LAST LAUGH

KELLI ROSE PEARSON

A short story from The World We Cannot Map

“Poppycock and pigeon droppings!” grumbled Bernadette 'Bertie' Templeton. Her jaw muscles flexed, her molars snapped together, and her button nose twitched. The tears that had been tickling the back of her eyeballs evaporated under the fire of her sudden anger. Before her, decked out in an immaculately-tailored navy pinstriped suit, stood old spindle-necked Harold Snodgrass. His audaciously bushy but perfectly manicured mustache could have comfortably housed a family of squirrels.

“Oh Bernadette, my dear…” A dramatic pause. “My utmost, sincerest condolences for your loss."

Below his mustache, a smile stretched his plump lips into the shape of overstuffed sausages. “Everyone loved Maggie,” he said with a sigh.

Bertie’s stomach went hollow. She supposed the smile was meant to look sympathetic. Fail.

Nice cliché, Snotgrass. Bertie’s lips pursed. *My condolences for your face.* She thought the thought loudly, hoping that Snodgrass would somehow hear. She imagined telling Maggie about her (silent) retort. They would have cackled together. Sometimes they joked that they were just a couple of twelve-year-old juvenile delinquents trapped in old lady bodies.

But Maggie Mossbaum—queen of collard greens and queen of the mighty writer's quill—was gone. The small coastal city of Savannah, Georgia felt as if its heart had been sucked out by a rogue funnel cloud. And so did Bertie.

Bertie squeezed her eyes shut for a moment.

Today was the inauguration of Memory Roots Maritime Forest—the first ecological forest cemetery in Georgia. It was Maggie's passion project. "Modern funerals are really a strike against life," she would say. Embalming fluids, concrete vaults, imported hardwoods, and steel caskets are all ways to stop the body from doing what every other living thing eventually does—returning. And besides, they leave the living with a plumb of toxic soup.

She didn't get to see it come to life, but her stubborn perseverance had spread the seeds and prepared the soil. After her death, people had come together, and the plan had finally wended its way through Metropolitan Planning Commission and the City Council (just barely).

Snodgrass—the skinny windbag—opposed Maggie's vision from the start. He had tried to stop it then and now he was back for an ex post facto assault. She could tell that Harold Snodgrass was just itching to slide an ace out of his sleeve. Bertie had ears at the State EPA and knew that he had filed an appeal of their permits and an environmental injunction—it was a boon from his idol, the God of Bureaucracy. Maggie's forest was the sacrifice and paperwork was the blade. Memory Roots could be killed with a penstroke from Atlanta. And now he thought he could show up here and pay homage to Maggie along with everyone else?

Maybe Harold Snodgrass's condolences were genuine, Bertie thought, but so was that condescending and determined gleam in his eye. Even at their first encounter at a Victorian Neighborhood Association meeting 30 years ago—before her white hair, before his mustache—Snodgrass had been sleek as a seal with effortless superiority. Damn him if he couldn't lift his right eyebrow just a whisper, perfectly calibrated to express great skepticism while maintaining plausible deniability.

And here he was, lurking over her, waiting for the expected funeral pleasantries.

"I appreciate it Harold." Bertie said out loud, forcing an even tone. "As you know, Maggie would have given anything to be here to see this."

Bernadette Templeton was a tax accountant with enough self-clarity to admit that she had the charisma of a soggy sandwich. Unlike Maggie Mossbaum, she did not, in fact, light up a room. Nor did she darken it. But Bertie had the rare gift of making any place she happened to be seem extra-ordinary. Not extraordinary, but ordinary squared.

At that moment, for example, Bertie was sitting on an enormous moss-covered stump of an ancient live oak tree. She was wearing a bright red pantsuit and a golden fedora adorned her goose-down hair. The sheer size of the stump combined with her striking attire (and her rotund form), might have made her look like a queen amongst garden gnomes perched on a throne made with infinite shades of green velvet. Bertie, however, made the scene somehow pedestrian.

"Yes," Snodgrass said after a moment. "Of course she would have."

