

**Pen & Ink Writers' Group Meeting
September 18, 2023**

Word: Vulnerable

**Return to Gummi Glenn: Part 5
By Mark Moe**

After reading the letter to herself, Sunni handed it to Kylie and Edward to read, while Sunni found the spell and its components right where he said in the letter. "We must locate the Great Seal of the Gummies. Zummi always said it has great magical power and it can help me to cast the spell. Hopefully, it has not been destroyed because I do not know if I can generate enough magic to cast it. I have magic just like the others, but my affinity to use it is not great. I never worried about developing any magical talents since we always had Zummi and Grammi." "How far away is the seal?"

"It is down another section in what you would call another roller coaster ride in the quick tunnels. We should be there in a bit, assuming those tunnels are still intact. It is the oldest area of ancient Gummies. Let us go!"

The trio hopped back into the quick tunnel and Sunni removed a hidden Gummi symbol like a smaller medallion from her pocket. She pulled a hidden compartment out of the console and laid it flat on the indentation inside. As it started to glow, a new section of tunnel opened up and their coaster was pulled onto the new track. "I am going to go ahead and start screaming now," replied Edward. Sunni and Kyli laughed in response, but the ride was just as scary as the first, only longer and more terrifying. There were sections of the tunnel that were missing, but fortunately, the speed at which they were moving allowed them to clear the chasms. When they arrived, Edward had already fainted shortly after the first jump. Kylie helped to rouse her friend, while Sunni went to inspect the Great Seal on the floor.

As Kylie and Edward walked out of the tunnel, the two found themselves in a massive room with a very high ceiling and an enormous faded golden seal on the floor. Sunni was busy filling in some of the cracks with sparkling gold dust. Every place that was filled repaired a portion of the seal instantly. Edward and Kylie watched her work with no intention of distracting her with questions.

When she finished, the seal still had a faded look upon it, but now it had a warm, golden glow all over the Gummi Bear symbol. "Good thing the ancient Gummies designed a way to repair the seal magically to counteract the effects of the earth moving. Give me a minute to set up the spell and I hope I can cast it. I want my family back."

Sunni moved to the center of the Great Seal and spread the components around her in a circle. She began to chant the words in the ancient Gummi language. The warm glow of the floor intensified, and the golden glow of the symbol began to illuminate more of the massive room revealing unseen tapestries and artwork on the walls. As she approached the end of the spell, the entire room floor to ceiling was illuminated in a golden radiance and it culminated with a blinding flash of light that opened a shimmering purple and pink portal. When the trio looked inside, they saw four bears frozen in place with a look of terror upon their faces and one bear leaning on the other four clearly asleep and snoring softly.

"Zummi wake up! It is me, Sunni! We need to get you and the others out of the portal before it closes back again."

Zummi woke with a start and looked in the direction of the other four and said the release word to reanimate the others. The four bears resumed screaming and proceeded to knock into one another and caused themselves to fall out of the portal into a heap on the floor. Zummi walked out behind them smiling as the portal closed. "I knew you could do it, my dear. Let us help them up. I must tend to Gruffi and Cubbi. They were injured severely while trying to hold back the Ogres."

Grammi and Tummi disengaged themselves from the pile, while Zummi started casting the Cure Serious Wounds spell on the injured bears. When all four bears were able to stand, they took note of the two humans standing outside of the seal. They all waved to Kylie and came up to meet this other older gentleman. Sunni introduced them to Edward and the bears relayed their story of the harrowing escape from the combined forces of Morgana and Winthorp's Ogre army.

"All right everyone, let us go back to the Great Hall. I am glad that we survived, but now we need to figure out if we are going to stay in this future or face the problems of the past," declared Zummi. He headed towards the quick tunnel and everyone else followed him.

About thirty minutes later, the six bears and their two human friends sat in the Great Hall to discuss the situation. "I for one would rather stay in the future, than go back to deal with that sorceress and her powerful magical creatures and all the magical enhancements she provided to the Ogres," stated Gruffi.

