

## **On Bluebird Lane**

### **A Polyptych**

By Randall Silvis

## **183 Bluebird Lane**

*The Revenge of Miss Evelyn Beech*

Wendell wasn't dead, not yet, but she wished he were, she wished he would die, the sooner the better. Miss Evelyn Beech wished he would take a morning stroll through the Arizona desert and accidentally wade into a nest of scorpions. Panicked, he would leap away with that brittle, stiff-jointed gait of his, but not before eight or nine of the creatures punctured him. His leap, inhumanly high for a seventy-two year old Elizabethan scholar, would send his thick eyeglasses flying. Moments later he would land atop a pile of loose rocks, scattering them like marbles in his hysterical attempt to run, and in so doing uncover a nest of rattlesnakes. Where the arachnids had not stung him, the sidewinders would bite. Veins poisoned, flesh swelling grotesquely, perhaps even with a few tenacious serpents still pumping their venom into his ears and nose and that wattle that was once his chin, Wendell would lurch toward the scrawny blur he mistook for his wife, wanting to die in her embrace, to gasp a last breath with his own dry lips glued to hers, only to discover too late that he had staggered into the clutch of a prickly pear cactus.

Such was the fate Miss Evelyn Beech envisioned for her colleague, professor emeritus, retired lover, Wendell P. Albertson, Ph.D. He and his wife had moved to Sun City, leaving Miss Evelyn to face a chilling Pennsylvania winter alone: her first since...her first ever.

Forty-four years ago she had matriculated from her parents' cozy home to the body-warmed halls of the university, and from there, before her first semester ended, into the dangerous heat of Dr. Albertson's extramarital bed. For nearly half a century then, Miss Evelyn, as Wendell had always called her, even during their most tender moments, especially then, she had lived for the times they spent together – times vigorously stolen throughout the early years, then dwindling to once weekly, Thursday night, 7-11 PM, his wife's bridge night. There had also been the occasional weekend conference, the

occasional chance meeting in his office or hers. Plus that one other time – she blushed now to remember it – that time in the faculty lounge, a late summer night, her naked back sticking to the orange vinyl sofa, the janitor banging his bucket and mop down the hall.

She had been young then, young and eager, gawky and shy. Now she was old and tired and gawky and alone. Nearly fifty years of her life had passed without a trace. She had spent so many of those years proofreading and typing and correcting the monographs Wendell wrote. She provided him with ideas, with insights for his papers and talks. She drained herself so as to nourish him. And what had this slavish devotion gotten her? A career, distinguished only by the excesses of her servitude – she was rumored to actually reside in her office. A reputation among the students as a sour-faced spinster, asexual totem of higher learning. A small home – she and Wendell had burned the mortgage one Thursday night a dozen years gone, had saturated the document with brandy in a chaffing dish and made of it a mortgage jubilee, then got tipsy and made love on the floor, and suffered from stiff necks for a week – a spinsterish home at the end of a cul-de-sac, one of the oldest homes in the neighborhood. A home from whose front window she could now gaze upon the snow in the yard and begin to fear it, the slippery sidewalks, fractures waiting in ambush, the icy air that would freeze the roseate moisture in her eyes and make her nostrils, already blown cracked and sore, stick together. And no one waiting at the faculty coffee pot to warm her with a smile, a quick touch on the arm, a secret shared.

It was February now, shortest month of the year, no Leap Year this time around, no Sadie Hawkins Day. The coldest month. The darkest. And the snow that filled her yard was not a pretty snow, not fresh. It was gray and crusted, soiled with yellow stains and two frozen lumps of excrement, compliments of the Landers' golden retriever. Numerous footprints also pockmarked her yard, but none of them were hers. They were footprints left by other people's children, mannerless waifs who thought nothing of chasing one another through the drifts that seemed to accumulate highest around her house, raucous and snot-nosed children who never seemed to notice her sitting there behind her living room window. Or if they did, never waved.

And in the meantime, Wendell was lounging about in Arizona, making like D.H. Lawrence with his Frieda. Miss Evelyn imagined how ridiculous he must look in Bermuda shorts. He probably wore black knee socks and white sandals with them. His wife would let him get away with something like that; what did she care? Miss Evelyn, on the other hand, his colleague, amanuensis, analyst, succubus, concubine, call girl, foil, muse, foot warmer, editor, his everything – she would have dressed him better.

She had all but authored his biography of Tennessee Williams! *Publishers Weekly* declared it “Brilliant!” Even *Kirkus Reviews*, those dyspeptics, even they had loved it. “Piercing and insightful,” the *New York Times Book Review* had called it. “Albertson captures every nuance of Williams’ genius and melancholia.”

Albertson does? *Albertson*? All twelve drafts of that book were on her hard drive, not his!

