

FORECASTS

By K.B. Holzman

Because today is Monday, Clare cleans the bedrooms. Tuesdays she scrubs the bath. Imagine if, willy-nilly, she decided to vacuum the living room instead? Who knows what crap might suddenly grow in the toilet bowl? How quickly things can begin to stink.

Clare is amazed how much can change overnight.

Last night, the future looked dim. A nor'easter threatened the coastline. Maine was about to be slammed. This morning, the entire storm headed out to sea. Clare's cat, Sophie, jumps into her lap, her purring concurring, all is well.

Joe, Clare's husband of forty years, protests when she opens the window to let in the crisp spring air. While Clare putters, opening and closing shades, preparing shopping lists, Joe lies in bed, his glasses perched low on his bulbous nose, his laptop, as always, open.

"I don't know what you are expecting to find on that thing that you can't figure out by looking out the window," she says, smoothing his blankets and craning her neck trying to see what holds her husband's undivided attention.

"Let me be, dear," he says. An engineer, Joe never expects her to understand the machinations of machines, any more than she expects him to load the washing machine, sort the dirty laundry, or protect the delicates.

Their daughter, Leeann, takes after her father. On Saturday morning, Leeann heads up to her father's bed where perched on unmade sheets—Clare is lucky if she is able to make the bed by noon—Joe and she whisper like conspirators as their fingers dance on the computer's keys. They study the computer screen like surgeons preparing for a transplant. When Clare offers a cup

of tea, Leeann waves her away. Physically, father and daughter are a mismatched pair. Joe, bony and balding, wears wire-rim glasses which mask his near-sighted eyes. Leeann, big and burly, wears a plaid shirt and jeans, kicks off her mud-caked hiking boots, a reluctant acknowledgment of her mother's unwavering rules of household propriety.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable at a desk?" Clare asks. "How can you type sprawled out on the bed?"

A software engineer like her father, Leeann explains to her mother that on the internet, change is more important than accuracy. In the race for the newest thing, engineers are urged to write flurries of code and upload routines long before they can be thoroughly tested. The inevitable bugs are corrected in future updates, but if her team releases a new shiny thing first, the market generously rewards them.

Clare longs for a chummy mother-daughter talk. She appreciates her daughter's regular visits but can't help but feel relieved when Leann announces that she has a "thing" that afternoon and won't be able to stay for lunch. Her daughter is like that: on the surface straight-forward and frank even when she fails to provide details which would allow Clare into her life.

"Does she seem happy to you?" Clare asks Joe after their daughter leaves. He barely looks up from his screen, carefully tilting it away from her prying eyes.

"She's fine," he snaps as if he knows or maybe doesn't care.

"If you say so," Clare walks out of the room, pausing only briefly in the hope that her husband will continue the conversation.

Usually, on a Saturday afternoon, Clare does the wash. Today, however, out of curiosity, or more likely jealousy of Joe's intimacy with Leeann, Clare abandons her well-established routine. On a whim, she boots the aging PC that her daughter abandoned in the small bedroom

when she moved out of the house. Hours before Joe stirs from his bed, Clare studies the swirling circle that brings the machine to life, a crystal ball bearing a message. Methodically, following the directions that appear on the screen, she enrolls in G-mail and sends her daughter an e-mail: Guess who?

She giggles, imagining her daughter's surprise when she discovered her mother in her e-mail queue.

The next morning, Clare opens her mail, hoping to find a response. Nothing. Instead, she scans the latest headlines on CNN.com. But, on her next visit, in recognition of her mother's efforts—"At least you're trying"—Leeann shows Clare how to log into Facebook, explaining that the website, high jacked by baby boomers, might be a portal for her mother to reach out to friends from the past. Maybe find a support group. Wary of strangers lurking in Facebook's shadows, Clare insists Leeann activate every privacy protection on the site. She routinely rejects friend requests. As a result, she finds the news feed rather monotonous, as cluttered with ads as TV news and less reliable. Nevertheless, she checks in each morning, titillated at the possibility that Leeann's status might change to "in a relationship." Even engineers have to realize there is more to life than the internet.

