

Ghost Orchid

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Dedication

To my muse, the love of my life, keeper of my heart, without whom no words would be written, no stories would be told.

One The Curve

The high-pitched, grating sound of twisting metal chased screaming birds into the sky. A sickening rumble erupted as the car dove into the earth, upside down, crushing the roof. The screeching tires etched black marks on the highway for several yards, carving trenches in the shoulder as the vehicles left the road. The bright, red sports car glanced off the white sedan, but slid safely along the edge of the blacktop and stopped just short of the ditch. A plume of smoke and dust almost concealed the careening vehicles.

The shocked dump truck driver, pulling a heavy load of gravel, lost control and the truck slammed into the ditch on the other side of the narrow two-lane highway, the impact jamming the doors shut. For a moment in time, a deafening silence filled the air as though the crash sucked the life out of the universe in exchange for the life of the driver who attempted the left turn from the sanctuary road. Her car was upside down across the ditch, her bleeding torso visible half out the window, suspended by the hanging seat belt and the deflating airbags.

The contents of the car—shoes, a jacket, a briefcase, a computer—flew with abandon across the field as the doors popped open on impact with the red car and the final slam into the earth. A silver disk hung precariously from the player slot, the music from his heart collected just for her now useless, empty. The cell phone that was in her hand at impact flew out the window and found its resting place in a clump of brush, well hidden from the

carnage. In that split second, in a blink of the eye, a snap of the fingers, the time it takes for a sip of coffee, to change a computer disc, or to glance out the window; in that split second, she was gone. All that remained was a broken shell of the person who just moments ago validated life in her beloved sanctuary, the sanctuary where her heart resonated with nature, transforming all the doubts in her life into new hopes and longings just beyond her reach.

The dazed truck driver tumbled out, hitting the ground awkwardly as the door broke loose. Landing hard at first, he seemed unharmed. The driver of the red sports car ran toward the overturned sedan; but the truck driver, reaching for his fire extinguisher, dialing 911 on his cell phone at the same time, stopped him. He pointed to the raw fuel that poured down the side of the overturned car, filling the air with its ominous odor. Traffic stopped. A few people dashed from their vehicles in useless attempts to help, some to gawk. The site was terrifying: the tires still spinning in the air, the blood still oozing from the lifeless body, and the growing pool of potentially explosive fuel spreading ominously.

Everything that mattered before was no longer of any consequence: not the important papers that blew down the highway or the projects on the computer or the lists of things undone or the secrets that would never be revealed. Death was like that; or is it?

Two Suspended in Time

At precisely 12:00 p.m., the middle aged woman in the third office pulled her chair back, logged off the computer, picked up her small purse with the long, thick strap and a bottle of water and left the room. She walked into the sunshine, away from the old and decaying building. The heat was shocking at first, even though she dressed casually in linen slacks and a white, cotton blouse. She hurried to the main office and signed the log, “Twelve fifteen, lunch.”

She smiled at the office manager, “See you after my walk,” she called over her shoulder, anxious to start the best part of her day.

The younger woman grumbled to herself, “She’ll be late again,” and followed with her eyes, thinking how old and tired the woman looked as she walked through the grass and dirt to her ancient automobile, coated in dust.

“I’ll never look like that.” She sighed, glancing at her own youthful vision in the mirror next to her desk.

The automobile engine’s smooth hum was a welcome sound, and the steady flow of cool air chased the heat from the car as the hairline around her face released a few droplets of sweat. Backing out, she drove through the opening in the chain link fence past the tiny migrant housing shacks hidden from the highway by a picket fence, but visible from this access road. A ditch full of filthy water and flotsam followed the narrow road. Apparently, the cranes, ibis and egrets did not notice the filth, but rather

appreciated the bits of food they found during the drought. They had wandered astray from the swamp. The family of alligators left in search of water also. She smiled at the memory of baby alligators riding on their mother's back. The graceful birds looked out of place here, just like her.

She turned right onto the two-lane highway, just like every other day at 12:20 p.m., and set the cruise control for 56 miles per hour, a necessity since the day the Sheriff's Deputy stopped her for driving twenty miles over the speed limit and gave her an official warning instead of a ticket. She always hurried to keep her lunch within one hour; but now she still completed her walks, late returning or not. She had driven much too fast for the dangerous, two-lane highway, but now used caution, since the near ticket. A ticket was such a waste of hard earned money.

Another right turn led her into the swamp, just as it had for several years, where she still looked for the parking spot under the tree at the far end of the lot with a bit of shade, knowing that by the time her walk ended, the sun would be beating on her car, searching for things to melt. She parked in the end spot with sprigs of shade, right next to the staff parking sign. She tucked her long hair, streaked with gray, inside a wide-brimmed cap, catching a glimpse of herself in the rear view mirror as she adjusted her one splurge, the stylish sunglasses. She smiled. They hid the deepening crinkles around her eyes and the furrow between her brows. Otherwise, she was lucky that her complexion remained smooth with a youthful glow.

