

together for the serious rituals of consumerism. Sometimes Hillary actually went back to sleep for a bit after delighting in the clever toys and unusual treats Susan had searched out for the stockings. As a teenager, Hank was now actually more interested in sleeping in than getting his stocking early. So, it was after eight by the time everyone was awake and supplied with cups of coffee or chocolate and pastries.

The Stewarts followed a strict protocol for opening gifts, one package at a time, youngest to oldest, then around again. Even with only five of them, the process could take a couple of hours, since Susan insisted on taking pictures of each gift opening – first the person holding the box; then ripping the wrapping; finally the appreciative smile or modeling of the gift. Since the children had been posed this way all their lives, it seemed normal to them. Although lately, Hank sometimes complained about his mother’s picture-taking when his friends were around. Henry had tried a few times to get Susan to put down the camera and enjoy the moment, but by now he knew better. She would have been disappointed not to capture the moment on film, even though she had given up scrapbooking several years earlier. She had boxes of unfiled prints and discs, and now computer space, taken up with snapshots, most of which would never be seen by anyone past the first obligatory clicking through the lot when she sent them out. Many of them weren’t worth a second look anyway.

When the living room floor was covered with wrapping paper and no one had another box to open, the beautiful mystery gift was still under the tree. No one confessed to know anything about it. Susan nudged Grandpa Herschel. "I think you should open it. Wait! Let me get a photo." Inside the elegant package were six smaller boxes, wrapped identically to the larger one, but each had a gift tag: Herschel, Henry, Susan, Hank, Hillary, and finally – The Stewart Family. Grandpa handed out boxes and remarked that each was pretty heavy for its size.

Each box contained a green velvet drawstring bag. Henry and Hillary both shook a dozen or more large, antique gold pieces from their bags and exclaimed in delight. Susan, Hank and Grandpa Herschel were eager to share the good fortune but found their bags each contained a heavy lump of coal. Susan's face moved through an array of expressions as she struggled to keep puzzlement from turning into anger. Hank didn't bother making the effort and complained loudly, dumping the lump of coal on the carpet. Grandpa Herschel allowed as how it was a pretty poor trick alright, but quickly recovered, saying he had a diamond in his bag, it just wasn't finished yet. He handed the final box to Susan to open. She wasn't sure she wanted to.

All the pleasure and anticipation created by the beautiful gift had disappeared. Father and daughter were a little embarrassed to receive riches when some unknown giver seemed to be scolding the other family members. Hillary began counting her coins into piles to share with

her mother, brother and grandfather. Henry realized he would be expected to do the same. Susan untied the last tartan silk ribbon and caressed the luxurious special paper one last time, trying to recapture some of the excitement she had felt when the original box was delivered.

In the final green velvet drawstring pouch was a miniature bagpipe. Its plaid body was another example of the Royal Stewart colors. The mouthpiece and drones of the instrument were carved wood, lacquered black. Instead of a chanter, the last and lower pipe, was a small crank, the handle of a music box hidden in the woolen folds of the little bagpipe. Susan turned the crank and cocked her ear to the melody. "Listen."

The tune played several bars before anyone recognized it. "Amazing Grace," Hillary shouted.

"But, what does it mean?" Susan asked.

Henry held a stack of coins like oversized poker chips, ready to ante them out to the stacks Hillary started. "It means nobody gets what he deserves. No one. It's all grace."

Widow Black

The filaments were fine and silky, like spider webs, and Marty thought that's what they were for a long time. Never a good housekeeper, she was no stranger to spider webs. Most of the time she told herself it was a good thing to have spiders. They caught flies and nasty bugs, didn't they? But, when she found herself grabbing at the silvery threads to get them away from her face one morning, she decided it was time to call an exterminator.

Drat that George! He left me with more than one kind of mess.

Marty Black was widowed in April. George always did the record keeping and bill paying, and six months later she was still trying to sort out his system. Why the spider webs were his fault she couldn't say, but she had a sort of permanent irritation with George now that he was gone, so it felt natural to blame him for the webs as well as anything else she had trouble with.

The exterminator said the filaments didn't look like any kind of spider he knew, but he was glad to lay down a toxic fog with the wand from his sprayer tank and charge Marty for it before he told her so.

