

Time is the Finest Healer

By Carolina Cautillo

Margaret glanced around the paper-strewn room, trying to find a reflective surface in which to check her hair. In a way, she was grateful that Dave, the big ox, wasn't in his little cubby-hole of an office. Having to climb five flights of stairs to get here left her red-faced, out of breath, and sweaty. Dave expected certain things of a girl he was dating, after all, and right now, Margaret did not meet her boyfriend's exacting standards, thanks to the stairs. Whoever thought to put theoretical physics on the top floor of the oldest building on campus was an idiot, Margaret decided. And whoever heard of an 'Institute for Temporal Studies,' anyhow? Dave's descriptions of his work were confusing and therefore immensely boring. So far as Margaret could tell, everything moved through time at a steady, predictable rate of one second per second, and she liked it that way.

Margaret sighed, smoothing her bangs. It had been Dave's idea that Margaret cut her black hair pixie-short. Margaret hated the hair cut, though Dave kept telling her how sexy she looked. She wondered, sometimes, if he was just trying to manipulate her, but that was hard to believe when she looked into his deep, blue eyes. He was tall, and he was pretty good-looking. Okay, he was gorgeous. More importantly, he needed her – he was busy, and there were all sorts of little things she could help him with, little things he didn't have time to do himself. Plus, he always wanted her on his arm at parties, or to accompany him when he went to meet with friends, so Margaret figured he had to love her.

Margaret brushed at her dress where the old building's soft, fluffy dust had marred the perfect white surface of her skirt. It was just like Dave to make a date, and pick the place to meet, and then be late. Dave always claimed that his graduate supervisor, Dr

Henderson, thought Dave was the best student he'd ever taught, but that was another thing Margaret was starting to doubt. Sure, Dave knew his physics, but sometimes, knowledge wasn't everything. Punctuality, for instance, that should count for something.

Bored, Margaret glanced around the room. Her eyes fell upon a strange device on the table under the window. It resembled a small Van de Graaff generator – a perfect silver sphere, no more than 15 centimetres across, atop a wooden cylinder. It sat on a wooden base with a prominently placed switch with a note taped to it. The note read, “Try it out, Dave. I think this is the breakthrough we've been looking for! - Dr. H.”

Margaret smiled looking at the little machine. She hadn't seen a Van de Graaff generator for years, since her high school physics teacher had used one to prove some point about electrical charge while making all the girls' hair stand on end. Margaret supposed her hair was too short to stand on end, now. Thoughtfully, she placed her hand on the silver ball. Funny, she mused, the ball was warm - almost hot - under her hand. Curious, she flicked the switch. The room instantly filled with a roar, a sound like standing directly beneath a waterfall, and there was a sudden flicker of blinding light.

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The cold wind cut right through James' greatcoat as he stood high above the quadrangle at the heart of the growing building. He didn't want to be here. He wanted to be home, feeding wood into the stove in his quiet, warm kitchen, with his little boy beside him and the memory of Meggie in the very air. It was hard to believe that she had been dead six weeks now, long enough that Davie had stopped asking for his mother. It had been hard when the little boy had asked for her on almost an hourly basis, but James thought

that it was even harder now. It seemed wrong that Meggie, who would have died for her child, had already passed out of their son's life.

“Mr. Prendergast? Sir?” called a voice, drawing James back to the real world.

“What is it, Robin?” He barked at the stonemason's apprentice.

Robin was fifteen, enthusiastic, and, to James' eyes, very young. “Mr. Turner wants to speak to you. Wants to know if that big carved dragon eavestrough is for the North facade or the South. He also says it's silly for the architect to be wandering the building instead of staying on the ground looking at plans like he ought to do.”

James sighed. “It's my building, I have to see how it's going. Especially when I've been away for so long. And tell him the South.”

He expected Robin to disappear back down to the ground floor, but instead the boy conversationally said, “Do you think this place is really haunted, Mr. Prendergast?”

James was surprised. “Haunted? Who told you such a thing, Robin?”

Robin smiled sheepishly, and explained, “My sister 'Tilda, she has a beau, and he said that all this land was all stolen from the – I think he said Sioux. And that this hill was where they were all buried, when they died. So it's haunted. This hill, I mean.”

“There isn't any such thing as ghosts, Robin,” James said wearily, “No matter what your sister's beau says. And there have never been any Sioux around here, he got that

name out of the newspapers. Next you know he'll be claiming it was the Prussians. Now run along and tell Mr. Turner about the dragon, if you please.”

“Yes, Mr. Prendergast. Oh, and Mr. Prendergast? We were all sorry to hear about your wife, but we're all glad you're back at last. Even Mr. Turner.”

Then the boy turned and scampered back down the half-finished stairs. James looked out over the quadrangle again, trying to forget that the boy had mentioned Meggie. Instead, he tried to focus his thoughts on the idea that the hill that was to form the centre of the new university was haunted. The idea was risible. Who, in this modern, enlightened era, when man had conquered distance and even time itself with steam locomotives and great ironclad ships, could possibly believe in ghosts? Children were practically medieval, James decided, and Robin was, after all, little more than a child still.

