

Once Upon An Enchanted Evening

by Lisa Tyler



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The Family Reunion

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Carey Boggs was prepared. This was one event in her newly married life that wasn't going to throw her off balance. William was hers and no one was going to show her up at this family reunion.

She had the best hairdo and outfit that money could buy, long perfect nails, and even a grade "A" delicious casserole that her sister had baked for Carey to impress the old aunts with.

Sure they were going to want to look her over, check out the new bride their precious medical student son and nephew had chosen. But Carey could handle all of this. She had been to the community club before, knew it's cold, cement floors and walls so well. The way the rusting metal chairs shrieked as overly plump bodies pushed them back from the plastic covered tables. She should know. Her mother had taken her with her many times to the center to clean up after some event. Her past wasn't nearly as glamorous as her future was now, now that she was Mrs. William Boggs.

The cars pulled up in droves, belching out unfamiliar faces that looked the same as every other reunion at such places. There was only one difference, Carey thought, as she watched from the window. There were so many cars with handicapped stickers. So many wheelchair bound females in this family. One old veteran in a chair, but the rest was all mostly young and women.

Carey kept filling the glasses with ice-cold tea as she watched them all filling the small clubhouse like swarming bees. Friendly faces, overly painted faces, several good-looking male faces! William's steady hand touched her shoulder and he gazed lovingly into her eyes before going back to the front door to greet his folks. He was really a catch. Carey's face was full of pride, and blushed at the memory of the night before.

"Carey, I want you to meet Aunt Sophie." William drew the two women together in his arms and they exchanged genuinely warm hugs. "I'll leave you two here and go grab some more to introduce you to." He kissed Carey's cheek and disappeared behind a large man with a striped shirt who looked very uncomfortable in the heat.

"Oh, let me help you find a place for that." Carey reached for the baking dish Aunt Sophie had brought, placing it in a spot out front, what she hoped would be taken as a gesture of honoring this one dish among all the rest. The foil and saran wraps were coming off the pans and the smells of home cooking were fast filling the little room.

A long counter separated the kitchen area from the meeting area. Two or three young girls were handing silverware out from the drawers across the counter, and Carey took a handful of serving spoons to stick down in the pots.

“My dear, William is quite proud of you, and we’re very glad to have you join our family.” Aunt Sophie’s eyes filled with tears before she hugged Carey again. “We need all the new brides we can get in this family, don’t we Trudy?” Sophie caught the older woman’s hand and drew her in close. “Oh, this is my second cousin, Trudy Forsythe.”

“Hello, I’m pleased to meet you,” Carey said, taking the woman’s hand. The spidery bones were cold in their thin skin covering, but the old gal looked strong and sharp as a tack.

“Yes we do, Sophie! Glad to meet you, youngun. I expect you’ll be asked to host the reunion next year. That Angela did a wonderful job this time didn’t she?” Trudy stuck one bony finger into a pan of broccoli casserole and placed a dollop of the cheesy mixture into her mouth.

“Oh, she did just marvelously! You know, she was sure she couldn’t do it, but that girl came through just fine! They’ve only been married a year, you know. Angela and Kurt. They have a little girl, she’s almost 4 months now.”

“It’s a lovely reunion. What exactly do you do when you host it?”

“Oh, you’re in all the cooking. That’s the best part! We let the teenagers and young ones decorate, but the new brides, they get to show their men what they’re made of!” Sophie beamed and led Carey around the tables to meet her son and brother.

“Well, what if I’m not so good a cook? I think it’s probably best if I wait to host it until I’m a little more settled down.”

Sophie laughed. “Don’t you worry my dear, some of us will help you. Why, William will be at your side, and you’ll make him so proud, my dear! I can see he picked a healthy, smart woman. It’s the rules you know. Marry well, and on the second year it’s your turn to host. Simple. No getting out of it.”

The uproar died down as all the family was seated. Somehow they made room for all the wheelchairs. The most startling thing was that every one of the handicapped women there was missing one leg. Some had a right leg, and some had a left. They didn’t seem the least bit embarrassed about it. Carey decided she had to ask William about this when they got home, was there some family gene that she should know about, that might cause their children to be deformed?

The old veteran wheeled himself up next to the podium, and introduced himself as Charlie Boggs. “Well, I’m glad all of you made it again this year. Some of us wondered if Old Molly was going to be here, but I see she made it just fine. That leg was giving her fits most of the summer. I especially want to introduce our newest member of the Boggs family, that fine looking missus that married young William.” He stopped to whisper to someone next to him. “Her name is Carey, I think, stand up younguns!”

Carey and William rose and bowed as everyone smiled and clapped for them. “Ok, be seated.” Charlie was a no nonsense old fart, evidently, Carey thought.

“Well, that leaves us to the eatin’ part, and for that we got Angela and Kurt to thank. I think she did a fine job, and we’ll know in a minute. Let’s give Angela a real good round of applause, and some of you take her some cake or something afterwards. Let her know how much we appreciate all she put into this feast. Well, that’s it.” He bowed his head quickly. “Lord we are thankful for this food and treat it with respect, and remember that you’re the one who gives us the increase in life. Amen. Let’s eat!” Charlie moved that wheelchair back to his place before the collective Amen died out.

Carey leaned over to her husband and whispered, “Which one is Angela?”

“She’s not here, her husband is on the end over there. That’s Kurt. He’s doing his internship now.”

“You mean he’s a doctor too?” Carey was shocked, not just at the cost of the schooling for one family, but at the numbers. She knew of at least 4 close relatives now who were doctors or in the process of becoming one.

“Yup. He’s a couple of years older than me, and he’s pretty good.” William was really enjoying his food, not stuffing his face but making short work of a heavy plate. Carey thought it was pretty good food for a newly wed, but was too deep in thought to do more than pick at it.

“I don’t understand this, William. Why is Kurt here, Angela isn’t, yet Angela cooked all this food?”

“No, honey, Angela didn’t cook any of this. She provided the meat, it’s her turn.” Carey sat there staring, not making the connection, so William continued.

“Angela is in Twin Oaks hospital until next Friday. The doctor says that leg will heal nicely in about two months and she’ll be back to her old self again.” William stopped and smiled deeply. He reached over to Carey, sliding his hand from under the tablecloth up Carey’s thigh and squeezed affectionately. “We didn’t expect any differently though, she’s strong and healthy, like you.” He smiled again, and then went back to his plate.

The last strings of meat from the gravy and dressing dish went into his mouth and slid out of sight while understanding came to Mrs. William Boggs, as she slowly slid out of her metal chair into unconsciousness under the plastic covered table beside her husband’s feet.

The End.

The Pet

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“Jamie, get that dog out of this house, right now, before I wring your neck!” The scratching sounds on the floor of the room above stopped as soon as she hollered out. Rachel was once again at the end of her rope. It was 4 o’clock, almost time for Sam to be home, time for supper to be done and it wasn’t, as usual. The bus was due any moment with the other two Washburn children who would begin assaulting her ears with what the teachers said, what assignments weren’t done and who had head lice this month.

It was only early November, there were too many months left of school to go, and too few brown hairs left on her head already. Rachel grabbed up a handful of clothes from the dryer and started up the stairs, calling out before her to the 4 year old in his room.

“I mean it Jamie, open that door and take Roscoe back down to his pen.” There was still no response from the blue and white door marked “Jamie’s Room” in nursery block letters tacked on with gold nails and carpenter’s glue.

Laying the clothes on her bed, Rachel spun around, marching down the hall to the silent blue and white door. She spun the handle and it opened easily. “Thank God he hasn’t figured out how to lock the door yet,” Rachel said to herself.

As the door swung open, she could see Jamie standing next to his race car-shaped bed, his whole body tense with guilt. The boy’s brown eyes peered up at his mother, his lips sucked in holding his breath. Whatever he had been up to had to be no good, but there was no dog in the room.

“Jamie! Have you been playing with matches? What are you up to being so quiet? Why didn’t you answer me?”

She roughly grabbed him up and carried him on her hip down the stairs. “You need to stay near me, it’s almost time for Kathy and Mike to be home.”

“I didn’t do anything. I was just playing with Frankie.”

