

The Sand Wind

By Bob Papp

Sometime after 2 a.m., the neighbor's dog starts yelping. It's not his usual bluster, hurled at some raccoon defiling the virtue of his yard. These cries warble with uncertainty, more frantic pleas than barking bravado. About the same time, my right leg starts aching.

My neighbor could sleep through a freight train roaring down her hall; she won't do anything about her dog. I'm the opposite. My nights are long and unforgiving and these cries of distress hit too close to home.

I stand, but pain sears from the old break in my femur, pitching me back into the recliner. My leg shouldn't bother me anymore. The accident was ... years ago, I suppose. Talking heads on the TV start laughing at something, maybe me. I flip the remote at it. The screen shimmers to static, then dies. The room goes dark.

Judging by the dog's bleak whimpers and whines, the boogeyman is still in the yard, so I ease up from the chair again and test my leg. Good enough. I head down the hall.

In the kitchen, I leave the lights off to see out. The smell of my ramen dinner is gone but the shadow of the pot lingers in the sink, like it's been there for years. The window above looks over the backyard. I rub a murky pane, smearing grease and dust on its surface. Outside, webs and dirt still obscure the view. Something, maybe an overgrown shrub, shifts in the wind.

Moving to the door, I unlatch the lock. The knob feels too cold for the night. As I open it, I realize I should have guessed what that meant. A dark figure looms on my back porch. Waiting.

I drop back, meaning to slam the door, but pain flares again in my leg. By reflex, my hand whips off the knob to grab the counter behind me for support.

"Stay back," I yell. "I—I've got a gun!" I don't have a gun. Not in my hand and not in my house. I slip my free hand behind me to conceal my imaginary gun.

"Micky." Her thick voice sends prickles up my spine. Across my scalp. "What did you do?"

"Jesus," I whisper. My knees go loose and I give up my gun ruse to grab the counter with both hands. It feels fouled with tacky grime and grit. Something clinging to its surface should have been cleansed long ago. "Althea. Y—you can't be here."

She bows her head but otherwise stands still as stone at my threshold.

I first became captivated with Thea at the start of fourth grade when I found her outside school yelling at small architectural statues that perched above the doors. I was new to the school. She was an outcast, clinging to imaginary friends and fanciful ideas of how the

world ought to be. Our peers mocked us, but we didn't care. For years, she was a magnet and I was steel, helplessly drawn to her fancies and dreams. Even when I got serious about life and drifted loose, I'd still revisit her from time to time. Until the accident, anyway.

I remember how she looked the last time I saw her. Beads in her hair, shoulders draped in multi-colored scarves, wearing a bright cloak and patchwork baggy pants. Stains spreading....

Now, she haunts my porch, an inscrutable shadow.

"Yy—uh." I clear my throat. "I'm ... not comfortable with this." An understatement, but it seems respectful.

She looks up then, but I can't make out her face. Wishing I'd turned on the porch light, I think about reaching for the kitchen switch. She wouldn't like the stark light, though. If she left, I might never know.

"What do you want, Thea?" My voice breaks and sounds weak. Fluttery.

"I wanted to be with you, Micky." Hers seems distant, but so much stronger. She never lacked conviction. No matter how strange a notion might be, she always made it real through the strength of her belief. "Why did you do it?"

I can't answer that. We stare across the void between us.

"I'm sorry, Thea." My breath grows short and tears well in my eyes. When I blink, they roll down my cheeks in bitter, cold streaks. "I'm so sorry."

"For you, or for me?" She raises a hand, palm out. "Keep your sorrow, either way."

I can't blame her; she has no reason to forgive me. I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath until it drains out of me then, like a long, lonely wind.

"Micky. I'm here for a reason. You are the last person I would trust to help me but the only one who can."

"No." I roll my head away so I don't have to look at her anymore. "It's over. It has to be."

A chill breeze probes the kitchen, stirring dust in its wake. I risk a glance back. She remains on the porch but is turning. The dog next door whines once, alone.

"Do you really have a gun?" she asks. "And would you use it if you did?"

"Althea, no. You know me. I barely have a knife in the kitchen."

"Then come with me. Listen carefully, Micky. You owe me, and I am claiming your debt."

I barely recognize her now, yet I made her this way. Burned away her dazzling whimsy and scarred her with severity.

"I ... I don't think it would be wise to leave here with you."

“Well, then you never will, and your debt to me will devour you.”

The house creaks around me as night seeps in through its open door. Down the hall, the living room calls. Soft and comforting. Sheltered from the world outside. I could go there now. Wander back to the frayed recliner. Pop a few more pills until the hours and days roll over me. My home doesn't judge me or expect anything of me. It accepts me as part of itself. I belong here. Feel safe here.

