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The Many Seasons of Furbiss

Furbiss got the call on a Monday. Her idiot brother was getting married.

“It’s a miracle,” said her mother.

“It’s a warning,” said Furbiss. “He relapse?”

Her mother sighed heavily. “You can’t just be happy, can you? It’s something to celebrate. He gets to be a husband.”

“He’s gotten to be a lot of things,” said Furbiss. The list was long. Addict, thief, swindler, and the kind of puke who sold timeshares. But there was more than a mote of truth in what her mother had said. Happiness eluded Furbiss, then and always. It wasn’t a matter of effort so much as a constant disconnect. She had been well and truly happy three times in her life: When she quit smoking, when she divorced George, and when she quit smoking again. She could be content from time to time but never in the serious, pre-packaged way her mother conceptualized whatever the hell “happy” was, and certainly not the way everyone else seemed to conceive it, which was like a sore they liked to pick, pick, pick, delicious in its agony. No, Furbiss was happy with her animals, her little house, her on-again, off-again friends at the bar and the marina. She promised her mother she would attend when–if–the wedding went down and hung up.

Out on the porch, one long gray cat stretched in a rattan chair, then barfed up a hairball. It sat in a spreading yellow pool. The cat stared at it. So did Furbiss. She took it as an omen.

Furbiss lived in Black Point, Florida, a pimple due west of Fort Lauderdale. The city was so named for its founder, a Belgian who had fought for the Union in the Civil War. Way it went was as follows: Assigned to a cavalry division, the Belgian spent most of the war racing his horse between outposts to deliver messages. He was not prepared for much in the way of violence, and so when violence found him it did so with awful, perfect, acuity. One minute he was astride his horse, uncomfortable with the late summer heat and the awful humidity in south Georgia where the Union was but lately pressing into the Confederacy's southernmost holdings, and the next a hot wetness had taken his foot. He looked down and there beside the muscled flank of his horse was his boot in the stirrup, a hole shot cleanly through the leather and the underlying flesh within. A neat fount of blood followed. The Belgian fell from the saddle and howled. From the nearby tree line emerged three filthy rebels in tattered, ragged uniforms. Their bones showed through their skin. They seemed mere haunts, poorly armed with a single rifle between them.

While the Belgian writhed and fumbled for his pistol, the haunts loomed above him and took turns spitting on him. They mocked his pained cries, his well-fed face. They kicked him and started to unbutton his coat. The whole time, his hand that gripped the pistol had been wedged beneath him, hidden, and thus when he drew it forth and

shot them all point blank they died with the same expression as when they had been born: stupid.

From that day forward the Belgian hated the South, its wretched Southerners, and all things Dixie. After the war he took a job as a surveyor and, when sent to Florida to lay out a town, took revenge upon his deceased and defeated adversaries by naming the town after the injury that had taken three toes off his right foot–Black Point. That was the first part of his revenge. The second was his refusal to lay out the city in a grid. No street would be truly straight, no avenue laid so that it wouldn't close back on itself. His goal was confusion, frustration, and eventually rage in any and all who dared inhabit his village of madness. He stayed and presided as the town's first mayor, elected three times despite an unending tirade of insults toward his bewildered (and often lost) constituents.

Furbiss loved the story of the mad Belgian. She passed his statue on the way to the marina, the only quaint thing about the downtown circle that, in truth, was more a crooked spiral. She, too, hated the town, but it was the one place in the state where housing remained affordable and her job at the community college wouldn't allow her to live otherwise. She taught history three times a week to bored freshmen who preferred their phones to her lectures, and Furbiss found she no longer cared. In years past, she had fought for their attention with crafty, innovative lessons designed to awaken their minds to history's wonders. Now she merely arrived to class, often late and disheveled, and sometimes smelling of strong drink, and gave tests that almost no one passed.

What was Napoleon thinking, I mean really thinking?