When Sophie insists on breakfast, bumping Clare before jumping into her lap and tapping at the computer keys, Clare stands up with a groan, her body protesting the sudden movement, and opens the shades. The maples, sharply defined by a hopeful morning sun, strain to bud. She can almost see sap surging beneath the bark. Soon a carpet of red will coat their dormant lawn. Next door, her neighbor Jason rakes fallen twigs, piles up downed limbs. She guesses he has already applied for a permit to burn winter's refuse in a smoky bonfire. Soon, he will fertilize his

lawn and turn on his sprinklers. His wife Tammy weeds the flower gardens as their kids pull out bicycles and troll the driveway.

Joe asks her to shut his window. “The incessant buzz of that mower drives me up the wall.”

“Can’t you smell the new grass...?” Clare’s attempt to call her husband’s attention to the burgeoning spring fails before she completes her sentence.

“Do you know where my headphones are?” Joe asks. “I can’t concentrate with all this noise.”

“Of course, dear. A bit of music...”

He interrupts her again, swatting her away like the flies emerging from the mud and lingering piles of snow. “Could you find the headphones now, not later?”

Clare sighs and trudges down the stairs.

That afternoon UPS delivers a package addressed to Joe, no last name. Clare doesn’t recognize the return address. Curiously, she carries the small box upstairs, knocking on the bedroom door before asking, “Sweetheart, did you order something through the mail?”

At last, she commands his attention.

Before opening the package, Joe picks up his phone and texts his daughter. Over his shoulder, Clare reads his exultant words: “It came!”

For once, Joe hasn’t bothered to hide his text from her.

“What came?” Clare asks.

His eyes twinkle, crinkled in the corners with delight. Before he answers her question, his phone vibrates. Leeann texts back: a long line of exclamation points.

“Leeann and I are exploring,” he informs her after replying to his daughter.

“Exploring?” To her knowledge, father and daughter haven’t ventured outside the house together in the six months since he retired.

“We’ve found our way onto the dark web.”

“The what?” Looking at the laptop resting in her husband’s lap, Clare imagines a dark screen. Wouldn’t darkness indicate that the computer was turned off or, as he liked to say, asleep? Was the quiet engineer hallucinating? Insane? For this, she had counted down the days until he would finally have time to spend with her?

“The dark web. The underbelly,” he licks his lips with relish. “Outside the prying eyes of the government.”

“What’s in the package, Joe?” She is not amused.

“Weed.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Clare has not heard the term since those long ago days in the dorm of the State University. Even then, she had avoided the rooms of students who thought college should be a time to experiment, to break their parent’s every rule.

Her husband opens the package methodically, a boy on Christmas morning.

“You wouldn’t believe what you can get online. Drugs, guns, prostitutes. Without ever leaving the house. A whole world out there where anything goes.”

“So now you’re a criminal?”

“No, but,” he stops laughing, serious now, “I’m having fun.”

“Marijuana will be legal any day now,” she says, not that she approves. “There’s no excuse to do something so risky.” It dawns on her that he has done this right under her nose, has had the nerve to drag their daughter into his life of crime. “Leeann helped you with this nonsense?”

“Leeann showed me how.” Proudly, Joe shares what he has learned. He prattles on, using words that mean little to Clare: encryption, off-shore servers, cryptocurrency. “There was one morning,” he brags, “when my screen went blank and I thought I’d been swindled out of \$200 dollars, but an hour later the money showed up in my escrow account and the next day the order was shipped. It is so cool.”

“Are you going to smoke?” she asks, thinking this is what Leeann has been hiding. Her daughter a drug addict, loitering in unsavory places where she could not be found.

“Leeann has a bong. She’s bringing it over tonight.”

