

Blue Sun
by Eugene H. Bales

Tommy McBeth, public speaker, said to his audience in Springfield, Missouri, “Next time you speak to a differently-abled person, be foulmouthed.” They had chuckled nervously and mirthlessly, wanting him to be joking.

For awkward moments such as this, when he soured audience rapport, he had copied his first newspaper ad in the Bough’s Glade News and its answer on a three by five card which he concealed in his hand. He glanced at it.

What?

Something nearly divine, a lot more than you think and
just as much as you can imagine. Watch the heavens.

When he ended his speech, before the crowd cleared, when people, all smiling, pushed forward to talk to him, a pen was created for him of folding tables, folding chairs and people whose warmth and smell closed around him. Panicked, he searched for an escape, all the while concentrating on smiling. This was why his brother, Quentin, loved to fly. In the air, you saw the earth’s pens—the farm fields, highways, towns, businesses, houses, but for your airborne moment, none could press you. Tommy reminded himself that soon other people in his town would feel a momentary torture. He would have his laugh.

As always after he had spoken, Tommy felt an oil mask on his face. He rocked his hand-propelled wheelchair back a few inches and forward the same. He stretched his smile.

“I’m going to lose weight now, Mr. McBeth,” a man intoned. Tommy guessed him at ninety pounds overweight, the extra flesh solid, there for a lifetime. “If you can do what you’ve done, I can be the I I’ve always wanted.”

“I’m interested in your progress,” said Tommy who answered everyone who wrote him. “Drop me a line. Here’s my card.” Tommy pulled a card from his shirt pocket and handed it to the man who clasped it in a pillow hand.

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Empowerment

Motivation Positive Ideas

People stepped up to talk and strode away beaming. When the last person turned his back to Tommy, his smile twisted to a grimace.

In spite of the October chill which made him hurry, he broke a sweat wheeling to his car. He unlocked its door and removed the right armrest from his wheelchair. He hand-walked himself into the car seat, lifting his legs with his hands. How many more weeks until his legs were like bamboo poles?

The cushion, the back wheels and finally the wheelchair's frame followed each other into the back seat. Once the car was in motion, he pressed down on the accelerator, a lever on the left of the steering wheel. To apply the brakes, he pushed forward on the same lever. He inserted a tape in the tape deck, shifted to drive, and left the parking lot.

"My man's a little pissed off," came Beth's voice on the country song she had written for Tommy. She giggled. "He's rootin' for loving, ain't none in the trough." Beth was Tommy's longtime friend and lover.

Wrong tape. When he found the right one, he heard his voice imitating Jack Nicholson reading his newspaper ads:

"Where?"

"On the square in Boughs Glade.

"How good is it going to be?"

"It's going to be so good you'll dance, sing, shout and destroy something you've always wanted to see gone.' "

On Friday evening, Tommy pumped his arms on his wheelchair's push rims to wheel himself from his living room to the bedroom telephone. Massive antique furniture and family heirlooms brooded, crammed the inside and spread its darkness, "even around corners," Beth had said. The house smelled like the lightless creations in nature, caves and night. Oaks trees sculpted an umbrella for it, blotting the sun in the spring and summer.

In the bedroom Tommy looked at a framed sign hung at his eye level.

**HIRE THE HANDICAPPED. THEY GOT THE
BUSINESS**

done in calligraphy, which he learned in the hospital when he was recovering from the wreck. Tommy liked best the Chancery Italic Hand whose letters slanted and flowed freer than the squatty letters in other hands. At first, he thought he would be unable to learn calligraphy. Left-handed, he smeared the letters he had just written when he wrote more, but learned to shift the paper.

He called his brother.

"Quentin." His brother answered like two drumbeats.

"You ready?" In his mind, Tommy could see his brother stroking his end-of-day black beard stubble.

"Yes. Pray for no wind."

"I'll talk to him or her."

The brothers hung up at the same time.

"Please, God," Tommy said. "No more than a breeze."

Tommy looked at his hands, used on his wheelchair for three months, and felt the calluses. He phoned Beth and asked her to come over.

“Business or social?”

“Maybe a little of both.”