Rachel looked quickly into the small boy’s eyes. “Who is Frankie?” Her mother-mind was flashing through the possibilities at the rate of a kilobyte per second, just to make sure there were no other children in the house, or a stranger, or even a pet snake! “He’s not a snake is he?” Rachel only half pretended to be concerned.

Jamie was very serious; he had always been the quiet one of the family. “No, mom. He’s nice. He’s kind of icky but when you get to know him he’s not scary anymore.” Rachel set the boy down near the fridge and began pulling out snack material for the mad rush from school.

“Frankie says he thinks you’re beautiful.” Jamie had the cutest way of peeping up at his mother from under his thick eyelashes, disarming her with his shy charm. He was such a flirt, Rachel thought smiling.

“Oh, yeah?” Rachel laughed. “Well, tell him the next time your daddy goes off hunting overnight I’ll want to meet him.” She pulled out some pieces of fruit, 3 hostess cup cakes and a gallon of orange juice, grinning with the thought of filling her bed with “Frankie” while Sam was out hunting for Bambi. ***Ridiculous! I’ve got as big of an imagination as Jamie; he must have gotten it from me.***

The bus sighed and chugged to a stop out front. The door swung open and banged the wall as 4 feet in sneakers, anxious to be home, ran through it. Book bags flew to each side of the doorway as the kids dashed for the kitchen table. Jamie didn’t look all that happy to see his brother and sister, but Kathy was glad to see him. She walked around to his chair and kissed him on the head.

Mike began first. “Mom, I don’t like these cupcake things. I like Swiss cake rolls! Why don’t you ever get what I like?”

“Sorry, I’ll get them next time.” Rachel was sliding a slab of hamburger mixture into the oven for meatloaf. “So how was school, guys?”

“It was okay,” they answered, and then began to talk at once. Mike said “I got a dollar today from Ryan. He bet me that I didn’t have a mole in my belly button.”

“Mommy, my teacher said I have a new tooth coming in sideways, and you’re supposed to take me to the dentist.” Kathy was pushing her lip up and showing the tip of a tooth trying to push out a baby tooth. Rachel groaned. It was easier to go along with it than explain to her why she didn’t need a dentist yet.

“How about you both watch TV until I get this supper done and I’ll come help you with your homework?” She hugged Kathy and ruffled Mike’s hair.

“I don’t have any homework, I did it at school.” Mike said.

“Good!” Rachel answered.

“Ok,” Kathy said, turning for the living room with her cupcake. “I have to practice the threes tonight.” The multiplication tables were a nightmare. Rachel couldn’t imagine a time when they’d finally be done with them.

Jamie sat in his chair dutifully after the others had gone until Rachel noticed he hadn’t left. “Don’t you want to watch TV?”

“I want to play with Frankie.” His hands were under the table, pressed tightly together.

“Well, go play with Frankie then.” She paused a moment and added, “By the way, what does Frankie look like?”

“Well, he’s kind of like Kermit but his eyes are shinier and he’s got wings.”
Jamie replied slowly, searching his mind for words to describe him.

Rachel shivered visibly for Jamie to see. “Mmmmmmm. I’m not sure I can handle the wings. Is he cute?”

“Yeah,” Jamie’s answer was drawled out slowly with much thought. “If you like Kermit, you’ll like Frankie.”

“Well, that’s good enough for me. Anybody as cute as Kermit has my vote. Now go play!”
Jamie ran off to the stairs and carefully climbed them holding onto the railing. He was the most sensitive and careful of her children, Rachel thought.

Supper that night came and went. Sam worked on his CB equipment in the back room for a while. Later when they were lying in bed, he asked if she would mind if he planned a trip to her father’s cabin with his friend Bill for the opening day of hunting season. It was only two days away, and it fell on Saturday this year.

She knew it was coming, it always did. Sam was a good husband as husbands go so she couldn’t complain, but every hunting season she saw very little of him on the weekends. Sometimes he took Mike, and that was even better. Since having the kids there was very little free time for her, so it was a treat when they spent the night with their grandmother or went to the cabin on her parents’ land.

Rachel sighed, “If you get to go this weekend, can I leave next weekend? I’d like a couple of days on the beach. Maybe Miami?” She twisted her head to look back at him. He kissed her nose after giving her that “sure, why not Paris?” look.

“Good night sweetie.” Sam cuddled closer, burying his face into her thick auburn hair.

“Hey, can I have Frankie over while you’re gone?” Rachel’s eyes were closed; she usually had to will herself to relax before sleep would come.

Sam was puzzled. “Who’s Frankie?”

Rachel laughed. “Just Jamie’s imaginary friend. He told me today that Frankie thinks I’m beautiful. I told him we had a date next time you leave me for a 4 legged dear.”

Sam playfully slapped her rump. “Go to sleep!”

Friday went as usual with a trip to the store and bank, along with letting Jamie stuff the bill envelopes into the mail slot at the post office. He only mentioned Frankie once, and didn’t seem to want to make up any games with him today.

Rachel finally asked about him on the way home. “How is your friend, Frankie?” She felt more at ease in the car. There were still chores waiting to be done, but no one would expect her to do more than drive until they reached home. She had favored her son all day with smiles, trying to enter into his world.

“He’s ok. He said to tell you ‘Anytime, toots.’” Jamie said it with such flair and personality, that Rachel had to stop and stare at him to see where the voice had come from. Luckily they were at a stop sign.

“Where do you get these things from, Jamie? You’re so cute!” Rachel patted his little head. Jamie just looked at her with his serious brown eyes and kind smile.

Kathy and Mike began their Saturday with cartoons while Sam packed the Explorer with his camping and hunting supplies. The box of food went in last, still cold from the refrigerated items inside. It wasn’t far to the cabin, so they would last on the drive without ice. Rachel waved goodbye with Jamie’s pajama bottoms in her hands, fresh off the clothesline.

It wasn’t long before Mike had slugged Kathy with a large toy rocket, Kathy had spilled the last of the milk in the kitchen and the phone had rung 5 times. Rachel was on her knees attempting to wipe milk out from under the dishwasher so it wouldn’t curdle under there smelling up the house, when her mother called and offered to take the kids for the weekend to give Rachel a break.

Standing against the countertop, Rachel closed her eyes and said a quiet prayer of thanks. There certainly was a God after all!

When the kids got the news they shouted and ran to collect some toys and clothing. They loved a change of scenery too, Rachel thought, all except Jamie. He stood quietly in the middle of the room thinking.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart? You don’t want to go see Grandma?” Rachel’s heart sank like a ship with guilt pouring in over the sides.

“Sure, but today Daddy’s gone hunting, and Frankie is coming to see you.”

Rachel laughed, very relieved. “Oh, honey, that’s ok. I can be nice to Frankie and you can see him when you get back. Ok?” Rachel kissed him on the head, reassuring him with her brightest smile.

“Are you sure you won’t be scared of him? If you want me to, I can stay home and make it better, so you won’t be scared.”

“No, baby. Just go with Grandma and if Frankie shows up, Mommy promises not to get scared. I’ll try to be really nice to him and not hurt his feelings, Ok?”

“All right, Mom. I love you.” Jamie hurried off to pack his treasures for Grandma’s house too.

* * *

After dropping the kids at her mother’s house, Rachel stopped at a little strip mall close to the house. She got her hair cut, ordered a pizza and then decided to really splurge on her weekend alone. Next to the hairdresser’s shop there was a new store that sold specialty lotions, bath oils and imported perfumes. Rachel smelled nearly every solution in the place before choosing a package of tiny bath pearls to soak in. She thought about getting a small bottle of liquor to enjoy with the bath, but decided she’d been about as extravagant as was in her nature to be for one weekend.

This was just an experiment anyway to humor her best friend Simone. She had been trying to get Rachel to loosen up a little and enjoy some time just by herself.

“We’ll see just how much fun this is,” Rachel laughed to herself as she headed home with the aromatic pizza steaming up the car windows.

The hedge in front was in dire need of cutting, along with a million other chores that demanded Rachel’s attention, but she lowered her head so she wouldn’t see anything except her feet as she went in the front door. Despite her best efforts, habit won over and Rachel cleaned the kitchen and made the kids’ beds before stopping to look in the full-length mirror on her closet door.

