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Life Science

by Matthew Muresan

As he looked around the autumn-colored park, the man felt a tremor begin to move through his aging body. He could blame only some of the chill on the weather. When it passed, he righted his underwear, spat, and lowered himself onto a bench. From within his jacket, he produced a bag containing something heavy that pulled and deformed the sack that held it. His arthritic hands shook as he tried to set it at his side. The shaking caused several false landings before the bag came to rest next to his gray wool pant leg. Then, from under his left arm, he produced an unwrinkled newspaper. His feet twisted in the wet leaf-covered ground below him. He slowly began to open the newspaper, and as he felt it between his fingers, they seemed to uncurl, and his limbs steadied. His feet found the friction of the asphalt beneath the leaves, and his body was finally still. Sullivan always started with the comics.

Smelling the autumn air, he was reminded of the Life Science classes he'd enjoyed so much in high school, and he remembered that the season was a showcase of entropy. He could remember it as clearly now as the day it was taught to him, though he'd held the lesson in him for more than sixty years. Plant decay, he recalled, was the slow process of energy release. Cell walls broke inward like doomed buildings at the moment of their demolition; the relative destruction was comparable, but the organic version happened in perfect silence. What once was sunlight became methane. What once was solid and flush with veins of green chlorophyll became more and more like water and earth. Energy abandoned the plant and made its way back to the ground.

Then something moved. From the corner of his eye, Sullivan saw a figure begin to travel from right to left in front of him, disappearing behind his paper. He frantically widened the shaking daily to cover even the outermost edges of his world. When

he heard a pubescent voice call to some friends, he let some air escape his lungs. *Only children. Young children*, he thought, and he worked the paper between his fingers. The digits gradually relaxed as if the paper held a liniment. He was finally still again. It wasn't often that he found himself so far from home.

The page started with Andy Capp. It surprised him that a comic he had once enjoyed so much had become so awkward. There was a time when he could laugh along with their squabbles and apparent alcoholism, but now the only word that came to him was "dysfunctional," and how had he been trained to notice that? At least Blondie's pinup body had held up with time. His wife Judy had loved Ziggy, with his world-positive insights. When Sullivan had asked her how it was possible to "actually like Ziggy of all comics," she'd just stuck out her tongue and said she liked a lot of unlikely characters. His favorite was Peanuts. After fifty-one years of marriage, their feelings on the comics had been as true as anything else.

Back on the page, Dennis the Menace was still a kid and, Sullivan guessed, always would be. He read to the bottom until all that remained to see on the page were his own hands. The tendons in his fingers were blue and twiny beneath thin skin. He winced. He thought of skin's transparency. He thought of Judy. His hand still wanted to rest on her next to him on the bench; like a phantom limb, he could still feel her shoulder there. Then he sniffed and turned to the front page, as a high-pitched buzzing filled his ears. He tried to believe it was just insects. He shooed around his head and the buzzing slowly passed.

He heard another noise beyond his paper screen. This time it came from his left. It was the sound of something rolling across the asphalt path that had brought him to the bench. A breeze began to blow toward him, bowing the paper





Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

inward. The rolling sound became louder. Then the breeze became a gust, and the paper flew from his left hand with an eruption of color, opening the full park scene to him. A gray-haired woman was pushing a stroller. She stopped and turned to face him. His eyes darted to brittle trees, to the flap-

ping newspaper just out of reach, to dying leaves on branches, and then finally settled on the face of the child in the stroller. He breathed and held his eyes on the infant. Safe. He almost smiled at the beautiful young face, and his free hand reached and finally retrieved the paper and resurrected his

curtain. Was that a "hello" he heard spoken to him in a raspy voice? He locked his gaze back on the center crease and didn't reply. *Too old to be pushing that baby around*, he murmured. This time he pulled the paper nearly around his head. His eyes resumed their walk down the safe, boxed aisles. The sound of the stroller finally restarted and then faded away to his right.

