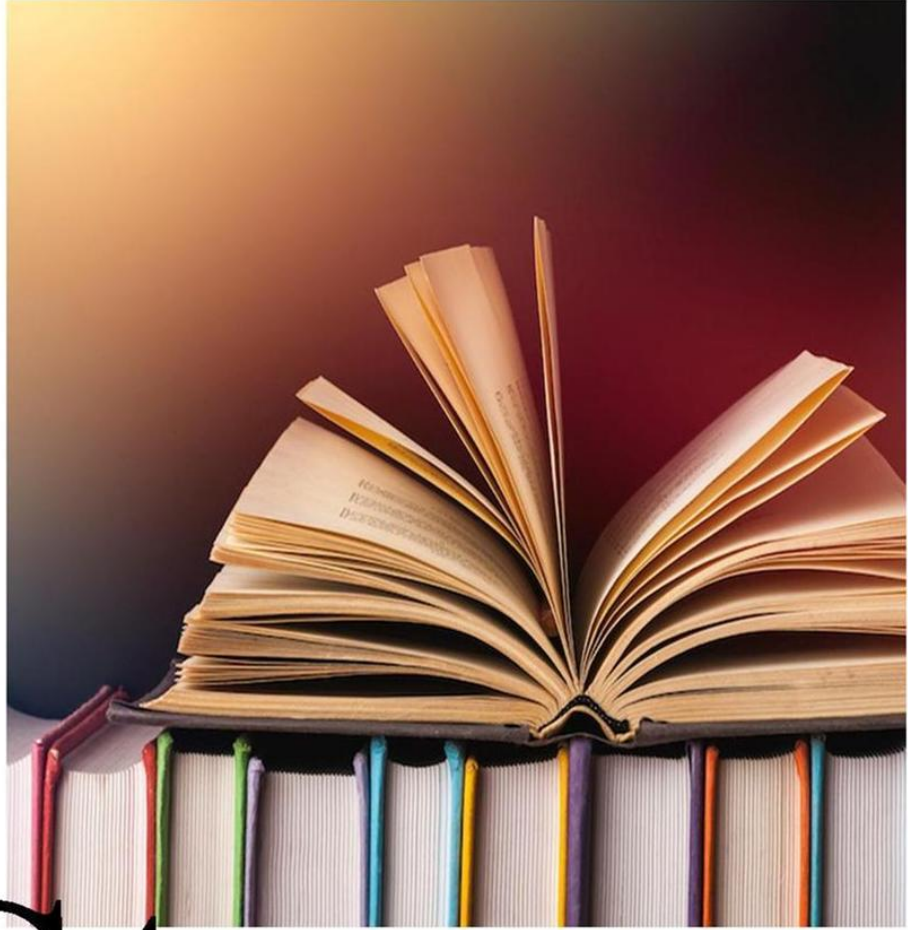

The Society of Southwestern Authors



Story Snacks

Volume 5

He Moved

by Sharon K Miller

It was one of those moments when time slows and details become more pronounced, a rather macabre *tableaux vivant*, burned indelibly in my mind. My father, outside, trying to break the door down; my mother inside with the shotgun.

What they were fighting about, I have no idea. It doesn't matter. Their fights were about power and control. My father wanted to control her, but she wasn't having it. In fact, she refused to have it for more than thirty-six years, never backing down, usually throwing dishes or skillets in self-defense. He was taller and stronger, but whenever he knocked her down, she got up and got back into his face.

But this time, she had the advantage. I don't remember how she got him out the door where he was cursing and kicking and rattling the knob trying to get in. I don't remember her getting the shotgun, but she was pointing it at the door with him on the other side.

When she pulled the trigger, through the window I saw his head jerk backward.

In the silence that followed, I heard his pickup racing out the lane.

Calmly, my mother put the shotgun away and then examined the hole in the kitchen wall. Outside, a couple of tar paper shingles were bulged out. "Go get two shingles from the shed. I'll take care of the inside."

While I replaced the damaged shingles, she cleaned up the hole on the inside, stuffed newspapers into the opening and covered it with paper tape. Having recently painted the kitchen, she used leftover paint to cover it and hung a calendar in the space. Even though we were reasonably successful at hiding the evidence, it wasn't likely a forensics team would be fooled.

A short time later, a car drove in the lane. I looked out the window and said, "It's Joe."

Joe was a likeable and funny bachelor who often came to shoot the bull (metaphorically speaking) with my father. He got along with both my parents. He mounted the back porch and knocked.

“Hey, Joe,” I said as I opened the door and stepped back.

Mom turned from the sink and smiled hello.