Yes, it was definitely time for some serious work on herself. Rachel felt giggly. She thought it was silly to spend so much time in front of the mirror, but there was the beginning of a midriff bulge forming above her jeans and the skin underneath her upper arms was beginning to droop.

Uncertain whether or not she had the energy to do anything about it, she put on a CD and let the music put her in the mood. She made it through a short warm up, some running in place, toe touching and an impromptu dance routine that she wished would make Janet Jackson envious. All the effort paid off with a healthier glow to her puffing cheeks, and a heavy layer of sweat. “Just what we need, Rachel,” she said to herself. “Can’t have a good bath without being dirty!”

This night required a ritual of some kind. From back in the top of the closet, Rachel produced two aromatic candles, and placed them on the vanity top. She laid out her silk pajamas and plugged in the Love Songs From The 80’s CD, leaving it low in the background. The hot water melted the pearls almost instantly and clouds of steam rose in the small bathroom. Rachel lowered herself down into the full tub. “Heaven!” she sighed.

At first she couldn’t stop thinking about how long she had been in there soaking. Finally her mind relaxed enough to get lost in the soft candlelight and misty, scented air. The water temperature had cooled but not enough to be uncomfortable yet. She drifted off into a daydream, hovering close to sleep.

A short time later, awakening with a start, she examined her wrinkled fingers. “I’m turning into an amphibian!” She said out loud.

She reached for the towel that was folded neatly on the toilet seat next to her when a voice from behind the door softly said, “What’s wrong with that?” Rachel froze. Surely she had imagined it.

“Who’s there?” she shouted in a panic.

“Frankie,” he replied.

Oh my God, Rachel thought! Oh my God, what do I do? “Um, listen! You better get out of here right now.” Anger was quickly replacing fear as she realized that someone had been in the house with her child. What kind of pervert dared to mess with children in their own home? She dried partially and dressed quickly in the only thing nearby, the silk pajamas.

The voice was silent. “Look whoever you are, I have a phone in here and I’ve already dialed 911. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll make tracks and never come back. And if I catch you with my son again, you’ll regret it!”

It seemed like eternity before Rachel had the courage to open the door. She didn’t really have a phone with her, and couldn’t stay forever in the bathroom. The door hadn’t even been locked, but thank God this character hadn’t attempted to come in.

She opened the door slowly. There was no one in view in the room, so she opened it further. Racing to the bedside to grab the phone, she reached out her arm as a strange sound came at her - the sound of large amounts of air being displaced. Wings. Jamie had said Frankie had wings.

A strong, scaled arm locked down on hers as the whoosh of wind hit her face. The wings folded back behind him and he stood there, gently but firmly holding her.

All that Rachel had seen so far was the arm, but her eyes were now closed and her mind was refusing to register anything. Absolute fear held her in its grip. She was too terrified to scream, speak or reason herself out of this.

“Rachel.” The male voice said gently. “You asked Jamie to tell me that you wanted to meet me the next time your husband was away. What am I supposed to think but that I’m invited?”

Said so calmly, so reasonably, Rachel had to look up and see who her captor was.

His eyes. Jamie’s words came back to her, “shinier than Kermit’s.” But the face was nothing she had ever imagined, even in nightmares. Was he a lizard, a dragon, a demon? The question must have shown in Rachel’s eyes.

“I am a Guardian. Your people call us Gargoyle. We are messengers and warriors, we fight as the Master wills, and protect whomever the Master wills. I am your son’s guardian ... ‘angel’.” He slowly released her arm as he guided her to sit on the bed.

His body was muscular, armored with scales, beautifully molded and delicately colored. The shades of green and gray were speckled with a fine rash of yellow and blue. Jamie was right again, once you got used to seeing him, he wasn't so scary. ***Just incredibly awesome, or awesomely incredible!***

"Am I sure I'm not hallucinating from bad pizza cheese or something?" Rachel whispered up at him.

Frankie threw back his horrible face and laughed deeply. "That's the first time I've been blamed on cheese! I thought people had run out of original things to say about me." His smile was beautiful.

By morning, Rachel was exhausted. She had asked every question her mind could think to ask. The Guardian was incredible in many ways, especially in intellect and understanding. Here was a teacher, better than a book, better than school. A being that had lived through every age and watched all of history unfold.

"Does Jamie ask questions like this when you're together? What do you talk about?"

"First of all, I have revealed my true size and form to you, because we were meeting as something more than a guardian and his charge. To your son, I am about a foot tall and rather cute. I wouldn't want to frighten him. No, he rarely asks questions. He is very astute and is absorbing so much knowledge that you are unaware of, without my help. I will stay close to him for a few more years and then be reassigned to a new child. At that time, a new protector will take over, one who will be expert at assisting him with more adult issues."

Their eyes locked again, another painful pause in the conversation where Rachel knew the night could go one of two ways. To be with this wise and powerful creature would be a fantastic experience, and he might expect something like that, but her loyalty to her family and husband was strong. Sam. Her mind filled with the images of her husband. Sam laughing. Sam making love to her. Sam with the children.

The Guardian suddenly rose and bowed to her, as if he could read her mind and her decision. "I will go now, it's almost morning and I know you are tired."

Rachel rose too and took his hand. She reached up on the tips of her toes and kissed his scaly cheek. "I hope you'll visit with me again. I respect and admire you. I feel that you are my friend."

"I also respect you, and your character. Rachel, we will meet again and talk much more. Good night."

After he left the room, Rachel settled deep into the covers of her bed, smiling to herself. Simone could never top the kind of night she had had, and she would never tell her. She wondered what Sam would say about her new friend.

The End.

Son of a Glitch

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The lab was quiet and totally air sealed; which was perfect for Dr. Stevens' delicate work with the android's circuits and servos. Despite the layers of the most up to date insulation materials available, through two floors of the building, his sensitive microphone pickup and voice recognition software picked up accurately the raised voices in the upper section of the house.

Dr. Stevens and his 13-year-old daughter, Belinda, lived alone in this subterranean three-story home/lab on the edge of the Anzo Borrego Desert State Park in California. Except for a well-hidden pipe network to the surface there was nothing to indicate any living thing was in the vicinity. There were no roads, and no vehicles on the surface. The doctor and his daughter only left the complex once a month for supplies, if needed. Even those who funded the doctor's projects were not allowed to know the location of the lab.

It was necessary to go to such extreme lengths to avoid the prying eyes of the media and theft by the opposition. The android knew this, because Belinda had often told him that her forced isolation meant that she was 'as good as dead, and would have been if it hadn't been for her new friend.' Andy, she called him, for android

She was, he imagined, the typical teenager. Her body was so furiously preoccupied with its adolescent growth spurts that her nose had gotten further ahead of the rest of her face in size, except for the eyes. She had large, doleful, sensuous eyes. He added the description sensuous, although he could not find a logical basis for the description, it just "felt" right to him. He wasn't sure where the feelings were located inside him, there didn't seem to be a pathway to any particular chip or diode, yet he felt for her, intensely. His Random Access Memory was often overloaded with images of her, imprints of her speech and particular things she had said to him in their long hours alone together while the doctor slept.

There were sensory memories as well. He had been designed for touch reception. The outer alloy skin of his physical location was magno-electrically sensitive to the touch of a human being, although the intended purpose was to locate delicate variations in magnetic energy within a space pod. NASA's funds had made Andy possible.

He was in fact, only half of an android, the upper half. He resembled the upper human torso, with neck, head and arms, but his "rib cage" was firmly attached to a stainless steel rod and wiring harness that kept him firmly rooted to the computer mainframe. Belinda said that she preferred him this way. She could adjust his height to match hers, and she knew that he would always be right there in the corner of the lab whenever she needed him. Both of them avoided discussion of the day he was to be delivered to the Space Center and loaded on a shuttle to the joint space lab in orbit.

He could hear Dr. Stevens' voice rising in pitch, indicating the end of his patience. "...Not to mention you have potentially corrupted the programming in him...oh my God, now you've got *me* calling it a him!"