The top story was international: old wars, alive and well. Young people, dying with lungs full of air. In the middle of the page a delivery address label was stuck to the margin. It read: "Stuart Sullivan, 127 Atticus, Apt. 3." Inches from it and his bifocals was the lead local story: the murders. A rash of killings had the city holding its breath for the past few weeks. He smelled the decay of the leaf-covered ground. How many years had Judy lay in their apartment before dying? Before she slowly started losing air? The article said the victims were all found within a two-block radius of the first death, and that they all had been "shot in the back of the head (continued on page four)." Sullivan pictured the base of the skull and felt the hairs on his begin to rise. Letting the paper float, he brought one hand up and felt his own head. He thought about the beautiful puncture of the human shell, and how the bullet had started everything. The word for this, he recalled, was "catalyst." Then he smelled something sour. Inches from his right ear a loud cough barked into the silence. Hoarse. Close. It filled him and rang in his brittle frame. Too close. He was no longer alone on the bench.

The presence left him weak. His body jerked, and the paper crackled loudly, calling attention to his panic like a bully once had in school. The scent began to settle around him. His left foot slipped in the leafy mash, and he felt that he might vomit. He pushed the newsprint shield outward and, without turning his head, noticed the blurry edge of a man to his right, on the same bench. The smell was the acrid essence of the disregarded. Of things left at the curb. It blanketed Sullivan. He leaned his hip slightly and was reassured when he felt the brown

paper bag still between him and the stranger. Then the buzzing noise returned, now as a mechanical wail, louder and almost from above, filling and shaking his head. The sound, now more familiar, grew insistent before gradually, finally fading.

Pulling it nearly to his nose, Sullivan could only breathe the smell of newsprint. Only by doing so was he able to continue reading. It seems all the murders had taken place in daylight and only in the past three weeks. The killer was able to cover the sound of the gunshots with the periodic roar of airplanes taking off and landing just next to the park. Each bullet was booked; a one-way direct flight to within someone's head, flying in air drenched with sound. Sullivan remembered how Death had come to live at his house. It had arrived with a green suitcase, like Judy's mother once had, and it stayed for nearly two years. It was soon after that that Judy began to melt into her bed even as Sullivan watched. Every day microscopically less herself, the only audible memory of the decline was an occasional moan, the only personal account was his, formed from hours of quiet vigil.

All three murders took place at Airport Park. The police had the description of their only suspect from an eyewitness. The witness was homeless, one of the shopping cart-pushing people who lived around the park. Sullivan, still unsteady, turned his head right until from the aching corner of his vision, he could just make out his bench companion, also reading a newspaper. The indistinct figure turned to him, and again he fled to his newsprint asylum.

After Judy left, her exit preoccupied him. Weren't couples supposed to follow one another into death? Wasn't the strength of their bond what had opened their eyes in the morning? Hadn't he loved her enough to follow? He thought about the slow arrogance of Death in their home. How it had toyed with him in its pace. He remembered Life Science and thought about cells, how they could divide from one into millions in the first nine months: Zero-to-life. Then, from millions of cells,



it took a slow lifetime until the last one died: Life-back-to-zero. At times he thought he could hear the failing cells pop like carbonation. Yet, with the exception of the occasional moan, Judy had faded in total silence. One night, after she'd gone, he even found himself crawling on her old mattress, looking for molecular traces where she had been. He rarely slept. The paper mentioned that all of the park victims had been older than eighty. For this reason — and since the killer struck just under the flight path — the paper, the one with huge black headlines, had named him the Runway Reaper.

There was movement to his right. Through his blurry half-sight he could tell that the man had bent over. Sullivan took this opportunity, finally, to feast, turning with a snap and drinking him in with both eyes. The muscles in his neck and eyes were relieved at last. The man was reading the same paper and the same article. Bent over as he was, though, Sullivan could not see his face, just a collection of bags and a loaded shopping cart a few yards away. He identified the smell as urine. Then the man creaked upright, and Sullivan was back to the article.

Judy had never liked for him to travel very far from home, let alone to a place across town like the now-infamous Airport Park. When Sullivan mentioned to her that he might like to watch the air-

planes take off, she'd told him that it was too noisy and just not safe for a man his age, alone in that neighborhood. She said he'd "get bonked on the head and then what?" He never had an answer until recently. A person needn't be alone, he thought, as he remembered the brown bag. The "bonk on the head" or the bullet that entered through the back door, "make way!" These things were not decay. These things didn't wait around for cells to get so tired of splitting that they mutated, just for fun, into cancers.

