

Short Story Contest

October 2020

 LIBRARIES



PROMPT: You find a Polaroid camera that seems to predict the future: its pictures show what will happen exactly 5 minutes from the moment you take them.

[Untitled]

by **Kara Delbridge**

So, first thing you need to know about me is I like getting lost. Second thing is I like to find things while I'm lost. Frequently I'll end up somewhere in Appalachia while driving, in search of spaces where time seems to warp a bit from wear and tear. In abandoned places that feel haunted in a way, not from what has happened there, but the lack of anything happening now. There's just something odd about seeing the same Jell-O recipe book from your grandma's bookshelf in a random home with the walls crumbling out. Or stranger still, the countless abandoned businesses that clearly used to be packed before the country roads became the undesirable form of travel.

I've always been of the strong opinion; the best places are always where your phone loses signal. You'll see the coolest stuff in between the pokeweed and the cars being taken over by kudzu in somebody's front yard. Find an interesting shop selling who knows what, in the middle of nowhere, and you'll be hooked too.

Last week I was on the hunt for a new oddity driving down the long highway by the remnants of the brick factory. About an hour and a half into making random turns, I spotted it on my right: the newest interesting place, I didn't know I needed to find.

It was a curio shop nestled into the side of the hill, right by a gas station that couldn't have held anything since the 70's. It was less of a store, than some amalgam of what obviously used to be a country diner and the shop that now inhabited its bones. In the windows the legs of a side table with claw feet peeked out from underneath a liberal sheen of grime. The shop's light was on, and I was intrigued.

Slowly I turned in, onto the joint lot of the shop and abandoned gas station, gravel groaning under my car's wheels as I parked. Taking notice of the railroad ties that were working as the

step up to the threshold of the door, I cracked the door, and an entryway bell rang above me.

The interior was unremarkable, filled to the brim with wooden furniture and odd trinkets. It was like a dozen more shops that could be found on back roads and other decaying places where civilization had been abandoned. Right inside the doorway, baseball cards were stacked in random tins in one corner and the near ubiquitous glassware of every color and size in the other. This place was full of the forgotten. A stranger's voice snapped me out of my wandering gaze.

“Hello?”

The voice called out from the side of the shop my eyes had yet to reach. It was a man, further on in his years sitting behind what looked to be a repurposed department store glass counter. It was now functioning as some sort of checkout area. As I looked at him his hands retracted from behind a postcard stand on the counter and folded up to his chest.

I watched as his expression morphed from furrowed brows to something more akin to paternal jovialness. His hair was white, his wrinkles deep, but his voice sounded younger than he looked. It had a cheery quality that was so at odds with the dust filled store that it took me aback.

Taking a moment to re-center, I finally settled on a brilliant response.

“Oh. Hi.”

“Oh, please don't tell me you're not much of a talker?” He responded quickly. “I was looking forward to a lively chat from you.”

He motioned over to mangled mannequin head sitting on the shelf behind him.

“You see, Betty over here isn't much of a conversationalist, and I don't get many others walking through the door.”

I chuckled. His quick wit had caught me off guard and suddenly reminded me of my grandfather.

“Well,” I replied, “maybe you just haven't asked Betty any interesting questions”.

Now it was his turn to laugh.

“Maybe, you're right. Anyways, what brings you to this neck of the woods today?”

“Oh, I’m an avid seeker of all things interesting and this seemed like a good place to find something neat.”

“You certainly came to the right place.”

He waddled out from behind the counter, moving towards a door I hadn’t noticed beforehand.

“Take a look around and let me know if you see something you have questions about, I’ll go see if I have anything particularly fun in the backroom.”

As he left for the backroom that looked like it was probably the original diner’s kitchen, I started to pour over the books stacked haphazardly along the wall. After finding a couple of half interesting novels, I realized the man still hadn’t returned, so I walked up to the glass counter thinking there might be a service bell.

Closer to the glass case, I could see that it contained some jewelry, and on top of the counter to the left was the swivel postcard display I had seen earlier. To the right was an old polaroid camera. The postcard display began to move slightly as a breeze came through the window behind the desk.

It was then I noticed the revolver behind the postcards. It was shining in the soft light of the afternoon with the cylinder out. He must have been in the middle of loading it when I walked in.

“See anything you like?”

Startled once again by the old man, I started calculating my way out of the situation that wouldn’t involve the gun. Thinking that asking about the revolver might spook him, I asked about the camera instead. He grumbled slightly and I feared I had unwittingly asked the more loaded question.

