

On the Edge
of Faerie
A Modern Fairy Tale Novella

Also by Stefon Mears

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of Faerie
A Modern Fairy Tale Novella

STEFON MEARS

Thousand Faces Publishing

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Not*

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JANET COULDN'T FIND this 'Carterho.' Not after three hours with four AAA maps and another two scanning online maps and satellite views. The town was supposed to lie somewhere north along the coast of California, maybe an hour or two south of the Oregon border. Her directions said to take highway 277 west from 101, and that she would find Carterho just south of the Hat-trick River. She confirmed them by phone when the maps proved unhelpful.

But she couldn't find the Hat-trick River either, nor any reference to highway 277.

She did know Uncle Ian was dead. Mom had told her last Friday during their weekly video chat. Heart attack, and at the tender age of forty-nine, and had Janet been getting her regular checkups while she was away at college?

Mom knew how bad the stress could get for a freshman away from home for the first time, and that Janet's doctor – she did have a local doctor, didn't she? – would want to know that her uncle had had a fatal heart attack at such a young age. And not even a drinker, at least, not as far as the Wallace family was concerned.

That had made Janet snort, which got *that look* from her mother. Janet had ended the call quickly then, before the lecture-front moved in. Gave her room to cry, too. Janet loved her uncle. He always brought smiles and stories when he came to visit. Mom and Dad said never to believe a word he said, but Janet hung on every syllable: his travels, his adventures in exotic locations, the loves he found and lost. She wanted to grow up to be just like Uncle Ian, making friends and finding excitement all over the world.

The letter had arrived two days later, from Uncle Ian's lawyer, Thomas Rime. Uncle Ian had no children, and when he passed he left her his house and property along the California coast. One last gift from her favorite uncle. Mom insisted that Janet sell the property to pay for college. Janet didn't want to do it, didn't want to give away the last piece of her beloved uncle, but she knew Mom had a point: small town life was not for Janet, and she would have a hard time traveling the world if she was in debt more than a

hundred grand.

But spring break was coming up, and Janet wanted to see the place herself before she considered selling. She wanted to walk the grounds that Uncle Ian had called his own, go through the books he bought in five languages, spend a few nights under the roof her Uncle had built with his own two hands.

That was when the trouble started. Janet owned a house in a town that didn't seem to exist.

The lawyer, at least, Janet had been able to find online. Once she proved to herself that she couldn't find the town, she dug around about the law firm. Their website looked official, and she confirmed the office location in Eureka. She even called the California Bar Association to make sure that Rime and Associates were members in good standing.

Everything looked legit. Except the town.

Janet worried about that for a whole day before she asked herself what Uncle Ian would do. Janet had never before asked herself that question, what Uncle Ian would do in her shoes, but in the coming years she would ask it often. Uncle Ian may have died young, but he lived as he chose, and always had a smile on his face. That was how Janet wanted to live.

Uncle Ian would follow the directions and

go check out the house. Janet would do the same. Almost. Uncle Ian would have gone on his own, the way he had always traveled. Janet thought anything worth doing was worth sharing.

"I can't believe you talked me into this," said Shawnette, Janet's best friend, as they watched for the exit sign that neither expected to see. The skies were clear and bright as fine sapphires, but Shawnette had started griping when she realized just how remote this town had to be. "I could be down in Cabo right now soaking up the sun—"

"And don't think I don't appreciate your waving your money in my face."

"Please. You own a house. Fanciest thing I own is my car."

"Speaking of which, why aren't we taking your Lexus instead of my Cavalier?"

"I don't think so," said Shawnette, holding up one dark, elegant hand as if to ward off an omen. "This town of yours is supposed to be near the ocean. Salt water does not come near my paint job, thank you very much."

Janet had a retort at the ready about risk and adventure and how her old car had supported her like a faithful steed, but just then she saw the exit sign: CA 277, Carterho 12.

Shouldn't the sign have had an exit number? thought Janet as she eased off the road to the

right, then took an underpass that looked as though it had been hewn from living rock. But that was ridiculous. No way had the state gone to that much expense for an exit.

Janet and Shawnette came out of the rock tunnel into a much larger tunnel of green and brown. Massive sequoias surrounded the road, closing out the sky save for dappled sunlight that dripped through here and there: enough to see, but filling their world with shapes and shadows and hints of things half-seen from the corner of one's eye.

"Whoa," said Shawnette.

"Yeah," said Janet with a sly smile. "Still wish we were in Cabo, Shawnee?"

"Yes, but this is pretty impressive too."

