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THE BLUE HAIRS

Renée Thompson

My name is Eden Pilgrim, and I am sixty-seven years old. I find myself in a meadow at the base of a mountain where three Appaloosas stand. I have come in too hot, alighting roughly on both feet before toppling forward and bumping my chin on the ground. My teeth gouge my lower lip. Blood pools in my mouth. My husband, Wilder, lands on his ass, where he remains, motionless, as he gathers his senses. The hover which has so rudely and haphazardly deposited us here departs, spinning in a chaotic circle as it lifts, drifting left, then right, then left again, sputtering just below the horizon. I lean over and spit, keep my eyes on the big black machine as it shears the tops of a dozen aspens, its lights flaring and buzzing and then burning out.

Bzzzzt. Bzzzzt. Bzzzzt.

The ship careens to the ground, skids, bumps, and explodes. A great flash of light illuminates the landscape: ponderosas, Douglas firs, a pond trimmed with cattails. The horses scream, rear, bolt. Debris flies everywhere: bits of tungsten, bits of alloy, shards of shattered metal.

“Cover your head!” I yell.

Wilder ducks as a human head zings past. An arm. A foot. A white hat studded with gold piping.

“Good god!” my husband cries. “That’s Captain minus his body!”

Wilder sits, knees pulled up, thin legs splayed. He hasn’t shaved in three days, and his hair is mussed. I’m trying not to panic. My husband and I are fit but look our ages—beyond the limit of what’s allowed on Q-99, the planet from which we’ve come and, quite possibly, what’s allowed here. Wherever we are. Which means we may have all of six minutes to vacate this meadow before sentinels sic their dogs on us and collies eat us alive.

Cut the shit, Eden. Collies don’t eat humans—they eat Funyuns, just like everyone else.

That’s my husband, thinking. I can read his thoughts, as he can read mine, except Wilder has the curse of the Undecided, meaning one minute he’s a simpering baby, the next a total badass, although, granted, the badass rarely emerges. He is twenty yards away, still planted on his rump.

“Get up!” I holler, pushing to my feet. “Now, Wilder! We’re dead if the sentinels find us.”

“Totally dead!” he cries.

We lurch toward the forest, an endangered couple from a faraway planet, a land once lovely but now grown cold, owing to its condemnation of seniors.

FOUR DAYS EARLIER

We had known things were heading in the wrong direction, having witnessed the growing intolerance, the impatience, the downgrading of older humans. First, there was the statement from the Higher Ups (HUs) requiring that everyone over the age of sixty-five identify as Elderly, regardless of health, fitness, or appearance. It was bad enough that the HUs had, for some time, referred to us as Blue Hairs, but Elderly? No one had used the pejorative in two-hundred years, and the fact that the HUs so freely trotted it out now told us where they were going. Sure enough, the following week they issued an edict stating that because we, as a collective, were feeble, we were allowed to consume only foods approved by the HUs.

Two dozen of us stood around the News Quad that afternoon, awaiting the specifics, when an administrator dialed in a hologram depicting a dozen circles, thick red lines slashed across them. Prohibited were the French fries we loved. The pancakes and eggs. The Flamin’ Hot Cheetos and Hershey’s bars. Recommended replacements included applesauce, oatmeal, and tapioca pudding. I’m sorry, but as if.

The administrator, an LD (Lower, Down), tapped the hologram with his swagger stick. “Commit these foods to memory,” he said. “Failure to comply will result in obscene and primitive torture.”

Wilder looked at me. “What the hell?” he mouthed.

Be *still!* I thought. I was about to think *You knew this was coming* when an Active Ager (see how easy that was?) standing next to me hollered, “Why can’t we eat what we damn well please?”

“Yeah,” shouted her companion, a man with an unfortunate comb over. (As you might have surmised, we are also identified by generalities such as Chin Hairs, No Hairs, Turkey Necks, and Tire Bellies—which we also deeply resent.)

“Why can’t we eat what we damn well please?”

“Because you’ll choke!” the LD hollered. “And if you choke but fail to die, we’ll have to deal with you, and we have no intention of dealing with you. Not anymore, at least.” He jerked the hem of his starched gray jacket, tucked his swagger stick beneath one arm, then strode toward a sliding-glass door, the heels of his boots *click click clicking* against the tile floor.

