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The Voice

By Joe Kilgore

Who would have thought it possible, particularly today, when everything and everyone is subject to microscopic scrutiny from the press, the blogosphere, the paparazzi, even the government... It was the sort of thing that most would say could not happen. But it has.

It began in the wee hours of the morning. A local late-night disk jockey for a radio station in far West Texas called in sick twenty minutes before his show was to air. The engineer on duty, fearing nothing quite so much as having to take the microphone himself, rummaged through stacks of program tapes in hopes of coming up with something that hadn't been played and replayed countless times already. He found a tape marked "The Voice" 90 minutes. That would suffice, he decided, listenership at such an ungodly hour being virtually nonexistent anyway. At two a.m. The Voice aired for the first time.

It was a calm voice, deep, though not raspy, sonorous, some might say. There was no background music, only a single voice intoning straightforwardly, pleasantly. A voice that neither hurried nor plodded. It

simply spoke in a cadence both measured and mild. And this is the first thing it said, "I will always tell you what I truly believe. You can count on me"

For the next ninety minutes, The Voice covered a wide array of subjects--philosophy, psychology, religion, culture and more. It avoided proselytizing. It neither condemned or recommended any particular mode of behavior. Instead, it simply discussed the overall nature of things. What some people believed. Why they believed it. Why others felt differently. Its monologue was, in a word, mesmerizing.

At three-thirty, when The Voice stopped, and normal programming began again in the form of continuous country music interrupted only by local used-car and supermarket commercials, the telephone calls and e-mails began. The engineer was soon flooded with a tsunami of questions he couldn't answer and requests for re-airing the parts that listeners had missed. He had no idea how to respond. So at 4 a.m. he played the tape again.

By the time the regular day shift arrived for work, the radio station was besieged. Who was the voice? When was it going to be on again? Why didn't the station's regular programming guide include it? The communication holding company, which owned the station, called and said they too had been inundated with entreaties about when the voice would be airing again, and which of their stations might carry the broadcasts. Why hadn't they been informed? Who was this new talent? Had The Voice signed a contract? The West Texas general manager was beside himself. He had a phenomenon on his hands and he was unaccustomed to dealing with success. But he was not without ingenuity. He found the package the unsolicited tape had arrived in, and he immediately contacted the e-mail address that had been included.

The e-mail he received in reply was succinct. Yes, the tape could be re-aired at the price the station manager had suggested. Yes, more tapes would be supplied and approval was given to air them on all the holding company's stations at the agreed-upon price. No, there would be no biography or publicity stills included with the tapes. The anonymity of The Voice would be maintained. That was non-negotiable.

Within weeks, a media maelstrom was raging. The Voice had gone into syndication.

It was heard on radio stations across the country. Critics from newspapers, magazines, radio, even the talking heads of television, were vying with one another to best explain the zeitgeist that was gripping the nation over this unseen purveyor of solemnity and wisdom that people were embracing. Investigative journalists were looking into e-mail and street addresses that changed constantly. Paparazzi hung out at studios and offices hoping to snare the elusive face behind the sound. Bloggers converted the broadcasts into manuscripts, seeking opinions from the worldwide web to help unmask the author. Unbeknownst to the public, with the permission of the communication company, The FBI examined the tapes for any clues that might lead to the name or whereabouts of the sender. But all was for naught; The Voice managed to stay off the grid while still getting its words to an increasingly adoring public.

When people were asked to explain their fascination with The Voice and its messages, their responses were different, yet somehow similar.

"It sounds calm and reassuring."

"It's not trying to sell us anything."

"It makes sense, common sense."

"I trust it."

"I get lonely when I don't hear it."

The enthralment with The Voice and its broadcasts went on, unabated, for months. Then someone, perhaps one of the anonymous individuals who log on to chat boxes, suggested that The Voice become a candidate in the upcoming presidential election.

Wildfire is too mild a name for what happened next. Tearing across the Internet first, the ludicrous thought then started tumbling out of the mouths of talk-show hosts. Celebrity guests referred to the idea as innovative. Spokespeople for non-mainstream political parties suggested that The Voice couldn't be worse than the major party nominees. As the political season progressed, poll after poll showed the public was far from enamored with either party's ticket and intrigued with the idea of The Voice as a candidate. The communication conglomerate loved the idea. It meant even more publicity for them. And if it also meant they had to give other candidates equal airtime, so be it. They were riding a comet.

Filing fees were paid. There were no election laws that stated a candidate had to appear in person to be on any ballot. In fact, there were no laws that said a candidate had to appear at all. So The Voice, perhaps less reluctantly than some might have expected, agreed to run.

There was initial concern regarding the debates, until an ambitious young executive suggested that it might make great television to have each candidate on either side of an unattended podium, with only a microphone atop it to transmit responses from The Voice's undisclosed location. Smashing idea, the networks concluded. The traditional candidates, needing exposure at any cost, agreed. They, of course, lambasted The Voice as craven, cowardly, and comical for attending the contest via satellite feed. But The Voice didn't respond to their attacks. In fact, it never acknowledged their presence at all. It simply spoke directly to the people, as it always had, clearly, calmly, convincingly. It was as if the other two candidates were the ones who weren't there. Only one debate was needed.

The inaugural address was given from the Capital steps in the same manner. An unattended microphone addressed an exuberant throng. Enraptured by exquisite timber and soaring rhetoric, no one seemed to find it the least bit odd.

The White House was totally re-wired to accommodate its new absentee tenant. The Voice, secure in an undisclosed location, could hear anything and everything that went on in every room. Discussions and instructions were disseminated via strategically located speakers. Even the hallways were equipped with broadcast capabilities.

Appointees for cabinet positions were selected, vetted, and eventually interviewed by The Voice over secure audio lines specifically designed for confidential communication.

Initially there was a degree of angst over relatively unknown individuals selected to serve in important administration positions, but confirmation hearings proceeded with far less bickering than usual. Popularity of The Voice was at such an astronomical level that few politicians felt it wise to publicly oppose its nominees. In fact, to better ingratiate itself with the public, both houses of Congress fast-tracked an end to term limits on the office of President.

This general state of compromise and cooperation pleased the public, long tired of endless debate and rancor among its elected officials.

Therefore it was not surprising that legislation too was subject to a similar

scenario. The Voice would recommend a bill. Congress would go through the motions of debating it, though never with any displays of animosity or real disagreement. It would then be voted into law.

The Voice made weekly addresses to the nation informing all of how well the government was functioning now that logic and order had replaced debate and discord.

And it was certainly verifiable that not only the trains, but the planes and everything else seemed to run on time far better than ever before.

It is without exaggeration to say that by now the citizenry was completely under the spell of The Voice. Nothing it did surprised, dispirited, or angered them. A general aversion to any sort of discontent seemed to emerge. Everything was decidedly better now that The Voice was in charge. Why would anyone want to go back to the way things were before? Finally, the country was on the way to achieving its destiny.

Little wonder then, that there was nothing but compliance when The Voice said it was necessary to take far more unique approaches to solving the few social ills that remained.

New measures would be initiated, it intoned. Measures that, to put it bluntly, shocked many in the outside world, but seemed to have little antagonistic effect within the country's borders.

Unemployment was the first issue The Voice addressed. Its dulcet tones laid out the proposition that overpopulation was the cause. There were simply too many people and not enough jobs. The solution would be euthanasia of everyone over the age of sixty. Were there cries of "appalling", "inhuman", "reprehensible"? Only from the outside world. Only from those not fortunate enough to have been subject to the teachings, the vision, some uninformed might say, the indoctrination of The Voice.

Within the country, the overwhelming response was predictable. If it came from The Voice, how could it not be the right thing to do?

Obediently, people gave the authorities addresses of their mothers, fathers, grandparents and more, who were trucked to local area hospitals where lethal drugs were administered. Painless drugs, of course. As promised by The Voice.

Immigration was next. All those who spoke with any sort of accent or regional dialect not pleasing, or in some way similar to The Voice, were to be rounded up, held in internment camps, and eventually deported. It was, The Voice explained, the sensible and humane way to deal with this divisive issue.

Economic imbalance created major potential for public strife, The Voice proclaimed. It made imminent sense then that all wages, bank accounts, stocks, bonds, and other forms of individual income should therefore be impounded and put in escrow to be divided equally among the general population. Such division to be overseen personally by The Voice.

