

Short Story by **STEPHANIE ANDERSON**

CENTURY VILLAGE



BETTY GRIMES WAKES at 5 a.m. Wind and rain from the Bahamas are beating at her Florida condo, rattling the hurricane shutters and pounding the shingled roof. At first the hurricane feels like a long summer rainstorm, but by noon small branches smack the walls and Century Village becomes an island surrounded by several inches of water. Thank God she has a third story unit. The east-facing windows shake so hard Betty fears the shutters will fly off and a tree will sail into the bedroom. This causes her to mix a vodka cranberry earlier than usual. She watches the yellow and red mass spiraling over South Florida on the TV weather map. By 4 p.m. a dark stain appears on the living room ceiling, and soon water drips steadily from the center, which Betty catches in a mixing bowl. When the power goes out in the evening, she wishes she'd checked into a hotel.

"Dammit, Joe," she mutters in moments like this, when she needs something but doesn't have the money. Oh, Joe had left a mess behind. He had handled the money: checking accounts, credit cards, mortgages, bills, retirement savings. He liked doing it, he insisted, though Betty knew that was just a front for wanting control. Over the years he took things — car purchases, vacation bookings, what schools the kids should attend, even what color to paint the house — gently out of her hands with a false smile, as one would take a glass ornament from a baby.

Betty saw now that she should've asked to see bank statements and bills. She should've known exactly what he made as manager of the button factory. So fitting: the man had spent most of his life in a warehouse full of buttons, his life as tiny as the buttons.

Betty sets her camp stove on the kitchen table and boils water for a package of Pasta Sides. Back in the '60s she and Joe had camped several times a month all summer, motoring up to Vermont or out to the Alleghenies. For some reason the sex was better in the tent, but that wasn't the only reason they went. They hiked, canoed, fished, swam in lakes — partners in escaping the city, "getting free" as they put it. Betty loved Joe then, and at what point that changed she wasn't exactly sure. It just did, and by the time the kids were teenagers Betty wanted a divorce but knew asking was pointless. She couldn't afford to live on her own, and Joe had grown so stubborn he'd never agree to an idea that wasn't his.

She lights half a dozen candles — the shutters made the house dark as a cave — and sits down with the pasta and tries to read a book, *The Arduous Road to Christ Made Easy* by one of those horrible mega-church preachers. In five minutes, Betty's sure she'd rather listen to the storm. She tries *Eat, Pray, Love* for the third time, but once again can't get over her jealousy. Elizabeth Gilbert got to visit not one, but three foreign countries for a single book. Betty had begged Joe to travel. They say Mexico is so cheap you'll never come back, she had said. England would be

easy, they speak English. Fine, what about Napa, wine and vineyards? For God's sake, not even the Outer Banks? When their son Robert got married in the Hamptons in 1993, Betty rode the train up the week before and slept alone in a Motel 6, but Joe wouldn't drive up until the morning of the wedding, and he made Betty come home with him early the next day.

Some alcoholics ease in slowly, aren't sure when they cross the line between fun and addiction, but Betty can recall the exact moment. When Joe opened the credit card bill with the Motel 6 charges and berated her again about "the extravagance," she had a distinct thought: Screw this. Screw this marriage, this house, this job, this whole damn life. She found a bottle of Ketel One in the liquor cabinet and a half empty bottle of cranberry juice Joe was drinking for a urinary tract infection. The mixture burned almost as hot as her resentment.

Betty closes the book and sinks into the couch, a blanket balled behind her head. Candlelight shines through her empty glass on the coffee table. She closes her eyes and feels the heavy sensation she loves after enough drinks, as if she's a stone sinking to the bottom of a deep ocean.

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BETTY HEARS A KNOCK on her door the next afternoon. At first, she thinks it's flying debris, but when the knock comes again, followed by a man's voice asking, "Anyone home?" She peers through the peephole and sees a white-haired man in jean shorts and flip flops. She opens the door halfway. "Can I help you?"

"This storm sure is something else," the man says. "Don't have these up in South Dakota. We might get a three-day blizzard, but not a three-day rain and wind. We're lucky if we can get *any* rain. Fact is I've never seen this much at one time. Coming in sheets!"

"Very strange," Betty says. She has seen this man at the pool, talking about cows to their neighbors in his thick Norwegian accent. He usually sits on a lounge chair, fully clothed, never stepping a toe in the water. Betty hasn't spoken to him before and isn't sure she wants to now.

"A guy can't even see a hand in front of his face," he continues. "I figure if it keeps on old Century Village will be Century Lake. Gonna have to get us all outta here by boat." Betty holds back a laugh at the word "boat," he sounds just like the characters from the movie *Fargo*. "Don't think we've officially met. I'm Tom Sorenson. Live right below you, first floor."