A. Very little

B. Oatmeal

C. Gettin' randy for the old musket fire

The dean of the college had already given her a stern talking to and told her to improve on most everything such as her appearance, her performance, and to stop coming to work wreathed in the stink of gin. Furbiss listened blithely, meekly, cursing the man inwardly. His name was Perfo Benoit and he claimed to be the son of Italian tomato farmers, a claim Furbiss was as likely to believe as she was to shit gold bars. He was small and pretended not to know. In his hard, bright shoes he stood several inches below her. She could often see herself reflected on his bald pate.

It was Furbiss's belief that Perfo had, let us say, *a thing* for her, though there existed little in the way of firm evidence. He was cordial but distant at work, professional to the utmost, but he lingered too long in his looks. More than once she had caught the man's gaze fixed on her ankles. Scant evidence to be sure, but to Furbiss's mind *sufficient*.

At the marina, she found her only close friend, the proprietor of the business, Pep Lee. The woman was engaged in the sale of a boat to a customer. The boat was in hock to her for back rent owed on a spot on her lot. The owner–about to be former–stood nearby, tears in his eyes, pleading with Pep not to sell his beloved watercraft.

"It's all I got," he blubbered.

"All you had," said Pep. She was shaking hands with the new owner, collecting the cash in hand.

"I put that Mercury on myself. My kids and I, we use it to fish."

Pep spat. “What’s this crying? The country might be free but my marina ain’t. Get.”

Furbiss paid little mind, though. The new owner was Perfo, counting out bills into Pep’s hand, dressed in shorts and linen. She had never seen the man’s pale skinny legs before and shuddered. When the transaction was complete, Perfo came over and gave an embarrassed shrug. “I had believed that to be you,” he said. “It occurs that we’ve never met outside the institution.”

He wore sunglasses, prescription. The kind where the tinted lenses flipped up when necessary. Good Christ, thought Furbiss. The man was a freak.

“Didn’t know you fished,” she said, aware that she cared nothing about fish or the conversation but was otherwise at a loss as to how to extricate herself from more freak talk with a man whose legs resembled PVC pipes.

“Learning,” said Perfo. “The price was too excellent.” When Furbiss didn’t say anything, he said, “After my wife passed–it’s been a few years now–I decided to learn new hobbies. I admit to being a poor fisherman but I remain dedicated.”

Out in the yard, the boat’s former owner had slithered away and Pep was helping her crew get the craft on Perfo’s trailer. It looked new, the trailer, with glossy paint and polished wheels. A stark contrast to the aged, faded boat that squatted above it.

“That’s going to need work,” said Furbiss. She pointed at the boat.

“I know,” said Perfo. He was squinting in the sun, the tinted lenses up because–who knew?

“So,” said Furbiss. “Fishing. And boat repair.”

“There’s a term for it,” said Perfo. “Caulker?”

“Shipwright?”

“Mender?”

When Perfo and the boat were gone, Pep, without asking, pulled two chairs before the boat house door, then produced two cold beers. They sat in the shade, Furbiss and Pep, and watched the Black River slap the shit out of the reeds. The water was up and mad after big rains the last few days.

“Collin's getting married,” said Furbiss.

“No shit?”

“I give it fifty-fifty.”

“At the altar or after?”

“Both.”

Pep nodded. “Long odds,” she said. “You’re gonna win.”

“Not once,” said Furbiss.

“But this time,” said Pep.

When the town got to be too much and Furbiss got fed up, she went out into the streets to breathe the bad humid air and find her way to the bar. She liked Bert’s the best, a dilapidated shack set back from the road and without a proper parking lot unless you counted the flattened lengths of weeds and grass. It was the first and oldest bar in Black Point, and the first black-owned business, and the first and only bar in town still under the lackluster care of its original proprietor. Old Bert himself, haloed with his head of white hair, was behind the bar seven days a week, at times so stoned on his own inventory that he hardly acknowledged, much less rang up, whatever Furbiss ordered.

Bert had wisdom borne of age. He was seventy three and tight on rye whiskey and had, like Furbiss, given up smoking–twice. He'd been in Vietnam with Gramps Rud, a cantankerous old man for whom the wheelchair ramp had been custom built in the 80s. Bert and Gramps got tight in the evenings and played darts. They regaled their customers with stories about every person, living and dead and fictitious, who lived in Black Point.

