Cross

A short story by Tony Earley

WELL, TO START with, I’m dead old. Maybe more dead than old, that’s what my wife tells me, I don’t know, but who is she to talk? She’s dead old, too. To be honest, neither one of us has a tooth left in our head, and I don’t like looking at hers any more than she likes looking at mine.

It’s springtime, that big dogwood out in the yard is blooming like a teenage girl, the hostas are coming up finally, and the grass needs cutting. Only this time of year it ain’t so much the grass that needs cutting, but that purple stuff, the deadnettle or the chickweed, I can’t ever remember what it’s called. I don’t mind it so much, I think it’s kind of pretty, but my wife is all over me about it. Why don’t you do something about that? Why don’t you do something about that? It looks disgraceful. She sounds like a rusty hinge when she gets going on about something. What I want to say is, “Old woman, why don’t you do something about it if it bothers you so much,” but you don’t stay married coming up on 60 years going around saying whatever it is that happens to swim up inside your head. So I tell her, “I’m retired. Emphasis on tired.” Well, that always makes her snort, and she goes off in the kitchen and bangs things around and makes a racket. It’s a wonder we got a pot left in this house. Anyway, after while I’ll go on out to the shed and see if the lawn mower will crank, and if it does I’ll cut the grass. Until then, I guess I’ll just watch the war on television.

It’s a nice day, and with any luck at all, Wilma won’t show up. That’s a terrible thing to say, but it’s true. Wilma’s our oldest girl, 54 years old, and she’s on drugs, if you can believe that, somebody that age. She never comes by the house unless she wants money or she’s already high. One way she cusses at us because we won’t give her any money, and the other way she just cusses at us and says all her problems are our fault. (And who knows, maybe they are.) Wilma is crazy as a bat, and she broke our hearts years ago. We don’t open the door anymore. That’s what a drug counselor told us to do. Don’t open the door, he said. So we don’t. And she’s been messed up for so long, and cussed at us so much, that we’ve hardened up like a couple of scabs. Wilma can be going on out in the yard, calling us every vile name she can think of, and us in here watching television, and we won’t think no more about it than if it was a dog barking.

The deadnettle out in the yard is a new thing, just the last five or six years, however long it’s been since the tornado came through. That tornado blew it in here, I’ll swear by it, and it’s taking over the place. I’ll take the deadnettle, though. Like I said, I think it’s kind of pretty, and things could’ve been a whole lot worse. The funnel came through here less than a hundred yards away and tore down several houses and ripped the roofs off a whole bunch of others, but we didn’t lose a shingle. Not a shingle. Not a bush. Not a bloom off that dogwood. I’d always heard that a tornado sounded like a freight train, but that’s not how this one sounded. This one just came through here with a great big WHOOSH and then it was gone. The old lady and me were laying in the bed taking a nap, or trying to. It’d been bad all day, warnings and the TV getting interrupted, bad wind and thunder and lightning and what not, but you can only watch that for so long and we decided to take our nap anyway. Right before it hit, the wind didn’t seem no worse or better than it had been all day, and it never got that dead still like you always hear it does. (You hear all kinds of things about tornadoes, all of them wrong, near as I can figure.) Anyway, I don’t know how I knew it was coming, but I did. Maybe the light changed. Or maybe I knew the way a dog knows about an earthquake. But I knew. And when I knew, I just rolled over on top of the old woman and she looked up at me and said, “Lord God. What in the world are you doing?”

And I said, “We ain’t got a basement.” And she looked at me like I was crazy and continued on page 86.

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