

Sunsets

By Clint McInnes

I noticed the sunset on my way back from the barn, so I stopped a while to watch. That's just one of the many perks of putting a homestead way out here in the Montana hinterlands: you get to see some of God's best work, up close and personal. It's one of the few pleasures I still have these days.

Growing up, I was an avid reader of an author by the name of Zane Grey, who wrote these lurid and passionate stories about the old west, and who would wax poetic over the magnificence of the average Big Sky sunset. I'll have to say, he had the right of it. But I've got one up on him. My home is here. He just visited a few times.

A very pleasant quarter-hour later, I resumed my walk. The water line out to the feed lot had gotten plugged up, and I'd spent the better part of the day getting it flowing again. Any more, what with my condition and all, it takes me a long time and a lot of effort to get things done that I used to knock off in a few minutes without more than half a thought. It isn't much fun, but you play the cards you're dealt, know what I mean?

I spotted Barb's old truck when I was still a ways from the house, so I stepped up the pace. She'd parked and was carrying a bag of groceries in before I got to the porch. Pulling up short at the corner, I watched her fondly as she fumbled for her keys.

Let me tell you about my mate, my lover, and my best friend. It's something of a trifecta when you can say all that about one fur, but it's the God's truth, I swear. When we met, we started talking, and pretty basically never stopped until ... well, I'll get to that. Barbara's mom is a loris. Her father was a badger. Some furs might think the combination looks kinda weird, but she's never been anything but stunning to me. Those huge eyes give her a perpetually startled look, and the facial stripes she inherited from her father (which delineates the sum *total* of what he gave her) always leave the impression that she's moving fast. She's no stick-figure supermodel, either. You'd never mistake *her* for a Cub Scout, and I have always loved the curves. That, and her platinum-blond headfur, just like her mother's.

She got the key in the lock and went inside, so I followed her, and on into the kitchen toward the rear of the house. Our dwelling was built around the end of the nineteenth century, your basic, sturdy farmhouse sort of place, but later owners had each added something. By the time we bought it a few years ago it stretched to an even dozen rooms on two floors, and Barb fell in love with the place at first look. I fell in love with the view. But I sort of already covered that. The homestead is situated at the top end of a long, shallow valley, and on clear days you can see a few snow-covered crags a ways west. Let's just say we were happy with our purchase, and move on.

I stood in the doorway and watched her while she put things away. Methodical girl, my Barb. My mother (not a methodical sort herself, really kind of what you might call a free spirit) would sometimes refer to her as 'Barbed', as in 'wire'. She privately thought my wife was a bit of a tight-ass, but it wouldn't be a cliché if there weren't a lot of in-laws who didn't get along. No matter. I observed my sweet girl as she finished her tasks,

placed the little plastic bags in the recycling receptacle, and then looked around the kitchen. Evidently satisfied, she headed my way, probably intent on going up to her rooms, so I stepped aside, pressing into the wall slightly so as not to brush against her. Didn't want her getting a chill. I noticed again her sober expression. Smiles came to rest rarely on that lovely face these past many days. I trailed in her wake while she locked the front door and climbed the stairs.

It didn't take her long to get ready for bed. I lingered near her chair as she brushed out her headfur, and then put a tiny spritz of perfume along the nape of her neck. It was a small ritual that she'd come up with for me, because I liked that perfume so much. But now ... well, the veil allows sight, and I can touch a little now and then, but it doesn't pass smells. I remember, though.

A book waited beside her lamp, a novel I thought, by the dust jacket. She'd taken to reading in bed, reading until she dozed off and the book slipped out of her fingers. If I had the strength, I would close it for her and put it on the nightstand, so that she wouldn't have to deal with the lump. It never seemed to surprise her the next morning that it wasn't still on the bed.

She got under the covers, got herself arranged, and started reading. I rested on the lower end of the bed. Heh. Rested. As if I ever get tired. The accident had changed many things.

I never get tired of watching her, though. The long days of heavy labor that it took to make this place self-sufficient frequently kept me apart from her more than I liked. I guess you'd say I'm making up for lost time.

A couple of hours passed before her eyes eased shut and the book dropped away. It slid off the side and thumped to the floor, but she didn't hear, so I left it there. Lengthening my gaze, I examined the area around her, checking for the nightmares I knew would form. I moved over beside her, gently cupped her face in my paws, and lifted the bad dreams away. This is my nightly gift to her, and I will give it as long as I am allowed.

See, I know this will end. I can feel the time approaching when her need for me will no longer outweigh my need to leave. But today is not that day.

I stretched out along the foot of the bed, and waited for the morning.