

## FORTITUDE

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The smarter half of this community is beginning to suspect the Turner brothers.

Three summers ago, the farmers here were aptly thrilled with the idea of raising swan-peacocks or nightingale-geese or any of John and Jimmy's experimental hybrids. But these oddball, snot-colored chicks didn't grow any bigger than your fist. And no matter how old they got, they never did learn to swim or fly or sing. They stayed absolutely ugly and laid perforated, snot-colored eggs that tasted like urine and hatched out a breed of mute and freakish birds that today, right now, you can hear farting from every fence post in the county.

That was for starters.

Then, last spring, the two brothers, John and Jimmy, were selling aphrodisiacal mushrooms from the back of their revved-up pick-up for ten dollars a pint at the outdoor market, the same place where they sold the booger finches as we call them. And who was there except Mrs. Whit, the preacher's mother, asking what `aphrodisiacal' means?

"I won't lie to you, Ma'am," said Jimmy. "It's for people who want to bolster their sex drive."

"Oh," said Mrs. Whit, picking up one of the orange bubble-like things and squinting at it. "How else can you use them?"

And John Turner managed to keep a straight face when he told her he thought they'd be good in pea soup, knowing full well that she worked in the kitchen at the women's convalescent center. Well!

The aphrodisiacal mushrooms went good in pea soup. Everybody's grandmother ate the pea soup. Mrs. Whit ate the pea soup. Turns out they weren't aphrodisiacal mushrooms. They were

some sort of evil polyp that sprouted on the waste dump behind the paper mill.

I have a lot to say about this incident, but not as much as every newspaper from here to New Zealand did. I'm just thankful that all those women were past child-bearing age. There were tumors (so far benign), bad dreams and hair loss. Last month, Mrs. Whit had a cyst removed from her back.

"It didn't hurt at all," she said. "Like cutting dead skin."

I don't want to hear about it; she's not alright. She says that the doctors wouldn't admit that the cyst was filled with orange, bubble-like mushrooms.

But people don't remember like I do evidently. What people remember is John's and Jimmy's star performances on the high school basketball team more than a decade ago. "How 'bout those Turners? Put our town right up there." Of course it wasn't 'our town' at all, but Northwood where the school is. And who remembers that our daughter Pamela, who can read a poem like nobody else, took first place at the state forensics tournament?

Anyway, nobody lifted a finger in protest when John and Jimmy came back after four convenient months away following the mushroom fiasco. The postman, Fred Hauck, who was the first to see them, claimed they had been touring all the upstate fairs and flea markets.

"Touring!" I said. "Touring with what?"

"Well, it's almost October," said Hauck. "Of course they'd be selling their Everburn Burnforevers."

I was afraid to ask. I went home and waited for them to come calling, which they didn't. In spite of the bad publicity, they still expected people to come to them. Unbelievable! And if it wasn't for a flat tire one morning near the market (Well, it was low anyway, and I got out to check it) I wouldn't have been suckered into buying seventeen self-igniting fireplace logs that looked like giant sticks of dynamite with pull chords on the ends of them. If I had any sense, I would have told

Ben to take the boat out that same evening and dump them all in the middle of the lake. Not because they were ineffective which they were (instead of heat or light, they put out an intangible smoke that turned the wallpaper green), but because our daughter, Pamela, insisted on going over to the Turner house to get my money back. One thing led to another.

"Pure bad luck," said Ben, my husband. "You can't hold that against them. If Pam wants to see Jimmy--."

"I thought it was John!" I snapped. Singly or together, they make me edgy. "And I don't like the word `see'. I know what a date is. I don't know what `seeing' is." But now I know, even though Mrs. Whit insists that it's orange mushrooms growing in there and not twins.

Nothing happened at the wedding to ease my mind about the situation. If John and Jimmy had looked more alike, I wouldn't have been able to say who was and who wasn't the groom. There were more pictures taken of the brothers together than there were of Jimmy and Pamela. We didn't find out until the rice came down that John was driving the newly-weds to and from the Poconos. Even Ben commented that it was a little out of the ordinary. Unheard of is what I call it.