It should have been her book. It was her book. So far removed from Wendell’s bailiwick. Even the committee questioned it.

Her secret gift to him. Her career sacrificed for his.

Wendell was promoted to full professor because of that book. And what did she get from it? A mention on the Acknowledgements page? A dedication? No, an autographed copy signed with the obligatory *Best wishes!*

*Why oh why had he chosen her to leave behind?*

Who was going to remind him to put sunscreen on his nose? His self-absorbed wife? And him with such a conspicuous nose, aquiline. It would scorch in no time at all. She had seen it happen once before, in San Francisco, where they had gone for the MLA Conference. Irish coffee, Alcatraz, rides on the trolley cars, just like in the Rice-a-roni commercials. Then down to Cannery Row in a rented convertible. Then Carmel-by-the-Sea and a room with a private hot tub on a deck overlooking the grand Pacific. How her students would blanch if

they could picture her in that bubbling pot, playing footsies with Dr. Albertson. But they couldn't picture it. They never would.

You selfish man! You egotist! You purveyor of unspoken lies!

It was February and the shortest month of the year. The longest days and longest nights. Miss Evelyn hated this month. She had never realized just how much she hated it until now, seven days into it. The house was overheated and dry. Her skin was dry, her eyes, her scalp. Her lungs rustled like charred paper.

Maybe a cup of tea would help. No, don't be silly, how could tea help? Nothing could help. Not tea nor music nor photographs she should probably burn, nor the articles authored by Wendell P. Albertson which she had ghost written for him. Not even fantasies of Wendell hotfooting it over desert sands, barbs of prickly pear wobbling from his nostrils. It made her chuckle to envision this...but it did not help.

In a drawer in the kitchen lay a card she had meant to place in Wendell's hands by now. It was a Valentine's Day card purchased a month ago, before Wendell's sudden decision to move halfway across the country – a decision, she now understood, that had not been sudden at all. Only his announcement of the decision had been sudden. And it was a very nice card, she had spent a long time at the rack picking it out. It had cost her four dollars. And now it lay in a drawer in the kitchen, yellowing with age.

It was not a particularly romantic card, not overtly so. Love it said on the outside flap above a caricature of an overweight winged Cupid clothed only in a fig leaf, and on the inside *is a many blundered thing* below a picture of Cupid's chubby girlfriend with his arrow in her buttock. It was a card purchased because she and Wendell had argued about some trivial matter; an apologetic card. She understood now that Wendell had picked that fight on purpose. A sophomoric ploy. Albeit from his point of view quite successful nonetheless.

It was a silly card, actually. Silly and stupid of her to have purchased it. But she had. And she considered it a sin to waste anything. A life, for instance. It was a sin she would always

regret but could not remedy now. Could not repent. She could only push the sin to its limits, maybe turn it inside out, shake the lint from its pockets, gather up the loose change.

Why not send the card after all? Maybe address it to both of them, to Dr. and Mrs.? Who knows, it might open the channels, they might strike up a correspondence. Hadn't she and Wendell's wife met on several occasions? They were practically friends! As for Wendell, surely he would appreciate being kept up-to-date on departmental monkeyshines.

Yes, she would do it. She would start with the card, she would see how it went. She would make a cup of tea. She would not burn any more photographs, not just yet. She would sit by the front window where the light was good, snow-reflected and warm, and she would sign her name to the card, *Fondly, Miss Evelyn Beech*. She would keep an eye out for that golden retriever. And if any of those neighborhood children happened by, those noisy ragamuffins, those mittened miscreants, she would rap on the window and...

She would try out a smile....

She would hazard a wave.

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### **306 Bluebird Lane**

*Richard Waits for the Mail*

Richard works his way toward the mailbox, shoveling snow, pushing the wide-bladed shovel with his heart, lifting with his heart, his heart in every heavy load of white he dumps into the yard. An almost old man with a tear of mucous hanging from his nose, his glasses fogged, Richard keeps his eyes on his shovel so as not to be glancing further down the driveway to the tread marks left by the mailman's Jeep, to the mailbox itself, gunmetal gray, his name and mine lettered in scarlet, my Richard with the broken heart.

It is a morning like any other, awakened with hope. A thin hope perhaps but like last night's snowfall substantial enough to conceal the smooth black asphalt of the driveway, the dented black of Richard's fear. We started with tea and whole wheat toast, sliced bananas

in skim milk, two aging men in bathrobes and slippers, shuffling through our mornings, sharing a newspaper, sharing a home.

I used to love mornings, but not anymore. Six mornings a week – on the seventh, the mailman rests – Richard is taciturn and sad now, already beyond his golden years, well into the leaden period of poisonous despair. In the afternoon he might perk up a bit, reconcile, become a kid of fifty-three again. For a while even laugh and putter, talk of spring, give me a feathery touch when we pass. But it is these mornings I have come to hate, another week of them beginning now, the first one come and going as inexorably as all the rest.

