

“Return to me,” repeated the voice.

For some reason, Crazy Man checked under his arms and finding nothing but sweat stains on his Keystone Cops tunic, he checked the soles of his beaver tail shoes. Nothing.

“Over here,” said the voice, a little louder.

They craned their necks in unison and there it was...the source of the voice. Behind them. They turned and stared, their eyes ablaze with questions and wonder at the sight. They stared directly into the maw of a giant mouth-like, petal-enclosed, tongue-like shape that loomed over the path of adventure and new meanings like a flower of out of Edgar Allen Poe’s favorite nightmare. However, they were somehow comforted by the sight.

“Return to me,” said the shape.

“What are you?” said Crazy Man.

“I am the womb of life,” said the womb of life. “I will immerse you in the warmth and comfort of the unborn in a sort of reborn kind of way that’s too complex to explain, so you’ll just have to take my word for it. You can step into me now.”

The voice of the womb of life was cuddly and reassuring. It pulsed with a graceful rhythm reminiscent of waves lapping on a moonlit shore, but Crazy Man and the dog, Sidestepper, had become seasoned travelers and they weren’t having any of this *step in now* talk, which was almost always an invitation to step into a world of shit. And besides, Crazy Man was nowhere close to exploring this outside thing and the dog, Sidestepper, would be doomed to walking sideways forever if he didn’t find his mother. Crazy Man scanned the petals for signs of maps to food.

“Forget those things,” said the womb of life as though it had been reading their thoughts or the story’s narrative. “All that will fade as all things fade with the passage of relevance. I offer you the comfort and safety of the re-unborn.”

Crazy Man and the dog, Sidestepper, were flummoxed. It was a tempting offer but they’d become more than a little attached to the journey and what the womb of life’s offer sounded a little on the boring side.

“But what can you offer that’s neater than a whole new day in the making?” said Crazy Man.

“I offer you escape from the whole new day and all the uncertainty and threat the ‘new’ offers,” said the womb of life. “I offer you the sublime comfort of eternal sameness.”

Crazy Man and the dog, Sidestepper, were immediately suspicious. These words from the womb of life sounded familiar. Had they been here before? Was this a recurring trap? Was there more to life than pain and angst? Surely to god there would be at least a bite of food somewhere in that gaping womb.

“No,” said the womb of life. “There will be no chewy food, just a big old tube buried somewhere under your belly button. You won’t even see it.”

“How can we not see it?” said Crazy Man. “I look at my belly button all the time. Sometimes I talk to it. I don’t want anybody sticking tubes into it.”

“You won’t be aware of the tube,” said the womb of life. “You won’t be aware of anything but the comfort of not being aware of anything.”

“Sounds a lot like being dead,” said the dog, Sidestepper.

“You’ll be sort of dead but you won’t be aware of being sort of dead,” said the womb of life.

“But that sounds like being dead,” said the dog, Sidestepper.

“But you’ll be aware of the comfort,” said the womb of life. “I think.”

“You think?” said the dog, Sidestepper.

“Well,” said the womb of life, “one doesn’t jump to hasty conclusions in these matters. I’ve been doing a lot of research on the matter and it looks, so far, like you have a very comfortable fifty-fifty chance.”

“Fifty-fifty chance of what?” said Crazy Man.

“Well, uh...” said the womb of life. “I guess a fifty-fifty chance of being dead or being re-wombed. But hey, you got anything better to do? Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“But,” said the dog, Sidestepper, “if we stay on the path of adventure and new meanings, we have a hundred percent chance of being not-dead and we’ve already escaped from the womb once so why would we go back?”

“Because now you know what it’s like outside the womb,” said the womb of life. “No mothers, no food, no comfort, no direction...”

“No,” said the dog, Sidestepper. “There’s lots of direction.” He pointed his nose forward towards the horizon sinking below the path before them. “The path of adventure and new meanings is our direction.”

“Right,” said Crazy Man, “and who needs comfort when you can be attacked by mean birds and large cat-like creatures that turn out to be cats?”

It was the womb of life’s turn to be flummoxed. “But why would you want to be attacked by birds and cats when you can just relax and let me ward off all evils and keep you safe from the path.”

Crazy Man and the dog, Sidestepper, glanced at each other briefly. The womb of life was beginning to sound like a con artist. Caution would be required.

“But,” said Crazy Man, “if we step into you and we don’t like it, can we step back out?”

“But you *will* like it,” said the womb of life. “The comfort. The lack of worry. The absence of pain. You’ll revel in the absence of everything but the comfort, the warmth, the soothing...”

“Sounds boring,” said the dog, Sidestepper.

“Will there be movies and popcorn?” said Crazy Man.

“Will there be Frisbees?” said the dog, Sidestepper.

The womb of life began shaking in a very un-womb-like manner. Petals appeared out of nowhere and the womb of life shed them as soon as they appeared. The ground piled up with discarded petals.

“Don’t listen to it,” said one of the petals. “It’s a trap.”

A giant furrowed tongue shot out of the womb of life and licked up the petal before it could say anything more, except: “Noooooooooooo...”

The womb of life burped and scowled at the other petals as if to say, “Would the rest of you like the same?”