He shifted his weight, his face arranged into what he clearly hoped looked like solemnity.

Harold Snodgrass wouldn't win any prizes in the charisma department either, but he fancied himself a charming eccentric. Hence the mustache.

Before the awkwardness had a chance to swallow them both, Old Man Nuthatch wandered up with a big-toothed smile and a pair of binoculars dangling from his neck. Nuthatch was a coastal naturalist extraordinaire and had naturally assumed the role of unofficial officiant of Memory Roots. His given name was Nathaniel Clarence Hatch, but practically no one in Savannah remembered it.

"Bertie, Harry, pleasure to see you. Did you see that flock of Cedar Waxwings over there feasting on Wax Myrtle berries?" He pointed and actually giggled. Surprising from a man of his substantial stature. "Did you know these rascals eat so many fermented berries, they actually get tipsy?" He shook his head indulgently.

They both turned to look, grateful for the interruption.

"They were Maggie's favorite," said Bertie softly.

Nuthatch sighed. "I know it and I feel lost without our friendly Waxwing rivalry."

Every fall he and Maggie competed to see who would spot the first Cedar Waxwing and the loser would host their annual Moon River Oyster Roast. Mountains of fresh local oysters and endless kegs of beer. Every birder in Savannah was invited—the title of "birder" was generously interpreted to include anyone who had ever spotted a bird and then pointed at it enthusiastically.

They stood together for a moment, remembering.

"Well, I better go practice my speech," said Nuthatch. "That longleaf pine over on the creek is a great listener. The last few weeks I've found myself coming here quite often to talk to it." Nuthatch smiled sheepishly. "Trees are cheaper than therapists."

Bertie snorted and smiled. "And they interrupt less." Her shoulders relaxed.

To her surprise, Snodgrass nodded. "Well, good luck with the speech, Nuthatch," Snodgrass said. He then touched two fingers to his forehead and drifted off into the crowd.

As he walked away, Bertie's gaze zeroed in on his back and followed him mingling with a cluster of people. She noticed that his shoulders were stooped more than usual. He stopped beside Carolyn Green, whose face was blotchy with tears, and gave her a not-as-stiff-as-you-might-expect half hug. Her family was a tenant at his Oak Promenade development, so he probably felt obligated.

Bertie shook her head and narrowed her eyes.

Why was he really here? To rub it in her face of course. Now, even after they had already broken ground and were ready to launch a state-wide publicity campaign, he was still finagling a way to stop it. His superpower was his meticulous and infinitely patient capacity to manage red tape. Bertie sometimes wondered if he could smell a permit violation the way a hound smelled a rabbit. He saw the land they were standing on as

prime real estate for another housing development and he was as single-minded as a snapping turtle clamped onto a cane pole— utterly convinced that housing was the best possible use of this degraded scrap of forest.

Sure, Savannah needed more places for people to live, but not here, thought Bertie. Maggie and Bertie had a radically different idea for this particular spot—they saw a big picture sea-change for life, death, earth stewardship, and everything.

Death had always been a thing with Maggie. She thought of it as a fascinating unsolvable puzzle. Her bookshelf was full of titles like *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, *The Whole Death Catalog: A Lively Guide to the Bitter End*, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, the obligatory *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and so on. When she read *Playing Possum: How Animals Understand Death* she made sure that everyone in her orbit knew that elephants, chimpanzees, orcas, crows and jays all have their own way to grieve and honor the dead.

But, Bertie thought, Maggie never really, truly considered that death would apply to herself. Maybe everyone feels that way, but Maggie was so vibrant and strong everyone assumed she would hit her centennial no problem. In fact, she just missed eighty.

Not fair! Bertie thought. *Maggie loved the word octogenarian*!

Whenever she could, Maggie would slide her favorite words into casual conversation: "Oh, is your aunt an *octogenarian*?" She might ask, smile hovering in the corners of her mouth.

"Maybe octogenarians are a secret society," she speculated. "Maybe everyone over eighty has four extra appendages with brains in them."

"Well, you'd think their nurses and doctors would notice." Pragmatic Bertie.

