

In Search of a Meaningful Moment

by T.R. Wolfe

Two zebra-striped Angelfish bobbed upside-down on the water's surface. Their exposed silver bellies reflected the light of the florescent white and blue bulbs that hung under the fish tank's canopy. He walked over to the tank, pulled the lid open and sighed. There were no more fish.

Great, he thought to himself as he dipped the net into water, *now I won't be able to sleep tonight either.*

Lately, he'd dreamt of silhouetted, humanoid figures that rode oil-spill-black horses and chased him endlessly through impossible labyrinths, until he awoke, gasping and covered in nightsweats, to an empty bed and silent cell phone. It had been forty years since he'd had nightmares as vivid as these.

They were, however, the very last thing he needed at the moment.

* * *

Bubbles popped mercilessly on the surface of the still-operating fish tank. The smell of browning banana peel made its way from the desk-side trash basket to his nostrils. A wanton draft of cold air grazed the back of his neck. Outside, the first flakes of a December snowstorm fell against a muted sky. He sighed and gripped the spice bottle in his right hand and massaged the corners of his forehead with his left. A headache coursed around in his skull and had done so for fifteen minutes. It had been a fourth sleepless night.

The bottle of spice was still wrapped in its orange and tan label but it was now fading and frayed at the glue and read "Lemon-pepp--
--ices. For Poultry, Fish, and --her meats." He'd had it for eight years. He knew its contents but had no reason to open it. He wondered if he ever would have one.

There was a knock and his secretary quietly appeared from behind the door.

"Still not here, Mason."

"Thank you, Stephanie. Please see her in as soon as she arrives."

"Of course... You doing okay?"

"I'm fine," Mason said. "Just a headache. Long night."

"Your wife doing okay? You need anything?"

"She's doing alright but I could use a joint and a beer."

Stephanie laughed. "I'll get you the aspirin and some water."

"Thanks," Mason sighed through a tired smile. Stephanie slipped through the closing door and Mason went back to his thoughts.

* * *

It was two days earlier. A man, dressed in an expensive tailored suit, walked into Mason's office and immediately demanded to speak with him.

"Are you Mason Erskine?" the man asked, picking the lone piece of lint off his coat.

It was Mason's lunch hour and he'd missed breakfast. This was not what he wanted for lunch.

"Nice watch," Mason said, never once looking at it.

"Are you Mason?"

"Yes, *Doctor* Mason."

"My daughter needs help."

"A lot of daughters need help, Mr..." Mason replied.

"Mr. Watkins. Keith Watkins."

"Right."

"She wants your help, demands it, actually." Keith said.

"Why mine?"

"Don't have a clue but the only way she's going to get help is if you help her."

"Why me?" Mason asked, again.

"I said I don't know, she just mentioned your name."

"What kind of help does she need?"

"It's better if I let her explain it," Keith replied.

"Well, I have a lot of patients. Appointments backed up for a weeks. It'll have to wait," Mason responded, enjoying the power shift favorably to his side.

"I don't want her to wait," Keith said, with a shake of his head.

"Too bad. That's how it works."

"I'll pay."

"Everyone pays or I don't see them. Pretty simple."

"I'll pay handsomely," Keith responded, sharply.

"Handsomely? Sir, I've been a psychiatrist for a very long time," Mason said. "Everyone I see pays handsomely." Mason made two finger-quotes in the air while Keith shifted in his stance and adjusted his starched white collar.

"Not like I will."

"Not interested." Mason said.

"I'll pay triple for the next two weeks," Keith said. Silence followed. Keith had won and Mason knew it. Keith adjusted his tie.

Shit, Mason muttered to himself. He called Stephanie in to cancel appointments.

* * *

"Shit," Mason said, a lot louder this time. It was Stephanie knocking at the door. She wrapped her head around the door and said, "She's here, Doctor."

Mason placed the spice bottle back on the desk and stood, pulling out the two-day wrinkles in his shirt, which was not tucked in.