What an idiot! George didn't leave enough insurance for me to throw money around for no reason.

She thought about calling the Better Business Bureau but decided to settle for complaining about the company to anyone she knew. She muttered about the exterminator's incompetence as she padded around the house, catching dust bunnies on her slippers. At least she thought they were dust bunnies. After a while, she realized what was accumulating on her shoes was more of the web-like filaments. Bunched up like that, they were a soft, white mass.

Marty kept hoping her daughter would make the two-hour drive from Lewiston and offer to help with housecleaning. The apple had fallen very far from the tree in this case because Marissa actually enjoyed cleaning house. Marty was always happy to let her. But when Marty hinted, Marissa made excuses about her heavy schedule at the hospital. She was the new charge nurse in the cardiac unit and couldn't get away often. Marty tried a not-so-subtle appeal to guilt, but Marissa said she'd come over when she could and didn't succumb to her mother's manipulation.

You'd think that girl would be more help to me, considering all I've been through and everything we did for her. George always did spoil that child.

Marty's cousin Annette was always asking if she needed help with anything, now that George was gone, but she never climbed down from her

Cadillac SUV in Marty's neighborhood. Annette wasn't likely to pick up a dust mop or even bring over her fancy vacuum.

Thinks she's really something because her husband's oil change franchise is raking in the dough. And to think George lent them money to get through the first year.

Marty had worked as a clerk in the nearby pharmacy for several years and her manager was very generous with time off during George Black's final illness and death. Jim let Marty come in whatever hours she could and worked the rest of the employees around that. She knew he worked a lot of extra hours himself to accommodate her and she was grateful. Taking a few hours away from the hospital to work every-other day had been a relief, a kind of respite. And after the funeral, going to work gave her something else to think about. But now Marty was having trouble getting to work and Jim was growing impatient with her.

So, what? I owe him because he helped me out before? He didn't really want to help me, he was just racking up I.O.U.s for my time? If George had worked for the city instead of White's Truck Repair – had some pension waiting – I wouldn't have had to work anyway!

Whenever Marty entered the house, she kicked off comfortable leather clogs and walked into her house shoes. Web-like filaments continued to collect on the bottom and sides of the blue terry cloth slippers, eventually puffing up around the tops, too, so it looked as if she

were scuffing around in cocoons of a giant moth species.

Marty grew so used to seeing the dangling threads everywhere she stopped trying to brush away the filaments that grew down from the closet ceiling and rested on the clothes there. Individually, each line had a lot of tensile strength. When she pulled out a garment to wear, several of the thin, silvery threads dangled from the shoulders. If other people noticed them when she went out, no one commented.

When Marty hired a carpenter to make repairs to the back fence, he trampled the chrysanthemums. She was angry with him, of course, but also with George, again, and even dredged up some bitterness for her son who was killed three years earlier in Iraq. When they were thirteen, Alan and a friend borrowed some boards from the fence to make a skateboard ramp. Even after George put the boards back, that section of the fence was never sturdy.

That boy could come up with more ways to torment me. And when he ran out of ideas, he joined the Army and went off and got himself killed. No consideration for his family at all. That carpenter should have joined the Army. They probably don't have flowers for him to step on next to their fences. George never liked those flowers there. It's a wonder they survived, the way he was always running the mower into that bed.

Marissa called at least once a week to check on Marty, even when she couldn't get over to visit. If she had come to the house that fall,

Marissa would have been alarmed. Puffs of the webby material were collecting in small drifts in every corner of the house. Marty's favorite robe, a match for the blue terry cloth slippers, had so many of the filaments embedded in the looped fabric it was starting to look like a giant cocoon, too.

Marty didn't tell Marissa when she stopped going in to work. She didn't tell Jim either. He let it slide a day or two, then called to see if she planned to come in. She resigned over the phone and was sure Jim's sigh signaled relief. After that, Marty started calling the SuperShop to deliver her groceries. It was amazing to find she really didn't need to leave the house at all, although the delivery boys from the market were often late or clumsy. Sometimes her order would be incomplete, but at least the store never charged her for what they didn't send.

When Marty stopped leaving the house, she also stopped changing into street clothes every day. She knew other people would find that odd, so she stopped bringing in mail until the following morning when she went out early for the newspaper. Neighbors never saw the woman in strange, puffy slippers and oddly padded robe who left the house for those brief moments every day.

