

STREET OF DREAMS

BY STEVEN BLAIR WHEELER

The Sunday morning light felt as strange as it looked. The pearl gray overcast had an odd rosy hue. Saturday had been breezy and warm and a night wind gusting through her open window had awakened her. But now it was still, which pleased her husband Christopher who had a 7 AM tee time.

Isabella was fine with having the place to herself that morning. She would not be idle. She rose from their king bed and was in the kitchen making tea amid the lingering aroma of breakfast burrito when he called, “Morning, Bella!”

“Good luck,” she replied, and meant it, but not just in the usual sense.

She let the tea brew hearing the car trunk and door and garage open and close and the Jaguar F-Type convertible driving off. Last night he’d asked if he could drive it after their dinner guests had finally departed. She’d said of course. It was really his car anyway since he’d refused to buy the electric model. Her point that an electric would be perfect because they’d never take a long trip in it was overborne by the growl of the V8 engine. He said that they were already helping the planet with her hybrid CRV. He did not say so, but she knew that he also wanted to avoid “tree hugger” comments from other execs at work and the club.

The Jag was his latest toy following the stupid-looking high-topped van he’d had to have two years ago. His idea was that they could go on weekend trips and not have to check into a hotel or BnB. The idea sounded good, but washing dishes in a tiny sink with less water pressure than a good stream of pee was dreadful. And it was no fun driving like an old maid worrying that it might tip over on a curve.

So when he just had to buy a huge new house on that year’s Street of Dreams, which made zero sense now that Jessie and Sam were away at college, she’d insisted that they sell the van to lower the McMansion mortgage. That wasn’t really necessary,

but it was her chance to get rid of the behemoth. He'd conceded because he already had his eye on the Jag.

Isabella carried her tea and scone up to her studio regarding the oddly roseate world outside. The view included a stretch of fairway leading to the 9th hole of the Chesterton Golf Club, of which her husband was a proud member as if the only thing exclusive about it wasn't the exorbitant membership fee. In a while, he'd be along in a golf cart. He'd wave, but she wouldn't be looking.

His partner was their odious neighbor Jason Wright who had a Napoleon-sized ego with scant justification. She'd put up with him and his ditzy wife 'Ahna' during dinner. Only a ditz could live with a reactionary jerk like Jason. This morning he and Christopher were playing against two more conservative creeps who could give Jason a run in the self-assessment department and fit in perfectly with the SOD crowd.

The big house was silent without even the whir of the heat pump. She did some breathing exercises to release negative energy and gazed at her work in progress. It was a large landscape of a beautiful corner of the Tualatin Valley near Helvetia. That's where she'd have bought property if Christopher hadn't gotten agog over the SOD monstrosity.

The best thing about the place was her studio with its wonderful light through the south and west windows. It was the roomiest space she'd ever had and she had been able to create in it. But dismissing the negative energy that surrounded it had become more difficult. She hadn't lifted a brush in two weeks.

Even so, *Helvetia Idyll* was nearly complete. She'd captured late summer afternoon light on the wheat fields against the rich deep blues of the foothills and blue-purple of the distant coast range over which sailed a few wispy clouds that the setting sun would set ablaze in golden orange and red against heavenly blues. It wasn't a sunset scene, but the promise of one. Viewers should feel the sun on their face as though standing behind the lovely old church. So much of her painting was about what was not in the picture, but what influenced how you felt being there. She intended to add hints of leaves overhead to suggest the majestic oak over the viewer's right shoulder...

Bang!

A golf ball hitting the house was always startling and she would have spilled her tea if there was more left. Had Christopher done that? But he couldn't be near the 9th hole already, and he probably wouldn't be that reckless. Not after having replaced a window stung by the insurance deductible. The cost and bother were frustrating, but what really irked him was the club's hiding behind a liability clause. Upset as he was, she had not reminded him how he'd belittled the risk before the sale. She used that pinch of moral superiority to nix a tall hedge.

Christopher Moore could afford to replace a window or two. He made a mid-six figure salary with generous stock options as the CTO of a big optics company and relished the status that went with it. But he'd been toying with the idea of retiring to do consulting until he discovered the McMansion opportunity.

Doubting that he was really ready to quit his head honcho job, and not wanting him in her hair all day, Isabella had encouraged him to go out on a win by completing his latest project. And, the bonus would pay off the mortgage without having to sell stocks.

