

Just Add Water

Though it wasn't the sort of place she'd pick to spend her eternity, Samara wasn't sure she would call it heck. Not until she got some answers. In the physical realm, she was a mere fifth-grader sitting in the lotus position and astral-projecting her inner essence so she could interview the dearly (and darnedly) departed. In the celestial realm, she was also a fifth-grader, only she had direct access to the mysteries that lay on the secret side of death's door.

The setting varied from subject to subject. This time around, it looked like a circus jail with no doors but plenty of curvy hall tubes and sawdust. Did this indicate a divine nature, or an infernal one? Silly everyone else who thought it was all either goldy clouds or belching volcanoes. Only Samara collected the true scope of it all.

"Would you call this a happy place?" she asked of the seven-foot hamster before her. That's the thing about these afterlives. There was never any consistency amidst the souls outside their mortal vessels.

He shrugged. Through mouthfuls of sunflower seeds, he said, "Some might call it that. It's happy enough. Plenty of grub to live off. TV only has three channels, though. The furniture could use some refabricating, or whatever you call it."

"But you wouldn't say it were dadgumnation?"

"Well, now that you mentioned it, there is a squeewa in the meewa, and there's that hoople-hobble-hingle-hoo to put up with. There's only so much orudorudoru I can take, not to mention the fizzlenov ecology."

He pointed to an area behind the TV that lay completely out of reach. There was no deciphering the downsides to this place. Some deity somewhere got wind of some transgression Samara forgot to confess, and now she had censor mists to put up with. She couldn't see what he was so unhappy about, and his description of it twisted and tangled into words that never existed.

Samara bore down on the mist. She waved her hand through it. She sniffed it. She even stuck her face in it and waggled her tongue around. Nothing. Whatever it was hid from every sense imaginable. She hopped through it to see if there was any sensory input apparatus of hers she was missing. Nope.

"Be gone," she ordered. "Away with you, stingy phenomenon."

This was making the hamster look at her funny. She began to fear he wouldn't take her seriously, so she bid him an opulent eternity, and returned to physical reality through the projection portal.

These sneak peeks at other people's spiritual destinations were never without risks. So ardent was her concentration that her body back on Earth could end up anywhere without her realizing it. For all she knew, she could open her eyes to her six-year-old cousins playing "dead animal grenades." Tonight, upon awakening, she saw all the dead animals were there, but no cousins. Good.

Actually, the carrion were there on purpose. Her secret roommate brought them. They were the elevators that went in directions with no spatial components. Insects, lizards, roadkill, anything that had once drawn breath or did whatever plants needed was all over the floor (weeds, peels, and kudzu shared her living quarters). It was amazing how much you might have in common with dead animals after they bit the dust. Everything spoke Ghostanese in the afterlife.

"In the name of all angels, ranked high and low," lamented Samara, "Dirt has been dug on me, and I shall have to polish it. But where is this dirt hidden?" The answer may just have been pawing there at the window, ready to deliver the latest helping of a traffic tragedy.

Samara opened the window and let in a small zaftig kitten. The cheap cloth purse she hauled in must have outweighed her threefold, but she had no trouble heave-hoing it into the room. Then again, a hefty fraction of that work came from the Big German Shepherd she'd been traveling on.

"He's still warm," reported the kitten, and opened the purse to show the armadillo within. "Or she. I didn't look very close. It just didn't feel right."

Samara exercised less restraint and learned the thing was a dude. "Oh, Daffodil, your reticence you should spend elsewhere. Wherever this creature's soul is now, I'm sure that such inspections bare little matter to him."

"He's soft, too. But his heart's not working." She didn't want her host to think she'd kidnapped someone from an animal rescue shelter. "And he's not breathing. He tooted some on the way. Is that important? You can't smell it, can you?"

"Not in here."

Outside, the whining started. Samara's parents were well aware of the zoological tomb that made up Samara's bedroom, even if it were the center of their nightly parent-child debates. What might have blown their cover would be the Big German Shepherd's vocalized hunger, or complaints over being left out. Whatever the trouble was, it was going to blow their cover if they didn't shut him up fast.

"Would it spoil their afterlife if I just fed him one of these?" Daffodil pointed around the room at the carrion.

"Just feed him that." Samara pointed to a gopher, so Daffodil hucked it out the window. That stopped the whines, but without them, a disappointed despair was more obvious on Samara's face..

"You seem... unhappy," said Daffodil.

"The censor mists are back."

The meaning behind that was clear. Daffy knew all about the afterlife system, she knew the earthly powers put in charge of it, all peering out with their beedy little eyes through the mailslots down those darkened corridors. She knew what they wanted in exchange for the full package: dirt. And not just any dirt. They wanted the dirtiest dirt. Dare she say, Daffodil dirt?

"What will you tell Father Swirley?"

Samara held up her fingers to hide a gasp; Daffodil must have forgotten how high up the clerical ladder Father Swirley stood. So high up, he must have been encountering mists of his own. She glanced to the left and right, as though the dead animals themselves might tattle, then bent over to whisper.

"I shall say to him, 'what is my sin, that meteorological weather infiltrates my senses during meditative moments?' That is, I shall say that should they send me to a court that high. To those nearer Earth, I shall say the same. Someone ought to know something I do not."

No promise to keep Daffy's presence under the rug. Great. The kitty was just about to take a more direct approach to see if something more reassuring would come out of Samara's mouth when there was a knock at the door. She dashed beneath the bed.

There they were, Mr. and Mrs. Tamsen, only intending to remind their daughter to take out the trash when they got a whiff of all that death they saw. So they put that on the docket instead. They fought about hot, juicy things, just like the needlessness of upside down graveyards and the places where noses ought not to be pinched. These issues led to news from the principal that Samara had brought back unsatisfactory revelations from the other side.

Riveting stuff, for sure. Daffy couldn't really listen; she had to concentrate on hacking up a stubborn hairball without making any noise. Once she got it out of her gullet, she didn't have to worry about exposure, but she did have to get rid of it as soon as possible. Anyone else's reaction would have been, "Ew, flush it down the toilet." They wouldn't be so quick to introduce water into the equation if they got a better look at it, with its shell ready to split open and puke out the contents of Pandora's purse. No, water was the wrong element. She needed fire.

She wrapped it up in a nearby used tissue and put it in her purse. There were matches down there somewhere, but only lousy guests lit matches under their hosts' bed. She'd have to find some secluded place away from any civilization or water. Now, how would she get out of this place? She could use the deceased beasts as a cover and tiptoe her way out the window, but she didn't know if their devotion to the argument was solid enough not to notice. Even if it was at one point, it stopped being that when the Big German Shepherd barked loud and clear, stepping up to his role as a chaperone.

She wished he hadn't. Mr. and Mrs. Tamsen dropped the argument instantly. "Are any of these things still alive?"

"Want to take a good look?"

Mrs. Tamsen reached for a squirrel, then stopped good and wise, aware of the diseasifying adventure that would ensue.

"No," said Mr. Tamsen. "We don't want a good look. But we want all of this... nature... out of your room, dead or otherwise. Pretty sure the only thing that can survive in this place are the flesh-eating bacteria."

They left to fetch a garbage bag and a trash picker, but otherwise left her to deal with the depressing odorous atmosphere by herself. On their way out, they either threatened or promise dto take her to a laboratory and get a microscopic look at all those dirty little germs colonizing her skin.