As the neighborhood had changed over the years, George and Marty never connected with young couples who moved in around them. For one thing, Marty didn't like the camp trailer the family next door parked in their driveway.

Can't they see that thing blocks my view down to the corner? Why do they think I'd prefer a view of their metal box in place of a tree? I guess it's not as bad as those brats across the street who destroyed my front flower beds. Why wouldn't George sell this place and move into a condo after our kids were grown?

The silvery filaments draped every doorway in the house by November. Sometimes Marty couldn't avoid getting some of the stuff stuck on her lips. When she tried to clear it away, making little spitting noises with her tongue, she noticed it was sweet at first but had a bitter aftertaste that lingered. The tendrils drooped from the hem of her robe and wound about her legs when she walked. Marty was fascinated yet repelled by its gentle stickiness, like cotton candy.

The recliner Marty sat in to read or watch TV began to accumulate the webbing in its upholstered folds. She didn't always get up from the chair at night anymore...just fell asleep there after the late news. She moved the telephone base to a table by her chair and stashed some snacks in a basket below it for those days she didn't feel like getting up at all.

Marissa worried about her mother. Sometimes, Marty didn't answer or return phone calls. If Marissa asked later where she'd been, Marty always insisted she hadn't been out, just couldn't get to the phone. Explanations were vague. Marissa made plans to bring a friend and everything needed for Thanksgiving dinner; Marty shouldn't do anything.

How thoughtful. She couldn't be bothered to come and help me clean up this mess, and now that I can hardly get out of my chair, she tells me not to do anything. As if I could.

Friday before Thanksgiving was the last day Marty answered Marissa's call. Sunday morning when Marty woke up, her left sleeve was woven to the arm of the recliner by the accumulation of silver webbing. She thought about calling Marissa. She could almost reach the phone, but she was tired. There was a bottle of water with her in the recliner and Marty managed to get a drink. She couldn't reach a cracker or packet of raisins from her basket.

Marissa called again on Tuesday and got the machine. She was working overtime to have a couple of days off for the holiday and pushed her concerns to the back of her mind. She had watched her mother grow bitter after Alan's death and kept a distance to avoid the poison Marty often spilled out. After George died, Marissa felt an obligation to be a more attentive daughter but she was glad to have the excuse of her job and a two-hour stretch of highway to keep from being dragged into her mother's constant grievances. She tried talking to Marty about it once, suggesting her mother let go of some of the grudges she carried. Marty bristled at the idea she might not be completely justified in feeling mistreated, or at least slighted, by everyone she complained about. She pouted the rest of that day and refused to return Marissa's calls for a month. If she had known Marissa

considered it a welcome breather, Marty would have been enraged.

Marty hardly heard her daughter's Tuesday call. She was very tired. The ringing of the phone and Marissa's voice on the answering machine seemed far away. She could not open her eyes to tell if it was morning or evening. She tried to lift the bottle of water and found her right sleeve was now in the grip of the webbing surrounding the chair. By the time the delivery boy from the SuperShop banged on the door, Marty understood she was finally, completely, enveloped by the softly sticky threads. She knew, too, helplessly, belatedly, that she had woven her own shroud. Her lips barely parted to form an involuntary "Oh!" of insight. With the sharp intake of breath, she felt the filaments fill her mouth and nostrils.

Beauty Will Save the World

Nathaniel was in his second tour of duty in Iraq when his mother died of the breast cancer that had stalked her for several years. When he returned from the funeral he could not tell his cohorts how his mother died, could not speak the word breast to those men whose conversations were full of hooters, tits, and boobs. The word was too tender and intimate, too innocent for such company. He could say cancer, the ugly word, but the beautiful one burned his lips. How could "Beauty save the world" when it was dying out itself, when words like breast and cancer could be part of the same phrase?

Beauty will save the world. The sentence from Dostoevsky's journal had haunted Nathaniel ever since Bonnie Miller showed up his junior year of high school wearing it with unselfconscious irony, silkscreened across her chest on a tee shirt. Bonnie was a senior, who moved to Spring Ridge for her last year of high school because of her father's work, a striking young woman with no idea of her classic good looks. When she wore the amazing tee shirt, at least once a week, the more boisterous jocks made fun of her behind her back. One liked to grab his crotch and hiss, "Say, baby, save this."

