

CONSERVATORY OF DEATH



Drinking Fear from Translucent Stalks

Pissing Lava That Turns to Rocks

The Blue Children of the Mushroom

Hide in the Shadow of Truth

~“Blue Children of the Mushroom”

By The Crystal Asparagus

Nearly blind from the slamming glare of the late afternoon sun, Betty Smith glided her white Safari Cargo van onto the exit ramp of Route 138. Once she left the highway she could see again and was soon cruising along Old Applewhite Avenue, a narrow, circuitous road that took her winding quietly past deep woods, campgrounds and cornfields, past old farm-houses and barns that stood so far from the road they looked like discarded toys children had left out in the weather and forgotten.

Betty hadn't slept in two days. Poor old Myra Johanson had been up all night crying and screaming. The acetaminophen wasn't controlling the pain anymore. Betty finally quieted her down and got her to sleep with soothing talk and hydrocodone.

Experience told her that the pain would only get worse. She'd already spoken to Doctor Ponte about getting her some morphine.

Myra Johansson was seventy years old and dying. She was being devoured by cancer. With every visit Betty noticed another bite taken out of her. The cancer had attacked her bladder first, and then quickly chomped into her

HANK KIRTON

rectum, cervix and stomach. Eating her, voracious.

Old Applewhite Avenue forked into Ironstone Road and Woodland Road. At the end of Woodland sat the Suffoletto house.

Angela Suffoletto was eighty-eight years old and dying. Cancer was eating her too, but at a slower rate of digestion than Mrs. Johansson. Angela's cancer had a more refined palate, eating away at her brain, sucking memories and reason from her like strands of spaghetti.

Whenever Betty pulled into the Suffoletto's long dirt driveway, she felt a queasy mix of absurdity and anxiety. The Suffoletto home was a small, white, ordinary-looking Ranch house. Sprawling oak trees hugged it from both sides. There was no lawn, the front yard was parched gray dirt with a few bunches of tough crabgrass here and there.

What disquieted Betty were the lawn statues. There had to be at least a hundred of them, standing in front of the house like a vast cartoon army. Concrete deer and pink flamingos grazed beside chipped gnomes and winged fairies. At least a dozen Virgin Marys wept or prayed or just looked forlornly over pipe-smoking snowmen and grinning jockeys. A dirty plastic Santa Claus with a hole in his laughing face stood shoulder to shoulder with a worn, wooden Jesus, crucified, his face erased long ago by rain.

Betty picked her way through the statues, stepping over little nativity scenes, stone cherubs, angels, gargoyles and fat bloated frogs with obscene, outstretched tongues. A pink plastic Easter Bunny with a deranged look on its face stood guard by the door.

Mr. Suffoletto had told her she could go ahead and walk right in, anytime, sweetheart, but she knocked on the door anyway.

CONSERVATORY OF DEATH

Tommy Suffoletto, Angela's eight-year-old grand-son opened the door.

"Hey there, Tommy. How are you today?" Betty asked, her voice much more cheerful and energized than she felt.

"Fine..." Tommy said, stepping back to let her into the house.

The house was dark and smelled of cedar and worried sweat and slowly roasting beef. Antique paintings of dour, 18th century faces hung over floral, plumb-colored wallpaper.

There was a low smoldering fire in the fireplace.

"How's your grandma doing today, Tommy?" Betty asked.

Tommy didn't answer. He backed away into the kitchen.

"She saw her daddy today," said a man's voice.

James Suffoletto, Angela's husband of fifty-six years stood in the hallway. James was eighty-five and aside from high blood pressure and mild arthritis, in fine health. Betty could tell by his face he'd been crying.

"I'm sorry?" she asked.

"Angela's father came and visited her this morning. I heard her talking to him. It took me a little while of listening before I realized who it was she was talking to. It was her daddy."

Betty nodded, trying to appear solemn. "Yes, that's quite common. I've seen that with many of my patients. Most find it comforting. You know, a departed loved-one paying a visit, reassuring us that there's nothing to fear." Betty didn't mention it, but a patient imagining a visit from a deceased relative was also a sign of the preactive phase of dying. The cancer's appetite was increasing.

"I don't think she found it comforting. Not judging by

HANK KIRTON

her tone of voice or what she was saying to him. About what he done to her when she was little.”

“What did she say?” Betty asked and then immediately wanted to bite her tongue off, withdraw the question.

Mr. Suffoletto pulled a gray handkerchief from the back pocket of his jeans, honked snot into it, then wiped his nose, dabbed his moist eyes.

“You get along with your daddy?” he asked her.

“Um, I never really knew my father. He left us when I was a baby.”

“Run off then?”

Betty nodded, not wanting to reveal anything about her private life. She didn’t feel like explaining that her father had been committed to a mental hospital before any memories of him could coalesce into lasting images in her mind. She didn’t want to discuss his drug problems, or the fact that her foster mother hadn’t allowed her to see him, and that by the time she was old enough to visit him on her own, she was too terrified to face him.

“Sometimes that’s for the best. What kinda work did he do?”

Betty hated being questioned like this, but didn’t have the heart to shut him down. He needed the distraction. He needed to nudge his wife from his mind for a little while and focus his attention on someone else.

“He was a musician.”

“That so? What’d he play?”