With the phlegm tissue tucked safely out of sight and the Tamsen parents out of the room, Daffy couldn't help indulging in a little out-loud wishful thinking when she crawled out of the bed.

"Maybe it's the animals. Maybe they're the ones causing the mist clouds when you meditate. You don't think it could be their toot, do you?"

Samara jammed the trash picker into an iguana jugular. "Nothing," she professed, "is more important than the revelations behind our post morten souls. Grades, garbage, microscopes... all things that will wither away into ashes."

Ashes. That is just the thing this morsel had to turn into before it got wet. If there was anything that could compromise Daffy's place as a stowaway in the Tamsen house, it would be this slimey thing in its mature phase. Besides, Samara had enough on her mind and spirit.

Daffy went to the window. "I'll bring you back something less tooty."

Samara paused her skewering. "Oh, I won't need one so soon. Besides, we can rule out browncloud. I drew something awful and pointy on the floor and lit five candles. When I snipped off my lock of hair and lay it in the center, I saw but censor mists, sensurround. I was completely clear of browncloud long before I began. I made sure to be."

"You can see your own after-" but no, obviously she couldn't if she was bringing up the censor mists in that context. "I mean, your bodies don't have to be dead?"

"The spirit resides in the spiritual realm," explained Samara. "The entities in the mortal realm are the mere vessels through which our life essences construct our eternal inhabitant. Although those with defunct physical units are less likely to bogart their body parts."

It sounded like she didn't need a whole dead animal, either. If anything, it would stink less and therefore be less reason for the Tamsen parents to barge in and gripe .

"I'll remember that." Daffy hauled her purse out the window. "I need to take the Big German Shepherd for a walk in the mountains." She hopped out the window. "I also need to wag my finger at him. He knows to keep quiet, don't you, sir?"

The Big German Shepherd harrumphed, and Samara watched them trot out of sight. When they were gone, she closed her window. As she proceeded to bag her beastly bodies, she started brainblasting places she could get her hands on some decent resin. She had more questions, and no way in the sizzling fiery underworld was she parting with anyone, dead or super dead, that easily.

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There was a howl somewhere off in the distance. Widow's Peak and its surrounding geography always gave Daffy the creeps, especially at night, but it was no match for Samara's suburbs, the "Skinflint District." The neighbors didn't have pets; they had other people on leashes and paper bags over their heads. The statues depicted snarling animals in max-security cages, when they weren't losing arm-wrestling matches to humans. Try to light a fire over there, and she was sure to end up in a net while the rain (and rain there would be, if that thunderclap said what she thought it did) fizzled the fire and let the hairball... well... it was a good thing she was lighting the fire away from civilization.

Now that she and the Shepherd were plenty far away from the nearest sip of water, all she had to do was find a fresh match. All that rubbish she had collected over the years could be the campfire. Failing that, she'd have to go all the way up the peak and fire up the wizened widow's stove. All the way through Devastation Den, along Lamentation Ledge, and across Relentless River.

The sheer amount of garbage she had to excavate started to worry her. She couldn't throw it in the Tamsen trash; nothing would have come closer to blowing her cover. "Shame on me for all this mess." She sighed and dumped out the hole thing. Finally, amidst all those ziploc bags, tissues, empty lipsticks and used matches, she spotted just what she needed with her trusty tapetum lucidum. She scooped everything else up in a pile - it didn't count as litter if it all eventually wound up as crispy ashes - struck the match, and lit up her little pile.

She opened the tissue encasing the hairball. "For the life they'll never live," she prayed. Before she released it onto the fire, though, a wet soggy boot beat her to it and snuffed the flame.

"Pampers!" she cried, and cuddled the hairball close. It wasn't wet; gross and sticky, but it had always been that way. The German Shepherd hopped into defensive stance, arching his back and snarling. Who'd thrown the boot? Was this the work of the Tame-the-Flame bergade? Or was it the work of, she worried as she got a clearer picture of the intruder, two jailbroken arsonists here to stomp out prospective competition?

They sure weren't do-gooders. They were hairy, sweaty men in getup fished straight out of a dumpster, including cowboy hats and bank robber masks. When they pulled down their masks, they displayed smiles that would show up in a "don't let this happen to you" poster in a dentist's office.

"Do you need some floss?" asked Daffy. "Because I'm afraid I don't have any." She was more afraid of other things, like a specific identity that these two might possess.

"Well, well, well, little lady, what you got there instead?" The taller, hairier, dentally-worse-off one cocked a shiney yellow eye over the crusty inanimate objects between them. "Nuffin' too pricey and presh, I hope. After all, a kitty what's got her own goody-bag? A dangerous thing to be out here in this nick of the woods, don't you think?"

Why'd they stop her? Were they the very thing she was out to abort in the first place, only much more powerful, probably armed, definitely down to divulge some deadly Daffodil dirt? They could do that if they were who she thought.

The shorter one kablooyed the big brown pants trumpet so audibly and smellably that even the big German Shepherd had to drop his protective spirit to protect his nose, Daffy figured there was only one way to know for sure.

Through pinched nostrils, she asked, "I'm not supposed to change your diaper, am I?"

She wasn't quite sure either one heard her through the taller man's coughing fit, but when he was finished, he loomed over his partner. "That does it. I'm taking half your share of whatever we take off this gal."

So they were plain old bandits. Good. At least she didn't have to put up with unexpected parental responsibilities right away. She wouldn't know how to break up the ensuing haggle-bicker anyway, so she slipped the hairball back into her purse and nudged the Shepherd and signaled him to tiptoe them out of there. They only got six centimeters away before they heard a cocked gun.

"Not so fast, missy. Looks like you got something you're not showing us." He turned to his partner. "Fire, Squabby."

"Right away, Beans."

The shot was like howler monkeys plunging over to hold a screaming championship inside her ears. She couldn't count how long it took for her tiny grip to settle her skull. When she could think again, it dawned on her: Squabby? Beans? No wonder they'd turned to a life of crime. Ever in possession of a trusty tapetum lucidum, she saw her shepherd was in even more pain. He buried his head beneath his paws and ground his teeth against that inner cranial calamity. She massaged behind his ears, rough and rugged, the way he liked it. But then she saw Beans staggering around with her purse, now with a big hole in it, and, rather than in the wispy white dandelion puffs that she'd prefer the hairball be in, it was peeking out, intact and potent as ever.

"Sir, I'm begging you." Daffy tugged at his leg sleeve and got greasy oil stains on it. "I have to get rid of the thing in that purse. If it gets wet, it'll be deadly."

Beans regained a little balance. He looked down and gave her the kind of grin you would find on a gargoyle.

"Deadly, eh? How deadly?"

The German Shepherd couldn't ever speak. Given how achey his ears were, he couldn't hear either. With all that dehydrating going on in his eyes, it would probably be a while before he could even see properly. But he could definitely smell. And the abominable stench of thievery hung heavy in the air. He didn't need his sight to locate his targets. He couldn't speak, but if he could, right before he lunged, he would have declared, "This deadly!"

