

R.A. GRAVES

MONUMENTAL



HAVEN'T YOU HEARD, God punishes the wicked? People in Somerset know. Joe Moss warned them of it. Joe's a quiet guy and doesn't like to talk about it. But I tell everyone who comes into my store.

Joe Moss minds his own business – and our yards. He owns Moss landscaping, which, in Somerset, means he mostly mows lawns. It's perfect for him. He can go about his work, property to property, never having much need to talk to anyone, and there is the hum of the engine, and the headphones he wears that keeps him in his own world, with his own thoughts. That's where Joe Moss prefers to be.

One day a neighbor flagged his attention while he was cutting a lawn. Joe lowered his earphones to his neck and killed the engine. It gave way to the quiet summer afternoon.

"Are you going to bow down to the beast?" he asked.

Joe shook his head. Whatever he was talking about, it didn't sound good.

"Yeah, Faulton is putting it up."

"Putting what up?"

"That ungodly statue they discussed in committee last month."

Joe shook his head again. He still didn't know what he was talking about. He didn't keep up with rumors, even ones from the town council. "No, I'm not going to bow down to anything," Joe said. Then he put his headphones back on and started the engine. He had three more yards to do. One of them was nearly five acres.

He saved the big one for last and finished up just as the clouds were turning pink over the green trees. Funny how he always managed to finish just in time. Whether he had four yards or eight. Joe was happiest to work with leisure, but he could work hard, and fast, and without rest when the occasion called for it.

Curiosity must have got to him while he was in the hum of his own head, because when Joe got home that night he asked his wife, Autumn, about the statue.

"It's been on the news," she said.

No wonder Joe had not heard of it. He never watched the news.

"It's for that author who passed away last year," she said.

"Who?"

"Walter Chouse. He lived in Somerset, you know. I guess Mayor Faulton was a big fan."

"I never heard of him." But of course Joe had. Everyone had. Walter Chouse was world famous, and sadly, the pride of Somerset. "What's the uproar if a city wants to put up a statue of a writer who lived here?"

"It's not a statue of him. It's one of his characters, Bouvane, the god of sudden love, I think they call it."

"Like, love at first sight?"

Autumn tipped her head and showed a sheepish smile. "No, not like that. He conjures up storms that make people fall passionately in love with one another. But yes, at first sight."

It was the way she said passionately that carried the gist of the matter.

"What kind of writer is this guy, again?"

"Sorcery. Magic. Stuff like that. Honestly, I wish I never heard of him either."

"What does it look like?"

"It doesn't look good. You'll see it soon enough. Next time you drive Main Street."

"It's already up?"

Autumn nodded. Her lips, tight and straight. There was no more she wanted to say about it, so she changed the subject. "Are you going to have a day off with the storm coming in?"

It was the first he was hearing about a storm too. "I hope not," he said.

JOE HAD NO desire to see the thing, but he needed Main Street to get to the hardware store. Traffic paraded slowly past, everyone getting a good long gawk, whether they wanted it or not.

The thing was massive. It measured twelve feet to the tips of its horns. Its dragon-like body was made of steel and stone. Its belly was bulgy. Its wings, stumpy, even at full span. It squatted proudly, its legs permanently bent, its calves and thigh muscles straining. It looked down Main Street and out over the ocean, and over the comings and goings of the people of Somerset.

The worst thing about it was its nakedness. A shocking reminder that this thing was supposed to be the god of sudden love.

In the hardware store, a group of guys had congregated at the checkout counter. The beast could be seen through the front window and they were laughing and gesturing. The door jingled, but no one noticed when Joe came in.

"Maybe it can brew up a hot storm for us here in Somerset," one of them said. He jabbed his elbow into the man beside him. "You get what I mean?"

"It's an abomination," Joe said.

That got everyone to turn. His voice was hard. Not like Joe at all. It was like when your mower comes upon a rock it can't cast away. It clanks horribly and shuts down. I doubt he meant it to be as such.

I loved him for it. My sentiments exactly. Although, I would not have known the words. Nor was I as bold as the introverted Joe Moss.

The group went its way, the door dinging once for them all.

"What are you looking for today?" I asked.

Joe broke his stare from the window and slid it a few degrees my way. "I have to pull a few stumps today. I need chain."

"You need something heavy. Not the pre-cut stuff." I pointed and went with him, as I would have to cut the chain. The chain was on large industrial spools and could be pulled out, link by link to custom lengths.

"How much do you need?" I grabbed the first link and began to pull.

Joe shrugged. "Maybe I'll know by eye." He gestured to keep it coming.

"I watched them put it up."

"What?"