Indeed, those measures, plus other like-minded reforms, were administered with reasoned, persuasive, passionless rationale from The Voice, and acquiesced to by an increasingly passive and lethargic public, made more so by government-sanctioned, universal distribution of free barbiturates and anti-depressants.

Looked at from the outside, some might say that such things are unimaginable, absurd, incomprehensible. But such views are reflected only by those who have not been privy to the insights, the information, the direction, of The Voice.

You see, from one coast to the other, a contented ennui has settled in. We are all comfortable in our sedation. No longer do we even try to ascertain the identity of The Voice, where it comes from, or for that matter, when, if ever, it might decide to leave. Curiosity, inquisitiveness, and of course a few malcontents might say sanity, have virtually ceased to exist.

Still, there was that one item in the newspaper the other day. A simple one-column filler, just below the fold. It probably wasn't true. Or, if it was, it was certainly an anomaly. But believe it or not, it said there was a radio station, way out in West Texas, which had issued a formal apology to each and every citizen; an apology that also included the unbelievable announcement that henceforth, regardless of what might eventually happen to their license, they will no longer air any broadcasts whatsoever, from The Voice.

Fallen Flyboy

by Cathy Eaton

The mailbox wasn't empty. Her heart rate drummed faster than her feet as she raced up the front steps of her parents' home. A letter from Colchester, the town nearest to the English airbase where her husband had been stationed for three months.

But the flimsy envelope postmarked July 26, 1942, wasn't from her husband.

Mary smiled anyway. Yet another of her Cy's squadron mates was writing. How they loved the socks, scarves, and sweaters that she'd been knitting and posting overseas. It made her feel good, sending handmade things from home. With all the requests she was getting from Cy's flying buddies, she planned to recruit her friends to start knitting.

Mary, home from work, deposited the rest of the mail on a table on the kitchen table, slipped out of her heels and shrugged off her suit jacket before she banged shut the mudroom door and padded barefoot across the lawn behind her childhood home. She slumped down against the fence inside her dad's Victory Garden and wriggled her toes in the soft blades of grass.

"We all loved Cy," the letter began. "It tortures me that I must be the bearer of such unthinkable news, but I will do my best to describe the details of the mission." Her stomach lurched, and the sky tilted as the twenty year old blinked furiously, needing to decipher what this man she'd never met was trying to explain about her husband. Phrases lurched out.

Awakened ...June 30th...Six crews ... our squadron's contribution to the raid...
Leveled off ... ten thousand feet...coast of Belgium... flak...evasive tactics...
Jerries throwing stuff up...Cy's ship ...a wide spiral...Three Jerry
fighters...riddled the plane...Damn cold-blooded...spiral tightened into a
spin...hoping the ship broke up sufficiently to enable some of the crew to
escape.

The toxic words tingled her fingertips as she clutched the letter to her breast. Numbness seeped into her chest and spread to her knees that were hunched into her body. She wanted to roll up into a tight ball like the caterpillar she had plucked off a tomato plant. The sounds of neighbor kids jumping rope and cars streaming home from work evaporated until she was enveloped in a cocoon of silence. Later, much later, she crawled past a row of leafy lettuce. She saw dandelions poking their jagged leaves through the earth. Her fingers ripped them out, but their roots defied her. She dug with her hands. They were the enemy. If she could rid the garden of these diabolic weeds, then she could make the words of the letter disappear, make today turn back to last week when Cy had been writing about the lousy food at mess time.

Official word arrived later: a uniformed colonel, a folded flag, and a crisp salute. Family gathered and a stream of visitors invaded their home to shower Mary with their sympathy, but she refused to sanction a funeral, refused to grieve. No one witnessed her shed tears.

A reporter seeking to write an article about the fallen flyboy came to interview the young widow, married less than a year. Mary wore red, not black. A fashionable belt singed her slender waist. Blond wavy hair framed her freckled

face. She looked like a high school student, not a war widow. She interrupted each attempt to express condolence with a tale of Cy's crazy antics as if at any moment he'd walk in the door and take them for a spin in his convertible. The newspaper columnist, Margaret Nye wrote:

We fluttered our handkerchiefs and began to murmur, but she said, "That crazy guy! Always getting into scrapes—Do you remember when he rode the wild colt and he stayed on for five minutes before the colt threw him and tried to stomp on him, but he hung to her foreleg and wasn't hurt a bit."

We leaned back in our chairs and remembered and kept looking at her.

"Why, that crazy guy," she said. "Remember when he took the sailboat out and the storm came and everybody said no boat could live through it, and then he came in and there was a cut on his face and the mast had broken, and he asked what we were fussing about."

No word from Cy came, and Mary's parents welcomed their daughter to wait out the war with them. The priest at their parish told them to try to keep life as normal as possible. Everybody went off to their jobs during the day and came home at night to eat dinner as a family. In the evenings they played bridge or hearts. Mary's concentration was sloppy. While the others counted points and took tricks, her thoughts drifted to the roasted chicken she'd prepared for Cy in the cottage they would buy in the country when he returned. Her parents fretted as she spent more and more time drawing sketches of cottages. She even cut out tiny photographs from magazines of appliances and furniture that she glued into rooms labeled kitchen, dining room, and bedroom.

She needed to believe that Cy was coming home to her. In his last letter before his bomber spiraled out of control, he'd closed with a promise.

"Just so you'll understand and won't worry—a great many boys get shot down, and aren't heard of for a long while—but they are all usually safe. If anything like that should happen to me, you'll know I'm O.K."

A month after his plane was shot down, her trust was vindicated. Another letter came from a stranger, this one postmarked Holland.

Dear Mary,

Your husband dropped from his aeroplane, while he was flying from England to Germany in the South of Holland, in the River Schelde. I was there in the vicinity with my ship, and it made me very happy to be able to save him from death, when he came down by parachute. He was wounded on his breast, back, and legs, his bearing was very courageous. His situation was not hopeless. I was very sorry to be compelled to hand him over to the German authorities and probably they have brought him to the hospital at Benyen op-Zoom, as their prisoner.

Mary's counterfeit smiles became real. She felt lighter and began picking names for their children. The hinges on the door of the mailbox practically wore out with her constant yanking it open to search for mail.

On August 13, 1942, Mary received a postcard from Cy:

Darling: Am a German prisoner of War! This is my first chance to write. Let Squadron know... I was the only one who got out alive. Have sorta been through hell. Taken 27 shell fragments out of me but feel pretty good now. Spend most of the time thinking of all the fun we will have when it's all over. All my love to you. Cy

Energy flooded Mary. She began volunteering in the maternity ward at the hospital. Each baby she rocked was one step closer to holding her own babies. She resumed knitting socks, hats, and scarves for Cy's war buddies back in England. She wanted to keep them all warm, to keep them safe. She scoured magazines for decorating ideas for their cottage home. Every day was a gift.

For nineteen months, Cy and Mary exchanged letters that the Germans and Americans censored. Thick black lines drawn through sentences robbed the couple of pieces of this fragile lifeline. As permitted by the Red Cross, Mary sent monthly packages: books, more wool socks, chocolates. Cy received only two parcels.

In February 1944, Cy wrote a letter detailing how he was teaching a philosophy

class to the other officers. He described chess tournaments, track competitions to keep fit, and gardening to keep sane. No letters arrived from Cy during the month of March. Nothing in April.

Mary wrote daily. Just because his letters weren't getting through didn't mean hers wouldn't reach him.

At first Mary made excuses. Battle chaos and the retreating Germans were to blame. Each morning, her mother practically shoved her out the door. It was all Mary could do to drag herself to the advertising agency where she took dictation. She pretended not to notice how the clacking of the typewriters sounded like gunfire. She rouged her cheeks to hide their paleness. She splurged on red lipstick as if to paint a smile on her face. Friends tiptoed around her, and their compassion felt like betrayal. She hushed their pity with stories about that crazy daredevil she'd married. The guy who during training had flown beneath bridges and dive-bombed barn roofs, making farmers leap into haystacks.

Death kept ambushing her. In less than a month she attended seven funerals: her neighbor, two high school friends, three guys from basic training, and Cy's fraternity brother, all young warriors who wouldn't be coming home. Ministers spewed sermons about sacrifice and courage.