He struck like a bowling ball into a pair of pins, an absolute whirlwind of jaws, claws, and fur. Daffy couldn't help but hop a little in excitement as he snapped and mauled so speedy that the armed men couldn't aim. They did fire, though, and one of their bullets finally did hit. Not the Shepherd, but some flying thing that wailed like an airplane taking a nosedive. An albatross crashed into the fray; pretty much ending it all and vanquishing Beans's grip on the purse so Daffy could confiscate it.

Yup, there was the hairball, safe and sound but at least dry as ever. They had no choice now but to go fry it on the wizened widow's stove. This was no place for Daffy, the Shepherd, or the hairball. She pawed his shoulder and he dove between her feet and scooping her onto his back. With one last swipe of her claws, Daffy plucked an albatross feather so Samara could have it, and they were off down Widow's Peak trail.

All that gunfire had put their hearing a tad on the non-existent side, but they knew the bandits were shooting at them. They could see wood splinters and rock shards erupt left and right as they tore down a more wooded area. As their hearing returned, they noticed, alongside healthier trees, the persistent click of empty gun barrels, followed by threats and swearing. It was all behind them. Now they had to deal with dangers of a different breed.

In the sky overhead, Daffy saw another albatross, wailing like a banshee. It probably already knew about its fallen companion, poor sojourner. She was right. It did know his friend got shot, because it saw the tail feather peeking out of the purse. It made a dive for the purse, to which Daffy clung by reflex. The force swept her off the Shepherd. He swivelled around, chasing and nipping at the trash barge turkey's huge Southern end.

While they were all going in the wrong direction, there rang out the gunshot that extinctified the Devastation Den coyotes. The Scout scout who fired it turned to one of his yesmen and jerked his head toward his accomplishment. As this weasely little doormat hauled the carcass towards the pickup truck limo, the armed teenage Scout did the three-finger salute to the other dozen or so in his semi-circle, and motioned for them to remove their earplugs.

"Now, if that doesn't prove the sovereign might of man over animals, nothing will, if I, Alonzo Dubois, do say so myself." Calls of "attaboy" from his male accomplices mixed with snorts and pfffts from the female portions. The frenchman's waved it all away. "This entails that the likelihood of an alien invasion screwing up the gene pool in the Skinflint district has dropped to zero coyote pank. Dr. Saturn will surely be pleased with our manly restoration."

One of the girls stood up. "Hey chauvinist, some of us are women." She got acclaim and support from the other girls, cheers of "Roar, woman, roar!" and "You tell him, Genevieve !" took all the boys by surprise, but Alonzo (ahem) "be prepared"ed for it.

"Well then why don't we kick you all out so you can start your own troop?" he snapped. "You can call yourselves the 'Attabimbos.' That's what you dress like, anyway."

While the paragons of upright behavior devolved into a gender-fueled armagedden, a wolf-like entity began circling them. Alonzo was the first to notice: "Oops, we appear to have missed one." Once he reloaded though, Genevieve spotted her chance and grabbed the barrel, chanting, "my turn, my turn!" "Not without earplugs!" They yanked and kicked as Genevieve's finger crept its way to the trigger. She pulled it, blew out everyone's ears, then blamed Alonzo for "missing the wolf thing and hitting a stork. See what you made me do??"

The argument was over. All anybody could do now was yell out, "Whazzy say? Whazzy say?" As they all tried to penetrate each other's hearing damage, two stinky sweaty hairy lowlifes shambled up. Alonzo saluted everyone else to shut them up. He didn't hear the first part of their introductory yammer, but there was no need to ask them to repeat it. They did that themselves, everyone realized, with their talk of "ain't no plain Earth varment that there running clean across. A talkin' cat, that was. Talk you all into extinction, set foot down in Skinflint county. Bet she's got kitty kids in mind, you better watch out, or she'll marry the likes of you..."

"Sacrilege!" Alonzo did that three-fingered salute around the troop. "I'll not have filthy alien intermarriage polluting our cherished district. And neither will any of you, will you, stooges?"

Most of the scouts, boy or girl, were scandalized enough by the inttermarriage thing to fogive that stooge remark. Not Genevieve. She gave Alonzo an emancipatory shove. "Listen, caveman, I'm nobody's stooge. And I'll do some shooting, too, you'll see."

Alonzo glowered. "Yes. I expect we shall. Everyone into the truckozine."

When the vagrants tried to climb in, the scouts kicked them out. "Get scarce! If you come along, they'll take away our 'Stranger Danger' merit badges."

Back at the albatross, Daffy wondered weather plucking a feather from it would be bad form. Samara could at least see if it had reunited with its friend in that big trash barge in the sky. Then she heard a door slam, a car engine fire up, and on instinct, she yanked out another feather. Drat, the car! They made tracks.

It wasn't far into the woods before they all started shooting. It was like nobody could get by around here without guns. The scouts behind also damaged nature by swerving the cars into trees and botched up this and that nest; a family of ringtails and woodpeckers joined forces to claw up or make a dart board out of the limo, so the gunners turned their poorly aimed attention onto this other wildlife, and only wound up helping them jalopify their own property. Mankind lost fifteen points to nature right there.

Genevieve never lost sight of the real targets. Fed up with the patriarchal stinginess, she choose a coyote carcass as her weapon. She yanked one out of the back, swung it around by its tail while leaning out the window, and launched it towards the flea-possessed mutt and his furball high impress. She missed them; if anything, she overshot her trajectory and their corpse trophy went straight over a cliff. That was where the Big German Shepherd slammed on the brakes.

He'd stopped only inches short of become this wretched guy's tombmate. "May he hunt freely in that great woodland den in the sky," whispered Daffy, then swivelled around to face the scout-hicle. Animacidal or not, everyone deserved a fair warning. She signaled the danger posed by the cliff by charading a person diving into a pool with no water. It was clear enough from the Shepherd's perspective, so he picked her up by the collar and pranced to the threshold of Lamentation Ledge.

-They weren't long gone by the time the scouts pulled up; the ledge forced them to take the slow-and-steady approach. This gave the scouts time to get out of the car and marvel at the lengthy drop, perfect for disposing of alien vermin, and then call out, "Where are you, vermin? Talk, we know you can!"

The German Shepherd growled. He could hardly help it, being in his protective nature and all, but it erupted into a bark. Everyone pointed their phone lights in their direction and chanting, "there they are, there they are!" They probably went on chanting that in spite of a thunderclap. They got out their shotguns only to be disappointed with all that ammunition they wasted on the woodpeckers and rat-possums. Still, they didn't relent. They cranked up the power on their phone flashlights and tried to blind them both over the edge, even though they were already relying more on their footsy feels to navigate rather than their peepers, or even Daffy's trusty tapetum lucidum.

The scouts were just about to start another war over who got to flash the "killing light" when a tremendous crack called for silence. Several feet above Daffy and the dog, a sheep leered down at them. Just like the Skinflintizens enforced a zero-neog policy, the alpha wooly boggler upheld a zero-anything-that-wasn't-a-sheep-or-tasty-plant policy. On sight of his nemesis, embodying more than a century and a half of canid oppression, he ushered in the hour of ovine oppression.

He stomped at the ledge to create his own rain. Rock rain. Scouts and his inferior herdmates cheered him on with hoots and bleats. All the human cheering turned to boos and jeers as the show rounded a corner.

