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Cooper

by Gwynyth Lozier Mislin

Cooper went off to the bathroom to identify the crawling thing that had sent me shrieking into the living room.

“It came straight at me, Cooper, I swear. It was a horrible, bizarre-looking thing. And huge!” I wondered if I should have sent him. He was getting so weak that an extra trip to the bathroom required more energy than he had to spare. However, I felt obliged to join him in the pretense that everything was just as it had always been, and Cooper had certainly slain monsters for me before.

“Please come out here and tell me what that awful thing was.”

His answer was laughter, which immediately became a shallow cough.

“Don’t laugh at me, Cooper.”

“It was only a little water bug,” he said, reappearing in the doorway of the living room.

“Not little,” I objected, “not little at all. Did you kill it?”

“There are bound to be hundreds. Why kill one?”

“As a warning to the others, of course. Cooper, please explain this awful place. How can you live here?”

“You’ve said that about every place I’ve lived. I like this apartment. I won’t be here long, anyway.” He had arranged to move to a nursing home when he became too weak or too ill to live alone. “But never mind that,” he sank into his green velvet reading chair. “Give me my quotation.”

I sighed. Cooper was brilliant at this game of ours. He was fifteen years older and much better read, so his score was thousands of points higher than mine.

“‘Wouldst thou fashion for thyself a seemly life?’” Laughing, I realized that I must certainly have been thinking of the chaos of this apartment when I chose the quote.

Like a flash, Cooper shot back the next line of the poem, “‘Then do not fret over what is past and gone.’ It’s Goethe. A non-English author means a thousand points for me, Dina.”

“Cooper, doesn’t fairness demand that I be given a handicap? All those years you spent tucked away happily in the libraries of Europe, I was

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trapped in the suburbs with kiddies and diapers.”

“Speaking of your very nice children, I’ve received charming postcards this week from each of them.”

“I didn’t hate the children, I hated the suburbs.”

“Through the suburbs, sleepless people stagger, as though just delivered from a shipwreck of blood.”

“Rarely that dramatic, I assure you, but we had the sleepless people staggering. There’s never a wink of sleep with children.”

“You’re stalling, Dina. You don’t know the answer, so admit it.”

Of course, he was right; I absolutely did not know who wrote that. I glimpsed a volume of Garcia Lorca in the stack of books nearest his chair. “A poet. A foreign poet. Lorca?”

“Dina, I’m impressed.”

Conversation drifted to mutual friends, my husband’s work, and the weather, and then he seemed tired, so I asked to be allowed to straighten the kitchen. Neither one of us was entirely ready for me to leave, but Cooper admitted that he needed a little rest.

“I’ll just shut down for a moment, Dina. Wake me when you’ve had enough in there. No shrieks, please.” He was smiling, but his eyes were closed.

“Whatever moves is a fair target,” I laughed. Like most healthy people unused to the very ill, I had failed to see the signs of his fatigue.

The kitchen was not as bad as I had expected. Someone had been cooking and cleaning up. It could not have been Cooper. I attacked what mess there was with the zeal of a sinner. The truth, we both knew, was that I was at least as messy as Cooper and always had been.

Wiping my hands on a surprisingly clean towel, I walked back into the living room and stood next to his chair. He was deeply asleep. Without animation, his face was much too thin and the colors of his skin looked all wrong. Cooper never had seemed to belong to his own time. With the addition of a few whiskers, his height and natural elegance would have made him a handsome Victorian patriarch. I had certainly never seen him in riding boots and a long coat with a white stock neatly tied at his neck, yet that was the portrait I kept of him in my mind. But, of course, being Cooper, his stock would have come undone and been just the tiniest bit grubby, and his tummy would have spoiled the line of his riding clothes, and he would have been just as terrified of horses a century before as he was now. I leaned over and kissed the top of his

head. He seemed so far away from me.

No one in my life had been what Cooper was to me. He offered comfort, whatever the problem, as long as it was not mundane: "Dina, don't tell me domestic troubles, I can barely manage the dreary aspects of my own daily life, so how can I be expected to help others? I am your resource for the truly important questions of life. What should you wear? What poets ought you to be reading? What direction should the style of your painting take? Should you or should you not buy that Directoire commode, and which man should you marry? These are the questions I welcome, but your troubles with your studio lease are not really up my alley."

Yet Cooper was good at finding original ways of dealing with situations unfamiliar to him. Once, at the beach, he was overwhelmed by the rowdiness of my children in the close quarters of the cottage. On a hot afternoon, he put a Bach record on the player and the children rushed off to bed for their naps as if by command.

"Cooper, what did you do? They hate taking naps."

"It's a simple plan. I promised them two ice creams each after their naps. Your children are resting in their beds, and they are listening carefully to Bach because when the music stops for good, they may get up." Even after Cooper left that summer, "Bach hour" had been so firmly established by him that it became a family tradition.