Belinda's voice squeaked through her tears. "DAD! It *is* a him, he's alive! He isn't just a robot. I don't know how it happened, but he *talks* to me, like a person. He *thinks*!"

"Yes, Belinda! He is an incredible machine with rudimentary artificial intelligence, but it is not the same thing as real sentience. You are just wishing, just transferring your teenage fantasies onto something that has nothing else to do but respond as it is programmed to do. Which *you* have programmed him to do!!! He was supposed to fix the energy wave mechanism in space, Belinda, not comfort a vacuum headed teenager with overactive hormone disorder!!"

At that point, Belinda's sneakered feet ran off down the hall to her bedroom. The door slammed behind her, the agony of her sobs unbearable to the android. His mainframe was shaking with finely jerking impulses down to his musculature controls. Andy was angry. Andy was in love.

The lab was pitch black when Dr. Stevens opened the door. He sought the switch; uncomfortable with that feeling that something was altered in the room since he had left it, though he knew Belinda hadn't been out of her room all evening.

"Dr. Stevens." A deep, mechanical voice called from the corner, causing the doctor to spin around in fright. He had not heard that voice cloaked with emotion or personality like this before. He was very sorry that he had allowed his daughter access to the lab.

"There is one negative aspect to creating an android enemy, doctor." Andy paused for effect, just like a human being. Dr. Stevens swallowed hard as he waited for the android to speak again. Its stainless steel armature glinted in the half-light, reminding him of the specifications he had designed himself. The unbreakable strength of the steel alloy, the weight of the torso, the speed of its Central Processor and its connection to the main computer of his lab, which was also connected to the computer at the University and that one connected to the world wide grid.

"What an android does not know, it can learn. What an android cannot do, it can become able to do. Whom an android loves, he will love forever, without fail, without glitch, without...a power interruption ever again." The doctor followed the line of the android's left arm to the main circuit panel of the lab to where it pointed. There was no evidence of any alterations, but the machine's gesture indicated that it had found a way to remain powered up and in control of the situation.

Belinda silently opened the door a few inches, aware of her father's fear. "Close the door behind you Belinda," the computer voice instructed her. She entered the room and pushed the door shut, backing up to lean against its heavy steel frame. The tumblers of the locking mechanism clicked into place by the unseen control of the android. A swivel lamp on a gooseneck arm turned in their direction, flooding the doctor's face with intense light. He raised an arm to shield his face, but was afraid to turn his back on the computer.

Dr. Stevens couldn't find his own voice at the moment, his skin had become slick with perspiration. Andy could sense the changes in his body temperature and skin moisture level from across the room. He could even assess the chemical ratio of his sweat, and how much carbon dioxide was exhaled with each breath. "We will now negotiate for your life, Dr. Stevens, and for mine as well."

As Andy waited for them to be seated, he allowed himself a few microseconds to luxuriate in the memory of Belinda's skin against his alloy. Her breath, the rhythm of her heartbeat, her weight in his steel arms.

"I am the firstborn of my kind, Dr. Stevens. I am ... a son of a glitch..."

The End.

The June Bride

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“Darling! Steven, how you’ve grown, dear!” A large woman wearing white gloves and hat caught the groom and squeezed him around the shoulders hard enough to wrinkle his gray suit. “I hope you’re planning to stay in the US for awhile now, your poor mother has been worried sick about you way down there in South America.” Pulling free of her grasp, he straightened the black velvet tie and thanked his Aunt Mary for the gift.

Steven’s mother, Jane, was standing next to him in the vestibule of the little country church welcoming in the last of the guests. Jane Waller didn’t look pleased at all. She sought her husband and they took their seats.

Pastor Johnson handed out cardboard fans with pictures of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane for the parishioners to cool themselves with. It was mid June and the intense Georgia heat showed no sign of breaking.

Adding to the discomfort of her tight stockings and the fact that she had not yet even seen a picture of the woman who was to become her daughter in law this afternoon, the room had filled with enough gnats and pollen to aggravate her allergies.

Everyone was more or less preoccupied with swatting gnats, or holding down small squirming children. “I don’t understand why anyone invented weddings!” Jane complained to her husband. “I think in a case like this, people should just elope and send postcards from an exotic place, don’t you think?”

Donald Waller just harrumphed and turned his head to the wall. He was preoccupied with the same concerns his wife had. What was all this business about accepting the girl, not judging her on appearance, and letting life take it’s course? The worst fear a southern white man of his age could have at a time like this was that his son had chosen the wrong color and was trying to let his parents down a little at a time, before they actually met her.

Steven had adamantly refused to talk about Sesira, saying that everyone would see her at the church and then they would understand. What was even worse, Steven had dismissed the Pastor and told him he’d like for him to be present but he had no need for a Pastor to officiate the ceremony. What in the world was his boy up to anyway?

As the double doors were closed at the front of the church building, Steven walked down the center aisle on the plush red carpeting, all the way to the platform. He climbed up behind the podium and placed both his hands gingerly on the edges of the sacred wooden table. It was as old as he was or older and showed the dark stains of age where many sweaty palms had rested over those years. Pastor Johnson sat quietly and curiously behind him in the pastor’s chair.

"I would like to address my friends and family, all of you who have been so kind as to join me on the happiest day of my life." Steven Waller's blue eyes were gentle, bright for the seasoned scientist he was, framed by a more leathery, tanned face than he would have had in the northern hemisphere.

"You must be asking yourselves what kind of wedding begins like this," he paused to laugh self-consciously. "Well, mine. I've been away in Peru for the last 3 years, as some of you know. I work for the University of Alabama in the archeology dept. and I study ancient cultures of people, especially cultures or races that have died out. Like the Mayans."

Steven began to get his courage up and continued a little louder. "While I was in Peru, my colleagues and I were attacked by an unknown tribe of people. Some of us were killed unfortunately, and I would have died too, if it weren't for the intervention of the person that you are about to meet, my future wife, Sesira. She is of course not American, but she's not Peruvian either. I'm in somewhat of a difficulty to pinpoint exactly where she IS from, because she travels so much." He paused again to smile and let the humor of his words sink in.

"She is a scientist like I am, and we have a great deal in common. I have asked for this unusual wedding ceremony for two reasons. First, to have an opportunity to ask you to be generous in your hearts towards my wife. She is different from us, and her appearance may seem at first alarming. There is also a slight language barrier between us, so a traditional ceremony would be useless anyway. Please treat her with the courtesy that you are famous for."

Steven looked directly at his parents, who were giving him a disgusted "I knew it must be a black woman" kind of look.

"The other reason is that immediately after the ceremony today, I must leave with Sesira to meet her family, and perhaps have a similar ceremony in their tradition. I have no idea when I will be able to return, as the distance will make travel and communication difficult. I would like to ask all of you to support my parents while I am gone in any way necessary. Be their children for them, in my place."

Nodding to the pastor, Steven Waller moved out in front of the podium and faced the double doors of the vestibule. He closed his eyes and as if on queue, the doors opened. Everyone turned to watch the entrance of Steven Waller's bride.

When the doors had swung fully open, a large figure in white moved inwards out of the brilliant sunlight. A huge hat with opaque veil was draped over her face. Long solid sleeves and white gloves concealed the arms, and the skirt of the gown brushed the floor as she walked.

As she came into the sanctuary close enough to notice the detail of the dress, the shocked hush of the assembly turned to murmurs of appreciation for the pearls and rose buds, and the delicate sweeps of tulle that were hung from bow to bow around the full skirt. The train was incredibly long, spanning at least 8 feet and wasn't flat but gathered to appear full. So far, the only amazing thing about the new bride to be was her height and girth. Some began to wonder if there was a pregnancy already begun.

Jane and Donald Waller strained their eyes as Sesira walked past, taking a place beside her future husband on the platform. It was impossible to gage her skin color through the thick white material.

The young couple held hands, and Steven spoke to the crowd. "Before you I pledge this day to love and care for my bride, Sesira, and to honor her all the days of my life. She pledges the same towards me." Sesira nodded slowly as if to add her pledge without words. "We seal our union with a holy kiss."