At home Mary knitted late into the night, postponing sleep as long as possible. Her dreams sucked her into a war newsreel. First scene: jaunty pilots wave from their bombers. Second scene: squadrons of planes blow up munitions factories, bridges, and troop trains. Third scene: dirt clumps on flag-draped coffins. Fourth scene: jaunty pilot waves from his cockpit. Some nights she woke up and couldn't remember the color of Cy's eyes. She pressed her face into her pillow on those nights so she wouldn't scream.

Mary began canceling dates with friends. Volunteering in the maternity ward became impossible. She hibernated in her bedroom. Once slender, she grew gaunt. In June her older sister coaxed Mary to take a train to visit their father, who had been transferred to Washington D.C.

On the night of their arrival, while they rocked in wicker chairs on the porch of the boarding house where he rented a room, he paced in front of his daughter. Usually quick with a story, on this day his words stuttered to a stop.

Mary smiled at her father. "What is it, Dad? Cat got your tongue?"

He knelt at her feet and reached his hand to stop the steady creak-thump of the rocking chair. "For six months the Red Cross has not been able to find any record of Cy."

Her smile evaporated. She started to say, "Well everything's chaotic over there. His letter promi . . ." but her windpipe squeezed shut and she couldn't remember what she had started to say. Her jaw hinged open as she gulped air, searching for oxygen, searching his eyes for a glimmer of hope.

"You have to accept that he's not coming home," her father continued. "It's time to let him go."

"You're wrong," Mary finally choked out. "He promised."

Her father's erect posture slumped as he stroked his daughter's fists that were clenched into the hollow of her stomach. She couldn't feel his touch; she couldn't feel anything. Ice chips moved from her fingers, through her veins, to her heart.

Hours later, Mary agreed to go out for a walk. Anything to stop seeing their gouging pity. Her father and sister escorted the shell-shocked war widow down the grassy avenues of the Washington Mall. Abruptly, she broke away from them and rushed ahead to catch up to a tall aviator in a khaki tunic, screaming her husband's name. When he turned to face her, she saw Cy's blue eyes, his tooth that had been chipped in a hockey scrimmage. She grabbed the pilot's arm as if she would tear it out of its socket. Her father and sister had to pull her away from the startled soldier. They bundled her into a taxi. Despite the gas shortage, her father paid the cabbie to drive along the Potomac River until her rampage of tears dried.

The rattling, swaying train trip back to Cleveland drugged her asleep. Back home, weightless like the feather from a down pillow, her body floated up the

spiral staircase to the bedroom she shared with her younger sister. She didn't undress but burrowed beneath the covers.

Despite the summer heat, she shivered.

She tried to imagine Cy's final hours. Had shrapnel wormed into his heart and poisoned him? Had a Nazi guard drilled him with bullets? Had pneumonia suffocated him?

Mary squinched her eyes shut, willing herself to witness his departure from life. No visions came. Then she squeezed her skull between her hands and tried to envision a life without him. She couldn't.

He had promised he'd return.

Finally sleep soothed her torment, as if the doctor had dosed her with morphine.

The phone rang. Its harsh jangle woke Mary. She listened to the footsteps thudding down the stairs to the hallway foyer. More footsteps. Her door creaked open. Why wouldn't they leave her alone?

"Mary, hurry. The phone, it's for you." Her feet carried her downstairs. Her hands raised the phone to press against her ear.

"I'm home, Darling. We escaped our German guards. Everything was chaotic. They were marching us to another camp as they raced to flee the Americans."

Air gushed out of Mary's lungs. The floor tilted as she pressed the phone so hard against her ear that it bruised her cheek.

"Where are you?" Her voice sounded shrill.

His voice sounded bruised and far away. Static made it difficult to understand his words. "In Washington D.C.," she finally made out.

"I'm coming," she said and told him she'd be on the first plane. She had so much to say to him, but for the moment her words shriveled up. Someone pried Mary's whitened knuckles off the phone. Her younger sister wrote down the address of the Pentagon.

Seven hours later, in a staff sergeant's office, Mary embraced her husband. Three of his teeth were missing. His skin was blotched with a rash. She barely recognized the cocky flyboy she'd married. An emaciated soldier wrapped his arms around her. In all the years she had awaited his return, it never occurred to her that he would return a stranger.

That night she cradled his emaciated torso in her arms as if he were a newborn in the maternity ward. She rocked him in her arms as he gazed into her eyes, trusting her to make him whole again.

The Isle of Langerhans

By Denise Bouchard

"Excuse me, Edgar," she whispered. "I hate to disturb you but I was wondering if you could help me with something."

He simply looked at her and waited, his brows raised in question. She felt uncharacteristically flustered. For a guy who was considered to be a real geek, he didn't behave half as unsure of himself around her as some of the more suave guys did.

"Could you help me with my advanced biology classes?"

He barely looked up now from his stack of books on the long library table, though the fact that she was beautiful was not lost on him. Her name was Ava and like her namesake "men would have to prop themselves up around buildings when she walked by." She was known to be a big flirt around campus which was no sin in his mind, the only problem being that she never flirted with him. She hardly spoke to him yet here she was in need and still she was flirting, just stating that need. He could almost respect that.

"I'm really busy right now, Ava. I'm working on my dissertation."

"I'll make dinner for you," she said almost playfully.

Ah! Here was the flirtatious move. It wouldn't hurt his reputation, he supposed, to spend a few hours with the type of girl every other girl tried to emulate.

"Even a man working on his dissertation needs to eat," she added and smiled.

He was paying attention suddenly, her eyes were taking him in and he couldn't turn away as if their gaze was a siren call and he was crashing into the rocks.

"You're right, I do need to eat." He couldn't argue with that.

"Saturday night at seven?"

Well, well, well...things are looking up for me, he thought sarcastically, *she's just given the class geek a peak time slot*. He knew that she was using him and as soon as study/dinner hour was over he'd have to be on his way and that during that insufferable meal, every guy in campus would be calling on her. And what does one talk about with a girl for whom fashion is her bible?

To his surprise that night, her cooking was as good as her fashion sense. She'd made a roast, the carrots and potatoes browning in the pan, making his mouth water as soon as he walked in the door. She served an excellent vintage wine. It was not only the best food he'd had in months but she was charming, witty and surprisingly humble at her own expense. Thus, he was surprised to find himself relaxing for once. She was the only woman he'd found who was easy enough to be with for a short while without getting tongue-tied.

"So what do you need help with?" he asked her as they sat on the plush, comfy couch in one of the nicest apartments around campus which had interesting, and he was sure very expensive, artwork gracing its walls.

"Memorization of the endocrinological communications systems. I bombed the last test and this one doesn't look like I'll fare any better."

"May I be so blunt as to ask why you went into this course of study when it's all biology and chemistry?" He knew it was a rude question but he had to ask.

"Well, the grades are there usually and so is the interest, to the point where I'd like to do research on this someday. Of course, I like the idea of the money I could make as a doctor," she laughed, "...as well as the prestige. I come from a long line of doctors. It was this or becoming a lawyer for, as my father liked to say, I could argue my way out of anything but I couldn't square with letting a guilty person go free."

"Those are good reasons! So tell me exactly what systems you're having trouble with."

"The pituitary axis. It's very complicated, especially the way the female endocrine system seems to rule a woman's body, her mind, her life, actually. How does the hypothalamus, the pituitary axis, the Islets of Langerhans communicate and how can we as doctors affect said systems if they don't communicate well within the patient?"

What would it hurt, he thought, *to help her get ahead?* She was far more intelligent than he gave her credit for, he could surmise this just by her questions and what was more, she seemed to care for said future patients. He decided to give her a few of his study secrets. *Who knows? We might even become friends.*

"Ok- I have a trick for things like that."

"Spill," she said and once again gave him that smile that she was so famous for.

Her delicate hand was wrapped around her wine glass, her long red nails so well groomed. This was, he knew, the only way he'd ever be in the presence of a woman like this. The women of academia that he associated with looked more like him.

