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FIVE DOLLARS



fiction

Glow after Eric's death

by Babak Govan

The trucks of the Starlight Carnival Company rolled into town early Thursday morning, and I remember thinking how the compact trailers would soon unfold into giant monsters that would rise over the city. Now the sky was grim. From the same unexpected breeze that brought in the gray clouds, red, yellow, and blue fanion flags waved atop the Jumbo Ferris Wheel with its empty gondola-style seats. The rows of unlit colored lights that lined the metal beams of the wheel looked like the red arteries and blue veins of dead flesh. The Serpent-Saurus Merry-Go-Round spun around slowly as five passengers prepared to get off of the ride; the Hammer waited to strike; the Tower of Doom was vacant; the horses on the Stampede Carousel had time to

graze. Without cotton candy bags or paper cups anywhere on the wet concrete, the midway was clean.

I looked at the carnival from our second-story window. A thin man stood at the entrance to the House of Mirrors with a silver face that matched his silver penguin tuxedo and top hat, one arm under the other, holding a cigarette; he looked as if he had given up the idea of being in character at all times. At the least, another attendant—wearing a pink- and white-striped shirt and silly looking hat, stood inside the Roller Derby booth and looked as if he was pretending to be excited for the two customers who waited anxiously to roll their balls into the goals.

Tiffany walked through the sheer, lavender curtains that separated the kitchen from the living room and handed me a cup of warm tea. She rubbed my back

as I drank. I felt like I was eleven again—that year, I had mono and my mother was always at my bedside.

"It's going to be all right, honey," she said. "Eric is free now."

"Why so early? Why did he have to hurt?"

"I don't know. It's unfair." She looked down at her hand that was placed over mine. "At least he's done with this cruel world."

I knew I was dying when I saw my first grey hair. I was 25-years-old. It needed to be gone. I leaned up over the bathroom sink with a pair of scissors. I ended up with a missing patch of hair on the side of my head.

My best friend, Eric, came over that day and tried to color it in with a permanent black marker; the missing patch was too low for a cap to cover it. We laughed our way to the floor. We finally ended up driving in his pick-up to a barbershop where I got an army cut.

"It wasn't that bad, Tim. Now I've realized what you must think of me." He was referring to his receding hairline.

"It's downhill from here for the both of us," I said, but I never thought he'd be gone by thirty-five.

Tiffany stood in the garden with the Feng Shui consultant, learning how to use a Bagua compass. "We need to put everything in the right place so that we can create more positive energy," I remembered Tiffany saying as I loosened my iridescent necktie. I had met the consultant once. Tiffany called her a verbivore since she used all of the unused words in the dictionary like *languorous* and *superfluous*.

Tiffany looked over at me,

smiled, and waved as the consultant looked at the bamboo and miniature Chinese elms and junipers. She was wearing a pastel-orange, georgette dress, fitted around her waist a thin belt and a turquoise bib necklace. The ends of her blonde hair and bangs were flipped. She grabbed the sides of her skirt and swayed from side to side as the frill touched her legs. She illuminated.

I knew she was scared; Eric's death had frightened the both of us. From the day of his death, I changed my outlook on life. I used to think that unfortunate things happened just to other people. I was a healthy, thirty-four-year-old, but I believed that the end for me was near. I accepted the fact that one day I might get some severe, unexpected disease and die.

I can see the doctor coming into the room, trying not to hold a blank face that has death written all over it—but his mouth doesn't know how to start talking, although it's said the same thing many times before. He sits down, brings his hands together, and sighs. He then procrastinates by explaining every minor detail of my condition, before quickly throwing in the fact that I'm going to die. He exaggerates the number of people that have overcome my disease, while his last words are "I'm sorry."

It was only a matter of time. When it happened, I wouldn't be surprised at all.

I became a different person that day. For the first time, I felt terribly vulnerable.

Midnight, our pointer, was ready for a walk, waiting for his leash and sitting obediently next to the rain drainpipe that made ticking sounds like a clock. I needed to buy Tiffany a tenth-year wedding anniversary card from

the card shop. We left Tiffany and the consultant and walked across the neighborhood to Main Street. I could see the top of the Jumbo Ferris Wheel turning over the clay brick buildings. I loved the smell of wet asphalt, and I think Midnight did too because he sniffed more than usual.

Midnight waited for me out front where kids played with him. I browsed through the Anniversary cards in the back aisle near the colored-wood ornaments, pulling them out one by one and then sliding them back into the racks after looking at the covers. I was a quick card picker. If it looked and sounded decent, that was enough. But I browsed through almost the entire rack until I found one that I liked, a tall white card with swirls of glitter pasted on the front cover. I opened it, turned the glassine interleave, and began to read. This was the perfect card, but there was a problem with the last line: "One day when we've grown old together . . ."

I wanted to have a talk with Tiffany. I wanted to talk to her about death. Every once in a while, I feel my heart stop—but then it starts up again. Maybe I'm scaring myself thinking things, but I wonder when it will stop for good. I wonder how much more time I have. My doctor says I'm fine, just a little anxious after Eric's death. But I wanted to talk with Tiffany. I wanted her to be ready.

I browsed through the card racks again until I realized that I had been standing there for about a half-hour. I still held onto the card that I found earlier. I looked at the last card I pulled out. It would have to do—a one-liner, but it would do.

"Celebrating your tenth anniversary, how sweet," the clerk at the register said. "Hopefully,

you'll keep coming in for the next forty years."

"Yeah."

I untied Midnight's leash and we walked down the street. The sky was darkening; the rain poured down fast. I felt like I was hypnotized. I realized that I was almost home but didn't remember how I'd gotten there. I stood under the marquee of the Queen Cinema and looked back. The red neon lights flashed in Midnight's eyes, and everything seemed so beautiful but so foreign. I looked up at the vapor escaping my mouth. It could all go away so fast. When would my heart stop?

I walked in the middle of the street and imagined myself riding the towering merry-go-round in the distance, putting my head back, looking at the stream of lights passing above me.

After letting Midnight loose in the backyard, I stepped into the house and put the umbrella by the door. Tiffany was asleep on the couch in the living room.

She had lit a few candles, and I watched the shadows move over her body. I watched her sleep so contentedly. And then for a few seconds, I thought I saw her heart glow inside her chest. I put my hands against the doorway and leaned against it as I cried.

I walked upstairs and stood at an open window. I put my hand into the bag and pulled out the two cards I had bought. I wanted to talk to Tiffany about death, but then I thought it might be better to pretend that we are immortal.

I looked at the carnival through the trees. The lights were gone now. The monsters had lain down and curled inside their tails, waiting for another day to awaken.

— Northridge, California