

All of the Beautiful Things

Sean Mabry

On a clear morning, with the grass shimmering like silk and the air tickled with fruity pollen, Dana sat on her backyard patio and watched a butterfly flutter down to land on her hand.

“You must be a parnassian,” Dana said to the butterfly, “My husband told me about you.”

Her husband had indeed described for her several of the native species of butterfly, absentmindedly, over coffee. He said parnassians have wings the color of bone, patterned black on the edges. At the time, Dana imagined they must be quite dull. She considered praying for more colorful species to be sent round their new home.

Her visitor, however, changed her mind. Her husband had neglected to mention how the dark markings of their wings streak like charcoal and shimmer blue in the right light. Nonetheless, he was right about the color of bone, as Dana could see now. Her pulse spiked with horror, but she decided it could just as well be beauty. Thus, the butterfly became doubly beautiful. She looked up from her visitor to stare at the tower of the small chateau of her neighbor four doors down. The tower had a window just below its roof shaped like the top half of a skull. Her husband and children had all argued that it looked nothing like a skull and that its odd shape was just ordinary wear, but the more she stared the more skull-like it became and the more she had to stare.

The butterfly flew off. The sun rolled nearer the tower. Dana stared. Even as the sun threatened to sizzle her eyes, Dana stared. This skull window was not at all the audience she wanted for her life in the new home. She did not want a specter to watch her children roll laughing down the grass hill. She felt it had no right to watch her husband rise with the sun, and his notebooks, and his coffee, on the balcony. She shuddered to think of it peeking into their bedroom. She stared even as the sun rolled behind the mountains. Then, when the

skull window should've taken its rightful place in shadow, it filled with dancing orange light. The flame was somehow worse than a bulb would have been.

A plan occurred to her: she could, as a newcomer, greet this neighbor bearing a gift and discuss the offending window after exchanging pleasantries. But what gift? Something from her antique store, of course. Something that could be put to practical use, or set aside for decoration. Something also that she wouldn't miss. The cane, then, that had a spider etched on its handle, which always made her jump as if it were a real spider. Settled somewhat, she rose from her chair and retired indoors, one eye still on the window.

#

Dana stood at her neighbor's door, wrapped cane in hand. She had already rung the doorbell. The owner cracked the door. She could only just see his eyes, and from their position guessed that he was either very stooped or very short.

"Hello," he rasped, before clearing his throat, "How can I help you?"

"Hello, my name is Dana," she said, "My family and I just moved in a few doors down. I have a gift for you."

"A gift?"

"Yes," she tittered, her voice jumping with nerves, "A show of good faith."

He peered, then shut the door. Dana could hear his door chain sliding out of position. In one gesture, he swung open the door and extended an arm into his home. Now in full view, she could see that he was, in fact, short. His skin was hard, wrinkled, but in all other aspects he was neat. His embroidered green cardigan added a lively contrast to his modest brown trousers. His hair and beard, as white as ash, were gelled back without a strand out of place. His eyes and smile had a quality all their own—nimble, alert.

"Please, come in!" he said.

As Dana stepped in, he grabbed her hand and shook.

"Horace."

"Horace," she said, "You have a lovely home."

He shrugged, "It suits me well enough. Feel free to you take your

shoes off and bring that gift of yours to the kitchen. I'll start us some tea."

Dana slipped off her shoes and set them by the door before following him. His kitchen, all covered in mint ceramic, smelled of cinnamon. With the kettle in place, he hobbled over to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair for Dana. They sat.

"Let's have a look," he said, pointing to the gift.

Dana handed it over. Horace tore the paper away to reveal the handsome mahogany cane with the offending spider on its handle. He sighed and smiled as he inspected the cane.

"My my, this is lovely. A generous gift—thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Please don't say you went out and bought this just for me," he added, "It looks like an antique."

"It is. I brought it from my own shop."

"Oh, so you're the one with the new store. I've been meaning to poke my head in. Needless to say I'm quite convinced now. Have you been in antiques long?"

"Yes, about fifteen years now."

"And a fine eye you've developed in that time. I was in marketing before I retired here. One of my old clients was in antiques. His wares weren't as nice as yours, but with my ads he could keep the lights on. If I had you as a client I'd barely have to do anything, I'm sure. Your wares must sell themselves."

Dana nodded politely.

"Don't feign humility for my sake...Dana, was it?"

"Yes, and you are Horace."

He chuckled, "A woman's advantage. I've had to train my whole life to become a decent listener and to you it comes naturally. Anyway, how are you? What brought you to this town?"

