

VICISSITUDE

by
Steven B. Orkin

Vicissitude: a favorable or unfavorable event or situation that occurs by chance: a fluctuation of state or condition.

- Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Once upon a time, a man and a woman fell in love. Despite the statistics, they kept right on loving each other for the next ten years. They woke up every day feeling blessed they had found each other. Then one day, she died, and happiness left the building.

~~~~~

That was a year and a half ago. It's not a very nice story – certainly not like the ones I've written to some modest success – but it's mine, nonetheless. Sometimes, stories choose us. And sometimes, they can't be revised.

Since then, I keep to myself. Outside of an occasional wave to the neighbors, I rarely interact with anyone. To be honest, outside of 'can't avoid it' work commitments, I barely leave the house. Safer that way. At forty-two, I guess I'm pretty young to be a shut-in, but as I've learned the hard way, life is rife with anomalies and injustices.

On this sunny August morning, I step off the stool I've been using to tend to the flower boxes beneath the front window. Karen was the gardener of the family, but I feel compelled to carry on the tradition. It brings some small comfort. Flowers are elegant companions. They do not need to be entertained or impressed. Their sum requirements are earth, air, sun, and water. It doesn't get any more elemental than that, does it?

It's only ten in the morning, but the sun is already intense. I'll need sunscreen if I stay out much longer. I'm a burner, not a tanner, as Karen often admonished me.

Picking up my bottled water, I look toward the infectious, bubbly sounds of girls talking and see Amanda Rossi and Chrissy Alvarez coming up the street, ponytails swishing, flip-flops clicking in the hot summer air. Amanda turned eleven a few months ago, Chrissy the same a month later.

They pass by regularly, since my corner house is set between theirs: Amanda next to me on Farnham, Chrissy across the street on Canton. Both flash smiles and waves of greeting when they pass in front of my property. I do the same. Though our relationship amounts to little more than occasional 'How's school?' chitchat (and it's been months since that's happened), I feel a connection to them. Karen had been their teacher and they'd formed a special relationship with her. Though the whole class had sent condolence cards when she died, the two girls' cards were especially personal and heartfelt. I still keep them on my dresser. Sometimes, I still read them.

As they continue on their way, their voices drop off with a suddenness that gets my attention. Wondering if I've somehow been struck deaf, I snap my fingers, but even as I do so, I know it's ridiculous. I can hear my breathing, the soft rustle of my clothing. The implications of this realization begin creeping through my brain like a spilled bucket of spiders: If I have not gone deaf, something is preventing me from hearing.

Striding forward to investigate, I am blinded by a flash of light and am halted at my property line with such abruptness, I'm knocked on my ass, as though I just walked into a wall. I get back to my feet, brushing my hand mime-like before me. Celestial blue radiance flickers beneath my fingertips. I push at the invisible barrier, palms glowing as they make contact. Outside of the glow and a harmless, electrostatic tingling, both of which cease when I draw my hands back, contact with the barrier has no negative effect.

On a whim, I write 'HELP' with my index finger, but the ghostly letters fade seconds later. Strangely, I'm relieved. In fact, I'm glad. The truth is, I don't want help. That would require interacting with the outside world in a more direct and sophisticated way than I'm comfortable with. The grim realization that this line of thought is deeply dysfunctional, that the matter of this science fictionesque invisible dome is beyond my capacity to resolve on my own, bangs on the door at the back of my brain, but I don't care. I'd rather be permanently trapped in my own home than have to navigate the madhouse beyond it, where decent, loving women die for no reason.

Even so, I feel compelled to determine the confines of my imprisonment. A quick inspection reveals that the barrier surrounds my entire property. Picking up a handful of small, white gardening stones, I hurl them in the air at intervals across the front and back yards, determining that the barrier is a dome. I'm contained within a life-size terrarium.

As I return to my original position in the front yard, I wonder how long it will be before the phenomenon is discovered (most likely by a mail carrier), but it doesn't matter. I suspect that a Howitzer could be airlifted onto the block to blast the barrier out of existence and it would have no more effect than my hands.

After Karen died, I isolated myself here by choice. Now I'm an actual, physical prisoner of my own property. I take a moment to consider my options, then retreat inside the house, feeling like I'm simultaneously writing and starring in one of my own novels: investigating the source of my conflict, establishing my resources, formulating a plan of action to advance the plot.

The power is out, as is cell service and internet. I'm not just trapped. I am cut off from the outside world.