“I'm leaving you, Micky. And I'll not return.”

As she drifts from the doorway, I see a glimmer of her former light. The dream that the world is, somehow, more than it seems. That it can become whatever we want of it, if only we believe in it, like it wants to believe in us. Despite my aversion, I do want to believe in her again.

I step forward, testing the leg. It holds. At the threshold, the house tugs one last time, reminding me of the recliner and the bottle of pills that helped me forget. Whispering in my ear, promising succor. I push forward in denial.

Althea has already slipped away, but I find her alongside my house. She reaches the sidewalk in front and heads down the street. For a time, I lag behind, keeping my gaze down as we pass streetlights. When I gather enough nerve to edge up beside her, she asks again, “Why did you do it?”

I grimace, not knowing what she is capable of and fearing her reaction to the truth. The crisp night air is refreshing, but the further we get from home, the more fragile my state of mind becomes. I don't understand how she can be here again or the power she has over me. “I felt trapped, I think.”

“But you only made a worse trap for yourself, didn't you?”

“Maybe.”

I risk a glance. The hair that isn't in beads drifts around her head, oblivious to our pace through the night. Her eyes are closed.

Beside her, the neighborhood glides past in a blur. The houses all seem the same, remarkable only for the people slumbering inside. Soon the sleepers will awaken to a new day, different than the last, while mine never change. Except tonight.

“Thea, I don't know what you want from me. Where are we going? What do you need?”

“All in good time, my little pretty.” She smiles and I catch a glimpse through the ugly scars I've given her.

The neighborhood haze begins coalescing into solid hunks of architecture. Hulking shadows congeal into parked cars or trees reaching for the night sky. We cross a road and my stomach churns when I see where she is taking me.

Havengrove Cemetery sprawls into the night. The intermingled branches of its century-old oaks forge a thick roof above the endless carpet of graves. Even in daylight, you can't see through it. At night, it's an infinite cave of darkness.

"No," I insist. What could she possibly want here? "This was a mistake. I need to go back. I told you, I am utterly sorry. The accident was my fault. I—" I wanted it to happen. "I hurt you, Althea, and that may bury me forever. But it's over now. It has to be."

"You don't get a choice anymore, Micky. I called your debt. You left the house with me. We are bound again. You owe me and you're going to pay that debt to my father. He is beyond me."

I sag against the wrought iron fence. It stings. My brain is stripping gears, struggling to gain traction in shifting sands. None of this makes sense. She shouldn't be here. I tried to end her. Thought I had.

And her father? I can't wrap my head around it. She'd told me her mother died giving birth to her and she never got along with her father. All her life, it was like they were in different rooms, gibbering through walls at one another. As we grew older together, she gave up trying. Or did I imagine all that? I never met him. Is he even real? With her, reality and fantasy blurred. Still, he always sounded unstable to me. Frightening. Does he know what I did?

"Nooo. I can't go to him, Thea. He'll obliterate me."

"You're the only one who can, Micky. And you must."

What will she do to me if I refuse? It would shatter my mind, I think; I'm barely holding together now. She is inside of me and I cannot deny her, but *I don't know what she is anymore.*

Pulling my phone from a pocket, I try to thumb it on. I want to see her for real, in the full glare of LED light. Nothing to lose now and no more point pretending everything is normal. Maybe the flashlight will drive her away (I don't want her to go!). The phone doesn't respond. When did I charge it last? It's been so long since I cared enough. It slips from my grasp, receding into leafy debris.

"He's in here?" I ask. "Where? What am I supposed to do?"

When she doesn't answer, I gather myself and climb over the gate, then slide down to the gravel drive. The leg throbs but doesn't fight me. I risk one last look and she stirs.

"A bickering bear and wolf are trapped in a cave for years," she says. I have to lean in to hear. "A lost cougar finds them and the bear joins it, abandoning the wolf. After many adventures they are drawn to a wind blowing sand through the cave. It leads to a hole where daylight enters the cavern from above. The cougar jumps on the bear to escape. Which of the three deserve forgiveness?"

I don't understand, but it doesn't matter. She has already closed her eyes, dismissing me into the night.

The coarse gravel gradually transitions to sandy dirt as I trudge ever deeper into the cemetery. There are no streetlights here. No beams of moonlight filtering down. Only shifting, dark masses. I don't know where I'm going, so I stick to the drive, following it mostly by the feel of packed earth against my soles.

