

Chapter Two: Oracle

by W.F. Lantry

So I went out one morning onto the terrace with my coffee. I call it a terrace, but it's really more like a deck, and I sit out there, trying to wake up and collect myself before the day's work in the garden. Some days, if I'm feeling particularly ambitious, or maybe even a little thin, I take out half of yesterday's baguette with me, with butter and strawberry jam. Or honey, if it's been a good season.

It had, I did. The jar attracted bees, even when I screwed the lid down tight. I kept meaning to wash it off, wiping the smears away with a warm towel, but who thinks of that, in a pre-caffiene haze? So now I had a few bees, yellow-jackets actually, nasty buggers, and I'm allergic, buzzing about the black metal table. I took the jar and set it in the planters I'd built on the railing. The bees were completely fooled. They must have thought flowers made honey. They landed on every blossom, confused.

I looked out over yesterday's work. The sugar snap peas were coming up nicely. I'd pruned some low-hanging apple branches, and pressed them into the damp earth, until they made a long row about three feet high. Already the pea vines were grabbing them with their tendrils, already they lifted their white blossoms up to the sunlight. Yes, I should have done it before, but it looked like I'd staked them just in time. In a couple weeks, I'd have sweet pods with my coffee. Life was intolerably good.

And the rest of the garden was thriving. Oh, there were problems here and there: the birdseed, scattered by over-exuberant beaks, was rooting in some of the beds, and I'd let last year's Sweet Annie go to seed, so now I was faced with a thousand tiny shoots. Each one would make three feet if I left it, so I'd have to pull each one by hand. And the buttercups had gotten their runners down into the damp soil near the pond stream. Why had I ever planted them?

Just as I remembered the reason, I noticed something down by the fence. On the fence, really, it looked like paint. My lovely tall cedar fence, that kept out deer, whose planks I had planed by hand. It looked a lot like graffiti, but who would tag the inside of my fence? Gangsters from the south, passing through? Wandering explorers, blazing a trail for those who came after? It's said the Spanish friars rode their donkeys north, scattering yellow mustard seed as they went, which is why the hills are golden to this day in Spring. Mustard's a terrible weed.

It looked like a scarlet circle, with a star inside. I drank my coffee and stared, hoping it was just a trick of my eyes, the relic of some overnight dream I didn't remember, an afterglow burned into my retinas a moment by a quick glance at the Eastern sun. I tried looking at other parts of the fence line: no circles, no stars. Just that one place, down by the stand of blackstem bamboo. And it wasn't like I could paint over it, either: I'd have to sand the planks. But then they wouldn't weather like the rest of the fence. I'd always notice, for years to come. Those friars ruin everything.

I told myself I shouldn't blame them, it was just in their friar nature. Does one blame a mole for digging, or a bunting for eating the just ripened fruit? But I cursed their robes and their sandals as I rose from the table, and went down the steps I still hadn't fixed. They wobbled beneath my feet, unsteady, likely to give way with each step. I keep meaning to shore them up against ruin, but there's always something else to do. I made it to the landing, and headed down the path.

You could have knocked me over with an owl's quill. Someone had pitched a tent behind the bamboo grove, right in the bed I'd just tilled for the peppers. High-end nylon, a backpacker's tent, marked with a circle and star. It looked like some kind of branding, an update of "Killroy was here." Well, he could take his brand and go

elsewhere. I needed a sign that read "No camping allowed." I cleared my throat to show possession, to say without saying, "I am master of my domain, and I brook no branded friars!" The tent flap started to open.

The first thing I saw was a sandal, but it didn't exactly look priestly. It was golden and glowing, and the foot it was strapped to had red painted nails. The straps wrapped around her ankles, and up her slender leg, tied off in a bow below the knee. The rest of her emerged: a white linen dress, belted. Quite clearly, nothing underneath. Don't ask. Bare shoulders. Her hair nearly as gold as the ankle straps, brilliant, even in that early sun. She stood there, fully formed. I needed a little more coffee. I couldn't think of anything to say.

"You want to know," she said, "what I'm doing. Why I'm here, and what happened to your fence."

"That would be a good start," I said. The sun was behind her, the linen hid nothing. It was all I could do not to look. I made sure my gaze never left her eyes.

"I like it here," she said. "It's as if you made this garden just for me, as if you knew I were coming."

"I had no idea," I said. "Who are you?"

"My name is Constance," she said.

"Well, Constance, what, exactly, do you want?"

"What does any woman want?"

"If you can tell me that, I'll be glad to share my breakfast," I said.

"Well, for starters, I'd like some toast, with butter and jam if you have it," she said. "Honey will do in a pinch."

And with that, she started up the path towards the house.