In a flash of recall, I remember seeing a recent headline during a late-night doom-scrolling session about a similar situation up in Maine, though that had been an entire town rather than just

a homestead, and Maine is a long way from Long Island. Dismissing it as click-bait, I hadn't bothered reading it. I guess I should have.

My most pressing concern is water, but surprisingly, the plumbing still works. I estimate I have about two weeks' worth of food, maybe a few days beyond that if I raid the cat food. Of course, if the barrier isn't gas-permeable, I'll suffocate long before I starve.

When I return to the living room from the kitchen, Karen is sitting barefoot in her rocking chair, wearing the faded denim dress that had always been my favorite. It's the one she died in. She'd been barefoot then, too. Tabitha, our shadow-grey cat, lies serenely in her lap, purring like a motorboat as Karen strokes her long, fluffy fur from head to tail-tip.

My internal writer busily scripts my gasp of shock upon seeing my dead wife, my stunned stumble backward, my desperate flail for support from the wall, my stammered, *'But... but... how!?'* dialogue, but this does not actually occur. Instead, I lean against the archway separating the kitchen from the living room and simply watch her pet the cat.

With pragmatic clarity, I determine that this is not happening. There is no dome. Karen is not here. I feel strangely calm as I consider possible explanations: I'm undergoing some sort of spontaneous, semi-psychotic break. I'm having a hallucinatory, allergic reaction after breathing something in from the flowers. I'm suffering from some kind of gas leak-induced dementia. I'm experiencing some sort of final, bizarre, neurological phantasm as I lie outside on my front walk, having had a massive stroke or been struck by lightning.

"None of the above," Karen says, skritchng Tabitha between the ears.

"I've wandered onto the set of a C-grade ghost movie?" I offer with a sort of numb blitheness. There's something liberating about losing one's mind.

“Ha-ha, but no. Listen, Paul. We don’t have a lot of time. The specifics don’t matter. Let’s go with the old ‘Through the Looking Glass’ paradigm: ‘Now that we have seen each other, if you’ll believe in me, I’ll believe in you’ and leave it at that for now.”

Apparently, sixteen months at Wellwood Cemetery hasn’t dulled her literary acuity.

“That’s extremely difficult, considering the last time I saw you was in a pine box, and the time before that, you were choking on your own blood as you died in my arms,” I tell her.

“Dude, that’s harsh.”

“Why are you here?” I press, ignoring her subversive humor.

I don’t understand why I’m being severe with her, why I’m not crying with joy at the sight of her. I should be holding and kissing her, treasuring every second of this visitation. Instead, I’m resentful. How dare she intrude on my life with this fleeting taste of something irrevocably gone!

“Do you need closure to enable you to go wherever dead people go?” I ask, folding my arms across my chest. “Is that what this is about? Fine. I release you. There’s the door,” I finish, jabbing my thumb toward it.

“This isn’t about me,” she replies, unaffected by my flinty sarcasm. “Though I miss you more than words can say and the life we shared, I’ve likewise found peace and am enjoying this new phase of my existence. This is about you. It’s about letting go and moving on.”

“What makes you think I haven’t?”

“Try walking past the front yard or making a phone call.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Aliens have not bottled you up for their science project, Paul. If you want to know who’s responsible for that barrier out there, look in the mirror. You summoned that dome, and it will stay in place until you decide to remove it.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? The writing’s on the force field, baby. Incidentally, it’s the only writing you’ve had anything to do with since I left. You’ve locked yourself up here in Castle Strahan with nothing but memories for company. You have removed yourself from the affairs of the world.”

“I’m protecting myself.”

“Why haven’t you gotten help?”

“Help for what!?” I explode, scaring the cat from the room. “To reconcile that Life is nothing but a fucking coin toss!? That ship has sailed, Karen! You died during a walk around the fucking block, for Christ’s sake!”

Those final moments blaze in my mind like a magnesium flare. They have been branded into my brain, scarring me forever. I am standing on our front porch, watching her cross the street toward me after her afternoon walk. As is her habit, she walks barefoot, enjoying the organic mindfulness of feeling the ground beneath her feet. She is a vision of simple, natural beauty. I smile at her and she smiles back.

Then, I hear the banshee shriek of rubber on asphalt and I am bolting toward her, running faster than I’ve ever run before. But it is already too late. The sickening thud of two tons of fast-moving metal slamming into flesh and bone is very, very loud in my ears. The slow-motion arc of her body as it hurtles through the air and thumps to the ground fifteen feet from the car is hyper-real, like a special effect in a movie. By the time I reach her two seconds later, blood is pooling around her near-lifeless form. My wife is dying in my arms and all I can do is watch. Her final, wet gulps are sickening. The reflexive clench of her hands on my arm will leave bruises.