We were still digesting (so to speak) this news when the next insult arrived via our personal message silos.

“Henceforth,” the flyer announced in bold black letters, “all conventional foods are banned, including applesauce, pudding, and oatmeal. For the sake of convenience, you will consume flavored gummies only, and to expedite the process, you will not be permitted to choose which flavors you’ll consume; rather, the HUs will choose them for you.”

Wilder and I were in line, waiting to receive our gummies, when an attendant rummaged through a crate and made his selection. “You’ll have the blue cheese!” he shouted, tossing a box at my husband’s stomach. Wilder fumbled—no time to think!—and the carton fell to the ground.

He picked up the box and looked at me. *I hate blue cheese. I wanted cheddar.* He frowned, tears bubbling at the corners of each eye.

Don’t let them know they’ve gotten to you, husband. Stand tall. Be strong.

Almost imperceptibly, Wilder nodded. He pulled himself to his full height, glared at the attendant, opened the box, and popped a gummy into his mouth. “Delectious,” he snapped, my darling husband, the rebel I knew he could be.

Like I said, sinister events were brewing. That same week we also received notification that the HUs would no longer implant new chips in our communication devices or household robots, saying the updates would only confuse us. Metallica, our personal assistant, had just that morning wheeled off the elevator like a drunken sailor, not knowing which way to turn. A good-hearted neighbor intercepted her and brought her home with this warning: “For the love of all that is holy, Eden, keep Metallica inside. If the HUs spot her acting erratically, they’ll send her to the bone yard.” She inhaled, rather desperately wanting a cigarette, I supposed, then exhaled a smokeless breath.

“I hate what this planet is coming to,” I said.

Neighbor folded her arms. “And there’s not a damn thing we can do about it.”

“On the contrary,” I said, stepping closer and lowering my voice. “Seems to me that after the HUs have drawn their shades at night, we could slip out back and hijack a ship. I’ve heard tell there’s a Safe Zone, a planet more tolerant and—”

“That’s a rumor, Eden. No one *really* knows if such a place exists, and even if it does, there’s no way we’ll get out—any transport we have access to will be unreliable, nothing more than scraps of tin and refurbished pleather assembled by miscreants.”

I realized then that Neighbor would be stuck here always, unable to risk what she knew she had for a future she couldn’t imagine. I was not that person. I was a woman who, not twelve hours later, was in the middle of outlining our escape when the HUs issued their most threatening announcement to date. They posted holograms in gummy-distribution stations and on lighted billboards, as well as at jazz festivals, poetry readings, and pickleball courts: “Evolution doesn’t care what happens to you after you’ve had your babies, and neither do we. If you’re over fifty, you’re dead to us, and we’ll erase you from our network.”

They wouldn’t dare thought Wilder.

But they would dare, and they did. The HUs and their cronies rounded us up, loaded us onto broken-down behemoths, and then ejected us, willy-nilly, into the depths of the unknown.

“Listen closely, husband,” I said, taking Wilder’s hand as we boarded the craft. “We have no idea where we’ll land, let alone if the inhabitants are friendly. The minute our feet touch the ground, we need to be ready to run.”

“Where will we go?”

“I don’t know—we don’t have a sextant to guide us.”

“But we have these.” Wilder plucked a box of gummies from his shirt pocket and rattled its contents. “Blue cheese, minus the crackers. Fuck them and the ship they rode in on.”

I leaned forward and passionately kissed my husband. He sat back, blinked, and smiled. All at once, the spacecraft dropped in altitude, and we were ejected via the ship’s eastern portal. Wilder’s grip slipped from mine and down we went, spiraling toward the unfamiliar, arms and legs akimbo.

We find ourselves now in a meadow at the base of a mountain where three Appaloosas stand. “Get up!” I call, pushing to my feet. “Now, Wilder! We’re dead if they find us.”

“Totally dead!” he cries.

We lurch toward the forest, an endangered couple from a faraway planet, a land once lovely but now grown cold, owing to its condemnation of seniors.

We walk/run for hours, until almost dark, as we search for a cave, a bunker, a tunnel—anything that is as yet undiscovered and so unknown to the guards—anything hidden away in brush or tall grass, where we might safely spend the night. Wilder is winded and has trouble keeping up; his face is the color of Mars.