When Beth came, Tommy noticed for the first time a touch of hardness in her skin that he had told her looked like a cup of cream with one drop of blood stirred in. Before the accident he had been the handsome man with the golden hair and the hard look, his face tanned and taut, muscles and tendons humping under this skin. Now his skin was slack and his face looked soft and puffy. He had bought a sun lamp and sat under it regularly, but he felt foolish and frivolous using time feeding his vanity. Looking at himself in the mirror, he concluded that when he wore the protective goggles he should protect himself from entomologists. For the first time since the accident, he laughed at himself.

In Tommy’s living room, Beth looked at his newest sign and laughed. “What if your workshop students saw your signs?”

“I’d lose fifty percent of my leadership and inspirational qualities.”

The new sign said—

I’M SUPER. NOTHING IN NATURE
HAS WHEELS EXCEPT ME.

Beth laughed. “Hire the handicapped for everything except hanging pictures unless you’re a dwarf.”

“Think what a little tenderness could do for your business.”

“You want the usual?” Beth said.

“Yes.”

“My services are five dollars more than they were. I’ve lost thirty pounds at Weight Watchers.”

Tommy laughed and unzipped his pants. Beth slid her green knitted dress over her head.

“I’d pay you ten dollars more if you’d get that sun tattoo removed.” Beth had a blue sun with radiating lines on her right breast. “Be great in yellow.”

“Since when artists do yellow tattoos?” She unsnapped her bra, her breasts jiggling as they fell out of the cups. “Wouldn’t show up anyway.”

“That has its positive elements.”

“It’s cute and cheerful, Tommy. What’s with you anyway? On our last few dates you’ve been so long-faced. You want my advice?”

“No.”

“Cut down those damn trees. Get light in this place.”

Tommy chuckled.

“What’s it taste like?” Tommy whispered.

Beth laughed. Her dark eyes looked straight at Tommy’s. “Next time you do yourself, sample it and we’ll compare conclusions.”

He already had. It tasted salty and bland, felt slick and nasty too, like eating glue. The irony earned his laugh. Life’s fluid as bland as his audiences’ responses.

What about his own creep into colorlessness? How could he stop it? Probably impossible. Tomorrow morning would brake it.

Beth talked to Tommy about the ads in the Bough's Glade News. "Those ads make you curious about the kind of person made them up?"

"Yes," Tommy lied and hated himself. He was sure she, who never wore makeup and did aerobic exercises for natural attractiveness, had never lied to him. "You coming in the morning?"

"No, I sleep in on Saturdays. The hell with up at six every day."

They looked at each other a few seconds. Tommy tried to smile. "Why, Beth?"

"Even God asks himself that."

"What's his answer?"

"He laughs. He's an action figure. Why's at the bottom of his list."

"My question's still here, why?" Tommy said.

"When I know, I'll tell God." She rubbed the top of his head with her knuckles, bent over, and kissed his forehead.

Beth left, she and her green dress taking their sparkle out the door. Tommy wheeled himself to his bedroom. From a desk drawer he withdrew a blue scrapbook embossed with a family scene—mother, father, a boy, a girl beaming over a scrapbook. He ran his fingers over its bumpy surface and opened it to his newspaper ads. The first ones were beginning to yellow—

How good is it going to be?

It's going to be so good you'll enjoy
working for several days after the divine event.

"He's going to be sitting somewhere watching us and laughing," he had heard a banker's wife intone at the grocery store. He laughed thinking how such a resonant voice came out of this thin, shriveled woman.

How good is it going to be?

Black and white daydreams will come in color.

"Kind of hard to find a daydreamer in this town," Tommy's portly barber said, "when you think about how our government punishes us."

The barber had on a new after-shave every time he cut Tommy's hair.

Why is it going to happen?

A good man is tired. He sees himself tracing the same
patterns. You will be part of a new configuration on a
one-time-only basis. Enjoy.

After he had written this ad, Tommy's face felt oily. My stress gauge.
Would a good man be doing this?

**When?
Saturday, October 11, at sunrise**

On a lake a half hour before sunrise on a July day, he and Beth giggled. Naked, wrapped in warm water, they swam on their backs. Beth asked him what constellations he saw.

“Ob, the Object,” he said. They lay side-by-side in shallow water. Beth kissed him. They laughed until Tommy felt Beth’s tears drop onto his face.

Beth dared him to get a tattoo. After all, he’d talked about a crow—the survivor he admired—to perch on his neck as if the crow were counseling him on how to take from people without getting trapped in their nets.

“No can do,” Tommy said. “In the future I may need to seem respectable.”