But it was too late. Crazy Man and the dog, Sidestepper, knew a warning when they heard it. This womb of life was no womb of life...it was a non-venus non-fly trap that trapped dogs and men and sort of men and kind of dogs. And turned them into petals for its own sick amusement.

It widened its purple petal maw and said, “You can step in now.”

“I think we’ll stay on the path,” said Crazy Man. “I’m not sure about this fifty-fifty thing.”

“Me too,” said the dog, Sidestepper. “It sounds like stepping away from finding my mother.”

“But you won’t worry about finding your mother,” said the womb of life. “You’ll be comfortable and satisfied. Now...step into me. I don’t have for this foolishness. Step in.”

Crazy Man and the dog, Sidestepper, backed up and pretended they had swords in their hands/paws to ward off the womb of life.

“You’ll never again have to worry about anything,” said the womb of life. “No surprises, no unexpected visits from...”

“We’ll take the surprises,” said Crazy Man. “They keep things interesting.”

“But you don’t know what they’ll be,” said the womb of life. “You don’t know where they’ll lead.”

“Right,” said the dog, Sidestepper. “That’s why they’re called surprises.”

“But I am the womb of life,” said the womb of life. “I’m where life sleeps.”

“But we don’t want to sleep,” said Crazy Man.

“Yeah,” said the dog, Sidestepper. “We already did lots of that before we were born.”

This confused the womb of life to the point where its long slathering tongue suddenly retracted and the womb of life choked to death on its own tongue and dissolved into the air leaving nothing but a tiny puff of light that looked around and said, “Hot-cha-cha.” After which it winked out.

Crazy Man and the dog, Sidestepper, stared at the empty space.

“When I eat a pizza,” said Crazy Man, “I like to taste the pizza and feel it in my mouth.”

The dog, Sidestepper, nodded agreement and said, “Sounded like death by another definition.”

Crazy Man nodded knowingly even though he had no idea what the dog, Sidestepper, had just said.

Overhead, bubbly clouds and migrating geese filled the blue sky with awareness of itself outside the definition of space. But Crazy Man and the dog, Sidestepper, didn’t think about this as they turned back to the journey and this outside thing that was full of surprises, both good and bad but never boring.

And the deep dark scary woods seemed less deep, dark and scary but, as we all know, it wouldn't stay that way for long before the story continued.

To be continued...

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COMING THIS FALL FROM **FICTION4ALL!**



FROM THE FIRST STORY, *SLEEPING IN DITCHES...*

Near the close of the 21st Century, God commanded, "Hey Noah, I want you to build a canoe."

"But Lord," said Noah, "shouldn't that be an ark?"

"No," said God, "there's not that much worth saving."

By evening and day I'm the man of the hour, the life of the party, the wit, the insider, the compleat schmooz rider. I'm the water cooler sage, the lunchroom rage; everybody wants to hear me, everybody wants to be near me, everybody wants to absorb me through that huge umbrella of thought that surrounds me, bouncing away everything I don't want to know.

There's a lot of crap out there, and shit falls out of the sky, but not on me. I'm the source of my own crap and people respect me for that. I'm like the faucet I can't turn off. Wordsworth's spontaneous overflow without the meter. I'm a damn flood.

At night, I sleep in ditches.

Not the same ditch every night. I have favorites and sometimes I like to try something new. I've slept in ditches full of needles and condoms and barking spiders. I wear two wide swatches of red on my back from a slick of bubbling something-or-other at the bottom of a ditch by a chemical plant. I've seen small things flutter and flap in the darkness around rusted tin cans while they debated whether to leave me alone or eat me. But it's not all bad.

I woke once in a ditch with immaculate new suburban ranch-style houses with carved lawns on one side and a field of sprawling swamp and early morning animal sounds on the other. In a clearing by a stream banked with yellow and blue flowers, an army of bulldozers pointed right at the swamp and its animal noises. I felt like I was on the cusp of something wonderful and nascent. Soon, I thought, those bulldozers will turn God's land into something useful for his children. Yes, I believe in God. His outline glowed in the aura surrounding those formidable machines—his tools built by man in his power's image.

The grass in that ditch was long and thick and made for comfortable sleeping. Right by my head, the biggest most beautiful dandelions opened with brilliant bursts of yellow and orange, their leaves vibrating with the deepest green I'd ever known. There was grandeur in those flowers. Their beauty was irresistible. I reached out...and I ate them.

Blowing Up will be available at reputable online stores in late Fall. Stay tuned to biffmitchell.com for details. In the meantime...happy reading.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Biff Mitchell is bald and has no idea how to use his cell phone. In spite of this he taught writing workshops through the University of New Brunswick's College of Extended Learning for a decade. He's also given workshops on science fiction, humor, mystery, horror and publishing through the Maritime Writer's Workshop, the FogLit Literary Festival, Culture Days Canada and the Muse Online Writers Conference.

Biff's new publisher, Fiction4All, will be publishing the Boston Jonson cyber mystery series through 2021 and the questionable book of short stories, *Blowing Up*.

Biff is also a world famous photographer in his daydreams and has taken a few passable pictures that he displays on his photography website biffmitchellvisuals.com.

You can learn more about Biff at www.biffmitchell.com.