

FIRST PLACE WINNER

GONE

by Kris Thompson

I opened my eyes and had no idea where I was. Darkness surrounded me and I took a moment to try and get my bearings.

Surely I'm in my bed, but nothing feels familiar. I can't identify that 1800 thread count Egyptian cotton. Maybe that's the point of stupid-expensive sheets. To feel nothing at all. If that's the case, they're working. Bravo. I can't feel anything. But I'm also unable to move. Can't credit the high-quality sheets for my lack of mobility. Maybe I'm in that in-between state. Half asleep. Half awake. I try to wake myself all the way up. Speak? Nope. Toe wiggle? Nothing.

Perhaps this is the onset of dementia. I'm the right age for it. Was this what it was like for Mother at the beginning? The beginning of the end. Early onset. Or it could be the beginning of a dream about Mother? This prospect is nearly as daunting. Thankfully, it has been years since she's come to me in my dreams. I look around, uneasy, searching for her face or an outline of her unmistakable intimidating figure.

A light. Unexpected. There. Far away. I move toward it, drawn more than intentionally moving. One smooth movement. Like sliding rather than stepping. What a strange sensation. I do

not feel my legs moving but, no doubt, I'm along for the ride. Close now, I see a figure below, sitting in a chair, and another lying in a bed. In my bed. Wait, what? Yes, that's definitely my bed. White chenille with pale pink and brown peacocks on each corner. Mother's favorite. I remember early Sunday mornings tracing the peacock pattern with impatient childhood fingers, willing her to wake and make the biscuits. It's the one thing I really wanted after Mother was gone. Not the biscuits. The chenille. But I do miss her biscuits as well. I've got her recipe. I just can't make them nearly as well as she did. I'm fairly certain she left something out of the recipe when she gave it to me. Probably intentionally. She always liked being the best at everything, regardless the cost to anyone.

"Oh Mother. Why?" My sentiments echoed. In fact, it could be my life mantra if I believed in mantras. Alas, this utterance came not from me, but from the figure in the chair below.

I can only see the top of her head, but I don't need her face to know my daughter. The voice, so much like my own. Musical when happy. Icy sharp when angry. Heartbreaking when sorrowful. Today I can hear the pain in Austen's voice. She is Austen as in Jane. I'm Brontë as in Emily. The women in my family are all named after famous female writers. In the 1800s, Great-Great, I actually don't remember how many Greats to contribute, Grandmama Shelley, as in Mary, was the first of this delightful yet tedious trend. Some of us have been writers but, as of yet, not one has lived up to our namesakes. Of course, those are quite large shoes to fill. Mother, she is Eliot, after George who was technically a woman but went by a male pen name to conceal that fact, was the first of our matriarchal line to enjoy publication. Before she married, her book *The Woman I am Not*, struck an early chord with the feminist movement. I also enjoyed some early writing success, but eventually turned to teaching. I can still hear Mother's voice scoffing,

“You’re giving up then? And worse, you’re going to...teach?” She spat the word out like she’d discovered something spoiled in her mouth.

“Perhaps you’ve not heard, Mother. Teaching is considered a most noble pursuit.”

“Those who can’t do, teach. Good Lord, Brontë,” she spat my name similarly.

“Molding the minds of our future leaders,” I replied.

“You must be joking. You can’t even mold the mind of your own child.”

Oh, the happy memories of Mother. Why I’ve chosen this precise moment to dredge up that little ditty I do not know. I do, however, notice that in my distraction I’ve drifted, for lack of a better descriptor, a good distance away from the light. I move in closer. That sliding sensation again, but more purposeful than before. Like my thoughts are orchestrating movement, even if my legs and other body parts usually necessary for mobility are not involved. Coming close, I ungraciously notice Austen has let her roots go. Way past time for a touchup. It seems very un-Austen-like to let them go so long and very much like me to point out this and any other deficiency I can identify. I’m not sure why this sick need for superiority dwells within, but I am keenly aware that I’m not so different from my own mother in this specific respect. Perhaps other respects? And maybe that’s part of why I haven’t enjoyed a visit from my daughter in years. Hmm...something to contemplate. Later, but not now. I chastise myself for once again becoming distracted.

“Focus, Brontë.”

To my surprise I feel my lips move when I speak and can hear my voice aloud and not just in my head. Austen quickly raises her head as though she’s heard as well.

“Austen. I’m here.” I can’t help myself and add, “Trying out something new with your hair, darling?”

No reaction. I'm only half relieved she can't hear me.

By slower than expected deduction, I conclude the figure in the bed below is me. Myself. I. Well, maybe not all three of those seeing as I'm apparently hovering above and therefore exist in an additional capacity and subsequently deserve a pronoun of my own. Subject, object, intensive, reflexive? Oh, who cares. It's obvious something has happened. I will myself to move in even closer.

I am now nearly parallel over my other-me. I can see my own face. No makeup hiding my many flaws which, at first, I find alarming. But I soon admit to myself that I look more peaceful than I would have expected. Pleasant but not pretty and miles from beautiful. This is not news. It's a fact which was repeatedly pointed out by Mother starting from my earliest memory.

I'm five, maybe six. Mother is in blue chiffon, hair swept up in a beautiful shimmering clip, sitting at her dressing table getting ready to go to the theatre with one man or another. Father died shortly after I was born. We never spoke of him. Ever. I'm watching her put on lipstick.

"Pretty. Can I try, Mama?"

She froze, mid-lip. She appeared to be in in deep thought. Suddenly, she put her lipstick down and turned toward me. At first, I thought she was angry, that my request had crossed some invisible line my young mind could not yet conceive.

Mother gently took my scrawny face in her expertly manicured hands.

"Brontë, listen to me closely."

As a child it was extremely unusual to have her attention and even less common for her to touch me with any amount of tenderness. Even at my young age, I knew what she had to say must be important.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it’s past time you knew. Darling, no amount of lipstick is going to make you pretty. No makeup. No clothing. No hairdos. You are not pretty. Anyone who tells you different is lying.”

I must have whimpered or shed a tear. I don’t remember.

“I’m sorry, but it’s true. For some girls all that works. God knows it’s always worked for me. But sweetie, you are plain.”

She pickup her lipstick and skillfully applied it to my little lips. Then she sat me on her lap, a very rare occurrence. With matching lipstick, we looked into the mirror together.

“You see, darling. Not ugly. Just plain. Now don’t you be sad. It only means you’ll have to use your smarts to get what you want rather than relying on good looks.”

And she’d been right. Not kind, but accurate.

Suddenly, the thought occurs to me that I might actually be dead. Perhaps this is my version of my life flashing before my eyes. A sad statement on my life, but it makes sense. Maybe I’m a spirit floating above my corpse. Who would have thought those supernatural fiction novelists, songwriters, and scriptwriters had it right? I quickly focus on my other-body’s chest hopeful for rising and falling. Relief. Breathing, so not dead. Yet... I think morosely. Not dead yet.

I notice that I, me, she? My other-me doesn’t appear to have aged much past my (our?) 56 years. So, apparently, I’m almost current on events, just not the one that landed me here, or actually, her there...below, in the bed, sleeping. No, not sleeping. With my estranged daughter crying at my bedside, comatose is the more plausible explanation. Regardless of the reason, of which I am now determined to discover, it’s apparent that the Department of English at Pitt

would have to do without me come Monday morning. Of course, God knows what day it is. Or what year it is for that matter. Getting ahead of myself, as usual.

This might still be a dream...but I don't think so.

TO BE CONTINUED