"As soon as they move into the trailer," he assured me (the trailer was less than ten feet from their house), "Everything will fall into place."

Instead, the trailer was turned into a business office.

"Temporarily," said Pam. "Just until the addition is put on the house. What's wrong?"

Look up the word polyandry. I had to. The rumors had started even before the honeymoon.

"So they're a close-knit family," she snapped defensively. "Each is the other's right arm and one hand washes the other. It's a free country, Mother, and your group of priss piranhas can freely kiss my ass."

"But your babies," I said. "Is that the appropriate environment?"

"They're Jimmy's twins," she said impatiently. "Or triplets or whatever they are. We've all

agreed on that."

"Agreed?" My knees wobbled. "You mean you're not sure?"

"Well," she said, and managed to blush a little. "See, John finally perfected the little orange mushroom."

I couldn't bear to hear more. Aphrodisiacal mushrooms, Everburn Burnforevers. Who could bear it? I ran out of the room.

When I told my husband, he just shook his head. I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking that they sure put on a hell of a ball game.

I felt isolated. I became obsessed with scrubbing the green from the wallpaper. (At two scrubblings a day for six weeks, it finally muted to a forest green.) I took long walks in the evenings after the booger finches roosted. I contemplated being a grandmother.

One day in February I got a call from Mrs. Johnson who is secretary-treasurer of the town board and a close friend of Mrs. Whit's, telling me that John and Jimmy Turner had nominated themselves as co-candidates for the post of chairman in the up-coming election.

"Co-chairmen of the town board," she said. "Can you imagine? You should see the flyer. They're really making this an event." Normally there is a show of hands, unanimous, to reinstate Mr. Hergenroeder who has been chairman for the last twenty years and who is known in our community for his candor, his foresight and his bad breath. (He is also godfather to half the children in the township including Pamela not just because people like him, but because he owns the paper mill, the main source of employment around here.)

I went down to the mail box to see if we had gotten a flyer, too. Most certainly we had, photocopied onto yellow paper with a photo of the two brothers (one of the pictures from the

wedding) grinning like conniving purse snatchers, and a diagram of a basketball below with the word `VOTE' inside it.

I got in the car and drove over to the Turner place. The pick-up wasn't around but I thought at least Pamela would be home, hard as it is for her to get around with those bullock babies she's carrying. No one answered at the house so I poked my head in the trailer.

"Pamela?"

There were papers everywhere, boxes of envelopes, beer bottles, two typewriters and a wheezing photocopier spitting out copy after copy of that flyer in every color you can imagine. I noticed an addition to the text along the bottom: "Ahead of their time but in touch with your's." I knew Pamela had to have come up with that; two Turner heads together can't equal half of her's.

Walking back to my car, I noticed one of their gaunt and bedraggled peacocks perched on the railing of the front porch. I had to admit that, sorry as he looked, he was the prettiest bird color-wise that existed, sitting on the splintered rail like he was turning it to platinum, cocky thing.

It was not such a bad idea, crossing swans with peacocks and geese with nightingales. But look how it ended, I thought as I drove, hearing the intermittent popping of booger finch eggs under the tires. They lay them all over -- at least two a day and all year round -- on roads, in yards. After an incubation period of on average eight days, there comes forth with a croak and a fart such a creature that can't even be scratched with bird shot but can only be eliminated with two or three solid bullets through the head. Unbelievable.

"Campaign?" said Mr. Hergenroeder, sunk down in the middle of his battered armchair. He made a face.

"Listen, Wayne," I told him, parking myself on one of the antique wooden bar stools by the

window. "It's not right what they're doing."

He looked at me, his old man eyes soft and sticky with long-suffering. They drifted over to his empty 35 gallon aquarium still sitting on its stand by the sofa. (He had to give up his cherished collection of gobies last year after the Supreme Court ruling on the souls of marine fish. He was still bearing up under that trauma.)