The quiet nerds Nathaniel hung out with only thought it.

Dostoevsky's declaration became a burr in Nathaniel's mind, the hooked seed of a persistent weed, irritating his conscious, and his conscience. It made him think of the picture between the book shelves in the den at home, a grainy newsphoto from the sixties his dad had blown up to poster size – his parents, the hippie couple blissfully planting daisies in a row of National Guard rifle barrels. Their hippie days past, Nathaniel's parents raised him and his sister Charlotte in a Quaker Meeting. He internalized the pacifism and some basic Christian doctrines but he stopped attending Meeting when he was fifteen, about the time Charlotte married and moved to Colorado. Sometimes he went to another church with Larry, the kid from two doors down, Nathaniel's closest friend since pre-school days, even though Larry was one grade ahead of him. Nathaniel heard from his parents that Bonnie Miller's family was attending their Meeting, but even the possibility of seeing her wasn't enough to leverage him out of bed most Sunday mornings.

The war in Iraq was five years old when Larry graduated and enlisted. He was the third of six children and it seemed like a good way to make some money for college. He also declared himself eager to go "waste some terrorists." Nathaniel hadn't known Larry to have political interests before that, but he guessed maybe he hadn't been paying attention. Three weeks into

Nathaniel's senior year, Larry was killed by an IED while patrolling in the city of Fallujah. Where was Bonnie Miller's tee shirt when you really needed it?

Nathaniel became preoccupied with the progress of the war, especially Larry's unit, if the events in Iraq could be called progress. There were no "fronts," no orderly movement, no recovery of territory to be mapped, like in the interactive accounts of World War II he found on the Internet. Instead, Nathaniel thought, studying the current war was like watching a series of fox hunts interspersed with explosions. He surprised himself when he started eating at the Army recruiter's pizza booth in the cafeteria a few weeks before graduation.

Nathaniel's parents expected him to attend the local branch of State for at least a couple of years of college, and that's what he had expected, too. None of them knew what he might major in, what he was good at or what he might be interested in. His parents knew he was a classic underachiever, taking a little longer than some to "find himself." Their hippie experience allowed them to be "laid back" about the whole issue, but their Quaker sentiments were distressed when Nathaniel's mother found the recruiter's pamphlets under a pile of dirty clothes in his room. They talked with Nathaniel, again, about their principles, but they knew the Quaker tradition of respect for personal conscience was as least as long as the tradition of non-violence. Nathaniel assured them that if he did enlist, he would do everything possible to

serve as a non-combatant. His father asked him, privately, to consider his mother's health in making a decision that would surely take him far away. The cancer that would finally kill her was only a small threat at that time. Nathaniel was not a thankless child, but what he thought was the siren song of his destiny muffled his parents' quiet need, their unstated desperation, and he enlisted in the Army three days after graduation. The olive-drab and khaki tee shirts issued to him were not beautiful.

After boot camp Nathaniel had a short leave to go home before reporting for training as a medic at Fort Sam Houston. He could hardly look at the poster in the den when he entered the house in his desert camouflage. His parents were heartily cheerful during his visit. His mother was in a season of remission and the three of them saw a movie and visited an art gallery while he was in Spring Ridge.

By the end of Nathaniel's first tour of duty in Iraq he had met enough participants in the game to classify most of the Americans who came through his clinic into three camps. There were plenty of young enlisted men like his friend Larry. Even after seeing the war close-up they still told themselves and anyone who would listen that they were "fighting terrorism," and "keeping America safe." They fueled their courage and vitriol with steady doses of war movies and bull sessions with blowhard career non-coms who could never have found civilian jobs that let them advance by spouting their peculiar brand of patriotic misanthropy. On the

other hand, Nathaniel met some career officers he thought of as genuine "good guys," men, and a few women, whose ideas about the advisability of the invasion might differ but who were committed to trying to model and effect real justice, mercy, and democracy for the Iraqi people. The third group Nathaniel observed consisted of civilian contract workers and journalists. He thought of them as mercenaries, whether they carried arms or not. All of them were adrenaline junkies and the contract workers were motivated mainly by the obscenely large salaries they were paid. The journalists were after the Holy Grail of a Pulitzer Prize. For the first time in his life, Nathaniel became an active rather than passive observer of human nature, keeping a journal with stories of the people passing through his clinic. Beauty was in short supply.