Dana explained that she liked the quiet and seclusion of the area, and the nearness to nature. Horace agreed, and they compared notes on how splendid the forest was, how gentle the seasons, how soft the morning mist. Horace especially enjoyed the mist, and Dana admitted she had always considered mist a nuisance. Dana showed pictures of her children, and Horace admitted to being a bachelor. They finished their tea and Horace checked his watch.

“Well,” he said, “It’s been nice meeting you, but I’m sure you’re busy.”

“Actually,” she said, “There is one more thing I wanted to ask you.”

“Oh?”

Dana fidgeted. “Yes...I’ve noticed your home includes a tower on the west side. There’s a window there that I find disturbing.”

“A disturbing window? What do you mean?”

“It looks like a skull. I don’t like the idea of skull hovering over my backyard. Horace, I know you’ve been very gracious already, but would you mind letting me see that window from the inside? My family tells me it looks nothing like a skull, and I’d like to prove them right. Please.”

“I know which room you’re talking about. I promise you, there’s nothing unusual about it. It’s only a small study where I go to read.”

“I’m sure it is, but I need to see it for myself.”

Horace looked away.

“That room has a certain significance to me.”

His pause was not encouraging. Dana thought, then seized on a possible trade.

“Tell you what, Horace. You let me see the room and I’ll let you come into my shop and choose any one item there for free. That’s in addition to the cane, which is yours already. I’m sure you’ll find another significant thing in there.”

Horace looked back at her with a glint in his eye.

“You certainly are determined, aren’t you?”

“I am. This new home is meant to be a sanctuary for my family. I can’t leave something like this in doubt. Either your window is a skull, and I must deal with it, or it is not, and I can rest easy. I must know for sure.”

He nodded and picked up the cane.

“Very well then, I accept your offer. Follow me.”

Horace led her down a hallway, then to the left, up a narrow spiral staircase. Two-thirds of the way up there was a door. He opened and entered while Dana remained in the frame. There was the window, its aged panes glowing yellow with morning light. Dana gasped.

“The skullishness is even more obvious from within, don’t you think?” he asked.

Dana noticed, with cold comfort, that the semblance was at least

not deliberate. The stone was crumbled around the edges. Perhaps the strange look had only appeared over time.

“This window,” Horace explained, “Is the primary reason I chose this as my home. I saw the skull the moment I first entered the room. Come on inside, take the seat further from the window.”

Dana remained in the doorway, eyes locked on the window.

“How could you want something like this?” she asked.

“You might have noticed that I’m old.”

He sat now, cane leaning over the edge of the seat. He was inspecting the handle.

“All the more reason to avoid skull shaped windows!” she cried, “Surely now is the worst time for you to be thinking about death.”

“Or, the best time.”

Revulsion balled up in Dana’s throat. He smiled.

“I’m in no rush, but I know I will die one day,” he said, “That’s why this room is so important to me. I want to get to know death before it happens. Why get carried off by a stranger when I can instead leave with a friend? So, I come in here every day and read to it, or we just sit and enjoy each other’s company.”

He pointed the cane towards the other chair.

“Normally I sit in that chair, and I leave the chair I’m in now for death’s comfort.”

His face sunk into a frown.

“You should know that I would never invite most people to this room.”

Dana broke her vigil to look over at him.

“How come?” she asked.

“Most wouldn’t get it. They either wouldn’t see the skull or, worse, they would tell me the skull doesn’t mean anything. They’d say this whole exercise is silly.”

“It isn’t silly,” she muttered.

His face lit up.

“See? You understand!”

“No, I don’t understand. Your home, this whole town, it’s so pleasant. There are moments when I swear my own backyard is paradise. This window is not pleasant. It interrupts what we have here.”

“Does it, though? My window is so distant from your yard. Sure the

skull watches, but that's all it does. What do you care about the borders of paradise when you live in its center?"

"I can still see it," she said, "I can still feel it when I'm not looking. It feels like a threat."

"Again I disagree," he said, "I think you completely mistake death's attitude toward your home. It watches with admiration, not hunger. It remains aloft because it permits what you have."

"Absolute nonsense!"

Horace laughed, and the laugh settled into a sigh as his eyes fell squarely on Dana's. His eyes and his smile had a wistful curl to them then.

"A gentleman knows not to ask, but my god, your spirit must be only half your age."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you are not old. Not truly old. I've met the truly old. They don't fight against the obvious like you do."

He looked out the window. The glass was cloudy, but he could still see the other homes down the way.

"Is that one yours?" he asked, "With the red balcony?"

"It is," she said.

"Certainly a beautiful spot."

"It is!" she declared, "It's the most precious spot in the whole town. Paradise itself! Death watches out of jealousy for what it can't have."

