THE SPEED OF DARK

by Anne Aylor

All through our lives we are bombarded with facts. Facts like the electric chair was invented by a dentist and it's possible to lead a cow upstairs, but not down, and female polar bears have scent glands in their feet so rutting males can find them in the vastness of the ice. Facts like the changing angle of a bee dance is fifteen degrees per hour, reflecting the movement of the sun through the sky. But what about facts that have yet to be discovered, facts that are unanswerable? In 1878 a physicist named Michelson used Foucault's method to determine with lenses and rotating mirrors how long it takes for light generated by the sun to reach the earth. Now, more than a century later, is there a scientist, shaman or sorcerer who can explain to me the mathematics of the speed of dark?

After helping my mother hang out sheets, I dismantle the broken clothespins dangling on the line, the wooden ones I have been pushing aside for months. Unwilling to give up their exhilarating life on the high wire, the one-legged trapeze artists shimmy away from me, refusing to release their vice-like clamps. I curse them and rather than scold me for my unladylike language, my mother retreats into the house.

I have twelve crippled clothespins in my hand to throw away when my mother comes out wheeling my father down the ramp. 'Put them in here,' she says, pointing at the open Velveeta box on his lap. 'Daddy knows how to fix them.'

My father instinctively knows how things work: machines, guns, toys, engines. He has always known how to put things together, to explain the mysteries of the serial universe. She has gotten him out of bed to teach me another lesson in household husbandry: how to mend broken clothespins.

And here is another unpalatable, but irrefutable, fact. My father is dying. Disease is erasing his once-powerful body but, despite that, he is not upset he has been dragged from his bed because he still wants to be useful, he who has been useful all his life. For seventy years he has served others as a farm boy, husband, soldier, dentist, jokester, father. Now his world of usefulness is reduced to the house and wherever he can travel in his olive-green chair.

He wheels towards the edge of the patio to reconstruct the clothespins in a cool rectangle of shade. Trying to get there, the wheel of his chair nudges the table my mother has fashioned from a cable-reel. Geraniums, succulents and clothespins go flying.

He shakes his head at the flower pots lying on their sides. 'Sonofabitch.' A few months ago he would have laughed at what has happened, but he doesn't laugh much any more. 'Hell,' he says, 'I'm no good for anything.'

I put a hand on his bony shoulder, squeeze it gently. 'That's not true, Daddy, and you know it.'

I kneel to upright what's fallen and he rallies himself and smiles. Eager to start work, he bends over to pick up the clothespins and manages to complete two before he stops to rub his lumpy back.

'If I could only get rid of the pain for a few hours.'

He says this matter-of-factly and I am reminded of something rescued from the *Titanic*: a set of clothespins, pristine and intact except for their wire clamps. The thought that these bits of wood will outlive him is so painful, so poignant, I do the only thing I can under the circumstances. I turn my face so he can't see me cry.

My mother has many missions and one of the oldest is to impress upon me her Calvinist philosophy of practicality, morality and thrift. A daughter of the Depression, she is marked by the hard times she grew up in. Even though she is comfortably well off, she is terrified of becoming poor again. As a hedge against poverty, she collects coupons, saves books of Green Stamps, drives bargains with sales clerks, but it is her summer yard sale that gives her the most satisfaction. Like the ancient Roman holiday of Saturnalia, the world is turned upside down. During the days of misrule, she can save money instead of spending it by transforming herself into a purveyor of second-hand goods.

My mother ropes me in to help her sell because she wants to teach me to be as frugal as she is but, in her heart of hearts, she knows the truth. I will never have yard sales, patch sheets, sew new taffeta ribbon onto the end of blankets frayed by years of wear. According to her pioneer mentality, I am wasteful and wastefulness is a sin. Wasting food, wasting time, wasting money. Things you can't have back again which is why my mother presses scraps of soap together, re-hems a dress, buys used clothes for her only grandchild from thrift stores, mending them, if necessary, before mailing them to Peculiar, Missouri, in boxes wrapped in brown paper made from cut-up grocery bags from Piggly Wiggly.

For a week before her bargain extravaganza, my mother scours the house and garage for the few articles she can bear to part with: my thirty-five-year-old gym suit, a rusty toy truck she dug up in one of her flower beds, my father's disintegrating Fruit of the Loom underwear.

Knowing she will not be dissuaded from her sale, my father and I cringe in silence. Only my brother is brave enough to confront her. When she is sifting

through a cupboard I overhear him say, ‘It’s junk, Ma. Goodwill doesn’t even want the crap,’ but intent on making what she calls her “mad money” she snaps back, ‘You might think so, but there are a lot of people out there who think what I throw away is good enough for the Queen of England.’

A day before Labor Day my mother is still laboring over her sale. She has spent hours dusting, washing, pricing: prequels to displaying her wares. I find it inconceivable she is putting so much energy into a yard sale when her husband of fifty years is dying. She is not ignorant of this, yet it is a fact she pretends to ignore.

At the side of the house she has erected a table made from an aluminum ladder resting on two garbage cans. She’s covered the ladder with sheets of plywood and cardboard to make a table for the merchandise she wants to sell.

Stacked underneath are boxes full of items to sort and price, but she doesn’t start the task until she makes me promise to move my father’s bees. ‘They have to be put behind the oleander bushes so they’re screened from sight. No one will step into the back yard tomorrow if they see that durn hive.’

On the night before the sale my father brushes bees aside with his bare hands. Instead of stinging, they act dazed from the smoke he has drifted over them. Knees weak with terror, I stand behind him holding the smoker filled with tamped-down pine needles.

Wearing pajamas, my father is dressed for bed, not bees. Compared to him, my brother and I look like antediluvian spacemen in our bee suits, hats, zip-on veils, gloves and mukluks.