“*P-Paul...*” she gasps and gurgles, blood spilling from her mouth. “*L-love...*”

She doesn't get to finish. The stillness and dullness of her eyes as they fixate in death is terrible to behold.

"Yes," Karen says quietly, seeming to have shared my vision. "I died. I died senselessly, needlessly, and brutally. I was killed by someone who had no business being behind the wheel. It was a terrible, terrible thing. But you can't allow that terrible thing to be your albatross, Paul. You must embrace life, live it, love it, and hope for the best, with the knowledge that sometimes, the worst will happen."

"No!" I rage at her. "It's not worth the risk! I don't want anyone and I don't need anyone! All I want is to be left alone! No one gets in! No one! Not anymore!"

Karen looks down in her lap, closing her eyes as she places her fingertips at her temples, the very picture of contemplation.

"Okay," she tells herself after a moment. Her hands lower back down to her lap, her eyes open, and she looks back at me with a smile, radiating love and admiration. "You know what, Paul? You're the smartest guy I ever met. I completely understand that you're feeling all kinds of justifiable emotional stuff that's clouding that smartness, but I'm sure we can agree there's more to life than existing. On some level, you know you can't live in a vacuum just because you're pissed off at the universe. You have to let life in. More importantly, you have to let yourself out."

The topic of this conversation, to say nothing of the fact that I'm conducting it with my dead wife while trapped inside a supernatural forcefield of my own making, triggers a panic attack of titanic proportions. I begin to tremble uncontrollably, sinking to my knees on the floor, protectively wrapping my arms around my body. The reality that I've become more of a shut-in than I was aware of floats across the back of my mind. In fact, without even realizing it, I've progressed to Class A agoraphobe.

“I can’t!” I shout, voice shaking and cracking. It sounds like a stranger’s. “I won’t!”

“You can. And you will,” Karen gently assures me. “You have to assume you can, even if you don’t believe it.”

“I’m afraid...” I whisper, tears pouring down my face.

Her composed demeanor falters, and I see tears in her eyes as well.

“I know. But do it anyway.”

“Life is easier said than done,” I reply, glancing out the open front door, chilled to the marrow with terror. Sunlight streams through in a Spielbergian moment.

“Yes, it is. But you can’t let that stop you.”

She is right, of course. She had a habit of being right pretty much all the time about stuff like this in life, and she hasn’t lost her savvy in death. But knowing something and doing it are two very different things. My seclusion and isolation have never been about rationality, however calmly I may have carried them out.

Karen smiles and says, “Carpe rosas, my babe...”

*‘Seize the roses.’* Our amalgamation of *‘Carpe diem’* and *‘Take time to smell the roses.’* All couples have a secret language. This was part of ours. I haven’t thought those words or spoken them since... since. Though they held power throughout our lives together, in this moment, they are more sorcerer’s spell than playful empowerment. They calm me, fortify me. My panic abates enough to allow me to get back to my feet, but a fresh gush of tears nevertheless spills down my face as I take a step toward the door.

“I’m not sure I can do this, Karen,” I tell her, reaching for her hand. It is as warm and real as the day we met. “I’m not sure I want to. I feel... I feel like I’m abandoning you.”



“No,” she responds. “Never. One way or another, no matter where you go or what you do, I am always with you. Always, Paul.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“I love you, Karen. With all my heart. With all that I am.”

“I love you, Paul. With all my heart. With all that I am.”

More secret language. Part of our wedding vows. We repeated them often.

Karen nods gently toward the door, flashing her incredible smile. This, too, fortifies me.

“Go on, my babe. You got this. Barriers were made to be breached.”

I make my way forward and step back out into the world.

~~~~

Author's Note:

This story was originally written as a submission for a writing contest sponsored by Stephen King based on his novel, 'Under the Dome', which was published back in 2009. The criteria of the contest was to write a 2000 word story pertaining to the basic theme or concept of the novel, which is about a town that is suddenly cut off from the rest of the world by an invisible forcefield. Nothing came of the contest and I pretty much forgot about the story.

I recently came across it by chance. At that time, I had been contending with profound emotional adversity over the unanticipated ending of a significant relationship that had upended my life, perspective, and vision of my own future. After reading through it, I burst into tears, struck by the power and nuance it held for me so many years later, the way it had magically rematerialized back in my life at such a critical juncture. In light of this, I felt strongly that I needed to share it with the world to help cleanse my own pain, to help me find my way forward.

Maybe it will help you, too...

~S~

March 2024