"What they *could* do," I amended half aloud, but his signature halitosis had seeped across the room and engulfed my senses so entirely that I couldn't have told you the day or the year or what color my hair was, much less have been able to build up a coherent case against the Turners.

"If they want to waste their money and effort, let them," he said, moving his eyes from the empty glass tank. "To tell you the truth, I was thinking of declining the nomination this year anyway."

"You can't!" I shouted, jumping up. "Do you know what they did to my living room walls?"

He smiled and waved a hand around the room. I hadn't noticed the green tint to the paneling.

"I kind of like it," he said. "It glows in the dark. Those boys might have something in them Burnover Burnagains."

I barely caught myself from correcting him.

"I wouldn't be surprised," I said, recalling the scar on Mrs. Whit's back, "if that smoke isn't just as toxic as those mushrooms were."

"You know," he chuckled, "I have an aunt at the convalescent center. Awful what happened to some of them, but as far as *she* goes, that pea soup ended up dissolving her cataracts. Says she can see better now than ever."

I kept quiet. I have seen Emilia Hergenroeder. Her eyesight might well have improved, but she's lost all sense of balance. They say she can't even read without falling out of her chair. Not to

mention that the corners of her lips fused together so that she looks like a goby out of water when she speaks. But I kept quiet, remembering also that it was his paper mill's waste dump that produced the things.

"Besides," he said, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a son-in-law in civil service? Who knows but it might be the seed of a political career. Chairman, mayor, governor. Co-governors."

I could see it unfolding like a blighted dream. Scandals and catastrophes unending, environmental disasters, the booger finch declared state bird.

"So your not going to run," I said, my voice barely a squeak.

His head bent forward a little and it looked like he was examining his watch, like maybe he was figuring out the time in Burma or how many seconds he took between breaths. I knew this habit from my own days as town secretary. It meant he was going to sleep.

In spite of the many flyers distributed, the balloons and Tootsie Rolls given away, the hours spent putting the phone bill through the roof, I would never have been elected town chairman had not the sixteen Everburn Burnforevers exploded in our garage two days before the election. Not that most people really suspected sabotage -- some did -- but they felt it would have been wrong, given the circumstances, to vote any other way. If nothing else, I viewed it privately as a point for the high school forensics team. I had stopped the Turners in their tracks.

"Congratulations," shouted John. They were selling two-pound bags of Booger Finch Kill in the town hall parking lot.

"Non-toxic," announced Jimmy, "Expands when digested! Designed specifically to attract the booger finch, wart beetles, magpies and garter snakes."

Pamela sat in the front of the truck and wouldn't look at me.

"I hope you're happy," she bristled. "Doesn't everybody know you exploded those logs yourself? They just voted for you out of pity, Mother, to keep you from looking like a desperate woman." And she went on to say that it was lucky for me that John and Jimmy weren't the vindictive or resentful types, and that she hoped her twins or triplets or whatever they were would favor the Turner side, looks, brains, predilections and all.

But to show their good faith, John and Jimmy presented me with two complimentary bags of their exterminating bird seed.

In keeping with the traditional duties of chairman, I arranged to repaint the town hall and had the population figure on the signs updated (which is done irrespective of census years or the fact that we're officially unincorporated). That was all Wayne Hergenroeder ever did and nothing else was expected or wanted for that matter.

Times change.

With Mrs. Johnson at the typewriter and Mrs. Whit on the phone, I had the surface of the outdoor market blacktopped; I established a Thursday night community culture club (originally to be an alternating concert/lecture series); and I presented a surprised Wayne Hergenroeder with a petition demanding better processing of his paper mill's sewage output. It was the xeroxed photograph of his aunt's lips that convinced about twenty people to sign the petition.

