Granny's Tumor
T.M., REMIS

"What?" I asked again, and the Indian doctor repeated it. "Eat opera
bubbles," it sounded like he said. My mind struggled with the syllables,
his accent thick as homemade chutney. But then in a rush it was there,
the bits sorting themselves into a nasty image, as if I'd found a
spider on my knee.

Inoperable. That was what he'd been saying.

It was early April, sprimgime, the season of renewal, but it was
hard to focus on that. As we drove home from the hospital in the
pouring rain, and I peered out through the thick gray haze at the willows
drooping sadly with their own sudden weight, looking like war-
weary soldiers trudging back from an awful defeat, it seemed as if it
had rained always, had never done anything besides rain, that a
drenching, numbing, bone-chilling rain was all that I could remem-
ber, and that it would rain for evermore.

I dragged my eyes around to the road, or what I could see of it,
the windshield dull as the scrim on an unwashed glass.

"Slow down, Claude," I said to my husband, but there was no
reply. His hearing was fading fast these days, even with the electronic
aid we'd bought on the last of our credit. I almost envied him. No
more would he have to lay awake nights listening to our daughter
Eugenia sobbing over the dissolution of her marriage. Nor would he
need to hear the workmen bringing up their equipment to demolish
the Great Barn, standing proudly on Sloughington land since 1680,
and sold off now along with everything but the single acre under
the house.

"When will we be home, May?" Rose asked with surprising
coherence.

Checking my watch, I found it had stopped. I turned to face her
in the back seat. "Not long, dear. We're almost there."

She smiled at me sweetly with her lopsided grin. Claude said she
looked just like W. C. Fields since the stroke, but I wouldn't have it.
Imagine, his own mother. The poor thing; all she'd been through, and
now this. It simply wasn't fair. Osteoporosis had left her spine a mere
shadow in the X-rays. Arthritis in both hands had only aggravated her
suffering, as did the bursitis in her shoulders, the shin splints and
bone spurs, and that hip -- which hardly seemed improved since the
replacement. They claimed her ulcer was unrelated to the diabetes,
but I had my doubts. And all those transfusions during her colostomy
-- well, that wouldn't have helped anyone.

Still, Rose had remained our emotional anchor, always involved
and caring despite all of her personal challenges. Until the
Alzheimer's, of course. And now, to look into those gently crossed,
amber eyes, and to know that only inches behind them lurked a
silent enemy, a murderous, alien life form devouring her hideously
from within...

It was more than I could bear. "Oh, Rose," I cried as I lurched to
embrace her, and my elbow struck Claude's hand. We swung into
oncoming traffic and Claude jerked the wheel to the right. Then we
headed straight for the oak trees along the side. Claude wrenched the
wheel left and the traffic came at us again.
“Ahhhh!” we screamed together as he continued to overreact, the Mercedes describing a sine wave to-and-fro across the lane. Finally he lost it completely and we flew from the pavement, missing two trees by the breadth of a hair. We ran over something, Rose hit the roof with a thump, and the car skidded to a sloshing stop.

Claude and I stared at each other dazedly for a time before we remembered his mother. She was alright, thank goodness – still smiling even – though her eyes seemed a tad more convergent.

Then Claude got out of the car and headed around to the rear. Rose mumbled something and raised a hand to her head as I watched him over her shoulder. “That’s nice, dear,” I said, squinting to see more clearly through the rain. He was looking down at the ground, and then he had his face in his hands –

“I’ll be back, love,” I told Rose, and tried to get out myself. My door opened no more than six inches before wedging solidly in the gunk. I slid across the seat, opened the driver’s door and climbed out on that side. My feet sank instantly in the mud; I felt the cool damp oozing into my pumps.

Claude was indeed weeping – blubbing even as I made my way tortuously to join him. And then I saw it too, half buried in the muck: the body of Smiles, our beloved terrier.

We were closer to home than I’d thought.

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The sole was dry, the asparagus chewy, and the potatoes cold and raw, but we were lucky. I supposed, to be dining at all. Bernice – our maid and cook – was tipsy again, no doubt concerned about her future. She was right to be. We intended to let her go on the 1st of May, for no
other reason — that date I mean — than consistency. The real cook had gone on April Fool’s Day and the second maid in March; we’d fired our chauffeur a month after ringing in the New Year with a triple sucking of butler, houseboy and gardener. Soon I’d be preparing the meals myself, though no one had much appetite these days.