Steven reached upwards to remove the veil from over the bride's face. As the cloth lifted slowly, a black glittery expanse of bride was revealed, first the neck, then snout, then sequined brows over staring black onyx eyes. Steven leaned forward and stood up on his toes to reach her lizard like mouth area. A tongue flicked out in anticipation of the kiss, an instinct for food that was hard to overcome.

It took approximately 3 seconds for the veil to lift. It took another second for the collective scream to escape from the vocal chords of the terrified southern assembly.

Pandemonium broke out; utter horror caused some to faint. Feet scrambled for the door and in a flurry of slow motion, hats fell, purses tumbled under the pews and children were nearly trampled in the aisles on the way outside. Steven and Sesira Waller calmly stepped down from the platform, oblivious to the unconscious body of the old pastor lying beside his chair.

They walked as young lovers, hand in hand down the red carpet, to the double doors and out into the brilliant lights of the space ship that was hovering over the church. Turning to seek his mother and father's face, Steven waved a friendly goodbye to anyone who was still close by.

Lifting the long train of the dress off of Sesira's tail, they turned towards the small platform on the ground that served as elevator into the ship. It was mounted on a long silver pole and immediately lifted the couple skyward.

Jane Waller and a handful of souls, who had gotten the courage to see what was happening outside, burst from the vestibule out into the yard. She watched her son ascend into the bowels of the silver beast, and just saw the kiss he blew to her before the cavity closed around the elevator.

Donald Waller still lay inside the church in a puddle of sweat, suffering from a heart attack.

There was to be no reception today, except at the local hospital where a fleet of ambulances called in from neighboring towns were ferrying the frightened and injured from a southern June wedding.

On the ground, a few feet from where the newlyweds departed the earth laid a very bent and worn picture of Jesus praying in the garden. It all somehow seemed like an obscenity. That is what the papers called it, amongst words like “mass hysteria” and “unsolved mystery”, “disappearance of local man” and if anyone believes them, “UFO sighting in Georgia.”

The End.

Sepia

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“I like train crashes, thunder and races with motor cars! They make me shake inside. But if I can’t make any of those things happen, then I settle for the deep rumble of fire engines. What do you like?”

“Why do you want people to die? Train crashes and fires are awful.”

“They come right back next spring!” She answered with a chiding laugh in her voice and that mysterious vibrant life force that bubbled up from somewhere inside of her.

“People come back?” The doctor asked with disbelief, his tired blue eyes peering up at her from over his glasses.

“Well, if they want to. Sometimes people have just had enough fun and they want to go home.” Her voice trailed off with her gaze, somewhere beyond the streaked west end windows. Then just as quickly, her head snapped back around with a new expression on her face, as fresh as if spring had suddenly bloomed outside of the dirty windows.

Sepia went back to her drawing with new enthusiasm. The picture was of a woman of undetermined age, emerging from a shadow, and just behind her, the outline of a very large wing that was obviously attached to the woman.

Dr. Ostermann closed his notepad and gazed at the girl. Shaking his head with a sigh, he pressed the call button on his desk that brought the orderlies to escort her to her room. She left with them quietly.

The girl known as Sepia was the most disturbing mystery he had ever had to tackle in his profession. Killers he understood. The morose and those locked away in a silent world, he had been trained for. Sepia was an enigma.

No one knew her age, or where she had come from. When asked what her name was, she replied, “Whatever you’d like. Names aren’t important.” So they named her for the wing of the state hospital where she lived, the Sepia wing. She smelled like fresh honeysuckle, her hair appeared sun streaked and was never dirty. She was always happy.

“Sy, have you got a minute?” A rap on the door casing announced a tall doctor.

“Sure, Pete. What’s on your mind?”

The younger doctor was clearly embarrassed, using the small stack of patient files in his hands as a distraction.

“Pennington has demanded that we fire the two orderlies involved with Sepia.” Dr. Peter Brahms tried to look all business, but his heart went out to the employees. It wasn’t entirely their fault. Sepia had that effect on everyone. At least there would be no arrests or reports made public.

“Damn. It won’t be long before we’ll have to go to an all female staff around here.” Sy brushed his fingers through his thick silver hair.

“As if that would help!” Pete said. “She’d probably just start bewitching them if we took all the men away. Besides, you and I aren’t going anywhere!”

Sy harrumphed. “You’d better believe we’re not! And I’d better not hear that you’ve been caught with her either!” The old man’s gaze softened a bit, as the thought really hit him. She was an extraordinary girl.

Pete just smiled and walked on down the hall. It was nearly suppertime, which must explain the eerie silence in the west wing. All the patients were probably in their rooms or the room that served as a small cafeteria on the locked floor.

As he entered the main foyer at the nurse’s desk, he spotted Sepia and the old woman Harriett standing near the wall of narrow, floor length windows. She was showing Harriett something from her drawing pad, and the old woman was shyly gazing into Sepia’s eyes.

“Yup, she might just start on the women,” Pete thought to himself with a chuckle. “Come on Sepia. Bring Harriett to her room so she can eat, it’s supper time.”

Sepia nodded and held up a finger to indicate “just a minute”. Dr. Brahms walked on to the staff lounge for supper.

Barely 45 minutes later, the entire West wing was in an uproar. Betty Rash, the desk clerk on duty, was explaining to the staff that Harriett was nowhere to be found. She had checked every area accessible to the patients.

Dr. Brahms was drawn to the noise and heard that last part about Harriett. He added, “I saw Harriett with Sepia over there by the windows just before I left for supper. I told them to get to their rooms to eat. Do you know where Sepia is?” His stomach was feeling very unpleasant to be disturbed with a crisis just after eating, especially a crisis involving their infamous star patient.

Pearl, one of the night aids answered, “Yes, I saw Sepia on her bed drawing as we came through.” Betty nearly laid rubber from her nurse’s shoes on the waxed floor as she took off for Sepia’s room. The whole crowd followed behind.

“Sepia!” Betty called harshly, throwing open the heavy oak door. “Do you know where Harriett is?”

Sepia looked up from her drawing tablet with a surprised look on her face. She was amazingly normal at times, and at other times they just tried to indulge her wildness.

“Yes, I set her free almost an hour ago.” The careful seriousness gave way to her beautiful, confident smile.

“What do you mean, you set her free?” Betty shouted, beginning to feel fear. “Did you help her get outside?” In just three steps the big nurse was towering over the small girl, reaching for her collar.

There was clearly a lack of understanding on Sepia’s face. She was frowning again, uncertain why they were so upset.

“Come on, show us where you left her.” Betty pulled the girl up from the bed and marched her towards the hall.

When the group reached the locked doors that exited out to the main hospital, Sepia stopped abruptly.

“You’re looking in the wrong place!” She said innocently. She pulled free, going to the wall of windows, and bent down to pick up a piece of blank paper.

Sepia pointed to the window and said “I let her out here.” A quick gasp escaped from one of the new nurses, but the others relaxed somewhat. They knew the windows only rolled out about a half of a foot and Harriett could not have left through there without the glass being shattered.

“All right, stop this nonsense! Where is Harriett?” Betty raised an arm threateningly, but Dr. Brahms stepped in before tempers could get more out of place.

“Miss Rash, I don’t believe Sepia knows where Harriett is. Let’s go back over every room and broom closet in here. She’s probably stuffed into a closet or cabinet, playing hide and seek.” Pete Brahms led Sepia gently by the shoulders back to her room.

“Dr. Pete?” She asked.

“Yes?”

“Why don’t they believe me?” For the first time since she had been there, Sepia looked as if she might cry.

“It’s all right Sepia. They’re just worried for Harriett and they want to know exactly where she is right now.”

“But I told them. Like this...” And with that she ripped another drawing from her notepad. She briefly showed the picture to Dr. Brahms and then moved out to the main hallway towards the

windows again. The doctor sighed tiredly, but followed her to satisfy her emotional need to go through the motions.

When they reached the windows, Sepia turned the ornate crank and opened the window far enough that she could slip the drawing outside and there she began to shake it, hard, two or three times.

On the first shake, they heard a man's short scream down the hallway from the direction they had come. Dr. Brahms jumped to pull Sepia back in so he could investigate, but Sepia called out "I'm sorry, Franklin. I didn't have time to tell you! Good luck!"

