

## THE WIDOW MAKER

Every day for a week now, after A left for her job, the man would go into the bedroom and look out the back window directly into the neighbor's yard, to a large tree limb that had cracked from the main trunk and despite all expectation still hung high in the air, poised over the garden. The split was located on the tree at the same height as their second floor apartment, so the bedroom window gave him a good view, a ringside seat one might have called it, to the coming calamity the widow maker portended.

That day a week ago hadn't started any differently than any other day. That day, the man had been pulling weeds in his backyard garden. He was maintaining it in the meticulous way for which he suddenly had become known, for which he suddenly was able owing to the extra time the quarantine gave almost everyone. But then, as if a very large, ill-mannered person had leaned back in their chair at the dinner table and began belching and cracking their knuckles, a rapid series of snaps and breaks caused the man to pause from pulling a small, pale, anonymous weed that was only a few inches high. What the man knew about the weed though, what others probably did not know, was that the inoffensive-looking little blade had colorless runners that tunneled as much as two feet from the main shoot, surreptitiously siphoning off nutrients, sapping the healthy soil all along the way. It was the kind of weed that taunted gardeners with its boldness, daring, double-daring to be pulled. He had been just about to remove the root by zippering open the dirt, making a ragged gash in the earth; afterwards he would have gently soothed the earth with the back of a rake. Just as the man had the

little vine twined around his finger and was digging in his heels, about to give it the kind of tug he might have given a stubborn mower after the fifth or sixth attempt, he heard the cracking. The man sat on his heels and listened.

What he had heard was not anything familiar to him. It wasn't made by anything easily identifiable or familiar: the common jays, robins, cardinals, or the astonishingly melodious dusty sparrows; a muted two-stroke engine from somewhere over there: a lawn mower? One of those deplorable leaf blowers? This sound had come from high up in the trees in his neighbor's yard, which, frankly, the man felt his neighbor did not keep very well tended. This was the sound of something coming seriously undone.

He let go of the weed. The weed collapsed, relieved, and the man stood up.

Just then, an enormous tree limb spanning more than forty feet overall and easily weighing a half-ton or more became unmoored, slid down the main trunk and jerked to a stop about thirty feet over the man's head. The man didn't have time to run or cower or cover his head. He did that belatedly, seconds afterwards, in pointless effort to protect himself. All he could do during the moment of unmooring was stand in his helplessness with his arms at his side, slack-jawed, and quiver, in the same pose as the little weed had done just moments ago. Leaves and twigs and pieces of bark drizzled down through a shaft of sunlight onto the man's head and into his open mouth and eyes. The limb was as wide as it was long, a massive fan now unhinged, perhaps due to rot, decay, or simply because of its own undoing: the arrogance of its size perhaps, the belligerence of its colossal weight, or the stubbornness of its existence. It appeared with the same clarity that comes when one sees a thing that had not been there and now suddenly is there, and either luckily or not, the man was the first to see it, consuming his attention entirely. He felt as the discoverer of, say, a comet must feel: set apart. That is how the man felt about the enormous tree limb that was now dangling perilously over his head. With as much self-possession as he could muster, he collected himself and fled upstairs to their apartment, frantically slapping leaves and pieces of bark from his hair, from his shoulders, from his self, spitting them from his mouth as if they were bees, and he lay down on the couch for the rest of the day.

So there he is standing in the morning while A gets ready for work, with his second cup of coffee growing cold in his hand, having been drawn to the window by this new disaster frozen before him.

"A watched pot never boils, and a watched tree limb never falls," she said.

Since the financial crash in 2008, the man has held down a series of insignificant, inconsequential, and utterly unfulfilling jobs. With nothing left to do, and having made A's lunch and hung it on the doorknob (and a quick breakfast made of two buttered pieces of toast cut on the diagonal and folded over the way she liked it placed on a plate at her chair at the table next to a small glass of orange juice), he stood at the window trying to keep out of her way, trying to become invisible. He sipped his coffee, not caring that it was getting cold.

"Do you have your phone," he asked. "Your schedule book? Sunglasses? Mask?"

"It's in the car, with my gloves. Stay off the computer," she said. "Try to get out, it's going to be a lovely day, don't stay cooped up in this apartment."

"Out? Out where? Where am I supposed to go out to? The one place I could go I'm now in danger of being crushed."

Sigh. "Just wear a mask. You'll be fine."

"Love you."

"Love you, too," she said.

"Be safe," he said.

The apartment was now quiet. The man was alone.