'Dusk's the best time to move a hive, but it's also when bees crawl. They tend to creep inside your clothes when it's getting dark. That's why it's important you have the right gear on.'

He casts his eyes to the spot where the colony is to be moved, the ground behind the oleander bushes aflame with crimson blossoms. 'We're lucky it only has to be moved ten feet. If you move it more than that, the field bees will come back to the original site rather than the new location.'

'I thought these guys have insect radar.' Behind his veil, my brother sounds more than a little nervous.

'They navigate by physical landmarks as well as by the sun. If we had to move the colony further than the bushes, your mother would have had to postpone her sale.'

'Why'd she have to do that?' I ask.

'If we wanted to move the hive five miles away, there'd be no problem, but say we wanted to move the colony from one side of the yard to the other. That should be done a few feet at a time with a few days between each move otherwise the field bees might get lost and Mom's garage sale—'

'Garbage sale,' my brother interrupts.

'Garbage-sale customers wouldn't want a swarm of disoriented bees looking for their hive.' He smokes the entrance again. 'That's insurance to keep 'em inside till you get them to where they need to go.'

My brother and I get into position. Moving bees is something neither of us has done. We're apprehensive about transporting a colony of bees, even though it's only ten feet.

'Before you and the buckaroo start, remember hives are hard to move.

They're heavier than they look. Whatever you do, don't bump or set the box down roughly. I wish I didn't have to ask non-bee people to do it. I'd love to help, but I can't.' He grins to give us courage. In a comic voice he says, 'You doin' the slave thang and I doin' the Pharaoh thang, directin' from my chariot.'

From seven thirty in the morning until one o'clock, a stream of customers arrives: rich and poor, Anglo, black, Indian, mestizo, Hispanic. Sixty in the first hour.

The first person to turn up points at her hand-lettered sign. He is an elderly man and, from looking at his hat, something of a joker. "Once-you-get-over-the-hill-you-pick-up-speed" says, 'How many yards you got for sale, lady?'

She sits behind her sagging table: smiling, enthusiastic, as much in her element as a Marrakesh souk trader. 'Only the one,' she says, 'but it's a humdinger.' She takes a towel, slaps it against a golf bag. She waits until an apple-shaped man passes before she says, 'You play?'

He shakes his head. She stares at his gone-to-seed waistline. 'You ought to. There's no time like the present to lose that stomach of yours.' Having just read a book about the ancient Romans, she wants to show off the knowledge she's recently gained. She looks him in the eye and says pointedly, '*Carne diem.*' What she means is "seize the day", but what she says is "day the meat". Realizing he can't be motivated by drawing attention to his stomach, she changes tack and removes the cover from one of the woods to try and tempt him into buying.

I see my young father lift his shiny, new drivers out of their plaid bag, their rosewood heads gleaming because he polishes them with beeswax before going to the driving range. His golf clubs smell of honey when he uses them at his weekly lessons, so intent on perfecting his swing that he studies a year with the college

pro before he ever plays a round.

Though I would never say so, my mother is doing something inexcusable: she is trying to sell my father's first set of golf clubs. He has another set: nicer, more expensive Arnold Palmers and my mother will sell those, too, in time. But not today. She is trying to sell my father's clubs today because it is her unspoken admission that he is dying. Flying not at the speed of light which physicists have been able to calculate, but at the unknown speed of dark. She faces my father's extinction in the most practical way possible by selling what he can no longer use. My mother does not realize the brutality of her actions, but as my father travels into the nothing of nothing, he perceives her hidden motives if she does not.

A man in a checked shirt pokes around the camping stove and mildewed tent. He sees my wheelchair-bound father sitting in the shade of the house in a bucket hat that says "Shut up and fish". Checked Shirt takes this in, then brusquely asks my mother if she has any fishing equipment.

I want to slap him for trying to take advantage of my father's dying, but my mother scrabbles under the table and pulls out a dented aluminum bucket, bamboo rod and a pimento jar with hooks and lead weights. She offers to pour out the contents of the bottle to entice him into buying.

Not interested, his face says, seconds before his mouth does. She sniffs and whips the jar away. 'You know what's wrong with you, bud? You're too picky. You don't have the sense to recognize a bargain when you see one.'

Checked Shirt straightens his back. Before he marches off he says, 'Lady, I've been to more yard sales than you've had hot dinners, but insults are no way to get customers.'

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By the end of the first day she has made $4.50 which exactly covers the cost of the ad. The proceeds come from things that astound me: a personalized Christmas can once filled with popcorn. She has obliterated our family name with a label that says "Peace on Earth, Goodwill to Men". She sells colored golf balls and a handful of tees, a rusted sugar canister and a broken ice crusher to a woman in pedal pushers who says she likes kitchen gadgets.

She fails to sell bars of motel soap she's hoarded for years, their paper wrappers grubby and torn. She is astounded that, at the knockdown price of a nickel a piece, she has no takers. 'You can't tell me people don't need soap. People see us living in a big brick house must think we don't need the money.'

No buyers either for the gag-gift elephants filled with liquid that used to live in the freezer until their weekly appearance at my parents' bridge parties. Their once-pink colour has faded and the sad, albino pachyderms bob in a jam jar filled with water, lonely as my Duplicate-loving father for the familiar shuffle of cards.

At one o'clock we put the goods away, stack my father's dozen golf hats in as many colors clothespinned to the wire fence. We fold the sheet she's made with YARD SALE in Magic Marker, untie the balloon bouquet left over from my father's last release from the hospital, some shrivelled to the size of grapefruit. Tomorrow, she's convinced, she'll have a better day.

The truth is, there will never be a better day. This will be as good as it gets. I push my father towards the house, past his golf clubs glinting in the sun, and tell him another fact: salt is the only rock you can eat.

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