Jokingly, I tried to take the question back, “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize that you were more of a Kodak man.” Forcing the universal “*I did not mean to offend smile*” mixed with a bit of “*please don’t shoot me*”.

“No, you’re fine. You obviously are the curious type to be in a place like this. And I guess there’s no reason I can’t tell you the story behind it now,” he sighed. “That camera right there is how I became a millionaire *and* lost my soul in five minutes.”

I looked at him with a mix of bewilderment and incredulity as he limped back to the seat behind the glass counter. His words didn't quite match his tone. He had started talking with regret and had somehow ended the statement with an intonation similar to a TV sales pitch.

Surreptitiously, he removed the revolver from my line of sight as he passed the left side and placed it behind him out of reach. It was now near Betty's head, which was fine with me because it was further from mine.

Shuffling himself down on the metal foldout chair, he started to crack a wry smile.

"What? You don't believe me?"

"If you're a millionaire what are you doing here, and not living it up on some beach?"

I made sure my disbelief was on full display now. I was feeling much easier now that the gun wasn't front and center.

"I never said I was currently a millionaire; maybe I lost the money"

"Maybe, or maybe it's easier for you to sell things with a backstory," I retorted.

"Everybody knows antiques sell better with a story," he said, "Tell you what, you let me tell my story about the camera and we'll see if you want to buy it by the end?"

I laughed realizing the old man was probably just a lonely old salesman that kept the gun around for protection. "Of course," I said.

He started in a quiet voice that had me leaning in to hear him.

"When I was about eighteen, I first saw this camera being used by a soothsayer that I went to see at a local carnival. She told everyone at the act that it would show the future five minutes ahead of when she took a picture. And then she proved it with a card trick, using it to show the crowd the revealed card before it was drawn."

"Was this act possibly sponsored by Polaroid?" I interjected with a chuckle, "What kind of a fortune teller has a camera as part of their act?"

"Listen I didn't judge, and neither should you. The Victorians believed some soul stealing stuff about cameras in their time, so it didn't seem so out there. But as I was saying before you rudely interrupted, she was doing card tricks with it. And I, being an enterprising young man in 1962 decided I could probably make some money off the camera."

He shot me a guilty look.

“So, I stole it.”

“You stole it! Are you about to tell me that you’ve actually stolen everything in this shop over the years and that you’re secretly a thief extraordinaire?”

“No, of course not.”

He pointed to the chest of drawers in the corner.

“If I had been lugging stuff like that around for years, I’d have even less of a back than I have now. But, yes, I did steal the camera.”

He gazed at the camera in the corner and stayed locked onto it as he continued.

“And then, I took it to the derby. I reasoned that horse races were quick, and I could take a picture of the horses five minutes before the race. If I could see who won, the plan was to place a bet and make a buck.”

He stopped talking and looked me in the eyes.

“But when I took the picture...”

I gave him the politest eyeroll I felt comfortable giving an old man.

I interjected again, “It didn’t work, and the fortune teller had been doing a trick to read cards.”

“No, it worked.”

I stared at him.

“Liar.”

“No truly. I could see clear as day that “Decidedly” was going to win, but it was what I saw in the left-hand corner of the photo that was the problem.”

He hesitated.

“Ok...what was it? You can’t just stop there.”

“A jockey was on the dirt; he had fallen off his horse and had been trampled. Had two different

hooves on his ribcage in the picture.”

“So, what did you do?”

He looked at me with regret that was so real I felt myself start to believe the ridiculous story for a second.

“I did nothing. I knew what was gonna happen, and I didn’t do anything. I could either place the bet or do something. I couldn’t do both in five minutes. There wasn’t enough time.”

I knew he could tell I was judging him at this point; his posture was deflating. His hair grayer in the darkening light of the outside.

“At least that’s what I’ve told myself for years. But I pulled it out of storage the other day, and I’ve been thinking. Lord knows; I’ve only been thinking. Truth is, I just cared about the money a lot more than the stranger.”

There was a silence for a couple of seconds, and I could hear the wind stir through chimes somewhere.

“And the jockey?”

“I watched him get trampled. He was carted off and died at the hospital later.” He continued, “Lost the money, drinking it away over the next couple of years. Drank so much I almost got myself to forget what I had done.”

He huffed, “I kept the camera though. So, I guess I couldn’t truly let go.

He ran his hand over the strap of the camera.

