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"What is my purpose?"
wondered the dog.
"What am I to do with my days?"

Woman Born Fully Formed

Marlene Wurfel

Many men have scrupulously slogged through the paradoxes, the problematics, the pedantics—the whole tangled mess of space, time, and spacetime travel. They have devised numerous arguments against its probability—against its possibility. They have prepared documents, lectures and refutations. They have permuted and computed. They have scribbled, squabbled, and scrawled. They have scratched their furrowed brows and wrung their elegant hands.

"Look here," says one. "I have proven that time travel is impossible. I call my proof: *Thermodynamic Law and the Inviolability of Energy Time Conservation via Isotropic and Anisotropic Radiation Measurement*. It is very clever. You should read it."

"Yes, well, look here," says another, more famous man; "If it were possible for men to travel through time, then our quaint little present would be swamped with tourists and their wives from the smoggy future, wouldn't it? But men have not traveled here from the future. That is because time travel is not possible in the future. Nor has it been in the past, nor is it in the present. Men, therefore, cannot travel through time. I have prepared a lecture on the matter. It is very clever. You should attend."

Five hundred and twenty-eight years ago a woman lay on her back near a mossy stand of shivering poplar trees. She was being pleased

by an unskilled but persistent and terribly earnest young man. The sun hung low in the sky, large and yellow. The poplar leaves that shuffled and clattered in the wind were yellow too. The young man was dark brown from a long summer and slick with sweat.

After just under an hour of alternately patient and frantic coaching the woman had just reached climax when a blooming red blood vessel exploded in her brain. It was an aneurism. It killed her at the very crest of her orgasm. There was no dénouement.

The woman's afterlife was excruciating.

For five hundred and twenty-eight years she screamed, clutched and clenched, mad with the desire for release. Wherever her ghost passed, birds flew screaming from their perches, still waters would eddy and froth, skin would pucker, fur prickled, leaves curled, and ions reversed their charge.

It was five hundred and twenty-eight years until she finally found the spirit who had been with her at the moment of her unhappy demise. His elders had instructed him to expect and to fear her wrath in the spirit world and so he had been hiding his soul in the cool green boughs of a lone spruce tree. She was not wrathful when she found him, though. She was, in fact, eminently delighted.

"Get me off!" she told him in the language of spirits. "Get me off right now!"

He wasn't terribly sure how to begin. He'd lived a life of total abstinence after the woman's death. Also, he lacked bodily substance, as did she, and, he was desperately afraid of her. But, after five hundred and twenty-eight years of anticipation, the task was far less complicated than he could ever have imagined. It took so little effort on his part, really, for the whole bursting arc to unfurl and complete itself.

And then, such a tremendous release it was, such a soaring, lofty pleasure it was, such a marvelously quenching coup de grâce it was, that the woman spontaneously, in the circularity of the afterlife, conceived, gestated and bore herself.

She squeezed and thrust through the amniotic meat that separates this world from the other and fell naked and whole from the cool green boughs of the lone spruce into a place and time where the tree no longer existed. Some sixty odd miles north of the city of Calgary, the woman fell steaming onto a frozen and twisted field of wheat stubble.

She was greeted, immediately, by a white and red-freckled dog. The dog had been recently driven from his home by an unambiguous series of shot-gun blasts. The dog was fond of the thrill of fresh chicken

meat and because of this vice, could no longer peaceably co-exist with his owner. Now, homeless and jobless, the dog was in the midst of an existential crisis.

"What is my purpose?" wondered the dog. "What am I to do with my days? Who, on this machine-slashed, sun-slapped, gopher-infested prairie, will call me a good dog?"

The dog had been nervously circling the ground where the woman fell. His brilliant nose had a hunch about the genesis that shook the boughs of that long-since-obliterated-by-time spruce tree. The dog had been following his nose which had been following the hunch around the perimeter of the long-gone tree all morning.

"Ah ha!" said the dog when the woman fell from the sky. He was absolutely and immediately certain of his duty to love and protect the woman until death or worse should part them.

First things first, he licked the woman clean.

"Good dog," the woman sighed, slowly remembering the language of bodies and quickly forgetting the language of spirits.

Her lungs were seared, burnt and sore, and she cried and flailed for many hours while her vision began to function. Then she slept in the sun until her hunger and thirst coaxed her to learn how to crawl and then to stand and walk. The dog led her towards a perfect stream where they gulped sweet, cold, glacial water. The woman shook the wet strands of her own hair free from her face then looked affectionately at the dog. The dog wagged his tail and whimpered for joy.

Wherever the woman walked, the isotropic radiation released by her spontaneous generation warmed the way. As woman and dog traveled, the ground thawed around them. Where their feet fell, a trail of spring crocuses sprang into bloom behind them. The woman yanked the crunchy, crisp bulbs out of the warm earth and ate them like apples. The dog hunted gophers. They traveled for many days in this manner.

They traveled like water, along the path of least resistance. They headed South. They passed farm houses and silos, crossed gravel and asphalt roads, traveled underneath power lines and over fences. The highest point they reached was a sage and snow covered hill, just outside the great, gleaming city of Calgary. From the distance they observed it, the city looked like a geode split open to expose a sparkling bounty of crystal high-rises. Its pink, gold, green, and blue glass spires glinted in the sunshine so majestically that the woman, for a moment, lost her breath. When she caught it again, she, and the dog, ran towards the city.