Each time A left the apartment for work the man was left with the irrefutable impression that he would never see her again. Ill-founded melancholia always had been the man's overarching response to life. A headache convinced him he had a tumor, and not just any tumor but a rare, inoperable one located deep inside his hypothalamus. An unanswered text or email certainly meant he had slighted the other person in the most unforgiving way. Now a clearing of the throat or a sniffle bode a suffocating end, death by drowning in his own phlegm, alone in an overcrowded ward with a ventilator hose rammed down his throat, or worse, cocooned in a sheet on a gurney parked in a hallway, there being no more room at the inn. So now, even more so, the man was convinced something terrible would befall A—a car wreck caused by some stupid, self-absorbed, entitled young woman behind the wheel, texting, even though texting while driving has been illegal for years, but she's texting to a friend about last night's episode of *Dancing with the Stars* and, in one of those inexplicable and unfair circumstances, she walks away from the accident without a scratch (and probably later in life she would procreate, perpetuating her stupid self) while A hadn't stood a chance. Or by the hand of a disgruntled client who shows up at A's office with a gun, blind with rage at another social worker for a perceived or even a real injustice imparted on him by the judicial system. And it's just a fluke, but A strays around a corner of a green, antiseptic hallway hurrying to her desk, lining up in the sight of his Glock, her eyes widen above her surgical mask, a split second of panic, her last moment of awareness before he squeezes off a round and she crumbles to the floor, her eyes immense with not understanding what had just happened. The man would spend his day with those particular heavy loads of anxiety weighing over him, waiting for A's return, like Hachiko, the dog of Japanese legend waiting nine years for his dead master to return, but who never did. When A reentered the apartment in the evening, he'd greet her at the door, double-locking it behind her.

"Essential for whom?" the man wanted to demand. "What about me?" he wondered. "Isn't she essential to me?"

Once, the man and A on a trip to Costa Rica stayed in a house that stood on stilts high in the air in a grove of mango trees with a view not unlike the one right out his bedroom window, not above or below the canopy but directly into it. The house also was situated on a sort of arboreal thoroughway used daily by

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bands of monkeys, and twice a day, every morning and evening at approximately the same hour, just like the morning and evening commutes in any city around the world, monkeys would race pell-mell through the trees like office workers scurrying to and from their jobs, gorging themselves on mangoes, taking one wasteful bite of the fruit's fleshy pale-green meat with their ghoulish teeth before flinging it down into the litter, adding to the collection of rotted, fly-covered husks below. They would defecate and urinate as they ate, swinging, jumping, and crawling from tree limb to tree limb. The man and A would stand at the window in their rented house on stilts, sipping cocktails, observing the madness like it was a new nature show on HBO.

"Life is wasteful and it doesn't stop to shit while it eats," the man said to his wife.

After she went to work, despite what A had said, the man still would go into the garden. There, he'd stand, hands on hips, his head and body thrown way back, off balance. As best he could ascertain, the widow maker would hang in the air for however long would be its lifetime, then in its death throes it would plunge toward the center of the earth as surely and adamantly as Newton predicted it would, pushing a shear of wind out of its way like a giant fan made of ostrich feathers. He contemplated a snap and a growing crackling of falling leaves, twigs, and splinters, his skull crushed from the weight and force and roar of the deadfall, and instant nothingness. He retreated two steps, then, inexplicably, the man took three steps forward.

Just as the man had discerned there was a truth to those monkeys in the jungle, the man felt this widow maker held the same kind of truth. And so the man took yet another step forward.

A week more passed and the tree limb still hadn't fallen. Its leaves were still green—greenish—but noticeably wilted and beginning to take on a grey, dusty complexion, though the gash of white where the wood tore itself from the trunk retained its luminance.

With his coffee in hand getting cold, the man said to A, "Why doesn't Tom do something?"

"What would you like Tom to do?"

"Cut the damn thing down. It's his tree."

"Oh."

"He's cheap. He doesn't want to spend the money."

"Maybe he doesn't have the money," A offered.

"I bet he thinks if he waits long enough I'll take care of it. I think I'm going to talk to him."

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Tom and his wife lived alone, like the man and A, now that their daughter had moved away. The man and Tom weren't exactly friendly. They would talk over the old rusty fence that marked the boundaries of their yards, exchanging pleasantries and small talk. If the widow maker ever fell, the fence would be gone.

"Tom, that's going to come down someday," the man said, pointing at the limb.

"Yah, maybe so," Tom answered.

"Maybe you should take it down. Before it falls and hurts someone."

"Yah, maybe so," answered Tom.

From then on the man resigned himself to working in his garden underneath the widow maker. If the wind blew, the man might look up to watch it ruffle its leaves, but the branch seemed held fast, which is how the man began to live with the permanent threat of the widow maker hanging over his head.

The man began spending more time in his garden than was necessary, making work, picking the ground clean of every weed, every intruder, patting and calming the earth, exchanging metal tools for his bare hands and working on his hands and knees. He was a potter and the rotating earth his wheel, scooping the damp, crumbled earth, raking it through his spread fingers, shaping hillocks, thrusting his hand deep into the soil like Thomas into the side of Christ.

His hand a cultivator, slicing the soil into furrows, planting the seed, and folding the soil back over itself like water in a boat's wake.