Even in disintegration, Judy had been his security. In losing sight of her, he believed he'd gained sight of truth. And the truth was that everything was dying. If he looked closely, he could see doomed cells, their membranes and nuclei, as they quivered and let go of life. Quietly. His own cells, too, were well along their way. He even likened the approaching autumn hues to the colorful bloated swell of human decomposition. He spent hours on his knees scrubbing the floors of the apartment, trying to clean away the evidence of death. But there was always something left. A hair. A nail clip. Some cellular record. He finally threw down a few pieces of newspaper on the kitchen floor. What worked even better, though, was to leave the apartment. He found himself in the new train station and in the hotel and office lobbies of the revitalized portion



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

of his neighborhood. Shiny places.

One rare evening spent in his apartment, he found himself trying to catch a fly that had been buzzing over his head. He caught it and threw it on his table. Then, while carefully watching the captured insect's cellular life pass, the idea came with a loud smash of his hand. The sound rang through the room as the realization rang in his mind. After the deathblow, all the insect's cells began to fall at a consistent and controlled pace, a pace he had initiated, and with a sound. Sullivan, the catalyst. After that, for a little while, he could sleep.

He continued reading the article. The paper started to crinkle in his now-clutching hands, and he stared into the fibers. How he loved its daily arrival at his door. Delivered by a young boy, it was the one thing that he owned that was reborn every day. The newly-bound lattices still in rows, like incubators. Crisp and young. Still in the fresh beginning of its form. He smiled at the thought.

He read the description the homeless witness had given of the Runway Reaper's clothes. Did the clothes make the reaper? He looked at his own gray wool pants, his heavy winter coat, and his worn walking shoes. They made him sick. What was the difference between the clothes of a killer and the clothes that were in the green suitcase Judy had used at the hospital, before they told him there was nothing else they could do and sent her home. Would a killer dress in clothes from a green suitcase? Or maybe more like the man to his right? Sullivan had slowly dressed in these clothes this morning mostly for warmth. Airport Park was far from his home anyway. You needed to take the 86 bus line all the way across town. Nothing but old, polluting gray buses could take you there until three weeks ago, when a new electric series started.

The smell on the bench became unbearable. A chill like cold electricity entered him. Fighting the aching pull on his neck too long, he gave in completely. He turned to the stranger. Eyes met tired eyes. Fearful recognition was realized and

mutual. He heard urine drip through the slats of the bench. Then, as if on cue, the mechanical wail returned, its loudest yet.

The air vibrated. Sullivan shook, now hot. The paper rattled, and he dropped it like a curtain to face a universe of decay. His ragged, destitute partner on the bench, well beyond eighty years old, got to his feet.

In the apartment, after Judy was gone, something had changed. He had laughed when it occurred to him. He had done a jerking dance, realizing he, Sullivan, could steer the slow rot of life. He could hit the accelerator. He looked around him. Every inch of the apartment was covered in newsprint. Pieces were torn to fit in odd corners; they were on the couches, countertops, his bed, and even on the tops of lamps. He shouted the words "death" and "catalyst" over and over and finally gave it the dignity of a sound. Death, who was sitting in the den with his feet on the newspaper-covered coffee table, looked up at the shouts. Sullivan asked permission, opened the green suitcase, and filled the brown bag. He said good-bye and resolutely left the apartment with the bag and today's newspaper, the Runway Reaper headline showing under his arm. He had waited for five buses until a new electric one stopped. Then he was here in the noisy park. On this bench. And now, finally, he rose from it. Upright now, with his pitiful palsied hand, he grabbed the bag from his side. The whining turned into a screech and grew louder. The dignity to end with a roar. Entropy. Catalyst. Sullivan opened the bag. He saw the man, older than he should be, smelling of death, falling apart as he walked. Cells abandoning ship. And his hand became steady, the fingers smoothly opening. He stalked in the direction of the fleeing witness, who'd so long been a blur in his periphery, and finally, with a roar, the plane was overhead, screaming as the landing gear unfolded from beneath.

