

Bessie & Elmer

Silver Arts Events

Literary Arts Category
Short Stories

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"Bessie & Elmer"

The steam coming out from the hair dryer's bonnet was less from Bessie's moist hair, and more likely from a simmering anger inside her about to erupt. "I've been clipped, curled, and colored, and do you think that man of mine will ever notice?" she muttered to herself but just loud enough that the other salon patrons heard her. Bessie's venting out loud was nothing new in the salon, or even in the grocery store as she cashiered and complained. She was aware of her misery and frustrations but never pondered the root cause of them.

Today the handgun resting on a towel on her lap was a new twist and it alarmed the salon ladies. Disassembling, cleaning, oiling, and slapping the parts into place as she reassembled it, she was unable to disassemble her frustration with Elmer, her husband of 23 years. She knew all the women in the salon, both the hairdressers and clients, and she caught them silently exchanging glances with each other, most likely wondering if this was the day she shoots him. One whispered, "Her man's head is always in the clouds and he hasn't a clue that she's run out of patience with him." It never occurred to any of them to call the sheriff.

Bessie sat under the dryer, proud that she was a practical woman who was making good use of her time by cleaning her gun, frustrated that she'd been waiting a shade too long for the manicurist to come file and paint her nails with a coat of Five-Alarm Red nail polish. She would have preferred just a clear coat but Elmer really liked 'em red, and fluttering them about was the only way to distract him when he prattled on and on about his discoveries in the great outdoors each day.

No one would ever consider Bessie sexy. She had a stout and sturdy body with just

enough of an indentation around her middle to suggest a waistline. It was the curse of her Italian/Hungarian heritage that no amount of cosmetic or surgical remodeling would ever turn her into an attractive woman. Each visit to the salon did little to improve her overly processed and dyed hair. Her thin lips would never look luscious no matter how she arched her lipstick. Fast approaching 50, her face was square-shaped and jowly and the only thing that drew attention to it was a mole trapped in the crease beside her mouth, accentuated by a few sprigs of hair. No one ever noticed that her eyes were a rare natural purple. Perhaps that was because of her perpetually furrowed brow and clunky generic glasses that hid them. And so she sat under the hair dryer, chubby pantyhose-clad legs crossed at the ankles to hide that she'd forgotten to shave them again, and balancing the handgun on her lap.

Elmer wandered aimlessly a few miles outside of their east Texas town. Walking over the dry terrain, around yuccas, and too often not lifting his head in time to avoid bumping into a Saguaro cactus. Always looking down, rarely straight ahead, intent on finding something no one else had ever laid eyes on.

Now in his middle 60's, he'd caught the exploring bug as a child and often whistled the Davy Crockett theme song as he pretended he was Lewis and Clark or Spanish explorer Juan de Onate. Elmer had always felt as if he was on a quest but he could never figure out what for or why as he walked for hours toward no place in particular.

Balding and pigeon-toed he would never resemble those dashing explorers he fancied himself to be. He was shorter than Bessie by several inches and had a stooped posture. Elmer was forgetful to a fault, misplacing his car keys too often, forgetting to replace the batteries in his hearing aids, and not wearing a hat to keep the sun from burning his head and neck. He

tried to stay organized but was easily distracted, tinkering with another soon to be forgotten project in his garage, or by any bugs, birds, or rocks he spied on his walks. The canvas bag sliding off his shoulder carried his notebook and pencil, a map of the local area, an Audubon bird checklist for east Texas, and a magnifying glass. He could be fascinated by the strangest things. Every time he brought home another interesting rock he'd discover it was similar to all the other rocks he'd thought were unique, filling up a tattered cardboard box in the garage.

Taking a moment to stand straight and stretch, he pulled a handkerchief from his shirt pocket to wipe his sweaty brow and dusty glasses. Checking the watch he'd been awarded after retiring from the sewage treatment plant he saw that he had another hour before heading back home for dinner. Still, he stepped up his pace so he wouldn't be late, not wanting Bessie to be annoyed with him again. Last time he'd had to dodge a Corelle bowl she'd hurled at him. Raising his arm to protect his face the bowl had struck his watch, cracking the face. "I'd better get a move on," he said to the little lizard watching him as he hiked up his dirty khaki pants barely held up by his old cracked pleather belt, and weighed down by a pickaxe hanging from a belt loop. Once he figured out just where he'd parked his car he chose a slightly different route to get there, dragging his feet and further ruining the heels of his shoes, reluctant to face Bessie's mood de jour.