The very thought of food — mastication, actually — was repugnant to me now, to all of us, since the Tsunami. I don’t recall who first dubbed it that, but it was certainly apt. It had wiped out everything in its path: status, fortune, peace of mind...

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Deputy executive vice-president, that had been Claude’s title. Of Beechtree Corporation, makers of fine food and beverages since 1924. The folks who’d brought you Lushess® — the one and only indistinguishable sugar substitute — and seen their stock rocket from $18 to $190 in a little over six months.

Then the teeth fell out. By the truckload. All over the country. But they weren’t rotting, oh no, we had that in our favor; it was nerve-death from a toxic reaction with the sweetener. A reaction that hadn’t surfaced during testing, apparently, because the hired consultant had elected to spend his research funds on a handful of phony charts and a sumptuous beach house in Rio — to which he’d retired along about the time of the Tooth Fairy’s windfall.

Never much for candy, I had consumed no more Lushess than a single, obligatory taste. Claude himself, however, and Eugenia, and her new husband Todd, and a goodly number of the domestics and our friends, had partaken heartily of the free samples of gum and soda and snack foods laced with the dental defoliants. Our daughter was the
first person in one hundred years to appear at the country club sporting a full set of dentures.

The latest sheaf of lawsuits, delivered this morning by a smirking FedEx messenger, was thick as a Brooklyn phone book...

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Conversation at the dinner table was nil; the clink and chatter of silver and china the only counterpoint to the shush of rain against the windows. Soon the silver would be stainless, I thought, and the glassware straight from Sears—

“You know, Claude,” Rose ejaculated. “I’ve been thinking.”

“What?” he yelled from the far end of the table.

As usual, I acted as interpreter. “Rose says she’s been thinking,” I told him, exaggerating the pronunciation and pointing to my head.

“You’re souring your new pink dress in Kindergarten?” Claude bellowed. “You described that colorful incident yesterday, dear, in some detail.”

“Claude!” I reproached. “Mind your manners. It’s Elsevere’s kittens,” I explained to him. “She wants to give one to Reverend Jones.”

“Father drowned them, dear,” Claude called out with mock gaiety.

“Claude,” I hissed.

“In the toilet—”

“Claude!”

“One by one. Don’t you remember, Mother? We were there together, watching. Good old Dad. And Reverend Jones was killed in the war, dear,” he went on. “Head knocked clean off by an 88 during morning prayers. Shell didn’t even explode, they said—”

Eugenia’s whimpering, a backdrop throughout the meal, now
reached a climax as she burst into tears. I reached for her hand across the table. “What is it, honey?” I asked her, knowing full well what it was. Her marriage to Todd, only a year out of port, was already on the shoals.

“Oh, Mummy,” she sniffled, “I just don’t know what to do. He seems so – so distant.”

“He’s in Afghanistan, dear,” I reminded her. He was an engineer with Noble Oil.

“No – I mean on the phone. Last night. I hardly recognized his voice.”

“It was probably the line, dear,” I smiled. “Who knows about the connections in those third world burgs.”

“Todd’s a eunuch,” my husband blurted. “You’re better off without him.” This sent her into fresh hysterics.

I turned on him angrily. “Now look what you’ve done. I hope you’re happy with it. And might I remind you that Todd happens to be the only person in this household currently earning an income!”

Claude had his head twisted to favor me with his good ear. My remark drew a scowl. “Income,” he countered. “Daddy gave me more than that for my allowance.”

“Well Daddy’s dead,” I snarled, “and so is his legacy thanks to you bunglers at Beechtree!” I threw a hand to my mouth, knowing at once I’d gone too far. Claude stiffened and looked away. What had gotten into me?

“Sometimes,” said Eugenia, dabbing her eyes with a napkin, “sometimes I think he might have – might have –”

“Mothballs!” cried Rose and then she was silent again, lost in the
impenetrable mystery of her dinner plate.

"Why Mother, I think you've hit it!" Claude roared back, and then he shook with laughter.