I also had the seven graves on the side of the hill behind the Baptist church dug up and transported to the legitimate cemetery. People had been talking about doing this for years because of the rate of speed with which four Johnsons, two Hergenroeders and a mystery corpse were sliding toward the cranberry bog. (Mrs. Whit is superstitious and takes the effort every Sunday to drench the graves with water from that bog. She has also been known to fly the flag at half mast on days of the new moon and to swallow a marble with her daily diet drink.)

For those that might have voted for the Turner brothers, I mail-ordered real bases for the ball



field and tried my best to overlook certain scenes in certain places that could be attributed to the little orange mushroom.

"Ya, but they sure had a way with a basketball," said Fred Hauck standing, mind you, on the sparkling new asphalt surface of the market and staring dead center at the drying coat of paint on the town hall like he was watching some scoreboard from ten years ago. "You should get cable TV put in at the hall. It would be less expensive than those Thursday night quartets nobody goes to."

A sigh came out of my mouth like an ocean wave.

I was outside one day inspecting the construction of our new garage. Ben was in bed with his monthly bout of stone foot in which his left leg, from ankle to knee, turns to dolerite every three or four weeks; fairly rare, according to the doctor, in a man so young. On those days he isn't worth a blue fart, so I have to take care of his side of the universe -- house repairs, lawn mowing, whatnot. We had hired Turner Construction, a subsidiary of TurnerCo, to build the new garage. It was my reluctant concession to repairing the rift between Pamela and myself.

I had to admit that they were doing a marvelous job with the people they had trained to carpenter. It was a family of refugees from South Asia that had landed thousands of miles away and simply followed their noses, I was told, to the one wholesome community left in America. They were occupying the new addition to the Turner house.

"Only 'til the babies come," insisted Pamela, then in her ninth month and looking like two mastodons in a house dress.

I shrugged my shoulders like it didn't much matter, and thought despairingly of the lines of poetry she would never write. But it didn't matter. What mattered was that, overnight practically, the community was infested with refugees. In a month, Turner Construction had overwhelmed the

sky line -- which had consisted of two church steeples and the smokestack of the paper mill -- with a series of thatched housing units set up on two-hundred-foot stilts. Granted, it's all on Turner property, but it makes those forty acres look like some sort of bizarre bird sanctuary.

As I pour over the forms and letters that flow daily over my desk, I can't block out the continuous sound of the gongs resounding from the windows of these structures. No one here has figured out just what they mean (Mrs. Johnson noted an increase in precipitation but the Almanac *did* call for lots of rain this summer) so the Mahakaats are left alone in their mystery. Part of the mystery is that as their population increased, the number of booger finches dropped proportionally. To be sure, no one assumes it was the work of the expanding bird seed. The only thing the Finch Kill did was to sprout a plague of knit weeds that strangled everybody's lawn grass and that, I notice, isn't too kind to narcissus either.

"When it's through with the narcissus," erupts Mrs. Whit, "It'll go for the roses, and when it's done with the roses, it'll eat up the glads, and when the glads are finished, watch out for the sun flowers."

She lays down on the floor and clutches the table legs, overcome with fear and sorrow for her hoard of gladiolus which would have decked the steps and tables, windows and pulpit of the Lutheran church.

I step over Mrs. Whit and walk out into the evening. The air vibrates with the sound of the gongs. The tops of the Mahakaat houses are in silhouette above the tree line. They really do look like some kind of bird houses. Birds of a lost era, pterodactyls maybe.

I see a scrubby little booger finch on the hood of the car. It hops down meekly at the sound of my feet and waddles, farting in its retarded scramble toward the bushes. It left a brown juice dribbling over the bumper, shitty thing.

Running under the sound of the gongs, I can hear a steady rumble like a storm that's tearing

up the next county and headed our way. It's not a storm, though; I've been hearing it even in my sleep for the last four weeks. It's the sound that comes from my daughter's stomach, from those eleven month babies clamped into her guts. I don't have much faith that she'll ever deliver. They'll just get bigger and bigger until one day my Pamela simply won't be there. There'll just be two or three more Turners in the world.

Forensics has gone the way of hoop skirts. I know it.