"Hmm!"

Horace contemplated.

"Why can't it have your spot?"

"Because...It just can't. We've worked too hard for it."

He saw on her face something he could not contradict, even playfully.

"Very well, Dana," he said, "You hold your ground there, and I'll put in a good word. Friend of a friend, you know."

"That's sweet of you," she said, "but I still can't let your window keep watching my family. Couldn't you put a curtain over the outside? It could even be something thin so you could still get the daylight."

"No," he asserted, "I think it's important that the window remain as it is. I could maybe request some sort of cover for it in my will."

Dana had to replay his last statement in her mind a few times to

catch the tone of it. For once, he wasn't playing around. She thought of him dying. Then she wondered why she thought that and tried to push the thought away. She took a seat and rubbed her temple.

"You really are a strange man," she said.

"All the more reason to preserve my eccentricities while they still exist."

Dana looked at his bookshelf. The tomes were old. Most of their spines were too faded for her to read without her glasses.

"What do you usually read to it?"

"I'll read whatever I enjoy most," he said, "I suppose it's presumptuous to think death shares my tastes, but it hasn't raised an objection yet."

"Then how about this," said Dana, "I'll write a letter for you to read to death so it doesn't get any ideas about my family and I. Would you do that for me?"

"Sure," said Horace, "I only hope you'll keep some grain of the courtesy you've shown me."

"I will."

"Good," said Horace, "On that note, may I see you out?"

"Of course."

Horace led them back to the front door. As he shook Dana's hand, he spoke.

"Come by again, won't you? Even after you've dropped off the letter. For reconnaissance, if nothing else."

Dana agreed, then left. Back at home, she wrote:

Dear Death,

I've noticed you watching my family from that horrible window in Horace's house. I know he reads to you, so I'm having him read this letter to you. I'll have you know that I am not unreasonable. I do not ask that you make any of us immortal. I only hope you will take us each at our appropriate time. Let my husband and I grow old. Let us see our grandchildren. Let our children grow old and see their own grandchildren. Let it continue likewise.

I think I deserve your respect and especial consideration for being so direct. So many others stop at praying for protection against you,

or worse, they litter their homes with meaningless trinkets to ward you off. While I certainly do pray for providence, I have no qualms about confronting you directly. In fact, if this letter somehow proves insufficient, I shall force myself to come up into that room alone and speak with you myself.

Don't think you can fool me. I know how beautiful my husband and my children are, and I know how that tempts you. I can see your interest. You take all of the beautiful things. Please spare mine.

Sincerely,

Dana Hamlin

She delivered it to Horace the next day. On a subsequent visit, he confirmed that he'd read it to death and that he'd keep her posted if he heard anything new. On the walk home, Dana wondered if their little game was going too far.

#

The next few years turned Dana's paradise into a home, with all its comfort and tedium. Horace visited the shop regularly, selected a porcelain vase after much deliberation, and offered business advice where appropriate. Dana in kind visited Horace's home, happy to give him her book recommendations and quietly wondering how she might obscure death's stare. Occasionally she would go back up to that room and stare at the window, only sometimes taking the chair.

One day, she and Horace both stood in the room. Her children were playing on the grass hill. She and Horace could see them through the eyes of the skull.

"Does it bother you at all?" asked Horace, "Looking at them through death's eyes?"

"They're still under my watch," she said, "My watch above all else."

"An unwavering watch, I'm sure."

"It is. Mothers always have to watch their children. Even when fathers won't."

"Oh? I hope all is well between you and Gregory."

Dana looked away.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I shouldn't speak of him like that. Certainly not in front of anyone else."

"Fret not, and please speak freely. Friends, as they say, are God's apology for family."

"He spends so much time in his books. When I complain to him, he spends even more time with them. I know how much he cares about his research, but I worry the children aren't getting enough quality time with him."

"Hmm."

Horace traced the edges of his beard with his thumb and finger.

"How many times have you mentioned this issue to him?"

"Many times."

"And how many times have the children brought it up?"

"..."

"Well?"

"Not once."

"Ah."

She wheeled on him.

"What are you trying to say? Don't tell me you're going to take his side. I swear, you men find it far too easy to become recluses as you age."

"As we age?"

Horace took a seat and looked at her askance.

"I don't think it's a matter of age."

"Fine, then it's personality. Or attitude. Whatever you call it, it's frustrating that you choose to be recluses."

He studied the head of his cane. He spun it and watched the spider blur.

"I wouldn't necessarily say I chose to be a recluse."

"You have chosen to stay a bachelor," she said.

"..."

Dana took the opposite seat and leaned into him.