In front of the garage door is where he began, always begins, shoveling the width of the driveway clean of his footprints, careful to throw not a flake of our snow into the neighbor's yard, to give our neighbor, a high school gym teacher, yet another cause for complaint, another indication of our sinister lives. Richard takes a dozen slow swipes across the top of the driveway then can wait no longer. He cuts a walking path down the twenty-yard slope. He is still ten feet from the mailbox when he pauses. But it isn't fatigue that has stopped him now. He looks up at the mailbox. I can almost hear him thinking, Oh what the hell. He sticks the shovel upright in the snow and wades out to the road, snow flying about his ankles, filling his corduroy cuffs. He yanks open the mailbox door and shoves a gloved hand inside.

Four Christmas cards, the telephone bill, a flyer from the hardware store. Quickly he scans the names and return addresses. Even from here behind a frosted window I can see his hopes fall, the smile that wanted to come to his mouth going slack now, those sagging unshaven cheeks tugging at the corners of his eyes. None of the cards is from an unexpected place – none, in other words, from one of those places where his son must be living, some distant and startling place, or so he assumes. A full-grown son with his own family now, or so Richard assumes. A son nearing thirty, that age we look back hardest from. That vantage point from which a man might view his boyhood Christmases with softer thoughts, might search through dim-lit rooms of youth as if at midnight he came

creeping down the stairs to find the Christmas tree ablaze with tinsel, lights, a golden star, and there beneath the tree a gift aglimmer in silver foil, a small package, but shining: forgiveness.

It is Richard's belief, a belief that crept up on him a few days before Thanksgiving, coming as discreetly as the scent of leaf smoke from a distant fire, that if his son does not make contact in this his thirtieth year, another ten years will pass before the season of reflection descends again. And at forty, the most dangerous year, his son might think too much time lost to ever recover, and let the impulse pass. Or worse yet, remember the decision made by Richard himself in his fortieth year, and instead of understanding, find renewed contempt and fear.

Richard would give me up, I know, to be a father again. A grandfather. Invited to another home for Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthday parties full of noise and balloons, Sunday afternoon football on TV. He would welcome that ultimatum, I know. It is what he looks for in the mailbox every holiday season. It is what I, who knows better how to be alone than he does, what I hope he will someday find.

My own father died when I was a boy, thank God.

Richard comes onto the porch now and eases open the door but does not enter, drops the mail inside. Not a word is said or desired. He wants no commiseration from me, the problem made flesh. He pulls shut the door against the new chill he carries, stomps his feet on the porch, sets off down the steps. I would like to call out to him that Christmas is still two weeks away, still plenty of time for a card to arrive, it's still technically fall, for Christ's sake. Instead I make another cup of tea. I commiserate with the teabag before I toss it in the trash.

He is at the head of the driveway again, I hear the noise, the scrape of long slow strokes. He doesn't lift the shovel now but only shoves it like a snowplow. We have two shovels; I could

bundle up and go out to help, but it isn't snow he stays out there to clear away, it isn't anything that I could lift.

And in any case it is still autumn after all, still several more days until the solstice. There are a few more Christmas cards yet to come, more greetings from friends scattered far and wide. Besides, Richard needs the exertion more than I. More, too, than me. He needs to walk a hundred more miles up and down that driveway before he gets where he is going. He needs a new snowfall six mornings a week, a new snow every night until spring, when lilies will poke like bony fingers through the thawing ground, and reach for light. When even sad old men might drop their shovels for a time and be fooled by the warmth into one more season of hope.

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## **218 Bluebird Lane**

### *Neighbors*

The paddleboat moored to the Carlson's dock stayed in the water all through a chilly fall, long after it should have been hauled out, and sank lower in the lake with every autumn downpour. In winter the thickening ice squeezed the fiberglass hull and gave it the illusion of lift, made the little boat appear safe from submersion. During Christmas week Dennis dragged a snow shovel across his blanketed yard and out to the center of the lake, then cleared an oval path around the hummock we call an island, then stood on one side of the island with a bundled-up Jane on the other side while Andrea, Ben, and little Donnie stumbled and glided and staggered round and round on their skates.

I sat at my little table by the window and looked back and forth from Dennis to Jane. He gazed in my direction only once, a long hard stare, mouth grim and eyes narrowed. Jane's glances were furtive and brief. I found myself hoping that the dampness shimmering in her eyes had been put there by something other than the chill. The children lurched and slid from parent to parent, round and round and round.



