

TUNNEL ISLAND

Stories

by Bill Gaston

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THE CARETAKER

JACK MET HER OVER PINTS OF DRAFT BEER AT THE ARK. Mona, who would shove him into lifelong trouble. That's how he saw it anyway. You need someone to share the blame, otherwise yours is a loneliness absolute.

His last job of the day. René Leblanc had phoned and left a message: his gas mower didn't work so could he come fix it? Jack found the place in the island's forested south and there at the head of a gravel driveway a mower sat waiting for him. He cranked it ten times to no avail, screwed off the air filter, sprayed some magic mist into the carb, pulled the cord some more until it coughed immense white smoke and roared. It ran steady but took forever to cut through some thin roadside weeds. He flipped it and found a blade whose life of hitting rocks had hammered its edge so round it could no longer cut, only punch. In his truck were some homely old tools to get the rusted blade off using a level of violence he rarely needed. He was proud that some on the island called him the Junk Whisperer.

He laid the blade on his truck's bumper, held it with a boot and scraped at it with a file, in a half hour arriving at something like an edge. Then he pushed the old mower up the driveway and through an orchard to the house to collect fifty bucks from René Leblanc, a dapper wag of about forty. They shook hands and eyed each other quizzically. They decided they'd spoken before, maybe at a party somewhere?

"I know where," said René, finger pointing up. "Orphans Night. The Ark. It was Orphans Night. A few years ago. Were you ever at Orphans Night?"

"I was," said Jack.

"You going tonight?"

"Orphans Night is tonight?"

"It is!"

So maybe it was fated. Though Mona would tread on his already injured life, it began as a beautiful romance. Orphans Night—held between Mother's and Father's Day, its one requirement for attendance two dead parents—had begun as a cynical joke but for some reason always packed the place. Jack wandered with his mug of beer, hunting for an empty chair, then found himself in the spotlight when sassy René looked up from his table's sudden quiet.

"Jack! Okay, so we just decided you look like you sleep in your clothes."

Jack knew they were only having fun, smiling as a group as he stood there with his mug. He shrugged and they erupted with "It's true!" and "You really kind of *do!*"

Like René, these people were acquaintances rather than friends. The woman with the empty chair beside her he didn't know at all, though it didn't stop her from smiling up at him

and saying, “And when you put on something new it looks like you’re *going* to sleep in it.”

Jack plopped down beside her and said, “I sleep in my clothes all day long.”

Everyone else turned to other things but beside him this woman he didn’t know did something extraordinary. He’d assumed she was with the woman on the other side of her, Markie, because of the way they’d been leaning at each other talking. What the woman did was lay a calm hand onto his thigh and squeeze in sympathy and humour and sex—all at once. Her not looking at him while doing it let him feel it more.

Markie introduced them. Mona was her old friend from school down in California. Mona was now a prof, still in California, here on sabbatical “writing a book on Jane Austen but not really.” She had been on Tunnel since October and loved the island, though it made her drink too much, she said. She was leaving in thirty-seven days but who’s counting, she said, and Jack smiled for her again.

Jack’s brief university career had also been English Lit. Two years in, his daughter Abigail happened and he needed a job sooner rather than later. He took a one-year Education program and began teaching high school, some English but mostly gym. He enjoyed the appearance of having sacrificed his education, though in truth he hadn’t loved English anyway. He loved reading what he loved to read, and if anything, school got in the way. Not that his sacrifice carried any weight. His marriage ended, he had his breakdown, he did what he did, they called it kidnapping. He got a perpetual restraining order, and he hadn’t seen Abigail in ten years.

Markie wisecracked as Jack asked Mona questions about California. Mona didn’t lord her degrees over him, nor did he

reveal the reverse-lording that was actually in play: life had taught him that English Lit wasn't something you took seriously. He watched Mona sip her beer in that cautious way she had, and knew her degrees were proof she wasn't as smart as him.

Bill Gaston lives with the writer Dede Crane on Gabriola Island,
in the Salish Sea.