"Haven't you?"

Horace raised his cane and pointed it towards Dana's home. He let the tip rest on the glass.

"Do you know why beautiful things are beautiful?"

“Well, I suppose. I know beauty when I see it.”

“But do you know why? I ask because you mention beautiful things in your letter to death. I think we ought to clarify our terms.”

Dana thought hard for a moment, her brow in a knot.

“If I’m missing something, you’ll have to enlighten me.”

“Beautiful things are beautiful because they are fragile. Something is beautiful when we know it can break. The most beautiful things are the those we know for certain won’t be there one day.”

Dana thought back through all the parnassian butterflies she had seen since she had moved into the house. They were all so beautiful, and it occurred to her now that most of the ones she had met were now dead. Certainly the first one, the one that changed her mind, was long gone.

“But what about the night sky? Or the ocean? Or any number of inanimate things that aren’t going anywhere?”

“Oh, they’ll die too. Or, if we must be literal, they’ll change. They’ll end. Besides, those are the first things people take for granted, precisely because they stick around too long.”

“I’m not sure about that,” she huffed, “I’m not sure I want to give death that kind of credit.”

“Then don’t. Only recognize that there are millions of ways a family can change or end. I know. I’ve seen too many examples.”

“That’s grim. Why are you always so grim?”

Horace only smiled.

“Don’t you worry about me. Instead, go home to your husband tonight and look at him like something that won’t exist one day.”

“That sounds awful.”

“Just try it. You’ll thank me.”

Dana shook her head and groaned.

“Such a strange man.”

“According to you, there are reclusive old men all over. Nothing strange about me.”

Dana chuckled. The conversation turned back to simpler topics, and soon Dana returned home. That night, once the children were in bed, she asked Gregory to come outside and look at the stars with her on the balcony. It was a clear night. The stars were splendid. She stood next to him, hands wrapped around her own elbows to guard against the cold. She looked over at him and, sure enough, saw the dancing light of the

skull window hovering above him. She wanted to look away, but forced herself not to. Perhaps Horace had a point. When she couldn't look at the skull any longer, she looked back to the stars, and then to Gregory. As she traced this triangle again and again, she found herself drifting closer to him. She took his hand.

“Gregory.”

She looked him in the eye. After a deep breath, she let herself admit that he wasn't always going to be there. She hugged him tighter than she had in years. She grabbed him by the hair and kissed him. She led him back inside to the bedroom.

The next time she visited Horace, she conceded that his suggestion had worked.

#

Her little Diana finished her sandwich, wiped the crumbs from her mouth with a napkin, and folded her hands in her lap.

“May I please go look at the crow?” she asked.

The crow in question was dead, lying in heap at the base of a tree with blood trickling out of its beak. They had found it in the forest during their walk. Dana had then led them on a winding route back to the tree line, where they had their picnic, hoping this would make Diana forget the crow and where to find it.

“Why do you want to look at that?” Dana asked.

“It has pretty feathers. I promise not to touch it.”

Dana pointed to a patch of flowers nearby, where parnassians fluttered in the light rays.

“What about those butterflies? Aren't they beautiful? Want to look at them?”

“Yes, but the crow is too.”

Dana had to stop herself from calling her a liar. Surely, Diana couldn't compare the dead crow to the living parnassians. One was horror; the other, beauty. Diana had to know that, and she was making a choice between them.

#

Dana sat with her tea cup and saucer in her lap, staring out the skull window. Horace had already finished his tea, and he cast a concerned look at hers.

“It’ll get cold,” said Horace, “Why don’t you drink it?”

“Sorry,” said Dana, “I’m distracted.”

“Surely a first,” said Horace.

Dana reflexively took a sip, not tasting it at all, not feeling what little warmth was left.

“Were you ever not a bachelor, Horace?”

“Sure. Boyhood doesn’t count as bachelordom, does it?”

“Horace.”

“What?”

“You never talk about your past.”

“Neither do you. If you want to share, go ahead.”

“I don’t, but...”

She set her tea down on her side table.

“But I thought things would be different. Or at least this part would be different. I thought I’d changed it. I used to live a very different life. I used to be obsessed with death. I celebrated it. I said, ‘if we’re all dying anyway, what does it matter?’ I tried to soak up every pleasure I could. I wasn’t searching for anything, and I didn’t expect any of them, any of those nights or those men, I didn’t expect any of them to yield anything. They were just fun, and I was going to die, and it didn’t matter. Flaunting the horror didn’t change it, but it didn’t need to. I only stopped because I was exhausted.”

Horace nodded along.