"Not if the appendages were invisible and immaterial," countered Maggie.

Bertie conceded the point, but Maggie didn't get to join the club.

Bertie squeezed her eyes closed, remembering. When the reality of the fast-moving cancer sank in, Maggie got mad and sad, then curious. She was scrupulous with her treatments and health regime. Then there was a cancer-related stroke.

The neighbor had found her in the back lane, lying on the ground, staring up at the clouds. To the obvious question ("Are you okay?") she had answered, "Of course."

He had wanted to believe her. "But, Maggie, you realize that it's not normal to be laying in the dirt in the middle of the lane?"

As he told the story later, he had leaned down to hear her garbled words. "I'm *not* normal." Maggie slurred emphatically. "And I *like* dirt."

Both things were true, but it was also true that Maggie didn't know where she was or what day it was. She couldn't move. She didn't make it back from the hospital.

But, tears starting to leak, Bertie scolded herself, *today isn't just to celebrate Maggie's life and feel sad.* She straightened her shoulders. *Today is about victory! I will* never *give up.*

Just before Snodgrass had unsettled Bertie, her imagination had been tunneling underground, feeling the great roots and stringy mycelial networks of the stump, feeling it share its nutrients and memories with the biotic community of the land.

This piece of land was a good 60 acres tucked against the back fence of the Hunter Army Airfield. It was scrubby and wild, cut through by a winding brackish tidal channel. It had been cleared, planted with pines, and then logged by Georgia Paper Company for woodpulp for toilet paper. The last remnants of the old maritime forest were a dozen graceful, relatively young live oak trees (around 100 years old) and a stand of towering longleaf pines along the bank of the channel. And this massive living mother stump.

When they were first exploring the land, Maggie had approached the stump with reverence, stroking the soft moss spilling out from the nooks and crannies. It was at least 7 feet in diameter.

“This mother tree must have been over 500 years old, Bert! Old enough to have shaded the Muscogee people fishing here on the Creek. Old enough to see the first timber crews arrive with their crosscut saws and their damned certainty.”

A slender sapling oak was growing out of one side of the stump. “It’s so hard to believe that this delicate being will someday become a massive oak tree.” Whispered Bertie. Somehow the whole scene made Bertie’s eyes a bit misty.

The stump, who had once been a towering oak tree, had been old enough to know, in whatever way a tree knows things, that the forest can always come back. That death can become something else entirely.

Maggie had made Bertie promise that at her funeral they would start the procession from here, to pay homage to the life-giving stump, and then bury her biopod at the far end near the young oak tree she had named Arthur. She thought he had a quite kingly bearing. But she wanted to be planted under a new Wax Myrtle sapling. “I don’t need a grand tree, just something to feed the birds.”

Bertie promised and then cried.

She had considered cremation too, briefly. Most people did. It seemed simple. But then she had done the research. In America, every year cremations create the same amount of carbon as driving for 1.14 billion miles or “to the moon and back 2,300 times!” as Maggie liked to say. “My final act as a bunch of organic material is *not* going to involve a machine burning through fuel just to turn me into ash.”

Bertie forced herself back into the present, with an effort she noticed the sweet scent of forest honeysuckle caressing her nose and the buzz of winged life in the air. She heard a chorus of unmistakable high-pitched, buzzy trills. A couple of Cedar Waxwings singing their hearts out. Bertie closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath.

“Today is the future,” she muttered, as she scooted herself off her throne. She touched the delicate sapling and patted a bunch of resurrection ferns sprouting from the center in a frothy green patch, still vibrant from the rain the night before.

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The landscape twittered with lively conversation as the mourners (everyone in Savannah who had been touched by Maggie's particular kind of magic) mingled and reminisced. It was just as Maggie and Bertie had imagined: filtered light waltzing through the branches of the young oaks, magnolias, and cedars, and the majestic longleaf pines. A comfortable silence overlay the mingled sounds of chatting people, bird songs, and the thrum of cicadas. People were clustered here and there. There was a table for refreshments and snacks. Children chased one another between folding chairs. For a place dedicated to death, it was strikingly full of life.

