.

Queens was worse than that God-awful Tarrytown in Westchester last year, which everyone said was so "quaint." This year, her hotel was near the venue, 12 miles from LaGuardia Airport, but still too close for a good night's sleep. Trucks rumbled by day like dinosaurs, and sirens screamed at night like colicky babies. And in the morning, she'd have to take that "cattle car" they call a shuttle again.

Still, Buddy had done well today, and she was sure that Elizabeth would make the best showing of him in the non-sporting final tomorrow. She just hoped he wouldn't drool, the bane of English bulldogs. Alberta loved the breed. She had owned one as a child, and Buddy, a three-year-old, was her third and best show-dog yet. With patches of brown over his eyes and a cheshire grin, Buddy was a living Puff-a-lump. She fancied him as the crowd favorite, so strong, so poised, so affectionate. Not unlike herself, she thought.

The sound of the telephone startles her. It's almost 10:30 p.m.

"I'm sorry to disturb you this late, Alberta, but there's distressing news." Elizabeth sounded as if she'd been crying.

"Is Buddy alright?"

"Well, not exactly..."

"Is he dead?"

"No, but he's gone. Someone swiped him from the grooming tent this evening.



Alberta was sure that Elizabeth would make the best showing of Buddy in the non-sporting final.

CREDIT: Image by [Sven Lachmann](#) from [Pixabay](#)

“Weren’t you there?”

“Yes. But I, well...” Elizabeth was choking back tears. “I should have called you sooner.”

“Well, what happened?”

“I stopped to get a hotdog, and when I returned, Buddy was gone. The cage door was open, but I know it was closed when I left.”

“Oh, Elizabeth...”

“We alerted security, and people have been out looking for hours. I thought we’d have found Buddy by now.”

“Did they call the police?”

“They notified the police, but NYPD won’t get involved for at least 48 hours.”

“Don’t they realize, this isn’t just any dog?”

“They do, and they do the same for people. Most times they come home on their own.”

Alberta repeated an expletive three times. “So what do we do now?”

“There’s not much more we can do but wait. I mean the final doesn’t start until 1 p.m.”

“I don’t really care about the show anymore. I just want my dog back.”

“Security said they’ll resume the search in the morning. I’m so-so sorry Alberta.”

“Don’t worry, Elizabeth. We’ll get him back.”

Alberta hung up hoping she could believe her own words. Her mind raced. Who’d want to steal her dog, any show-dog? Certainly, the perpetrator knew. It was most likely someone at the show.

Could it be a jealous competitor? Perhaps. Alberta ruminated about her interactions with the other owners in the non-sporting class. She had her suspicions but wondered how warped someone could be to attempt such a thing. Money wasn’t even a factor. In fact, there was no prize for Best in Show at Westminster, only prestige.

More likely a breeder then. Buddy could command serious stud fees, which would jump to \$50,000 to \$100,000 or more for a best-in-class winner. But the litter could never fully benefit from the pedigree without falsifying documents. Could it be an inside job? Standing in her nightgown, Alberta wondered who would risk their reputation.

She switched off the light, not sure she could sleep. She pictured Buddy’s pudgy face and wished she could kiss him. Her fears chased around like greyhounds after a rabbit. Eventually, she started to drift. Buddy stood firm and poised while the judge placed his hand on his back for inspection. From the sideline, Alberta could see moisture forming at the corner of Buddy’s mouth. Couldn’t Elizabeth stop him from drooling?

Her heart pounds. Three loud bangs sound on the hotel room door. She glances at the clock—11:45 p.m. She throws off the blankets and dons a robe. With the security lock still on, she peers through the peephole. No one. She hesitates before cracking the door. Still no one. Perhaps some party heads had too much to drink.

As she stands there, she feels something underfoot, an envelope hand addressed to Miss Larkin. She closes the door and tears it open. Inside she finds a note:

Meet me by the fountain in the park across the street in 15 minutes. Come alone.

--Buddy

Many top-flight people from the show stay at the hotel, and since the note is on hotel stationery, she figures it's a guest. The hotel has security cameras, so it shouldn't be difficult to discover who.

Alberta parts the curtains and gazes across the street. The park is covered in shadows, but she can see the fountain in the distance. A circle of lights illuminate a statue of a Greek goddess. She pulls on a sweater and slacks and slips into her walking shoes. She calls Elizabeth, hoping she'll pick up but must leave a message. Someone found Buddy, and she's about to get him back.

Pushing through the revolving doors, she decides to go back to the front desk. Unfortunately, hotel security will not return until 7 a.m. She lets the clerk know where she's going and says to contact the police if she's not back in 15 minutes.

Tall bushes line the walkway into the park and cast shadows where someone could lurk. Several sidewalks intersect at angles, and they, too, are lined with bushes and overhanging trees. Against the light of the park lamps, branches perform a ghostly dance in the breeze. Alberta's heart flutters. She bites her lip and presses forward, determined to get Buddy back.