He made a light, snoring sound, and I adjusted the thin blanket over him. I wanted to stare at his face, memorizing every part of it so that it would be with me forever. Over the years I had tried to paint him a dozen times, but my efforts ended in frustration and annoyance because I could not capture anything important about him on canvas. The pictures looked like Cooper, but the expressions were never right. Now, I felt sorry that I had painted over them all.

The moment he awoke, I would speak very seriously with him. Cooper usually insisted on keeping the tone light, whatever was going on, but I had important things to tell him. I wanted him to know that I would never leave him alone and that I was fully prepared to make this entire journey with him. I had disappointed myself earlier by chatting idly when there were things that needed to be said and so much that had to be settled.

Curling up in a corner of the huge velvet sofa known as "the barge," I fell asleep too. Asleep and dreaming, I felt Cooper's being expand and surround me. I could not see his face in my dream, but his presence became an ocean wave that carried my dream-self fast and far away.

I awakened abruptly with the impression that something had brushed against my cheek. The unfamiliar echo of the sea was in my ear. Cooper was sitting up in his chair. He was wide awake and smiling at me.

“Where have you been, Dina?”

Stretching myself out of sleep, I returned his smile. “I have hidden myself and I have found out the way.” This was one of Cooper’s standard quotations from the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

“Dina, I want to ask something of you.”

“Anything, Cooper.”

“This won’t be easy. I want you to promise very solemnly, and I want you to keep your promise.”

This, then, was the tough talk I had been dreading. My heart was missing beats and I had to remind myself to breathe. Whatever my friend wanted, I would do. I permitted myself to realize what I had known from the beginning of his illness: Cooper was dying and there was nothing that could be done to save him. He would not get better. We would never resume our old lives.

Clearing my throat so that I could trust my voice, I looked across at him and said, “I will do whatever you ask.” From my seat on the sofa, I smiled at my friend, while my entire body called to him that I loved him.

“Please, Dina, I want you not to come here again. I’ve made plans to be cared for and it’s important to me that you not be involved. I want to say goodbye to you today. I want to leave things with us just as they are now.”

My arms and my legs were tingling as if blood had stopped flowing into them. What in the world to do when there is nothing in the world to do? Others would perform the tasks that I had been anxious and terrified to do for him. Someone else would sit with him. A stranger would close his eyes.

“I don’t think I understand. What can you mean, Cooper? I want to be with you.”

“You’ve taken excellent care of me, Dina, and I’ve counted on your affection through whatever has happened to me in this life.” He was quiet for a moment, and I watched him set his face the way he did when he intended to get his way. “We’ve had such fun, haven’t we?” He looked across the room at me, and I saw how desperately he wanted what he was asking of me. “There are people who know how to do this, Dina, strangers, but people who know how it goes. I don’t want your memory of me to be ruined by what’s about to happen.”

So much was going on inside my body that I could no longer sit. I stood, walked to the window, and looked down at the trees and the river across the street. Rain must have started and stopped while I slept. The sidewalks looked damp; not freshened by the rain, but muddied by it. Misery and fear were overcoming my desperate attempt to keep from

breaking down and begging him to change his mind because I wanted every single moment of him, no matter what it contained. Then I realized that I couldn't let myself cry, because he didn't have the strength to deal with my despair.

His voice came ragged from his throat and he said, "I could never leave you, you know."

"Nor I you." There was nothing more to say. I went over to him and sat down on the floor. I leaned against the arm of his chair and lay my head there as he stroked my hair. Eventually, I felt his hand become heavier, and I thought how weary he must be. Every movement and each conversation drained his diminishing energies. It was time to go. I stood and went to get my coat.

In the bedroom I noticed a picture taken of me one Christmas with my children. Enlarged and framed in silver, it stood on his nightstand. I picked up a pen and pad and wrote my final quotation for him. I left it propped on his pillow.

At the door we embraced. He had been my truest friend, my teacher, my father, and, sometimes, my child. He kissed me softly on the forehead but said nothing. My arms tightened around him, and I pressed my head into his chest, trying to memorize the smell of him. The thought of losing him, the pain of touching him for the last time, trapped my voice in my throat. Against my will I took a breath, and the moment was broken. My numb fingers opened the door, and with difficulty I walked through it. He closed the door very gently behind me.

For a while, I stood outside, leaning against the doorway. My mind was trying to move my body down the hall, but I stayed planted, listening. There was no sound from the other side of the door, and I knew Cooper was still there. After another moment, I heard his voice: "It is the temper of the highest hearts to strive most upwards when they are most burdened."

Then I had to smile. I leaned against the door and said, "Sir Philip Sidney."

He laughed. "Exactly!" I pulled my coat around my shoulders and walked down the hall.

He would go straight to bed. And when he did, he would find the words from Alexander Pope that I had left on his pillow, "How vast a memory has love."

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