Whooping crane feet and bear paws were stamped into the cement walk to the main building for the little ones to follow toward their adventure. She followed the bear paws, still smiling at the kid in her that enjoyed the imagined tracking. A blast of cool air greeted her as she entered through the double doors of the main building. To the right was a small café, to the left, a gift shop. She already passed the metal sculpture with wood storks feeding and the giant map of the bird sanctuary trails sanctioned by the Audubon Society.

“Well, hello.” The elderly guard with the very southern accent, standing at the centrally located reception desk, greeted her with a smile. He wore crisp khakis; his white hair was trimmed neatly, and a tidy white mustache finished off the combination that possibly made him appear older than his age. She’d passed through his gate for many years. His wife started a new diet. He recently recovered from surgery. He liked his job. He might take a class at her school sometime. This day, he was engrossed in a book to which he returned before she could respond to his perfunctory greeting. They had a relationship, she and the elderly guard. They said “hello” nearly five days a week. When he was not there, and a stranger occupied his place, the day felt a bit off. She wondered if he noticed when she did not pass by the desk. She had an annual membership. She really did not need to stop.

Her face softened and filled with a glowing smile as she walked through the cool building into the hot day and the beginning of her official walk. Some days she and the guide had long conversations. He read her published stories and had plenty to say about the morals portrayed in some of them. It was a good thing she wrote fiction. He might not let her in the park. Each day when he read a new story, he quizzed her about the decisions made by the heroine, asking, “What’s next?” Of course, she did not tell him. His smile was particularly charming then, attempting to coax an answer from her.

Today was hot. It was so hot it took her breath away. Likely the temperature was ninety-eight degrees or so; but the humidity was equally high, weighing heavily on her chest as she started her brisk walk. She breathed deep and slow, making certain she did not panic. She believed she had beaten the life-threatening asthma that reached into her lungs and robbed her of many enjoyable activities recently, a time when she felt like she was drowning and life might be slipping away. The diagnosis, “occupational asthma,” was caused by the ancient and unkempt building where bats made their home in the roof, asbestos was

a primary building material and mold and mildew lurked beneath new paint. The fate of its occupants was of little concern to their supervision.

The building was “condemned” and received little attention and certainly no expensive repairs or maintenance. After all, she should be able to find a job elsewhere if it was that bad. When she felt the heaviness grow in her chest and the labored breathing began, she started counting, “One, two, three, four,” telling her mind to relax the muscles so the lungs could function more efficiently. It seemed to work. Like the building, she was also condemned.

The bulletin board had only a few cards marked. Earlier visitors posted little cards that displayed the plants and animals they identified on their visit. She scanned the board to see if anyone saw a bear or a deer. The swamp was hot and dry; many of the animals moved elsewhere in search of water. Yet, the miracle of life continued to spring forth with new surprises; some of the smaller animals stayed here like the locals who enjoyed the hot summers, the easy pace and the lack of traffic. Perhaps, like her, they had nowhere else to go.

Ahead, a little squirrel ran along the railing at the edge of the boardwalk, looking back to see if she was chasing along behind. For a few minutes, she felt like she had a companion.

“Don’t run away,” she said to the squirrel. “I am harmless.” She laughed as the animal leaped from the rail to a tree, just barely catching the limb. It looked back at her and chattered as if to tell her that she had interfered with plans. Laughter was the balm of the soul.

“Oh my!” escaped from her lips with an audible sigh. “God must have spilled a bucket of whitewash to cover the entire marsh with white cymbidium, floating on slender stems in the weak breeze.” She stood in wonder, gazing across the marsh, the cypress swamp bidding her to hurry onward. She fantasized leaving the fenced boardwalk to dance through the flowers, but continued toward the cypress instead.

Little red cardinals darted among the newly budding cypress leaves, their feathers even brighter with so few other blooming plants with which to compete. Only the white cymbidium found enough moisture to thrive. The redheaded woodpeckers were having a convention; two and three hammered on the same spreading trees. She heard an alligator with its deep-throated, grumbling sound in the distance, keeping time with the gruff bullfrogs. A little further down the path she slowed her pace, in awe of the barrel owl just overhead.

“If I had been walking a little faster, I would have missed you entirely!”

These were her friends, her companions during her afternoon walks. She spoke with them as though they would respond to her inquiries.

She stopped and the two of them stared at each other. She began her journey again, strolling down the path. Glancing back, she saw the owl following her with its head moving around on its perfectly still body, the eyes glued on her, piercing and watchful.

After she passed, she heard another owl calling “Whoooooo?” from deep in the swamp; and she recognized her owl answering. She smiled and commented to the quiet vastness of the swamp,

“Ah hah, so you have a mate.”

The little anoles were every color on this day, black and brown and green. One day she saw one changing color, mesmerized by the miracle. Another squirrel decided to join her. They were the least timid, apparently enjoying the company of those who walked along the boardwalk. A solitary, bright red swamp hibiscus, surrounded by gigantic ferns and alligator flags; its five large red petals on a tall, too-thin stem, bobbing a little in the swamp breeze seemed to say, “See, I am still here.”