They couldn't hassle anymore, but the sheep sure could. With the sheer downpour of gravel combined with her efforts to keep her footing, Daffy didn't know when the rain began, but yes, there it was. What's more, something in her purse started yawning. She tugged the German's Shepherd's leg and said, "It's wet."

Her collar was instantly in his mouth, and he revved up his shuffle. The extra speed threw a margin in the alpha sheep's accuracy, and in an overkill act of oh-yeah-well-two-can-play-that-game, he hurled his hooves onto the ledge at an approximate 650 psi rate, and sent himself rolling down towards the lower level.

Lucky for him he had horns; they were the only thing saving him from an utter vertical splat. That lent him to the humiliation of having the big German Shepherd bite off a hunk of wool off his mop, and then hiking his leg. "There's no time for that," said Daffy. With the grunt, the shepherd left the former alpha dry of everything except the rain as his former underling looked down in awe and dismay.

By the time they got to Relentless River, the hairball was now in the "Mexican jumping" phase, rattling around the purse as though prospecting for an exit. Net would come the hatching phase, unless she could leap from cobble to slippery cobble and evade piranha after starving piranha. She boarded the Shepherd's back. Even after the ordeal at the ledge, he was the more agile of the two. He deserved much bacon and beef when this was all through; the widow wouldn't mind if they raided her fridge; most of her senses were stuck in some other far off dimension, anyway.

The Shepherd skipped and leapt from cobble to cobble, nipping at any sea life that came too close. Daffy reached into her purse and pinched the seed; it wouldn't stop the thing from growing completely, but it might at least stunt it a bit. "You have to believe me," she said, "you do not want to be a part of this awful world."

"Where ya goin', girly?"

Daffy and the Shepherd looked up. Headed straight towards them in a canoe were the two bandits, missing many more teeth than they had not more than twenty minutes ago.

"See that there kitty?" One of the bandits had a fish by the lips. "It's her what's put you and your ancestors on the menu so long. That thing in her purse is what'll set you free.. And I'm a-help you." His help involved throwing the fish up in the air and swatting it with a big fat stick in Daffy's direction.

Who knows what he was expecting? The German Shepherd was starved. He hadn't had a decent meal since he'd taken half a bit out of Squabby's booby (it was in his nature). One snap of the jaws and there was no more piranha, just bones and eyeballs. The irked but persistent Squabby and Beans weren't defeated yet. On their way past, Beans swung a paddle at the Shepherd, who left away in time, while Squabby reached into the boat for another piranha only to yelp when it bit his finger. Beans wapped it off, then wapped Squabby for his careless uneducated behavior.

But the bandit's business was none of Daffy's; the hairball had stopped bouncing, and now it was cracking. There was Widow's peak cottage. As the German Shepherd headed straight for the door, Daffy clenched the purse as hard as she could to stop it from growing. They barged through the door, spotted the wizened widow playing a game of cards, and Daffy dismounted to turn on the oven and toss in the hairball seed, which was now growing six legs from eight different species (some of them shared).

The whole cooking time, she had her back to the oven door, listening to the harrowing "EEE! AH! OOH! AH! EEE! AH!" that proved her mission to be a successful one. She was a bit confused as to the widow's card game; her opponents included a deck of cards with all the best ones missing, a magic eightball with an "out of order" sign nailed into it, and a bra. Maybe these were neoimmigrants from planets that not even the intergalactic travel federation had heard of.

The German Shepherd watched Daffy with concerned eyes. It was probably not the best idea to sit with her back against the oven door, but she wanted to take no chances. The cries of pain eventually subsided, and Daffy looked into the oven door to see no hairball, no seed, not even a crumbling ash flake. All there was left was a thin, ghostly whisp of the life that would never be, and it curled through the air into the ether.

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Daffy woke up. She wouldn't miss those dreams, the ones where so many undead cubs and litters chased her that she had to hide in trenches and treehouses; there was a frog king who barrelled his fins because he wanted to get her, but she'd never see him on Earth.

Unless one of her hairballs got wet.

The morning scene started on an old sofa cushion. The Big German Shepherd must have carried her there; she was draped across his paws and his chin lay across her hip. The wizened widow was knocking various fragile items off her top shelf, including antique tea pots and saucers. "So sorry to see you go."

Everyone could forget about breakfast, but Daffy couldn't forget the hullabaloo last night. She slipped off the paws and cushion and hopped up onto the window sill. The storm was over. It was still soggy out there, but at least the sun was out.

Samara was out there, too, in the lotus position, meditating over some sippy yuck-mop. What was that thing? From the window it looked like a festering tangle of hair. The similarities raised more than a little alarm. Daffy knocked the big wooden plank off the door hooks and scampered over. It wasn't what she thought it was.

It was definitely wet, but there was no phlegm. No sign of growing. Just nasty wet wool. Probably the same patch she'd stripped off the sheep.

The Big German Shepherd came right out after her, heralding everyone's presence with bellowing barks before Daffy could signal an ix-nay on the arking-bay. Samara lifted an eyelid unto them. "I could see nothing, anyway." She gave up the vision altogether. "Censor mists everywhere, except for around a goldenrod sac." She scooped up the wool, which somehow made the Shepherd drool. "You know, I have a hunch that he from whom this matter fell is still alive, and that sac was some celestial womb." Daffy didn't know about any womb, but she was glad that sheep was still alive, even though he'd probably been demoted a few letters down the Greek alphabet. "That could all be silliness, too. It's a hunch nonetheless."

The whisker, feathers, and fins lay to Samara's right. Daffy was about to ask what she'd seen of these souls, but there was a not-to-be-severed intergalactic focus to Samara's gaze, pointed directly at her. Even the Shepherd deemed it abnormal, and he whined a little.

"You probably wonder why I am not at the Educationary this morning hour." Daffy couldn't say she did. She spent most of the day looking for dead animals and only went back to the Tamsen house in the late evening. Samara's schooling hours were yonder out of mind. "I was, in fact, at school. Not at my Earthly appointed room, for piffing Earthucation is sure to wither to the dirt that births it. Instead, I confessed at Benedict Hall." Her eyelids parted further and further, as though her eyes wanted to strike out on their own. Daffy wondered if she needed to push them back in, or more than the celestial realm would disappear from Samara's perceptual access.

They halted with the question, "Do you know what the priest told me?" She actually waited for an answer. No fair, thought Daffy. I'm not a psychic like you. But she didn't need to be. She had a solid, sour idea what priestly wisdom her hostess was about to report.

"He said those were not the mists of my sins and oopsies, but that of a feline, one who spoke the language of Earthankind."

Feline. There was no escaping that category, but there was some comforting ambiguity in the rest of that description. "After all," Daffy suggested, "Earth has lots of languages. You think the feline they want speaks French? Or Mongolian? Or whatever it is that one over there speaks?"

There'd been a bobcat watching them the whole time, probably thinking about nasty tricks he could pull on the Shepherd. Said Shepherd growled at the animal that could be a potential scam artist, but Samara held up her shush finger and stood up. She walked towards the bobcat and called out every sound combination her mouth knew how to make. She weed-wackered her arms and boogady-booged her fingers in case he only spoke sign language. Somewhere, in the midst of all those sounds and gestures, there had to be words that would tell him her supernatural plight and unlock the wellsprings of pity.

