

SOILED MEMORIES

by

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Another Christmas story for my daughters
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She was digging in the garden.

Lif had come to gardening very recently. Perhaps you could call it gardening – her encounters with the tangle of thorny overgrowth surrounding the pod. She brandished a laser shovel that buzzed with each strike, generating a crackle from the disintegrating brush and a low hum as it penetrated the soil. This sequence of buzz, crackle, hum became almost meditative, not relaxing but reassuring in its predictability. Lif was nothing if not methodical.

A century or more ago they would have branded her eccentric. Not now. Not here. She was a survivor, a refugee from the early calamities of her fifty four years on the planet. The creeping sense of doom that marked her teenage years had turned into a cascade of ruinous disasters by early adulthood, but she had dealt with each calmly, more like a tribal elder than coddled citizen of the south. While those around her flailed desperately to find a path through the chaos she'd methodically assessed every situation and at each crossroads made the right choice. Family and friends fell to the wayside, their ranks decimated by the failure of individuals and governments to address what confronted them. Decisions inexorably became personal not societal. The demands on her accelerated while the options shrank. She was one of the few who not only persevered but also succeeded, eventually finding tranquility, even hope and prosperity, in this land on the edge of the Arctic Circle.

The light bathed every corner, feeding lush summer fertility in the independent state of Nunavut. She had no need to tame the soil around her pod, certainly not for food. In fact, she was laying waste to her annual harvests of blackberries and rosberrys. It didn't matter; there was plenty of food languishing in the enclosures and the well-tended fields of transformed tundra that nestled in the foothills of majestic Mt. Odin. Just a solex ride away in Pangnirtung there were substitute berries, fresh produce, juicy insects (although she still couldn't bring herself to eat the cockroaches), tasty jellyfish, purex, and even elixir, all at reasonable prices, even in the depths of the dark season. The sunsubs made sure of that. Mostly she bartered, trading her fine woven fabrics rather than deal in currency. She saved that for the bigger things in life – her solex, a new loom, a replacement plasma panel and, this week, her laser shovel.

The gardening had started a few days after her loom broke. She was waiting for replacement parts and found herself filling the time looking through the handful of memorabilia she'd salvaged from her turbulent youth. Mostly Lif avoided this painful past. It was easier to get on with the present and plan for the future. Like so many up here Lif had been offered a memory wipe but unlike most she'd turned it down, convinced that, with a little help from officially approved MDMA, she had the personal resources to tame those memories. Besides, she believed they were what made her who she was, even when stowed safely in the very depths of consciousness. She hadn't wanted to totally obliterate them.

But perhaps the passage of decades had made her over-confident, led her to over-estimate her ability to bury that pain in the graveyard of her sub-conscious because something changed after that day of sifting through her artifacts.

First the dreams came back, then her compulsion to enter them. Lif wanted to wander among towering trees of dying forest, go on walks by the river with her family, sit under her parent's giant umbrella, argue about government follies around the dinner table, share Christmas presents from beneath a scrawny pine, hear the laughter of a family gathered in celebration. Most of all she wanted to hold her little sister. To wrap her frail innocence in her arms. To see her face looking up with a beaming smile of trust. To be responsible for someone she loved. For too long love, deep unbreakable love, had been absent from her life. Def had been her parent's late-in-life mistake. She had been Lif's saviour.

The big mistake was connecting to the plasma panel in the bedroom and giving herself up to the dreams. She'd wanted to wallow in the secure past of her pre-teen years. But it hadn't worked out that way. Gripping a mug of chicory coffee she replayed the dreams the next morning with the panel set to movie mode. What she viewed was not contented nostalgia but a reprise of the calamities, ending with graphic episodes of her fateful journey to Nunavut. Sure, there had been some uplifting family scenes – a Sunday barbecue with Uncle Gron and Aunt Seph, seagulls floating over the harbor on their east coast vacation – but mostly the dreams took her through hard times not good times. The plasma panel was unforgiving. She sat before it with tears flowing as she confronted the unedited reality. She'd long ago lost the ability to tell the

difference between what had actually happened and what had crystallized in her sub-conscious. Now the dreams were mining that sub-conscious and depositing it before her as three-dimensional truth on a plasma panel.

The midday heat was close to unbearable, even up here. She leaned the shovel against the Buckminster pod, wiped her hands on khaki coveralls and took a long drink of purex from the pouch at her side. She was not tall but compensated for this with broad shoulders and muscled torso, developed over decades of operating a giant loom. Wiping away the sweat and pushing back the few stray greying hairs that had escaped her ponytail, she surveyed the swath she'd cut that morning. She studied the ground carefully in search of something but eventually her shoulders drooped in apparent disappointment. She drew on her heavy work gloves. Returning to where she'd started, she bent at the knees, gathered an armful of the stricken brush and hauled it to the growing pile. This she repeated without a break for more than a dozen journeys until the blackened swath was free of growth. Once more she traversed the path, scrutinizing each centimeter of turned soil with the eye of a prospector. Again, failure to find whatever it was she was looking for led to a shrug and a resigned sigh. As she stooped to start on the next section the whine of an approaching solex straightened her from the work.