Of course they didn't really need the money, and she had her own from her painting and inheritance.

But she'd so much rather have her parents. She'd lost her beloved father six years ago to a heart attack, and as sudden and hard as that was her mother had passed last fall. The doctors said it was the cancer, but she knew it was a broken heart. Cecilia and Roland Olivera had been college sweethearts and as close as two people could get. The pain of missing them cut sharply and she hugged herself in her chair.

Cece and Rolly had been great parents to her and her younger brother Sammy. Rolly's dentistry had provided for his family, and Cece had kept the books for years while being a wonderful mother and a skilled potter. When she and Sammy were old enough to travel they'd had many fun vacations. A top favorite was Monument Valley which had really inspired her to paint. Her rendition of The Mittens hung over the family room fireplace.

Cece and Rolly had many shared interests which kept them well-connected and very happy together. They'd been, and were inspirational.

They'd liked Christopher and adored their grandchildren, but after Rolly passed, and despite Cece's diagnosis of colon cancer, her mother had recognized that her daughter and son-in-law seemed to be drifting apart.

Isabella had said, "I know you and Dad never did, but don't most people?"

Cece'd said, "Oh Izzy, you'd better come for lunch tomorrow so we can talk."

Isabella welcomed the invitation. She loved their Grant Park home. She and Sammy had gone to Grant High, had actually walked to school. Their bedrooms were now used by Sammy and Laney and their twin daughters when they came home for Christmas or when Emma and Ellie visited in the summer. Her brother and sister-in-law both worked with the Keck Observatory on the big island and had a home near Papaikou.

For lunch, Cece had served fish tacos and fruit salad which they'd eaten in the cozy breakfast nook looking onto the fine backyard that Cece tended with the devotion of a master gardener. Isabella and Sammy had spent many happy hours playing in the tree house in the huge old oak, in the gazebo by the water feature, or croquet or badminton on the wide lawn whose bordering planting beds eagerly swallowed a ball or birdie.

Their home on Thompson Street had once belonged to a former mayor and was a wonderful example of classic charm from the music room to the library and the gleaming foyer all tastefully decorated for elegance and comfort.

Mother and daughter ate lunch with the sun illuminating the garden flowers and humming birds. They'd finished their tacos and were working on the salad when Cece gave her a considering look. "So Izzy, are you really going to let him buy on the Street of Dreams?"

Isabella chewed a grape and gave her mother a long-suffering eye-roll.

Cece nodded sagely. "I knew it! Why?"

Isabella regarded her for a moment trying to conceal a devilish smile, but Cece saw it in her eyes.

"It'll keep him busy."

"And what will you be doing while he's busy?"

"Planning my getaway."

Cece considered that for a moment. And as happened much more often now that she was facing her mortality, she focused not on the why, but the how. "When do you plan to leave?"

Isabella swallowed the strawberry she'd been chewing knowing that her mother would cycle back to the why later. "Not for a while yet. Maybe in a year. Sam will be a sophomore and Jessie a senior."

"And maybe I'll be dead."

Cece's matter-of-fact statement caused Isabella to drop the fork and take her mother's hand. Through her constricted throat, she said, "I hope not, Mommy!"

Cece squeezed her hands with a sad smile. "I'm not kidding myself, dearest. And I'm not going to go through months of miserable treatment just to be sick as a dog every day and night until I die anyway. We've talked about this."

"I know, Mommy," Isabella said, tears welling. "I know, and I'll be here with you no matter what."

She'd hugged her mother who'd returned it with the love she'd known all her life.

And she'd been right about Cece's eventually asking about the why, but was surprised that it was so long in coming. Isabella had taken her to an infusion treatment and driven her home. It was the second session and Cece had weathered the first pretty well, but this time she looked tired.

In the kitchen, Isabella said, "Why don't I fix you some herbal tea while you relax?"

Cece put her purse on the table and sank into a chair. "I don't know if I could keep it down. Maybe a little water first, dear?"

Isabella poured filtered water into her mother's favorite mug, set it on a coaster by her, and got busy with kettle and tea leaves.

Cece sipped water sitting back against the chair. She closed her eyes and Isabella wondered if she might slip into a doze.

"Would you rather lie on the couch, Mom?"