“Come on, husband!” I implore. “Just a little bit farther now!”

He slows to a shuffle and clutches his chest. “I’m done, Eden. Don’t bore me.”

I backtrack twice to encourage him, to cheer him on, and then to prop up his back. I end up pushing him upward, farther into the trees, putting my back into it. When we at last reach the top, we stand, exhausted, beneath an aging alder. It’s a good hiding place and it appears that an animal recently lived here; there is a divot beneath the tree, a nest comprised of decaying leaves and pliable pine branches, and Wilder looks as tender as goose down. “Can we rest here?” Wilder asks. “Please, Eden—no one’s coming.”

I scan the horizon. No men on horses, no gilded swords swinging, no collies at their heels. “All right,” I say, “but we leave at daybreak.”

Wilder lies on the ground, reaches into his pocket, takes out the box. We each chew a gummy. I lie next to him and a long moment passes. *I love you, wife* he thinks.

I look over at him, see his smooch shining in the dark. *You’re not going to die, Wilder. Don’t even go there.*

There was a time, early in our marriage, when I began to understand that my husband and I possessed the wrong names. He was Eden, not me—a garden of delights—kind, polite, and considerate. He wanted to live a life of bliss in a place called Paradise, where I wanted the life of a warrior. I was Wilder. I needed to be a warrior. There has never been another human in my life that I’ve loved as much as my husband, and it is my job to keep him safe from harm.

We awaken to mares’ hooves traveling in the distance. Appaloosas? The ones we saw when we landed? I press one ear to the ground, feeling the animals’ vibrations. *What do you hold in your hearts? I ask. Are you good, or are you evil?*

The horses don’t respond, which concerns me. I help Wilder to his feet. We again take off, climbing yet another dirt trail and then fording a stream. In my carelessness to rush across, I slip on a stone, landing hard on one knee. I yelp and grab my leg.

“Oof!” Wilder says in commiseration. “You all right?”

“I’m okay,” I say. “Keep going.”

I hobble toward a stand of ponderosas, my husband behind me. Sentinels are coming on fast now; I can see their heads bobbing over the ridgetop, hear horses galloping beneath them. The men look to be about a quarter mile out, maybe six-hundred yards.

“Wilder,” I say, my voice stern, “look for the biggest tree you can find and hide behind it.” My husband complies, and then I too hide, sucking in my gut, holding my breath, praying the sentinels will mistake my beating heart for distant thunder. One check is pressed against the fir’s rough bark when a hand snatches the back of my collar. “Don’t scream,” a man says as he jerks me off the ground. He’s eight feet tall and only vaguely human, a body comprised of animal flesh, human flesh, and clothes spun of spider’s silk. He smells of loam and bark and dried apples.

I won’t scream. I promise I won’t.

Despite the man’s appearance, I sense a positive presence; if he wanted to kill us, he would have; instead, he grabs Wilder’s collar, as he grabbed mine, then throws us onto the backs of two of the Appaloosas we saw after Captain ejected us from the spacecraft. The stranger climbs onto the third horse, a broad animal with stiff gray whiskers, then takes up the reins and tells us to do the same. “Follow me,” he says. “Don’t look back.”

“Why can’t we look back?” Wilder asks, his voice threaded with fear. The big man turns and with dark eyes peers at my husband; with that, Wilder crows, shoulders hitched. “Never mind,” he says. “I don’t need to know.”

We ride fast. Pebbles fly and dust gathers on the trail behind us. “Who are you?” I shout.

“Horseman,” he says.

“Are you taking us prisoner?”

“I am not.”

When he says nothing more, I say, “Will you tell us where we are, at least?”

“Earth 2.0,” he says, “like it used to be, before the Great Undoing.” Wilder and I exchange confused glances, which Horseman catches. “The planet has regenerated but humans have not. You are a threatened and threatening species here. We are more comfortable with foxes, bears, and eagles—they are predictable, and we know what to expect from them. Humans are something...other.”

“If you’re not taking us prisoner,” Wilder says, “where are we going?”

“Safe Zone,” says Horseman.

So there is a Safe Zone I think. Then: “Why should we trust you?”