Paper white cymbidiums and a white swamp lily or two were also dressed in their finest. The more she looked, the more flowers she saw. The purple morning glories were still partially open. Tall ferns, reminiscent of the age of dinosaurs, rose from the dry swamp floor, surrounded by other broad leaf, alligator plants, try-

ing to catch a little dew and a wisp of sunshine. The mysteries of the swamp were like a well in a story she loved, beautiful because they were initially hidden, just waiting for the right conditions for their dramatic entrance. Some pine tree seeds only opened after a fire cleared the way, dormant for years. Thus, the Everglades were always beautiful for two reasons, what was seen and what was left to the imagination, waiting to burst forth in the future.

The swamp was the coolest place she knew this time of year. Even on the hottest and most humid day, a little swamp breeze wafted through the trees, rustled the dry leaves and cooled the sweat on her face and arms. Her hat acted like a sweatband, stopping the salty, pooling drops from slipping down her forehead and into her eyes. She loved the winding boardwalk where she threw her shoulders back, looked up into the green canopy overhead that provided some shade and did not miss a step on her brisk walk. She breathed in the oxygen, knowing her lungs were saying thank you with every step.

One thing she knew about walking in the swamp: she did not cry. An overwhelming sense of peace filled her heart to overflowing with joy from the first step into its wonders until the last step out. Tears were for lonely automobiles, the back of the church, the empty rooms. Her Creator who made this swamp such a beautiful and serene place where nature lived in harmony according to its predestined imprint had done no less for her. In the swamp, she felt her God filling the void in her soul; and she was at peace. This walk was the highlight of her day, a *raison d'être* for the long drive to a job that lost its spark with an accumulation of career disappointments. The swamp never disappointed.

Thunder began as a rumble in the distance but rolled forward with loud crashes. Lightning soon followed across the sky, long, jagged lines of white light connecting the growing cumulus clouds with the earth. These bolts of lightning were frightening this time of year. They started the unmanageable fires in the swamplands that filled the air with acrid smoke and threatened the homes of those who ventured too far into the wilder-

ness. The heavy wind howled through the cypress; and heavy rains broke through the canopy, dancing on the wide alligator fronds and turning the moss covered walk to “swamp ice.” The initial raindrops glanced off her hat brim as she quickened her step. She enjoyed the warm, summer rain. The air was alive with the crackling lightning, and she counted in her mind’s eye how far it was to the next protected area to possibly wait it out. Wet, her blouse clung revealingly to her skin, the cool dampness uncomfortable.

Just as quickly as the storm arrived, it passed away. The sun returned in all its hot glory; diamonds glistened on the broad, deep green fronds and cool drops still fell from the canopy overhead. She was cool and wet, but she would dry by the time the walk ended so she could return to work with no one knowing she came through a storm. Her recent hairstyle was straight with short bangs cut across her forehead. She wore little make-up to wash away in the rain. The main disaster was the shoes. The damp leather soles slogged through the rain, traversing the slick pine needles; they might even separate from the straps. This happened before. The swamp was the dividing line between before and after.

Before, she talked for the entire walk with the man who resided in her heart. She shared the serenity, the pure joy of this special place that meant so much to her. In spite of the “no cell phone” rule, she was eager for his calls that he actually timed for her walks in the swamp. Perhaps for him it meant she had private time to chat, away from the office, just the two of them. She found a bench off the beaten path to be away from the occasional patrons who might give her the evil eye for whispering into a cell phone.

A radiant smile filled her face the whole time, heart racing, heat rising. He had that power over her. He was “the one,” the soul mate for whom nothing was sacrosanct, except for her painful secret, buried too deep to reveal. They were of one mind and heart, and her very essence with all its greatness and its flaws

was safe with him. He would do her no more harm. As soon as their conversations ended, she thought about all the things she should have said or chided herself for talking too much, being too eager to share every thought with him to make up for all the years of separation.

Maybe I should have held back a few more secrets, she thought in the painful time that came after.

The walks were still the same. She passed the bench where they chatted, and for a fleeting moment her mind turned to him. She would not let it linger there. She was not a glutton for punishment. She understood at last that she was what she held in her thoughts. If she thought about the loss, then she felt the pain. She had experienced enough pain in her life; this was a time to reserve space for joy whenever possible. Wasting thoughts on a love gone sour took good space and turned it sour as well. She could not help but have a moment's passing thought, however, always a risk for tears.

Every ecstasy carries the risk of agony; at least I have known both. He meant so very much to me; surely loving him was not a mistake. She looked out across the swamp, watching the mist rise from the wet leaves, carried through the ferns and alligator flags on the gentle breeze. Life was as unpredictable as the storms and as mysterious as her little anole. She waited in anticipation; perhaps her beloved swamp would provide her the answers with which she could live.