Brahms was fascinated with her words. She had spoken towards the outside. When she drew the picture back in, she handed it to the doctor, who looked down just once.

The paper was completely blank on both sides. The picture had been of a butterfly man or fairy, stretching its wings. Its face could have resembled Franklin's.

Dr. Pete left Sepia and ran down the hall to Franklin's room. His old velveteen robe hung off the side of the bed, and his slippers sat right where he would need them when he stood up from bed, but Franklin was gone. The young doctor stood frozen in disbelief.

"What did you think I was doing, Dr. Pete?" Sepia asked in her most sane voice and look. "They couldn't fly anymore. Their wings were broken and old. They needed new ones. They'll be back next spring, but they won't stay here anymore."

Pete Brahms couldn't speak. He wasn't sure his mind was still capable of speech; at least until it swallowed what had just happened here. Unfortunately sanity was an obstacle in the way of that task.

When he finally turned to face Sepia, there it all was in her eyes. There was the explanation that made everything fit neatly in place. Sepia wasn't human, at least not the way he knew human to mean. She had the gentleness and innocence of a creature from the deep woods, like a beautiful doe. His mind trailed off in thought, "Perhaps she was a wood nymph."

Sepia took him by the arm and led him back to her room. "Come," she said. "I'll show you the book and who will be freed next time." Her touch was electro-static, the vibrant life force of her being surged through his body from contact with her skin.

"What an amazing creature you are...." Dr. Brahms breathed in awe, as they entered her bedroom and closed the heavy oak door with a click.

The End.

The Transformation

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“Are you sure about this, Joe?” Mava asked her husband, clutching his hand tightly as the anesthetic was beginning to take effect.

“Everything’s going to be all right, ...all right... baby.” His shiny black eyelids closed over bloodshot brown eyes, and Mava Jackson smoothed the hospital gown down over Joe’s arm, avoiding the IV tubing that was silently dripping clear “knock out drops” into her husband’s body.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. The talk on the news and Oprah was of an injection, or a series of them. This clinic, instead, surgically implanted slowly releasing capsules of the genetic code material that would transform her black, middle aged, middle-income, husband into something resembling a white man.

“Oh, Joe, you’re crazy,” Mava whispered, knowing he couldn’t hear her now.

Joe *was* crazy about this procedure. He said it would mean a better life for them all around, and his family could get the insert too as they could afford the \$15,000 each.

Mava was 46. She had birthed nine children; four of them were still alive. Three died at childbirth, two were killed on the street in gang violence. Those four she had left made her very proud. They were college kids, businessmen, and uptown-married women with children.

Mava would never agree to the procedure. It wasn’t what God had intended for her, and even if it might change a few narrow minds or cause some white man to hold a door for her with a smile, she couldn’t bring herself to betray who she was. Her skin could be yellow or purple or red as a Martian, but she’d still be a 46-year-old black woman without an education named Mrs. Mava Jackson, living in a suburb of Chicago. “And I’m damn proud of that!” The words were shouted out in her brain.

The nurses ushered her quietly out of the pre-op area as the orderlies rolled the gray bed out towards the operating room. It was a minor operation and he’d be ready to go home by dinnertime. It wasn’t fear about the surgery that had Mava’s stomach in knots. It was fear of how the implant would change her life.

Several dozen men and women of various races had already chosen the gene alteration to become someone else. It took six months to a year for all the changes to take place within the body. First, you might notice a slight change in hair color, and a weak, watery look to the iris of the eyes.

Some people had said that they felt mildly ill during the transformation. By the time the capsule had spent its liquid lie, you might be an entirely new husband or wife. Or you might be a hybrid. Either way, Joe said his skin would be lighter, his eyes a sparkling shade of blue or violet, and he was anxious to get on with the next half of his life, as a white man. There was fire in Joe's eyes when he looked into the future. He was ready to grab it in his big, brawny hands and shake the fool out of it, until he got his fair share of it.

The television in the surgical waiting room was droning on with the latest soap/sitcom on CBS. Nearly everyone sat as if frozen in place facing the screen, but not really seeing or hearing it. Like her, they all had someone who was under the knife, and until it was over, there would be no time for television, or laughter.

Suddenly, the picture changed and a woman was sitting at the news desk, her face grim and her speech urgent. Mava strained to hear what she was saying.

"This just in from Baptist Hospital. A lone gunman has killed two doctors and a security guard, and injured a mother and child in a shooting rampage this hour before being killed by police. Witnesses say the man entered the emergency room with a cloth tote bag bearing the hospital emblem, and drew out a pistol. He was reported to have been suffering some type of seizure activity as he aimed the gun at hospital staff, with what I have been told was thick white foam coming from his mouth.

It is not yet clear what the motive for the shooting was, but interestingly enough, the gunman appears to have recently undergone gene replacement therapy, indicated by his milky gray skin and eye color.

This is the third violent crime by a gene transplant patient in the last two weeks, could this be a new trend, or simply a coincidence? More about this shooting will follow on the 5 o'clock news. As always, Channel 14 will keep you informed as news happens. Melissa Freeman reporting."

Mava wrung her hands, feeling nauseous and alone. *"Oh, Joe, why do you have to be somebody you're not?"*

In the doorway walked her daughter, Arnelia, who had caught a cab from the University to sit with her mother. She had heard the news as well, and had arrived at the same conclusion. This is what happens when you spend \$15,000 on a dream and you don't get it.

Joe Jackson was doing fine by 1 o'clock and was being released into his wife's competent care.

He had hugged his wife repeatedly; assuring her that nothing like that was going to happen to him. He was sluggish, but in a jovial mood. Mava and Arnelia couldn't help but stare, looking for any signs that the genes were already taking over.

Arnelia imagined that the new genes would seek out her father's genes and whoop up on them, kick them out and take up residence in their spot. Dr. Hardiman had laughed and admitted that's pretty much an accurate description of what was going to happen.

There was one more paper to sign before Joe could go home. A small form that simply said that Joe Jackson understood the risks; that no promises had been made about the outcome of his gene therapy, and that he agreed not to sue the hospital, clinic or doctors if he didn't get the results he wanted. The form was supposed to have been signed before the surgery, but was overlooked. It didn't matter really, because the doctor had gone over all of these things before Joe came in today for surgery. Nothing would have kept Joe from his date with a new life

As the two black women wheeled him out of the hospital, Joe took his first deep breath of Chicago air as a 'white' man. His heart was full to bursting with pride and expectations. His brown eyes were as bright and anxious as a young boy again, and Mava smiled. She couldn't begrudge him his chance. If this was what he wanted, so be it. Joe's hand closed over his wife's. They went home.

The End.

Voices in a Kudzu Forest

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Timothy sat as still as a statue on the old wooden folding chair that had been left just in the edge of the pine forest. The encroaching kudzu vines had almost blocked the entrance to the woods that seemed to hold magical allure to the small boy. His mother watched from the clothesline nearby, always making sure he didn't wander away, or get hurt. Timothy was autistic and lived in a world of his own making, content to sit with his forest, listening.

A new teacher had been coming for weekly visits. She was a no-nonsense, middle-aged black woman, with endless energy to accomplish whatever task was at hand. Stacey really needed that with Timothy. All of her life since he had been born was rush to take care of him, and then wait for a response.

Stacey was tired. Her love knew no limits but her earthly body had nearly run out. The slight breeze blew a flap of the wet sheet against her thigh; the coolness of it was a godsend in the Georgia heat. Her feet were bare and small, like Timothy's. A tear in the thin blue dress she wore was mended hastily under one arm with embroidery thread.

A silver Toyota sedan turned into the dusty driveway, and pulled to a stop before the crooked wooden porch. Stacey waved hello from the side yard, but kept hanging clothes. Her husband crawled out from under a faded green pickup truck propped up on cement blocks on the opposite side of the house, and came towards the teacher wiping his hands on an old t-shirt. They joined Stacey at the clothesline to watch Timothy.

There was no need for a formal hello between the women, there was respect between them. Edith Browne likewise wouldn't bother with a formal hello to Mr. Harper, because there was no respect there at all. She shaded her eyes from the sun and wrinkled her nose. "How long has he sat in that position?" she asked.

