

When She Came Walking

By Tim Jones

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The first time she walked down our street, pots jumped off stoves, coal leapt from scuttles, wood went rat-a-tat-tatting down hallways. In our yard, a broom and spade got up and lurched around like drunks, trying to decide which way she'd gone.

I caught my first glimpse of her from the window, and that was enough for me. "I'll be back soon," I told Mother, and slipped out the door before the questions could start. It was all I could do to stop the door coming with me, and the street looked like a parade had passed through: everything from Mrs. Ormond's wrought-iron railing to Connor O'Brien's henhouse had torn free of its moorings and sashayed down the street after her. Lacking much in the way of legs, the henhouse hadn't got far, but there were frightened hens clucking about and eggs lying hither and yon.

I left Mr. O'Brien to sort them out and followed Mrs. Ormond and her railing. She was cursing it a blue streak and telling it to get the hell back to where it came from, but it wasn't paying any attention. It clumped down the road on its six metal legs, making a fair speed and leaving her in its wake. Damn, I thought, damn, I'm going to have to stop and help her. Why didn't she fix the damn thing securely in the ground?

I ran after the railing and caught it with one hand as it was turning into Fenton Avenue -- and Fenton Avenue was so full of writhing inanimate objects I was happy the railing was there to delay me. "Come here, you," I said, and concentrated on it as best I could. Gradually, the railing's struggles eased to a few hopeful twitches. I could barely keep it upright, and I was glad when Mrs. Ormond's strong hands came to join mine.

"Thanks, Pat, you're a pal. Help me get this back home, and there's sure to be some cookies and a drink at the end of it."

I wanted to remind her I wasn't eight any more, but there was no changing some people. "Give them to Ma for me, would you? I was headed the other way."

She shook her head. "If you take my advice, you'll go home and stay there -- but there's no chance of that, I suppose."

"None at all," I told her.

By the time we had wrestled the railing back to Mrs. Ormond's yard, it had given up its dreams of freedom, and it lay down meekly at the foot of Mrs. Ormond's steps. "Now would you care to fetch Carl Dooley for me, Pat?"

I was already backing away up the street. "I think you'll find Carl's got his hands full today," I told her. "Almond cookies! I'll be back for them!"

Fenton Avenue was full of irate householders, Harvest Lane likewise, and why in the name of the Lord had she chosen to walk through the market? Fruit and vegetables still counted as alive, but empty crates and wooden trestles evidently didn't, where she was concerned. There was real anger here, and calls for vengeance. I began to think Mrs. Ormond might have a point, but I hadn't come this far to give up now. I dodged a box, parried a table, and went on.

It was like walking into a fog. One moment, bustle, cries of alarm, the whicker of wood flying end-over-end; the next, only my footfalls broke the silence.

Then I saw her. The police had encircled her, and all I could see was a glimpse of her tousled hair. Half of them were facing her, half facing outwards, frowns of concentration on their brows. What the police lack in power, they make up for in determination, and nothing was moving on this section of the street that didn't have legs and a legitimate reason.

The legs they could see, and I was working on the legitimate reason as I walked towards her, no more able to resist than the wrought-iron railing.

Next to a police station is the best location in town, and the shops here sold stuff we'd never be able to afford, and dared to keep it behind glass. I veered away from the cops and pretended to look at some furniture while watching the reflected scene behind me. One of the cops was giving me a mighty fierce glare -- that, or he was simply trying to stop the glass from breaking.

They were trying to persuade her to come to the station, and she begged to disagree. One of the cops lost patience and grabbed her arm. I saw his wooden baton waggle its way free from his belt, float up beside him, and tap him smartly on the head.

That did it. The outward-facing cops turned inwards, and in a moment the street came to life. I ducked and rolled as a shower of glass exploded above my head and a procession of heavy chairs, ornate tables, and long couches made for sinning waddled onto the roadway. The cops and their quarry were moving in a tight little group towards the doors of the police station, currently the only safe place in the neighborhood. I ran towards them, ducked between two blue-clad

bodies, and found myself face to face with her.