There was already a pattern of winding footpaths mulched with pine straw. After the natural patterns of movement were confirmed, the paths would become more permanent. A pair of children crouched beside a patch of milkweed, arguing passionately about something caterpillar-related. Near the creek, Jodie Butler, a retired schoolteacher, was pointing out a woodstork high up in a pine tree to a wide-eyed group of all ages. The decorating team had tucked mason jars of wildflowers onto the refreshment tables, and the young Flanders sat beneath a cabbage palm with their sleeping baby sprawled across their laps.

Bertie joined a small cluster of people, but kept a sour side eye on Harold Snodgrass talking to Nuthatch nearby. Obviously, Bertie *meant* to stay civilized and to focus on Maggie and on the beauty of the forest.

She glanced up for a moment as one of the Waxwings swept down from the branches. Her throat was suddenly thick with unshed tears.

Snodgrass also noticed the bird. As it flitted between them, he turned around and Bertie's eyes, which had been burning a hole in Snodgrass's back a minute before, now locked onto his.

And then Bertie took a step forward and opened her mouth. Out flew words in a voice that she hardly recognized. "Maggie's almost in the ground, *Harold*. This forest is hers now.".

Well, she sounded like a disgruntled frog, but she had said it and couldn't take it back. So she put her hands on her hips. "You lost once already and you'll lose again."

Snodgrass's expression didn't change except for a practically subliminal flutter of his eyebrow. He stepped towards her. A flame flickered in his eye.

"Hmmm. I understand your position." He said mildly, "I also understand the EPA still has concerns."

Bertie felt her jaw tighten.

"Funny how '*concerns*'" said with an ostentatious airquote gesture, "only seem to appear when a wealthy land developer starts eyeing the land."

A few people nearby pretended to be very interested in the sweet tea table, but they were listening so hard their heads tilted and their ear muscles flexed.

Snodgrass sighed through his nose. “Housing isn’t a criminal enterprise, Bernadette.”

“No,” Bertie replied. “But deciding that every piece of dirt is unfinished pavement ought to be.”

For one brief second, she thought Harry Snodgrass might actually snap back at her. Instead, he adjusted one cufflink with infuriating calm.

"Savannah's changing,” he said quietly. “Whether either of us likes it or not.”

“Oh don’t start.”

“There are families living three to a room ten blocks from here.”

For one irritating second, Bertie hated that he had said something reasonable. She glanced toward the creek. Two teenagers in volunteer shirts were helping an elderly man navigate the boardwalk that wound through the wettest section of the property. Last month they had finished planting a variety of native grasses there. The place was barely open and people were already treating it like it belonged to them.

Bertie opened her mouth, ready with a scorching reply, but he continued before she could fire.

“Maggie never understood scale.”

Bertie stiffened. “Meaning?”

Snodgrass hesitated.

“She could love one piece of land so fiercely she forgot there were people who needed somewhere to live.”

Maggie had a strong streak of hooligan, but she was also a green-fingered wizard. Some even claimed she could bring a plastic fern to life. She had tended rogue gardens scattered throughout Savannah and defended each one with the fury of a nesting marsh hen.

“I’m willing to be the bad guy if it means more housing.” To Bertie’s annoyance, Snodgrass looked genuinely sad.

Bertie stared at him. Beneath the layers of righteous indignation, she knew the most frustrating thing about Harold Snodgrass was that he occasionally wandered into being right. This wasn’t a new fight. It had echoed for years through city council chambers and planning meetings.

Lord, those endless meetings.

After a while, the city council chambers had stopped feeling like a government building and started feeling more like a poorly supervised gladiatorial arena for anyone with a crusade or a grudge, and some procedural vocabulary.