Today, Bert was behind the bar and bossing around his new orderly, a drunkard who used to coach college football, some creep named Sandy Preston. Likely from Black Point, thought Furbiss as she sat down and poured herself a rye. Likely never left. Like all true Southerners, this Preston dork had two first names and half that number in brain cells. He ambled about with a broom, with a plunger. He did quiet, minor things.

"Heard about your brother," said Bert. He was suddenly there, perched against the bar, and perfect. The wisdom shone in his eyes.

"Didn't hear it from me," said Furbiss.

"Word gets round, something, something. You ring that up?"

"Do I work here? Ask the light bulb you hired."

Bert grinned. "He's under your skin. The marriage."

"Today and every damn day. Ring up two while you're at it. Then two more if you get the time. And don't mention my brother. He gets every opportunity in life to skunk it up and when he does just that, folks pat him on the back."

They both knew what Furbiss was referring to so neither required much in the way of explanation. Collin had been given every opportunity, face-planted into every pratfall, sunk to every shitty depth. He always managed to crawl back and reinvent

himself and always expected everyone to take the new Collin seriously, to treat him like the first off the assembly line. Meanwhile, every mistake clung to Furbiss's skin. Every morning she woke to three things: the sun cutting through the vinyl blinds, the yowling of hungry cats, and the familiar tang of regret on the back of her tongue. Collin getting married? The family making a fuss about it? It made Fubiss sick.

"The many forms of pity," said Bert. He was pouring the ryes and sloshing a few more on the bar what with his bad hand. He had to wave over the flunky to finish and mop up.

"Pity," scoffed Furbiss. "Just happy to have expectations met."

"Maybe this time is different," said the flunky. What was his name? Sanderson Preston. Sounded like the kind of freak that wore fishing shirts on dry land.

"I ask you?"

Preston shrugged. "Didn't ask anybody."

"And remembering that is your Christmas bonus." Furbiss was steamed. She considered dashing the man's face with her rye and having a go at him with the rolled up towel, a snap to the thigh to shut him up but good. But temperance won out. All the women in her life wanted peace, tranquility. What Furbiss wanted was to sit and drink and think until one or the other began to encroach upon the other. Then she would *just* drink or think or sit, and leave the rest to another day. And now Collin would delve into the smoky armpit that was marriage. Furbiss had been married once, to George, a man both incomparably kind and dull. They made it three years before Furbiss pulled the plug, asked the man to kindly pack his things and leave her house. There had been no fighting, no nastiness, no infidelities. Furbiss has simply woken up one morning and

realized that whoever had married George had not been her. It was some other Reb Furbiss, someone who, in a moment of incredulity, had the gall to think that hitching her life to someone else's would produce anything other than banality. She saw it in the bills that arrived, jointly accusatory, and in the phone calls that asked for mister and misses so and so. She heard it when certain people, the kind of people who thought going to church exonerated them from voting, said the word, "husband," as if their teeth were rough concrete.

"What's a lady got to do for another rye that doesn't involve violence?" said Furbiss to anyone and no one. "And a smoke. Bert, you holding?"

"I quit," said the aged proprietor. "And so did you."

Furbiss had quit many things in life, she reflected on the plane. She quit marriage by quitting George. He had taken the news rather well until he didn't. Then he was in a rage, calling her at odd hours, demanding an explanation more substantial than, "Our mutual doldrum." Furbiss asked him to consider whether it would be all that different from staying married, from the awful inside knowledge dredged up anew every time their gazes alighted upon one another that life-long love was a carnival barker's pitch, nothing more, and that they were aging beside one another, two in-need mummies who had yet to be serviced. Didn't he see it, that wary shifting of the eyes whenever they smashed their bodies against one another long enough for one or the other or none to achieve some sad climax?

Eventually George got it. Or he didn't. Either way he stopped calling and signed the papers.

