

Last Dance at the Polka Dot Restaurant

And Other Travels Through Life

by

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Keeping House

The problem was that Dave had died ahead of schedule – not that a death schedule was the way the investment counselor had described their financial plan. However, their joint investments and incomes exactly balanced the household bills and mortgage payment.

But then Dave up and got sick and then laid down and died. Not quite so simple as that really, more like the tearing apart of the fabric of the universe. A quiet rip. One that frayed life into meaningless strands. In the determined regathering of those drifting threads, Jan forgot the plan. She scheduled a trip to visit her best friend from college, took Dave's truck to be fixed, and hired professional painters to redo the whole outside of the house because the south wall was peeling and Dave would hate that. She even called the water company about the leaking hydrant that had worn the gravel in their driveway to mud.

In a brittle fog, she wrote checks, swiped her charge card and forgot the plan. The bank did not. One month, two, three months behind. Phone calls. Threatening letters. And suddenly, when

it was really too late, Jan became aware that the house, her home, had slipped into foreclosure. Jan jerked back into the world as though snapped by a rubber band. She called the bank.

“Good afternoon, this is Ryan. Am I speaking to Mrs. Bishop? Good. Good. How can I help you today?”

“You are foreclosing on my home. What can I do?” Ryan barely missed a beat before transferring her to another department. In bewilderment, barely English-speaking Cindy transferred her again, and Vivian explained in nasal boredom that there was nothing to be done.

“What if I pay you? Everything? A fee?” Desperately Jan figured out how to rack up the several thousand that must be owed. She could do it. Just.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but if you had acted responsibly, we could have helped you.”

Jan explained, contained the quiver in her voice, asked for supervisors (all unavailable) made offers and wished she could meet Vivian in person in order to effect her death. Slowly.

“Well, there is an appeal process,” Vivian reluctantly admitted. *“But your house is already listed. Thank you for calling Grabitall Bank and we hope we can serve you again.”* Click.

Trying to think, Jan took a strawberry yogurt from the fridge and sat at the table with a spoonful wavering between cup and mouth. In despair she clutched her hair, coating it with glops of yogurt.

And then the doorbell rang. She dropped the spoon, splattered herself more thoroughly and answered the door. An agent and a professional couple who fairly dripped money smiled at her. Jan wailed and clutched her strawberry moussed hair. The three took a step backwards. Silence but for Jan's wracking sobs.

"We...we'll come back later," the agent said.

"No we won't!" hissed the woman. "I'm not buying from a crazy person. The market is flooded with houses."

In embarrassed triumph, Jan watched them leave. Then she called her lawyer. Time, he said. She had to stall for time to get the appeal through. And the real estate agents were required to make an appointment.

Forewarned is forearmed.

Word must have spread because the next agent's call did not come for 10 days. Jan was really quite surprised at how quickly she had been able to acquire the 19 shelter cats she had agreed to foster. Not all house trained sadly – they had said seven were feral but she hated to make them live in her garage. Now they were one big caterwauling, litter-boxing family.

Jan opened the door to the agent and a man she sized up as an investor looking for a deal. "Come in," Jan smiled and sneezed again. The man sneezed in response.

"My, what a lot of cats," the agent said wide-eyed.

“They are my life,” Jan said. “The neighbors hate my little cat graveyard, but I like to honor them in death as well as life.”

“A cat graveyard?” The man sneezed again. “How many have you buried?”

Jan smiled sweetly. “Too many to count now.”

“That’s not legal!” the agent accused.

“Really?” Jan murmured. “Should I start digging them up?”

The next agent brought a family with three girls. Jan stared at them silently for several beats before intoning. “What sweet little girls. Have you been saved? My neighbors brought over pamphlets. There are some in every room, and a little something to read in the bathroom. Help yourself. The neighbors will be over often...very, very often, to support you in your search for salvation.” She smiled sadly. “And watch your shoes; the cats pee on strangers.”

Two more weeks passed. Almost there, the lawyer promised – with a refinance deal to lower her payments. If there was enough time. But suddenly, a flurry of agents called with serious buyers. The bank had dropped the price. A lot.

Jan sat at the table absently stroking Fantine and Jean Valjean. She gazed out the window, wishing she could put up a barrier like they had in *Les Mis*. A water company truck drove by and once again did not stop to fix the hydrant. Jan’s hand stopped mid-stroke.