The wind picked up, with a sound like a rushing waterfall. James turned to go back towards the staircase, but a sudden flash of something – lightening, perhaps – stopped him. He blinked as what seemed like an orb of light formed right there in front of him, almost at the point where there would be a window someday. For a terrible moment, he thought that Robin was right, and the ghosts of the people who called this land home years ago had come to exact some sort of bloody revenge.

Instead, James watched as the orb grew to form a sort of window, painfully bright, but a window nonetheless. A human figure seemed to stand inside the window, the figure of a young woman whose face James couldn't quite make out. Still, the way she held herself, the dark hair . . .

“Meggie?” James gasped, in shock.

The woman threw her shoulders back, as if in surprise, then seemed to relax slightly. In a soft voice, she asked, “Dave?”

James struggled to answer, “Davie? Davie's fine. I'll watch over him Meggie, I promise! Oh, Meggie, I've so missed -”

But it was too late; the bright light was gone, and Meggie with it. For what seemed a long while James stood staring at the place where she had been, oblivious even to the playful wind that tossed his hair about. Then he hurried down the stairs almost as quickly as young Robin had.

It was obvious to the entire construction crew that something odd had happened to their architect. His face had been pale as milk, and he had downed two mugs of hot tea before he would say a word. Robin had capered about, insisting that Mr. Prendergast had seen the ghost of a 'fierce, dead Sioux warrior! Or a Prussian!', but James shook his head.

“I saw – I saw Meggie,” he finally admitted, quietly.

Robin's eyes grew wide, but Mr. Turner said, “You've come back too soon, I think, Mr. Prendergast.”

James shook his head, “No, no. It's alright. I'm fine.”

“Fine? You're seeing things,” Turner pointed out.

“Not *things*, Turner. Meggie. My wife. It was her. She came – she came to tell me to watch over Davie. And, I think, to say goodbye.”

Robin, curious as ever, asked, “What was it like, seeing a real ghost?”

Turner tried to hush the boy, but James shrugged and said, “There was a great noise, and light. And Meggie was in the light. I couldn't see her face clearly, but it was her. She was just as I had seen her last. Even her hair was cut short, as the doctor had ordered in her final illness. And -” James blushed, but went on, looking at Turner, not Robin, “She was dressed in only her shift. What woman, ghost or evil spirit or angel alike, would appear to me almost undressed, except Meggie?”

Turner and Robin did not reply. James looked down at his hands, and added, “I have been given a gift. I was able to see her one more time. That is all I ever wanted.”

Turner let out a long breath and said, “So, the dragon eavestrough is for the South entrance, Robin tells me?”

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Well, that was odd, Margaret thought. That was the most vivid daydream she had ever had. And unlike most daydreams, the images had been out of her control, like a dream you'd have when you were sleeping. Not that she minded. The surprised looking man she'd imagined in the centre of the orb of light seemed nice enough. Margaret flipped the switch again, turning the little machine off. Her palm was warm as she lifted it from the

silver orb. She wondered if she needed to get more rest. After all, what else could explain that weird little daydream about a guy who not only wasn't her boyfriend, but was a figment of her imagination altogether? She heard the door open behind her and turned away from the little table with the machine on it. It was best not to let Dave know she'd touched it.

“Hey, babe, what took you? Everyone at the party will be waiting for us,” he announced, hardly looking at her. The guy in the weird daydream had looked at her. He had looked at her intently, almost devotedly. Funny, how the imagination worked. Dave never looked at her like that. In fact, he hardly seemed to notice she existed, except when he needed her to appear on his arm or run an errand for him.

“I've been right here for a long while waiting for you, Dave,” Margaret frowned, “If we're late it's your fault”

Dave grinned, and said, “I'll just tell them it was you. You know they'll believe me.”

Margaret sighed. She followed Dave mutely out the office door and down the hall to the wide wooden staircase. She was surprised to find that the handrail was shockingly cold, but realized her hand was still warm from resting on the little silver globe.

“Dave?” she asked curiously, “What was that little machine in your office? The one near the window, that looks like a Van de Graaf generator?”

Dave shrugged, “It's just a toy. It doesn't work anyhow. Dr. Henderson's an idiot if he thinks that little thing is of any use to anybody. His ideas are half-baked anyhow. He needs to go back to his chalkboard and work it all out again.”

“And if it *did* work?”

“It can't, stupid girl. It's not possible. Besides, I had it on all afternoon, and nothing happened.”

Margaret frowned, stopping on the stairs where she stood. She had a feeling her imaginary guy wouldn't talk to her the way Dave did. In fact, now that she thought of it, most guys probably wouldn't talk to her the way Dave did. Not if those guys liked her. Not if they wanted her around.

“Come on, let's go,” Dave said, pulling on her arm.

Margaret shook free, and Dave grabbed her arm again.

“I said,” he repeated emphatically, “Let's go.”

“No thanks, Dave. Go without me,” Margaret said.

Dave looked at her like she was crazy.

“I think I'm done with you,” She said decisively, “You boss me around and insult me and I don't think you even like me very much.”

“But, Margaret -”

“But nothing, Dave. It's through,” And with that she pushed her way past him, out of the room and out of his life forever.