

Drive Fifty-Five?

Carmyn Larck's Quiet Little House, Highlands, NC, Thursday, January 2, 2020...

The slamming of the front door woke him up. The giggling and the expeditious girl talk got his attention. The loud banging sound and the laughter prompted him from the sheets. While he yawned and fumbled his way into some old USMC sweats, he heard the patter of feet and furtive whispers. He thought something was crinkling. About the time he reached the bedroom door, the house became altogether silent. He looked down the hall and then slowly proceeded towards the front of the quaint 1930's bungalow. A clinking drew him into the kitchen. Something in the living room almost caught his eye, but it had been a blurry New Year's season already. He walked into the galley and found Carmen's daughter standing by the Keurig machine, facing him, waiting.

'Good morning, Tom!' the young woman said as she extended a large mug his way. 'Coffee, just the way you like it!'

'Thanks, Jessica, morning,' he said while squinting. 'Need some. Uh, what was that fuss a minute ago? Where's your mom?'

'What fuss?' Jessica immediately deflected with a sweet, if slightly deceptive up-speaking. 'I didn't hear anything. Anyway, Mom had to run out for a second. Said she'd be right back. Some party last night, huh?'

'Urm, yeb,' Tom slurred as he sipped a near-scalding mouthful of strong, black *café français*. The girl (and the K-machine) knew coffee. And, she was right about the party. He was then aware that he'd skipped his morning dose of Advil. 'So, uh yeah, happy new year, again.'

'Happy, happy!' she sang oddly. 'Hey! Let's go sit on the sofa and chat until mom gets back.' Without waiting, she grabbed his arm and started tugging. He had little choice but to move along, carefully balancing the hot liquid as they jostled through the rooms. He was still concentrating on the drink when she shouted, 'TA-DA!!'

Tom glanced at her wide-eyed and then settled his gaze on the enormous gift box sitting on the living room rug, the coffee table and a chair pushed aside to make room for it. It looked to be a cube with roughly six-foot sides. It was covered in a

hodge-podge of birthday (and Christmas) paper. A huge bow sat neatly on the top. A large label, which might have been cut from a pizza box, hung prominently on the front. It simply read: "TOM." He was about to say something - anything - when Jessica carefully took the cup out of his hand and set it a safe distance away from them. Then, she nudged him towards the giant present. She made sure to usher him in front of the oversized couch, seemingly checking as if to measure distance. She turned and checked twice as he mumbled incoherently about "a big-" or another. Putting her arm around his shoulders, she turned to face the massive favor. She kind of squeaked while bouncing up and down once and said, 'Go, girls!'

Tom gasped as out of the front of the box, through the mismatched paper, burst a foursome of now babbling and chortling women. He saw more than heard the collective roar of "HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" before they were on him. Vicky hit him high and left, while Carmyn went low and right. Ariana and Maddie completed the vicious gang tackle, driving from behind the other two and forcing them all onto the readied sofa. Jessica piled on the heap for good measure.

The hugs, kisses, squeezes, hair- tussing, poking, and a pinch(!), accompanied by various calls of "happy birthday," "daddy," "Tommy," "lover," and "old man," gave way to a jumbled silliness, with sighing chuckles and obligatory head-patting. No man anywhere was fonder of the opposite sex, but given the sheer mass and weight of the situation, he could only manage a rather muffled and labored 'thanks.' Mercifully, the top three girls removed their addition to the burden, as if peeled back by referees after a heroic goal-line stand. His girlfriend and his daughter weren't quite as courteous, still latched tightly.

Forcibly twisting and turning, he gained the pivotal advantage and wrested his way upright, carrying the armloads of fun with him. Following another minute of fussing and teasing, they parted and clung one to each of his sides. The others pressed in from the outside. Aright and once again breathing properly, he saw two large balloon number fives attempting to float on ribbon strings from the remains of the box. The women repeated the praise of his birth. Jessica returned to him his java.

'Wow, girls, wow!' he exclaimed upon partaking of another healthy swig. 'What a way to start a new year. Love you all!'

More hugs and congratulatory talk followed. Ariana and Maddie explained how they raced over to Charlotte, picked up Vicky, and hightailed it to Highlands in the

dark. A partial, if confused, explanation of the box was provided. The ribbing about someone getting older was generous. Contrary to reality, Tom felt more like five than fifty-five. But that ominously repeating number was the subject of jokes aplenty. One of the lovelies, probably Ariana, mocked, 'Now he's gotta drive fifty-five.' The rest found in mightily amusing if plausibly unrealistic.

Presently, along with a few gifts of ordinary stature and some more coffee (which one of the vixens saw fit to adulterate with Bailey's), a short stack of birthday cards was given to the man of the morning. They opened each one and presented it to him. At last, there was but one left - one that none of his gift-wrapped captors could properly identify. Ari delved into its origins: 'This came to you in the mail the other day in Blowing Rock. Knowing what we had planned, we thought to hide it until now. So, dear OLD Uncle Tommy, who's Velina??'

'Velina?' Tom replied with mild confusion. 'Huh?'

'Well - hope this isn't another special someone - let's just see,' Carmyn said, taking the card. 'Velina Walker, Sealy, Texas! So, he's got him a cowgirl!'

Through their snickers, Tom uttered, 'Oh! Sealy. That's got to be-'

'Hush, boy,' Maddie said. 'Please continue, sweet Adrestia.'

Carmyn opened the card and read its short message aloud: '*Dear Tom - DEAR Tom! - Thank you so very much and we welcome our partnership. Ooo, so formal, girls. As you know, this will be our first ... new ... mid-engine Z(?) ... and we are beyond excited that it will be yours. I spoke to Mr. Hennessey and he assures you and I that twelve-hundred horsepower ... will not be a problem, in fact, likely being the lower bound of what's possible. What tha?? The CIA-connected armorer has already been in touch regarding those special modifications you mentioned. Oh, Lord. We now only await your shipment from Chevrolet. Huh? You're going to be very pleased. So, Happy Birthday, Tom! Sincerely, Velina Walker, Hennessey Performance Corvettes.*'

With blank faces and open mouths, the women passed the card around amongst themselves, along with the enclosed 2020/1 Corvette mini brochure previously enclosed. And the purchase order from Chevy marked "pre-paid." Several mumbled either 'oh my' or, possibly, 'oh shit.'

Drinking deep of the Irish-French concoction, Tom smirked, 'Yeah. Happy birthday, me! This old man don't drive fifty-five.' He really don't.

A very happy birthday to Dr. Thomas "Fast Tom" Ironsides!