

Athena Estates

I lie here unable to help myself. It's so annoying to wake up way too early, unable to go back to sleep. The old brain's cranking and no matter how I try, it's going to keep jumping from one thing to the next. I might as well just go with it. Besides, right now I'm so comfortable. It almost feels like I'm floating above the mattress. Although I can't bring myself to move or even open my eyes, the projector in my head has already started rolling. At times like these, I can remember lots of details but they're in random order. Once I have enough pieces it's easy to put them in place and fill in the gaps. So, bear with me if I go slowly at times. It's been an insane year and how I got here is quite a story.

During the second wave of the virus, everyone lost their patience and big chunks of their lives. I was lucky enough to keep my job through the first three months, but since my real career abruptly ended a few years earlier, my resume was kind of shaky and I hadn't seen a paycheck in way too long. The Gillippi brothers had always been great guys to deal with but a few missed rent checks changed all that. Their construction business was right next door, so there was no avoiding them. The car was repossessed, and my savings account was down to my last few hundred bucks. There was no telling if another batch of aid would ever make through Washington's shit show. After a proud and pretty productive sixty years, I was just a sorry old widower about to become homeless. There were not even any kids to mooch from. I had already over- tapped my few friends and they're were in bad shape too. I felt screwed over by the universe.

On eviction day, the brothers were nice enough to buy the nasty furniture I left behind. Even before I had finished walking down the driveway, I heard them throwing it into the dumpster. So, there I was with a single suitcase of just a few basics, slowly shuffling away with my head hung low. I hoped they felt bad for me. Luckily, they couldn't see my uncontrollable smile. You see, I had a plan.

As rough as the last few months were, I had lots of time to go walking and thinking. Once I got past my negative ruminations, the walks became very pleasant, and my thoughts bounced between bouts of practical problem solving and welcome escapes of fantasy. Sometimes I'd have long conversations with my Alice, reminiscing about all the good times. It was the very beginning of Fall and the weather was perfect. One day I found myself at the long, leaf-covered driveway leading into The Saint Ives Chemical R&D Campus- the huge corporate center where I worked for over thirty years. It was just a few miles from my ex-apartment and although I had avoided the place for years because of the shit send-off package they gave me, here I was again.

They were gobbled up by their biggest competitor who with little notice, canned most of us mere mortals. Some of the higher paid tech people had a chance to move to Michigan. A few went but most just moved on. I was making a nice buck as The Assistant Physical Plant Manager and although I was just a glorified janitor, I got to learn some neat technology and most of the workers under me were all good folks. Although the fourteen buildings were almost forty years old, they were kept up to date and meticulously maintained. The campus was over a hundred acres of prime, beautifully wooded land. I couldn't even imagine what the property alone was worth. Now, there it sat abandoned, just waiting for one more chance at a new life. I knew the feeling.

Right before the pandemic, the State pitched in to finance its transformation into the new Athena Technology Park. The sign at the driveway begged "Please bear with our construction as we create new jobs." ... A promise of great things to come, flash-frozen when the virus came and fucked everything up.

It was a glorious day and even though the security gates were padlocked, I still had my trusty set of keys. It looked like they had kept up with the landscaping, hoping to attract new tenants for whenever things started turning around, but the dormant buildings desperately needed cleaning and updating.

I walked along the Campus Nature Trail that a couple of thousand employees and neighborhood joggers enjoyed on their off-hours and remembered with a smile the loving care I had given this place. It bothered me to see filthy windows and all those noble towering stone panels covered in bird crap. But the afternoon sun streaming in between the trees and the family of deer crossing the path ahead were so calming. Aside from an occasional sneaker clomp and the breeze shacking loose some leaves, the peacefulness of it all was entrancing. Only occasionally the faint buzz of a tractor trailer lumbering down Highway 308 in the distance would break the mood. With the lockdowns, even that busy thoroughfare was now just a ghost of its former self.

A canopy of trees blocked the sun and the path narrowed as I approached one of my favorite spots. A small wooden bridge crossed a thin thread of a creek that dead ended just to the right. I always wondered where the creek began and why it never dried up completely. The absence of people emboldened the wildlife. Squirrels scurried above and below me without a care and the occasional fawn would just stare me down as I approached only to casually hop away at the last second. Alice and I took these walks, back when she was still able. It was not as quiet, but like everything else, so much nicer with her by my side.

Moving on, the path opened to a site in its early stages of renovation. The grey and white building was surrounded by a chain link fence covered in translucent ads for the campus. Large sketches boasted of an old equipment barn that was renovated to a tavern-style restaurant, a bunch of yuppie types sitting at café tables, laughing and drinking. There was a rendering of a gleaming Meeting Center, and a variety of drawings of smiling people in business attire, lab coats and jogging suits- all lucky enough to be working and playing in this very cool futuristic setting. The promise of great things coming to the community was abruptly halted and now the only sign of activity was that of empty ropes banging against a naked flagpole on front lawn.

As I rounded the final turn of the path, there it was in all its glory- The Anthony Radovic Biotech Center- named for that famous guy I never heard of. The building was unbelievable. It was saucer-shaped and had fifty-four darkened elliptical windows staggered in two rows, looking like an alien ship ready for take-off. Even covered in bird shit, the polished white stone exterior looked other-worldly. After all those years, this place still amazed me. Back in the day, I couldn't wait for something to break, so I had a reason to visit. I remember thinking what a cool thing it would be to convert it into my private home. I had no idea what I'd do with all that space, but it would be a hell of a party house with a great view of the retention pond and surrounding woods. Poor Alice just shook her head and told me the window cleaning would be my job.