As she approaches the fountain, the sound of rushing water builds as if she's emerging from a giant seashell. She can't see anyone, but she's still a minute early. She walks around the fountain twice then sits on a dry portion of the ledge and glances at her watch. It's midnight. Still no word from Elizabeth.

She takes a long breath and exhales. Then a man in blue jeans strolls from the sidewalk behind her.

"Miss Larkin?"

She turns. "Are you Buddy?"

"No. You can call me Max."

Alberta couldn't see his eyes, but he seems to be forty-ish with a close beard and a gothic cross tattooed on his hand. "Do you know where Buddy is?"

"That's why we're here, isn't it?"

"Do you want a reward?"

“No, no, no. It’s nothing like that.”

“Well, what then, *Max*? Do you have my dog, or what?”

“Yes, and we’re here to give Buddy back. But you need to understand something first, Miss Larkin, because it’s not anything like you think.”

Alberta wonders what he thought she must think but figures it best not to ask. After all, he did steal her dog which made him a thief, and given the value of her dog, a grand thief. She can only muster one word: “We?”

“You can come out now, Eddie.”

A young man steps from the hedge and walks up to her with Buddy on a leash. The dog hops at her knees and wags his tail as he licks her face.

“Oh, you’re so happy to see me, aren’t you?” She kisses Buddy and rubs his back.

“Eddie, take him off the leash.”

Alberta notices the leash is an electrical cord from a lamp. “You didn’t hurt him, did you?”

“Oh, no. We wouldn’t do that, Miss Larkin,” Max says.

Eddie finally speaks. “We lub Buddy. We lub Buddy.”

Alberta looks the young man in the face, but the streetlamp is behind him. His knees are bent slightly, and his shoulders slump forward. He takes a seat next to her and pets the dog.

“Can we keep him? Can we keep him?”

“I told you, Eddie, he’s not ours. We have to give him back now. Buddy belongs to Miss Larkin.”

Max looks at Alberta. “Eddie’s on the spectrum. It’s not easy, especially now that he’s 19. He topped out of the system last year, and public services are non-existent. I’m in the electrical union, but I’m not rich. My wife passed away three years ago. Eddie lives with me, and I have my hands full. I mean, if it weren’t for the dog shows on TV...

“So is that why you took Buddy?”

“Well, I didn’t say *I* took him?”

“Look, I’m just glad to get my dog back. But somehow, I doubt Eddie took the dog on his own.”

Max shifts back and forth on his feet. “Listen, Eddie’s not stupid. In fact, he knows everything there is to know about Buddy, every award he’s ever won. Just ask him...” Alberta doesn’t reply.

“Ok, I’ll ask him: Hey, Eddie, what’s the first AKC show Buddy won?”

“Best in Breed in Florida at the Sarasota show in 2021 with Elizabeth Monteroy as his handler. Buddy beat out seven other bulldogs. Ace came in second, and Breckinridge third.”

“See? Eddie doesn’t slur when it comes to dogs.”

“Well, even if Buddy escaped his cage, Eddie must’ve had some help.”

“Don’t you see, Ms. Larkin? Eddie’s my only son. I love him just as you love your dog, and Buddy helped pull Eddie out of his shell.”

In front of the hotel, red and blue lights are flashing. “OK, so what do you want then?”

“I just wanted to give Eddie a dog-day afternoon with the dog he loved. I should’ve returned him sooner, but they were having such a good time together.”

A female police officer walks up with a flashlight, her partner approaches from the other side shining the light in Max’s face.

“We got a call. Is this man bothering you?”

Alberta stands up with the dog in her arms. “We’re ok, officers.” Alberta can see Max’s eyes now. His face is weathered. She whispers. “Are you sure there’s nothing you want, Max?”

“Just to be friends,” he says.

Eddie is sobbing. Alberta lets him hug Buddy one more time. She takes Max’s contact info for the fan list and promises to keep in touch.

The next day, the Best in Show winner is not Buddy but, coincidentally, a Petit Basset Griffon Vendéen named “Buddy Holly.” Alberta feels no disappointment, no jealousy, but rather a sense of relief. Her Buddy performed well, and she feels brighter than she’s felt in a long time. At the after-party, she chats with some of her favorite AKC people.

The following week, a background check shows Max is indeed a solid guy, and she calls to get to know him better. Though not her type, she admires his heart and tenacity. They arrange regular video chats that include Eddie, and of course, Buddy. Eddie is both caring and responsible, and on one call, he shows her his hamsters.

A few months later, she calls to show them the new litter Buddy has sired. After discussing it with Max, she tells Eddie the news on his birthday. One of the pups is for him. She’s the runt of the litter. She’ll be weaned in time for the Madison Square Garden show, and they’ll have choice seats.

When Eddie finally sees the wrinkly puppy, he falls instantly in love. He names her, of course, “Miss Larkin.”

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