"The axis is like the axis of the earth," he began, "...the control panel, if you will." He went on comparing the pituitary, the hypothalamus, sympathetic thyroid and thyroid to the planets and their proper alignments until she could

visualize it, understanding the synergy. He told her of how he imagined the Islets of Langerhans as little islands because of their function and given name. "It sounds exotic," he said, "...so I imagine it as my secret vacation hideaway in the Balkans where I take my favorite paramours."

She loved that; she just laughed and laughed. Perhaps by now she was a bit drunk.

He was smoking his pipe now as he described kidney-shaped organs as the pools where he and his lovers took their late night excursions. She saw it all and he worked with her so patiently as she sat at his feet, delighted with how he helped her to imagine everything so vividly until she had a way of connecting the dots and putting it all together. This way, she could not only pass but someday soon be able to confidently explain it in its exact terms to her patients who in turn would then not understand but would rely on her to reiterate it in laymen's terms that in the case of something like Graves disease for example, that though they had a serious problem, it could be lived with and what her prescribed course of action would be to better their lives.

She was so grateful and found that he looked somewhat distinguished when he was in his element. His sleeves were rolled up now. He sat back on the couch exhausted and still he had to go back to his dark, dingy little dorm room to study. The other guys would be spinning loud music all night long of the great decade they were in, the good old 60s. He told her he hated the music. "It's just noise." He also told her how none of them were serious students- that if he had to listen to "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" by Iron Butterfly one more time he didn't know what he would do.

When she heard this, her heart went out to him. She didn't want him to leave. She'd actually enjoyed the evening immensely and hadn't laughed so much or saw things so succinctly in a long while. It wasn't just the studying either. She'd enjoyed their conversation at dinner and when she had put on soft classical music in the background, he came alive. They found that they had much in common including ancient history, the objectivist poets and surrealist painters. She thought he'd enjoy traveling abroad with her. She did not tell him that like those other students, she also loved the so-called "hippie music" of her generation and could be found on most weekends dancing to it. She omitted this because she hadn't had such a seriously nice time for so long so that even she was surprised as she found herself saying, "Stay, stay here and study." Yet she was not as surprised as he was.

"Excuse me?"

"Stay the night. I'll clean up the dishes, I have a spare room or you can study here in the dining room. Believe me, you did me a big favor. You can study all night and I'll leave you to it."

He was so shocked by this that for the first time that evening he was at a loss for words. His instincts were to run, he'd only pretended to be confidant earlier, he'd never been alone with a woman all night before. Her easy way had made him feel almost suave so that on that evening he was perceived as such. He knew of course how he was usually perceived. He actually was the stereotypical scholarly type. He could've been 'okay looking' as he'd been told by other girls if... if he gained a bit of weight or muscle, if he had more hair, if he was better groomed, if he lost the square glasses and wasn't so shy, so awkward around women. His saving graces were a strong voice, nice eyes trimmed with long lashes, olive skin that tanned well and lately he'd taken to growing a beard to look wiser, older, less round in the cheeks.

He stayed and he actually got an enormous amount of studying done. Around four in the morning, she woke to find him still hitting the books. She brought him coffee and nearly knocked him off his chair in a sense when she started massaging his shoulders. He flinched.

"Enough work," she said and she led him to the bedroom; not the spare but hers.

"This isn't necessary," he whispered.

"I know," she replied as she looked at him with caring in her eyes.

Everyone was stunned silly when they began dating exclusively. He just wasn't at her level socially, not even close. He helped her almost nightly to study in the special way he had of having her picture things in an interesting fashion so that

she would have superb test recall. It took almost all the energy he had to groom her into a real academian and though she plied him with good food and fine wines, he was becoming stretched thin between his own studies and pushing her exponentially forward.

Consequently, she started doing so well in class that she began to surpass even him, his attentions having wandered. Lust was so new to him; he was so enamored that even the smell of her perfume made him want to lie down. He'd never known such bliss and he was very proud of her progress; all he was doing in his own mind was giving her a little push. She was also finally considered as a doctoral candidate and did her thesis on diabetes.

Their classmates were doubly surprised when at commencement she graduated summa cum laude and he magna, surely he was the smarter one. Ava, was a bright girl, a nice girl, but...

As she gave the valedictorian speech, none of her former boyfriends could take their eyes off of her as they wondered when she would be free.

So when Ava and Edgar announced as a couple at an after-party their plans for a European trip together, tongues really started wagging; especially since she was paying for it all. They'd figured she'd only been using Edgar and they had been prepared to get in line with marriage proposals.

Edgar didn't care what people said, he couldn't believe his good fortune. He was in love with her and would ask her to marry him when they got to Paris. His life had, no pun intended, turned on its *axis*, he thought, since the night he'd helped her to study. He would make her truly happy and as often as possible bring her flowers and breakfast in bed after they were married.

They visited almost every church in Italy, lingering over the frescoes, swam in the Mediterranean and she even tried to teach him to slow dance. The latter, the subject of much laughter from both of them.

That night, he planned to take her out for a change. He didn't have much money yet but someday he'd do ok as a professor with a PhD though not nearly as well as she with her MD. When he was honest with himself, he was really too shy to be a practitioner. He didn't want to touch anyone, except for her. And he wanted to touch her all the time. This facet of his life was new and exciting to him but he saw her as the consummate lady and wanted to make it legal and binding.

On vacation, he finally had time to be alone with her- no studying, no distractions- and he made love to her often...

She felt like she was gagging. She felt trapped. When would this charade be over? She had started out with good intentions in Cambridge and it had been nice. She even thought that his awkwardness might fade under her own tutelage. It did not. It started out as little things- sloppy clothing in the form of un-ironed shirts and ill-fitting, un-tailored blazers, messy habits, monotonously dull life stories... but then it had crept into the bedroom. Sharing such close personal space with him was utterly revealing to her. She'd lie there under his unimaginative hands night after night, gritting her teeth as he asked "May I kiss you again?" "Is it alright if I try this?" She wasn't one to play Mother May I; she wanted to be taken. *Be a man!* her mind screamed. *Be like the others.* She had all she could do not to punch him in the face, his fear bringing out the shrew in her more surely than if he'd been too aggressive.

The restaurant he chose was the La Tour d'Argent on the Quai de la Tournelle, a four hundred year old restaurant, considered to be one of the finest not only in Paris but in the world and they were treated like royalty. Waiting for the right moment, he awkwardly got down on bended knee. She thought he'd dropped something and wished he would sit back on his chair as people began to turn and stare. His pants tugged so he was finally now on both knees as he handed her the box with a small ring.

"I'll buy you a bigger one someday," he said as he held it out to her. He added, "We'll really have to tighten our belts back in Cambridge for awhile." This ring was going to take all his extra money as it was for now. They'd live a simple life...

Her eyes were wide. She looked at it, at him dumbfounded. He was happy that he'd surprised her enough so as to render her speechless. Then, she let out a kind of astonished cry or was it a laugh? She was almost confused by his

words. She couldn't imagine a worse fate for herself, as though the tightening of their belts was like a noose around her neck. She was shaking her head and tried to say 'softly' now as everyone was watching, "I don't love you in this way. I...was going to tell you...after the trip, but...I thought you knew! Edgar," she tried again, "...please get up. You're embarrassing me." A few seconds passed. Still down on his knees in a world famous restaurant where everyone was awaiting his reaction, something inside of him snapped. He'd been ridiculed a lot in his life but never had he felt like such a fool and she was embarrassed. He could almost hear what they'd say back in Cambridge where he would be living and teaching for the rest of his life. She'd be at the hospital telling all of their colleagues, "I thought he knew..."; perhaps she'd say this and laugh. No matter what happened, it would be those words that went down in history as certain as if they were to appear on his epitaph.

He looked down and put on a long-practiced smile, laughing it off, saying, "It's okay, folks. Win some, lose some." They finished their meal in strained silence.

Later, walking along the Seine, he told her, "Ava, you're right about this. I'd hate to ruin what could be a lifelong friendship instead of having one of those marriages of convenience like so many of our colleagues. Let's not waste next week mired down in what-ifs or recriminations. Truth be told, in the morning, I was hoping to do a little exploring alone. Then, we can meet back at the hotel at the day's end and we'll have a late night dessert; from there we can go on as planned to the Côte d'azur for our last week. Let's make the best of these last days together and we'll return to Cambridge as friends."

"Oh, Edgar," she said, "...you are such a sweet, dear man. Thank you for being so good about this."

