

Wedding Bells & Space Junk [July challenge]

by George LaCas

See, the thing with small areas is, when something happens—like what happened at the Lardner Hotel and Resort with the explosion—people right away start yapping and turning into the biggest drama queens this side of Broadway. And accuracy gets tossed right out the window, just like Keri Pratt's bouquet she never got to toss over her shoulder. Which maybe nobody thought of, anyway, because after the explosion at the Lardner Hotel (where Keri's wedding was supposed to be held), there was not an unmarried woman in upstate New York who wished she'd been there to catch it, no matter how much of a depressed old maid she was.

Right away, like toadstools, there were crackpot theories. The first: that kids out on the lake dock, against fire department warnings about the drought and how buildings, especially older buildings like the Lardner, were liable to go up like matchsticks if 4th of July fireworks got shot anywhere near them, instead drank eight or ten beers apiece like kids will do on the 4th, unearthed their secret stashes of illegal fireworks that one of their friends (now in prison on an unrelated charge) had bought for them in Tijuana, waited for the mellow dusk to turn into the blue of coming evening, arrayed their arsenal of bottle rockets, Roman candles, exploding stars, sky spiders, or whatever the Mexican fireworks were called on their packages, lit off the dry, gunpowder-caked fuses with the cherries of their smokes and/or joints, and then it was pretty much guaranteed that the biggest of their fireworks should shoot over the lake and onto the gabled roof of the Lardner Hotel and Resort and, well, destroy the entire building in a gout of flame. But it turned out the wind that night was blowing in the other direction, so the fire

marshal and the cops threw out that theory, and they had to let the kids out of the town's jail cells and mop the jailhouse floors of the kids' holiday vomit.

Another theory was that a mad scientist, in total secrecy, had been staying under an assumed identity at the Lardner, probably in disguise, and was experimenting with high explosives (some even said nuclear fusion technology) when he made a miscalculation with one of his formulas and, kaBOOM. But this theory was just a theory, and the lady who came up with it finally admitted to the police, who she'd called with her suspicions, that it was really the plot of a movie she'd been watching as she fell asleep, and then heard the real explosion and put two and two together.

There were lots of theories about why it happened, and none of them important, really, in the end, because the important part was poor Keri Pratt's ruined wedding, and how the would-be groom, Morris Phipp the druggist, had a big fight with the "other woman" he'd been sneaking around with. That was Shana Reilly, the bartender down at the Pierced Lip.

Morris stood there in his silly rented white tux with the ruffled shirt, watching her mixing a martini for the only one of her customers not drinking draft beer. In his hand he held a wedding invitation. She pretended to ignore him. She strained the martini into a glass, served her customer with a smile, and then she grabbed her sawed-off Louisville Slugger, leaped over the bar, and whacked Morris in the side of his head (he'd just had a haircut, too). The would-be groom dropped to the floor of the bar like a sack of potatoes, and Shana announced to all the barflies watching the mayhem without surprise that she'd buy anyone who pissed on Morris's head two drinks, but not premium.

Meanwhile, Keri Pratt was sitting in traffic behind a minivan full of kids, or very short adults or adolescents, but the minivan wasn't the

problem. It was the traffic. She checked the time on her cell phone: 6:42 ... she checked her position on her Garmin: 14 miles to go ... she checked her makeup in the rearview mirror: outstanding. Her stylist had done a fantastic job, had used some sort of airbrush and gave her a huge break on the cost of a makeover, and Keri was just wondering if she should send her stylist flowers or a bottle of nice wine when an enormous explosion erupted on the horizon, more or less in the direction she was headed.

"Holy shit!" Keri yelled, then covered her mouth because her father had been a minister. With saucer-wide eyes she watched the burning skyline, wondering if it was a terrorist attack or a plane crash or a fuel tank explosion. Watching the kids in the back of the minivan (who were all pointing at the smoking fireball) she was suddenly glad she was stalled in traffic, because seeing an explosion was a good way to take your eyes off the road at just the wrong moment.

Keri had a stressful few moments trying to figure out how to turn off the satellite radio (she favored Lite Jazz, 80's Pop, and Soft Rock) and turn on the regular radio, where there might be news, and just as she wondered if maybe there was no more regular radio, an announcer's voice crackled over the speakers of her hybrid car.

"... a huge explosion at the Lardner Hotel and Resort, out on Route 7, and police officials have issued a bulletin, coming in now ... oh yes, here it is. Police officials say to remain calm and stay out of the Lakeside Resorts area, to make way for emergency vehicles. Stay tuned." And then a Johnny Cash song came on, which Keri turned off with a violent twist.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" she screamed at the windshield. "I know that was the Lardner that just blew up! I just know it!"

Now, you've got to understand I'm only piecing all this together: I don't know exactly what Keri said, since she was alone in the car,

but I know what I would have said. You get the gist, I think. Later I did talk to her, and this is what she told me:

So there I am, still on the Interstate, and I see the explosion. Then I heard it: BOOM! It was incredible. I didn't even have the windows down, and still I heard it. And after I'm through yelling and screaming, because who wouldn't, still stuck in traffic, I get this call. I was so shaken up just then I thought my cell phone was, I don't know what, an alien or something. But my phone rings there on the front seat, I pick it up and see Morris's number on it, and of course I answer even though brides and grooms aren't supposed to see each other before the wedding and probably not talk on the phone either, but anyway I pick up ...