At its limits they discovered a fragrant bush, heavy with Saskatoons and a startled cat with its ears and tail missing to frostbite. The woman ate greedily. When she was full, the cat looked so penetratingly at the woman, in that way only cats can, that she was filled with a sudden shame at being unclothed.

It was a simple matter, once the woman had the desire, to lie in wait for one of the joggers that loped around the asphalt city trails, and to ambush and take his reflective micro-fiber jacket, his fleece pants, and his Nike running shoes.

So clothed, the woman and the dog kept moving towards the city center, she taking whatever food tempted her, and he viciously rebuking any attempts to interfere with her urban foraging.

"You going to pay for that?" asked a Dairy Queen employee.

The woman cocked her head to one side. The dog snarled low.

"Well?" said the Dairy Queen employee.

The woman froze in place. The Dairy Queen employee stood with her arms crossed, her eyebrows raised, and one hip jutting out. She looked aggressive, the woman thought, like she might attack.

"Look here," said the Dairy Queen employee, "For starters, dogs aren't allowed in here. And you certainly can't just help yourself to an ice cream cake unless you're intending to pay for it."

The dog pulled his soft, black lips back and lowered his freckled ears. He growled low and viciously.

"All right, all right," said the Dairy Queen employee. "But I'm calling the cops."

The city lay under a thin layer of brittle white frost, but where the woman lay sleeping under a concrete overpass, a bed of dandelions and quack grass bloomed. Spiders hatched from eggs all around her.

The woman's hair was wild, her face was dirty, and the laces of her shoes were untied. Except to reprimand her for stealing, no one had attempted to speak with her since her arrival in the city. Nobody met her eyes when she stared.

The first person to gently wave "Hello" to the woman and her dog was a parched and jagged-looking man who was missing his entire top row of teeth. He sat watching the woman sleep in her bed of greenery and waited for her to wake-up. Then he waved, "Hello."

The man was filthy and dissolute. He'd long ago traded his soul to feed a deep drug habit that twisted and wrenched his bowels. His addiction had compelled him to perform many ungodly acts for many ungodly people. By now, he'd reached such a zenith of moral depravity

that he was able to see, with precise clarity, the perfect essences of things. This woman, he perceived, had a pure, pristine, and unsullied soul. After five hundred and twenty-eight years of scouring and spit-shining in the after-life, it positively gleamed.

"What difference would it make to anybody if I stole this woman's soul?" the man asked himself. "None whatsoever," he decided. "She is completely alone."

And so, there, under the concrete overpass, the man, using the last, tiny, decayed hunk of his own as bait, lured the woman's soul out of her body. It emerged from her throat in a silver, flashing arc, like a rainbow trout. The man swallowed it hungrily and was whole again.

The dog, who had been engaged by a flutter of pigeons when the deal went down, arrived only in time to snarl after the man whose being was infused with the pure joy of rebirth and renewal. The dog barked and howled as the man ran, danced, and leapt through traffic and away from the overpass, the woman, and the dog.

The woman was listless. She didn't stir from her bed of dandelions, even as it cooled then completely froze beneath her.

A bicycle courier, alarmed by the dreadful appearance of the woman under the overpass, phoned the authorities to report what he saw there. The dog and the woman, who was by now barely alive, were quickly transported to the respective institutions that house lost women and dogs.

The dog was put down after five days of mournful yowling.

But the woman, having lost her soul, rehabilitated quite marvelously. She was taught the names of common things and how to comb her hair and tie her shoes. She was taught to speak politely, to read, to write and to make jewelry out of scraps of leather and sparkle-glue.

After many years of re-education it was discovered that, like others before her who have lost their souls, the woman had a great talent for making money. She became fabulously wealthy. At first she made money in real estate, then in the acquisition of small businesses and later in junior oil stocks.

Despite her scads of money, her lovely home, her enviable job, and her soullessness, the woman still yearned for "more."

"Isn't there something *more* I should be doing with my life," she asked herself? "Perhaps," she thought, "I should fall in love."

She met a lanky and distracted astrophysicist at a fundraiser to upgrade the city's planetarium. He had spinach dip on the end of his tie.

"Ah ha!" said the woman.

His finances were a shambles, he had been divorced three times, and he had to be continually reminded to eat, drink and bathe. He was hopelessly lost within the convoluted abstractions of his own mind. He courted the woman absent-mindedly between his lectures and conferences. He proposed marriage in September, as yellow poplar leaves dropped from the trees, like silent gold coins falling to the ground.

The woman vowed to have and to hold the astrophysicist. She vowed to remind him to drink the cooling tea and to eat the drooping sandwiches that she placed on his desk vigilantly until death, or worse, should part them.

"Look here," the astrophysicist told his wife. "I have proven that time travel is impossible. I call my proof: *Thermodynamic Law and the Inviolability of Energy Time Conservation via Isotropic and Anisotropic Radiation Measurement*. It is very clever. You should read it."

"Yes, dear," she said, smoothing out his papers across their bird's-eye-maple dining room table. "It is very clever."

The woman missed the dog terribly for the rest of her life. Besides that, though, she was at peace. •