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STORIES FROM OLD PINES

by

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I. SPORT

A gigantic black lab puppy wearing a metal-pronged choke collar bounded from his yard and circled round me. I knew from earlier encounters that Sport was more brawn than brains, and this time I was on Rollerblades.

I came to a screeching halt when my neighbor, John, appeared and beckoned me to approach, a feat I found tricky to perform on an incline in loose gravel and sand with a wild dog off leash.

“Hi!” I said. “How are you?” I was still upright.

“Oh, pretty darned good, but the stress is terrible.”

“It is? I’m so sorry!” Sport was sniffing the hindquarters of our ever-so-feminine Beardie, Calliope, who was also off-leash but relatively calm.

“Yes, I have to paint this mailbox post here, go to the Laundromat, pick up a thing or two at the grocery store, and come back for the wife to go out to eat at Foxy’s. I don’t know if I can

do it all.” He placed his hands on what was intended to be his waist and stretched backward, belly swelling out between red suspenders. Torn jeans and a paint-splotted T-shirt seemed an appropriate outfit for today’s chores.

“That doesn’t sound too stressful,” I said. He laughed, his face melting into soft puddles.

“Oh, you’re easy,” he said, making me laugh. “Get over here!” he shouted at the dog. Sport was still circling and Calliope was repeatedly sitting down and running away, tail between her legs.

“I don’t mind your dog. I just don’t want to get between our two dogs. I might fall. Where’s Foxy’s?”

“Foxy’s? In Spooner. Get over here, Sport! What’s your dog’s name again?”

“Her name’s Calliope. Is the food any good?” I said.

“Oh, terrific, we like it a lot. Beer’s good. Drinks are cheap.”

“And the food?” I asked again.

“Shrimp’s terrific.”

“Is it grilled?”

“No, fried. Calliope, huh? Like a merry-go-round?”

“Exactly. Also the muse of poetry. How do you get to Foxy’s?” I asked.

“Aw, it’s easy to find when you know the way. You take the first left after you see the sign for Spooner. You follow that road about a quarter mile, and take the second right and then a left by the school, and you go down the big hill that just kinda ends up by the railroad tracks. You’ll see a crossing sign and you cross there at the tracks. Then, you’ll see a dingy ole brown house. Turn left onto the dirt road that looks like it’s not going to be a road at all. But it is and

you take it until you can't go any further. You'll see a sign that says Foxy's, but that isn't your turn. That's just a sign to let you know you're on the right road."

"Tricky," I said.

"Well, some folks'll get confused here. Keep going straight another mile or so, go down another hill, and then there's a split rail fence on your left... Sport! I told you, now!" Sport was lifting a leg on a pine tree while Calliope was sitting as close to me as she could without tripping me up.

"You know, I think I'd probably call Foxy's for directions. I'll never remember all that."

"You want an easier way? Cut right through town. It's longer, but you hang a left by the DQ and then go about five blocks until you get to the third stop sign. You hang a right and then another left and then go about three miles until you see an old barn with a coupla brown-spotted cows in the pasture. Guernseys."

"Okay..."

"You follow right off the fork in the road until you see a billboard advertising the casino down in Turtle Lake."

"Mm-hmm."

"Keep going until you see a big pasture with a hand-painted sign for Surrey bulls. You're out of milking territory and into ranching country over there, y'see."

"Yup." Sport's circles were getting tighter as he was brushing dangerously closely to my leg. Calliope was hiding behind me.

"Go on," I said.

"Then you'll come to a turkey hunting registration and pass the little cemetery on the hill

there and pretty soon you hit Sand Lake.”

“Sand Lake?”

“Yup. You’re gettin’ close now. You’ll pass Simpson’s boat storage. There’s a big eagle’s nest up in the telephone pole. You’ll miss it unless you know what you’re lookin’ for.”

He looked me dead in the eye. “Been there for years. They just keep making it bigger and bigger.”

“And Sand Lake? How do I know when I’ve come to Sand Lake?”

“There’s a little sign that you can barely see unless you’re really looking for it. At night you won’t see it at all.”

“So I guess if you set out early enough, the sun will still be up.”

“Ha! Right you are. Well, as a matter of fact, cloudy and rainy days are kinda hard too because Foxy’s is set way down in the grass like a prairie chicken.”

“You know. When we’re at the cabin, we eat at home most of the time. Are there other lakes you pass?”

“Just a couple more. Bass Lake and Round Lake.”

“Yah, well, maybe sometime...” I rolled back on my blades to turn around.

He interrupted me. Sport had returned to sniff around Calliope’s back. “Sport? What did I tell you? I mean it now!” Sport put his big head down between his front legs and dropped to the road next to Calliope.

I started to roll backward by way of saying goodbye. “Well, thanks for the tip.”

“Okay, then, see ya. Say hi to the mister. Sorry Sport doesn’t mind his manners around your carousel.”

