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The dream vacation

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Short Story – Myrtle Telleen Collins Award

The Dream Vacation

By Emily Burney

Nora woke up before her alarm went off. She half-wished she could go back to sleep, but her internal clock was too stubborn to allow it. The room was still dark, and she lay for several minutes, listening to the silence and watching the glowing red numbers on the digital clock across the room. She treated the device warily, like a wild animal that sat encaged on her bookshelf. She hated the harsh sound of it enough to get up every morning and trot across the room to turn it off before it awoke.

After preventing its mechanical cry for another day, she whisked her thin peach robe off of its hook on the back of the bedroom door and slid her feet into a matching pair of slippers, then shuffled down the hall, past the stairs and into the kitchen to put the coffee on. While it began to heat and drip, she went to retrieve the paper from its spot at the end of the porch. Toby, the paper boy, who was actually getting too old to be called a “boy,” had been throwing it in the same spot for years. Harold used to grumble about it—“the laziness of today’s youth”—but Nora didn’t mind.

It was chilly outside, and wet. The spring rains had come and seemed content to linger over the neighborhood. Sunshine was becoming a rarity, and yet the grass was still beginning to grow. Soon, Nora would have to call Mrs. Hinkle next door and have Alex come cut it. He was such a sweet boy. She insisted on paying him two dollars for his service. Mrs. Hinkle was always telling her not to bother, but Nora didn’t want the neighborhood kids to think she was stingy.

She went back into the kitchen and sat at the table, pulling the bundled pages out of the plastic sleeve and unfolding and separating the sections into two piles while the smell of coffee grew stronger.

Once she'd filled her mug, she sat back down at the table and pulled the "Travel" section off of the top of one of the piles. The "Sports" section sat on top of the other pile, which she pushed to the other side of the table where it remained untouched. On the second page her eyes fell onto a photo of a beach somewhere. A sharp sense of desire swelled within her as she skimmed the adjoining article, entitled "Spring Break Hot Spots." It had been so long since she'd gone anywhere interesting. A trip would be a nice change.

After she was done eating, she went into the bathroom to shower, and the image of the photo stayed in her mind as the warm water spilled over her. When she was drying off, she saw movement out of the corner of her eye and turned. A figure stood before her in the mirror that she didn't recognize. The woman was small and hunched slightly, with a head of wet, white hair that stuck to her scalp, and skin that was distorted with wrinkles, age spots, and blue veins. The only thing she recognized was the eyes. They were hers—still blue and vibrant.

"Oh Harold," she sighed, "We got old." She had a habit of talking to him like he was still there.

She lingered for a moment longer before retreating into the bedroom to get dressed. It was a tiring process, she realized, and sat down on the edge of the bed afterwards to regain her breath. The image in the photo was still with her, and she remembered a conversation she'd had with Harold years ago about going to the beach

once they retired. She still wanted to go. She smiled, and the wrinkles at the corners of her mouth and eyes deepened.

“A trip would be a nice change,” she announced to the empty room, “You never did take me—always too busy. I’d love to see the ocean again.”

She stood up and bent over at the waist feeling her hand underneath the bed—air. There was nothing there. A sense of confusion that was becoming all too familiar began to grow. She looked in her closet, but the floor was covered with shoes, and the top held old boxes of letters—love letters from a very young version of Harold were up there somewhere. Cecile told her that people didn’t write letters anymore. It was such a shame. Letters were the most exciting part of falling in love.

She hoped the suitcase wasn’t upstairs—was getting so difficult for her to climb them. The only person who ever went up there anymore was Cecile. The hall closet by the entryway was her last hope. She opened it and pushed the coats aside. There it was, resting in the back—a large, brown leather suitcase, with a faded luggage tag dangling from the handle that read: *Mr. and Mrs. Harold Everson*. She carried it slowly into the bedroom and lifted it onto the bed. She unzipped it and went over to her closet, where she stood pondering what to bring. It was probably hot at the beach this time of year—of course, that depended which beach she decided to go to. She reached for her short sleeve shirts and went to the dresser and pulled out several pairs of slacks.