As Tommy sat in the cold on the courthouse lawn’s high ground waiting for sunrise, he watched the stars closest to the rising sun disappear first. To the north and south the sky was a dark gray but close to the sun it lightened.

How many people were there? Maybe sixty or seventy—good turnout for skeptical rural people. In the amber streetlight’s light, children threw dry leaves at each other. A patch of deep rose and orange light appeared. The smoke from chimneys, rising straight in the windless air, appeared blue.

“Thanks, God,” Tommy whispered. “You can be a good guy.”

He looked straight up which made his neck hurt. The eastern star band disappeared. Blue expanded in the sky. Tommy’s breath condensed as he exhaled. He was glad he had worn gloves.

Light came on in an apartment above the hardware store. The rose, orange and now yellow sunlight had stretched out north to south and while it stretched it yellowed, losing its intensity. Only a few of the brightest stars were still visible in the west. The amber streetlight dimmed to darkness. The sky was bluish-white where the sun would top the horizon.

Visibility was good a few minutes before sunrise. Tommy fisted his hands for a few seconds. Only when he unclenched them did he realize he had done it. He wondered how close the phony bills would be before people could tell they were the same size as dollars. Given the size of the crowd’s desire, perhaps when they first saw them in the sky. When would they be able to tell they were green? Tommy, looking at trees’ leaves still green close to him and trees in the distance still darker than they would be in full light, guessed forty yards.

As the sun, a giant orange, bulged over the horizon, Tommy heard his brother’s plane’s drone. In his mind, he saw Quentin smiling and stretching his long body as best he could in the cockpit’s confines. Quentin would be listening to country music on the Bough’s Glade AM station on the automatic direction finder.

Seconds later, people saw the paper falling from the sky, hollered and ran. Their lethargy flew back from their feet. All, even the fat and middle-aged, ran toward the paper, giggling and laughing, as young as the youngest child there. Tommy thought of himself, when, after the car accident, recovering at home, he realized his youth and wholeness were lost.

Beth had come in the twilight three weeks after he returned home from the hospital. He sat on one side of the room. She stood on the other. He could smell her perfume, like spring's sunlit flowers. He felt a tingle in his groin. He rolled toward her, and she stepped away.

"I want to touch you," he said. "I want you to touch me."

"I'm charging now, Tommy."

"You're going to charge me? Your sex mentor—willing to take you on at sixteen."

"I was yours too." Beth laughed. "I need to supplement my income. Someday I want to disappear. You have to be who you are on a legal secretary's salary."

"Is that the only reason?"

Beth wet her lips with her tongue. "No . . . no. When I do it for pleasure, I want something for myself."

In the days following, Tommy felt the shroud of age and loss slip over him. He saw his feet losing their use. He sank until a wheelchair caught him. That's the way the people running for the money would feel, their youthful dance slapped down to the aged's slouch and shuffle. As high as they were on hope, the people would have to hold the bills in their hands before they realized they were phony. Even before there was a chance of grabbing one, victims leaped for them.

Tommy grabbed his wheelchair's push rims and shot himself down a ramp into the people's midst. "There's nothing on them," he screamed. "Only disappointment. Walk away. Let them fall on the street."

No one turned toward him. No one took his eyes off the bills.

The bills fluttered inches above fingertips. In a count the people would be reading words in calligraphy: EVERY CLOUD HAS A FOGGY, CONFUSING LINING.

THE THING THAT MAKES YOU SO SPECIAL IS YOUR PRESENCE HERE WITH OTHER CREDULOUS PEOPLE.

DISAPPOINTED? BUB OR BUBETTE, THAT'S A RHETORICAL QUESTION. CHECK YOUR DICTIONARY. LEARN RHETORICAL.

LIFE'S HANDED YOU A LEMON. USE ITS ACID TO MAKE YOURSELF MORE INCISIVE.

MONEY CAN'T BUY HAPPINESS, ESPECIALLY THIS MONEY. HEE HAW.

The crowd's hum suddenly hushed. People read and shrank. The bills dropped from hands. Tommy looked at the sun perched on the horizon. He thought of Beth's blue sun tattoo. If he had never wrecked his car, and they had lived together or married, would she have betrayed him for another of his inadequacies?

People stared at him, ready to absorb his words. He met their hurt eyes until the burn became unbearable. His head drooped, and he stared at the bricks that the street was made of.