"I only ask one thing from you," he added, "...people tend to blow things like this out of proportion. Please don't tell anyone about tonight- not the ring, not the proposal. It's all I ask. I do need to go back there and live my life. I wouldn't want 'us' to look foolish, to become the stuff of legends." He knew if he included her in looking foolish, she'd acquiesce.

"You know Edgar, I agree whole-heartedly on that. Here's to another one of our little secrets." She reached out and touched his hand. "If it's any consolation, Edgar, I do care about you deeply, you're just too good for me."

It was those stupid last words that sealed what was already well-formed in his mind.

The headlines in the New England papers were shocking- "Beautiful Co-ed Dies in Hotel Pool on Vacation, Ruled Accidental, Fiancé is Heart-broken". And the story went on to describe how he'd adored her and how happy they were, how he'd proposed just a week before in Paris. Her mother cried at the news when Edgar broke it to her. Ava was buried in Cambridge with the tiny ring she'd hated. He'd immediately put it on her hand after she had "drowned" to be worn for all eternity. "It will be a great comfort to her," he'd assured her mother who had never even considered an autopsy, so great was her trust in Edgar and so obviously deep was his grief.

He barely thought of her now, except late at night. He'd always been the smarter one. When he'd gone through her summer itinerary the morning after the restaurant fiasco, he found that he wasn't even in it- he'd been so blind.

Ethanol is colorless, odorless. Only detectable in large amounts. It just took a minute amount and added just an extra touch of sweetness in her late night desserts which he started bringing her every night until the trip was over. He never touched her again except for when she'd so easily gone under in the pool on their last night's excursion. She was so sleepy, he'd only held her head for just a moment before he began to wail like the actor he'd become in his own life.

He would go on to become a highly regarded and well-loved professor at Harvard Medical School, never getting married. Even the guys who'd been a bit mean to him now felt sorry- they'd nod to him, smile on the hospital rounds where he sometimes taught. The generalized sloppiness of the introverted, distracted scholar, of scuffed shoes, un-ironed short-sleeved shirts, the inward gaze and weariness of others only added to his persona of the poor, long-suffering widower. His name was whispered with respect in the halls, "There goes Professor Carlton... such a shame he doesn't have his lovely wife to take care of him. She was something. What a loss and right before they were to be

married.”

Late at night, glass of wine in hand, he'd toast the picture of her he'd kept on his desk at home, the one at work being just for image's sake. He'd sometimes laugh when he toasted her. "Thank you, Ava, you've given me a good life in spite of yourself. You served me well in your own way but you were right- I was too good for you."

He'd think in this deluded state how sad it was that he'd lost his loving wife-to-be in their beloved paradise on the Côte d'azur or as he privately liked to call it at these moments, the Isle of Langerhans, and he'd laugh until he cried; the nature of the tears weren't of humor but rather an inescapable lament that he'd carry on his shoulders for the rest of his life.

The Mountain

By Eric Victor Neagu

The day before he died Dick Curry sat on his patio watching the children play in the distance. When I saw him through the sliding glass door, he looked as austere, isolated, and powerful as always. Solitude seemed to be Dick's great pleasure, so prodding him to socialize was not in my plan for the day, but my sister and wife had banished me for the afternoon to Dick and his patio. With no other options, I breathed deeply and slid open the door to greet him. He looked up and I thought I noted the upturned corners of a brief strange smile. He quickly restored his usual grimace and offered me a drink.

"I'll have what you're having. Scotch is it?"

"You know better than that," he said and poured a glass of ice water for me from the small bar near the pool.

By the time he married my sister Joanna--15 years his junior--Dick was already a millionaire several times over. Before and after the wedding, the family debated how someone like Dick, "a nobody from the plains," came into his money. Joanna believed Dick's genius came from some dark and brutal decisiveness that enabled him to determine fates without regret. Dick just said it was hard work.

His success may have been punishing, but any stresses and strains were concealed. He was never irritable, never discussed his work, and appeared to love his family. Only the uncomfortable silences, the bags beneath his eyes, and the striking silver in his sideburns indicated his days might cause sleepless nights. I suppose his death was an indication of something, as well.

The event that day, Dick's fiftieth birthday/Fourth of July party, was an ideal opportunity to garner some much needed investment advice from Dick. On the patio I poked and prodded at the stoic edges of his personality for suggestions on what I should buy and what I should sell. I tried valiantly to glean information with, "How's the market treating you?" Dick's standard response "Could be better, could be worse," did nothing for my own portfolio. I had been down this road before and it was painfully dull. Finding only impenetrability and disappointment in business conversation, I resolved to watch the children. They offered better entertainment.

For fifteen minutes the two of us sat in silence, overlooking a swimming pool, a tennis court, a small soccer field where the boys played, and several out-buildings; an expanse of property extending well into the mountains that loomed above it all to the West. I never understood why Dick would want to leave such a place behind. Every tree and flower looked like billboards of contentment, and the slight wind and warm sun instilled confidence and calm in me with every visit.

The children were playing football now and one of Dick's boys caught an easy pass, an event I used to nervously break the silence, "Looks like your little guy's got some talent."

"This?" he waved his glass, pretending to catch the ball. "Talent is only as good as the discipline that supports it."

"Who said that?" I asked, sure he had stolen the line.

Dick looked directly at me, "I did, just now." I laughed quietly, uncertain of myself. He leaned back into his chair.

"Any talent these boys have will be lost. Your sister spoils them," said Dick.

"What good mother doesn't?" I replied. My sister and I were not close then, but she deserved defending.

In the field a large boy pushed Dick's other son, Nathan, over. Nathan, a pudgy round and whiny child, began to cry. They were not far from the patio and I quickly stood, wanting to correct the larger boy. Dick motioned for me to sit, and then he mumbled something and shook his head.

"Tough luck," I said, sitting down.

Dick changed the conversation. "I'm going to be fifty years old tomorrow and I was never once pushed to the ground," he grunted and drank from his glass.

"So what are your plans for the big day?" I asked.

Dick's birthday actually fell on Independence Day, the next day, which offered a host of festivals, fireworks, and parades. Having assumed he would spend it with his family, I sat in quiet confusion when he announced, "I would like to climb a mountain tomorrow. I'm pretty certain I can do it still. I need," he shook the ice in his glass, "...I need a testament, a witness to my efforts. Any interest in joining me?"

Dick's demanding presence forced an immediate gut response. I wanted to dwell on his decision. I wanted to figure out just what "testament" and "witness" meant in the context of mountain climbing. But he had an uncanny ability to convince others without consideration of consequences. Like a good salesman, Dick generated trust and confidence in everything he did. The outdoors is no friend of mine, but before I could think I replied, "Sure."

"Are you certain?"

I did not answer. There was a foreign nuance to this question, a tone I had never heard from Dick before. The power he emitted was built on a complete lack of subtlety. I straightened in my chair, glancing nervously at the children. They were back to falling in one another's arms. A smiling fat boy fell back into a small girl's arms. The girl wore glasses that appeared to break when the fat boy crushed her.

"They're playing a game of trust," said Dick.

"I know," I said.

The next morning Dick picked me up and we silently drove through the moonless twilight to the mountain. We parked the car in an empty lot

where we collected our backpacks and water bottles before starting up the trail. For two miles we followed an inclined railroad bed at the bottom of a valley. Early morning rays of sun crested the peaks, illuminating the uppermost reaches of the valley. In the dimness, we could see the scars of old mines in the walls high above, where crumbled tailings and broken planks marked obsolete dreams of wealth.

A stream wound alongside the trail. Spruce trees and wild roses obscured it, but we could still hear the reassuring sound of trickling water.

And we felt the cool air drifting from the energetic little brook. There were no clouds in the sky and remnant early morning stars still shone in the pale blue ceiling as we moved ahead.

Shortly past the trailhead the path became difficult and the sun began to burn. Roots jutted from the ground, and large boulders the size of small cars periodically blocked our way. I moved slowly, cursing my little belly and shapeless thighs. My lack of fitness aside, I assumed because Dick was twenty years older than me that we would hike at the same pace. But on the mountain, as the sun moved higher overhead, I found myself falling far behind.