He extends his hand, which Betty shakes. "I'm Betty Grimes," she replies.

"Nice to meet ya, Betty. Listen, I come up here because I'm in a bind. I got a little water coming through the patio door and

it'll be in the bedroom before long. I don't know anybody in this here building, but I've been knocking on doors and it seems most people headed to higher ground. I was hoping I could find someone to hold a few things for me that I don't wanna see wet. If it ain't too much trouble."

Betty glances around the condo. "I suppose I have a little space in the dining room," she says. Her first impulse is to help, but she's been warned not to trust anyone in Florida. She doesn't like the thought of his stuff in her house either, but isn't sure why. He lives here, she tells herself. It's not like he's a stranger. You'd want someone to help if it were you. She opens the door wider. "I can help you carry stuff up if you like."

Tom talks non-stop as they follow the covered catwalk to the stairs, then descend to ground level. Betty gasps when she walks into his condo. Water stands an inch deep in the living room and kitchen, and Tom has piled the dining table and kitchen counters with lamps, books, chairs, and a TV. Outside the water laps against the glass patio door. "Ran outta towels," he explains. Betty is amazed at how cheerful he is. "Don't think they'd do any good now anyway. I unplugged everything so I don't get zapped. I just wanna get the important papers out. Everything else is fine stacked up."

"You can't stay here," Betty says. "Where will you sleep?"

"I don't think the water will get as high as the bed," Tom says. He hands her a box of photo albums. "These are important. They should go up to your place."

"You need to get out of here," Betty says again. "It could storm like this for days. Come stay at my house. I have a couch you can sleep on."

Tom looks around and suddenly seems defeated. "You're right," he says. "I didn't want to trouble you. But it'd be pretty rough staying here. I appreciate it, Betty, I really do." He splashes to the kitchen and fills a shopping bag with canned food. "I stocked up for hell or high water, and we sure got the high water. Even bought me some of the good stuff." He pulls a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue Label from a cupboard. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all," Betty says, looking away. "Why don't you pack a bag?" She covers the photo albums with her sweater and walks quickly along the catwalk back to her house. In the parking lot, the weeping fig waves frantically, like a man stranded on a deserted island waving at a passing ship.

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TOM UNLOADING FOOD on her counter and throwing his pillow on the couch seem too familiar. It makes her nervous. He helps her heat up soup and slice bread and he's constantly *right*

there in the tiny kitchen, so close his back brushes hers a few times. When it gets dark, he tends to the candles and it's strange seeing a man's face in such an intimate form of light.

They eat on the couch and discuss safe topics: favorite restaurants in Deerfield, pool repairs that aren't getting done, the bank across the street that laid off its tellers and directed people to automated kiosks. Betty wants a drink but holds off. After dinner he does the dishes, and Betty brings two crystal highball glasses from a curio cabinet. "We might as well enjoy an after-dinner drink during all this." She rinses the dust out of the glasses. She quit using the nice glassware long ago.

Tom holds up his glass. "Cheers to you for taking in a wet dog on a stormy night."

"Cheers to your insurance coming through when this is all over."

Tom laughs. "You bet. Gonna need every penny."

They drink and Tom goes on talking. "You've got a great set-up here," he says, walking through the house. "Real nice." He stops to look at the single picture Betty has displayed of herself with Joe and their kids. They're sitting on the front steps of their Long Island house. The kids are little, probably 6 and 8, and she and Joe are still in love. The picture reminds Betty of a sunset: a last moment of beauty before darkness falls.

"A little damage would be nice," Betty says, hoping to distract him from the photo. "I'd like to get rid of the carpet and redo the bathroom. It's all so expensive unless insurance pays."

"The good thing is retired old birds like us don't need much," Tom says. "Give me a bed, a bottle of Scotch, and this gorgeous Florida weather." Something, maybe a tree branch, lands on the roof, rattling a lamp. "Well, not so gorgeous at the moment."

"I never thought retirement would mean hunkering down in some cookie cutter condo during a hurricane," Betty says. The whiskey warms her chest underneath her blouse. "To be honest, I'm not sure retirement is all it's cracked up to be."

"What did you think it'd be like?" Tom's eyes are blue like a little boy's. He has a pot belly, skinny legs, and a bald spot that would hide perfectly under a baseball cap. Betty can tell he's kind. She can also tell he was handsome, still is in that old man way she finds more endearing now. She spent her whole life avoiding older men and their comments and "accidental" touches. Now she sees good-looking ones and feels that familiar shyness, like being a teenager again.

Tom doesn't make her feel that way, but he — or maybe the whiskey — does make her feel like talking. "I don't know what I thought it would be like. I knew it wouldn't be like the glossy ads in those stupid AAA magazines of people playing golf and drinking wine on the beach. But I thought it would at least be close."