Now, even if you’ve never been to a city council meeting, just imagine that your friendly upstanding neighbor is a species akin to a werewolf. When the city council meeting is

launched with a sharp wood on wood crack of the gavel, the poor neighbor fights to keep their human form and howdy neighbor smile, but with each minute taken by the council secretary, their control breaks further…until the mild-mannered neighbor who waves at your dog and remembers your birthday is gone entirely, replaced by something that would make a Victorian asylum director reach for his clipboard. Things happen that are later described in the minutes as 'a brief procedural disagreement' — which is what they call it when a grown man spits on Robert's Rules of Order and weeps over a zoning variance.

Once, in front of everyone at the city council, even Maggie had snapped. She was just about to launch into her well rehearsed defense of natural burials—the part where she would read out, item by item, the far-reaching social and ecological benefits—when she caught Snodgrass wearing that cold fish-eyed look of his.

She stopped mid-sentence, turned to face him, and barked out, "Harold, get that look off your face and listen to what I'm saying!" Which would have been fine. But then she added. "You will take me seriously if I have to grab you by the mustache and shake you."

Cue the righteously wounded indignation. "Maggie, I assure you, I was listening to every word with my utmost attention." Dramatic pause. "Really, there is no need for violence my dear."

Bertie had been at her side and heard Maggie's grumbling. "Utmost attention, my left tit," Under her breath. A little louder: "Who the hell uses the word utmost anyway."

Then, overcome, Maggie had wagged her finger dramatically in the air. "Harry, your grand plan seems to be to turn this town into one big people-stuffed concrete box. Have you no shame, no heart, no vision?"

Snodgrass had looked down his nose at her. "Come on Mag. Give me some credit. Of course I love the green spaces and the beauty here. But…" His sausage lips had pursed. "We can find a balance between development and nature."

"Then why are you blocking our project? This section of degraded forest is perfect for an ecological cemetery. We've done the calculations, the surveys, the soil tests. The local Audubon chapter is supporting us. The master gardeners are supporting us. Half the neighborhood showed up to the planting day in *August*. We can regenerate it! Anyway, it's not just a green space, it's creating whole new ecosystems of meaning." Maggie's literary bent tended to come out under pressure.

"Maggie, be practical…"

"Practical? You really think you have a monopoly on what's practical, don't you?"

"My projects are for the living," He had responded coolly.

For once, Maggie had no immediate answer. Then she looked at him and said quietly: "..and you think death isn't?"

Still, Maggie was embarrassed that she had lost her legendary cool. She had been three minutes of oratory from the kill. Instead she had handed him the gavel, so to speak, and he had used it. He spent the remaining council time performing wounded dignity so effectively that the vote was postponed. Maggie didn't speak to herself for a week.

All this flashed through Bertie's mind. Just because Maggie (the charismatic evangelist) was gone didn't mean Snodgrass could steamroll the project. Memory Roots was bigger than Maggie, bigger than Bertie. She glared at Harold Snodgrass and dove back into the fight.

"This is not a zero sum game, and you know it Harold. Stop this false choice bullpuckey and admit it—you're just too lazy to find another spot."

Conscious of the ears all around them, Harold opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. Then opened it again. Fish mouth to match his cold fishy eyes, thought Bertie.

"Well, surely you realize Bernadette, that the same could be said of *you*," he finally managed. "Not everyone wants this burial ground in their neighborhood. *You* could find another site." Then he primly examined his fingernails. "Besides," he said, "every site has complications. This one has fewer, which means better return on investment for everyone."

Bertie's eyes glittered. She was on firm ground with this one. She wasn't a tax accountant for nothing. Harold wasn't the only one who could dot and i and cross a t.

"Ha! Nice try, Snodgrass." (Or did she actually say Snot?) "We analyzed every piece of abandoned land in a twenty-mile radius. We walked the neighborhoods. We listened to people."

She jabbed a finger toward him.

"You remember Ray Cranston?"

"Yes, a lively character. I recall that he had some serious objections to your plan."

"The man practically declared war on us. He buzzed us with drones every time we came out here."

"I remember. He wasn't fond of having a—how did he put it?—'dirty hippy graveyard' in his neighborhood."

"Well," she said, eyes brightening, "even he finally understood that we weren't dumping rotting bodies and dancing naked around trees."

Not that Bertie would have minded dancing naked around a tree, but old Ray Crankeypants didn't have to know that.