"Gruffi Gummi, that is just like you trying to avoid responsibility," replied Grammi.

"So, is it our responsibility to save the old world? We do not have the magic of the ancient Gummies. Even with the six of us on the Great Seal, we cannot generate enough power to summon the ancient Gummi army from eons past to help us against the might of Morgana. Without a seventh Gummi bear, we cannot compete on her level. We are too "vulnerable" and weak to go back to the past," Gruffi responded.

"A seventh Gummi bear? That gives me a great idea. Might I discuss something private with you, my dear Kylie," pondered Zummi.

####

Safe at Home
By N. Stewart

“Come on, let’s go outside, Connie.”

“No, I’m fine here.”

“You haven’t been outside for a couple weeks. Just sit on the porch or the stairs with me. You need to feel the fresh air on your face, the wind in your hair. How does that saying go? Sit with me for a little while anyway. It’s a beautiful sunshiny day. Maybe, you might need a little sweater though. There’s a fall chill to the air. All’s quiet. Here, take my hand and we’ll go outside.”

“No, really I’m fine in the house. I don’t need the outside fresh air on my face or the wind in my hair,” she said with a bit of sarcasm in her voice. “It’s too scary out there since...”

“Since...what? Tell me about what happened to you that makes you not want to leave the house.”

“Nothing happened. I’m not going outside. I’m good here in my chair. You stand guard and I’ll be safe and comfortable. Here in the house. With you.”

“It’s the getting started, taking that first step forward that is the most difficult and the hardest to do. Come on, for me, will you try to go outside? It’s a big world out there and we need to be a part of it.”

“Yes, it is big, way too big for me and I feel vulnerable going out there.”

“I’ll be with you. We’ll play cards or Scrabble on the porch. You’ll forget for a few minutes about whatever has you rattled. It won’t be so bad. You’ll see.”

“Maybe later, better yet maybe tomorrow we can try, but not now. Even this conversation is making me terribly upset. My heart is racing. Can’t you see that I’m profusely sweating and chilled at the same time. Bob, I feel like I’m going to pass out. We need to stop talking. I don’t feel well at all. I need to lay down.”

As they walked to the couch Bob said, “You still haven’t told me what happened to you. This started last week when you came home crying. Do you want to talk about what brought it on?”

“No, I said leave it alone. Nothing happened. I can handle it.”

“Apparently not, Connie. You can’t or won’t leave the house. You haven’t gone to exercise. You haven’t gone out with your friends. You haven’t even smiled. You sit in that chair wrapped in an afghan. It probably wasn’t as bad as you are making it out to be. Did someone hurt you?”

“Please leave...it...alone. I don’t want to talk about it. Ever. Okay?”

“No, not okay, but for now when you are ready to talk know that I’ll listen to whatever you have say.

I still want you to come outside with me. Maybe take a short walk. I won't pry or ask any questions. I'll be quiet. You need to take that initial step and I will help you. Locking yourself away in the house doesn't change anything. Does it?

Well, does it?"

"Yes, In fact it does. I feel safe and I won't make a fool of myself out in public again. What if I go out and my heart starts to race or I get dizzy or I feel faint? What if I lose control? What if I pass out in the store or worse on the street?"

"Did something like that happen?"

"I'm afraid to go anywhere now."

"Go on. Please tell me more."

"The first time, I was in the grocery store and had everything I needed. I went to go into the checkout line and the world shifted. I was standing there but I was not standing there. It's difficult to explain. I was looking through my own eyes at everything but from this great distance. What was happening to me? I couldn't imagine. My heart raced and I started to sweat. I was dizzy. I was afraid to walk for fear I would fall over. I thought I would pass out. I thought I was dying.