"You! Out of here!"

"Sorry, sir, I was passing, the street went nuts, nearly lost my head, safest place I could find . . ."

"He was looking in that window just before it blew out!"

"Another one, eh?" An arm descended on my shoulders, and I was hauled inside the building with her. The doors shut behind us and the din ended.

"I'm Patrick," I said. "Pleased to meet you."

"No talking, you!"

So I just grinned. She stopped looking worried long enough to grin back.

How can I tell you how lovely she looked at that moment? She was a head shorter than me, blonde-haired -- a rare sight indeed in this town -- disheveled, careworn. I wanted to wrap her in my warmest coat and take her home for soup and Mrs. Ormond's almond cookies.

That didn't appear likely any time soon. We were put in separate but adjoining cells, locked, guarded, inert. When I tried to talk to the guard, he snarled, "Shut up!" For the first time, I felt afraid. "We'll be out of here soon," I told her.

"I hope so," she said. Then she burst into tears.

I reached through the bars to pat her on the shoulder, but the guard growled, "Stop that, you!" I took a hasty step backwards and waited for the tears to stop. In a way, I was pleased she was crying, because it meant I could afford a few sniffles myself.

When she'd calmed a little, she looked at me and said, "Sorry."

"No need. I'm scared too."

"I dragged you into all this . . ."

"No you didn't! My mother always said curiosity would be the death of me. I had to find out what was causing such an uproar in our street."

She looked even gloomier. "Did I cause a lot of damage?"

"Anything that was damaged should have been tied down better," I said gallantly. "But couldn't you have made your way through town a bit more quietly?"

"I was trying to! I come from the country, and I'm not used to great cities like this. I was all right till I started looking around and thinking how grand everything was--"

Grand? Our neighborhood?

"--and then I noticed things following me, and I got scared and ran, and that made it worse."

"And the policeman's baton?"

"They had no cause treating me as a criminal!" The bars of her cage flexed a little.

"Enough talking!" barked the guard.

"How long are you going to hold us here?" I countered. "We have rights, you know."

"A professor from the College is coming for her. I don't know about you."

"Can I get a message to my mother, then? She'll be worried sick."

"Should have thought of that earlier."

"I know I'm allowed one message."

Pad and pen produced from pocket. "Here. Fifty words maximum."

I was on my third sheet of paper, still trying to phrase things the right way, when a bustle of officialdom arrived. The man at its center addressed my beloved

severely.

"Miss Quigley, I have had to make some very detailed explanations to arrange your release. Substantial reparations have been demanded. In this instance, the value of your unique capacities to our research program has persuaded the Chancellor to pay them in full. Any repetition of this incident will not be tolerated. Captain, if you would be so kind?"

A flourish of keys. She whispered, "Good luck!" as they led her away.

"Hey, what about me?" I called. "I'm the innocent victim of forces I don't understand!"

College focused on me for a moment. "Then study, young man. You must take responsibility for your own destiny."

The Captain was holding the door open for him. They had forgotten me before it closed.

Crumple sheet three, start sheet four. "Dear Mother, I know this will come as a shock to you . . ."

They didn't believe me at first. When I started to bring home books, they said I'd never read them. When they found me asleep over Mundine's *Principles*, they woke me and said it was time to cut the firewood -- not a job for the absent-minded. When I passed the preliminary entrance test, there might have been a brief mutter of congratulations, but then they went back to the big news of the day: Mrs. Ormond and Carl Dooley were to be married, and the late Mr. Ormond not yet a year in his grave! "There was a power of ironmongery in that house even while Mr. Ormond still drew breath," said Mother darkly, but my sisters were already picking out their dresses.

When I told them I would be sitting the final entrance test in four weeks' time, and asked to be relieved of household duties till then, my father took me aside for a talking. The last time that happened, I had been ten, scared and sullen, locked in the storeroom of the greengrocer for filching his oranges. The fear of my father's belt had hung over the whole encounter, though he never used it.

Well, I was eighteen now, too big and too fast to be hit, whatever my mother might say. He took me through to the parlor, reserved for receiving the priest, the landlord, and our Savior should he chance to drop by. Lately, I'd been using it as a quiet place to study.