The sleek bubble drew to a halt and hovered briefly before settling gently to the ground with a hiss. A towering young woman drew near, bearing the bulge of pregnancy with ease. She was strikingly attractive, unmistakably a cross-breed with her combination of dark Inuktitut skin and Caucasian features. She bent to greet Lif with a touch of their cheeks. In a gesture of familiarity she used the tips of her fingers, adorned by meteor rock rings, to brush a strand of stray hair from Lif's face. She had a look of concern as she backed away and got full view of her host. Clearly the visitor was worried. She led Lif to a seat on the bench beside the door, went inside and returned with a glass of elixir. For nearly an hour they exchanged words and looks. Sometimes Lif was agitated and the visitor calmed her, sometimes distraught and the visitor comforted her. Eventually the visitor left, at least temporarily reassured.

It had become an addiction, plugging into the plasma, descending into her dream-filled sleep, and then re-living it on the panel the next morning, tears and all. Lif seemed intent on repeating

this until what she sought appeared. She would endure whatever torment necessary until she found redemption somewhere in these re-enacted dreams. On this morning the screen was filled with the hysteria of that dreadful day – what became known as the eco-collapse, when economy and ecology reached the bottom of their mutual death spiral. It was when all those blithely ignored warnings and failed half-measures had come home to roost. She sat hunched on the edge of the bed witnessing her family’s response to the news that power grids, stock markets, communications, what remained of food supply and the vestiges of governance had all collapsed. It was when it finally dawned on them that they were on their own.

Sweat was pouring from the family as they suffocated in the oppressive heat of a house deprived of cooling coils. Outside the streets were filled with panic as people looted, shot and fought for whatever tools they needed for escape to some elusive safe haven. The sounds of fleeing footsteps, screams, crashing vehicles, and gunfire coalesced in a symphony of discord. (On the bed Lif had to put her hands to her ears.) Def, just a five-year old, clung to Lif’s leg and trembled with terror. Lif soothed her gently, stroking her hair and muttering meaningless reassurance. The parents conferred in the corner in mutual agitation. Then they were all huddled in the basement, bare necessities for travel around them and, probably at Lif’s suggestion, awaiting the cool of nightfall. They were inside their self-drive, navigating through the utter darkness to the cottage. As if ejected from a giant vacuum tube they appeared in the cottage, Lif and Def. No parents, just Def still clinging to that leg and Lif staring into her own outstretched palms at mother’s rings and father’s gun.

On the bed Lif looked down from the now empty screen and gazed at the cupped hands nestled on her lap. She was shaking. Outside a feral cat the size of a mule was slinking back across the fields in the dawn light, sated by its nightly haul of rodents.

Two swaths of cleared and tilled ground surrounded the pod, every square pentimeter closely inspected and found wanting. The laser shovel was back to work: buzz, crackle, hum; buzz, crackle, hum. A third swath was underway, Lif’s daily routine now well-established. She would advance through her first section of the day until the sun was above majestic Mt Odin and

complete her brush-carrying and detailed scrutiny of the newly exposed earth by the time the sun was directly overhead. Then she would retire inside for rest and sustenance, returning as the sun began its descent to repeat the exercise for more sections. It took her two days to complete the first two circumnavigations of the pod. Now, further out, the larger circumference of the third round would take longer. Every time her scrutiny of the exposed swath failed to satisfy she sagged in disappointment, before rallying and tackling the task again.

At the end of this third day, as the sun edged to the horizon, she broke with routine. She peeled off the coveralls and removed her clothing, fastidiously folding each item and making a neat pile by the side of the pod. Then she joined the long horizontal shadows of early evening and laid her naked body face down on the ground, head turned and arms outstretched. It was as if she were embracing the earth that lay beneath her. She smiled weakly and looked momentarily at peace.

Def, looking at least six or seven, was riding piggy-back with her small beaver-skin satchel of essentials and foraged food draped at her side in imitation of Lif's larger moose-skin bag. The frayed straps – the only colour in this scene – were cloth, scavenged from some fallen soul encountered long ago. They were surrounded by ancient trees, nothing but strips of dead bark and brittle branches dangling from their rotting trunks, all grandeur lost. At the top of a rise these sad relics gave way to a panorama of utter devastation. As far as the eye could see nothing was standing, nothing was living, nothing was moving on a blackened and charred landscape save for one blot far in the distance – a huge mound of mangled concrete and steel. This was the aftermath of the abandoned and imploded Attiwapiskat nuclear plant, still glowing with uncontrolled reaction. Above it, like an invisible cloud, was the shimmer of radiation heat, rising as deadly vapours. Lif turned and with a look of terror ran like a spooked racehorse, Def bouncing wildly on her back. They gathered momentum and leapt through the air, landing on the deck of a dilapidated fishing vessel, the remnants of icebergs drifting by occasionally topped with emaciated polar bears. Caucasian men with tangled hair, matted beards and rags for clothes were hauling down a make-shift sail and frantically lashing the tiller, forcing the boat into a rising wind. And then both wind and night had fallen and the men stood in a semi-circle with Lif and Def the centre of their attention and trapped with their backs against the side