Elmer paused, hands on hips. In his path was a round stone the size of a bowling ball. Pushing up his glasses he bent over for a closer look. There sat the largest geode he'd ever seen, well, except for photos in the Backbenders Gazette showcasing the 30 foot long geode found in Put-in-Bay, Ohio. A geode of the size before him was an unusual find for east Texas. Like a hungry monkey craving a coconut, Elmer had to see what was inside. Aiming his pickaxe,

he swung a blow so hard and so perfect that the stone split open in halves. "Oh my!" exclaimed Elmer, giddy at what glistened in the afternoon light as he slid the two pieces into his canvas bag. *Wait until Bessie sees this!* Never before had Elmer wanted to show Bessie anything with such enthusiasm, picturing her reaction as he held out in his hands to her this magnificent specimen. There may have been something magical about this rock, for Elmer was a man who looked at things, non-human things. And not just on his exploring jaunts, but also as he drifted along in life.

Pausing, a realization, or perhaps a revelation, came to him. *Why have I focused on random objects rather than the treasure I have at home in Bessie? She keeps a good house and doesn't seem to mind all that much about my exploring.* On the drive home this question kept popping up, like a Magic 8 Ball that gave a different response with each roll but never a clear answer.

On her way home from the salon Bessie stopped at the Pack-A-Sack to pick up something for dinner. Something that wouldn't take much effort. Something frozen that matched her annoyance with Elmer.

Otis, the store manager, averted his eyes when he saw Bessie enter. He'd already had one humiliating encounter with her this morning. She had the upper hand and knew it. He'd been wanting to fire her for the past year because he hated looking at her ugly mug and he ached to hire the new divorcee' in town. That morning he thought he had enough goods on Bessie to finally can her. Customers had been complaining that the cash register scales were off. After watching the security tapes he spied Bessie's thumb on the scale, increasing the weight. She'd done it out of spite because nobody liked her and that probably included her

husband too. Before the store opened that morning and as soon as he'd seen Bessie enter Otis had turned to her and yelled, "You're fired!" She countered with, "Does your wife know you're bopping that little gal at Dairy Queen? Now get me my cash drawer and don't speak to me again the rest of my shift." He obeyed and shied away from her in submission. Otis now felt a trickle of sweat roll down his collar upon seeing Bessie return to the store that afternoon. He escaped out the back door before she could see him.

Bessie stood in front of the frozen food coolers, trying to decide what TV dinners to get. Opting for a Lean Cuisine Teriaki & Rice and some egg rolls for herself, she thought, *What the heck would Elmer want?* It didn't really matter much because he'd eat whatever she put on the table, smacking his lips and declaring she was a wonderful cook. And he really meant it.

When did I become so soured with Elmer? With life? She felt a twinge of guilt. Perhaps she was the problem. He wasn't the handsome hunk nor was she the voluptuous vixen being swept off her feet on the cover of her favorite romance novels, but he came home to her every night. With a shaking hand she reached for the regular Banquet Fried Chicken dinner but hesitated and then chose for Elmer the Hungry Man Country Fried Chicken meal instead. *I'm gonna give him another chance to do something nice for me. I'm not a rock he can toss into that cardboard box and ignore. I'm a woman who needs some attention and affection.*

After pondering further on his feelings for Bessie, Elmer didn't go directly home, making a detour to a store he'd never been in before. He was sure he could deflect her wrath at his tardiness by what was inside the small box he held in his hands. He felt virile and powerful.

5:45! Bessie glared at the kitchen wall clock with an anger so hot it could have made the hands on the dial melt down to 6:30. *So much for trying to be patient with him!* She was

beginning to regret unloading the ammo from the pistol on the table. She'd only left it there to make a point about her annoyance with him, but now she was thinking about making holes in something or someone. Out of the kindness of her tepid heart she'd left the oven on so she could pop in Elmer's Hungry Man dinner when he walked in the door. But now she wondered, *Why do I even try to do nice things for him?*

Bessie broke her reverie of drumming her red nails on the formica table top when Elmer strutted in, her eyes nearly bugging out. She'd never seen him do such a manly walk, shoulders back and standing taller. Before she could close her gaping mouth to speak, Elmer said, in a strong yet tender voice, "This is for you," and he showed her the outside of the geode. *Just what I wanted*, thought Bessie, *a rock*. But when he turned it around so she could see the glittering crystals inside she was speechless.

"These aren't ordinary geode crystals. They are a rare lavender, the same color as Elizabeth Taylor's eyes...and yours." The box rattled when she shook it. Removing the lid she saw gold jewelry settings for earrings and a pendant. "Pick which crystals you want to have mounted in these. Gems for my gem."

Gasping in surprise she stood, gazing lovingly into his hazel eyes, and taking his dusty face in her hands, Bessie gave him a long kiss. Breathlessly she muttered, "Dinner will be ready in a few minutes."