

Memo to Carolyn

Flash Fiction for Guests of the WordFeeder

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Metamorphosis. In Biology, a profound change in form from one stage to the next in the life history of an organism.

Except for a few details, this is a true story.

The doorbell rang unexpectedly that unseasonably cool, gray Sunday morning. "I'll get it," she said to Jack who was busy looking through the Best Buy flier in the morning paper he'd brought back from the store down at the corner. Walking from the kitchen to answer it, past the boxes she and her husband had yet to unpack, Carolyn looked through their bay window, wishing it would start raining already and get it over with. She was numb, having been unable to sleep the night before.

"Yes," was all she could manage to say as she opened their front door to see a woman in her thirties and a curly haired boy, maybe seven or eight, whose hand she was holding. In the boy's other hand were one or two sheets of paper, neatly folded in half with something printed in pencil Carolyn couldn't make out. He lifted them up, extending his arm, his eyes asking Carolyn to take them as his mother began to speak.

"Are you 'Carolyn'? the mother asked nervously.

"Yes," Carolyn responded tentatively, turning her eyes downward to the boy smiling up at her. "What can I do..."

"I... You don't know us. I live in Collier, about half an hour from here. My son, Jeff," the mother started to explain, squeezing her son's hand as she did, "is very bright. Good computer skills. This morning he was up early on his computer, typing. His hands are a little small, but he types real well anyway. Doesn't have to look at the keys." A sense of pride came through her anxiousness as she continued. "This here is what he gave my husband and me when he came in for breakfast. It's typed, as you'll see. That's Jeff's printing with your name and address there on the outside."

Kneeling down in the open doorway, Carolyn extended her hand to take the pages from the little boy, his big brown eyes giving momentary relief from the sadness she had been fighting. "Hi, Jeff. Is that for me?"

"Yep," he said, handing it over.

Unfolding it, she saw a page and a half of very neatly typed paragraphs. "Did you type this for me?"

"Yep," he said again, nodding his head up and down this time. "I'm in the third grade."

“How did you know my name and address? My husband and I,” Carolyn looked up at the mother to make this point, “haven’t even finished moving in yet.”

“Don’t know,” he smiled back at her, and her back at him. “It was just there.”

“Where’s that?”

“In my head, with the words I typed.”

“How ‘bout that.” Carolyn didn’t know whether or not to believe him, but, “What the heck,” she thought to herself, standing back up. “Well, thank you. Thank you both. I’ll read it while I’m finishing my bagel.” She didn’t know what else to say, forgetting even to ask how to contact them if she had any questions.

And the mother turned, walked down the stoop, her son in tow, when Jeff stopped, turned and said, “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about what?” Carolyn asked him, still standing in the doorway.

“About your dad,” and then he turned and the two of them walked back to their car.

She was stunned. The almost surreal experience of these two strangers coming to the door, now replaced in her heart with the memory of being at the hospital the night before, realizing that her father had passed away just before she could get there.

Sitting down again, she read the note out loud to herself and Jack, who looked up at the expression on his wife’s face and listened quietly to the slight trembling in her usually steady voice.

Hi, Honey.

I don’t believe in God. You know that. We’ve talked about it from time to time. Just because there’s something, many things we don’t understand, doesn’t mean a deity had anything to do with them. It just means we haven’t figured them out yet. I believe in science. Still do, even now. And I most certainly don’t believe in ghosts. “Dead is dead,” I used to think to myself. Sad, but true. We are nothing more than complex biological machines, the imperfect product of eons of evolution, born to die.

These last few months, sitting on the deck, watching the birds and squirrels, I’ve been thinking about what makes us different from them. Many things, of course, but the one that struck me as most important is imagination. They know we exist, that we’re some kind of living thing, but they can’t imagine, can’t conceive of what we are.

And so it occurred me, albeit a self-serving realization in light of my current “predicament,” that perhaps we, too, suffer from the same shortcoming, overwhelmed as we are by the conceit and over-confidence that come naturally to any highly intelligent species.