With a slight shake of her head, Cece breathed deeply. She opened her blue eyes and said, "Not just now, dearest. So, what're you going to tell Christopher?"

"Oh? Well in that case, I'm going to have a glass of wine."

"I'll join you. Forget the tea."

And so she'd laid it out for Cece over sauvignon blanc. "I always thought, or hoped, that one day he'd grow up. But he never has, and never will. Even losing Fred and Barb didn't do it."

Cece nodded holding the stem of her wine glass that rested on the table. "He's just like his father, and he doesn't have your depth of soul. I always wondered how long you'd be able to tolerate that. I'm not saying he's incapable of deep thought, but his mind runs in a different track."

Isabella's expression showed knowing acceptance strained by long years of experience. "He used to be fun," she said, "and we had some really great years especially when the kids were in grade school. But his career claimed more and more of his attention, and I think he's really come to accept the management's conservative crap. I bet if it wasn't for me, he'd have voted for that scum!"

"How do you know he didn't?"

"I made sure I saw his ballot."

Cece smiled appreciatively and sipped wine. "You don't think he has someone on the side? You don't."

"No and no. But I don't think he'll let the sheets cool all that long."

She might have added that he'd probably pick a woman with big boobs. He'd once brought up the idea of breast augmentation and earned a week of sleeping in Jessie's vacant room. If their daughter hadn't gone off to the U of O the month before, it would've been a couch. That was practically the straw that did the camel in.

Cece had closed her eyes again and breathed.

"You look tired, Mom. Let's go into the living room."

"In a minute," Cece'd said, then looked at her. "Just tell me: what are you hoping for?"

Isabella'd made a little shrug. "I think I'd just like to be on my own for a while. Not alone, but on my own. Be free to paint and come and go as I want, not have to cook for anyone unless I want to. But be around for you and Jessie and Sam. I'd love to go visit Sammy and Laney and the twins for a while. You know, do some painting..."

"Would you date?"

"I suppose if someone worthy comes along."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," Cece assured her. "You could move home. Turn your old room into a studio. Lots of good light up there."

Isabella had smiled with profound affection and took her mother's hand. "I just might take you up on that."

Despite the doctors' care, Cece's cancer had spread to her lungs which she found hard to fathom since she'd never smoked a day in her life. Based on the prognosis, Cece had refused a second round of chemo and in the end took the cocktail with her and Sammy in the hospice room. It was heart-breakingly sad, but they respected her choice. And Isabella took fierce pride in her mother's courage.

Cece's last words to her had been, "Now you can move home. I love you forever."

Later she and Sammy had talked about the house. They'd inherited it free and clear and both loved it. Luckily, they did not have to sell, though a cousin was very interested. While her brother wanted to move back to Portland one day, he was committed to his work in Hawaii for a few more years. Isabella had then shared her plan to leave Christopher and her hope to move home. Sammy's concern over the news extended to insisting that she live at home and offering to help with expenses. Isabella gratefully embraced her loving brother and assured him that she could handle it. They were content to let the matter rest between them.

Now, with the rosy glow diminishing as the sun rose higher, she finished her tea and blueberry scone. But some part of her thoughts had been puzzled by the weather and she remembered that it might really be forest fire smoke. This time it was south of Salem. Two years ago a wicked fire had raged along the Santiam Pass destroying towns and the magical old growth forest around Opal Creek. It had also razed the home of a potter she knew in Mill City. She and Cece had donated to the gofundme site and he and his wife had rebuilt on their property above the Santiam with structures and landscaping less prone to fire.

She took her mug and plate down the ostentatious staircase to the open main floor which she hated. Why in hell would you want your kitchen exposed to the living room? And it had cost a bundle to install blinds on all the windows to avoid living in a goldfish bowl. She'd had a mind to sketch the architect hanging in a garret and send it to him for a Christmas card. *Here's what I think of your design, hotshot!*

She washed, dried and put away the breakfast dishes, then did a light stretching routine thinking of what she'd say when she met the kids for lunch in Corvallis. Sam was a Beaver and Jessie was a Duck. Jessie would not be surprised, and maybe Sam wouldn't either. But it would still be upsetting and she'd stress that she'd do everything possible to make things easy.

She took a shower and washed her hair thinking of what more to pack. She'd already taken some clothes and things home.