"Like we'd finally get to enjoy ourselves," Tom says. "Do the

things we've always wanted to and all that."

"Exactly," Betty says. "Instead it's the same old life — worrying about dinner, paying bills, not having enough money — but in a different place."

"Betty, you're reading my mind," Tom says. For the first time all evening he goes silent and sad. Water drips into the mixing bowl and lightning flashes through the cracks in the shutters.

"You mind if I show you some pictures?" Tom asks. He's already digging through the albums before Betty can say yes. He opens one labeled "1987" and there are two younger versions of Tom standing in a golden wheat field, hands in their pockets. One is the actual Tom in his 40s, the other, Tom explains, is his son George. The caption, written in a woman's neat cursive, reads "George's 21st Birthday." A huge South Dakota sky takes up half the photo. "George was born in August, and that's always wheat harvest," Tom says. "The day he was born I was on the combine when my brother came and told me I needed to get Nancy to the hospital." He turns the page and points to a picture of him and a thin brunette woman with large round glasses sitting at a kitchen table. "First picture with the new Canon. December 26, 1987," the caption reads. "That's Nancy," Tom explains. "She worked on the farm with me all those years. I hope she loved it as much as she said she did." Tom shakes his head. "Boy, I miss her."

"I'm sorry," Betty says. She knows it's a terrible expression — and she can tell he's not just spouting platitudes about his dead wife — but she doesn't know what else to say. "No need to be," Tom says. "We had a lot of wonderful years, and we were good to each other." He smiles but there's no joy in it. "The only thing I'm sorry for is how things went with George."

Betty feels a cracking sadness, a recognition of his pain. A memory comes: she is lying spoon-style with Joe in the tent not long after their wedding. "I don't want us to be like my parents," Joe had said in her ear. "They're strangers living in the same house, like they forgot they were ever in love." He pulls her closer. "We're always going to talk to each other. I'm never going to forget that I love you." Betty takes the last swig of her whiskey to keep the tears away. "What happened with George?"

"We had a falling out," Tom begins, then stops. "I might need a bit more for this." He refills his glass, then hovers the bottle over Betty's and looks her way. She nods and he pours. "George is me and Nancy's only child. Maybe that's why I over-meddled. We farmed together from the time he graduated high school and things were fine, or so I thought. Here George thought I was controlling the operation too much and never asked his opinions. He felt like a hired hand instead of a partner."

Tom rubs his knees and sighs. "Golly, this is hard to talk about. Anyway, during all this he got married and had a cou-

ple of kids and now he's got a son who wants to farm. Except my grandson wants to try that sustainable agriculture stuff, organic beef and wheat and whatnot. George asked me about letting him try it on some acres and I said no. We got into a big fight and George told me how he felt all those years and says now I'm trying to control my grandson same way I controlled him. Things between us got so bad I said to hell with it, if nobody wants me around I'm moving to Florida. I've been here two years and haven't talked to George yet. It's 'bout killed me." He shakes his head. "I let anger leak into my heart until it was plumb full."

Betty looks at Tom and feels like she's looking in a mirror. She opens her mouth to say it but is interrupted by a deafening crack and the groan of splitting wood. They scramble off the couch, fling open the front door, and watch the giant weeping fig in the parking lot fall over in slow motion, crushing five cars. The roots burst through the pavement and send chunks of cement into the air. Betty thought the fig so graceful and majestic before, but now its branches and roots stick out stiff like a dead person's arms and legs. "That's the last tree I thought would fall," Betty says. "It was so proud-looking."

"That's exactly why it fell," Tom says. "I done some reading on the trees around here, and it turns out most of the big ones can't handle the wind. They're too rigid. Don't bend a whit." He points to a cluster of sabal palms across the lot. "Now those, they bend to the wind. They ain't so stubborn."

Betty stares at the weeping fig and suddenly she is the one weeping, both hands over her face. The tree is too terrifying to look at. If only she and Joe had been sabal palms. Betty feels the brick wall around her heart and its weight crushes her like the fig crushed the cars.

She slumps against the doorway. Tom slips an arm around her waist, bearing her up. "What's wrong, Betty? You look like you're going to fall over."

"You're the one who's going to fall." Tom looks confused. She takes his hand and says, "It's not too late for you to make things right with George. While you're both still alive to forgive each other."

"I don't know about that," he says. "We said some pretty bad things to each other. I don't think he would even pick up the phone if I called."

"He will," Betty says. "You love each other. Never forget that." She watches the sabal palms bowing to the wind, their fronds outstretched like someone reaching for a lover. How green and beautiful they will be after the storm, when everything else is wrecked, Betty thinks. She remembers Joe in the forest, making her eggs on the camp stove, apologizing for overcooking the yolks. Maybe she could still find a way to bend. 