Eugenia wheeled around to reply, but before she could utter a peep the door to the pantry swung open with a bang and Bernice trundled through with the serving cart. We drew in a collective gasp: the front of her apron was dappled with bloodstains!

But no, it wasn't blood, I saw now, it was juice from the strawberries she'd sliced - or pulverized - for the shortcake.

Leaning on the cart for support, she began unsteadily to collect the dinner dishes and hand out dessert. I could hear her humming a tune under her breath that sounded like the theme from Jeopardy.

"There yug-yug Miss Eugenee," she bumbled as she slapped a plate in front of my daughter. "Some nyshe shrubberies for ya." Only when she bent over did I spot the whipped cream in her hair.

Eugenia's expression changed from alarm to revulsion as her gaze fell to the dish. Moving away, Bernice lost her balance and clutched at the cart. It went up on two wheels and hung there precariously, perched at a frightening angle before righting itself clatteringly as she stumbled the other way. This couldn't go on. I got to my feet at the same moment the phone rang.

"Important call," Claude announced. "I'll get it." He slid back his chair and stood up.

A look of amazement came over Rose as the phone rang again. She searched the room in wonder as if a toucan were blaring in the corner.

I started around the table one way as Claude came around the
other. Bernice stopped suddenly and wobbled like a top that had finished spinning, and was ready to fall. Eugenia tried to get up, but caught her skirt on something and couldn't manage it.

The third ring was the charm. Rose found the telephone on the sideboard and picked it up.

"No, Mother," Claude yelped, throwing out a hand. "It's Blumberg, the lawyer, about the hearing. I've got to—"

"Nuts and cheese," Rose said firmly into the receiver and slammed it down in the cradle.

"No!" shrieked Claude, lunging, and now there was a crack of thunder and the room went dark. The last thing I saw as I tripped and went down was Rose's beaming face, and I realized with horror that Claude was right: she looked exactly like W. C. Fields.

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There was lawn. A vast, limitless expanse of it, a dizzying ocean of organic green. The view from the patio was what it was, except that where the fountain should be was a wooden lectern inlaid with neon chevrons of red and blue, and a wavy-haired man in a dark suit stood behind it. And then, abruptly, instead of being at a distance I was right up close, examining the side of his face. It was pockmarked and heavy with makeup, and there was a zigzag scar below one eye, and as he smiled the sunlight glinted off a canine of solid gold. The smile widened and he began to laugh, and soon he was cackling like a maniac, and the gold tooth shook itself free, plinked off the rim of the lectern and landed in my outstretched hand. The man turned to me with a wink, and at the same time his other teeth began popping out like champagne corks, and I recognized that dreadful, leerig face as
Alex Trebek, the game-show host.

There was thunder like distant cannon fire, and a great cloud blotted out the sun. A downpour commenced that was instantly blinding, and as I started away toward the house my feet became leaden and unresponsive, and I looked down to find I was up to my knees in mud. An unaccountable brightness drew my attention to a billboard standing beside the pool, advertising vacations in Rio de Janeiro, and in front of it — out of the rain somehow — was a row of podiums occupied by people I knew. Here was the Indian doctor with his turban askew, and next to him W. C. Fields wearing a garish wig, and then Eugenia who was crying into a dish-towel, and then Bernice, who reached quickly out to hammer a mushroom-shaped button.

"Yes, Berneeth?" queried a toothless Trebek, the words coming from everywhere like the voice of God.

"What ish-hic-unemployment 'shurance?"

Now a white blur scurried onto the scene. "Smiles!" I called out, overjoyed that our old friend was still among us. He galloped toward me happily on his stout little legs, pink tongue a-wag, when suddenly — with the blare of a horn — our green Mercedes burst from the mist with my own husband grinning at the wheel! Smiles made a heroic effort to get out of its path, his legs flying every which way in the slop.

"Smiles!" I cried, but it was too late. The front bumper caught him and hurled him into the heavens, and as I followed his trajectory skyward I saw that the rain was changing to hail! On to the house I ran in a panic, and I reached the patio and started across toward the
open French doors, hail clacking around me like a typing class on
No-Duz. But then my pace was fading as the footing became
uncertain, and now I couldn’t seem to go forward at all, my shoes
skating fecklessly in the rising dunes of white, and as I reached down
in terror to claw myself free I saw that they weren’t hailstones at all,
but...human teeth...