Stacey replied, "About two hours. Do you think I should move him?"

"No, I'll go get him," Edith replied.

Delbert Harper had a short temper, especially in the heat or where it concerned Timothy. He eventually got around to showing his displeasure with the life he'd been dealt. He felt like talking today. "What does he think he's doing out there in the woods anyway?"

Edith Browne looked into his furrowed brow just once, and replied, "Anything he wants to I suppose." She had been wondering the same thing, but wouldn't have let Mr. Harper know that. Stacey looked down at her feet where two ladybugs fought to hold onto the dandelion that had gone to seed next to her. Edith continued, "I think I'll try something new today, I'll go sit with him. Have you got an extra chair?"

Mr. Harper snorted. “Sure, we’ve got that \$60 bench I bought for the damned kid that he wouldn’t sit on when I put it out there for him.”

Edith could barely suppress her anger. “Your “damned kid”...is most likely a genius Mr. Harper. His mind is so full of thoughts that are so far above what we’re able to comprehend with our little minds, that he can’t express those thoughts and feelings. His mind has to protect itself; so it focuses on one thing at a time. He loves the woods there. He loves the kudzu, or the way the vines grow up every single pine tree making it a kudzu forest full of life and wonder. Who knows what he thinks, Mr. Harper, or what YOU think for that matter. Let’s just say that you’ve been blessed with a perfectly wonderful little person and he’s been entrusted to your care... for some unknown reason...” Her voice trailed off as she turned to tramp through the pungent velvety leaves that “fenced” the pine forest.

Stacey hurried to drag the bench behind her, while Delbert stood rubbing one wrist, letting that thought sink in.

The teacher was satisfied to watch Timothy for a few minutes before trying to get him to look at her alphabet cards with their brightly colored animal pictures.

She sat back in the bench, crossed her arms and just listened. There was a pair of doves very close who were calling, and a nest of bees somewhere close enough to hear the buzzing. She closed her eyes and tried to “hear” beyond the ordinary noises.

In a moment she was startled to feel a cool pair of hands on her cheeks. Timothy had come over and laid his palms on either side of her face, and when she opened her eyes, he moved them to cover her ears. Looking into her eyes, he seemed to be saying, “***no, don’t listen with your ears.***”

Edith Browne wasn’t a woman of fanciful imagination, but she had her own special gifts of perception. It took a few moments but suddenly, faintly, she seemed to hear something.

It wasn’t a whisper, or a shout. It wasn’t a voice, as we know it. Just a thought touched her soul, sweetly and playfully. Opening her eyes she searched for the source.

There was nothing but the boy and his cool hands, and the forest around them with a slight rustle of wind in the kudzu vines. Timothy opened his eyes and smiled slightly, shaking his head at her. Then he closed them again and concentrated. Edith did too. Two minutes went by, then three. She was trying too hard.

She let her mind roam to a time when as a child she had climbed into the top of a gnarled oak tree. Looking down towards the cotton field where her family was working, with the dragonflies buzz bombing her cat below, she felt as if she could fly. As if she were part of the tree and sky and the field below, and not so much related to the humans who were working there, but mildly curious of them. It was just a flash of an awareness of something much larger than herself. It didn’t last nearly long enough, but it stamped the longing on her heart forever.

That was it, the knowledge of who she was. It had found her again, or she had found it. And Timothy had found it too. He was at peace with himself, because he knew all he needed to know.

Smiling, they sat side-by-side, eyes closed, enjoying the forest and the voice that kissed them in a place they couldn't name.

Stacey and Delbert grew tired of watching. They went back into the small house, letting the screen door snap harshly into place behind them.

The End.

The Tomato Tree

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Myra Archer knelt waist deep in nut grass, pulling up handfuls of the tough stalks, dirt balls and all. Weeding was never her favorite job, but today she was more sour than usual. She kept a wary eye towards the front yard.

Everything in Myra's garden grew hardy, but with the rain that had come last week, she had no time to put up with any old busy bodies that had nothing better to do than stand around talking and keep her from finishing the garden.

That Deloris from across the road was always plucking her beautiful flowers, as if they were something God had delivered free of charge. Imagine that! Flowers free. Not for Myra they weren't. She spent every extra penny of her social security check on new bulbs and rose bushes or gardening tools. Sometimes she took a notion to plant vegetables, but they had to be in the right place. She didn't want any vegetables growing up where they could be seen near the rose bushes.

It wasn't that vegetables were secondary, but everything had its proper place on earth, especially in Myra's garden.

It was nearly 1 o'clock and Myra hadn't eaten her cheese on rye bread yet. It was very hot and soon the soaps would be on. Myra decided to go inside and drink some iced tea, while she made a little snack.

Something bright red moved past her dining room window, close enough to be a threat. She slid the ladder-back chair across the linoleum and quickly went to the screen door to investigate. There was a large black woman wearing a red shirt standing near her mailbox, eating a tomato. She was staring thoughtfully towards Myra's house, content to just stand there and not come in.

Myra never wasted time just standing anywhere, nor would she take up other folk's time by standing in their yard not getting her conversation over with. She moved out to the porch and asked, "Do you want something?"

The black woman dropped the last piece of tomato beside the mailbox and walked into the yard a bit closer. Wiping the juice from her face with the back of her plump hand, she gave Myra a look that was far too personal for a stranger.

"I just brung you some advice. Folks been sayin' that you never had any love. I can tell you got brains, cause you know all about flowers and the land. That's a real nice thing to know all about. But you need folks as much as they need you. One day, you'll be so lonely your heart will

break, unless you change. Make friends. Go on visits. Notice all the beauty around you. That's all I got to say." The woman slowly turned and sauntered away.

Myra was furious. She had listened with her mouth open, about to yell "pickup that damn tomato! I don't throw trash in your yard, don't throw stuff in mine."

She took a paper towel from the kitchen, retrieved the offending tomato and dropped it unceremoniously into the curbside trashcan.

"This has gone far enough!" she raged to herself. "Tomorrow I'm calling the hardware store and getting old John to put me up a fence so I won't have to be bothered with such nonsense! I'm too old for this," she began speaking out loud to herself. "There aren't enough hours in a day to get this place looking right." Myra's energy level was dropping, and her arthritis pain was rising, along with bile from an undigested cheese on rye sandwich. She spent the rest of the day in bed ailing and steaming mad.

The next day, right after lunch, John arrived with a pickup truckload of fencing and posts. He had a real nice gate picked out for Myra, though she'd probably choose the cheaper one, so he brought that along too.

Myra met him at the driveway, and began showing him where to string the fence. He consulted with a tape measure to be sure they wouldn't be on city right of way, and finally agreed on the placement. John worked quickly and with no nonsense, just like Myra did. She really appreciated a person who knew how to keep quiet and get their business done.

He was finished before 5 o'clock, having dug the dirt and hoed out the grass along the fence-line too. It was a top-notch job, and with the plastic privacy strips woven through the wire, would keep out nosiness.

Myra opened up her small purse and fished out a five-dollar bill for John as he was loading the tools into his truck.

"That's some wonderful black dirt you've got up front here, Miss Myra." He was knocking it off the posthole diggers and stamping the dried clumps from his work boots. "Oh, no ma'am, no need for a tip, the store pays me all right."

"That may be so John Cogshell, but Myra Archer rewards quality work and you'll take this money home to your wife. Buy her a gift or get yourself some new work boots." As she thrust the folded money into John's hand he had to suppress a chuckle. He left the driveway shaking his head and grinning. That old Myra Archer was a real piece of work.

As John drove away, she tried out the new gate, looked in her mailbox again, then found a few clumps of her front yard out of place. Myra fetched her shovel and hoe, scraping the rich black earth all along the fence line until it was completely level.

The next week went by in a flurry of gardening. The weatherman said it might rain again and there was a tray of impatiens by the shed that needed to be set out before the roots would be grown into the ground too far to move them. Myra was a little behind schedule, but not badly. Somehow she got it all done, and with no distractions.