Without saying a word, he came in and turned around to examine the door and the wall around it.

He looked over his shoulder and grinned. “I knew he was lying.”

“Who?” My mother looked genuinely bewildered.

“Your old man. He came tearing in to the barbershop and said you’d tried to kill him. Said you shot at him.”

“If I’d shot at him, I wouldn’t have missed.” She reached into the cupboard and got a glass.

“Want some iced tea?”

He drank his tea and shared a bit of barbershop gossip and then went on his way.

As he drove out the lane, Mom said. “He’ll make sure everybody knows the old man is the crazy one.” She chuckled and went back to the dishes.

Dance of the Silver Maple Tree

by Stuart Watkins

Back in my youth the woods were tall and noble. As a young boy I remember the majestic trees as mighty giants looking down and laughing at me, the intruder of their vast domain.

My childhood was filled with afternoons roaming through the woods, chasing the little animals and climbing the ruler of the forest, the tall, tall oak tree.

The oak was not my favorite, however, for I soon fell in love with the silver maple. When the wind is still her leaves hang green and peacefully towards earth. But, when the wind grows strong and blows in gusts, she lifts her silver fingers to the sky and dances a gypsy dance the likes of which no gypsy would ever try.

Her limbs swing to-and-fro like the whitecaps of a stormy sea. As the wind dies down her fingers give way to the calmness of the green; flashing now and then showing she still has spirit and will dance again when the wind blows her a tune.

As the peak of summer passes and it comes time for autumn, all the trees strike their colors and vie for the title Queen of the Forest.

When the green and silver leaves of the silver maple tree give way to her golden yellow and red colors, she is crowned Queen of the Forest year after autumn year.

The woods were not always pleasant to be in, however, for there is nothing more frightening than being caught in the woods during a thunderstorm. Ominous silence as the forest awaits the booming of thunder, frightening lightning dashes through the forest, slashing, smashing, slicing into a tree. Severing an arm, splitting the tree from neck to knee, bouncing back into the sky not caring if the tree dies, its sap oozing to the ground.

Oh, the groans from the old ones as the whistling wind twists them and turns them, bends and breaks them. Some are hurtled to the ground, breaking limbs, smashing bodies, ripping them down.

But the young saplings know nothing of the turmoil about as they swish and sway, prance and dance, enjoying the day.

As the winds die down and the saplings stop their play, the trees regain their composure and look forward to a new day. For there will be other children who walk in their shadows, climb their limbs, and marvel at their beauty.

Children will discover the magnificence of the tall oak tree, smell the aroma of cedar trees and when the wind blows, they will enjoy the dance of the Queen of the Forest.

The Case of the Pilfered Painting

by Christine Gross

Deputy Linda Miller reached for the ringing phone. Caller ID showed Susan McCloud, the sheriff's ex-wife. They'd parted amicably five years ago. He'd moved into an apartment, but he still mowed the lawn and did the repairs.

"Afternoon, Susan, what can I do for you?"

"I just got home, and my painting is gone!"

"You're kidding! I'm so sorry!" Linda opened a notepad. "How long were you away?"

"Four days. I'd planned a week, but the weather was awful at the lake."

"Was this the painting over your mantel?"

"Yes. You know the one." An early American oil portrait of a dour middle-aged man against an olive background.

"Did you see any signs of a forced entry?"

"Nothing!" Susan sniffed. "Is Travis around?"

"He's off at a water rescue. Someone with a truck got stuck in a stream. But I'll be right over."

She summoned her intern. Dale spent so much time on the computer, she thought it would be instructional to take him along.

At Susan's house, they checked all the doors and windows, and dusted for prints.

“You know anyone who might have wanted that painting?”

“No. Travis’ grandmother gave it to us. Apparently it’s valuable, but Travis didn’t care for it, so he let me keep it.”

“Thief probably planned to sell it. We’ll check the pawnshops.” Dale could search the auction houses online. “Do you have a house cleaner?”

Susan shook her head.

“Burglar alarm? Video surveillance?” asked Dale.

Susan pointed at a slender white device on a table. “Travis got me that thing, but I never learned how to use it. It’s just a visual deterrent.”

Linda sighed. Even in small towns, burglaries occurred.

Back in the squad car, she asked Dale, “Could you bring in Randy Galt?” The local cat burglar.

“Sure. I’ll see him at noon. We’ve got football practice.”

She blinked. “You play football with Randy Galt?”

“Hey, he’s off probation. And he’s a great quarterback!”

Everybody knew everybody. Travis and Randy’s uncles hunted pheasant. Randy’s father had been an exceptional deer hunter, until he’d come down with cancer.