I did not compete well with Dick on the trail. Where I occasionally stumbled, he never broke stride. Head held high, he effortlessly moved around boulders, fallen trees, and roots. Because I kept my eyes focused on my mud-caked hiking boots for most of the hike, I discovered with three-fourths of the climb behind us that Dick had advanced completely out of sight and into a last thicket of aspens. I trudged after him into the trees, grateful for the coolness of the shade.

When I finally caught him, he was sitting calmly on a rock in the middle of a high meadow beyond the aspens, sipping water from a bottle. Above tree-line now, rock outcroppings and scattered shrubs were the only interruptions in the contours of the mountainside. The sun was high over us by then, and it turned the quiet mountain into a small paradise. Fireweed, asters, and gentians blossomed and transformed the fields into brilliant hues of reds, blues, and yellows. Along a tiny hidden rivulet the flowers grew in denser patches. Here and there patches of melting white snow dotted the landscape like the footprints of some ancient wintry beast. Marmots squeaked as they darted among the rocks. Crows soared on the high mountain winds. And a chilling breeze gently waved across the mountain.

"I used to come up here every Sunday," said Dick, whose eyes stayed on a vacant ridgeline.

I was as surprised to hear Dick speak as I was to hear what he said. I laughed slightly; "I assumed you worked Sundays." Dick nodded to my disbelief and continued his story.

"When I first moved here I knew no one. I worked all of the time. So I came to this mountain on the weekends."

"It's difficult to make friends in the middle of nowhere," I replied.

"Yes it is."

Still breathing heavily, I said, "Dick, we have known each other ten years."

He interrupted, "That's a long time."

"And I still don't understand you very well."

"Well," he said, his smile fading, "I suppose you know me as well as you need to."

A lightning bolt streaked in the far sky behind Dick. A pika, like a frightened lost pet, squeaked and hurried beneath a rock. He grinned at the creature and I asked him, "Dick," I said, "You don't like people, do you?"

"That's not it at all," he replied, "They don't care much for me. And that..." He stopped short. The pika appeared from a crack between Dick's legs and disappeared again. He finished his statement with a melancholy sigh, "And that is the secret to all of my great success."

The wind increased and a low bellow sounded in the west. Behind Dick a thunderhead approached rapidly in the distance. The pink and orange fringes of the dark gray clouds mitigated the threat, but I was convinced we should leave. "Looks like we won't summit this hill today," I said, hopeful he would agree.

Dick glanced at the storm and a shaft of electricity split the sky. His face lit up enough in the white light that I could see the bags beneath his eyes were gone. All of the lines of concern and age had left his face. Even the white in Dick's temples appeared darker. He looked like a young man again.

And then the weather consumed the mountaintop with a stale sense of doom as it blocked the sun. Dick's age caught him and that youthful visage retreated into deep folds of skin and graying sideburns. In the growing darkness, the flowers closed up tightly and left a dull green where the reds, blues, and yellows had been. The crows floated closer to the earth, and the pikas squealed and dashed around beneath the rocky cover.

With the exception of two foolish grown men, the mountain life was gone.

"Looks bad," said Dick. He hefted his pack and stood. "Maybe we should get going." As the first large raindrops fell, he paused and fixed his eyes on the cloud-covered summit.

I collected my things. The thunder boomed and I had to kneel to steady myself. "After you, sir," Dick offered me the lead.

The rain poured down and the thunder clapped around us. Eager to get out of the open, I started down the path, dropping elevation quickly. I moved in leaps along the descending trail, darting toward the edge of the forest, eyes fixed on the rough terrain at my feet. The sky exploded at regular intervals and thunder blasted the mountain. I ran and leapt down the trail wherever the steep pitch allowed. Until I reached the trees, I never once looked back.

Past the scattered crooked evergreens, into the denser high aspen, rain falling, the whitish undersides of the leaves shimmering and dripping with wet, I stopped. I stopped, caught my breath, and turned to wait for Dick. The rain and wind flattened the grass, and made the mountain cold and lonely. It all concealed Dick, who was barely visible above the tall shrubs, walking in his deliberate manner, thumbs tucked under pack straps, head forward, and hat hanging from his head, in the opposite direction.

Instead of heading toward the summit, he walked toward that vacant ridgeline; each step traced the mountain's contours into the pitching storm.

The distance between Dick and the trail increased. Grasses waved rapidly in the wind and a lonely crow bulleted across the sky. To the west, away from the chaos and beneath the horizon, a small patch of blue shone through the gray darkness. The storm would be over soon. Against the

wind, he maintained a rapid and constant pace toward an unknown destination, his posture never wavered.

Rainwater soaked my socks and migrated into the boots. My condition agitated imagination and I convinced myself Dick was somehow doing this to spite me, to highlight some weakness in my manhood. Dick walked on, forgetting I was on this mountain because of him, forgetting me altogether.

I dropped my pack full of water and food and extra clothing—twenty pounds worth. I removed my shirt and felt light. That light sensation bonded with the imagined slight Dick had done to my manhood. I started up the hill after him.

Ignoring the trail, I went straight for Dick. Agitated imagination turned to anger and drove me through the dense grass, startling a ptarmigan that had ducked into the brush to avoid the winds. Water collected in low areas and I stepped into quick mud, caking my boots. I shook off the filth in stride. Dick moved, but I moved faster and was soon at the boulder field. Here, the vacant space beyond the ridgeline came into view.

Dick was headed toward a cliff that dropped into nothing. Before us, there was only void.

As the gap of blue between the base of the storm and the horizon increased, the fury reached full strength, letting us know it was almost done.

Gray clouds became pinkish masses and everything before me, including Dick, glowed in an ethereal light. Had he paused or stumbled, or looked in my direction, I would have caught him. Dick never paused, never stumbled, and never looked back. He continued slowly, methodically through the massive field of rock, and into those strange godly rays of light.

At one hundred yards, I shouted after him, but the thunder masked my voice. So I picked up a baseball-sized rock and threw it toward Dick. The rock shattered short against a boulder nowhere near him. Still, he paused slightly, a small nod of the head, as though he recalled something forgotten and briefly thought to collect it. The cliff lay before him, open and deep, and the rains began to recede. But the final winds of the storm blew through us and reminded Dick of whatever plans he had for the day. He moved forward.

And I followed, unsure, urgent, walking clumsily now, driven by confusion and stupid anger. I fell. Twenty yards from Dick, nearly close enough to have grabbed him, I dropped off the edge of the boulder field where a small meadow led to the edge of the great cliff. My chin bounced off a rock and split, and my ankle was sprained and swollen. Blood combined with the last of the rain falling on my face. The rain diluted the flow from my chin into a thin pinkish dribble where the blood gushed.

That was where I saw a kind of shamanic marker of what was to come. Next to me, huddled on the ground, was the white bleached skeleton of an elk. Had a cougar or coyote, or even a vulture eaten from its remains the bones would have been strewn about. But this animal was intact, clean, and restful. The skeleton, baked by the sun, was complete and curled as though taking a nap. Whatever random life fate had given that animal, its death was predetermined.

I crawled to my knees, one hand on chin, the other on ankle, hoping to squeeze the pain away. Three times I called after Dick, but like a captain on a mountainous ship he kept on at a pace I could never match now. He did not turn and there were no more pauses. The last small drops of rain moved east. All that remained of the great storm was a light breeze and a collection of pinkish clouds.

Crossing the vacant ridgeline, Dick's shoulders rose and fell as he breathed deeply at the edge of that great gap. I did not know what to do.

The storm boomed behind me and I knew the world would be safe again. I shouted one last time, but Dick never moved. Still and bold, his body became its own mountainous relic, as if nature had called him there to fill a space left by some absent spirit. And then he moved. Into the broad horizon, head forward, thumbs securely beneath the straps of his backpack, Dick Curry leaned into the fading wind and walked off of the world.

We live next door to my sister now, where everyone seems to think I can best accommodate my guilt. I have no guilt, but nobody believes me, so my wife forced me to go to counseling for several months after Dick's funeral and after I quit working. The counselor, an impressively educated man in his mid-fifties, tried his best to help me. I give him credit for effort. But there were no sleepless nights, no sudden bursts of tearful regret, not even a loss of appetite for him to work with. I had watched a man walk off a cliff and in my mind that is what I remember; that, and the pure white skeleton of an elk that had eluded all comers and restfully found a quiet meadow in which to give up the ghost.