of the boat. Def clung to Lif's leg. She started to cry. It wasn't clear if they were food or sexual prey. Either way the air was thick with threat. The men, descendants of 21st century climate refugees, sniggered in anticipation and mumbled in Russian. Lif stood cautiously and bade Def stay safe behind a barrel. She stepped toward the nearest of them, the one she thought in charge. He was smacking his lips and looking straight in Def's direction, leaving no doubt about his intentions. Staring into his black eyes Lif took his hand and placed it on her breast. She slowly unbuttoned her blouse, turning so all the men could see. Then taking the Russian's hand she led him and crew to the door below. She vanished through the door leaving Def alone but safe on deck.

Lif was no longer sitting on the edge of the bed, she was standing staring at the empty screen, a blank look on her tear-stained face, hands clutching her breasts. Far off in the distance the sound of thunder rumbled and lightning flashed in the receding dawn.

The laser shovel sparked in the rain. It didn't deter her. On she went, her routine only slightly derailed by the storm that raged around her. It was her sixth day and the wear and tear was beginning to show: filthy, unwashed coveralls, scratches and tears on hands and arms, wounds she'd neither tended nor, apparently, noticed. Her hair was beyond disheveled. At some point she had tried to put it in a bun but now it looked like the tangled brambles she was clearing. Her face was where it showed the most. She'd aged years in six days. Tears had streaked through the grime to reveal cracked and sunburnt skin. Her bloodshot eyes were receding beneath drooping lids and the cheeks were swollen like puffballs. Jowls had appeared and the wrinkles on her neck had multiplied. But her energy was undiminished. By now she was well into her fourth swath around the pod. It was mid-afternoon, the rain had finally stopped and she had just removed the last armful of brush from her latest section. Part-way through her detailed inspection she abruptly fell to her knees right on the edge of the swath. There, vanishing into the still untamed outer brambles, was a mound of slightly raised earth. She tore off her gloves and began scrabbling where the head of this mound protruded into the swath. She was frantic, tearing her fingernails but oblivious to the pain. Emerging from the mud as her clawing and scraping continued was a smooth flat rock, about the size of a flagstone. As its last corner was uncovered she calmed and with tender strokes brushed the final morsels of dirt from the surface. She slipped into some form

of reverence. All her features softened, yielding to the first real smile in days. It was an all-encompassing smile, one that seemed to emanate from her entire being. Clearly her quest was over.

Def was jumping up and down in excitement, her happiness mirrored by the smile on Lif's face. They were standing on a dock looking across an immense body of water at a mountain in the distance. An elderly Inuktuk woman was standing at their side, her raised arm pointing at the mountain with a stream of blinding light connecting the three of them and its majesty. Def was no longer a little girl. She was noticeably taller and there was the suggestion of budding breasts. A ship arrived. Painted on its side was 'The Pangnirtungan'. They were at the ship's prow gazing wistfully at the advancing mountain. Def, as ever, was snuggled close to Lif, both arms wrapped comfortingly around her thighs. The wave came from nowhere, a rogue that lost its way. It smashed upon the deck, covering it with a seething froth of swirling currents that engulfed anything untethered in a giant tumbler, like a washing machine gone mad. As the waters sluiced away and the ship settled back on its haunches Lif struggled to her feet and frantically looked around. There was no Def. Lif's mouth opened and a bloodcurdling scream came out. Suddenly there were crew everywhere and a lifeboat over the side. There was chaos, shouts, hollering and finally a great bellow and yelp of joy. Def was being hauled up the side, limp, sodden, unmoving but found. Then she was lying on the deck surrounded by ashen-faced crew and Lif was collapsed and sobbing on Def's chest. And then up close, only Lif's head and shoulders in the frame, there were whispered words:

– At least I have you back.

– At least I can take you home.

The towering woman stood over the scene, her attractive features crumpled in grief. Lif lay in an exhumed grave on the edge of her recent clearings. A flat, round stone was at its head, engraved with a single name: 'Def'. Lif was not alive, but she was not alone. The interred skeleton of Def was rearranged. The bones of arms and hands were no longer at her side ... they were clasped around Lif's legs.

The towering woman stood there in silence, not moving for a long time. Then a baby stirred in her arms. It began to cry.