Furbiss had quit smoking–twice–and good Christ on a popsicle stick, think on *that!* She had grown up in an era where you could smoke on a plane before and after takeoff, and in bars and restaurants where shoulder-high barricades separated those who lit up from the freaks who didn't. She could smoke in taxis and buses, in waiting rooms–*doctor's waiting rooms,* for crying out loud. No one thought smoking was healthy. They just preferred it to maiming each other.

She even quit her family–mostly–and her own name. Her mother, a barnacle of a woman sick for Jesus and the South, had christened her Reba in honor of a country singer she had never seen in person, much less met. Her mother went to a church where more than one woman had pledged themselves to Christ and forsaken most everything, even candy. Good oxygen was a premium for these people.

Finally, Furbiss had quit her brother, Collin, whose mission in life amounted to self-destruction. To that end he had been wildly successful, ruining three businesses, getting on and off drugs four separate times, a gambling problem, and even a relationship with, good God, a woman from *Texas.* There was no justice on Earth and the fact that Texas existed was proof.

Now the idiot brother was getting married. Cleaning up. Furbiss had enough mini bottles of whiskey to almost make the plane seat comfortable. Ten thousand feet in the air, her phone rang. It was Perfo.

"I want to congratulate you on your brother's forthcoming wedding," he said.

"Tell him," said Furbiss. But she was curious. Why was the man calling *her*? What was his angle?

"It's in Knoxville, I understand. My birthplace."

“It has mountains, I suppose.”

“Splendid ones.”

“And breweries. And yuppies. Is this about canceling classes?”

“I’ve given the wrong impression. Too often. Could we talk when you return? Over dinner?”

Furbiss fought to control her face. The dean was asking her out while she was hurtling ten thousand feet above the Earth, drunk as a skunk and contemplating the imminent doom for which her brother was writing vows. Was this an appropriate time? Was the act itself remotely appropriate? Was she remotely interested? She could not tell. But the call had dropped and airplane mode was certainly a thing.

Furbiss arrived at her brother’s house and was shocked to see it clean and tidy. No piles of dirty clothes everywhere. No stink of unwashed man. The wife to be was very pretty if you liked to imagine a cardboard box in clothes, and Collin was ruined on himself. Hair slicked and cut too short. A fake tan. HIs teeth, so white it hurt Furbiss to look when he smiled. And there was mother, sitting on a beige sofa, absolutely aglow.

“Reba, honey, you look tired,” said her mother.

Furbiss threw her luggage down. “Nonsense. Had a great gym on the plane. Does anyone smoke? Where’s the liquor?”

“Sister,” said Collin. He had actually *stood* and held his hand out in–supplication? A shock of annoyance went down Furbiss’s spine. “We don’t drink,” he said. “Anymore.”

“At all?”

“Not a drop,” said the betrothed.

“Is it a Jesus thing?”

Collin wore a smile that looked like a dishrag stapled to a face. “The Lord doesn’t say much about it but our pastor does. Please. We don’t want conflict in this, our happy time.”

There arose a clamor at the heart of which, Furbiss was shocked to learn, was *herself.* Mother was unhappy and Collin was trying to broker peace and the bride–Melanie? Mekaby? Morganys–remained quiet and smiling, a cultist in the midst of a serious acid trip.

Furbiss fled to the rental car and drove to the area around the university where she could find people like her, people sucking hard on thin air in the elevation, people whose lives had frayed because of those with whom they shared blood. How could she be kin to those freaks, she wondered as she sat in a bar and got into the rye. How could they be who they were being? Puffed up on themselves, on their pastor, on a quiet dry life. The sofa, she thought, and recoiled in horror. *Beige.*

Perfo had texted her in the meantime. *Apologies for the awkward conversation but the offer stands if you’re so inclined.*

She wanted to ask the man if being dean meant he got to skip college, but decided against it. No point in getting fired, not while she was in Tennessee, away from her home and her cats. Furbiss was not idealistic. She had a mortgage and liked to cook on the weekends. She liked to buy expensive costumes for the cats that only succeeded in enraging them. Not idealistic at all. Not quite practical, either. So she called Perfo.