Just when Daffy thought she could relax, the wind picked up and blew the albatross feathers across her face. She grabbed the wet wool and sneezed into it. The bobcat, once awestruck by Samara's linguistic prowess, turned and bolted. The snotty wet wool probably grossed him out. Now it was Samara's turn to be awestruck. She stared at Daffy with escalating fascination.

"You sneeze in French?" Her gaze wandered away, only a moment, then picked up a stick and conducted her memory of the sneeze in 3/4 meter. "Yes, I'm sure of it. That was a French sneeze, the way it rose in pitch and the

'ah' only to plummet, then raced up an octave and lowered only a trickle over the 'choo.' Why, the Benedict Hall priests were asking for you, weren't they?"

There was that unbreakable focus again. And the focus bug infected the Big German Shepherd as his own eyes ballooned nearly out of their sockets, as if to say, "what catnip smuggling cartail do you got going on?"

But it wasn't catnip. It was throatbooger. These priests were asking specifically for her, Daffodil Bogard, the chubby white tuft who coughed up deadly destructo hairballs, so that she would admit once and for all to the things that came out of her mouth, the things that belonged nowhere but the blazingest of blazes, or, once wet and grown, in the slammer, where they would never scare anyone again except each other. If it got out they came out of Daffy, she'd be in worse than the slammer. She'd be in the super slammer, whatever that was.

"I foresee your reluctance," said Samara as she knelt down. The German Shepherd got curious. "And it isn't meaningless; Clarkabeth Duncan Educationary is, after all, in the skinflint district. There is no shortage of neoimmigrant stigma there. To what might you subject your mortal vessel? Purists, fanatics, the inhumane society, I won't lie and say they won't be there. But I will be there too. As sure as your Shepherd dries his eyes and blows his nose, every moment you are in enemy territory, I will be no further than a buzzard toe away."

That was no measely comfort. Though the Shepherd with all his sobbing and nose-sobbing needed it more, Samara's assurances were morale shelter in and of themselves. Yet, there were still all those beans. If Samara stood too close, the whole thing would tip over, and there would be no forgetting a criminal history of that magnitude.

"How long do I have to think about it?"

"Oh come on. You know I won't get to get a good look, smell, touch, hear, bite, or sip of anyone's place in the great beyond until you... wait... right here. I have an idea."

Samara skipped into the cottage, so sure we was to find a checkmate by rummaging through the widow's refrigerator. Daffy could see through the widow that the thing had never been plugged in; upon opening the door, Samara had to exorcise the fumes. The German Shepherd nudged Daffy in the cheek with his nose and whined. He seemed to understand that the next place Daffy went to, she couldn't take him. She stroked an apologetic paw along his muzzle; this was as good a reason to stay put as any, but the least she could do was entertain Samara's spur-of-the-moment idea.

"Found something." Whatever that was Samara came out waving around, Daffy could smell it from where she stood. She braced herself while the Big German Shepherd ducked and covered.; Samara better be careful, or they'd be seing more of the afterlife than any censor mist could get in the way of.

Samara got close enough to show that she'd found a strip of bacon. New species of mold were growing all over it. Nothing showed Samara's eagerness to see the great beyond than the fact that she deliberately held it with her bare hands.

She pointed at the German Shepherd. "Sir, stand guard that no other nature may violate our visitation. Now, here, take hold of the other end. It'll only work if we all hold hands."

"But bacon doesn't have hands."

"Then let's pretend it does."

Samara was already sitting cross-legged with her eyes closed by the time Daffy realized she'd made the wrong complaint. She pawed and prodded. Samara wouldn't wake up for even a second. It was clear she was going to be

sitting there until Daffy joined in. Sighing, Daffy told herself she'd touched nastier things before, closed her eyes, and pinched her end of the bacon.

A UFO abduction beam Niagra Fallsed right through her eyelids and whisked away all of the natural elements. Shrubs, rocks, and trees all spun around up a whirlwind so that another whirlwind could come down and replace them all with a ritzy dining hall where roaring twenties flappers danced on the table and kicked off the steal dome covering the dinner's main course.

The girls sat in large cushioned chairs as an endless rain of glitter and confetti sprinkled over them without getting into the food. All the guests were dressed in Phantom of the Opera clothes and had mardi gras masks on sticks. They made cooing noises at one another, and at the girls when they noticed their arrival. Daffy was so delighted, yet so mystified, that she forgot that the physical world still existed for a moment. A man in a timber wolf mask reminded her of the German Shepherd. She turned to Samara.

"This is amazing, nothing like life back on Earth. If only we didn't need someone to stand guard, we could all three live here instead."

One of the dancers kicked the dome off the star of the dinner table; a roast whole pig with a McIntosh grafted up its gob - but not for long. It spat the thing out and said, "I'll trade places with you any day, sweetheart."

Then it was a lot less wonderful, especially with the butler storming over with a chainsaw in action. Samara took her by the paw and led her away from the table into the quieter foyer.

"Shouldn't we help him?" said Daffy.

"Love, the man's a mere bacon strip back on Earth. Not only that, but he's expired. There's no unbutchifying at that stage. Besides, I have something I want to show you."

That something was the stuff she could not show; cottony clouds following them, slipping in front of what could have been spectacular furniture, home décor, or acts of love. They scrambled what might have been compelling conversations, they plugged their noses when they pursued the gardens, numbed their fingers when they stroked the tapestries, and tranquilized their tongues when they sampled from a taffy tray.

Daffy tossed the taffy into a spit bucket. "I don't believe it. That weather gets in the way of anything fun we want to do."

"And not just the fun. There's plenty of unfun under there. I'm sure of it."

"More? But wasn't what happened to the pig enough unfun? And this is his afterlife."

Yes, yes it was. It was plenty unfun for everyone, however numb Samara had become to it. "Do you want-" she began, but the cracking bedrock beneath them cut her off. The furniture and walls gave up too.

"What is happening?" cried Daffy. "If this was heaven, I don't want to see what's in the other place." Probably way more meteorological censorship.

She didn't have to worry about that, though. The empty space beneath them was more blue than red, and when the walls and floor reassembled themselves, they were back in outside the Wizenid Widow's cottage. Samara was there. Daffy was there. The bacon, on the other hand, was not in hand but in mouth. The Big German Shepherd's mouth, to be exact.

"Spit that out," commanded Daffy. "The pig it came from is in enough pain, he deserves a decent burial."

Burials, decent or lousy, weren't things the shepherd cared about. He preferred to concern himself with meals. Even after Daffy pounced on his muzzle and tried to pry it free, he hoarded the whole thing like it was the last edible object on Earth.

Samara stepped between them. "There's no pain left in that bacon. It's all up on the other side of the mortal threshold now."

The bacon was all gone anyway, along with the bacteria colonies and whatever else had been festering on it, and Daffy had no intention of reaching all the way down into his stomach. Who knows what else she'd pull out.

"I still think it's indecent."

"Will Earthly decency matter so much to him who will be dined upon to no temporal end?"

Did it? Did a strip of bacon really bear any significance to that lonely, miserable, incredible edible soul, now forced to grind and pulverize between teeth for the rest of eternity?

"I have the power," said Samara. "I can stop more of this from happening, but I can't do that if these mists are in the way. I have to see what is behind them. I have to find that out. And the only way to vanquish them is a confession, from you to the priests."

