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There has been serious magic afoot this past month. I was selling books at the local Lions Club Christmas Fair at the high school and a girl who didn't have any money offered a trade. So I got five magic blue rocks in exchange for a book. I keep these lapis-colored rocks right by the keyboard to remind me that there are all forms of recompense for writing, not just money.

One of the paybacks for writing is that stories tend to find you. They stick to you like cat hair on that new sweater. They choose you because they know you will honor them by telling them, which is the closest they get to heaven, I suppose.

In these parts there are some fairly affluent retirees who have decided to visit every country in the world before they die. Along the way they sometimes send news of where they have been. But never in any of these missals have they ever shared one story of things that happened. Stories don't stick, at least to them. They're Teflon travelers. But I can't even go to the post office without something happening.

After the Big Snowstorm, I drove up to the post office in four wheel drive, carefully looking all ways at every moment because you never know when somebody much older and slipperier will be unable to stop. So I was coming

around the corner by Al Martin's house when this guy on a bike wearing one of those things Arab men wear on their head that looks like a small tablecloth with an embroidery hoop holding it on, the name of which I would love to learn, came right at my car. In a heartbeat, I thought, "He doesn't see me." I was going to honk the horn, which is unheard of in Mancos, and then thought, "He'll turn any second" but he kept heading right for me at full speed. Then in a heartbeat, I thought, "He's going to hit me and claim I hit HIM and there will be a big insurance mess afterward!" and that thought had barely crossed the threshold of my brain when another one screamed out, "He's a suicide bicycle bomber and he's chosen to start with me in Mancos." And at that moment, he turned abruptly (on the ice no less, without falling down) and turned down the alley toward the post office, behind Al's house. I just was incredulous. So I backed up to look down the alley to see where he went and in the three seconds it took me to back up, he vanished. So, I ask you, how can globe trotters go a million miles and not have stories to tell when I can't even come home from the local post office and not have one stuck to me?

As a writer who is not all that intent on selling stuff, more entranced with just writing it well, I spend much of my time fiercely staring down the Gods of Forgetfulness. That means when the Muses call me to get up and write at two in the morning, I dutifully stagger down the stairs and open up a new file and write until they leave me alone once again. I suspect that good writing like good theater is something best done in the dark.

Not too long ago, somebody asked me about the Illuminati and whether I believed in a cosmic conspiracy. It set me to thinking about how such manifestations of archetype come into being. Then it hit me (this is quite natural for a writer because it is one of the hot markets for articles and stories) that for the past sixty years, we've all grown up with Highlights Magazine-Tommy Timbertoes, Goofus and Doofus, find the secret objects in the pictures, wholesome stories-and hatched a thought that Highlights may be the root of conspiracy theory. When you do enough Hidden Pictures you begin looking for the perfectly disguised item inside something it isn't, sort of like the war in Iraq. Sort of like we looked for the "hidden objects" when we were bombing Iraq back into the Stone Age because we couldn't find the Hidden Weapons of Mass Destruction, or when the Watergate headlines first broke. Do you suppose it's all a result of Highlights, ubiquitously available in places of high stress like dentists' offices, hospital waiting rooms, and school offices?

Somebody else asked me if I were going to start a blog. I had to think about that. Blogs, I think, are like raincoats that tourists take to China. I can't imagine going to China. I can't even imagine going to the hot springs in Ouray or Pagosa and they're only 90 minutes away. But my old storytelling mentor, Kathleen Summitt, headed off to the wilds of China at the age of 92 with her fellow 92-year-old buddy Mildred. My mother, who had just recently visited China, insisted that Kathleen needed to take a raincoat. Kathleen insisted that like old Grandfather Rock in the story of Onktomi and the Ducks, she had endured the snows of ninety winters and the rains of ninety summers totally without a raincoat and could certainly survive a trip to China without one. But she was no match for my mother, and off they went to Dillard's where they emerged with a raincoat. Kathleen did indeed take it to China, and when she and Mildred had parted ways from the tour group they had started out with to go discover the REAL China (imagine two old white haired ladies who speak no Chinese and have no luggage-only backpacks-but are marvelous storytellers and you hardly want to think of them being spies or double agents) they ran out of money way off the beaten track. So they sold the raincoat for about five times what Kathleen had paid for it. So, when she got back to Taos she wrote a note to my mother. "Dear Elly-you were right. I really did need a raincoat in China." That's kind of how I feel about blogs.