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“Claude!” I screamed, sitting up with a start – but he was not there
beside me. Still trembling, I looked over at the clock. Midnight, it
read, the display flashing. That meant that the power was back, but
told nothing of the time. Sliding from bed, I drew on my robe.
Eugenia could be heard sobbing faintly through the wall. The rain
had not abated, I saw, and there was lightning aplenty to show me
down the stairs.

Claude was in the dark before the dining room window, staring
up at the barn. Standing there in his smoking jacket against the glass,
he looked like Baron von Frankenstein awaiting the mob.

Not meaning to frighten, I spoke out as I crossed the room.
“I thought I’d find you here,” I said. There was no response. When
I was nearly upon him, he turned unexpectedly, sucked in a breath
and jumped back, slamming into a table. I grabbed for the decanter
and caught it; he went for the Tiffany lamp and missed. It crashed to
pieces on the floor.

“Ha ha ha!” he spluttered, reeking of brandy. “Forget about it,
May! I’ve got good news! Good news!”

I looked up expectantly at his face in the gloom. His exuberance
was a joy to behold; I hadn’t seen him this happy in months.
“Blumberg called,” he said, taking me in his arms (here was another experience long denied). “After you turned in. We've won our appeal! Our appeal, May! That means we won't lose everything after all! Ninety-seven, ninety-eight per cent, yes — but not everything. We'll hang onto the house, I think, and a small piece of property. And — and the barn,” he gushed, glancing up toward it there on the rise, and then he crushed me to him passionately.

Lightning seared the room around us, and thunder shook the floor beneath our feet.

“Oh Claude,” I moaned, reveling in the power of his desire.

“Oh Claude, Claude —”

“Oh, Claude!” I shrieked, clawing at his shoulder. “The barn!”

Lightning had struck the roof, and it was ablaze. My husband spun to look, and for several seconds the two of us were transfixed, watching the flames envelope the ancient walls like hungry vermin.

I laid a hand on his arm. “Claude,” I said forcefully, “it’s not too late to save it! Quick, call the fire department!” He didn’t seem to hear me. I grabbed the lapels of his jacket and gave him a shake.

“Claude! Snap out of it!”

He swiveled abruptly to face me. “The fire department,” he told me. “We’ve got to call them!”

“Yes,” I agreed, nodding vigorously. “Go!” I pointed to the sideboard opposite and gave him a nudge.

“The telephone,” he said as if in a trance, and he started across the room. His second bare footstep found the broken glass.

“Yeowww!” came the cry, and then I was moving toward his ghostly,
hopping image, protected by my slippers. Completely forgetting the maid's call-cord, I tripped on it again, and clutching at Claude instinctively, pulled us both to the carpet. On the way down his hand struck the phone and it chimed to the floor nearby.

Ignoring the pain where my elbow had struck the table, I spoke assertively to the groaning specter. "Now Claude, Mommy will fix Mr. Tootsie in a little minute. Get on the phone this instant and call the fire department."

"Yes – yes," he muttered, and I heard him sweeping the carpet with his arms for the receiver. At last he had it in his hand. "I – I can't see the numbers, May! I need light!"

"Alright," I panted, struggling to my feet. The nearest switch was on the wall by the swinging door. Gingerly I felt my way along until I came to it. I palmed the thing on, and we were both blinded by 5000 lumens from the electric chandelier. Through my lashes I watched Claude punch 911, then clamp the phone to his good ear. In only a second he had made the connection.

"It's on fire," he said, and then he began to babble. "The barn. The Great Barn. You've got to save it. Please oh please you've just got to save it. There's still time, I think, still time if only you'll hurry – "

"Claude!" I screeched at him. "Get hold of yourself! Tell them the address, Claude! The address!" Even as I spoke, I became aware that the glow from the direction of the barn had intensified. As I looked now through the window, there was nothing left of the shape of it; it was an amorphous mass of flame.

"Yes, yes – the address," Claude stammered, almost child-like. "The address is fifteen sixty – "
The room went black then as a terrific blast of thunder echoed above our heads.

"Hello! Hello!" he repeated in the darkness.