Therein lay Daffodil's life purpose. Samara was right. Afterlives were at stake. Juicy, succulent afterlives, prepared by an expert chef. She cleared the bacon from her mind, and looked towards the Skinflint district.

"Where do I need to confess?"

* * *

So there they were on their way to Benedict Hall's confession chambers. Samara casually skipped along like she was on her way to a carnival instead of hiding seventy-three dead animals in her purse and one live animal. Yup, her failsafe strategy had Daffy surrounded by a crowd of contraband carcasses in case the purse got snatched. She peered out the flap for some fresh air, and saw just as much death around campus. Duncan's unanimal-friendly environment loved showing off Skinflint's ideology. One statue depicted a jogger with a smushed chipmunk spread over his shoe while he smirked over his shoulder. A tapestry displayed a family carving into an elephant, with the patriarchal poacher still armed with his shotgun. Pinned to a clothesline were a row of cat skins - turtle shell, chartreuse, Persian, Siamese...

Oh wait, no, she was imagining what it would look like if she got caught.

"Now, once you're inside, all you have to do is tell Father Swirley every sin you ever sinned. He will then chronicle it and express mail it to the Great Cosmic Wonder, dispense a pardon, and then kedabra! Those confounded mists will waft right back to the panty puffers whence they came. Until one of us sins again."

The solution didn't sound permanent enough to be of any use. What was the average person's sin rate anyway? "You're sure all of this will be kept secret?"

"As sure as a brigade of policemen clutter up that door, not a single soul ever discovers the criminal history reported."

"What??" Daffy almost threw open the flap with her latest peek at the world outside. Sure enough, there were cops and "Do Not Cross" tape positioned at every possible way in and out of the building Samara was headed for.

She couldn't tell if they had guns, but this being a place where people spilled their dirty rotten depraved little guts, all she could do was hope they were only around to ward off eavesdroppers. They certainly didn't let Samara in when she tried to choreograph her way around their poker game. One of them spotted her and wedged himself between Samara and the front door.

"Woah there, where do you think you're going? They even teach reading around here? Do not cross, see?"

"But officer," pleaded Samara. "I have to confess. I sinned, and I need my track record to be lily white and wholesome."

The cop narrowed his hard-boiled eyes. "Kid, the only confession we're interested in is who tied up old man Swirley, gave him a wedgie, and then dumped his bimbahoo in a pig slop barrel. If you didn't do it, hit the road."

"Officer, a dire cloud shadows the celestial realm. Only an ordained priest can clear it. If we can't see Father Swirley, whom may we confess to?"

"The judge if you don't beat it, missy."

Not wanting to jeopardize her cover, Daffy didn't peek anymore. She had the sinking feeling that this confession ordeal was more complicated than they planned. She also got the soothsense that whoever was behind Father Swirley's desecration was the kind of person who'd take her confession and broadcast it all over Damselwood. She didn't know what Samara did to inspire whom she thought was another cop to yell, "Are you trying to get suspended or something? Make tracks!" But it probably involved casing the building for a way in.

"We need a new plan," uttered Samara. "Maybe Father Tinkly is taking impromptu confessions. Let's go huddle."

Something fishy was happening, fishier than a measly priestly pratfall. Daffy flipped around the possibilities when the purse flap opened up, and she found herself surrounded by pearly marble tiles and pink floral stalls. Nobody else was around to incriminate them (at least not visibly), but behind Samara, like a starving albino cauldren of toxic waste and tragic travel, sat the thing she hoped she'd never see again, and suddenly the confession situation was catastrophically clear.

"Samara, is there a toilet in the confession room?"

At first, Samara's eyes nearly popped out since she was so scandalized. But then she remembered how curious the young were. There was just so much to learn at nine cat-years old.

"Why, the Duncan fathers' food essence doesn't steam out their pores into celestial heaven dust, as does the angels'. And they never leave the position until nightfall. Their corporeal incarnations are bound to the same cycles and processes as the rest of us, here on Earth. We can't deny them evacuatory waterworks so that they are forced to plop upon the floor, can we?"

Someone banged on the door with such force that the purse nearly fell from the hook.

"Samara Tamsen, whom in the world are you discussing the priests' waste organs with?"

Samara, her back to the wall beside the can and her skin close to bleached, steadied herself. "The Great Cosmic Wonder, whom is not in the world, and definitely not of it."

"There is nothing Great, Cosmic, or Wonderful in there."

It was a woman's voice, a beehive haired, machine gun bullet-repelling fanny, pink-spectacled woman's Cyaroyle Chyannying voice that gave away exactly the way she looked even though she was out of view. "You are in the company of..." she sniffed while Samara fished from her purse one of her cadavers, "one of *them!!!*"

That's when she nearly kicked the door off. Daffy dropped deep down into the purse as she pivoted towards the stall. All she could tell was that Samara had flushed the toilet and offered a dishonest, "Oops."

"Wonder help me, you are on their side as usual. Father Cumberbatch will hear of this. My office, now."

"But I haven't finished my business."

"No business is more important than mine."

To hear her talk, you'd think the Great Cosmic Wonder had taken a brake from all their intergalactic governing so that the dictatorial portion could come down to Earth and detentionize a single fifth-grader. Whoever this woman was, her mission wasn't swayed by Samara's protests. She was out the door with Samara in presumable tow, leaving Daffodil to battle her panic alone.

Death was all around. That melodramatic entrance had spilt about four dozen dead frogs, sparrows, spiders, hedgehogs, and mushrooms from their ziploc bags. Her scramble out of the bag couldn't be too quick. Nothing in the world ever made her want to puke more than overly affectionate frog intestines, though she knew doing it so close to the toilet was bad news.

Sit, stay, bad hairball. But her guzzler had no brain-ears for brain-commands. It was like a toothpaste tube milked by a cheapskate for the last curly-Q; she reached for the toilet paper. She couldn't keep it down, but she could at least keep it away from the toilet. A few more hacks and coughs, and she had another item that she had to get rid of. Now, where was the nearest scolding hot surface?

Uh-oh. Where was the bathroom?

Her trusty tapetum lucedum told her she was in a dark leathery place with perfume, make-up, and a pocket copy of the Great Cosmic Manifesto. Was perfume a fertile threat? She didn't want to find out; she hid her phlegm wad in her armpit, and then noticed a pair of voices above.

"I'll keep Muffinsy Uffins tonight, and you can have her tomorrow."

"Get real. Your peeping brother will get one look at it, and your mom will send her out on a sailboat. Besides, we aren't naming her 'Muffinsy Uffins.' She looks more like a Cream Puff to me."

"Don't be so sugary. And like you're so good at hiding things from your older sister. She excavates your room on a regular basis."

Darn that pukatorial hairball, darn it all the way to heck! And then into meta-heck, wherever that was! She'd put so much focus into its destination that two Duncaners had come in, seen her, and bagged her. She had to get out of here in a hurry. They'd stopped arguing and started singing a sorority anthem, for some reason. She lifted the flap a little. She only wanted a eency weence of a peek outside to get a preliminary idea of her surroundings and plan her escape.

What she saw was a pair of mean mad eyes that couldn't belong on anyone under forty. That's because they didn't. The purse opened all the way and a slump balding man with an avalanche brow pulled her out by the scruff of her neck.