"Now he walks his dog here twice a week. He thinks this place could be more beautiful than Bonaventure Cemetery someday. Last time I saw him he asked me if the neighbors could take just a small part for a dog park, where the dogs wouldn't dig up any dead bodies of course. And he actually winked at me when he said it."

Snodgrass raised a whole eyebrow. "One convert does not make a movement."

"No, but now even the venerable Savannah Botanical Society is even on board. The orchids helped." Bertie smiled and narrowed her eyes.

"Orchids?"

"Nuthatch found orchids, native orchids, Harold." Bertie swept an arm toward the trees.

“And the butterfly people are excited. The monarchs found the milkweed before the volunteers finished planting it. And the birders counted eighty-seven species last month.”

Harold pursed his lips.

“Who knows if the buried will go to some ethereal heaven, but this place will be bird heaven, pollinator heaven, armadillo heaven, and *people* heaven here on earth!”

Bertie was almost panting.

Snodgrass pursed his lips and twitched his mustache. “Save your soaring rhetoric for the EPA Bernadette,” he said flatly.

He turned on his heel and slowed his walk to a saunter as he made his way to the far end of the crowd.

Still shaking with anger, Bertie took a long quaking breath that rattled her bones.

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Act normal, act normal, act normal, Bertie muttered at herself. *This is Maggie’s day, pull it together.*

For one horrible second, Bertie became aware of every person standing beneath the trees. The people who loved Maggie. The people who had come to celebrate her. The people who had just watched Bertie Templeton turn a memorial service into a brawl.

All around a loud uncomfortable silence settled amongst the trees and everyone seemed to be looking somewhere else. Judy Butler was looking for birds straight up in the sky, Carolyn Green was examining the tablecloth like it might have a stain. Well, not everyone. A handful of children were looking straight at her, and so was Nuthatch, who stepped forward.

“Hey Bertie, what a beautiful November day for a funeral! Couldn’t be nicer.” The silence broken, the normal twitter of conversation resumed. “Shall we start soon? I think we’re all here who’re going to be here. Let me finish my tea and we’ll gather everyone for the procession. 10 minutes? I just have a few questions for you,” he said, gesturing her over.

Bertie attempted a smile and a nod, then composed herself and walked briskly to the sweet tea table. Her superpower activated and she did her best to broadcast a ‘nothing to see, this is all perfectly normal’ vibe. Her posture and smile suggested that disagreements between adults (e.g. shouting matches at funerals) are nothing out of the ordinary.

Nuthatch clasped her shoulder and she smiled tightly.

“Sounds good, everything is ready? Celeste?”

"All set," said Nuthatch. "Celeste has done us proud."

Celeste Grandlings, the grand dame of the Savannah funeral business, had surprised everyone by embracing the whole enterprise with characteristic thoroughness and

immediately getting a Green Burial Certification. “This whole dying business really is a business, dears, and one must stay up to date,” she had said.

The pallbearers gently lifted the bio-casket which was shaped like a giant seed pod. It was nested in elegant weavings made from willow, river cane, palmetto fronds, and sweetgrass and intertwined with native herbs and flowers picked from Maggie’s gardens. All the natural materials would gradually return to the earth along with Maggie. Once lowered into the forest floor, the soil, the fungi, the microbes, and the roots would start their work.

The procession formed, ready to begin the promenade toward the far side of the forest, where the young oak Arthur waited with outstretched limbs, festooned with silver-green moss.

Just as she was about to take her first step, Bertie furtively turned her head, her eyes narrowed to fierce slits. She couldn't resist shooting yet another scorching glare toward Snodgrass. He was walking with a stiff dignity, face completely blank. Clearly trying to erase the humiliating scene from just minutes ago. Bertie too was displaying unusually perfect posture.

But before she could turn away, her gaze was intercepted by a sudden, spectacular blur of gray, yellow, white, and a touch of rebel red rocketing through the air. Then another. And another. The solemn mood of the gathering procession was interrupted.