“What’s the deal?” she asked. “The boat. The tomato story. The texts on the plane and staring at my ankles. Are you hot for me?”

“I admit that my manners have not been flawless. That withstanding, if I have incurred a, let us say, incredulity, in the manner of a rudeness, in the manner of…”

“Hold on,” said Furbiss. “Are you drunk?”

“I’ve had a cordial or three. And vodka.”

“And you complain about me and gin.”

Furbiss heard the unmistakable clink of ice in a glass. Then Perfo said, “I make marinara from scratch that will bend your eyeballs.”

At the wedding, Collin’s best man gave a speech. What a ghoul, thought Furbiss. A gray, wizened man in ill-fitting polyester. He practically fellated the microphone before passing it to the bride’s father, an excellent candidate for shock therapy. The man went on and on about the joys of marriage and emphasized, no fewer than eleven times, how *hard* it was going to be, how *difficult* it was to build a life with someone, especially someone with a *past,* but if they kept Christ in their hearts, and oh God, she couldn’t take any more. Then he said it again. “A man with a past.”

At that Furbiss sat up. It was one thing for her to crack on her kin. They were hers. The torment was, if not evenly distributed, mutual. But it was something else for some Knoxville money hussy to ride in on his unblemished mare and declare Collin’s taint to a roomful of people who cried at puppet shows.

Furbiss stewed in her anger. She drank and thought fondly of cigarettes.

Then Collin stood up. He said, “My sister is here, Reba, and she knows better than anyone that marriages are hard and that when they go astray it can be hard not to lash out at everyone else who might find joy.”

“Hur, hur, hur,” the bride laughed. She seemed ready to melt into her gown.

“I pray for her,” said Collin. “And for everyone who hasn’t found happiness.”

“Hur, hur,” said the bride.

Furbiss stood and threw her shoe. It struck Collin’s head. Collin struck the cake. No more hur, hurs from the chucklehead.

In the rental car, down one shoe, Furbiss floored it to the house, gathered her things, then floored it to the airport. They tried to call. They texted. Then they stopped. Furbiss felt an inkling of peace when she passed through security. She discarded her lone shoe in the trash bin, then changed in the bathroom. She had expected the rage. What she had not expected was shame–for her brother, for her family, for the bride, for herself. They thought they had lucked out, discovered the trick to good, clean living. A little religion, a little clearance aisle self-help, a little public airing out. Collin had grievances. Furbiss had them, too. But there was a certain level of underhandedness in bringing out the dirty laundry at a wedding.

She called her brother back and barked at his voice mail. “I don’t know what I expected and it still got worse. What did I do to you? Here I’ve been drawing breath to hear your thirteenth redemption arc and for what? I grew up with you. I’m older.”

And then there was nothing more to say. She was curled in upon herself in an airport bathroom, her guts in a knot, asking herself why it hurt the way it hurt. Because we’re stupid, Furbiss told herself. No one was going to wake up every day happy, least

of all Collin, and certainly not when he rolled over and beheld a wife as meaningful as a wooden palette. And she, the chuckling wonder? What would she feel when she woke to find herself next to the human equivalent of a gangplank?

But why? Why was he her brother and she his sister and there blood between them and a beating heart the size of Detroit?

On the plane ride home, Furbiss got drunk and passed out. She woke to find the plane cleared out, the last of the passengers none other than her. Alien, such an environment. A human place devoid of all that is human. On the offramp, a strange sadness took hold. It didn't *have* to be like that, any of it, all the time. Not them, not her, not anyone. She'd had seasons–the marriage, the cigs, the rye whiskey. They all did. Seasons were all they had. Spring, life, summer, heat, and the long hard fall into sentimental Fall, the cold, the quiet, the lying still. She saw the tarmac through the airport window, saw the marshallers waving planes here and there, up and down. What they needed, she thought, was one of those. A marshaller. Someone to guide them in.