“Trust me or don’t, I don’t care. I’m not your prince,” he says.

“Well, you’re not our ogre, either.”

The Safe Zone a/k/a Underground is an existential space rather than physical, a place of authenticity. I understand without explanation that Wilder and I are expected to conduct ourselves as ourselves, rather than someone we’re not. On Q-99 we might have been killed for displaying such audacity; we had known others who had mysteriously died for claiming they lived their first lives as Jack Ryan and Harrison Ford.

My husband sleeps on a pallet near the fire, recovering from our journey, while a woman with a face carved of opal sits beside me. Her name is Sonia, and she hands me a cup of tea. “Honey?” she says, a spoon poised over a jar.

“Thank you,” I say, holding up my cup. “You have been here, as well as eagles and bears?”

“We do. Bears would take all the honey if it weren’t for Horseman—he collects it for us.”

I sip my tea, thinking about the powerful creature that brought us here, as well as his role in the Safe Zone. He’s a protector but unbothered to strangers, that much is clear. I ask Sonia why he saved Wilder and me.

“He needs you,” she says. “He’s got no one else. He lost his family in the famine and fire of the Great Undoing, and you are his loved ones now.”

“Loved ones? He doesn’t even know us.”

“He knows you. He has watched you and Wilder since you were young, no more than saplings in the forest.”

“Wait. Trees? We were once trees?”

“In your first life, you were a western yellow pine. Wilder, a white. White pines are softer and weaker than yellows. Yellows are sturdier.”

“That’s why he picked us?”

“You,” she says. “That’s why he picked you.”

There is a beat, and when her eyes meet mine, I fix my gaze on the ground. “What about you?” I say, looking up. “Are you a loved one too?”

“I am no one’s loved one,” she says. “I am my singular person.”

I take a sip of tea and tell Sonia my story. “The HUs dumped my husband and me on the east side of the mountain. I worried sentinels would come looking for us, so we ran all day and part of the night. I wanted to keep going, but my husband’s heart is fragile.”

“Yes,” she says. “He’ll be gone soon.” Her voice is matter of fact. “You won’t know what you’ll do without him, but you’ll be yourself, of course. Not your old self—not the self you created on Q-99 to survive the HUs—not what they wanted you to be: funny, stylish, waiflike, young. Here, you’ll be genuine.”

I yawn, and my eyes grow heavy.

“You’ve had a long day,” Sonia says. “Come, lie next to Wilder.” When I do, she covers me with a blanket woven of moss and dried lavender, and I close my eyes and sleep.

It is my job to feed the horses. Sonia tells me they don’t have names, so I christen them Wynken, Blynken, and Nod, after the characters in the childhood story of interspace travel, “Dutch Lullaby,” by Eugene Field. I hold oats in the palm of my hand, trying to coax the horses over, but they’re nervous, blowing air from their nostrils and pawing the ground. “I know you,” I say, my words rising above the wind, “and you know me. We met that day the spaceship crashed, and then again, when the sentinels rode you.”

That wasn’t us with the sentinels Nod says, but a hologram.

He’s the oldest equine, the animal Horseman rode and the first to walk over to receive my treat. His eyes are blue, his lashes white. He uses his thick, soft lips to rake oats into his mouth, and he lets me rub his nose.

Sonia says I lived here two centuries ago I say, before the Great Undoing—that I was born a yellow pine. I feel in my most ancient of bones that this place is familiar—its mountains, its streams, its scent of clean water. Yet I don’t believe I’ve been here.

You’ve been here he says. You’re from the tribe of Ponderosa.

When was this?

Nodding the time of greenhouse gas, Neoprene, and six billion plastic bottles.

Nod waits for me to speak, to actually assemble my history, and so I close my eyes and think.

You have it? he says.

I do I say. Humans left Earth because it was environmentally inhospitable—

wrecked is the word you want he says.

—and then Wilder I and wanted to leave Q-99 because it was socially inhospitable.

And now you’re back where you started Nod says.

How will this all end?

Nod whinnies and shakes his head. *You were a tree, but now you’re human. You hold the power to choose.*

That evening, after Wilder, Sonia, Horseman and I have eaten supper—a meal of roasted rabbit and dandelion greens—Wilder goes to bed, as does Sonia. Horseman pours two glasses of tart plum wine and hands one to me. “Proost,” he says, Dutch for cheers.