"Then bring her in, Stephanie. If you would...please."

"You're going to meet her like that, Mason?" Stephanie asked, amused that she hadn't called him "doctor" as was the office protocol when patients were just down the hall in the waiting room. She had come in and placed a cap-less bottle of water and ten aspirins on his desk.

"Yes...I am. I've already impressed this woman and she's never even met me," Mason answered.

"Good point, Doctor." Stephanie walked back to the door.

"Thanks for the pills," Mason said.

"You're welcome, Doctor," Stephanie replied as she closed the door behind her.

Mason stood and glanced quickly around the office. *Almost everything is as it should be*, he said to himself. He walked over to the far cabinet, opened one of its doors and pulled out the bag of incense sticks. He slipped one out and lit it. The smell was of burnt grapes and sun-freshed laundry. Pleasant memories flooded his mind but he fought them off. The electricity from the headache arced around his skull again. He hurried back to his desk and popped a few aspirins.

Five minutes passed. The door opened and she rolled in. Keith, this time not in a suit, but t-shirt and jeans, put his hands on the handles of her dark purple wheelchair.

"Dad, knock it the hell off. I can push my own goddamn wheelchair," she said, gripping the wheels.

"I know, but sometimes you put marks in the wall when the door's too heavy," Keith replied.

"I know. That's why I do it."

She wheeled more deeply into the office towards Mason's desk. Keith hurried to the desk and pulled the chair out of the way for her and she sat down next to her. She was blue-eyed, pale and completely hairless, which made it difficult to guess her age. Mason guessed 20. A blue-indigo and magenta tie-dye blanket was draped in folds across her lap. She wore dark-blue jeans and fisted a wadded-up black bandana on her thigh. A silver Angelfish, floating right-side up, was centered across the front of her black shirt. A stuffed bear was lodged in the corner of her chair, near her left hip.

"Hi!" she exclaimed.

"Hello there," Mason said.

"Sorry for being late," she said. "It's getting ugly out there. Real cold."

"It's fine. I had some paperwork to finish anyway," Mason lied.

"You look older than your picture."

"What picture?"

"On the internet."

"Oh...yeah, I haven't had Stephanie update anything in a long time," Mason said. "What's your name? And what can I do for you?"

"My name is *Marya*," she replied, emphasizing the schwa.

"*Maryaaaaa*? How do you spell that?" Mason asked.

"M-A-R-Y-A."

"Interesting way to spell it."

Marya turned and quickly glanced at her father. "My parents thought they were being clever."

Keith shrugged but didn't say anything. Marya turned back to face Mason. It was with the turn of her head that Mason noticed it. It was about the size of a cereal bowl and looked as if it had either grown inside her head or had been implanted there. It seemed to cup the crown of her head like a Jewish man's yarmulke.

Marya smiled an acknowledgement and turned her head towards her father again and said, glancing at Mason from the corner of her eye, "Cool, huh?" She then swung her hand to the back of her bald head and lifted up a tuft of golden-brown hair about three inches in length that was hiding behind the convex bulge. "It's the only hair I got left. Somehow the radiation didn't get it. No idea how it happened either."

"It's very cool," Mason replied. He wasn't sure what to think exactly.

"Most people aren't even sure what to say," Murya smiled.

"How fast does it grow?"

"Not fast at all," Marya replied, shaking her head. "The end here is from when I donated my hair to that wig-making organization."

"Locks of Love," Keith said.

"Yeah, that," Murya said. "It never fell out but never really grew either. It's just here, reminding me what I had and what I have now."

"And what do you have now?" Mason asked, slipping into doctor role.

"I have this," she replied, palming the back of her head.

"What is that?"

"It's a tumor. TBC."

"TBC?" Mason asked, knowing full well what it meant but wanting Marya to explain it in her own words.

"Terminal Brain Cancer," Keith said, interjecting.