Unlike my birds and furry friends on the deck and in the woods behind our house, we can pretty much imagine anything. It's the stuff of science fiction, proof positive that we can conceive of things well beyond our ability to comprehend how they might be possible. Imagination is the leading edge of discovery. More and more, as our technology and knowledge advances, it becomes clear that imagining something is the precursor to figuring it out, to finding it, to making it happen. It's not something the bird and the squirrel can do – although I wonder about the squirrels sometimes, the way they pause to figure out how to breach the “squirrel-proof” fence around the birdfeeder. They're thinking, and there is great promise in that.

What if our recent success over the past few thousand years had made us arrogant? What if we're not the most sophisticated, most intelligent life form on the planet? In the universe, of course we'll concede that there must be other, superior life, but that's a purely academic observation we lose nothing by making. Here, on earth, it's all about us. We are the superior beings. Even more demeaning, what if we were only a stage in a process so surprising, so different from our experience, that it is, to us, a thousand times more profound than the difference between the bird and squirrel and me?

Is it possible – and the fact that I can imagine it may make it so – that exobiological intelligent life – intelligent life without discernable form, the ultimate wireless entity – exists here, and that all we are, physically, is a cocoon, larva, an interim step in the development of something else, the existence of which is nothing like human, the presence of which we cannot sense? How presumptuous of us to believe that life must have form, or that that form must be something we can see. There was, after all, a time not long ago, before microscopes, when we believed the only life there was was what we could see with the naked eye. Just because you can't see or touch something doesn't mean it doesn't exist, but only that, whatever it is, you can't see or touch it.

*I've always scoffed at stories about ghosts, about communicating with the dead, out of body near death experiences, and reincarnation, about whether or not there's any substance to the notion of a “soul.” No doubt, they're mostly bunk, the product of confused minds and charlatans who would profit from the need many of us feel for something more. On the other hand, maybe, just maybe there's a simpler, explanation. Maybe it's just that there's another life form right here on Planet Earth, the distant relative we never knew we had to whom science will someday introduce us. What I propose, it's just occurred to me, is nothing less than a unified theory, a single explanation for all the spiritual mumbo jumbo. “**Boo!**” ...Sorry, I couldn't help myself. That used to scare you when I would read to you when you were a little kid. Scare you, and then you'd laugh – but don't think from that poor excuse for comic relief that I'm not serious – or that the circumstances of your receiving these notes should be easily dismissed. (Sorry I missed you last night, but don't feel bad. I know you came as soon as you heard.)*

Could it be that death is not the end, period, but only a milestone? That the next stage needs time to develop the intellectual power and experience to be self-sustaining in its final form? Is it possible that we fight so hard to live, not because we believe there's nothing more to it, nothing beyond our current existence, but as an instinctive mechanism to protect the life form we are nurturing? ...a life form our science will one day be able

to confirm and explain? What today is unbelievable, becomes tomorrow's common knowledge in the science textbooks of high school and college.

Honey, I'm not talking God here. Heaven forbid. Nor am I waxing philosophical about souls or spirits. I'm just wondering if there might be a form of life, from us, but not like us, into which we might, each of us individually, be evolving.

Well, it's all so much crap, isn't it? After all, no one ever dies to tell about it. One thing's for sure, if you're reading this, the words, "I will always be here for you," will now mean more than you would have otherwise imagined. As for the voice you'll hear in your head every now and then, the one you think sounds like me, maybe it will be.

I love you.

Daddy

There was a moment of silence around the table, Carolyn staring at the word "Daddy" while Jack's eyes moved around the table, his head fixed and face emotionless, settling on the open and now empty plastic tub from Trader Joe's.

"We're out of cream cheese."

Not bothering to look up at him, she drew a shallow breath and set the neatly typed pages she was holding down to her right, on top of the folded style section she'd been reading before the doorbell rang. Her left elbow on the edge of the table, she massaged her forehead with the thumb and fingers of that hand. And then, pulling her lips apart slowly, closing them, and trying again, "Put it on the list," she said instinctively, "...I'll, uh," forgetting for a moment what she was supposed to say, "I'll be going shopping later today."

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