A would return to the apartment from work, exhausted, her face mask dangling from her ears—by now the virus had been declared a virtual pandemic with no end in sight—calling for her husband and when she received no response she went to the bedroom and looked down on him from high up in the window,

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his kneeling form hunched in the widow maker's shadow, a shadow that embraced him as he placated the earth.

The only thing she'd say to him when he came back up to the apartment was, "The garden's looking nice."

Days and weeks passed. Months. Seasons. Violent summer storms with thunder and lightning that seemed to stop time, swooped down with pelting pounding rain, ambushing the limb with bursts of wind, but the limb remained stubbornly lodged overhead. Come cooler temperatures, a wind out of the north caused the withered leaves to shimmy and twitter in unison in the chilled waning light, making the widow maker look like the defiant cheering section for the visiting side at a college football game. The man would lie awake in the night's deepest darkness, tense and listening to rain thrown against window panes like fistful after fistful of pebbles, the trees cleaving the air, shredding the wind, and still the widow maker remained hung up, the next morning ushered in as the start of a benevolent, cool, blue-sky day while the widow maker greeted the man as malignant as ever. "Fall, damn you, fall," the man cursed. "Why won't you fall? Surely you should have fallen this time."

Once, when he returned from working in the garden, the man saw A looking at him. "I'm not one of your patients," he murmured with his back to her.

"I know. You're not."

"Do I alarm you?" He turned and looked back at her. "Should I be sent in for observation?"

"No," she said as a way of assurance. "It's something I've seen people do time and time again."

"Yes. In your patients."

"I don't understand what you're doing, but I think I understand why. Some people are better at it than others. Maybe I'm prejudiced, but I think you have a better than average chance of discovering whatever it is you're hoping to find," was her answer.

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It never stops: the thinning of the herd, the culling of the weak, the survival of the fittest, but the man seemed to recall it was adaptability, not brute strength, that defined the fittest. Viruses, we are led to believe, target the elderly, the infirm, and the compromised, but it was the young that the man thinned unmercifully in his garden as he crept prayerfully along on his knees in the dirt. Life is wasteful, not stopping even to shit while it eats. Millions of fish and frog and turtle eggs hatch for the luck of the draw that a few hundred might survive schools and flocks of apex predators. At the ringing of the midnight bell baby sea turtles break for the shimmering moonlit surf, their swimming flippers all but useless in the sand, ducking under aerial assaults from gulls shrieking their war cries, while scarred old-timers roll in the swell miles offshore, waiting. It is potential, not age, which should define criteria.

"How's that cure for cancer coming along?" he wanted to ask the doughy-faced young man wearing his base-

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ball cap backwards staring into his phone as he sauntered down the street, sans mask, scrolling through conspiracy theories. The man seriously wished a tree would fall on the young man, reducing him to a discarded husk, like a mango. What stopped the widow maker's free-fall that day, saving the man's life, he will never know, but any sense of purpose the man ever possessed in his lifetime was brokered during those months of stare down with the widow maker.

Each year, each season, the widow maker hung imperceptibly lower.

The first season, mildew laid low the zucchini early on. The fungus started in unspecified patches, but quickly grew, connecting and overlapping one another until the leaves were powdered, looking like the lungs of patients with the virus. The next year, brown leaf spot invaded the tomato patch, killing the leaves but not affecting the fruit directly. It was the poor health of the plant overall that caused the fruit to shrivel.

The next year, an infestation of rabbits decimated all the young seedlings. That was the year A died from the virus and the man didn't bother even to try to repel the rabbits. He'd plant seeds and no sooner did they sprout than the rabbits would devour them. Plant and devour, plant and devour. He felt A would have found some humor in that.

There was no funeral; they still were not permitted, and anyway, the graveyards were now all full. Her ashes were delivered by FedEx in a mahogany box with a gold clasp stuffed in a padded envelope. The man would bring her remains into the garden with him while he worked, setting them in the shade of the widow maker, keeping him company while he toiled.

Rats built a nest in the shed. Every morning the man didn't know if, when inspecting his yield, if the brightest, the ripest, the most coveted would have a chewed rip incised into it by the rats. Finally, the outer edges of the widow maker touched the ground, bowing down to the little man.

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Greiner-Ferris holds a BFA in Photography and an MFA in Playwriting. His plays have been produced in multiple cities, and developed at Boston Playwrights Theater, The Inkwell (Washington, D.C.), and Great Plains Theater Conference. They were semi-finalists at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Conference (2012 and 2020). In 2018, his play *Plank* was nominated for Best New Play, Best Set Design, and Best Lighting Design by the *Independent Reviewers of New England*. His work has been supported by a Live Arts Boston Grant for daring, new theater; Eastern Bank Trust grants; The Bob Jolley Charitable Trust; Vermont Studio Center Artist Merit Grants; and the Massachusetts Cultural Council/Quincy Arts Council.



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