It was really shameful how in the middle of the night the hydrant had exploded. The street and Jan's driveway ran with gurgling water. Jan watched from her window as the water company struggled with the mess. One of the men came to her door and while cats wove around his feet, apologized for the disaster. "I'm so sorry, ma'am. It's like someone hauled the whole thing out with a car and chain. It will be a week before we can fix it. You'll get a settlement."

"That's okay," Jan snuggled Cosette under her chin. "We'll be here, just keeping house."

On the Road Again

The sixties had been good to Marlianna. True, she didn't remember all of it – there had been some very good stuff available and she'd tried it all. But what she did remember vividly was the gut-gasping relief of escaping her home. It had been a study in beige – beige walls, beige furniture, beige carpets and a mother who had faded to beige under the relentless controls of her husband. There had been many rules, many demeaning jibes, and many hours of silent crying at the hopelessness of life.

And then at the fair's amusement park, Marlianna met Henry, scrawny, bead-wearing, laughing Henry. She had walked out of her parent's house and taken off with Henry in his Volkswagen bus. Two other girls and another guy... Tony... she thought, had gone too. There had been rock concerts, panhandling, drugs, music and quite a few more experiences than she had been comfortable with.

But she had felt free for the first time in her life. That trumped everything.

And then somehow, laughing Henry had started to take on a few of the less desirable traits

exhibited by her father. He wanted to know what she was doing all the time, telling her what she should think, mocking her ideas.

But he had taught her how to leave and so she did.

A little waitressing, some work as a secretary... and then Terry. She'd married Terry and he had never once laughed at her or tried to tell her what to think. In return, she loved him, raised kids with him, bought a house (nothing beige) with him, rescued dogs with him, and then despaired alone when he died.

And here she was in the sixties again – her own sixties. Too young to be old. Too old to be young. Not terribly keen on knitting and having “Grandma” as her only identity. More afraid of fading into an older version of her mother. Trying on this new identity of being alone.

“So what do we do now?” she asked Roscoe the rescue. The German shepherd mix barked encouragingly. She thought about the sights she had seen in Henry’s company, or only half-seen because they were all so stoned. She remembered believing she had painted glasses and moustaches on the presidential faces of Mt. Rushmore during a “trip” that had not involved much physical movement.

And suddenly, Marlianna wondered what the amazing wonders would look like when her eyes and mind were clear. When she was neither loved nor bullied but just herself, alone.

She called her daughters to tell them she was going on a road trip. Then she piled herself and Roscoe into her Honda and with Willie Nelson playing, pulled out of the driveway and headed to points unknown.

She was free. She was alone. She was herself only.

It wasn't too bad at all. In fact...it was wonderful.

Nell and the Ice Dragon

The Alaskan wind bit through the layers of Nell's clothing like a beast gnawing away all the warmth in her soul. She had been lost for hours, stumbling between ragged boulders, sliding into drifts of snow, scuttling crablike over treacherous slopes of scree. She had been left behind when her hunting-mad brother and his friends tore away from camp, guns waving, at the glimpse of some monstrous flying beast. Slaughtering bears and moose had begun to bore them.

If she'd had any sense, Nell realized, instead of scrambling after them, she would have stayed in camp. She might have been lonely in her awareness that she mattered to no one, but, she thought ruefully, she could have warmed her hands with a fire.

"Hallooo!!!" She called again. She had been shouting for hours. Soon the sun would give up its late winter peeping over the far horizon and fully set...and then the cold would finish its relentless work.

She wondered wearily how long her brother would hunt for her. Not long, she realized. He had no use for this sixteen-year-old sister who had no inclination to train to be a schoolteacher nor anyone she wanted to marry.

“Why can’t you be like other girls?” he had demanded petulantly.

Nell had had no answer for him, but the life he’d mapped out for her seemed a living death.

“You have no right to depend on me for your livelihood,” he’d snarled.

She did not point out that half of the money he’d squandered since their parents had died in the great flu epidemic was rightfully hers.

So in a fit of contrariness, Nell had insisted on coming along on this wretched trip. The surreal landscape enchanted her with its magic and mystery. But now it was killing her.

“Heeeelp meee!”

The wind gusted stronger now, seeming to carry an eerie howl of pain on its wings. Nell stumbled again. Her feet and hands were frozen, without sensation. Her shivering had become uncontrollable. The end would be soon.