After six weeks of questions meant to jog my memory and provoke psychic pain, the counselor capitulated. "I cannot help you if you will not accept my help," he said, setting his yellow notepad aside, putting the onus on me for my lack of emotional complexity.

To this I mumbled, "I know, but still..." which gave the impression of something unresolved, as I secretly decided this would be our final session.

"You know," he replied, "There is nothing you could have done."

He leaned forward in his chair and repeated himself, setting pad and pen aside, "There is absolutely nothing you could have done about a man who wanted to end it all."

For the first time, he managed to provoke something in me. I quickly stood, collected my jacket from the coat rack, opened the door, turned and said, "You know doctor, that's the problem, the truth of this whole mess."

He smiled, confident a sensitive chord had at last been touched, "Forgive yourself. There is nothing you could have done to stop him."

"But that's it," I bellowed, having just discovered the horrible indifferent truth, "If time turned back and I found myself with that man in that place again, I am certain that there is nothing, not a thing in this world, I would have done."

I left the office and never returned.

I Regret Nothing

By Terin Tashi Miller

The sun shined on that part of Plaza Mayor to which he was heading. The blue sky he hardly ever noticed anymore, that rich deep blue he had known only in Spain, and almost thought he had merely imagined, was above the Plaza and, when he looked up at it seeing just the tops of the buildings that formed the walls of the square Plaza bordering the sky like a red-tiled frame, its rich blueness pulled him up just as it had always done in the past. It was just as he'd remembered, just like when he'd been much younger and dove into the blue of the Mediterranean Sea from the beach at Alicante.

When he looked up at the sky, above the dark bronze statue of Felipe II on a horse, he still felt as if he could float or fly up out of the Plaza, over the frowning tiled roof tops of Madrid, past The Prado and the Casa de Campo and out over to the Guadarrama hills, where he'd sit on the gray craggy

rocks overlooking the road to Navacerrada.

He first saw the rocks, and the hills, and the Plaza back when he watched from the rocks as men moved themselves and their cannons and equipment on the road as they continued in their attempt to take Madrid. He remembered what they looked like to him from his spot high up among the rocks overlooking the road, the end of the one good old machine gun barrel pointing toward the road, the barrel's end only in his memory as if left in a photograph that had been cropped tight in a newspaper.

It was the same view as if you held a rifle in the direction of the bottom of a hill and you could not see yourself behind it but only its tip and your target.

He breathed deeply to clear his mind and noticed again where the sun fell on the Plaza and walked over to the white plastic tables, choosing a chair that faced outward so he could watch the tourists wander around or plop down onto the old worn cobblestones of the place and comb their eyes over their maps to figure out where they were or where they wanted to be.

He didn't feel as old as he was, except that now everyone looked so much younger and he was back in Madrid where he had not been for sixty years. He was back because a group of "brigadistas" had found his name on an old list - there were so many lists with so many names - and asked if he would like to accept the Spanish citizenship promised by Juan Negrin for their effort in defending the Republic. Twenty years earlier, his name on that list would have guaranteed he'd be questioned at the border by Franco's remaining loyalists. Forty years earlier, his name being found on that list would have cost him his job and his neighborhood. For the first time in a long time, he was proud of being on the list of volunteers who left their homes to join the International Brigades to defend the Republic from Franco and Hitler and Mussolini. It had been a much longer time than he'd remembered.

The chair he chose made a slight scraping sound as he pulled it from the table. He did not like how heavy things seemed to him now. He remembered the feeling of putting his hands on a woman's waist and lifting her that way as if she were a framed picture he was moving from one place to another. These days, framed pictures felt heavy - so he didn't move them often in his home.

He sat at the white table on the plastic chair with the sun drenching his face and forcing him to squint, the sun warmer than the air in the Plaza and the blue sky above beckoning him. He knew it would cost him maybe a hundred pesetas more for anything with him sitting out in the sun, but it was worth it to him today. He smiled remembering how, when he was much younger, he would never spend extra for luxuries like this.

Those were the days when he didn't have a hundred extra of anything, when he was growing up in Detroit and if you found a copper penny in the street you picked it up and saved it and anyone who knew you'd found it would say it would bring you luck, especially if it was new and shiny.

"Tráeme un café sólo, por favor," he told the waiter in the white tunic who came out from the warmth of the café to take his order. It was true that it was early spring so that the air outside of the sun still made your hands cold, but that made a spot in the warmth of the sun feel all the more rare and that was why he had decided to sit there in the first place.

He did not care that few people were sitting with him on the café's terraza, which was really just the café owner's expansion of tables and chairs into the Plaza.

He had been tired of walking in the morning chill from his room in the Victoria anyway and it just seemed right to him today to sit where he was and sip the molido Café Pozo coffee in a squat white porcelain cup, watching the activity of the Plaza like a tourist. At least he had been able to get back to Spain after all these years, he thought. He had known many who hadn't. And he had known many who never would.

But today - like everyday, his wife probably would have said - he was doing what he wanted, what felt right to him, and he was enjoying himself. And at least the Victoria was still here, along with its bar and frequent visiting cuadrillos of toreros. His wife had loved the Victoria, and the Plaza Santa Ana in front of it. Even some of the old cafés were still around. Out on the

Gran Via, Chicote's had even become "Museo Chicote."

The thought of his wife made him stop in his tasting of the coffee for a second, and he could almost picture her as she had been when they were both young and had no children. He could see her walking from the other side of the Plaza up to the table where he sat to say in that way she had, "Oh, there you are! My, this is a fine place, isn't it?"

She would never have scolded him for spending the extra money she'd know it would cost or for sitting there without her.

He put the cup back in its saucer. Even a squat cup held by his thumb and forefinger felt heavy. He looked around and pulled a handkerchief from his pants pocket and dabbed at the dampness that was blurring up his vision. He'd loved his wife, and she had loved him, and he couldn't help but miss her now. He had been older and lived much harder but she had been a great sport above all and to have died before him was not fair.

He took in another deep breath. The air was definitely cold. A group of kids, probably in their twenties, he figured, huddled in a group near Felipe. Each had on a backpack that looked terribly uncomfortably low-slung, touching their rears, with clothes that looked like they had been handed down by larger, much heavier, older siblings.

He thought of his own children and what they had worn, what they had looked like, what they had done and what they had believed, what they had believed so passionately; and then he thought of his grandchildren. Once again, he pictured his wife and he could see her tossing her hair from her face over her head like some of the girls in front of him in the Plaza and laughing at pictures of him when he got back from Spain, his hair long by the standards of the day and his rakish, pencil-thin mustache. At least, he'd thought the mustache had made him look rakish - like a pilot from The Great War.

He picked up the cup of coffee again, much of the crema from the espresso machine still hanging on the inside of the cup, and took another sip. He missed his mustache. It had been a long time since he had worn a mustache. He had just gotten in the habit of shaving, like having his hair cut or brushing his teeth and had never really thought about it. He could have grown one aboard ship during the other war - the Second World War - but he didn't. It was funny thinking about the habits he'd developed, like showering every day and putting on a clean pair of underwear, from the war. He liked the feeling of underwear that was not so clean and new it chafed his skin. He liked the feeling of underwear after he'd worn a pair a day or two or more. But because the medics wanted to avoid infections in wounds that might occur if the ship was attacked, everyone had been ordered to take a quick shower and put on clean underwear before heading to their battle stations.

Try explaining that habit to a teenager, he thought, laughing to himself. He had to put the cup down again.

Well, his children - their children - had turned out all right despite their father, he thought. None had gone to Pamplona to run with the bulls, as he had, but that wasn't necessarily a point against them. None had gotten themselves into trouble, or anyone else into trouble - the kind of trouble that now everyone openly discussed, even advertised and filmed. He imagined himself advertising a pair of Hanes underwear, on board his old Destroyer Escort, perhaps around the time they had to land troops on North Africa and the French started shooting at them.

And their kids had still managed to fight for what they believed in, to care for others and help try and make the world a better place - the same things he in his way, and his wife in her way, had tried to do when they were young and twenty.