This was exhilarating, she thought. Why didn’t she plan trips more often? It felt like she was young again, in her twenties, planning a trip with her college girlfriends. She’d gone to a friend’s hometown once. Nora wished she could remember her name. She had always been terrible with names, but she could still picture her face—dark

complexioned, dark hair, hazel eyes. They had somehow ended up at a dance being held as part of a county fair, she believed; although, the details had grown fuzzy with time. The dance itself, however, was still vivid: She had learned to two-step for the first time and had danced for two hours with a boy in a cowboy hat and blue jeans. She couldn't remember his face very clearly, but she could still feel the heat from his hand in the small of her back, and she remembered his eyes—the way they'd soaked into her, chocolate with flecks of gold. She'd never told Harold about this boy. As far as Harold was concerned, her only kiss before his had been with her cousin, Jimmy, the summer they'd spent at their great aunt's farm when she was eleven and he was thirteen.

Nora left the suitcase and went into the kitchen, where she refilled her coffee mug. She sipped it and gazed out the window at the backyard, which was growing greener by the day. She would need to be planting her flower beds soon, but it was getting so hard. The door at the front of the house opened and Cecile walked into the kitchen a moment later, setting her purse down on the table. She was such a sweet gal, but Nora worried that she was too young to be spending so much time with an old woman. She'd tell her this, but Cecile would just laugh and say that her friends weren't half as interesting.

“What are you up to today?” Cecile asked, sitting down.

“Well,” Nora smiled, trying to contain her excitement, “As a matter of fact, I'm planning a trip.”

“Oh, a trip. Where'd you decide to go?”

“I think I’d like to go to Florida. I want to go somewhere with a beach—I just love the beach. I haven’t been in years. Harold took me there for our honeymoon, you know.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We went to Myrtle Beach in South Carolina.” She trailed off, retreating to that place inside of her where she tended to take refuge more and more these days. She was young again, playing in the warm salt water, running from Harold, who was lean and dark from the sun. The light played off the water...

“Well, why don’t you go finish packing,” Cecile suggested, “And I’ll see about booking you a flight.”

“Oh, that would be perfect,” Nora lit up, “Although, I’m not much of flyer. Harold and I always drove.” She was glad for Cecile’s help—Harold had always been in charge of making the arrangements, and she always felt uncomfortable talking to strangers on the phone about a thousand little details that she could never remember. She stood up and disappeared into the bedroom, and Cecile came in about an hour later.

“I fixed some ham sandwiches and soup. Do you wanna take a break?”

Nora turned, “And what about the ticket?”

“I booked you on a flight to Miami for tonight.”

Nora sat down on the bed, thinking. Harold always worked out the details. “I should call a cab to come pick me up.”

“I can do that,” Cecile offered, already heading back into the kitchen. Nora followed, and Cecile dished up two bowls of tomato soup. While they ate, Cecile talked, but Nora was too busy imagining her trip to pay much attention. She caught a few

snippets, but it was alright because once Cecile got going, she could talk for hours without interruption. It wasn't really necessary to pay attention. From what Nora did catch, she was still having trouble with her boyfriend, Brad, who didn't know if he was ready to be a father to her son, Ayden. Nora had met Ayden, who was six now, and he was a pistol. She didn't feel like it was her place to scold, but she tried suggesting that Cecile take a firmer hand in disciplining him, but she was too young. She had said several times that she wanted to be a "hip" mom, although Nora had no idea what that meant.

After they were done eating, Nora went back to the bedroom to finish packing. Cecile came in about an hour later and informed her that she had to leave but that she'd be back before the cab would arrive to see her off. A moment later Nora heard the door close at the front of the house. She had come to hate that sound. It meant that she was alone again. She turned her attention back onto her bag. She had made a list of items and was running through it now for her final check. Toothbrush, she'd forgotten her toothbrush. She smiled and went to retrieve it from the bathroom. It sat alone in the cup on the counter, and she wished there was another next to it.