“Eugene Field wasn’t Dutch,” I say. “He was American.”

“Proost,” he says again.

“Proost,” I say. “This time we clink glasses. “Where are you from, Horseman?”

“A place I never want to go back to.”

“Same,” I say. “But this is the Safe Zone—we can stay here as long as we need to, right?”

“Yes, but the horses cannot. They betrayed the sentinels—shifted from holograms into real mammals—so they need to move on. You will take them to Sacred Ground.”

“What about you? Will you come too?”

“Later,” he says. “There are others coming. They need protection too.” I am quiet while I digest this news, and I suspect Horseman sees doubt and fear in my face. “You were born a tree,” he says. “You’re strong, and you possess the courage to make not only this journey, but many more to come.”

“What about Sonia?”

“Sonia will die here. Underground is her home, not mine, not yours.”

I think about Wilder. I think about how he is sleeping more with each passing day, reluctant to rise from bed. I think about how he will soon face his own Underground, and how it won’t be here.

The next afternoon, when Wilder and I sit and eat lunch by the fire, I make up a story but tell him it’s true. “You’re the man who slew the sentinels,” I say, “the bravest and I know.”

“Me? I did that?”

“You did,” I say. “Remember?”

He concentrates, his thick brows bowed. Then: “Ah, yes, I remember now. I was your hero then.”

“You’re my hero now,” I say. I reach over, smooth the hair from his face and kiss his forehead. He takes my hand and holds it to his mouth.

When my husband and I were young, I believed Wilder needed me more than I needed him, but I know now we need each other equally; he needs me to hold him and keep him safe, and I need him to balance that part of me that leans toward the dark.

Just before supper, when the sun is low in the sky, I stop to talk to the horses. Wynken and Blynken know me now, and they trot over with Nod. I tell them what Horseman said about the need to move on, and they bob their heads in agreement. “It will be a treacherous journey,” I say, “but Horseman says we can do it.”

We can, says Nod. Among the three horses, he is the most communicative. He tells me that while sentinels pose a significant danger, Appaloosas are kinder. *Problem is, we don’t have opposable thumbs, like sentinels do—*

—and dolphins Blynken throws in. They’ve had thumbs for years now.

—and dolphins Nod agrees—so we can’t carry weapons nor fire them.

“I can carry weapons,” I say. “Fire them, too.” I offer the horses a deal. “If the three of you guide Wilder and me to the sentient side of Earth, I’ll ensure that wickedness never finds you. I don’t know how—I wish I did—but I have faith it will come to me.”

It will come to you Nod agrees. You were a yellow pine, a ponderosa, and the sequoias taught you to stretch your branches until they were strong, and your fingers grazed the stars.

It takes eleven weeks to get to the opposite side of Earth. When we arrive, I remove the saddles from the horses’ backs, release them into a pasture of emerald, and feed them handfuls of oats. They are safe now. My husband is safe now. It’s been a long journey, and Wilder is tired. Nod is tired. Together they walk into the pink mist, where colors fade and shadows bleed into the stillness of the forest.

My heart aches as I watch them go. *Someday soon I will join you, my love. Not today, not tomorrow, and not when I’m elderly. Because I will never be elderly.*

How will I know you, wife?

I will be the wolf that sings you to sleep, the tree that shades I know you, the sun that warms you. I will be the bear that guides you, pushes you, needles you, as I have always been. You may not see me, but you will know me. On my life, I’ll be with you, husband.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Renée Thompson is the winner of *Narrative Magazine’s* Fall 2023 Story Contest. Her work also placed as a finalist in *The Missouri Review’s* 2023 Editors’ Prize, *The Missouri Review’s* 2023 Perkooff Prize, and the 2022 Autumn House Press Nonfiction Prize. Her stories have appeared in the anthologies *Manifest West: Western Weird* and *Twenty Twenty: A Year Like No Other*, as well as in *Narrative Magazine*, *Literary Latte*, *Arcadia*, *Crossborder*, and elsewhere. She is the author of the novels *The Bridge* at Valentine (named Woodland, California’s community novel in 2014), and *The Plume Hunter*. She is devoted to birds, mammals, and the people she loves.



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