She wondered distantly if her brother had managed to shoot the giant eagle or whatever it was that had sent him scrambling across the ghostly landscape. She hoped not. She hated his pleasure in the murder of innocent creatures. Would he have a similar surge of satisfaction when her death released him from irksome duty?

It didn't matter. She would not be there to witness it.

Nell's faltering steps led her into a hollow between the jagged boulders. Perhaps here at the base of the mountain the wind would be less fierce; perhaps the low cries of agony would be blocked.

But no, the sound was louder. How confusing... clearly an animal sound... and yet in her benumbed state, Nell thought she could understand a cry for help. How odd. A cry for help out here in the barren wilderness.

But I'm the one who needs help, she thought with a dying flicker of amusement.

And then she saw it. For a moment she stood still, swaying on her feet, thinking this vision must be the delirium of death.

But what a beautiful, terrible delirium.

The injured dragon lay among the rocks, its sinuous, silvery blue body glowing weakly in the scant light. As Nell stared, it lifted its head, and stared at her with eyes like molten sapphires.

For long moments Nell half-held her breath, waiting for the creature to attack, to spring at her and end her life with a swipe of savage claws or a bite from dagger teeth.

Time crawled by. A minute. Two. Nothing but the sound of soft panting and the scent of burnt sugar steaming from the dragon's maw.

At last Nell tore her gaze from the terrifying face and looked farther. The dragon's front leg was twisted, and a scattering of silvery blood and

ice blue scales glinted among the scree. Its fall from the sky must have triggered a rockslide, she realized. Stones and boulders pinned down a bent wing, the glistening membrane shredded by a splatter of gunshot holes.

A wave of anger and pity swept over Nell.

“I’m sorry he shot you,” she mumbled. She was unsure if words had come out of her frozen mouth, but she regretted to her soul that her brother had wantonly harmed such incredible, wild beauty.

For several moments, swaying with exhaustion and cold, Nell stared at the injured creature. She thought she should scream, possibly faint. But she shivered too hard to scream and if she fainted, she would never stand up again. It was too cold and night was falling.

“Doesn’t matter,” Nell muttered. “Dead by morning...”

“Not if you help me...” the smoky, warm voice hung in the air.

“Did you...?” Nell lurched a step closer. “Did you speak to me?”

“Yes...I am injured, not dumb.”

“Clearly not,” Nell felt a bubble of hysterical laughter lift up through her. “Are you, in fact, a...a dragon? Or am I delirious and dying?”

“I am a dragon,” the creature replied, “And in need of help.”

Nell hesitated, fear and desperation warring in the icy shards of her mind. Desperation won and she wobbled closer still.

“Could you be a fire breather? I am extremely cold.”

The dragon shifted uncomfortably. Stones rattled. A sound like a sharp, suppressed cry came from its mouth. “Lay down beside me and get warm. When you are no longer so cold, I will need your help. Or we will both die.”

Nell stepped closer. “Will you eat me?”

“No.”

“Why should I trust you?”

Something suspiciously like a gasping chuckle came from the creature. “If you do not come closer, you will be dead of cold very soon. And I, too. I promise I will not harm you. You have a choice to make.”

Nell couldn’t hold off any longer. She was sinking down fast into the arctic sleep of death. “I will trust you,” she forced out.

The dragon shifted his unhurt wing and leg so that she could first crouch, then lay back into a circle of blissful warmth. The shivering began in earnest... and then finally eased. The dragon’s breath, drifting from the fanged mouth above her head was sweet.

Like caramel candy, Nell thought drowsily. And her aching body was strengthening a little from it.

Sighing, nestling back into the sapphire warmth, Nell ignored the tears dripping down her cheeks. Safe haven at last...not with her horrid brother...but with a beast from fairy tales. For a moment her mind flickered at the thought that she had come home. Silly...delirium....

The long terrifying day, the seductiveness of the blazing warmth, the sense that she had dared such a thing created a wash of pleasure in Nell's mind as well as her body. Looking at the luminous blue skin, aware of the glorious eyes above her, Nell tried to marshal her thoughts. They were disturbingly unwieldy.

"I suppose," she said sleepily, "that I must question your existence and my sanity... whether I am lost beyond hope...imagining one magnificent being to rescue me from my dreary life.... My brother doesn't approve of my fanciful ways."