CA 277 itself was paved, but otherwise it looked nothing like any highway or freeway Janet had seen. It narrowed to a single lane, which meant that passing traffic one direction would have to veer onto the shoulder. But the shoulders looked broad and smooth, as though plans had been made to expand the road, but funding had fallen short before the pavers arrived.

The road twisted its way through the woods, curving so much in places that Janet would have sworn they had turned right around and were heading back to 101. Just about the time she was ready to pull over and see what

Shawnette and she could come up with on their phones – assuming they even had signal – the road curved one last time and opened into bright sunlight.

Bright, blinding sunlight. Janet hit the brakes hard, shielded her eyes as best she could, and screeched to a halt on a two lane road, nicely paved. Blinking in confusion, she turned to Shawnette and met worried eyes. Janet looked over her shoulder, and there were the woods and the road, but it looked two lanes wide now. She turned back to the road before her and saw a pleasant little seaside village just ahead: rows of small buildings on a main street, designed in the same fashion as a hundred other fishing villages up and down the coast. Behind the main road to either side Janet could see streets and houses and other buildings. She could even see at least one church steeple, and the dome of a broad, impressive structure toward the middle of town. While hardly as busy as Davis, their college town, Carterho made all the sounds Janet would expect: cars and voices and lawnmowers and a dozen other mechanical sounds Janet recognized, even if she didn't immediately identify them.

Janet turned back to Shawnette's curious eyes and said, "It doesn't look that small. Shouldn't we have been able to see it before we came out of the woods? And hear it?"

"Hon, I think I'll drive us the rest of the way. What do you say?"

Janet was ready to say no, but the irritated horn of a motorcyclist who pulled around them changed her mind.

THEY FOUND THE house at the northern edge of the town, way at the end of Yarrow Street: a modest, forest green one story front, with a simple porch and broad pane windows. The porch had a wooden bench with little shavings and scraps that implied wood carving, or at least whittling. Two smaller windows above hinted at either high ceilings or an attic. A small, attached garage awaited them at the end of a long pebble driveway.

"I take it back," said Shawnette. "My Lexus is probably worth more than this little postage stamp house."

"Not when you add in the land." Janet grinned at her friend's raised eyebrows. "According to the papers, Uncle Ian owned all the land to the forest in the east, the ocean to the west, and all the way north to the river."

"What did old Uncle Ian do?" She started the Cavalier creeping up the pebble drive, silently thankful that she was not risking her own car's undercarriage. Shawnette believed firmly in paved roads and room service.

"He used to hint at things, but he never told me. Dad said his brother always went his own way. Mom said he was a wastrel."

"Wastrel." Shawnette snickered. "Only your mom could get away with that word and make it sound natural."

They had to stop outside the garage so Janet could open it, and Shawnette harrumphed that Uncle Ian had never installed an electric garage door opener. Worse, the big door of the garage was stuck. Janet had definitely used the right key, and the handle would turn, but the door gave not the least when she pulled and even yanked on it.

Shawnette lost patience and parked in the driveway. "Any chance we can hit that diner in town before you walk down memory lane?"

"I just want to see the inside first. I promise, I won't get caught up."

"Too right. Because if you do I'll go ahead and you can walk to the diner." She made a show of dropping the car keys in her big purple purse.

Janet felt a flutter in her stomach as she stepped up onto the porch. This was Uncle Ian's house. She always imagined that Uncle Ian lived in a mansion with servants, or maybe a Manhattan penthouse with some French model, or maybe even that he never stayed in one place long enough to have a home, just lived in and out of

hotel rooms all over the world, called the world his home. But this place was his, and now it was hers. She slid the key into the deadbolt, sighed in relief when it turned. She half expected to have come all this way only to discover that the lawyer sent her the wrong key. But it worked in the handle as well, which turned smooth as silk. She pushed the door open...

... and it stopped after two inches, caught by a door chain.

"You've got to be kidding," said Shawnette.

"There's got to be a back door. I'm sure that'll open just fine."

"If it doesn't, you're paying for the motel room."

"Hey! You offered to cover me for spring break."

"Yes, when we were going to Cabo. You dragged my ass out to the middle of nowhere, you get to pay."

Janet started off the porch, but stopped short when she heard Shawnette sit down on the bench behind her.

"You're not coming?"

"If you get another door unlocked, come get me. Otherwise, I'll be right here waiting."

"Give me the car keys."

Shawnette smiled.

"Shawnee..."

"I was just foolin', Jan. I'm not going to take off in your old heap. But I'm not going traipsing through the grass either. I'll be right here." She pulled out her phone. "Catching up."

Janet narrowed her eyes. Shawnette's jokes could get multi-layered when she was in a mood, but she had yet to abandon Janet in a moment of need. And Janet *had* dragged her out here...