"But Mr. Yagerbasket, we found her fair and square!"

"I don't like that language. And the classroom cat has gone missing. I don't think this is a coincidence, so point your delinquent feet in the classroom's direction, and leave those rebellious attitudes behind. As for you," he held Daffy close to her face. She trembled under the glare he screwed into her. "For your little escape stunt, I'm teaching today's lesson extra educational." He carried her into the classroom, crammed her into a birdcage, and locked her in. "Let's see you get out of that."

And so began Daffy's first experience with stage fright. There couldn't be too many more than twenty-four kids; somehow it felt like twenty-four thousand. All of them had this eager gleam in their eyes, something that could have shot out a laser blast and smoked her there and then. They were dressed like funeral guests, but they leered like a saloon mob ready to watch a public hanging.

Dong donged a bell right behind her. She'd come within an inch of yelping, but she didn't. For all they knew, she was a dumb speechless kitten. It would take all of her strength (and half of Samara's, for the love of Wondy, if she could astral project, she needed it now more than ever) to keep it that way.

"All right, listen up, class." He kept staring at Daffy the whole time, hungry and eager as his students. "Today we're learning how to tell a filthy, fleazy, litterbox kind of vermin from the sneaky, greedy, breedy U.F.O. kind. As you all know, martians like to think they're human, just like us. They're not, but they like to think they are. Give me some things that humans can do that animals cannot."

"Talk," said one kid without raising his hand. That was the obvious answer, and someone threw a rubber eraser at the back of his head for stealing it. Other answers were things like go shopping, work a job, and drive cars (especially in light of a recent traffic report).

"Now, let's see if it can do any of these things."

They hopped aboard the school bus to take an unscheduled field trip to the nearest Mall-Mart, where Yagerbasket plunked Daffy into a shopping basket. She couldn't help but yelp a little at the sudden pressure, but for the love of cover-keeping did she force herself to make it sound as dim and unsapient as possible. She had much less acting success after he aimed her at the melon aisle and shoved her with all his might towards a honeydew stand, but when you factor in how loud the dewvalanche goop splatter was, they didn't hear her scream.

"Hey!!" A fruit attendant raced over to the class. "You're paying for those."

"Shut your mouth and your wallet," said Yagerbasket. "I'm saving your grandkids from alien mutation here. Gunther, go get me the vermin." As a sullen but obedient boy dug Daffy's bent and dented cage out of the melon pile, the teacher turned to the rest of the class. "So it can't shop. That's evidence of it being a vermin. Let's see if it can work a job."

They left the fruit man staring stunned at the sheer audacity while they boarded the bus and drove it to MacItclown. The customers gasped as loud as the cashier when the class waltzed right behind the counter and into the kitchen. Yagerbasket yanked the spatula out of the blemished teen chef and set Daffy right in front of the sloping burger grill. It was soon obvious that the burgers had more grease than meat, as a whole Nile of it spilled from the burgers into the grease pan, where it splashed onto the barstool and Daffy river danced to avoid the burns. That stopped her from tossing her hairball onto the stove for it to sizzle. She didn't know if the heat would out-chemical react the liquid.

"Hey, give my spatula back! You're drying the burls!"

Yagerbasket rebuffed his tackle. "Back off, boy. Pure bloodline take priority over any burger any day."

The grease splash ascended into a tidal wave, and Daffy slipped off, cage and all, into a puddle on the floor. As much blazing agony she was in, she did not let her concentration leave the hairball, lest it contact the wet stuff through the crooked cage bars.

"It doesn't have the brains to work a job, either." Yagerbasket helped himself to the dish gloves and picked up the cage. "We'll see if it can drive, and then we should head back." And he left the teenager to fume over his ruined fast food "masterpieces."

Yagerbasket drove the bus himself up to the top of a hill. The students dismounted, he put it in neutral, then set Daffy behind the wheel. Even in the birdcage's warped, crooked state, she was still too big to fit through the bars or even reach the door handle. She had no control over the bus or her own destination as the Duncaners gave it a push and she rolled straight into a lemonade stand, the pitcher smashing through the windshield and drenching her in sticky, diluted lemonade.

The stand's owner, an 8-year-old boy, stomped and screamed about how he knew that school would one day put him out of business until his Dad came out and shook his head. "Well, Chuckie Sebastian Filmore, it all goes to show you how much we all need insurance. I want this to be a little lesson to you-

"Hey!" Yagerbasket ran down the hill. "I'm the teacher around here. Kid, learn this lesson instead: we'll be out of more than business if the aliens get their way, we'll be out of humans."

On the rickety flat-tired jalopy ride back to school, Daffy gripped the hairball as tightly as it could. She was so shaken by these lessons that any tactile sensation could have been the hairball moving closer to blossoming. Nevertheless, once they parked the bus and carried her back into classroom, she saw that it was the same small slimey giblet it was when she spat it up.

That didn't mean she was off the hook, though. If anything, she was more hooked than ever. Yagerbasted attached the basket to a fishing pole and turned on the taps so that he could fill a big plastic storage tub.

"See how slimey and sticky it is now?" he lectured. "Anything with human intellect and sophistication would hop right into the bath while plain old Earthan vermin would just drown. Not that it'll be breathing much longer anyway if it's a martian that's infiltrated the premises."

Nothing posed a bigger threat to everyone's safety than the impending acquaintanceship between the water and that tiny little atrocity in her paws. As he swung the fishing pole around to dangle it over the tub, Daffy stared at his face in utter disbelief. There was a shade of eagerness under his hard narrow eyebrows. Their eyes linked. He gave his job a pause to raise an eyebrow at her definitely unprimitive expression.

Had she given herself away? Maybe so, but she saw that in the cage that separated them, there was a gap wide enough for her to slip through, and she went for it, pouncing off a startled Yagerbasket, and then the bell rung.

Action was action, but school was school. No butt stayed put once the bell announced their freedom. Kids flooded out of the classroom and into the hall saying stuff like, "I thought that would never end," and "good luck with Franny Furball, teach." He was in a state of shocked trance, so he failed to apprehend an involunteer. He only came to his senses when he heard a clattering atop a bookshelf, and there was the thing trying to escape so it could woo one of his students and spoil the genetic chain.

The ruler offered no mechanical advantage. It didn't matter how hard she gripped it, the vent cover screw just wouldn't turn. She wanted to look over the classroom to find a handier tool, but her view was obstructed by the throbbing red face of Yagerbasket, clutching the edge of the shelf and brandishing a gun.

She hopped off onto the counter and heard a tremendous collapse behind her. She couldn't see Yagerbasket anymore; he was buried underneath a textbook igloo. On top of that was the bookshelf she'd just hopped from. Had she done that? Was he even breathing anymore? Was this a trap to guiltify her into checking on her so he had a better aim? On the one hand, she had something to confess at Benedict Hall. On the other hand, there was that first hand clapping on it. Something was applauding.

"My, my, my. Aren't we feisty today?"

Daffy looked around. Nobody seemed to be in the room with her. Where had the voice come from? The cabinets? Under the desk? A loose floor tile?

"Not just feisty. I'd say we're fierce." There was another pair of clapping hands. The person attached to them and the amazed voice wasn't in view. If Daffy'd had sweat glands, they'd be in action right about then.