"Your mother had you marked out for the priesthood," he began, "and now you

do this to us."

It was feeble, and he knew it. "The Lord has other plans for me," I said.

"Why engineering, then? Nothing good ever came of it."

"It was a noble profession once, Father. I want to make it noble again."

"Noble, is it? Then how do you explain that terrible business with the nave of St Dominic's, or those hare-brained gas lamps, or that Mr. Deutschendorf and his 'suspension bridge'? And he was a Professor at this very college you insist on attending!"

"Ah, but that's the point, Father. Those projects failed because they were designed for yesterday's conditions. When you were a boy, did things move around as much as they do now?"

"No," he allowed, "they generally stayed where they were."

"Exactly! And that's because there weren't so many of us then, and we lived in villages, not in cities. As long as they didn't come under focused attack, even flimsy structures were perfectly safe. But now there's so many of us that any concentration of thoughts can send iron and stone and even wood breaking free and wandering away." That Miss Quigley could do all this and more on her own, I kept to myself.

"Meaning I have to pay good money to you and your sisters to think our house into shape."

I privately disputed his definition of "good money," but now wasn't the time to argue the point. He was rising to my lure.

"That's right. So what are we going to do? Go back to living in thatch and wattle?" He made a face at that.

"This is the old way, Dad" -- I held up Mundine's *Principles* -- "and this is the new way" -- Lyman and Parker's *Engineering in the Age of Uncertainty*. "I want to make the new way work."

"And how much do you suppose I'll have to pay for all this?"

"Not much at all!" I answered gaily. And then we got down to business.

I passed the final entrance test with a mark or two to spare, and between Father and Mother and Auntie Eileen who'd always doted on me, my family came up with the money for the first year. "You'll have to engineer yourself a job after that," they said.

Inside those imposing walls, the College was unimpressive: a warren of low, flat, narrow-windowed buildings. "It doesn't pay to build high around students," I was told.

The first term was torture, a crash course in mathematics and physics and chemistry. Did I really need to know the melting point of sulfur or the value of the Dietrich coefficient? Well, the latter was used in the calculation of animate field flux in inorganic materials, so I guess I did at that.

In between my studies, my duties at home, and my occasional opportunities to escape for a pint and a chat with my fellow students, I tried to find Miss Quigley, which was still the only name I knew her by. She looked no older than me, so I expected to find her somewhere among the first-year classes, but nobody knew anything of her. I glimpsed a couple of women with blonde hair, but both were Saxon exchange students who didn't spare me a second glance.

It was a week before the end of term, and I was struggling with Professor Carr's theories about magnetism, when I saw her: just a glimpse, hurrying out of one building and into another, with a couple of burly men by her side. I followed, and was met at the door by one of the men, who pointed to the sign that said NO ADMITTANCE.

"That girl went in," I said.

"EXCEPT ON OFFICIAL BUSINESS," he added.

There was plainly no budging him. An exhaustive study of the timetable showed there were no teaching rooms in that building, yet neither was it listed as a research facility. All the windows were locked, all the doors boarded over.

So what about the building she had come from? That was a bit more promising: it contained dormitories for women from country areas and foreign parts who were attending the College. I knew a man who boasted considerable knowledge of such women.

Dan Travis was as thin as a rake and acted like one. He claimed to be a magnet to the ladies, and if even half his stories were true, he was right. There had to be some explanation for how a man could eat so much and stay so thin. I bought him lunch and got him talking about the charms of girls from Saxony.

"By then I knew she wanted it, so I slipped my hand . . ." Yes, yes, Dan. Spare me the detailed description and concentrate on the interesting bit: how you got into her room.

Oh. You didn't make it back to her room. There was an alleyway. How romantic.

But Dan wasn't done with this flaxen-haired goddess, and eventually his urges drove him to test the fearsome security of the women's dorms.

"And do you know, I just walked right in? And there she was, waiting for me, with her legs--"

"You just walked right in?"