Soon everyone was staring as the birds landed on the branches overhead. The few Cedar Waxwings from earlier had expanded into a giant flock of more than a hundred! Almost immediately, a riotous commotion erupted from the treetops. The air filled with the flicker and flap of wings, a whirlwind of multi-colored confetti, a bombastic symphony in flight. Trills and whistles, high-pitched zeeee, tseeee, zeeeeeeees became an impromptu orchestra, mingling with the buzz of the cicadas.

While the audience watched, mesmerized, one particularly enthusiastic feathered daredevil decided it was time for a solo act. Down from the leafy canopy he swooped, with all the grace and finesse of an Olympic gymnast, wings whirring in a rapid blur. The entire forest held its breath in anticipation. Then, without even the slightest warning—

A well-aimed release, a white streak of feathery exuberance, a barrage from the bird above, descended with pinpoint precision. It landed squarely on Snodgrass's meticulously coiffed hair.

Bertie's jaw actually dropped. She felt something tickling in her stomach and her hand shot up to her mouth to stifle the bubbling geyser of laughter that was threatening to erupt. Meanwhile, Harry Snodgrass's usually polished façade evaporated and his face warped into a mixture of disbelief and shock.

The spectators gasped collectively, eyes wide and riveted. Even Nuthatch looked stunned.

Snodgrass’s expression morphed from bewilderment to dawning horror as he desperately attempted to salvage what was left of his dignity. He fumbled for a handkerchief with

trembling fingers, only to make the situation worse—attempting to wipe away the mess smeared it further.

“Umm, well, then…” He stuttered and took a deep shaky breath.

His walrusy whiskers started to twitch. Was it the tears of wounded pride? Sharp-eyed Bertie surprised herself by imagining she saw a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of Harry’s mouth. No, he was much too pompous and self-important. And his awkwardness quotient had just tripled. Everyone in the procession was stunned into silence.

Bertie looked up, still smirking to herself. Schadenfreude was an excellent word, Bertie thought, but it wasn't quite enough. There should be another specifically for the deep satisfaction of watching a pompous foe humiliated by something gloriously ridiculous.

Harold Snodgrass let out a small cough and tried to merge back into the crowd. He almost made it. Then a loud tweeeee cut the silence and another Waxwing launched into a nosedive from the trees. Not to be outdone by his predecessor, he twirled into an acrobatic aerial performance.

As Bertie watched, time paused like a heron on the hunt, freezing to witness the looping swoop of the magnificent little bird. His velvety feathers were a mishmash of colors varying from gentle grays to a pastel, blush pink, as if he had just rolled out of a cotton candy machine. And his bright yellow-tipped tail flashed in a patch of sun. His perfectly shaped wings, opened wide, were an homage to modern art, dotted haphazardly with waxy red droplets.

But most striking of all were the little bird’s eyes: large and black, framed by a bandit’s mask, reflecting the forest, and looking right into Bertie’s soul. And in the blink of an eye, the bird vanished.

Yet not without leaving a sizable gift.

A large, moist splatter splashed wetly on Bertie's shoulder, and her elegant golden fedora looked like a casualty from a cafeteria food fight.

The sight of Bertie, her face a mixture of amazement and disbelief, sent the crowd into peals of laughter. Bertie shot a confused glance at Harry. And, as their eyes locked, Bernadette 'Bertie' Templeton and Harold ‘Harry’ Snodgrass stood as still as marble statues in a cemetery. The crowd held its breath. Harry’s mustache twitched again and he let out a burbling sigh. A snort escaped Bertie’s small round nose.

She tried to glare, she really did. But when she caught Harold’s eye, they both succumbed completely. Their laughter erupted like the barking of coyotes, echoing through the forest and blending with the exuberant racket of the flock, which was still swirling about. The more they attempted to compose themselves, the deeper their chuckles became, until their laughter cascaded into unbridled hysteria.

Bertie bent over forward, grabbing her thighs to keep from collapsing.