"Dad! I told you not to say those words out loud."

"It's easier if we just call it TBC," Keith said as he looked at his daughter's face. He then turned back to Mason and gave him a look that begged Mason to go on.

"Fair enough," Mason said. "How can I help?"

"I don't have that much longer to live, a few months or so."

"I'm sorry to hear that. How are you handling it?"

"I'm afraid of it...of dying."

"That's understandable. We all are. Even if we won't admit it."

"Not everyone has TBC, doctor," Marya said. "Not everyone gets a timetable."

"I realize that but you should never feel alone in your apprehension towards death."

"Thanks, doctor, but I've read all the books and talked to all the priests, pastors, and gurus and I'm still scared."

"There's nothing I can really do for you then." Mason said. "I can sit here and listen to you and talk to you but it is completely up to you. Only you, yourself, know what you need to hear to alleviate the anxiety you feel."

There was a considerable silence. Both Marya and her father looked down at the floor. The fish tank's air pump seemed to grow louder. The space heater against the far wall clicked on and the office lights dimmed momentarily. The incense stick had snuffed itself out long ago.

Mason buttoned the top button of his shirt and looked out the window. Marya was the first to move as she pulled her stuffed bear out the corner of her wheelchair and readjusted her tie-dyed blanket. She looked at the bear's face but said nothing. Mason gazed out the window. It was now dark and the beams of headlights from the street illuminated heavy large flakes. He wanted to go home and sleep in his own bed.

"You used to work with Timothy Leary at Harvard," Marya said, breaking the silence but not the awkwardness.

"Excuse me," Mason said, keeping his focus outside the window. He slowly looked at her when she didn't respond.

"I know you worked for Timothy Leary back in the sixties when he was dosing people with LSD and psilocybin. I looked it up on the internet."

"I did. That was a long time ago, though," Mason said. "A *long* time ago." He quickly glanced at the bottle of spice and ran his fingers through his thinning hair.

There was another pause. Keith chewed on his thumbnail, Marya stared at the bear, Mason looked back out through the window. The wind caused small reverberations in the windowpane.

"I want you to dose me," she said plainly.

"Excuse me," Mason replied, somewhat startled and not sure if he heard her correctly.

"Excuse me," Keith replied too, almost in unison and looked at Marya.

"It's the only idea I have left," she said. "I've done everything else. Everything I can think of I've tried."

Keith looked at her but said nothing.

Marya stared at her blanket and fiddled with her black bandana and finally turned to her father and explained, "I searched for death and dying and anxiety on the internet and came across a few articles that got my attention. Did you know there's actually been government approved studies showing the therapeutic potential of psychedelics on terminal cancer patients? It's my turn. I want to try it. What have I got to lose?"

"What have you got to lose?" Keith replied after a brief pause. "For starters, how about your mind, the only thing you really have left?" He regretted the question as soon as he said it.

"Dad, you're right, all I have left is my mind and my mind is making it impossible for my soul to be at ease with what is just out on the horizon. It's coming for me and I have no perspective, no *idea* of what this thing is all about. These articles I read said that

sixty two percent of patients in the study felt the experience was positive and actually improved their outlook towards dying.”

She looked at Mason. The fish tank whirred relentlessly. The space heater droned quietly in the corner. A gulf of silence once again filled the air. He wasn't sure how to respond. He inhaled. “I have not been a part of that field since it was outlawed forty years ago,” he replied. “I have not been in contact with any of the people I knew back then. I wouldn't even know where to start.” He looked down and grabbed the spice bottle and held it in his hand.

“You can start by thinking of how you can help me get what I want,” she replied.

“Marya,” Mason said, calmly, “I'm sympathetic towards your state of being right now, I really am, but I am not about to risk my career, risk everything I've worked for, just to give you a powerful hallucinogen because you read about some study on the internet. I'm sorry, I'm just not going to do it.”

“And he doesn't have to either,” Keith said. He stood up.