"I am not a dream or a fancy," the dragon rumbled. "And I am not a unique being. If you are warm enough, would you help me now? Then I will show you what I am."

Nell was reluctant to leave the improbably snug nest, reluctant to again face the frigid world. "My brother would think I should shoot you."

"Why?"

"Because he likes shooting things. He...he is a hunter." Nell stared at the icy side of the mountain. "I hate it. He just kills, hacks off a trophy, and brags about it. The animals did him no harm and are so beautiful alive, so sad in death. I hate it." She twisted her head up to look at the dragon's face. "Do you kill animals?"

"To eat," the dragon replied. "It might have been your brother who shot me." There was a rumble of a laugh. "I swept down and prevented

them from slaughtering a bear cub. One did shoot me, but then they scattered like mice.”

“Good,” said Nell. “Wonderful, in fact.” She took a long determined breath and scrambled to her feet. “What do you need me to do?”

“Can you move the rocks off my wing?”

Nell eyed the boulders. “I don’t think I am strong enough.”

“Then you must have dragon strength. Come closer.” Nell edged toward the dragon’s head. “Closer than that...closer...”

She stood within a foot of his face. The sapphire eyes gleamed as she took short, sharp breaths.

“Now,” he hissed. A cloud of air, smelling of burnt sugar and magic enveloped Nell. She coughed, inhaled, and suddenly felt strength – enchanted strength – flow through her.

She stretched out her arms wonderingly. “I’m powerful,” she whispered.

And she began. For an hour she lifted and moved rocks almost as heavy as she was. The dragon helped when he could by shifting his body and wing to give leverage. He said nothing, but the occasional soft moan slipped through the fanged lips.

Finally, under the dragon’s direction, she pulled his torn wing straight and with a jerk, snapped the twisted leg into a more natural position. The dragon again suppressed a groan, but with his limbs straightened, he stretched out.

“Step back,” he commanded.

Nell obeyed.

The dragon extended his vast wings, gave a few experimental flaps, and then closed his eyes. A glow emanated from his skin; icy light gleamed across his scales. Before her eyes, Nell saw the limbs strengthen, the tear in the wing mend. With a shake of his massive head, and a triumphant roar, the dragon leaped into the sky.

Powerful wing thrusts sent him higher and higher. Nell watched in awe, tears freezing on her face, hands clutched before her. He circled the mountain peaks, shining sapphire in the fading light.

Glorious.

Elemental.

And then he was gone.

Nell stood watching the empty sky until the bite of cold forced her back to her own survival. Would the dragon warmth and strength keep her alive long enough to find the camp? The thought of returning to her brother made her groan in agony, just as the dragon had cried in pain.

But there was no help for it. Death or her brother seemed to be her only choices.

Nell climbed slowly from the narrow shelter of the rocks. Already she could feel the power in her limbs lessening, the cold increasing. But the surge of magic had awoken her mind; she would not give up, would not die out here alone.

Somehow, she would survive this. And then she would set the course of her own life,

not simply obey the dictates of society and her brother. Steadily Nell trudged on, not sure of the direction, but determined to keep the dragon will-to-live.

Moonlight shone over the landscape, eerie and beautiful. There was no sound but the endless souging wind around her, the ice crunching beneath her boots, and her own soft panting. Occasionally Nell glanced up from the treacherous footing to determine the best direction.

And then she stopped. A short distance away, she perceived the figure of a man standing, waiting. Her brother had found her after all. Nell suppressed a sigh and walked slowly towards him.

But, it was not her brother. A young man with ice-white hair and sapphire blue eyes, stood at his ease in the frigid landscape.

“I can guide you back to your brother,” he said before she could speak.

When she said nothing, he simply waited, as patient as the vast landscape.

“You are my dragon,” Nell said suddenly. “How?...but I know, you are my dragon.”

The dragon-man smiled widely, delight shining in his eyes. “Yes. And if you can see this, you are one of the few who are called....”

“Called?”

“Called by the wild heart that beats. We have a small settlement not too far away. Silver Claw is hidden from the world. You could join us...be one of us?”

Nell laughed, joy bubbling inside her. It had not been delirium or ice dreams. She had come home at long, long last.

“Yes, please,” she said, and held out her hand.