I had to get out of that store. I struggled with myself to leave the basket of groceries and run for the nearest door before passing out. It seemed time stood still. My hands started to shake. My forehead was covered in sweat. Somehow I managed to hold on to reality long enough to pay for the groceries and leave the store. I threw everything in the trunk. I sat in the car for quite a while, wondering if I should call 911. Then, I thought if I could only get home I would be safe. And, that's what I did. I was safe. Here in my house. "

"You said the first time. Has this happened more than once?"

"Yes, That's why I don't want to leave the house. Almost every time I go out it happens. It's safe for me here. "

"Let me help you. You feel safe with me don't you?"

"Yes,"

"You trust me, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Let's go outside for few minutes and see how it goes. I'll be right next to you. Okay?"

"Okay, I'll try. Give me your hand."

###

Vulnerable
By Pauline Bastek

Do you know what the COVID pandemic did for me? It showed me how vulnerable I was. It did what the newspaper headlines screaming about our increased crime never did. Even after my friend, Rose, out walking past a neighborhood park on her way to catch a bus at 10:30 on a weekday morning was attacked by teenagers who took her handbag and knocked her to the ground, kicking her cane aside.

Fortunately, they were unable to do more damage as Good Samaritans came to her aid and contacted the police. This was on the Northwest side of Chicago in a supposedly safe neighborhood. the teenagers were from an adjacent area and were apprehended but her attackers were not children of the ghetto out to avenge themselves on society but resided in homes with market values exceeding the apartment building where Rose and her partner live in a two-bedroom 2nd floor unit.

Rose is a frequent visitor of vintage clothing store and certainly does not present a picture of glitter and gold. She also needs a cane to facilitate her walking and can only read large print books. She doesn't drive and relies on public transportation and the availability of her partner or friends who drive to travel to social activities and shop.

The teens who attacked her had prior offenses on their records but were released into the custody of their parents.

I just watched a TV news clip showing an older man being attacked by three teenage girls in broad day lite in a business area of Chinatown. He was saved from more serious injury by pedestrians coming to his aid as the teens proceeded to carjack his vehicle. One teen has been apprehended. Her features were blocked out as her age protects her anonymity but the victim is shown as he is not granted the same protection. He is vulnerable as I am and as Rose was and is and we will continue to be vulnerable as growing old is growing vulnerable. Society protects minors by shielding them in anonymity but we are nothing to protect our seniors.

An older woman was recently killed in Harwood Heights by a young white man who was in the process of carjacking her vehicle at about 6 a.m. on a weekday morning.

During the COVID pandemic seniors were given priority in receiving the vaccine as we were considered among the most vulnerable. Yes, I feel vulnerable, not just to the Corona Virus, but because I am in the course of trying to enjoy the Golden Years. The vulnerable years.

####

5 Things You Didn't know You can Recycle
By J. Smetana

The folks on Lower Wacker Drive are the most VULNERABLE. Like the Walking Man.

Yeah tough break but don't forget it's part of God's plan.

You mean the compassionate loving God we worship each Sunday?

That's the one!

###

Vulnerable
By Edward Scheffler

How many of us on occasion have been accused
of doing things we never did.

Victims of misunderstandings

To misjudge good intent. To write off or
underestimate one's potential. Without
gathering all the facts.

As indeed first impressions are incomplete.
Only TRUTH is often patient and enduring to reveal
itself.
Onto a purpose of its own.

###

The Golden Years
By Vicki Elberfeld
(For the Writers of Pen & Ink Only – Not for publication)

I'm at an age where I don't relish the idea of growing older, but I don't much like the alternative either. I move more slowly, yet my limbs and lungs give out more rapidly. Even though I'm sleepier and continue to fall asleep easily, I can't remain in that blessed state for very long but toss, turn, and awaken several times per night. I am so happy to have lived long enough to experience the joys of the internet, yet I'm becoming more and more wary of Facebook which informs me, sadly, too often of the deaths of friends. Both relatives and friends, whether retired or still working, never tire of sharing with me their fears of falling, of getting cancer, stroke or heart disease or, failing any of that, outliving their money. It seems to me the best economic plan for all of us is simply to not live too terribly long.