“No, the horror did catch up then. It had been waiting. It let me push it back just so it could surge forward. So I committed to life; I found God. I had to. I needed something big enough to push back the horror. And now Diana is staring at dead things and she’s going to get obsessed. God, I just barely made it through. I don’t know if she’ll have my luck.”

“It’s natural for a mother to fear for her child,” Horace offered.

“It’s natural but it still hurts.”

“Like most parts of motherhood, I assume.”

A laugh, loud and inappropriate and boorish, smashed into the ceremony of her mood. She had to stop to catch her breath. The morning

light, which at last succeeded where the tea had failed, warmed her. She looked over at Horace, her eyes honest and clear.

“You really are a sweet man. I can’t believe you never found someone.”

“That’s a rash assumption.”

“Then give me something! Correct me for heaven’s sake, or just give me a hint.”

“Why?”

His voice turned dark. Dana sat up a little straighter.

“You know, you weren’t entirely wrong back then,” he said, “Just scoop up all the beautiful things while you can, especially since those are the things death wants most. I used to do that too, only I took it a step further. Men can do that, you know. We can act like death. We can seize things and hold them so thoroughly that even when they leave our hands we know they’ll never belong to anyone else again. I’ve done it many times. That’s how I learned. I watched the thing moments before my touch, death’s touch, shimmer at its most beautiful. Then I watched it turn to carrion in my fingers. Finally, I had the sense to stop touching things, and behold, they stayed beautiful, and I was happy. Irritated at times, sure, but happy. So I when I tell you not to reach for me, don’t.”

Dana watched his fierce eyes. He looked small then, the smallest he had ever looked, but nonetheless solid. Both of his hands clutched the head of the spider cane.

“And yet here you are,” she said, “Sharing your special room with me.”

“Because you pushed your way in.”

“Because you wanted someone to.” A smile cracked his stony little face.

“Only one of the good ones.”

Dana beamed. She scooped up her tea and drank it down, lukewarm and delicious.

“Let’s go for a walk,” she said.

He waved his hand.

“Maybe next time. I think I might take a nap soon.”

Dana let him see her out, reluctantly, and walked home. Her whole day was brighter. She hummed in the shop. She treated herself to a cookie at the grocery store. She nursed her small, but precious,

indescribable victory even as she held Gregory's hand on the couch and watched the children read their books on the floor.

She only learned the next day that Horace had died that same night.

#

A distant relative came to manage Horace's estate. For all the questions Dana asked, he insisted that he barely knew Horace, and that Dana herself likely knew more about him than he ever did. He took over the living room, filling it with paperwork, and allowed Dana to roam the house as she pleased. Of course, there was only one room that concerned her. She took the old spiral staircase and found the door open.

She had heard Horace had died in bed. She looked through the open door, at the skull window, and wondered if he had been in this room before it happened. Had death told him to leave the door open as he turned in for the night? Had death insisted he go to sleep first, to make the process easier? Or had Horace, in his last moments, given up the game and let the door hang open, breaking the seal?

Dana sat down in her usual chair and stared out the window. It was afternoon, so the window was in shadow, lacking the glow she'd come to expect. She sighed. It did feel like a room now, just like any old room. She looked over at Horace's chair and noticed, with a pang, that she was already starting to forget his face and his voice. She watched the chair and tried to gather up all she could.

But there was a letter. It sat in an envelope addressed to Dana. She opened the envelope and glanced at the writing.

"Of course," she said to herself, smiling, "He had to make one last move."

But the letter wasn't in Horace's handwriting. She'd seen it in the margins of his books and in Christmas cards. Whoever wrote this, she was certain, wasn't Horace. So, she read:

Dear Dana,

I did appreciate your direct style, so let me return the favor. I've enjoyed watching your debate with Horace, and I will miss it. I would've

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been happy to let it continue under different circumstances, although the truth is that it was going nowhere. You were both wrong.

I don't take things because they are beautiful, and things are not beautiful because I take them. It's all beautiful. Explosively, overwhelmingly beautiful—every atom. That's the only thing I'm trying to teach you. I used to give your kind infinite time to figure this out, but you squandered it. You decided on just a few beautiful things and hoarded them. So I decided to give you less time, hoping that would sharpen your focus.

Some of you have figured it out. The ones that share everything, that let everything flow freely through their hands, they've just figured out that it's all beautiful. Still, I'd like more of you to figure it out. I'm sure I'll think of something.

In the meantime, feel free to keep in touch. You know where to find me.

Dana folded the letter, put it back in the envelope, and returned it to the chair. She stared through the window, out past the tree line, as beauty and horror filled her heart, because they are, for mortal creatures, one and the same.