Once in a while Nathaniel was called on to treat a female soldier whose smile was still intact or whose natural curls escaped from the topknot under her cap, reminders that there were still soft, beautiful things in the world. A few times he rode out with recon jeeps and saw a desert landscape without wrecked vehicles and blast craters. Though it was foreign to his eyes, Nathaniel could see the desert had a certain kind of beauty, too. Mostly, he spent his down time with a book, just as he had at home, or with his journals. Sometime in his second tour to Iraq Nathaniel began to think of recording the stories of the people he met as an assignment, not just a pastime.

When his two-year enlistment was almost up, Nathaniel went home to Spring Ridge to see if he was ready to be a civilian instead of living whatever the Army dictated. Less than a year after his mother's death, Nathaniel's father married the mother of three teenagers and started a new life in a town two hours down the interstate. His grandmother was the only person left to make Spring Ridge a place to call home.

Nathaniel stayed with Nonny for two weeks while he visited Larry's parents, a career counselor at the local branch of State U, and old haunts. He attended Meeting with his grandmother, once. His dad had left some boxes of Nathaniel's belongings with Nonny when he cleared out the house to sell. The boxes held a few old-school, hand-held video games, souvenir tee shirts from family vacations, a shell collection, lots of books – nothing Nathaniel wanted to take with him but nothing he was ready to throw away either. It was odd to see his life-to-date packed into six collapsible banker's boxes. He thought about who he had been in high school and who he was now, his journals and new laptop the current repositories of his identity, more than the corporal's stripes on his fatigues. He wondered if the framed poster of the flower children and the National Guardsmen had been sold or if his father took it to his new home. Thinking about the poster re-seeded the motto from Bonnie Miller's shirt in Nathaniel's mind. Was war what the world needed saving from? Was the Beauty that could do it a person?

A thing? Just a dream, or a way of looking at the world?

Nathaniel decided to re-enlist and volunteered to return to Iraq for a third time. He used part of his re-up bonus to buy a small video camera to record interviews with the people he met. He thought telling the stories he found could be a good thing, maybe a beautiful thing, even if the stories themselves weren't pretty.

The camera was a moderately expensive one but it quickly developed a glitch. Sometimes there were halos on the faces of people Nathaniel filmed. He thought maybe he wasn't paying attention to lighting and worked to make sure he didn't frame his subjects in front of a window in the clinic or position himself looking into the sun when he tried to film out in the markets and coffee shops of the Green Zone. He was diligent about cleaning the lens before shooting. Still, when he downloaded footage to his computer for editing, he got halos – on a couple of the nurses, a young infantry officer, and some of the children he filmed. He thought he might have to give up recording interviews and go back to just journaling. Maybe he was only a writer, not a film-maker.

It was August when the wounded teenager was carried into Nathaniel's clinic, a skinny Iraqi youth, no more than fourteen years old. G.I.s had strapped him to the stretcher because they said he kept trying to crawl away, even though most of his left arm was missing after a blast that destroyed a crowded café and killed a dozen people, including two American soldiers. By the

time he arrived at the clinic, the kid was unconscious. Nathaniel's crew got him stabilized and dressed the wounds, then moved to treat other victims that had been further out from the blast.

The clinic's interpreter was busy in another ward when the boy regained consciousness, so there was no one who could reassure the kid he was going to be okay, going to live anyway, and that he was in a safe place. Nathaniel saw the fear, and hatred, in the boy's eyes; saw how he wanted to get up and run away, if only he hadn't been so weak. The medic was bringing a drink of water when the kid worked his remaining hand into the pocket of his ragged khakis and fished out a grenade. He pulled the pin with his teeth, just like in an old movie. Nathaniel shook his head and dove to the floor. What a stupid way to die. He meant the boy, and himself.

Nathaniel didn't die but he took enough shrapnel to set off airport metal detectors for the rest of his life. Evidently the reason the Iraqi kid had been close to the original blast in the café was because he was part of the suicide squad that went in to blow it up. There had been a woman and another boy wearing explosive vests. This kid only had a grenade in his pocket but didn't detonate it on time. Another corpsman and a nurse were in the corridor when the kid blew himself up while trying to kill Nathaniel; neither of them were injured badly enough to be mustered out with a medical discharge.