Most of my concerns about getting older have to do with energy depletion. Life still makes the same demands of me - to handle my financial affairs, clean and maintain the home and garden, prepare my meals, and maintain my social relationships and intellectual and cultural life - yet reduced sleep and declining energy make all of these ordinary tasks more of a struggle. Added to that, a number of my elderly friends have health problems impacting their mobility. Many can no longer drive and require assistance getting from one place to another, while others who reside in nursing homes need visitors and frequent phone calls. Those of us desiring to be more than fair weather friends can spend a great deal of time attempting to meet their needs. And time and energy aren't the only expenditures; in many cases the emotional demands are the most devastating. In my case, grief and anxiety are at the very top of the list.

My 70-year-old younger brother has been residing in a local rehab facility for the past half year. He has suffered from depression most of his life, but I believe his current situation would bring down even the sunniest disposition. He suffered a stroke a few years ago, and while he has recovered most of his language, he's nevertheless lost his math. He'd earned a PhD in computer science, and now not only math but basic arithmetic skills elude him. He struggles with balance when it comes to standing or walking, and despite visits to numerous specialists, he has yet to receive a definitive diagnosis or any particular treatment. All this rehab center provides in the way of therapy is two accompanied 300-foot walks per week. As a long time tooth grinder, he has destroyed the crowns of his dental implants and is therefore in constant pain. Removing and replacing his implants would cost tens of thousands of dollars which he doesn't have. To alleviate his depression he has been provided with ketamine treatments, magnetic brain stimulation, talk therapy, and many, many antidepressants, all to no avail. He holds out some hope for electroshock therapy, but it will take months for this treatment to be approved and carried out. Meanwhile he waits. And all those who love him wait.

Though depression has been his main problem, my brother was more easily able to recover from illness and injury in as few as five years ago when he was a youthful 65. Back then he could ride a bicycle and would walk four to ten miles on a daily basis. He would spend hours climbing stairs for exercise, enough to exceed the height of the Sears Tower. Now he cannot walk by himself around the block, though amazingly enough he can still get up and down stairs.

The two people closest to him, his roommate and I, regularly succumb to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness regarding my brother's future. The roommate and I both suffer from certain age-related sleeping problems, so that every day is a challenge for us, and anxieties about our own health and future prospects can't be kept entirely at bay. It's also so difficult to feel carefree when those we care about are suffering. We don't need to be reminded to take care of ourselves, for we genuinely appreciate that our energies are seriously, if not desperately, needed.

How do I take care of myself? With regular visits to doctors and the support of good friends whom I see on a weekly basis. I keep in touch with them throughout the week through online chats, phone calls, and Zoom meetings, for loneliness is painful and unhealthy, and social engagement is a key factor in longevity. A therapist helps me deal with stress and

depression, and I feel the need to retake the free course offered by Coursera entitled The Science of Well Being or, as I like to call it, The Happi. My genetic makeup is pretty good, for I expended real effort in choosing my parents, and I try to laugh as often as possible.

I particularly enjoy amusing myself with quotes and jokes about old age, such as the following, “He’s so old that when he orders a three-minute egg, they ask for the money upfront,” and Truman Capote’s “Life is a moderately good play with a badly written third act.” But my favorites are “Old age is not for wusses” and “Do not regret growing older. It is a privilege denied to many.”

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First Kiss That Counts **By Kelly Tansor**

“It was at a movie theater,” I told her. “Remember Issac? He and I were on our first date. It was some Christmas movie. He bought us popcorn and gave me his jacket. During the movie, he did that thing where he pretended to yawn and then put his arm around me. I think I watched the whole movie with my head on his shoulder.