Maybe later, or tomorrow, she'd phone Sammy and arrange a visit.

She stepped out of the big modern shower thinking that might be one thing she'd miss. But really, who needed a shower as big as the entire bathroom in their first house?

She toweled off and donned her bra and panties. Her breasts might not be as perky as they'd once been, but they were perfectly fine, healthy, and all her own.

Isabella dried her dark brown hair and regarded herself. She'd be sixty in a couple of months. She still had her figure, though her waist was a bit less pronounced, and her hair showed some gray. She didn't really mind that and thought she might just go natural.

But she was avoiding the issue of what she was going to say to her husband of 28 years, the father of her children, her life companion...

He'd be terribly hurt and surprised because they seldom fought, though disagreements had become more frequent these past few years. As the kids became more independent, and her joy in life eroded, she'd never said that she was unhappy. She knew that happiness was relative and had all the creature comforts, but the suburban housewife role was smothering, especially when surrounded by conservative cretins.

As for talking about it, there never seemed to be any point. He was who he was and would never change. No amount of couples counseling would make him grow up, or be less malleable to the opinions of those in authority he respected.

It was hardly all about him, anyway. Their lifestyle was a weary burden and she had to get out before she spiced a dinner with rat poison!

Isabella regarded herself with an odd mixture of determination and sadness. This was going to be painful.

She applied moisturizer and a hint of blush, and made sure that she had makeup in her purse. She selected a comfortable pair of light blue jeans and an olive and pastel green leaf-printed blouse that Cece'd given her.

She wished that she could just leave a note, but he deserved the respect of being told face-to-face. So she texted Christopher to make sure that he would be home by noon before she left for Corvallis. He replied with a thumbs up.

She pulled her CRV into the garage and closed the door to load her suitcases not wanting to give bitchy Allison across the street any hint of something unusual going on. She relished the idea of never again seeing Allison and Doug Pike and their shiny black Humvee and right-wing election lawn signs.

She returned to the kitchen seeing that it was only 10:01.

Too early to call the big island, and that should wait, anyway.

She popped a slice of cucumber into a glass of ice water and carried it up to her studio to see if she could do some useful work. She readied her palette while studying the canvas and to her surprise went straight to it. She felt inspired. Her brushwork flowed as though she was at peace. She didn't pause to question it, but simply enjoyed the moment that enabled her to complete the picture to her entire satisfaction.

Isabella admired it delighted with the finished piece. If she ever sold it, she'd have to paint another. She cleaned her palette and brushes and was putting them away when the Jag pulled into the driveway. She removed her smock, straightened her blouse and hair and went downstairs steeling her nerve with butterflies swarming in her tummy.

Christopher was in the kitchen pouring a glass of water and wrapping up a business call. He was four years older, four inches taller, and weighed 60 more pounds. He stomach was pronounced from lack of proper exercise, but his recent annual physical was good, although his GP recommended that he lose the gut.

From behind his dark aviator sunglasses he smiled as she entered. He was still a handsome man.

"Okay," he said into his cell, "we'll talk more tomorrow. Stay on it, Ray. Thanks."

Trying not to sound nervous, she smiled and asked, "Did you have a good round?"

"Yeah, I did!" Christopher quaffed his water, then reached a Hawaiian beer from the fridge, opened it and took a swig. "Mmm, that hits the spot. How about you? Get some painting done?"

"Yup," she said with a certain triumph. "In fact, I finished it."

"Oh, great! Let's have a look!"

She led the way upstairs with the butterflies doing loops.

He patted her buns. "Nice tush."

It was an old come-on that had worked for him in the past when she used to respond by giving him a wiggle. She said, "That's nice to hear." She almost added, 'I'm glad Jason didn't come in with you.', but that would've been too suggestive. "Did you guys win?"

"Almost. Carter made a lucky putt for birdie that clinched it for them."

"That's too bad," she said. They entered the studio and she stood aside.

He perched his sunglasses in his graying light brown hair. "Oh, honey, it's marvelous! Look how you've got the fields glowing against the coast range. I can almost feel the sun on my shoulder."

Such enthusiastic praise would have made the devil himself smile. She was pleased that her views on art were now his, too.

He put an arm around her waist. "Are you thinking of selling it?"

"I don't know," she said. "But I certainly could."