He could remember the battle of the bridge at the Rouge Plant, and of course, Spain. And he could remember - though he usually refused to - McCarthy, and how the turning in of neighbors and friends and associates and even people you'd just met in college for being "a little Red" had driven his sister mad. Or, at least, that's what she claimed the last time he'd seen her lucid. And that had been a long time ago.

But none of it really mattered, now, here, in Plaza Mayor in the sun on a

spring day in Spain. Because he was here, again, in the sun at a table at a café where they served the coffee from the Madrid roasting company, the coffee General Mola had to wait so long for.

He had lived through the Depression and World War II, and gotten married to one of the women he'd loved, the one he'd loved the most and the longest and, he hoped, the best. And they'd traveled and lived and made love that made him feel as light as looking up at the blue Madrid sky. And they'd had children and careers - he as a teacher, she as a nurse - and friends and parties and grand-children, color television and microwave ovens, barbecues, cellular phones, fax machines, computers, compact discs, jet airplane flights and boat rides... he remembered being in a fishing boat, looking at the water where he'd just had a wahoo spit the hook, the spot flat where the fish had been as he'd been cranking the reel to pull it out of the water, but the boat pulling away, pulling him away, from that flat spot in the water spot like he felt the sky pulling him now from where he sat.

It was odd but amid all the noise of the people going about their lives in the Plaza Mayor he wasn't sure but it sounded in the distance like Edith Piaff, that little French firecracker on the radio singing "Non, Je ne Regrette Rien (No, I Regret Nothing)..."

"Señor?" the waiter asked, bending over the old man in the chair at the table. "Señor? Quiere algo mas?"

But the old man was not listening. As he had promised his wife, he'd died with a smile on his face in the sun.

The Last Laugh

By Melodie Corrigan

For once, the locals agreed: the way the four old-timers behaved at Dickie Wainwright's funeral was appalling. What could have fired up four guys who could hardly rouse themselves to check if they'd won the lottery, to take such action?

No one who had seen the foursome crunched together in the second pew "like miscast extras from an old western," had imagined what they'd get up to. They had appeared a docile line-up. The dude stuffed near the wall was decked out in a shiny black suit ten years out of style, the next one sported a plaid shirt that had been ironed 'til the creases cut, the third wore an ill fitting beige jacket attempting by the strength of one faltering button to cover his expansive belly and finally the dresser, as he was known by his drinking buddies, was slicked out in a blazer and white pants anticipating that June would perk up for the funeral.

Regret might have been expected on the faces of four men who had known the deceased since high school and there might have been a trace of that but not so much on behalf of their drinking buddy's demise as for themselves. If a bar mate who like themselves had only gone 65, had bit the dust, would they be next?

But even stronger than their discomfort at the grim reaper's slash was their guilt. From the moment that Freddie, the bartender at the Pickled Oats, had announced to the Thursday night regulars that Dickie had died, regrets and excuses had flowed over the foursome as chilling as spring creek water.

"We should have done something sooner."

"How were we to know he wasn't conning us again?"

"Yeah, after bragging for years about his health, who'd believe he was sick?"

Then one of the four piped up that they had done a lot for Dickie and another reminded them how much they'd lost at poker. Their heads bobbed as they fell over one another to list their many kindnesses and losses when, two months earlier, they had finally conceded that Dickie was a very sick guy.

"I lent him \$200 towards that high end snowmobile I couldn't afford

myself, which,” the dresser hissed under his breath, “...I will now not see.”

“Last February in that storm where 17 cars went off the highway, I drove him to town to pick it up,” said plaid shirt.

“We never let him buy a round.”

“As if he ever tried.”

“And we played poker with him, the supposed learner, even though he kept cleaning us out.”

“Yeah, but as he said, with his health he had to be lucky at something.”

The night before the funeral, slouched at their customary pub table, the foursome had rehashed the scenario so many times they’d gotten tangled in the narrative.

Since they’d married, every Thursday they met at the Pickled Oats from 7 to 10 p.m. After a drink or two, they’d talk about how the world was going to hell in a hand basket; and how they suffered on the home front: the wives were making them lose weight, stop smoking, exercise, drink less beer, not watch TV sports and a hundred other injustices. And uninvited, but as punctual as tax time, came a number five—Dickie Wainwright .

Beer in hand, he’d regale them with his present, past and future exploits. And by the end of the evening somehow, one or more of the four had agreed to lend him his lawnmower or twenty bucks or bought into some new fangled get-rich scheme. They figured that over the years they’d lost about \$6,000—a lot to this pack—in beer, food and loans; and free services from one mechanic, one roofer, one gardener and a delivery guy.

Dickie always had the last word. Whenever the guys mentioned a high point in their week: a chance to snooze at work, a good buy at the flea market, an escape from a mother-in-law, or a sale on beer, Dickie outdid them with tales of his prowess. He’d conned them so many times over the years: get-rich schemes they couldn’t lose money on, but did; money for his son’s trumpet, which the kid never played; a trip to Florida to see his dying mom, who turned out to have died ten years earlier. “But for memories boys, for memories,” he explained when they confronted him.

Finally the dresser’s wife told them to smarten up and printed off suggestions from a website about how to say ‘no.’ After a few false starts with someone missing a signal: “What’s wrong with your eyebrows?” “What are you wiggling your mouth about?” They had set up a sort of code to warn the others when Dickie was conning them.

Then four months ago, after years bragging about his health, Dickie had moved from healthiest to sickest. He one-upped every mention of a sore hip or stomach ailment with a description of his more exotic illnesses. Knowing Dickie, they were skeptical. For two months as Dickie described how Dr. Conway and the many specialists he had consulted were flummoxed by his rare ailments they refused to believe a word.

“Might be the last favour I’ll ever ask you,” Dickie would sigh asking for help with a backed-up toilet, or “Who knows if I’ll make it to next week,” he’d say noting that he wanted the roof tiles replaced before he died so widow Cindy wouldn’t be flooded out. The most pressing demand was that they play poker with him, so as he put it, he “could take his mind off his imminent demise.”

Then one Wednesday, on a visit to the dentist, plaid shirt saw Dickie leaving Dr. Conway’s building and a week later, his wife saw Dickie slip into the medical building and the foursome concluded Dickie wasn’t pulling their leg after all.

* * *

When they arrived for the funeral and spied Dr. Conway they decided to show their appreciation for his efforts.

The dresser sidled up to him and whispered, “Thanks from us all for all you did. He counted on you.”

The doctor looked over and winked, “Well, he did learn a few tricks.”

“Not your fault he succumbed to his disease.”

“He died in bed... a heart attack.”

“But through his last months when he needed a doc on hand?”

He yanked his arm free of the dresser, “I got to get inside. I’m going to set the record straight. Who knows what BS that silver tongued preacher will say?”

A shiver of dread passed over the four. Once seated, they agonized whether the “something to set the record straight” would be about them—friends who didn’t believe when a buddy was sick. How in his hour of need, Dickie’s buddies doubted him.

“The heart attack got him in the end,” said creases. “But the paper should have said ‘after struggling with a long illness.’”

All through the service, the four agonized over what the doctor would say. They hardly heard the sluggish hymns or Dickie’s son’s remark about his Dad never getting to the mountain he wanted to climb. And finally, the old Doc struggled up to the podium, fumbled with his glasses and gave a wink. “Well,” he said, “You probably wonder why I’m here. Until his death, Dickie never had a sick day in his life.”

There was an uneasy wave of chuckles from the congregation and the four friends pulled up to straight.

“For the last year,” the doctor continued, “Dickie and I played poker at my office and even though he always had an Ace up his sleeve, I showed him a trick or two, which, he said, paid off with the boys.” At this the doctor swept his hand to the second pew and caught the astounded faces of the four bar flies.

Plaid shirt shot up. “Are you saying Dickie wasn’t sick these last months?”

“He was not,” said the Doc, chuckling. “More like him and I’d be out of business.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” said the dresser, “the old bugger.” He leaped up and rushed towards the coffin. Swatting aside the pile of bouquets, he grabbed for his own offering, bought on sale and wilting fast. As quick as black flies to the neck, the other three musketeers rushed up to do the same.

The congregation gasped, unsure if this was part of the ceremony, as out the door the four went, swinging their bouquets like sabers, and spattering the astonished onlookers with confetti petals... Quick as lightning, down the street they marched, straight to the Pickled Oats.

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