Marya looked up at him. “Dad, where you going?” she asked.

“I think it's time we stopped wasting Doctor Mason's time,” Keith said. “Plus, the weather is getting pretty bad. We need to get going before it gets too bad. Come on, let's go.”

“Just like that, Dad? You're gonna bail that easily on your dying daughter's final wish? To have a better understanding about death and the process of getting there? To maybe at peace with it? I can't believe this.”

“It was a ridiculous idea, Mare,” Keith replied, the strain on his voice finally showing through. “I wish you would have told me about it before we wasted Doctor Mason's time.” He turned to Mason and said “Thank you for your time, Doctor.”

“Yes,” Mason answered. He looked at Marya. “I'm sorry but I really can't help you. If you'd be interested in coming by tomorrow to just talk and sort things out, I'll be here for that. Whatever you need.”

"Thanks for nothing, Mason," she replied with no eye contact. She quickly turned her wheelchair around and glided towards the door. Keith held the door open for her and looked towards Mason.

"I have to work tomorrow but I can have a car pick her up and take her here if that's what she wants. I'll let you know."

Mason nodded politely. Keith and Marya disappeared behind the door. Mason downed the remaining aspirin and walked over to his coat rack and put on his heaviest coat. It would be a long ride to the hospital.

* * *

It was in his wife's room in the hospital that he received the call from Keith. It was midday and Mason had slept through most of it. It was, however, spent entirely upright in an uncomfortably padded chair by his wife's bedside. He gripped the back of his neck as he answered his phone.

"It's Keith, Marya's father."

"I know who you are, Keith. What can I do for you?"

"It's Marya. She said it's an emergency."

"Okay, how can I help?"

"She's on her way to your office right now. She said she needs to talk to you right away."

"Okay, I'll be there soon."

Mason closed his phone and kissed his wife on the cheek. She was still asleep and would be for some time. He was ten minutes from his office.

He walked briskly through the front doors. Stephanie was there as usual, though there would be no patients for the next week and a half.

"She's in your office. She doesn't look well," she said.

"How can she? She's got brain cancer," Mason answered.

"Yes, this is different though. Hurry, go in."

Mason entered his office. Marya was sprawled across his patients couch. She opened her eyes when he entered.

"Thanks for meeting me here so quickly," she said.

"Your father is paying me handsomely. I have to be here when you say I do," Mason said with a gentle laugh.

"I know. I was being polite. I also wanted to apologize for yesterday. That was...inappropriate of me."

"Yes, it was. I'm here to help you. I can't help if you're not here," Mason said.

"No, no, I know. I'm sorry. I had to talk to you."

"I'm here now. Let's talk," Mason said. He was tired, his neck hurt and he was more suspicious than curious of what she would say next.

"Okay. No bullshit?" she asked.

"No bullshit."

"Fine. I ate a fistful of magic mushrooms on the way over here. I'll probably start tripping soon."

Mason sighed. He was surprised but not shocked.

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

"Because you wouldn't help me, so I decided to help myself. I know you know how to handle this. You helped pioneer this shit! Now I want you to help me. No bullshit."

"How much did you eat?"

"Not sure, more than enough probably."

"Alright," Mason said. He walked over to the closet and pulled out a blanket, a pillow, and a small CD player. He called Stephanie and had her bring in bottles of water and oranges. He told her to keep the door to his office open and to lock the front door. Mason plugged the CD player into the wall and placed it on his desk. He pulled out a slim CD case from the desk drawer and picked one out and put it in the player.

Marya immediately smiled. "What is this?"

"Something my wife made for me, before she..."

"Got sick? Is she sick?" Marya asked. Her smile faded and she grew concerned.

Mason nodded and said, "Yes."

"Like me?"

"Doctors aren't sure what's wrong with her."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks."