II. OLYMPIAD

It seems like a lot of guys around here are named John. But this John is taller and mightier than the rest. He's even a doctor. And aren't doctors the closest we mortals get to gods? I am amazed at his stamina, his lean physique, his results! He stands well over 6'6". His teeth are even and white, his skin the leathery brown that suggests virility on men past *a certain age*—men whose skin has achieved the texture of worn hide that's been around the horn.

I wouldn't have encountered this John if I hadn't secretly explored his garden tucked away off the private road, scarcely visible. Most yards in lake country are simply marked by fading headless loon mailboxes, toilet bowls filled with volunteer grasses and milkweed; battered milk cans; or fields of daisies that last until they're mowed under. John's garden, once discovered, is dazzling and inviting.

He has invited Calliope and me to stroll down the flower-strewn paths, to share in the glory of Gethsemane kissed by sunshine with no crucifixion to follow. Terraced down to the lake, his garden is a spectacular riot, each flower clamoring for attention.

He has outdone everyone near and far, throughout every county from our lake home in Wisconsin down to Minneapolis. His clearing is filled with yellow, pink, and white Asiatic lilies; variegated hostas; wild roses; purple and yellow irises; white marigolds, ferns, and sunflowers—all spilling over one another in a plethora of abundant color. His flowers have a way of surprising you at each curve that slopes down to Crane Lake.

A bed of dahlias greets you by the shuffleboard court; sweet little tricycles and old red

wagons filled with impatiens and vinca decorate the greens; hand-painted rocks monogrammed by grandchildren nestle down amongst the flowers. He is not only a gardener extraordinaire, but he also has some kind of magical superpower that keeps animals at bay. His sprinkler system must have a motion detector to fend off foraging deer.

John's garden didn't happen by accident. There was a tornado here in 2002 that leveled many yards, taking scores of native white pine. Instead of bemoaning the loss, he arranged to have truckloads of manure deposited on his rubble. And he began to plant. Every time I see him, he's bending over, weeding, spreading mulch, or planting new beds of flowers. John seems driven by sheer love of soil, watching it spring to life as he nurses young plants and flowers to their ripest conclusion. When he works, his knees are married to the earth. His hands are invisible to the wrists. He is a titan of terrain.

To transport the dozens of flats of flowers, he drives a luxury SUV with a huge cargo space from which I've seen him unload dozens of bags of mulch and crate after crate of dazzling flowers, all in the midst of a deep green virgin pine forest.

DNR pamphlets would disapprove of the non-native species John has introduced, to say nothing of the fertilizer and other types of additives he uses to maintain this amazement. The DNR would further specify that John's garden may encroach on the proper number of feet from shore a garden should be. But herein lies the conundrum, perhaps his tragic flaw. Can John be a true Olympiad if he defies laws, singlehandedly building a monument to pure aesthetics despite its effects on the environment? Is this, after all, what the Greeks had in mind when they prayed to Zeus—that he was infallible and had a superhuman ego?

I have no answer to that, not being a scholar of Greek myth. I can tell you, I both admire

John's garden and wonder about the nutrients that may leech into the soil from flats of flowers grown in greenhouses somewhere, grass, fertilizer, and mulch so close to a wilderness lake.

Once John took pity on me—an unabashed admirer, doubtless one amidst a throng—and offered discarded fern that he had thinned. I was grateful and planted them in our garden, knowing they are native to our forest.

Along with the enormous scale of his investment and formal beauty is the scale of his expenditure. It has taken a sprinkler system and a gargantuan amount of plant material to create and maintain such splendor. However, if medals were being distributed for the finest garden this side of the St. Croix Valley, he deserves the gold.

A few years ago, Marshall and I ran into him and his wife, Hera, at a funeral gathering. “What are you doing here?” she asked in an icy tone. Apparently surprised at her own bluntness, she modified her question, “That is, how do you know...?”

“Well, she (the deceased) was a dear friend of our son's,” I answered. Hera's eyes widened and she smiled politely, patting her very large, paisley scarf, one end tossed casually but carefully over her square shoulder, before she turned to continue socializing with her familiars.

Not too long after that, after one of my strolls through his garden, I invited the two of them with their children and grandchildren over to our lake home on the adjoining lake. They came. They and their children and the heirs apparent ate our fresh poppy seed banana cake with warm fruit and real whipping cream. And we even found a few things we had in common.

However, one day Marshall and I parked our car close by and were getting Calliope leashed up to take our usual stroll around the loop road past John's house. From the direction of town came a tall, gaunt man and a young boy, both on bicycles. As soon as they approached, I

could see it was Gardener John. Not seeming to recognize us, he cocked his head and spoke sharply to us as if we were fallen from grace and needed to be quickly removed from Olympus, “Out of gas?!”

“What’s that?” Marshall said, smiling, not yet comprehending that John didn’t seem to know us.

“Are you out of gas?” he repeated loudly.

“No, no, we always park here and walk,” Marshall explained.

“Thanks anyway,” I said.