"That's right! These are big girls, after all" -- I leered on cue -- "and what they do after hours is their business."

Let me make it clear at once that what happened next wasn't my fault. I was shaking like Mrs. Ormond's railing at the prospect of actually going in there and looking for Miss Quigley, and even worse, talking to her if I found her, so I spent a couple of hours in the pub watching my classmates play silly games with the tables. By the time I lurched to my feet, squared my shoulders, and set off, I had thrown a skinful of bravado over the black pit of anxiety.

As Dan said, getting into the dormitory involved nothing more than knocking on the door. I was taken straight to her room, but she wasn't there. Margrethe, one of her roommates, was. "With a boyfriend no doubt Kate is outing," she told me. God forbid Margrethe was any acquaintance of Dan's, for she looked me up and down and said I was a fine-looking fellow, and why didn't I tell her all my troublings? Which I did.

Now *dormitory* wasn't really the word. The women slept four to a room, but they had an arrangement that ensured a gentleman caller could be entertained in private. And I was here to see Kate -- a much sweeter sound than Miss Quigley -- but she was out with her boyfriend, damn him for all eternity, and Margrethe was friendly, and warm, and sitting on her bed with her arm brushing mine.

And I found that when I leaned over and kissed her she put her arms around me, and we sank back on the bed, and her flesh was like cream, cool and deep. I came in seconds, then I came in minutes, then we both came in what felt like hours.

"Roommates coming back to roomen will," she told me in her endearingly mangled English. I kissed her deeply, found something to wipe myself, pulled on

my clothes -- God, did I need a shower -- kissed her again, and stumbled towards the door.

To be met by Kate Quigley, coming the other way, with no sign of the alleged boyfriend. She raised an eyebrow, smiled, and said, "I see you've met Margrethe."

"I -- er--" I said, and fled down the hallway, pursued by the faint sound of laughter. I had a good idea what they were laughing about. It comes of having sisters.

Until I had my brain wave, my three years of study were a time of disillusionment. When I walked through the College gates for the first time, I had two great desires: to find Kate, and to find a way to build the great, airy structures I saw in my mind's eye. I found Kate, or rather she found me; that was my fortune and misfortune both. And my years of study had put paid to those idle dreams of construction.

Why are our cities built of wood, not stone? Because stone, never having been alive, has no resistance to the press of our thoughts, and one stone joggled out of place can cause a whole building to come tumbling down. Build in stone, and you need to employ a small army just to think your building firmly in place. Build in wood, and as long as you're not subjected to a concerted attack, or some freak of nature walking by, you will probably be all right. And yet our winters are cold, and the fire bell peals like the crack of doom across our cities.

There are other things too, iron and that sludgy stuff they call concrete, and all of them equally vulnerable. Did you know that an optimistic son of the Rhineland has invented an engine that burns oil and can power a carriage without need of horses? Imagine what our cities would be like if they didn't stink of horse shit! We would go zipping about the place in Herr Kessler's invention, smelling the sweet clean air. But all it takes is one stray thought, and the whole complicated contraption falls apart, and the oil leaks out and collects in a little puddle on the ground. And the same goes for Mr. Magill and his electric light, and the unfortunate Mr. Stephens and his speaking device. (Unfortunate for me, too -- I could have used it to call my lovely Margrethe in Saxony and ask how she and her Baron were getting along. It had broken my heart to see her go, and other parts of me were just as downcast.)

So we knew what we needed: something with the strength of iron but the stability of living wood. I thought of the answer five minutes from the end of Professor Sullivan's 9 a.m. lecture.

I was lucky to be there at all. At 1 a.m., I'd been stumbling home after a hard night's drinking at the Flying Jug. My feet got confused as I walked beside the pond, and before I knew it I was covered in pond scum and fending off the

attentions of a duck. I got up early to avoid explaining the state of my clothing to Mother. In any case, I tried hard not to miss Professor Sullivan's lectures. She was always genuinely interested in what her students had to say, and I was always genuinely interested in talking.

Today's lecture topic was energy barriers to chemical reactions. As far as I'm concerned, chemistry is physics minus the excitement, and I listened with less than my usual attention.