Black Point steamed her, a hundred plus with the humidity. At home, her cats were happy to see her, and the catsitter, one of her undergraduates, was asleep on the couch. Furbiss nudged her with a knee.

"Drink?"

"Is this a trick?"

"Good question." Furbiss had the bottle, two glasses, a little bowl of ice. They had ryes, several, in fact, and sat on the screened in porch in time to catch a sun shower whip the front yard. It came with a heck of a lot of wind. Palm fronds bent low, then sprang back, upward, onward.

The next day her mother called. “None of that was necessary,” she said.

“On that, at least, we agree,” said Furbiss.

“Your own brother’s wedding. Not even strangers would act so badly.”

“Listen here,” said Furbiss. “We *are* strangers. I knew who he was and now I know who he’s going to be. Does he know me? He doesn’t even know himself! But he sure as shit knows what I ain’t.”

“Is that everything? You got it out? Reba, no one wants conflict.”

“That’s not even half true. Everyone wants it. He sure did. And he got it. Heck, I wanted a taste, too.”

“Ever since your divorce, you’ve been–”

Furbiss hung up. Before she could silence her phone, her brother called.

“Mom called you,” he said.

“Was that your idea or hers?”

“Come on. Hers.”

“Had to make sure.”

“I have a mark.”

“Then you got something in common with your Savior.”

“On my face. I’m serious.”

“So am I. Who gave you the stones? My business is my own. You think I don’t live with myself? I ain’t perfect. But neither was George. Neither is anyone. Neither is you.”

“You’re right,” said Collin. “I said the vows. I have to live with myself now. I have to live with everything I am and have been. Let me ask you. Could you?”

“Ask me in a year.” Furbiss hung up, so mad she could scream. But she didn’t. Instead, she silenced her phone. Hell of a thing for people to bash their heads against whatever life put in front of them, knowing–*knowing*–the relative fragility of the mushy matter between their ears. Oh, they would say Furbiss was a misanthrope who had never fully recovered from whatever apocalypse they imagined a dissolved marriage to be. They could imagine no worse scenario. And she could. A matter of scope, not perspective. Seeing well past the tree line.

At the college, Perfo was notably absent. Then he was there, in her classroom, just as it was clearing out. “I sense that perhaps your trip was not a happy one, cut short as it was.”

Despite herself, Furbiss was touched. An act of genuine politeness had that effect. “My brother would have made an excellent donkey,” she said. “You’re from Knoxville? And you left?”

“There wasn’t much there when I was young. The living was cheap and small.”

“I quit.”

“Here? Now? I had a feeling.”

“If I hustle, I can beat rush hour.”

“There is thankfully little of that in Black Point. Was it me? Am I the villain?”

“Of your own story or mine? Don’t get overconfident. I want to talk to Bert. Maybe tend bar. I want to try the private sector and learn to hate myself. Mostly I just can’t teach the same class for another year or ten.”

“I wish there was more on offer,” said Perfo. He gestured about the room in a way that incriminated the desks, the chairs, the college. Furbiss understood. Then the man took a paper from his coat and unfolded it. Furbiss recognized it as her own, an article she had recently published on Assyrian folklore. “A remarkable piece. I wanted to celebrate. Can I walk you to your car?”

Furbiss held the door. “First round’s on you.”

Three months later Furbiss got the call. Her mother, voice warbling like a parakeet. They’d found them both, husband and wife, stiff as boards, out of their minds on chemicals. The house was a mess. The beige sofa slashed to pieces.

There was no note, no explanation, no nothing. And somehow Furbiss had always known it would be that way. Loud in its quietness.

Later, much later, Furbiss would sit on the porch with a rye and remember her and Collin as children, and in particular the time they had dared each other to race across the house and slide on their knees across the horrific shag carpet. The point had been to see who could endure the worst rug burn and Furbiss, sure of herself, threw everything she had into the competition. She went full speed, legs pumping, and soon had hideous, bleeding swaths in the middle of her legs. But her brother had lost control and gone head-first into the coffee table, had broken his nose. He had sat up, the blood running down his face, nothing if not happy.

He said, “I win.”