“He, um, sang and played guitar in a rock and roll band, back in the Sixties.”

“That so? Was he famous?”

“No, not really.”

“What was the name of the band he played in?”

CONSERVATORY OF DEATH

“Um, they were called The Crystal Asparagus,” she said, nearly wincing at how uncomfortable it felt to pronounce the name.

Mr. Suffoletto smiled at that, stuffed his hand-kerchief back in his pocket. “Thank you, sweetheart,” he said, and winked. “I guess you better tend to your patient now.”

“Yes.” Betty passed him and moved down the hall, entered the bedroom where Mrs. Angela Suffoletto lay dying.

The hospice had brought in a hospital bed with bars on the sides after she rolled out of bed one morning and cracked three ribs.

The “Granny Cam”, always running, always alert, studied her from a shelf at the foot of the bed. Betty hated those things, they made her self-conscious, but she understood why people used them. There had been a home health aide named Ben Flaven who’d worked with Betty at the hospice last year and had been secretly videotaped forcing sedatives into an elderly man’s mouth, slapping his cheeks and throat to get them down. The old man almost choked to death.

Knowing Ben, she never would have guessed he was capable of such behavior and she was glad she hadn’t been a hospice case manager at the time.

Mrs. Suffoletto was asleep. Betty approached the bed. The old woman’s tiny wrinkled face was placid and restful for the first time in days. Her spotted, blue-veined hands were clasped over her stomach. They looked like a small pile of decaying chicken skin and bones.

On the nightstand, a black and white portrait of her taken in the early 30’s stared happy and frozen across time. She’d been a lovely young woman, her smooth black hair

HANK KIRTON

worn up in finger-waves, full, dark, heart-shaped lips, her big eyes glittering with youthful enthusiasm. Betty moved her gaze from the healthy, smiling young woman in the photograph to the withered, barely-breathing husk in the bed. The woman in the photograph would drop that gleeful expression like a mouthful of mud if the picture frame were a window through time and she could see what she'd one day become.

Stop it, said the Voice and she pushed these thoughts away. God, she'd gone way too long without sleep.

She touched Mrs. Suffoletto's fragile, bony shoulder.

"Angela?"

The old woman stirred – barely - and moved her lips.

"Angela?"

"No," she whispered. She started to say something that began with the letter "P", but quickly tired and gave up. She rested a few seconds and gathered the strength to say, "Priscilla. My name is Priscilla Seashore."

Betty squeezed her shoulder again. "Angela, you're having a dream."

Her eyes snapped open and focused on Betty with such sudden ferocity that Betty jerked her hand away and hid it behind her back, as if she'd been doing something shameful with it. She was careful not to look the Granny Cam in the eye.

"I am not dreaming," she said, her voice gaining strength. "My name is Priscilla Seashore. I'm an actress."

She tried to push herself into a sitting position with thin, trembling arms too weak to accomplish the task. "I made twelve goddamn films at Bluebird Studios. I worked with Henry Walthall and Clara Young, you little bitch. I know when I'm having a fucking dream!"

CONSERVATORY OF DEATH

Betty stepped back. “I-I’m sorry...I didn’t mean...” and then the hard, authoritative Voice said: *No, no, you’re not supposed to run away from this. Step forward! Control her. Get her calm again. Bring her back from wherever she is!*

Mr. Suffoletto came into the room, his face already anticipating some new heartbreak, some new disaster of his wife’s mind. “What’s wrong?”

Betty looked at him. Her face was pale, she was sure. *Damn it girl, now look what you’ve done!* “I-I tried to wake her and she, she...” *And stop stuttering!*

Little Tommy was peeking in from the edge of the doorway, looking scared.

Mrs. Suffoletto had settled back down in the bed. Her eyes were closed again. Mr. Suffoletto went to her side, placed his shaking hand over her forehead. “Angie? Angie dear, are you awake?”

Her eyes opened. They were calm and gentle again.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m awake.”

He let out a heavy breath and his whole body seemed to deflate, tense air filling the room.

“Betty’s here to give you your check-up and get you your medicine. Okay?”

“Okay, dear, thanks...”

Mr. Suffoletto turned toward Betty, looking helpless and lost. “She’s all yours,” he said in a quavering voice.

Betty nodded, stepped toward the bed, finally getting her startled nerves under control. “Thank you Mr. Suffoletto. I’m so sorry...”

“Please, would you please, for the last time, call me Jim.”

On the drive home Betty wanted to cry but didn’t. She was a damn good nurse. It wasn’t like her to cringe from a

HANK KIRTON

patient like that. It was just lack of sleep, she told herself. Her emotions sparked and popped like electricity under her skin.

When she got home she took off her shoes before she'd even closed the door. Fifteen minutes later she was sinking slowly into a hot bath. Unless there was an emergency, she wouldn't have to visit any patients tomorrow. A whole day of freedom.

Time to sleep, finally. Ray, her (soon to be ex) husband, had moved to Chicago two weeks ago. Usually, now that she had the house to herself, she felt lonely, a kind of empty sadness, but this had been such a draining, depressing week, she needed the solitude like nourishment, like oxygen.

When Betty was warm and dry and had changed into sweatpants and one of Ray's old T-shirts, she noticed there was a message on the answering machine.

It was from her older brother, Swatt.