Nathaniel's journals, laptop and camera finally arrived after he'd been at Walter Reed for a month. By the time he began learning to use the prosthesis attached to his right shoulder and walking on his reconstructed right leg, he was already trying to interview other vets in the orthopedic ward. The men and women who participated in art classes as part of their rehab became the subjects of several interviews in Nathaniel's journal. He noticed that some produced paintings and ceramic pieces with classic themes and pleasant color palettes while others seemed to be trying to reproduce the soul's anguish of an amputee, or even the moment of destruction and loss.

When Nathaniel talked with them, there was no consistent correlation between the styles of art and the emotional state of the artists. Some who seemed to be coping well, who were hopeful and looking forward to whatever life brought next, created works of dark chaos. Nathaniel tried asking questions that would lead someone to say all his pain was going into the art work, but nobody bit. He thought he might have to give up on getting a cohesive story out of the interviews, but he persisted in chronicling what he found in the rehab clinics. He knew he was trying to pour his own misery into his notebooks so he could close a cover on it, contain it somehow.

Nathaniel did go back to Spring Ridge. He moved in with Nonny and enrolled at State, almost as if the five intervening years hadn't happened. Almost as if he didn't have to strap

on his right arm every morning. As if he didn't have a permanent limp. Almost. Most of the time he avoided self pity.

Nathaniel got his prosthetic specialist to help him rig up a way to clip his video camera to the hook that was his new right hand. Above the hook, actually, so he could swing the little camera up to frame a scene and still hold other small items with the hook itself. It was almost like having three hands. In filmmaking classes Nathaniel was learning about setting up different kinds of shots and needed to practice, but the stories he wanted to tell were the ones in his notebooks, from the war. He didn't know how he would ever be able to shoot that footage.

There was a veterans' nursing home in the city. It wasn't called that of course – Spring Ridge Veterans Center – as if it were a clubhouse or a benefits office. Nathaniel started going there at the suggestion of the VA counselor from Walter Reed that he met with online. He dropped in on Thursdays after he got out of class and played chess with some of the guys or watched John Wayne movies or just traded war stories, in a place where that wasn't a cliché. The old men treated him like a hero, even the ones who had heard his story, who knew that he was a non-combatant. Nathaniel felt uncomfortable with their adulation but at the same time, it felt good; felt right that these aged warriors knew him better than anyone else in Spring Ridge. He started bringing his camera some days to record interviews with the old soldiers. A ring of light still showed up on some faces when he saved

the footage to edit. Maybe he needed new editing software.

It was at Spring Ridge Veterans Center that Nathaniel saw Bonnie Miller again. He knew her instantly, even without the tee shirt. Her classic profile, silhouetted against the afternoon glare of the sliding door in the dayroom, was an icon in his memory. When she moved into the center of the room, her dark hair waved gently on her shoulders and Nathaniel stood transfixed. She didn't recognize him. They had been mere acquaintances and while a high school girl is a grown woman, many eighteen-year-old boys still haven't finished growing and have scarcely started shaving. Few have only one arm. Bonnie pushed a wheelchair and bent to talk to its occupant, a man in a red plaid lumberjack shirt. When they passed Nathaniel, she nodded. He knew her smile was a generic courtesy but the light in her eyes was like a beacon to him, like a marquee spelling out the old promise: Beauty will save the world. He noted which room she entered with the wheelchair and determined to find out who the old man was and how often Bonnie came to the Center.

The veteran in the plaid shirt turned out to be Herman Miller, Bonnie's paternal grandfather, who'd only been admitted the day Nathaniel saw them together. He was there for a season of rehab after being hospitalized. Nathaniel introduced himself to Mr. Miller the following week and found out that Bonnie's habit was to come to the Center about four every afternoon to spend an hour with her grandfather before

the evening meal was served. Then she went home to sleep before going to her job as a night-shift EMT. She was a medic, like Nathaniel.

The fact that Herman Miller would be only a temporary resident at Spring Ridge Veterans Center was the excuse Nathaniel needed to start interviewing him right away. The first time he filmed Mr. Miller,

About the Author

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