"Morris, baby, I'm stuck in traffic and I just saw this huge ex—"

"Now you listen good, you little yuppie whore," says this woman's voice, and I look again at my screen and see that, yes, it is Morris's cell number calling, it says Connected, so I put the phone back to my ear.

"Who is this?" I say.

"This is Morris's girlfriend," says the woman, and I can hear, like, old people laughing in the background. I couldn't believe it! The explosion at the hotel where the wedding was supposed to be, and now this. "The one your precious little sissy-ass boyfriend has been shacking up with while you were off registering for china."

"I don't believe you," I tell her, because I don't want to believe it. "What's your name?"

"Sure, I'll tell you—it's Shana Reilly down at the Lip, where Morris is right now, by the way, soaked in piss."

I about threw up all over my wedding dress just then, because I was wearing my wedding dress in the car—not that it matters now. I'd tried it on before, the zipper stuck, and I had to keep the dress on while I—oh, never mind. Anyway, there I am, on the phone with this crazy lady.

“Whoever you are, you are a horrible, scummy person,” I say to the woman, who chuckles in my ear. “I don't believe that Morris would ever get close enough to a white-trash skank like you to be unfaithful to me.”

“You know that little mole Morris has about two-thirds of the way down his dick?” says this horrible woman, not even listening to me. “The little tiny one that looks like a beauty mark?”

Suddenly I couldn't breathe. “Yes,” I whispered.

“Is it true you won't give him head because of it, or is that just an excuse?”

And I slam down the cell phone—well, not slam it down, you know, but close it real hard—and I start honking my horn, crying and crying. It was really, really horrible.

Poor Keri. But Morris eventually did manage to get to his feet, after the customers had emptied their bladders or Shana Reilly ran out of the cheap booze she was willing to give away, and he stumbled out of the bar and down the road. Poor bastard never was right after that, with the head injury and all. He developed a creepy wink.

I say “poor Keri” because getting married just wasn't in the cards for her, not that 4th of July, not to Morris (who she never spoke to again, sad to say), and maybe not ever, but time will tell. Was it bad luck? Was it the stars, poorly aligned? Was it fate, which knew that Keri's and Morris's son was destined to be the next Hitler, should he

ever be spawned? Or was it just a coincidence?

As it turned out, it was space junk. NASA, in its press release, described what hurled into the Lardner Hotel and Resort as a “fragment” of a satellite, although they were extremely squirrely about what kind of satellite. Scientists in Europe, Russia and China came forward to say that the “fragment” had been, in fact, the size of a large house. Right about the time the jazz band was tuning up on the stage in the Nessie Room of the hotel, and the banquet staff was assembling a parquet dance floor square by square, and the food was piling up in the form of whole smoked salmon laid out on mirrors and spinach-and-feta-cheese canapés, and the wedding guests were already milling around and talking and guzzling liquor from the seven open bars distributed throughout the Nessie Room, the house-sized “fragment” came whistling down from deep space, or at least from orbit, and obliterated the Lardner Hotel and Resort with the undeniable force of a dinosaur stomping on a robin's egg. Or even more forcefully, considering the physics involved.

Not to say that there was a silver lining—there wasn't, because over two hundred people were killed at the site of the explosion, most of them at the Lardner and nearly a hundred of those were friends of the bride and/or groom—but someone on the other side of the lake (over near the lake docks where the teenage kids were drinking beer and smoking weed and shooting off the ladyfingers that were, at first, blamed for the larger catastrophe) happened to be walking along with her digital camera, and she got some great pictures, which are online now. You should see them, especially the ones of the crater.

But as for Keri, all I can say is that the story just isn't complete until you know what happened to her. The whole thing shocked her badly, as it would anyone. She wouldn't go see Morris in the extended care facility, even though her mother urged her to. She wouldn't see friends. She wouldn't go to work, and every few months she cried on

the phone to her daddy that she needed another check, or else “I don't know what I'm going to do!” in a dramatic and frightening voice. Maybe her parents, recalling the force and shock of the explosion that had pre-empted their daughter's wedding, and on some level feeling that Keri herself brought red-hot vengeance down on her cheating boyfriend from the depths of space, decided to just give Keri the money and support her, because who knew what she could do.

In other words, Keri turned into a hermit. She lived in her little house two miles from the lake, had her groceries delivered, and from what I hear seldom took a bath or changed her clothes. She turned into one of those cat ladies you read about, who have like 250 cats in their tiny homes with cat shit a foot deep. I believe it, honestly. My girlfriend knows the Pizza Hut delivery guy, who every Friday takes a large cheese pizza out to poor Keri's lonely house, and the pizza guy says that Keri always answers the door in her wedding dress, which used to be white, but you can tell what the inside of her house must be like from the way the bottom of the dress is all filthy, ringed in black. You can smell it, too, the pizza guy says.