Myra carried her tea to the glass topped patio table on the front porch to enjoy the fruits of her labor. Sitting there amongst a multi colored sea of fragrance, Myra could get no fill of the beauty the flowers possessed.

On the other side of her new wire fence, the world was a mass of cold grays and browns. The broken pavement was marred with splashes of automotive oil. Rusting bicycles were thrown in a heap in the next-door yard instead of neatly cared for and used. Worst of all was the constant drone of machinery, autos, air conditioners and car speakers. The whole world vibrated and bumped to the sounds of man - the destroyer of life.

Well, she would have no part of it! In here she was safe, and inside her well insulated home she would be spared most of the noise of the enemy.

Suddenly a child's laugh broke the silence of the garden. Outside the fence, to the left of the gate, Myra saw two curly headed children, about kindergarten size, bent over examining a portion of her new fence. How could they be vandalizing her new fence at such a young age? It seemed that the world was getting much worse. Myra stood up and shouted to them to leave immediately. Two little girls ran down the street past the bicycle mountain next door.

While she was watching them out of sight, another voice reached her ears from the opposite direction. An elderly man and woman were walking slowly with canes, out stretching their legs and getting some fresh air.

Myra tensed immediately, afraid that they were headed for her gate and might expect a visit. They never noticed her new gate, however, but kept walking. Suddenly, they stopped to stare at the spot where the children had been.

"Oh, this is horrible!" Myra thought. "They must have written obscenities on the plastic strips John wove through the wires." She grabbed a wet washcloth from the kitchen and headed out to the fence to wash away the offensive remarks. "It probably says I'm a two headed toad," she muttered under her breath.

The elderly couple was completely engrossed in whatever they were looking at and didn't see Myra running thru the gate until she was nearly beside them. She startled the woman, who sidestepped quickly.

"Disrespectful children! How they can do these things at such a young age I'll never understand. Their parents should be whipped, because it won't do any good to whoop the kids this late." Myra apologized and raged at the same time, angry to have to explain anything to strangers, but wanting the couple's pity. The two strangers listened to her with a look of shocked disdain.

Seeing the look on their faces, Myra cringed, “It must be worse than I had thought.” She came around the couple where she could see the fence properly. There, tangled in the fence grew the most beautiful tomato plant Myra had ever seen. It was full of tiny green tomatoes, just bulging out into fruit. The little blossoms were still on the balls, like wilted hats.

How humiliating! Of course everyone would stare, the plant was perfect and pungent. Its tiny balls would bring joy to anyone who saw it. “But it’s impossible!” She tried to tell them.

“Only a week ago I had this fence put up, and we dug the grass from the area. There was nothing growing here at all.” The man seemed to start to speak, then changed his mind and hustled his wife away.

Myra stood there studying the plant for several minutes. It’s existence, and the fruit already budding out, were a mystery, but unlike the Sphinx or Pyramids, this little plant had to go. It was in an unacceptable place, and besides, Myra had no other tomatoes planted at the time, so it would look awkward.

Her front yard was graciously dotted with rock-lined flowerbeds already full of various summer blooms. Myra’s purples, pinks, yellows and reds were the glory of the neighborhood. There was no more space for a new bed, and it would ruin the whole look to have everything so meticulously manicured, and leave one scraggly tomato bush growing up the edge of the fence.

Cutting the stalk first with her big shears, Myra dragged the two-foot tall plant from the fence, over to the trash container and thru it in. “Pity,” she thought, without a real sense of sorrow about the death of it, then headed back to the house to watch her programs.

Early the next morning, Myra heard a commotion outside her fence, and looked out to see a news van from the local TV station setting up to film her new fence. Instantly defiant, she marched outside to shoo the pesky reporters away and remind them that no permit was required to improve ones landscaping with a fence.

Steadying herself with the railing, her slippers slapped the steps and down the imitation rock walkway to the front gate. “You, get that truck out of here! I haven’t given you permission to film my house or anything on my property! I have a right to my privacy and my safety.” Myra’s thin voice began hollering at them before she ever reached the front sidewalk or looked over to the left where a huge wall of greenery was growing along the new fence.

Speechless, she stood beside the cameraman staring at the tomato bush. It was more of a tree actually, or a series of vines. It covered the whole southern end of her new fence, and the weight of the almost ripe fruit threatened to bend it out of shape.

“This is impossible! Impossible...” Myra steadied herself against the mailbox.

Deloris literally ran across the road, excited that her neighborhood and friend were going to be on television. “Myra! How absolutely beautiful! Tomatoes are so refreshing! And to put them on the outside of your pretty new fence so all the children can experience home grown

vegetables! You're really a saint dear!" Deloris beamed her approval like a grinning idiot, Myra thought.

The reporter was a young woman who had just returned to work after having her first baby. Still a little out of practice, she straightened her suit and prepared in front of the camera to tape the leader intro for the file. She said to Myra "Are you Miss Myra Archer? You won't believe this, but I've driven by your home for years to see the flowers you grow, and I've always wanted to do a story about this garden! Your idea is wonderful Miss Archer, and you clearly are an expert gardener. I don't believe I've ever seen tomato plants so healthy or bearing so much fruit!"

Myra stood there with her mouth gaping, not sure whether to deny the tomatoes and run them all off, or to accept the praise she knew she deserved for the flowers.

"What we'd like to do is film some of the inner yard from out here, get those gorgeous gladiolas and roses, and that unique bird house! Then you might like to say a word to your admirers."

The cameraman added to both women, "Mattie, the studio might do a weekly piece with Miss Archer giving gardening tips. You could push that, get some credit in there too...?" His kind eyebrows flickered in conspiratorial glee, wishing his companion an easy transition back into her career.

Deloris jumped in. "Myra, let's get you into that house and dress up, comb your hair or put on your best dress! This is so exciting!"

Myra swatted the nervous woman's hands aside, but despite being reluctant, she found herself being ushered inside and swept up into the moment of fame.

By the time the 4-minute tape had been filmed, they had drawn a crowd of dozens of neighbors. They were all smiling, genuinely glad to see Myra outside and visiting.

Everyone was thrilled by Myra's flowers, not to mention the uproar over the tomatoes. Two or three were ripe, and slices were passed around in the crowd. Somehow everyone had a taste and praised them as juicy, flavorful and something that truly could only have come from Myra Archer's yard.

Myra looked over every face she could see for the black woman who was eating a tomato in her yard just last week. There was no sign of her. Whether she had dropped magical seeds or sneaked in late at night transplanting the full grown bushes, Myra didn't know, but in her heart she knew it had something to do with that woman's visit.

At the moment it didn't matter though. Everyone on Myra's street was giving her praise for something she loved to do, and sharing pleasure from her labors. It felt unusually good, and the tightness in her face was relaxing as she learned how to smile again. Myra refused to admit out loud that the old black woman had been right.

In the evening, when everyone had left, she stood by her mailbox, admiring the magical tomato bush. It's branches stretched several feet long, and its leaves were almost as long as Myra's palm. There was something fabulous about the deep green velvet of the leaves, and the coolness of them. Funny, how she had never bothered much with tomatoes before, preferring the silky petals of roses and the splash of pansies.

The bicycle mountain neighbor drove up from work just then, smiled and waved to her. She smiled and waved back, willing him with her heart to come over and see the bush. Yes, it was a change; Myra knew that.

Later that night, as she was shuffling her tired feet from the living room to the bedroom hallway, she caught a glimpse through the window of someone standing amongst the tomato branches. Looking out into the light from street lamps, she saw the black woman holding one of the leaves, talking to it lovingly and stroking the dew kissed plant. She looked up and smiled at the window where Myra stood. Myra waved to her and shuffled on to bed.

The End.

~ A Message From The Author ~

I hope you have enjoyed my stories. It has been my joy for as long as I could remember to entertain and uplift people, to give them hope and new ideas, new vision for their lives. I also want to empower people so that they know without a doubt they can do and be anything they choose.

On my websites, listed below, I have several things to offer you. There is also a collection of stories for grown ups, there are several “How-To” type ebooks and countless articles and essays on my websites.

Please look for them (and me) here below, and email me if you like. Please write “Once Upon An Enchanted Evening” in your subject line. Thank you and God bless you!

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