After the heavy snowfall that surprised us in late February, while I was shoveling my way out of the garage, nine-year-old Andrea came padding up behind me, as quiet in the deep powder as a cat on carpet, and startled me by asking, “Did you see Bixley over here?”

I scanned the yard for tracks in the snow. The snow would have reached to the little terrier’s ears. I said, “I don’t think he came this way, honey. Did you look out back toward the lake?”

She nodded, eyes shimmering with two crescent pools of tears. Just then Dennis’s voice boomed across the Parmenters’ yard. “Andrea! Get over here *now!*” She turned her eyes up to mine, and looked so like her mother then, so lonely, so lost. “I’m sorry, baby,” I said.

When the ice thawed in March, the paddleboat sank lower. The rear compartments – where father, mother, Andrea and Ben used to sit, a giggling Donnie always riding on Jane’s lap, Bixley prancing and barking from the edge of the dock – took on so much water that the squared-off bow rose toward the sky in a posture that struck me as somehow prayerful, a supplicant on his knees, sinking down, desperate eyes beseeching heaven.

In April Laura arrived for the last of her things. She unlocked the front door, strode into the office where I sat pretending to read a document on the screen, and threw her key onto my desk. I gazed up at her. She spun away and strode upstairs. Drawers were yanked open and slammed shut. Hangers were yanked from the closet and flung to the floor. Every percussion felt like a padded blow to my brain. She said nothing when she left. The slam of a door.

I went to the window and looked out on the lake. The geese were returning, lifelong mates, plus a pair of mallards, the brown hump of a muskrat making a widening chevron wake. The Carlson’s paddleboat was all but standing on its stern, its rear compartments heavy with water. One more downpour and it would surely go under. “Why doesn’t he pull it out?” I asked the window glass. My breath left a circle of fog, gray blot on blue horizon.

I also contemplated what I would do if Dennis trudged down to the dock just then. If he waded into the freezing water and attempted to salvage the boat. He would look like a

water demon at such a moment, mouth pinched tight, legs and thighs stinging with cold, scrotum shrunken, heart on fire. Could I find the courage then to be as brave? Would I offer my help as he struggled with the weight?

It was something to think about. Impetuous acts come with myriad risks. But if the family's little boat did not survive, I would miss Donnie's giggles and shrieks as they echoed over the lake. Bixley's joyful yips. That pleading look in Andrea's eyes.

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### **427 Bluebird Lane**

#### *The Early Bird*

In the fall we first had second thoughts. We tried to burn them with the leaves. She stirred her pile, I stirred mine. But the smoke clung to our clothing and hair, it followed us into the house, the bedroom. It settled in our lungs.

The heaviness of winter came and kept it settled there, condensed and crystallized it, a mound of dirty snow slow to melt. Then spring, false warmth: the mud dried, buds burst, bees swarmed and did their honey dance. The last snow melted and sent its steam into the air. It became easier now to picture myself dragging furniture into a sunny street...working up a sweat...cooling a raw throat with a slushy beer. And yet, she was first to speak.

"I just don't think this is going to work," she said.

It was afternoon, a Sunday. I sat at the kitchen table, facing the sliding doors, the glass still gray with winter soot. In our tiny back yard a robin was trying to tug a fishing worm from sodden ground. The robin was young, the worm rubbery and long. The bird did not seem to know enough to step farther back, increase the tension, her leverage; or to move closer and gobble him down, that length of worm already exposed.

Caryl, at the counter, was preparing a lunch of salad and quesadillas; at least she had been until she spoke. I could smell the black olives in the can she had opened, the jagged lid

half-raised. It was a fungus smell – of something that pushes up quickly through rain-softened earth, something gasping for air.

I glanced at her just once; she was pinching a finger, had cut herself.

I turned to the robin again: still struggling.

If the bird gets the worm, I told myself, I won't argue with her, I'll make it easy. If not, I will think of something to say.

“Ry?” she asked, but I would not turn. “Ryan? Did you hear what I said?”

“We could get a dog,” I answered. “They make smelly messes too. And they're quicker to train.” A joke; the house seemed so quiet, in need of a laugh. It didn't used to be.

Her silence made me look again. She had put her finger to her teeth, was biting the wound. The taste of coffee in my mouth turned salty-sweet.

“We should give it seven years at least,” I said. “And then...blame it on the itch. We've only two to go.”

She stared down at the olives, black empty eggs. No pits, no pimentos. Their sea was dark but clear. No living thing disturbed them.

“We have several options yet,” I said.

She considered her wound. The bleeding had stopped. “Just substitutes,” she said. Her tears seemed as gray as the olive brine.

I turned to the window again. My breath smoked the glass. The robin gave a final jerk, weary of delay. The worm snapped. With but a piece of worm in her mouth, a taste, the robin took to the air. She had a nest somewhere – it was the natural thing to do.