Randy had an airtight alibi. He'd been fishing with friends, and had the fishing license and campground reservations to prove it.

The fingerprints all belonged to Susan, Travis, or one of their grown children. None of the neighbors had noticed anything unusual.

That afternoon Deputy Miller and Dale marched into the Sheriff's office.

"You heard about the burglary?" Linda demanded.

He nodded.

She related the investigation details. "Travis, did you take that painting?"

"I did."

She folded her arms. "Why?"

"I borrowed it for loan collateral. Bobby Galt needs some expensive new chemotherapy, and his health insurance won't cover it. But Susan came home before the appraisal went through."

Dale perked up. "Why don't we try crowd-funding? There's 5,000 people in town, and if everybody donates \$10, we could cover the chemo!"

So Randy's father recovered, and Travis hired Dale as a computer consultant.

The Third Plague

by Sharon A. Lashinger

Cindy sat on the edge of her bed and cried quietly into the flowers on her pajama top. She was scared. She did not know what to do. She knew that Tina, her best friend in the whole world, was sick. She felt sick too. She had told her mother, the actress, but her mother was busy. "I have to learn my lines for my new play" slam went mother's bedroom door. Cindy crept quietly out to the hall where the phone lived.

It was a party line. There were six other families who were on it, but if she listened very quietly, she could hear things. Things she wasn't supposed to know. This sickness was a new thing. People did not know much about it but they were worried. They called it called Polio. You got sick. Your legs hurt. You could have a fever. Cindy knew Tina had all these things. She did too. Tina's father was a big, strong farmer. He did not believe in sickness. But her father might. How could she tell him? Her mother did not believe in sickness, either. It would interfere with her learning her new play. Maybe he would listen when he came home from work. He might if she was very good and did all her chores, even if she felt too sick to do them. It worked. Her father listened. The Doctor came on a house call. He told her what to do. How to sterilize things and take care of things. Her mother was closeted in her room the whole time. They all survived. Because she knew what to do. Because Tina did not get the help that she needed, Tina died.

Cindy had spent all day cooking, cleaning, and getting her toddler and her newborn son ready to greet their father when he got home from his very expensive conference. He had been gone almost a week and suddenly here he was at the front door. She turned on the porch light. Bill was yellow. His eyes were yellow. His skin was yellow. She was shocked. You are sick she screamed. You go right to the emergency room now! You can't come in here. The kids cried. Bill was immobilized. But he looked in the hall mirror at himself and realized that she was right. He was placed immediately in ICU. The Doctor told her it was hepatitis. Very virulent. She was told that the baby would probably die and she and the little girl would get sick, too. Nuts to this, said Cindy to herself. Nobody dies. She made the Doctor give her a protocol for cleaning and what to do to survive. And they all did.

Cindy gritted her teeth, according to the news reports there is a new word of the day today, COVID. Here we go again, she said to herself. The third plague. Just where did I put the CLOROX?

Where is Beauty?

by Stuart Watkins

Beauty was the most perfect bumble bee any momma bee or poppa beecould ever wish to have. Her wings were flawless, her torso symmetrical, her waist tiny, and her proportions were perfect.

Her stinger was to die for. It was “The bomb.”

Beauty was perfect in every way except one, Beauty was a rover.

She was a flower hopper, nectar sniffer, fragrance follower, fluttering forfun.

Momma bee and Poppa bee were often asking, “Where is Beauty?”

Dr. Markel Bartholomew was a biologist for the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. He loved bees. He had a telescope that would let him follow the flight of a bee for hundreds of yards.

One day he was outside with his students when one of them exclaimed, “Look, Dr. Bartholomew, I do believe I have noticed a bumble bee of distinctive characteristics!”

This student was most excited.

Dr. Bartholomew set up his telescope and spotted Beauty right away. Hetook out his bottle of bee luring fragrance he had invented, and liberally sprayed it into the air.

Beauty flew hither and yon, but got closer and closer to the cluster of students.

Dr. Bartholomew motioned the students to stand back. He took a rose from his vest pocket, sprayed it with his special bee luring fragrance, and waited.

Beauty landed on the middle of the rose.

Dr. Bartholomew took off his glasses, leaned over ever so closely to get an even better inspection of the spectacular bumble bee, when Beauty became frightened and jumped straight back into Dr. Bartholomew's eye.

It was supper time at Momma and Poppa bee's hive. Beauty was nowhere to be found.

They called out to the worker bees, "Where is Beauty? Has anyone seen Beauty?"

A worker bee flew over to their hive and said, "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, but Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."