The spool was too loud and I had to stop it. "I watched them put the statue up yesterday morning. They used an old rusty chain, smaller gauge than this." I pulled a few more feet and let it coil on the push cart I had standing ready. "They just

dangled it from a backhoe, moved it from the flat bed to the platform like that. It took them the better part of two hours to set it down because they had to line up the anchor holes." I added a few more feet to the growing pile and looked to Joe.

"More?"

"But the funny part," I said, "is that they forgot to order mounting bolts, so it's just squatting over there. Oh-well, as if it's going to go anywhere, right? The thing must be a thousand pounds." I added more chain then stopped the spool again. "I think this will do, don't you?"

Joe breathed out long and heavy. "Give me a little more."

I pulled, and watched Joe's face as each link clanked out.

"Little more," he kept saying.

I guess it's always good to have extra chain around. You never know what kind of job might come up.

JOE MOSS HAD all that day to think about the statue. All day with his thoughts, inside the hum of his mower, in the muffle of his head phones. He got to see the chain at work against the stumps he pulled. He knew they were plenty hefty.

He had that night to think of it too, but he didn't need it, because he didn't even discuss it with Autumn. That could only mean one thing. His mind was set and he did not want it changed. Still, he slept on his plan, and rose the next day, no sooner or later than normal.

Nothing about the morning was unusual, not for Somerset. The sky held up on a thick layer of clouds, the bottoms of which were colored a textured, rosy-gray. The seabirds flew low beneath it all.

Only Joe Moss was out of place. He drove this truck down Main Street, almost too fast without the added weight of his trailer. He felt as though people were gawking, reading his mind.

He passed the beast without so much as a glance. Then he made a second pass, and a third. On the fourth, he figured he better do what he came to do or else go get his trailer. After all he had plenty of yards to do, and it might be his last day to do it before the storm came in.

He cranked the wheel and veered right over the sidewalk, swinging the nose of his truck so that the statue was at the back end. He hopped out and reached over the bed-wall for the chain. It came up heavy and limp. It would not be the fast work he had hoped for.

Link by link clunked over the tailgate. louder than the traffic. They must have wondered, but no one stopped. He went about his work, getting down on the ground to hook the chain to the hitch, using the same method he used to pull out the stumps. When he finished he checked the traffic again. Nothing more than watchers passing by.

The work required some encircling, and climbing of the statue. He wrapped the chain around the neck, the torso, then made a double pass behind the hooks of its horns. He pulled the final pass down between the legs, ignoring the vulgar protrusion, and clasped the lock-hook at the base of the creature's tail.

He had garnered more attention. The traffic slowed. He saw smudgy faces peering through the reflective windows. I wonder if he saw my own, pressed eagerly against the front window of the store. I like to think that he did, and that it encouraged him.

All he had left to do was climb into the truck. I saw him strap his seat belt before turning on his hazard lights. Then he pressed the break. Shifted. Released. There was a tug at the hitch, then he helped it with some gas.

Bouvane came down easy. Quiet, too, just a dull thud in the grass. The nose of the beast plowed a furrow through the soft earth all the way to the sidewalk.

Then came the noise. Then came the full stop of traffic.

Joe dragged the beast onto Main Street, like he was taking his spot at the head of a parade. The bound beast fought, flopping about and tugging back on its chains. The truck revved loudly and coughed out a black cloud that, to this day, some say came from Bouvane. After a short but fierce fight the truck won out and Bouvane surrendered, finding a submissive position and leaving white scuffs on the dark street.

Officer Pierre pulled behind Joe. He whooped his lights once then followed the slow progression up Main Street. They turned onto Maple, then Imperial Way. A line of cars grew behind the officer, wanting to see where all of this was going.

Each turn they took, Bouvane flipped himself over and bucked at his chains. He grabbed signs at the corners but they were no anchor and tore free of the ground.

The parade came to a quiet halt at the residence of 100 Imperial Way.

If not for the way the stumpy wing propped it up awkwardly, you might believe that its muscly legs had once carried it about Somerset, or that its bulging belly had once swelled with breath. In the rear view mirror the beast appeared dead. Joe was finished. He had delivered a heavy message. He laid his head down on the steering wheel and waited.

Officer Pierre stood behind the door of his cruiser. After two decades on the job, he had seen a lot and knew exactly what to do in every situation, even what code to prescribe. This time he stared, dumbfounded, not knowing what to do next.

Mayor Faulton came out in flip-flops, holding the front of his robe together. He knew exactly what to do, and he called for it, loudly, as he flopped down his walkway into the street.

Officer Pierre snapped to duty, opening the back door of his cruiser. He motioned for Joe to get out of the truck and into the car. Joe obeyed. Before

shutting the door, Officer Pierre leaned down. "You understand," he whispered, "this is my job."