"All right. I won't be more than a few minutes either way."

The grass didn't look all that wet, but Janet's sneakers seemed to stick a bit with each step. Her walk around the side of the house felt as though it took twice as long as it should have. She did get a good look at the huge bay windows facing the ocean, but not the rooms beyond them because gold and white curtains barred her view. Still, eventually she reached the back porch, which was three times as broad as the front porch, and had a huge brick barbecue built in, fancy, padded lawn furniture and an umbrella, and a hot tub that hummed like it had been kept running.

The hot tub was on the wrong side though. Janet would have put it on the ocean side and the barbecue on the forest side, to provide a scenic view. As it was, from the hot tub, bathers would have a better view of the forest in two directions

than the ocean at sunset (which was about two hours away). Maybe it had to do with the wind.

Janet also noticed a small empty saucer by the back porch. Uncle Ian must have been feeding a local stray. The back entrance had a screen door – unlocked – and a wooden door fitted with a glass panel. Like the bay windows, the door's shade was drawn.

Janet held her breath and tried her key: it turned in the lock. The handle turned in her hand. But before Janet tried to push the door open, she muttered softly, "Come on, Uncle Ian, let me in."

The door creaked open at her touch. Janet felt a shiver wriggle its way up her arms. She stepped into the kitchen: gray stone tile floor and white marble counters, stained white oak cabinets, and expensive looking steel for the refrigerator, dishwasher, and six burner gas stove and oven. The kitchen seemed huge, as though it must have taken half the house.

One door off of the kitchen led Janet into an expansive bedroom, complete with California king size bed. The room was done in red and brown woods, from the floor to the floor-to-ceiling dresser, the bed frame, and the overflowing bookshelves. Janet ran her hand over the dark green comforter: soft enough to wrap yourself in and hide from thunder. A door along one wall led to a walk-in closet full of clothes and shoes

and a bathroom with three skylights, more white marble for the countertop and white oak for the cabinet, a sunken bathtub and one of those fancy showers that sprayed from multiple directions. The walk-in closet had another door. Janet couldn't quite make the house layout line up in her head, but she thought this door must have led into the garage. If so, she thought it was a strange place to put such a door, and stranger still that the door was locked. The house key didn't fit the lock, either. Janet didn't waste much time or thought on the door just then, though. There was too much else to see in the house.

Janet marveled at the use of space as she wandered back through the kitchen and down the hall. She would never have believed how much could fit into this little house. Doors on the right included a coat closet and linen closet, a second bathroom, and even a small guest room before she reached the living room. More bookshelves here, and deep leather couches that could sleep three people abreast without anyone touching. Then there was the recliner: wide as a loveseat. Janet had to try it out, and the moment she stretched out she fell asleep. It was simply too comfortable to resist.

Janet's phone woke her with Shawnette's ringtone: "Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves." She pushed the button and garbled a greeting.

"About time you answered. I was getting sick of leaving voice mail. Now, are we going to go eat? Or am *I* going to go eat?"

"I'll be right out."

"Too right you will."

Janet unhooked the door chain and opened the front door. An impatient Shawnette tapped her foot on the porch, keys jingling aggressively in one hand and purse swinging in the other.

"Just let me lock up," said Janet. "I'll be right back."

"Two minutes and I leave without you."

Janet hurried back through the house, her legs perhaps still half-asleep. She certainly felt as though she took longer getting to the back door and back than she should have. The look in Shawnette's eye confirmed this. Janet still took the time to lock the front door behind her. Small town or not, some habits ran deep.

"What happened to you, anyway?" asked Shawnette.

"I fell asleep in the leather recliner."

"*Leather* recliner? What else does he have?"

"There's a hot tub..."

"Might not be so bad after all."

"No T.V. though."

"Lord have mercy."

Janet continued describing the place as Shawnette drove them into town.

TANIA'S DINER DIDN'T stand on formalities. When Janet and Shawnette walked in, the guy behind the counter – and guy was the right word, Janet decided, because he was caught in that nebulous age between late high school and college – waved them to sit wherever they liked while he prepared a milkshake, to the glee of the boy who spun on a counter seat and the indulgence of the boy's young parents who shared some private smile, but nodded greetings to the two newcomers.

Janet and Shawnette grabbed one of the four empty booths. Tania's Diner had a fifth booth, but a deputy sheriff sat there, too intent on her burger-with-everything to look up when they sat down.