Sometimes I'd visit old Doc Nedfeld. He was such a nice guy. Although he ran the showcase lab of the building, he always treated me like a colleague. He patiently explained their work to me lots of times, until I had the general idea of what they were doing- something about artificial DNA for medical research. I gathered that if someone's DNA were broken, they could make a patch to fix it. I'd marvel at the instrumentation with hundreds of tiny tubes neatly looping all-round the lab benches. Once my eyes glazed over from too many details of his project, they would scan his office- a perfect place for the master bedroom. He even had a small shower in his private john. I decided that once I took over, I'd

leave his kids' pictures on the walls, out of respect. When he saw me eyeballing his family, he'd break into some stories about his wife and kids. I was always a little jealous. Kids just weren't in the cards for Alice and me. Just another bad hand dealt by the universe, but we were fine with just having each other. I shook my head and returned to my walk.

With no one to stop me, I was finally ready to move into my dream house. One afternoon I brought my suitcase and a deflated air mattress. My mater key still worked on the front door and I went for it. The stench of stale, moldy air mixed with traces of God-knows-what from the labs, knocked me back on my heels. I dropped my stuff inside the door and went around to the facilities room at the back of the saucer. The door was not even locked but on the other side was my worst nightmare- a curtain of spider webs from floor to ceiling, crawling with hundreds of the little bastards. I hate those things- makes my skin crawl. I grabbed an old broom left on the ground and began clearing the webs. I hoped some of the insecticide spays were left behind. I just had to clear a way into the next room. I was in luck and sprayed the hell out of the area, ran back outside and waited for the fog to do its thing. The gate to the tank farm which was empty except for two large emergency propane tanks kept for the back- up generators. What a lucky break for a squatter who knew the ropes. If I trimmed the system way back, I might have enough power to make it through the winter.

Late that night, I walked over to grab some sleep in the Post Office outer lobby, making sure to be out of there by daybreak. It was a short walk back to my new estate. I spent the day spraying gallons of insecticide until I felt safe enough to get into the generator and electric power room. Without too many tries, I had the power turned on, throwing only the few breakers needed for my executive suite. To my surprise there were none of my eight-legged friends in Nedfeld's office. The room was swept clean, except for a few lengths of damp rope the movers must have left on the floor. I blew up my air mattress and realized Ned's picture were gone. I went to the water tower and opened the water main. There was still enough reserve water in the tower for a few days of emergency operation, hopefully enough to meet my meager needs for months.

The sun had was set and I took the fifteen-minute walk to Micky-Dees. They would be throwing out a load of old burgers and If I were fast, I could grab some before the rats did. This was no time for pride or fine dining. I had to conserve the few bucks I had left. After my gourmet dinner, I decided to check out Doc's lab next to his office. Other than some very dusty empty lab benches and a very dirty, clean hood, the room was empty. Considering what they made in that place, I was relieved not to find buckets of experimental DNA sitting around. I got along very well with just two eyes and one nose, thank you. I did wonder if that was just ordinary dust though, whatever that is.

Last night was restless, I could hear scratchy little feet scurrying around the hallway outside of the office. I guess it was no surprise that rats were also enjoying my estate. The office door was closed, and I tried my best to ignore the noise, although I did imagine the little toenails seemed to stop briefly at the door before moving on. That creeped me out.

So now I'm up, but just too tired to move or even open my eyes. Things just don't seem quite right though. The chill is gone, and I feel a nice warm glow- just another reason to stay in bed. Strangely, all my usual aches and pains are gone this morning. In fact, I haven't felt so good in years, but I really can't move! Although they seem stuck, I'm going to force my eyelids open.

They opened just a slit and slammed closed. My mind is messing with me again. The room is dimly lit, like the sun is just rising. I don't want to but have to prove I didn't see it. This whole thing must be a bad dream, so I might as well keep looking. A furry ball sitting on a jumble of legs, is over there in the corner of the room. It's the size of a German Sheppard and surrounded by more of those wet those mover ropes. This can't be happening. Better get the fuck up and end this shit... still can't move.

I'm going to close my eyes and go back to sleep. When I wake it'll all be gone? Nope. Can't sleep. I'm trying to remember exactly what old Nedfeld said about his experiments and imagining the worst. Nothing about spiders? Through my closed eyes, I can sense the sunlight getting brighter. The breeze is whispering through the partially open windows, but I can't feel it- just that even warmth. Is the tarp-blanket still on? I don't feel it. In fact, I'm completely numb.

After much debate, I force my eye-slits open a little. It's still there, but that's not the worst part. I opened a little more. The reflection in the window across from me is much worse. The tarp is on the floor. I can see my exposed rib cage and a fist-sized chunk is missing from my side. I could swear I see a little of my spine hanging out. A piece of red meat is vanishing under the hair pile in the corner. I don't even want to know. Something very bad has happened to my neck.

The pile begins to stir and waddles towards me and I catch a glimpse of the red eyes. My field of vision slowly narrows and the curtain closes. There's nothing to left but a floating sensation.

A canopy of trees blocked the sun and the path narrowed as I approached my very favorite spot. I can't see her, but I feel her smile. Even this is so much nicer with Alice by my side. I'm thinking that me and the universe are now even.