"I can see by the glazed looks on your faces you've all been finding this deeply absorbing," she announced with a few minutes to go, "so instead I'll bore you with some of my current research. Professor Koch and I are about to announce in *Chemical Review Letters* that we've invented a new field of chemistry."

"Do we need a new field of chemistry?" I called out.

She assumed a severe expression and said, "Even you might find this interesting, Mr. McCreedy. I recall you telling us about Herr Kessler and his carriage that burns oil. That never amounted to much, but we've discovered that oil has other properties of great interest." She explained how she and Professor Koch had derived carbon compounds from oil and used them to make light, flexible materials with considerable resistance to directed thought. "They'd be perfect for cups and plates, and even chairs and tables," she went on, "but they're not strong enough to build with. We're working on a way to make the stuff into fibers and cables, but we need to increase its resistance to thought as well."

"I've got an idea," I told Professor Sullivan as we left the lecture room. "Have you got five minutes?"

Fifteen minutes later, I had been added to her research team. Almost a year after that, we were ready to put my brain wave to the test.

A team of us gathered round a thin coil of material. On the outside was a kind of hardened, transparent resin, and on the inside was a thin filament of carbon (made by controlled pyrolysis of cellulose in an inert atmosphere, if you really want to know). One fiber couldn't take much load, but put a bundle of them together and you had something much lighter and far stronger than iron, ready to build bridges, and vessels, and cables. But, of course, little more immune to the College's Chief Materials Tester than a freestanding iron railing or an incautious policeman's baton. Which is where my idea came in: between the resin and the carbon was a thin film of water, and in that water thrived microscopic pond scum, which in its mindless aliveness would, so we hoped, turn away the most destructive of thoughts.

The Chief Materials Tester walked in. I didn't think she would hold anything back

in the testing. Kate and I had exchanged polite conversation once or twice while I'd been waiting for Margrethe. Since Margrethe had departed for her ancestral halls, clutching her degree with one hand and giving me a final squeeze with the other, Kate and I had not exchanged a word.

"Straighten the coil out, please," she said, and we did. She and her assistant attached instruments, one at each end, one in the middle, and then she stood back a few paces, frowned in concentration, and looked at our handiwork.

Looked at it hard. I could see the lines of strain on her face. It mirrored my face as I looked at her. Time stretched taut in the room.

And nothing happened. The fiber didn't budge, the needles didn't move. There was a poker in the grate. Kate turned her gaze on it, and it leapt from its place and flew up the chimney. For all I know, it's still climbing. Then she relaxed, stepped back, and said, "You win."

Big grins, slaps on the back, time to bundle up the material -- we call it carbon fiber -- and take it back to the lab. Professor Sullivan was talking to me about further work we needed to do -- manufacturing techniques, the micro-pumping problem -- but I excused myself and asked Kate if she would have dinner with me that night. She said she would.

Kate had moved out of the dormitory and was now boarding privately, and there was a suspicious old biddy standing behind her as she opened the door. "Mind you don't stay out too late, now -- I've seen his type before!" the old biddy cautioned. Maybe she had once been as beautiful as Kate.

Dinner was undoubtedly delicious, but it might have been boiled cardboard for all the attention I paid to it. I was too busy watching Kate. She was wearing something dark and flowing which set off her hair and her beautiful soft skin, and just before her dress got in the way there was a hint of the cleft between her breasts. I wanted so much to slip my finger in there and start undoing the buttons, but I didn't have the nerve. There was coffee, conversation, and dessert -- she could pack the food away for such a slim thing, which my mother says is always a good sign. I excused myself to go to the toilet, and while I was sitting there I made up my mind. "Would you like to come home with me?" I whispered as we stood together outside the restaurant door.

And she thought it over, and said yes, she would like that very much. Our first night was glorious, and our wedding night better still. Each morning we walk to the College together, and each evening we walk back to the room we share in my parents' house. I love my parents, but it's time Kate and I found a place of our own. There's times she and I set the whole house to shaking.

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