“After the movie, we stood up and hugged. Then he lightly grabbed my chin and lifted my head toward his. I stared into his eyes; they felt so warm and inviting. Then he leaned into me, and I leaned into him, and...we kissed. It was quick, but it felt...nice. Like, *really* nice. My head felt light, and my legs felt like they were floating—*flying*. I wanted to kiss him again and again.”

April gazed up at me as I recounted this story, her head laying on her fists, her eyes wistful. I know I had painted her a beautiful picture, and it was all true. However, there was something that April didn’t know. Almost every woman has two stories: Her first kiss, and her first kiss *that counts*.

Issac was the first kiss that counted. Desmond was the first kiss.

Around 6th grade, I noticed I was having a harder time on the monkey bars at school. I used to zoom past them like no tomorrow, but now it was a struggle just to get past two or three bars. Maybe I gained weight with puberty, or maybe it was that growth spurt I had. Regardless, our older brother Joe spent that summer working out with me in order to get me stronger. By the time 7th grade started, I was back to flying past the monkey bars with no issues.

One morning before school, I was on the monkey bars when Desmond and Tristan showed up. These two always picked on me—throwing paper balls, passing dumb notes to me, drawing gross pictures on my desk and making it look like I did it, and so on. I was hoping they would mind their own business and leave me alone. When they approached the school playground and walked up to me, I didn’t even look at them, silently praying they would go away.

Desmond climbed up the ladder on the other side of the play structure and walked up to the monkey bars on the other side of me. We were now facing each other. A spark shot through my spine and I knew I was in trouble. Before I could drop down, I felt something wrap around my ankles. I looked down and saw that Tristan had wrapped my legs in an embrace. He looked up at me with a sinister smile as he held on tighter. I felt my hands start to sweat, but I kept my hands on the bars, too afraid to move. Desmond climbed the monkey bars toward me with a quickness, his eyes darting into mine. I gritted my teeth and struggled to break my legs free from Tristan, but it was no use.

Before I knew it, Desmond was only one bar away from me. He made one final swing and collided his lips into mine. I winced in pain as I heard laughter all around me. I felt my legs release and I could finally open my eyes. Desmond had already dropped down from the monkey bars and was running off with Tristan toward the school building. Everyone else on the playground continued to laugh.

Desmond kept on behaving like nothing happened. He still bullied me on occasion (he now added “knocking my books out of my hands” to his list of repeated behaviors) but he never brought up that kiss. It was almost like it never happened.

So I did the same—acted like it never happened. Some of my classmates from middle school are still my classmates now in high school, and they still remember it. Some of them still whisper Desmond’s name when I walk past (he doesn’t even go to this school), but that’s about it. Guys have shown interest in me, but I mostly kept my distance from them. I could never be too sure if they *really* liked me or if they had some ulterior motive.

Issac was the first boy I reciprocated feelings toward. He wouldn’t compliment my hair or body like the other boys would; he would compliment things like my eyes, my voice, my handwriting, etc. He’d ask me about more than just my classes; he’d ask about my day, my family, my hobbies, what I normally do after school, things like that. It was never one-sided, though. He would tell me about his brothers, his practices with the basketball team, what it was like to run across the train tracks everyday on his way to and from school. He trusted me, and...I trusted him. He was the first boy since 7th grade that I felt it was okay to be vulnerable around. Like I could tell him my most painful secrets—including about Desmond—and he wouldn’t tease me or run away.

One day he offered to walk me home from school, even though I lived the opposite way from him. He didn’t mind, though, and this walk was where he first asked me on a date. Boys have asked me out as a joke before, but I knew Issac was serious. That’s how the movie date happened, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Issac and I dated for about a year until he and his family moved away. We broke up, but we still talk and remain friends to this day. The year we spent together taught me that not all boys are Desmond, and it *is* okay for me to let my guard down with someone. I’m still careful about who I let see my vulnerable side, but if it weren’t for Issac, I never would have thought it was possible.

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