FEW PEOPLE HAD the guts to stand up for Joe. Even those who hated the statue said that his actions were foolish and pointless. For one, he got himself in trouble, and besides that, they simply hauled the thing right back down town and stood it up again. The whole thing damaged the road more than it did Bouvane.

The lovers of the statue loved it all the more. Their beast had fought a battle, and it had won. Who would dare tear it down now?

They threw together a celebration for the beast. They set up a six foot ribbon on stanchions in front of it and Mayor Faulton cut it with an oversized pair of scissors. Then they sold pie on Main Street, and ice cream and cotton candy. They set up a bounce house for the children and a stage for music.

The celebration was cut short by the weather. Masses of black clouds sailed from the south like an invading force. The sky came low and dark, sending the people of Somerset running home. Even the street lights dimmed themselves. I could see, in their glow, the pernicious beast abandoned by its worshipers to fend for itself, daring someone to come and topple him again. I could not help but remember the lack of anchor bolts.

Of course it crossed my mind. I knew a few good men and I had every tool we would need. This time it could be done under the cover of night. And not just night, but the cover of the storm. We could take it to the bay, drop it to the bottom. It would never be found.

I looked across the darkening street. The shadowy figure looked back at me. I think it knew what I was thinking, and it dared me to enter its stormy kingdom.

I don't know what Joe was thinking. Maybe he was making a statement. Maybe he was obeying a call from God. Or maybe he was just acting emotionally. To this day I'm not sure. I don't know if Joe is either. Such matters take prayer and wisdom.

In hindsight, I'm glad I didn't take action. But that is not to say I made my choice prayerfully, or with wisdom. I was afraid. I am no Joe Moss.

Joe heard the cell door and looked up.

"Don't get excited," officer Pierre said. "You're just moving to a sheltered cell." Joe's heart sank. The only cell with more shelter was the confinement cell. "Just for tonight, I promise. This storm is gonna be a nasty one.

On the walk down the hall to the confinement cell Joe asked, "Do you think I acted foolishly?" He wasn't fishing for a response. He was sincere. Officer Pierre shrugged.

"If it were up to me, you'd be at home with Autumn right now, but you did make a lot of weighty enemies."

He meant the mayor and the judge and the police chief; that was why he was in a cell. No one took his statement. No one filed a report. He didn't even get to see Autumn, just straight to the cell.

The confinement door slammed shut and Officer Pierre's face hovered in the little barred window. "I didn't go to the celebration," he said, as some sort of concession.

I imagine if Joe ever regretted buying extra chain from me, it was then. But he was vindicated that very night.

In Somerset, we get strong storms. Occasionally a hurricane makes it up the Gulf Stream and remembers the strength of its youth. Such was the case that night.

The storm hit two hours before sunrise, simply running up the length of Main Street. Man had made a perfect pathway for it, but it was providence that ushered

it through. It rushed unimpeded, with a mission, bothering only to knock down a few signs and snap off a few branches along the way, saving its wrath for Bovane.

The news said the statue was thrown by sheer winds. They said it was the creature's wings, the wind blew across them, just like a plane. Give me a break. It was picked up by the hand of God. Who else could lift Bovane, carry him half a mile, and drop him on Mayor Faulton's house?

They found Faulton in the morning, in the closet - his shelter room. It was more than adequate for the storm. It was interior, and small, but it was not a storm that came to Somerset, it was the wrath of God, and there is nowhere a man can hide. If God wants to drop a 1000 pound hunk of steel and stone on you, he will do it.

That beast nestled right down into those four protective walls like a toy dropped back into its box. But in case you celebrate this justice too hardily, let me tell you right here, they found Faulton clutching his wife and daughter.

God is not debonair.

On that day no one dared to mourn or celebrate. There was no one willing to bring the beast back to its seat in town, or to press charges against Joe Moss. No one had to tell Officer Pierre to release him. When he opened the heavy door of the confinement cell and told him he was a free man, he had to add, "Don't get excited. There's been a tragedy."

It reminds me of the Bible verse, "Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?" (Amos 3:6)

Some say that Bovane was given to a museum somewhere in the United States as a historical work of art. I guess, in that way, people like to pretend that whatever mysticism they believe to be associated with the thing is still out there somewhere. But it's not likely. The statue may pass as art, but it's certainly not historical. In the end, I believe they simply hauled it down to the bay and threw it in.

All that remains is the bare platform with the four holes, and a lot of rumors. One of those rumors is that those holes are drilled all the way down to the depths

of Hell, and if you put your ear down to them, you will hear the tormented cries of Bouvane's ungodly celebration.

That's not true, of course. Not literally. Not that I've been foolish enough to test it. Every once and a while I see someone at the platform, their ear down for a listen. When I see that, I think to myself, you fool. You ignorant fool. Then I go over there. "Hey! Haven't you heard, God punishes the wicked?"