At a fork in the road, a soft wind gathers. I choose to walk into it. Grit prickles my face in gusts and I squint. I've been awake for too long. My leg aches again and I just want to go home to rest. And forget. But, as I trudge past the trunk of a massive oak, I spot a bluish-white glow in the distance. I turn toward it and start picking my way quietly through rows of silhouetted tombstones.

When I'm about fifty feet from the light source, I call out, "Hello? Is someone there?"

A man jumps to his feet. The glow is before him, casting him in a macabre mix of shadows and light. He raises an arm toward me. "Get back! I've got a gun and nothin' to lose! Get the hell away from me. Now!"

I drop to the ground. Unlike me, he wasn't bluffing. I saw the glint in his hand.

"U—um." My voice quavers again, as it did with Thea in the kitchen. "I'm a friend! A friend sent me."

"What friend? Who? I don't have any!"

I hear him moving. Approaching.

"Your, uh, daughter." As the words come out, I know how crazy they must sound to a crazed man. "It was some time ago," I add, hoping that might help.

"Liar!" A shot cracks from the gun.

"Agh! No, please! Don't shoot." I don't think he was aiming for me. It didn't sound like he hit any gravestones.

He stomps closer. If he keeps it up, he'll be on me soon. "I don't have a daughter! What do you want?"

"Althea wants me to help you. What can I do?"

He's still moving, but not nearer. Pacing, I think. Then, with a voice small like a bewildered child caught in a lie, he asks "How do you know about Thea?"

My brain skitters a bit and I try to keep it on track. "I ... I was with her when it happened. When she died." I hear my words, hanging in the air. Wonder about them.

"For real? At the hospital? You were there?"

What hospital? “No. At the accident. I was ... driving.” I wanted it to happen. It was time to let go. “It was my fault.”

“No. You got it wrong. There wasn’t any accident.” He stops moving, then coughs and clears his throat. “They both died in the hospital. Thea was stillborn.”

Stillborn? Had I stumbled across the wrong grieving father? No, it couldn’t be. No....

The wind gathers, swirling sand around me. My world pitches and twists with it. My mind isn’t fraying, it’s pulling together. Gathering threads of truth. I crashed the car on purpose because she was with me. Being together was tearing me apart. I wasn’t strong enough to keep living in a world where she was both real and not. One way or the other, one of us had to die. I thought it would be her.

“I watched her grow up,” he continues. His words are slurred. Drunk, maybe. “Pretended I did anyway, I guess. Even talked to her sometimes and imagined what she’d say back. So hard to understand. But I know she wasn’t real. Then, sometime around grade school she left me. I stopped seein’ her, I mean. I figured she was growin’ up. Must’ve been time for me to do the same.”

I rise, wavering, and reach for a tombstone for support. He’s there, just a few paces away, watching. The light is behind him so I can’t see his face. “Sir, why are you here in the cemetery at night ... with a gun?”

He sags, deflated. “Huh. I seen her again tonight. Didn’t go good. ‘Bout lost my mind. I know she ain’t real. I thought I was doin’ better, goin’ so long without seein’ her like that. Now...? No. I don’t have it in me to start down that path again. I—I ain’t that strong. It’s too hard wantin’ for all I’m worth to have my daughter in my life, and knowin’ at the same time she’s been dead since the day she was born.” Sighing, he turns back to the light. “I come here to join ‘em both.”

“No.” I inhale deeply then step forward, reaching out to touch his back.

“You’re cold,” he says. “Jus’ let me go.”

“No. I ... had a friend named Thea. She had a father. They didn’t get along.”

He snorts. “Yeah? Us neither.”

“When she had the chance, when she had somewhere else to go, she left him alone. But that choice burdened her, I think. Scarred her. One day, maybe she tried to go back to him. To tell him she was sorry.”

“What for?” he asks. “Her Pa loved her, I bet. No matter what. He’d have only wanted the best for her, right?”

“Maybe to seek forgiveness?”

He shrugs. “No need. Like I said, he loved her.”

I nod and, as his answer sinks in, I feel something taugth break free inside of me. "I don't think you have to worry about seeing your daughter again. Even if you do, someday, maybe that's ok. Maybe your world can be just that big if you want, and if you let it."

He looks down and frowns, then asks to hear more about my friend, so we talk for a while. I tell him about what Thea meant to me and about how much I miss her. Eventually, he hands me his gun and wanders off, seeking his own way out of the cemetery.

I go to fetch his light but exhaustion overwhelms me. Slumping to the ground, I sit and stare through heavy lids at the tombstones of his wife and infant daughter and the light beyond. Soft footsteps approach from behind, but I'm too tired to look. Instead, I close my eyes in peace.