Ten minutes passed. Marya yawned, which caused her eyes to fill with tears. She grabbed the base of her neck and began massaging it. She smiled and began to giggle. The giggles turned into loud belly laughs and Stephanie walked in, wondering if everything was alright. She left when Mason assured her everything was fine.

"My body...it's...heavy...and...buzzing," Marya said. She had quit laughing.

"You're starting the trip. You need to relax. It gets more difficult."

"What does?" she asked.

"The trip. You've stopped laughing. The novelty has worn off. You've got to work now."

"My neck, is it supposed to be buzzing?"

"Yes."

"The walls are breathing, Mason. I hear alien circus sounds. Whose voices am I hearing?" she asked. Her eyes were now closed and shifting from side to side behind her eyelids.

"You should really stop talking if you're hearing voices. Most people never hear voices. You need to listen..."

* * *

A few hours later, Mason withdrew his propped-up feet from the desk and popped in another disc. It was the last his wife had made for him. Marya had hardly moved the entire time, only gasping occasionally in what Mason guessed was astonishment or awe. He hadn't been where Marya was right now in a very long time.

Marya opened her eyes and looked directly at Mason.

"What?" he asked.

"Those voices," she said, closing her eyes again.

"Yes."

"Incredible."

"Yes, I know."

She opened her eyes again. "Like what I always imagined angels would sound like if I believed in angels."

"Yes. I try not to describe them though."

Marya nodded. There was a pause. "They said something to me."

"What?"

"It sounded like a poem."

"How did it go?" Mason asked.

"Though earth and man were gone, and suns and universes ceased to be, and Thou were left alone, every existence would exist in thee. There is no room for Death, nor atom that his might could render void: Thou -- Thou art Being and Breath, And what Thou art may never be destroyed."

"The voices said that? In English?" Mason laughed.

Marya laughed too. "They said it more times than I can remember or they only said it once, I'm not sure."

"What do you make of it?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing," Marya said.

"They were talking to you, not me."

"I know. It's just...I'm not sure. It's..."

"Exactly what you needed to hear?"

"I think so, yes."

"Emily Bronte."

"Who?"

"Poet. The voices were reciting lines from an Emily Bronte poem," Mason said.

"Never read her."

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe I will." Marya smiled, closed her eyes again and fell asleep.

* * *

Two hours later Marya opened her eyes. "I meant to ask you: what's in the spice bottle?"

Mason smiled. He was exhausted. He grabbed the bottle and began massaging his forehead again. "Sugar cubes," he said.

"Why?"

"Their special sugar cubes."

"How?" she asked again.

"Because they're psychedelic sugar cubes.

"Why are they psychedelic?"

"Because they're laced with Blue Sandoz."

"Blue Sandoz?"

"The purest LSD ever created," he said with a wide, genuine grin. "These things were practically bathed in it."

"Oh," she said, with a smile that would have melted the face of the sun had it been shining. She closed her eyes and lay back down and drifted off to sleep.

Mason walked over to her, picked her up, and placed her in her purple wheel chair and rolled her out of his office down to the waiting room where Stephanie was filing paperwork.

"Well...", she asked.

"She made it. Fell back asleep."

"That's good."

"Yeah."

"Her father's on his way to pick her up."

"That's good."

"Go see your wife, Mason," Stephanie said. "I'll wait with her."

"I will. Thanks."

* * *

The vibrating of the cell phone on the nightstand next to Mason startled him awake. It was Keith and he spoke softly.

"She's gone, Mason. Few hours ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"Yes, you're welcome."

"Was she ready?"

"I think so, yes."

"Wish I could've..."

"You did what you were meant to do."

"I hope so."

"Goodbye, Keith."

"Goodbye, Mason."

Mason placed the cell phone down on the nightstand and looked to his wife. Her eyes were still closed and her hands were still folded across her stomach. He looked out of the window to the snow-covered landscape and saw three rays of sunlight punch through the grey clouds on the horizon. He smiled. His headache vanished. He turned the blinds up and fell back asleep.