Shawnette examined their surroundings with tentative touches and a critical arched eyebrow, but Janet thought the diner was quaint, like something that got dropped into the real world from a '50s sit-com. The counter guy, with his acne scars and buzz cut hair might have been an extra on the show. He brought them small glasses of ice water and laminated menus that looked well worn from age and use, and greeted them with a voice that still showed signs of cracking.

"What are the specials?" asked Shawnette.

The counter guy – Brad according to his name tag – hesitated. The silence was filled by

the boy at the counter, slurping his milkshake. Brad said, "Everything we make is special."

Shawnette drew her head back to reply, but Janet spoke first. "I like that." She didn't. She had hoped that they had weekly specials or something like that. After all, if she moved into Uncle Ian's place...

Janet lost whatever follow-up she had ready for her lie. Was she considering *living* in this flea-speck of a town? It made Davis look like San Francisco. Shawnette must have said something, because when Janet looked up again Brad was gone.

"All right, girl," said Shawnette. "What's going on with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You 'fell asleep' in a recliner? Now you zone out while you're talking? Did you even notice me ordering you a diet cola?"

"Wait. You ordered me a *diet*?"

"Yes I did. And you didn't correct me, so you're going to drink it." Shawnette's smirk extended to almost half her face. "Teach you to zone out on me."

"I must be wiped from the drive."

"Please. This wasn't much longer than the drive to your parents' place from campus."

Janet shrugged helplessly. "Maybe I'm still in shock about Uncle Ian."

"Ian Wallace?" said the young father at the counter.

"Yes." Janet blinked. "You knew him?"

"It's a small town." His smile almost looked like an apology. "I'm Garth. This is Tilly" – Tilly smiled and Janet tried not to feel ugly and awkward in comparison to her elegant blond contemporary – "and this little scamp is Phillip, but he answers to Fizzy." Garth rubbed Fizzy's hair, eliciting a smile that lit the child's chocolate-covered face. "I helped Ian improve his house. Build his deck, install his cabinets..."

"And the hot tub," added Tilly.

"Yes, and his hot tub. So if Ian was your uncle, you must be Janet then. He talked about you all the time."

"That's right," said Janet, a little dazed. She never expected that Uncle Ian the Adventurer would talk about his drab little niece. "And this is my best friend, Shawnette Myers."

The introductions brought Brad back into the conversation, and after everyone had greeted everyone and Fizzy had sung/shouted a meeting-new-friends song he learned in Kindergarten, the deputy spoke for the first time, in a level, if friendly voice. "If you have the Wallace place now, you should be careful. There's a motorcycle gang, the Wild Riders, knows all the back trails in the woods around here. They generally leave

us alone, which is good because we don't have the manpower to even try to go after them and they don't commit obvious enough crimes for us to beg the state or feds for help."

"Are we in danger in that little house?" asked Shawnette, giving Janet a sideways I-told-you-so look.

"Shouldn't be. Just be careful around the woods, especially close to the river. That's Tim Lane's territory. He's one of the Wild Riders, the one seen most often around here. He doesn't like people poking around anywhere he considers his. He'll take something from you, like you're paying toll."

Was it Janet's imagination or did the hint of a smile play around Tilly's lips?

Janet ordered a barbecue burger and a side salad and Shawnette ordered the chili with extra cheese. Brad brought the salad out early – around the time the deputy left – but Janet set it aside until her burger came, then used the whole salad, dressing and all, as burger toppings.

The two friends were only just starting on their food when Garth and Tilly made ready to take Fizzy home. But before they left, Tilly leaned in and whispered something to Garth, then stood up and walked toward the ladies room, catching Janet's eye along the way.

Janet took that as an invitation and followed. She found Tilly washing her hands and tilting her face to check her makeup. Tilly said, without looking, "The deputy'd never tell you this, but the Wild Riders, well, they're not like you and me. If you stay around here, you'll see them, sooner or later, and you'll understand then." She dried her hands and turned to face Janet with a knowing look. "As for Tim, well, he won't ... hurt you. And what he takes from you, well, it might not be an object."

"He might rape me?" Janet couldn't believe the deputy hadn't warned her, or that Tilly – a woman herself – would talk so casually about a rapist.

"Oh, no! He won't force you. It's just that..." Tilly's little not-quite-a-smile was back. "He can be very persuasive. You might have a boyfriend, or be saving yourself for marriage or something and, well, let's just say Tim's the kind of guy who can change your plans for you."

"I can handle myself."

Tilly quirked a smile with a raised eyebrow and Janet flushed bright red with the unspoken message: Tilly had thought the same thing until she met this Tim Lane. Tilly patted Janet on the shoulder as she left the bathroom. Janet turned to the sink and splashed cold water on her face and neck.