“Or maybe, the camera just couldn’t let go of me.”

The pregnant silence that had formed out of previously thin air lay thick, until a door from the gas station blew open and clanged shut.

I coughed and when I started talking again, it was a notch too loud. It was as if I was trying to run off the chills of the story he had just told.

“WELL,” I lowered my voice, “You sure do tell a good story, but I’m afraid it only made me want to stay far away from that camera. You might need to work on your salesman’s skills” “Then you’re wiser than I was, but you don’t believe a word of it. Do you?”

“No” I smiled uneasily.

It wasn't quite the truth, but it wasn't a lie either. A sweet old man, murdering by omission was a bit hard for me to swallow.

“You're a smart girl, believe half of what you see and none of what you hear. Am I right?”

“Right,” I said.

I was thankful for his slide back to a more colloquial tone.

“But it's a cool looking camera at any rate, ain't it? Why don't you take it with you? I'll give it to you for free. You let me tell my story, even if you did interrupt a couple of times” he chuckled.

I began to object, picking up my books and started walking towards the door. He picked the camera up and followed behind me. I was standing on the threshold of the building with him holding the shop's door open. The sky had turned threatening shades of blue and orange while I had been inside.

He didn't notice and instead carried on about the camera, “I think it's time I gave it up. Don't you? It doesn't even work; Here let me show you.”

He turned the camera towards himself and snapped a picture. The camera whirred to life. The winding mechanism was audibly struggling to work and clicked desperately. I held my breath. Nothing came out. There was no picture.

Some part of me let out a sigh of relief. It was like he had just played Russian roulette in front of me and won. It was so stupid. This little old man had made me afraid of a camera in a day and age where we all had one in our pocket.

“See, it's not much use to me if the film won't come out. Here, why don't you just take it anyway,” he said, placing the polaroid around my neck by the strap.

I still protested, “I can't take this.”

“Who else will? You see any other customers around?”

He feigned looking around with his hand resting on his brow bone.

Looking at the chipping paint of the Tesco sign next door, waving in the coming wind, and our lonely cars in the small shop lot, I had to agree. There was a deafening silence around us. We were surrounded by the mountains in this valley, and he most likely never had customers.

“I guess... I’ll take it,” I relented.

“Good!”

He smiled and then finally looked up at the sky.

“Eh well, it seems the weather has turned rather quick since we’ve been chatting. Thank you for keeping a weary man company for a bit.”

I stepped off the threshold of the shop and onto the gravel.

He looked down at me, with a look that was too somber to fit his face naturally. His wrinkles were suddenly so deep and even his voice aged. His eyes locked on to mine and spoke with resignation.

“You better get going. After all a lot can happen in five minutes.”

This time there was no laugh to make it seem like he was joking around. The statement just hung in the air as he closed the shop door and I heard it lock.

As I got into my car, I placed my books on the floorboard. I unwound the camera strap from my shoulders and placed it into my passenger seat. The camera glinted menacingly as the first snap of lightning came across the sky. Thunder rolled soon after, and I decided to get a move on. There was no reason to drive these mountain turns in an onslaught of rain.

I kept thinking about the man’s story and his changing demeanor. Did I believe him? It was an extremely odd interaction to say the least. But maybe he was just socially strange because he’s out in the middle of nowhere all the time. Would I get a kick out of creeping out strangers that came into my shop? While I drove, I kept thinking about what weird stories I would come up with if I were him.

I stopped when I started to feel the car’s wheels slip on an incline and pulled off the road to a lookout area. I was going to have to wait, just until the rain wasn’t a complete downpour. At least I had my books. As I flipped through them, I could see the camera in my passenger seat glaring at me. I gave the books a couple more minutes of halfhearted effort but gave up

on reading. Instead, I picked up the camera that was calling to me. What harm could taking a picture with a broken camera do?

Rolling down my window, to put the lens in view of the mountainside, I held my breath and thought about how ridiculous I was being. I clicked. And as I pulled the camera into the car, my heart sank. An edge of a photo was starting to slide out, like a tongue, as the camera gears creaked.

It wasn't a mountain scene. It didn't need to develop. It was the picture of the old man that hadn't come out earlier.

As the wind whipped outside the window, my eyes scanned the photo.

He wasn't in the doorway like he was when he took it.

He was sitting in the metal foldout chair.

He was slumped over.

He had the same revolver in his hand.

He had a bullet hole through his head.

"A lot can happen in five minutes."