John’s eager expression paled. He had wanted to perform an heroic deed exhibiting his godly beneficence as an example to his grandson, but we weren’t cooperating. He sped past us without further comment toward his home, spitting up gravel behind him.

John may be mortal, demigod, or god, who achieves success and floats slightly above ground, levitating without support. If he knew you once, there is no guarantee he’ll know you the next time. He exists in a kind of superstratum, a vaporless vacuum of impermeability. Eyes on the prize or, in this case, the flowers.

I don’t visit his garden much anymore. I’d rather watch the rusty needles fall thickly from the majestic pine trees in our yard. They seem so effortless and beautiful in an ordinary sort of way.

III. LESTER

I pull into the dark garage, the heady smell of pine flooding my senses. I am breathing

deeply again after a particularly hectic week in the city, already imagining myself swimming in our magnificent lake, arm over arm, not another soul in sight. I feel my cares melting away when I have nothing to do but scan the horizon for the tallest pine, my marker that it's time to turn around and swim back toward home shore.

I unfold out of the car after our long ride, lift the back gate, and out springs Calliope, my sweet merry-go-round, running and barking through a thick bed of pine needles, searching out a spot to anoint.

A loud gunshot bursts through the woods, puncturing my fantasy, jolting me into the moment. Calliope gallops back to me, quivering.

The shots are coming from the woods, I mutter aloud, stepping hesitantly out of the car door, trying to peer through the trees. In each hand, I carry groceries and odds and ends from the car into the cabin.

Lester will know. I'll call him for an answer. He keeps up with everything. Because he's the only one around, Lester's the go-to guy for information. He knows how long the baby loon has been on the lake and what day the sandhill cranes depart.

Lester flies two flags on his property—one a Confederate flag, and the other a Marine Corps flag. The only year-round resident, his little white cottage is directly across from us on our small, remote lake. Between us is the deepest, cleanest, prettiest part of the lake. Not a tendril of a weed.

"Hi, Violet," I begin. "How are you?" Violet, Lester's wife, has a bad heart and has been dwindling for years.

"I'm better, thanks. How are you?"

“You know, I’m really fine except I heard a shot. Sounded like it was right next door. Doesn’t hunting season begin on Thanksgiving?”

“Hang on a minute.” There’s a loud clunk as Vi puts the phone down.

Vi picks up the receiver again. “Yup. Handgun’s missin’. I think he’s out shootin’ in the trees.”

“In the trees? Why?”

“Oh, there’s a branch he can’t get down. He keeps shootin’ at it, hoping he’ll scare it down.” She laughs a husky, smoke-filled laugh and lapses into spasmodic coughing.

“Hmm,” I say.

We often hear shooting when Lester and Vi’s son and grandson visit from Tennessee. Their shots vary from the popping of handguns and the pinging of rifles to the rat-a-tat-tat of semiautomatics. The deafening reverberations might as well be in our front yard. With little to do but watch television, smoke, and watch his wife linger, this ex-Marine is someone I may need in a pinch, so I limit my comments about their intense and persistent gunfire. If I call to request a temporary halt, he usually cooperates.

I hear some explanatory conversation in the background whereupon Lester takes the phone from Violet. “Lo,” he says, “Wife says you don’t like the shootin.’ They’re just practicin’ their huntin’. Don’t like to say too much since Junior only comes once in a while, but I’ll tell him to quit for now if it’s bothering you,” he says.

“Thank you, Lester, very much,” I say. “I really appreciate it.”

I take a swim, hoping they’ll hold off long enough for me to get out of the water. *I wonder what the loons feel in the water from the gunfire.* When I swim across the lake, I don’t

swim all the way to Lester's dock. Although I have no proof, I believe he has binoculars trained on me. I swim directly toward his house and then stop at my white pine stretching way above the tops of the others, where I turn around, and swim back. Calliope attends at the end of the dock, paws crossed, scanning the woods, then watching me, then the woods.

As I'm getting dressed, I find myself thinking about Lester looking in the windows. He's only done it once, to my knowledge, but I have to admit that one time made me uneasy.

About three years ago, I was standing in the kitchen, fully clothed, thank God. Suddenly, I saw a red hat pass by just under the window frame. Kind of bouncing up and down in a half-marching, half-limping gait. Lester.

I burst through the front door, the screen door slamming loudly behind me.

"Lester," I said in my most assertive voice, "can I help you?"

"Just checkin' on things," he said. "Thought I saw smoke across the lake and since there was a fire here once, I wanted to make sure everything was all right."

"I'm burning some brush," I said, my mind trying to fathom why he didn't call first. Or better yet, why didn't he come to the door and ring the bell?

It's scary sometimes at night here alone. I stash a row of defense weaponry on top of my bedcovers—a rosewood truncheon, my cell phone, and our cordless land line. We have installed a blind over the outside door that has a direct sightline to my bed. When I close my eyes, I dream I'm being hunted.

THE END