Harold grabbed his side. “Ohh… my…hurts…” he managed between guffaws. And he actually sank down to his knees and then sat on the ground. Bertie joined him, still giggling and pointed at him, starting a fresh round of laughs. Harry's tailored suit was

well-spackled with avian mischief and Bertie held her white-coated, once-dignified hat by the edge of the brim.

The rest of the crowd added their chorus of chortles and hoots.

As they eventually caught their breath, Bertie and Harold lay back on the ground, breathing heavily, their eyes gleaming.

“If she weren’t already dead, Maggie would have died from laughter," Bertie wheezed. “You know, that woman could find humor anywhere. Even in a bitter battle. She admired your tenacity, Harry. Actually, she told me once that you remind her of old Mary Helen of Ossabaw Island. You remember her? She was Ms. Sandy West’s most irresistibly stubborn Sicilian donkey.”

Harry shook his head. “That might just be the best compliment that I ever received!” He laughed again, a deep, warm belly laugh. Bertie joined.

Finally, after some shuffling and hushing and final stray giggles, Bertie and Harold managed to stand up. They walked side by side as the procession began. When they reached the spot, everyone formed a semi-circle around Maggie Mossbaum's resplendent willow basket. Gentle light filtered through the streamers of moss swaying from the branches of the young ambitious oak tree.

Nuthatch was standing beneath the oak and waited for the last chuckles to fade.

“Well,” he said, glancing at Bertie and Harold, both still decorated with varying quantities of Waxwing grafitti. “I’m pretty sure Maggie would have considered that a promising start.”

Another wave of laughter. Now the audience was relaxed and paying attention. Nuthatch talked eloquently about Maggie’s life, her work, her passion, her kindness, her humor, and her perseverance. And then he gestured to the land and trees around them.

“You know, most folks spend their lives trying not to think about death. Maggie spent hers trying to improve it.”

Then Nuthatch looked up into the canopy.

“When we first talked about this place, I thought Maggie wanted to build a cemetery.”

He shook his head and paused.

“Turns out she wanted to build a forest.”

His eyes swept over the crowd.

“A forest has trees, sure, but also relationships. Seasons. Habits. Little dramas happening everywhere if you pay attention. She wanted a place where the living could remember they belonged to something larger than themselves.”

He took a long deep breath in through his nose and let it out through his mouth in a sigh. A woodpecker knocked somewhere up in the pines.

"The microbes don't care about our arguments. The roots don't care about our zoning maps. The birds don't care who's right."

He smiled toward Bertie.

Then toward Snodgrass.

They both smiled sheepishly back.

“Life just keeps finding ways to turn one thing into another. Our tears, our memories, our *bodies* will make it happen! It’s a beautiful vision.”

Some loud sniffling filled the pause.

“But Maggie used to say she'd know we'd failed if this place was only busy on burial days. She wanted seasonal planting days. She wanted picnics, dog walkers, romantic meet-ups. She wanted grandchildren dragging grandparents through the mud looking for salamanders. She wanted schoolkids learning the names of birds.” He pointed to his binoculars. “I’m ready!”

Nuthatch stopped talking and just looked up into the oak.

“More than anything she wanted life!”

Nuthatch let the pause fill with sounds of the forest and sounds of grief.

“Goodbye, Maggie,” Bertie croaked. “Thank you for…well you know,” her voice cracked and tears flowed.

Next to her, Harry nodded. Bertie glanced at him, and noticed that his eyes were glossy and his lips didn't bear such a striking resemblance to sausages anymore. Instead, they formed a gentle, rather pleasant curve beneath his wonderfully ample mustache.

Later, they found themselves side by side as they walked back towards the parking area.

“I still think Savannah needs housing,” Harold said quietly.

“I know.”

He looked back toward the oak.

“But maybe…” He stopped for a moment to look Bertie in the eye. “Maybe I need to make another call to my friends at the EPA.”

He paused. “But we all know Savannah still needs housing.”

Bertie smiled. “I know.”

As Bertie reached to put her hand on Harold's arm, they were interrupted. In a fluttery commotion, the whole flock of waxwings rose out of the waxberry tree and launched into a joyful cacophonous chorus.

THE END