After watching Sound of Music (has your community had a Sound of Music sing-along? You get to come dressed as your favorite character and sing along standing up during those parts) I couldn't help but hear Liesl's song in the gazebo as "I am sixty, going on seventy (my birthday is tomorrow)" and wondered if there isn't a message in this somewhere? Or as Billy Collins, poet laureate and sit down comic says, "Love is the early bird who is better late than never."

The snow storms mostly missed Mancos. They did however reveal certain truths: Denver has more plows than the whole state of New Mexico. Snow removal costs in Denver during the recent blizzards cost \$15million. Mancos snow removal costs were \$45 for Peter's overtime and a pizza. I learned that there really IS such a thing as thundersnow. This joins the New Weather Vocabulary along with "dry lightning" and "night rainbow."

The weather here just reminds us of how remote Mancos is. It's eight hours to Denver, seven hours to Salt Lake, five hours to Albuquerque, and nine hours to Phoenix. We have no strategic importance to anybody, and I've taken to amusing myself by lighting a fire early in the afternoon, before it's even dark, and watching the dogs watching the cat watching the fire. If that ain't excitement, I can't say what is. Not only is Mancos the center of the known universe, it has some sort of gravitational field drawing to it, keeping in its field, people with massive wounds of the heart, the mind, the soul, and the body. We've had another incident here of botched surgery at the local hospital that made me much more confident, should the need arise, about just opting to go to the local vet for surgery of any kind.

The seed catalogs have begun to flutter in. They promise tomatoes the size of footballs. What they don't tell you is there are grasshoppers the size of frogs waiting, lurking, darkly plotting their resurgence like minions of Darth Vader. Somebody suggested I get turkeys because they not only eat grasshoppers but they take no guff off of weener dogs. I'm thinking about it, keeping in mind that turkey farming was one of the reasons by Lou Blachly left Silver City with a borrowed tape recorder and inflicted himself on Marietta Wetherill recording hours and hours of life stories; his father expected him to run the turkey farm after him. He later hustled those tapes to UNM and NAU and WNMU as the Pioneer Foundation, allegedly telling all three institutions they were getting "the originals." He recorded seventy-some tapes of Marietta telling tales that never let the truth get in the way of the story! He also did over 100 tapes of Montague Stevens, an ex-pat Brit who rode stock for the Bell Ranch and various outfits from Douglas to Geronimo Springs. I do believe I am the only living person who has bothered to listen to any of them. But I know there's a story in this somewhere.

Remember the orange cat I complained about? Well, one night at about three in the morning, Henry insisted I get up, and while I was standing on the front porch in my nightgown and Sorels, I heard the cat being eaten by the coyotes or something bigger. After dawn, we went down to the thicket to see if there were any remains to be buried and Henry said, "Let me at him!" and I had to haul him off bodily to keep him away from the thicket. I suspect the bear is in there, not hibernating because it wasn't cold enough, or because there was not enough food to build up fat, but it was the last time I go for a walk unarmed, let me tell you.

Mere, my magical cat, has become a total slut. She shamelessly drapes herself over the edge of my recycled paper box by the computer and demands attention, like some teenager with a stove bolt through her eyebrow in a six inch long skirt on the street corner of Bisbee, a sort of time-slip Tacey Cromwell (by Conrad Richter, more famous for Light in the Forest). The cat however also inflicts herself on me in bed, pinning my hand to the bed, no matter what way I try to hide it-under the covers, under the dog, under the mattress. She finds it and sleeps on it. I suppose this MEANS something but I can't figure out what.

I have to rant for one moment about people who take their ill-mannered children shopping with them and let them run around the store like hyenas on the prowl. I almost did the old geezer thing and reprimand one but then thought better of it. If I had access to the loudspeaker, I would have said, "Out of control children have been microchipped. The CIA will be in touch with you soon."

You all know I am totally addicted to cooking shows, but the only thing I get is an hour on PBS every day and they torment me with variability, some weeks doing Jacques Pepin and some weeks Bubba's Barbecue. But I was watching the other day and solved one of the great mysteries of life-how to peel garlic. Now this might not sound really like a big deal to you, but to a klutz like me who tries to peel a piece of garlic and invariably drops it in the trash, this was like the epiphany of the year. What you do is SMACK IT. First you smack the clove to release the little cloves. Then, you cut the top off the little cloves and you SMACK them with the flat side of a knife and the insides slip right out of the skin. Like magic. And then, instead of mincing it or smooshing it in a garlic press, you SMACK it with the flat side of a knife and voila, it's in little tiny pieces. Wow.

With that epiphany, I shall leave you until next month in hopes you will all stay busy, keep warm, and write down your stories.

gwynne