"In a heartbeat! It's lovely, and so are you."

She averted her face to take his kiss on her cheek.

He was a little surprised. "I thought you'd be happy with this masterpiece."

"I am, Chris." She withdrew from his embrace. "But I'm afraid we have to talk."

"Oh?" He regarded her with his expression morphing into concern. "What's up?"

Isabella had thought this would happen in the living room with both of them sitting down. Improvising, she said, "Let's sit on the bed."

She sat on the edge of it and he followed leaving his beer behind. He stuck his glasses into the V of his yellow polo shirt as he sat next to her. Concerned, he asked, "Are the kids okay?"

She swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded. "They're fine. Chris, I'm sorry, but I think our marriage has pretty much run its course."

Christopher looked like he'd been stunned by a heavy blow. He blinked in wonder regarding her doubtfully with maybe a fleeting trace of hope that she was kidding.

"You're leaving me?"

Isabella nodded. "Yes, Chris. I'm sorry, but I am."

Christopher gazed at the cream-colored carpeting lost in a situation so unexpected, so alien that he had no words.

Her heart aching, Isabella gently laid a hand on his arm. "I know this is a surprise, Chris, but it'll be alright in time."

Christopher stood out from under her hand and moved to the doorway shoulders sagging. He turned toward her and leaned against the jam. With his arms across his chest, he shook his head a little and muttered, "Damn!"

He straightened and his hands dropped into a gesture of supplication. "Is it this place? I know it wasn't your first choice. We can sell it and move wherever you want."

Saddened by his desperation, Isabella shifted on the bed. "That's part of it, Chris. But the reality is we've grown apart and there's no fixing it."

His hands fell as he raised his chin. "You mean you don't want to try, is that it?"

Isabella remained still. He had never been and would never be violent, but she did not want to stoke anger. "If we went to couples counseling for months," she said, "we'd wind up where we are now, Chris. I'm convinced that we'll be better off apart."

He re-crossed his arms. "How long has this been coming, then?"

Isabella shifted her feet. "I talked about it with Mom. I wanted the kids to be settled in school, and you settled here."

Christopher leaned back against the door jam and shook his head in disbelief mumbling, "Jesus Christ!" Then, anger flaring he demanded: "Is there someone else?!"

"No." She replied evenly and held his gaze so that he would know it was true. "I know this is a shock, but really it's for the best. You'll see." She stood. "I have to drive down to Corvallis in a minute."

He sat in her vanity chair looking overcome. "Where will you go? Thompson street?"

"Yes, and I think I'll go visit Sammy and Laney and the girls for a while."

With a flash of suspicious incredulity he asked, "Have you already spoken to a lawyer?"

She clasped her hands at her waist looking at him with sympathy hoping to reassure him that she was not so calculating. "No, I haven't. And please, Chris, let's work together on this. I'm not looking to take you to the cleaners." Her voice deepening she said, "I still care for you. Look, I'll meet with the kids, and then I'll be at home this evening on Thompson."

Christopher followed her downstairs and when she picked up her keys from the kitchen counter, he asked, "You're going now, just like that? You've probably already packed..."

"Yes. Listen, I'll call you later, okay? I don't want the kids to wait and wonder."

Christopher nodded woodenly. "No," he said in a dazed tone. "You're right. You'd better go on, then."

She paused and gently touched his cheek. "We'll all be okay, Chris. We really will."

He covered her hand for a moment, then removed it and let her go. Tears glistened in his eyes. He said brokenly, "Bella..."

She hugged him feeling her own tears starting, released him and walked to her car wiping her eyes as she got in.

Brushing away his own tears, he asked, "Are you alright to drive?"

She sniffed and grabbed a kleenex to dab her eyes and blow her nose. "I will be."

She pushed the garage button. The rising door revealed the Jag parked behind her.

"Hang on," he said. "I'll get my keys."

She gave him a grateful, watery smile as he returned. He moved the Jag to the other side of the driveway and she backed out carefully seeing Allison across the way.

Isabella stopped beside him and put down the passenger window. "We can talk later, okay?"

"Sure," he said, sad and bereft. "Mind your driving, Bella."

She smiled as best she could, dabbed her eyes and carefully backed out with Allison staring from behind a rose bush. Isabella flipped her the bird.