"We're not fierce, dope. She is." That had come from the the bookshelf, but instead of hands clapping, she saw a book lifting and dropping its front cover. "And even more than fierce. Do we have a... ferocious mama?"

Chills tingled all up and down Daffy's spine as she backed away, only for the clapping behind her to louden. That was coming from an opening and closing cabinet drawer. It wasn't long before applauding desk lids, floor tiles, the vent shaft, and even the bookshelves surrounded her, lifting and dropping, opening and closing, surrounded her.

"And looks like we're about to have another sib." The sink faucets turned. Now the water was running and ceasing in rhythmic ovation. "One of us. One of us. Baptize it, Mama. Baptize it in the name of the Great Cosmic Wonder, the Cosmetic Wonderful Greatness, and the Wonderous Grateful Cosmos, amen."

"Baptize! Baptize! Baptize!"

It was a whole circus mob of chanting voices. "Come on, Ma, don't tell us we exiled that potty-named priest for nothing." The room started to spin. Anything that wasn't nailed down, scissors, the window pane, and a paper weight, was hopping up and down or flapping clapping.

She didn't give in. She held her sanity as tightly as she held her hairball, although by little more than a whisker. So deep in delirium was she that she thought the five-and-a-half-foot stack of shapes saucing in and calling for "Lloyd" might be a hallucination. The ensuing shriek, one that penetrated the window, was most definitely not, and nor was its transformation into an alarm bell. As for her hair popping off and spinning around like a helicopter, well, that was a mystery for someone else. Daffy would just have to pray for the late window on her way through it, not to mention for those two dozen floor tiles she shuffled as she motorcycle dashed, not to not to not mention for the shape woman's teeth that aforementioned dozen tiles smacked into.

She grabbed a lone glass shard and left behind a riot; the clapping classroom might have been the most possessed part of this complete nightmare, but there was insanity yet to unfold. Men armed with nets and wearing hats shaped like bare-hiney humans paraded in. The lady explained the situthrough mouthfuls of floor tiles, and they got to administering alien-distinguishing tests on one another. Could they drive? Could they shop? Could they work a job? Could the shape woman do any of that?

While they tied one another up and forced them into shopping baskets and behind the wheels of moving vehicle, Daffy turned her attention to another window. Intact, ironically the way it should not have been. There was a frown behind it. A frown surrounded by a face, and a face on the hanging head atop a drooping neck above a forsaken body, all adding up to a very disappointed person.

"I can't help you, Samara. You'll have to break out on your own. Your school is a looney bin." There was no confessing now. There never was. All she could do was stop one more insidious entity, one more slumster, from entering the world.

* * *

Once again, Daffy sat among the deceased. Goon Lagoon, that bone dry basin dividing Skinflint from the rest of Damselwood, used to have water. Otherwise, she wouldn't go near it. After a snorkler discovered frogs and marine life hanging out, the district decreed that it be syphoned. They had plenty of water coming out of the ugwan, what would they need the swamp for? No one even knew if those animals turned out to be aliens. I guess that's the way the fanny yodels out in Skinflint.

About that hairball, and how to make it fry: Daffy aimed with grit of teeth and glare of trusty tapetum lucidum, but no matter how hard she wished, the evening Arizona sun just wouldn't point adequate blazerbeams through that window shard and onto the seed. She'd seen it done before; attaboys using glass to exterminate the least breedable creatures possible.

"I'm telling you, you'll end up just like this window if you live in the world. Go on to the afterlife. They'll take much better care of you there."

Telling it to hurry up and fry didn't make things any faster, hotter, or even unfraidier.

"It's the flatness of the glass," said a very disappointed person. "Only the lumped ones gather the drops of golden sun and meld them into one mighty... stick of might."

So she did make it out. The question now was who would point the first finger: The girl who promised to solve that big celestial problem and failed to deliver on it, or the girl who left her defenseless friend stranded at the hands of her bigoted enemies?

But no fingers unfurled after Samara saw the dewey, greasy, and what-kinda-looked-like-pee-ey state of Daffy's fur. "What happened? Why are you cuccooned beneath clumped layers of food and food's aftermath?"

"It's a long story. Something that looks like tears and blood gets in the way when I try to remember." Daffy hid her hairball. She didn't want to explain that either. "How'd you get out of school? There were looneys all over the place."

"To be sure, there were." Samara went back to being somewhat disappointed. She wasn't used to answers so out-of-reach, even with all that obnoxious sin weather. "

"Principal Saturn - oh do try not to upchuck, we're far from the proper place for it- she summoned them. Duncan is under quarantine until every priest, teacher, and impressionable young dumpling has been verified all natural homegrown organic Earthan. I'm let free because I passed the test."

All of the sudden, she gasped. She covered her mouth as though to stop herself from inhaling too much. She looked ashamed now. She expressed the shame by sitting on the sand and holding her knees close.

Meanwhile, Daffy dropped her own secrets behind her so she could puzzle. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't pass the test. They let me go, but only for mortal reasons. Flesh reasons. Faltering, Earthly reasons." She closed her eyes and sighed. "There was an earlier test, one I failed to recognize. I should have known those weren't priests. Real men of the clergy don't do things like..." she opened her eyes. No verbs would show up and rescue her sentence. She was stuck there in grammatical dark. "I don't know what they did, but you had to pay for my failings. I must be losing my touch." She closed her eyes again, hiding her face behind her knees.

"If you really feel that way, maybe you could use some of mine."

While returning the clear blue view, hear, lick, sniff and touch of the afterlife was not in Daffy's skill set, gliding across Samara, bare fur -to-bare knees, might at least bring up a reminder of its softer moments. It at least got Samara to part her knees.

"Why... I can't leave you like that. Just let me..." she licked her hands and reached out. She didn't get to start washing; Daffy flinched and hopped backwards. "You don't want to stay crusted, do you?"

"Um... no, it's just that..." then she remembered she'd left it on the ground. "I can't let that get wet."

"Out here at Goon Lagoon? There's no dryer place in the city." But Daffy was already on her way to pick it up. Just as she reached over to pick it up, a blast of Turbo Teapot™ Turret Torrent beat her to it and soaked the thing. Samara hopped up and told off the boy who'd fired it. "Go on, Alonzo! Spend your freedom elsevenues!" Bigger trouble was abrewing, and no amount of burying it under mere lukewarm sand stopped it from germinating.

Alonzo only left when Samara threw bones at him. Even then, she couldn't be sure he wasn't peeping from a distance. She joined up with Daffy. She'd set herself to help bury the thing, but she was so enamored with its glowing, unfolding nature that she had to wait and marvel.

"What is it?"

"It's... dog padugu," Daffy invented. "The Big German Shepherd made it, and if we don't burn it up soon, we'll never escape from the-"

Sand and sesame shells flecked both girls in the face. They stumbled backwards, overcome with an otherworldly exposure to heat. Daffy, trying to rub the stupid seasoning out of her face, wondered where all that heat had been when she actually needed it. She backed far enough away so it wouldn't stink up the juices already pasted to her fur, and then she saw the final form. Samara saw it, too. Daffy examined Samara's face for any sign of fear. She couldn't concentrate after hearing the question,

"What the pee pipe are you looking at, gagmuffin?"