She used to pack for Harold when they would go on family trips. She'd pack his suitcase and a bag for the girls. These days, they were always calling to tell her she shouldn't be living alone anymore. She had gotten pretty good at changing the subject because she hated the idea of a nursing home—it was a destination that seemed too final. She grabbed the lone toothbrush and left the bathroom, avoiding her reflection in the mirror.

Once her bag was packed, she set her alarm clock—just in case—and sat down on the bed. It was only two o'clock. If Harold were here he'd be going over everything, checking and double-checking the arrangements. It was too much to think about—Nora had never been much of a planner. Katie and Liz were always planning too, like their father. They wouldn't be happy if they knew she was planning a trip for herself. The realization made her smile deviously. She could hear Katie's voice on the phone: "Just wait, Mom, we'll all go on a trip this summer—together." She could hear Liz's call too: "Well, we should all go on a trip, but not this summer—I've got a conference for work, Tom's working on a big merger, and Sarah's taking some graduate seminar." Nora knew if she wanted to go, she would have to do it herself...

A harsh beeping sound rang in her ears. She opened her eyes and looked across the room to see the flashing red time on the alarm clock—3:00. She must have fallen asleep. She got up and hurried across the room to switch the angry device off, relieved that she had thought to set it and secretly grateful for its jarring cry.

In another ten minutes she had gone to the bathroom, rolled her suitcase out to the entryway, and pulled on her coat and shoes. She went into the living room and sat down in her rocking chair to catch her breath. Her thoughts drifted over a thousand misgivings. She wished Harold was there to figure out all of the last minute details and take charge. She wished he was there to talk to about their trip—*her* trip. She could feel her resolve getting away from her, but she tried to reign it back in. She was sick of this dreary place, and she *did* want a change.

* * *

She heard the door open. Cecile walked in and set her purse down on the table. Nora didn't move. She continued rocking gently, back and forth, back and forth, staring at the wall, unable to move or control her thoughts, which went where they wanted. The late afternoon light faded, as she sat there rocking, and the room grew dark. She lost track of time.

A noise from the kitchen jarred her slightly, and she realized the cab hadn't arrived. She went into the kitchen and found Cecile fixing something. She was in that same blue outfit she always wore. So boring, Nora thought, but never said anything. Cecile's white sneakers squeaked on the floor as she turned to see Nora standing in her coat by the refrigerator.

"I don't think today's such a good day to go to the beach," Nora announced in a voice that sounded raspy and uncertain. She was trying to think like Harold, "I'll need to unpack my suitcase..."

"Don't worry, honey, I already unpacked it—just like last week, remember?"

"What?"

"It's okay. I put the suitcase in the hall closet, so you can find it again next week." Cecile smiled, but it was mixed with amusement and pity. "Everything's taken care of, honey—don't you worry."

Nora nodded absently and shuffled into the living room. She sat back down in her rocking chair with her back to the window. The room was dark except for a strip of light that escaped from the hallway. She stared down at her lap where her hands lay clasped together. They were covered in wrinkles and dark blue veins. They didn't belong to

her—her hands were smooth and delicate. One of the first things Harold had ever told her was that she had the smoothest hands he'd ever touched.

She felt so tired and empty as the feeling of confusion was closing in upon her once again. She imagined the beach and could almost hear the sound of waves crashing onto a shoreline somewhere—crashing upon her. The image faded faster than she could catch it, and she was back in the dark, surrounded by the silence that suddenly seemed more threatening to her than her pesky alarm clock. Where was Harold? Oh yes, gone. She was tired, tired of this place—she needed to see something new...a trip, that's what she needed. Harold had said they'd travel more after he retired, and there was no reason why she couldn't. She'd plan a trip somewhere—to the beach.