

The Knight

“You’re like Cinderella,” Larry said to his fiancé as she handed him a sandwich. The desert sun radiated between them inside the car. The air conditioning was out again. Larry kept one eye on the road as he looked at Lena with appreciation, not just for the sandwich, but for all she had given him. Lena smiled good-naturedly as Larry picked at the sprouts.

“I’m like the coachman,” continued Larry.

“What do you mean?” asked Lena. She saved him from the sprouts, adding them to her own sandwich.

“You belong with a prince or a knight,” Larry answered, placing the sandwich on the dashboard and reaching for the road map. He did not explain that he was not a prince, that he didn’t even have princely aspirations.

“It’s just a sandwich. Cinderella? Any minute I could turn into a pumpkin, just like the carriage. I love you too.”

Larry looked out the window at one cactus after another, imagining them to be saying “stop, wrong way” or “welcome, nice to see you” with their arms in the air.

“Did I ever tell you those glass slippers are a little tight?”, Lena laughed.

Larry signaled back into the slow lane after passing two semi-trucks. He returned Lena’s smile. They would have had cool air if they’d taken Lena’s Prius, not to mention the savings on gas. They decided to save that argument for another day. Luckily, it wasn’t summer yet.

His knee was feeling better thanks to the physical therapy. It was a bullet ten years ago that first injured his knee. The second knee surgery was last month. Newly forming scars crisscrossed with the old scar ridges. The pain had been unrelenting afterward. One night, Larry was yelling out in agony. Lena rushed him to the emergency room. A stent was surgically placed inside a vein to keep blood clots from traveling to Larry’s lungs. Lena, his savior.

Larry put on his sunglasses and rolled up his shirt sleeves. He felt at the front pocket of his jeans to be sure the letter was still there.



“How’s your knee?” asked Lena, as she handed him some water. She leaned over and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You should have let me drive.”

Larry could feel his knee throbbing a little. It was his right leg where the surgical battles had taken place. He thought he’d be able to drive okay. She was right. Rest.

“I’ll stop up the road here for a break. Time for another walk. Hope I don’t have to run from a snake. You’ve got the wheel next,” Larry said.

The bullet in his knee had been the least of it. That day turned his mind into a twisted torrent of doubt and remorse. *Do old ghosts ever leave you alone?* Larry looked at the tumbleweeds scurrying in both directions across the highway in front of him, like the wind couldn’t make up its mind either.

He eased the car off the highway at a roadside rest. Lena got out of the car and struck up a conversation with a married couple, with twins and two dogs. Flat, dry land stretched to brown hills on one side and a mountain range on the other. Larry stepped carefully on the uneven dirt.

In the high shadowed crevices of the mountains, he saw something unexpected. *It can’t be.* He narrowed his eyes as if that would better focus his vision, and determined that, yes, what he saw was snow. It didn’t look very far away. *Snow in the desert. Amazing.* Looking toward the San Gorgonio pass, he spotted something else unfamiliar to him. *Giant white aliens?* Dozens of high cylindrical towers, with their three-pronged rotating blade arms. *What? Is this place on my map?* On this barren yellow land, all around him, reptiles with skin as hard as the rocks they scurried under, watched and schemed against him with their marble eyes. Larry allowed himself a smile and relaxed distractedly. When Lena sneaked up behind him, he nearly fell over.

“I startled you,” apologized Lena.

“No, I was on another planet,” Larry mumbled.

“Let’s get moving. Our house adventure awaits us,” Lena gently urged.

Sitting on the passenger side now, Larry wondered how much longer he’d be able to feign his interest in buying a house in the desert. He glanced guiltily over at Lena, who was deftly maneuvering his 1976 Cadillac Coupe, his baby, in and around the big trucks, her back relaxed against the seat. Larry closed his eyes and imagined her back pressing warmly against his chest. Larry had begun to wonder if it was Lena’s essence alone which effortlessly pulsed both of their



hearts. Often, she seemed to be the one who sensuously held them together, in their love making and otherwise. A vehicle's horn blasted nearby, so loud and close Larry instinctively braced for impact.

"How 'bout one of those date shakes the signs are bragging about?" Larry suggested.

"Can we please wait until town and get the good ones with soy?"

She was driving him to the future. *How would he tell her he didn't want to go?*

Cruising along Palm Canyon Drive, Larry felt his mood shift a little. He was back on earth amongst brilliant pastel buildings and gleeful people sitting in sidewalk cafes with cool mists of water. Green oasis promises surrounded him. He and Lena ate at a vegetarian restaurant. Larry poked at his veggie burger dubiously. Soon they were back on the road to the realtor's office, with Lena determined to see a couple of the houses on the list before nightfall.

Inside the first dwelling, they followed their fast-talking realtor. The current owners were not at home. While Lena inspected the backyard, and the realtor fired off details of square footage and copper pipes into Lena's eager ears, Larry doubled back to the kitchen. Still hungry, he pulled open the refrigerator. With silent thanks for the abundance inside, greedily he grabbed a fried chicken leg and gulped milk from the carton.

Larry rejoined the women. Lena looked at him with something between a question and a frown as if she could smell the meat. He moved to the window pretending to admire the framing, and looked past the sage brush, and their lengthening shadows, toward the setting sun. *Ghosts, like shadows, are impossible to escape.* The bloodshot yellow eye stared back at him.

Answering her phone and walking toward the front door, the realtor gave them a nod. "Take your time." Lena tugged at Larry's sleeve. After her reminder, he checked out the backyard.

Meanwhile, Lena grabbed his jacket, and she swept up Larry's twice folded realtor's sheet from the floor.

How do you confront a ghost? Sitting in the back of the realtor's car, Larry kept ruminating about the past. The passing of time had only empowered the ghost. The faster and farther he ran, the larger and closer the ghost's image grew until his own shadow was two shadows...until every thought in his head



was two thoughts. One belonging to himself. One belonging to the ghost. He tried to escape by closing his eyes. Before long, he was asleep. Lena noticed his fitfulness.

Lena was about to transfer the papers in her hand to her house hunting folder when she saw the letter Larry had folded inside his realtor's sheet.

Lena read the contents. It was dated recently, on the tenth anniversary of the shooting. A woman named Carol was thanking Larry again for saving her life and that of her unborn child on that fateful day. She also pleaded with him to understand that he couldn't have saved the boy on the bicycle. He couldn't have saved everyone. Everything had happened too fast she said. She asked him to please forgive himself because there was nothing to forgive. She wondered if one day they might yet be friends. Let me remind you of the good of that day, she implored.

Larry woke just as the realtor pulled in to drop them at their hotel. After she left, Lena handed the letter to Larry and confessed she had read it. His yearning poured out, "I've been wanting to share..." but Lena caught him in a tight embrace. They stayed like that on the boulevard under the hotel's neon for a long time. He felt her love for him. He felt his love for her too. Lena whispered softly, barely audible, in his ear, "Not a knight, huh?"

