

Beulahland

by Susan E. L. Lake

The best part of my day was the time I spent in the ambulance while the EMS personnel tried to keep the blood from pouring out of my body. At least, I was still alive.

When I had gotten to work that morning, there were three messages blinking at me. One was from my kid's orthodontist. I didn't want to talk to her. I figure her messages each cost me about \$500.

The second was the insurance agent. He wanted to talk about my roof. He wasn't even cheerful. Ecstatic was a better description. I'll bet he's not planning on helping me nail up those shingles. Or even help pay for them.

The last one was a deep growl. It sounded like a bear coming out of a cave at the end of hibernation. I started to hang up figuring it was some kind of crank. But then back in the background, kind of coming through all the grizzly noises, was this voice. At first I couldn't tell what it was. It was just at the edge of hearing. The longer and harder I strained the worse it got. Just as I hit the rewind, I caught a last fragment. "James Buchanan."

Now only Great Aunt Beulah ever calls me that. Even my mom doesn't try it. I wondered what Aunt Beulah was doing calling me. I would have thought she was probably at home weeding her marigolds. That lady grows the biggest marigolds you ever saw. They are about as big as baseballs and smell worse than you'd expect. Aunt Beulah doesn't care. She hasn't smelled anything since that time she fell off the porch trying to catch a butterfly. She busted her head real good. She was out for most of the day.

Just then the phone rang. I answered in my most sincere voice, "James Nash Real Estate."

"Is that you boy? Is that you James Buchanan?" The voice was just loud enough to make out.

"Yes, Aunt Beulah. What is it? Why are you whispering?"

"You've got to help me. I can't do it alone."

“Where are you?”

“I’m at home. Come quick.” The phone either went dead, or she hung up quickly.

I couldn’t imagine what was going on. What could that old lady be up to? I drove on out to the house. It had been pieced together during the depression using about four different houses that were just about falling down then. Time hadn’t helped. Now it looked like an old lady whose face lift didn’t work. Different parts were sagging at different speeds.

I didn’t bother to knock as I went in. I could hear someone in the back with a hammer. It was Aunt Beulah. She was beating nails into pieces of scrap lumber that she was holding up to the door going into the spare room. The nails were scrap, too. They were bent and rusty. Her hammering was just making them more bent.

“Auntie, let me have that. You’ll hurt yourself. What on earth...” Just then the door sort of bowed out. “What’s on the other side?”

“The bear.”

“What bear?”

“The one that was eating my marigolds.”

I started to ask more, but the door was pushing the nails out of that scrap lumber and looked like it was about to open. I started hammering them in as fast as they got pushed out. At least I got mine in a little straighter than hers.

“Now, tell me what this is all about.”

“Well, I came out this morning and found half my marigolds were gone. I went over to the other side of the house and found this old bear just tearing them up. I was so mad. I just took after him with my rake. But he didn’t run away. Instead, he ran into the house. I’d left the door open. Well, I couldn’t let him do that. I chased right after him. He ran in here. So I just decided to make sure he stayed until you could get here.”

I blinked. I blinked again. “Auntie, what am I supposed to do?”

“Take him over to the next county. If he stays around here, he’ll just get into them again.”

“But Auntie, how do you propose that I do that?”

“Well, I’m sure I don’t know. I knew you’d figure a way.”

Faced with all that faith in me, I couldn’t disappoint her.

I went on outside and picked some more of those marigolds. I got the orange and yellow ones. I kind of held them out away from them. Boy, did they stink. Then I drove my car up real close to the front porch and opened the hatch back. I’ve got one of those little station wagons. It says James Nash Real Estate on the side. It can hold about three wiggling kids and their parents when we are out looking at houses.

I propped up a couple of the metal “for sale” signs I carry so they acted like one of those police barriers between me and the back. Then I spread the marigolds like breads crumbs from the back of that station wagon right up to the door of the spare room. I took the hammer and loosened the nails a little. Then I told Aunt Beulah to stand back with her rake. When that bear came out, she should shoo him toward the car.

Well, it worked pretty good. That bear came out roaring, took one look at Auntie, another at the flowers and started wobbling out the door. He climbed right in. I just took off driving as soon as he was mostly in.

The driving must have startled him. He seemed shook for a few minutes, and I thought I was home free. I was going 75 toward the county line in nothing flat. But that bear didn’t stay stunned for long. Before I knew it, he was pawing at those signs. They’re pretty sturdy, but they weren’t going to last long.

I was trying to watch for those big claws and drive at the same time. He caught me a couple of times. I looked down and saw that I still had a few of those marigolds. I didn’t know if he hated them or loved them. Either way, maybe they’d keep him occupied. I threw them at that bear. He roared so loud you could still hear the echo if you listened.

Just then the tire on the right front blew out. I’d been saying I needed to get new ones, but I wasn’t pleased to have that confirmed right then. I swerved to a stop. All that swaying must have confused that bear for a minute. He didn’t start after me right away. I could see a house off the road a little, but it was too far to run. That bear would catch me for sure.

I scrambled out of the door hoping to get to the back hatch before he did. No such luck. He met me as I started around. I dropped to the ground and rolled under the car. He kept swiping at me and got my leg more than a couple of times. I'd roll way over on one side. He'd come around and I'd roll on the other. Fortunately, that car is real low to the ground. That's a problem on some of our county roads. I was glad this time. I wondered how long this could go on. I was getting tired of rolling.

I suddenly knew how long. That bear started pushing on that car. It started to tilt over to one side. One more good push and it would roll. I was a goner for sure. If the bear didn't get me; the car would.

Trying to think of some way out, I realized that I still had another marigold in my pocket. I didn't know if that bear wanted me or that marigold, but it was worth one last try. I tossed that flower out as far as I could get it. It only went a few inches. Suddenly, I saw the strangest sight. That bear was holding the flower up to his nose. He looked like a cat with catnip.

I edged out from under the car and into the driver's side. Somehow a new rim didn't seem important. As I slowly backed away, I kept my eye on that rascal. He never noticed me. He just kept swooning over that silly yellow and orange flower.

I drove back to Aunt Beulah somewhat slower than I had left. I was bleeding all over the place. She was tending the remains of her garden, looking up as I rolled to a clattery stop. "Why James Buchanan, what did you do to your tire? Don't you know you shouldn't be driving on it like that?"

At least the ambulance guys understood.