Clare holds up her hands in dismay, speechless. This was what happens when disorder is allowed into her orderly house. Since Joe’s retirement, she has tiptoed around her husband, unsure of how to incorporate him into a lifetime of methodical housekeeping. She has turned a blind eye, and as a result, the man lying in her bed has morphed into a stranger.

Later that evening, Leeann tromps in the front door, a large brown paper bag clutched in her arms. “I know what you have in there,” Clare says, willing a threat into her voice.

Leeann chuckles. “Dad told me he had let you in on our secret. Care to join?”

“Not on your life,” Clare responds. When, through the floorboards, she hears Joe giggling, she thinks, *Who is this man?* and then, when Leeann joins him: *He sounds happy.*

She imagines inviting the two down to the living room, putting out a plate of goodies—munchies she thinks they are called—but instead she clips the cat’s nails, carefully depositing the cuttings in the trash.

Leeann kisses her on the way out. “Mom, what harm is there in his having a little fun?”

“Flouting the law? He could go to jail!” Certainly, her daughter knew better than to encourage her father’s folly.

“Dad plans to rent a PO Box under an assumed name. Don’t worry, Mom. We’ve set his account up so that the deliveries will be untraceable from now on. I’ve promised to keep you out of it.”

After Leeann leaves, the upstairs bedrooms reek of grass. Joe eats the chicken soup she has prepared for dinner, demonstrating his appreciation with a loud smack of his lips. He suggests they go out for soft serve for dessert, ordering sprinkles on a large bowl of chocolate ice cream. She nibbles on her cone, afraid he will lick out the bowl right there in front of the raucous crowd of high school students. Lucky man, unlike her, he never gains weight.

Leeann starts dropping by once a week after work. Sometimes she arrives with takeout. She carries her backpack upstairs unopened so that her mother can’t examine the nefarious things she has retrieved from the anonymous P.O. Box. Occasionally, she joins her parents for supper.

“Weed, OK so maybe I get it.” Clare concedes. “But guns and pornography?” Her husband’s description of the dark web has started to intrude into recurring nightmares. She is afraid to look under the bed when she vacuums for fear of discovering an arsenal, a stack of magazines portraying people doing God knows what. “I can’t imagine what goes on while I sleep.”

Her daughter, slumped in the dining room chair, guffaws. As usual, she wears frayed jeans and a tee-shirt with the logo of some rock and roll band. Hardly appropriate attire for a successful engineer. “Dad gets a hoot out of crossing over to the dark side. I think he spent too much of his free time watching police procedurals. It may have affected his brain.” Whatever his motivation, Leeann clearly gets a hoot out of it.

The whole idea of crossing over gives Clare the creeps. Why wasn’t Leeann more like Tammy next door, all bright and shiny? Soon after Leeann heads home, Tammy drops by with a

plate of home-made chocolate chip cookies on a plastic plate decorated with Disney characters. Clare resists the temptation to confide in the smiling neighbor, tell her that the only way Joe will enjoy the delicious cookies is to get high. Instead, Clare eats the whole batch standing up in the kitchen with tears running down her face. Heading up to bed, her belly aching, disgusted by her own lack of discipline, she walks into the bedroom to find Joe stretched out on the bedspread, a salacious grin on his face.

“Joe, I’m such a disgusting pig,” she says.

“Clare, do what you need to do. I understand.”

A bigger woman would have said the same to him. Instead, she closes the bathroom door while she changes into pajamas. She isn’t about to compete with the disgusting pornography she imagines he accesses with reckless abandon.

Despite her flannel pajamas, Joe holds open his arms when she emerges, a toothbrush dangling from her mouth.

“What kind of example are you setting for our daughter?” she returns to the bathroom to spit. “No wonder she is alone.”

“Unmarried, but not alone.” Joe carefully chooses his words.

Clare rearranges the pillows before lying down.

“Do you know something I don’t know?”

“I respect Leeann’s privacy, but I suspect one day she will surprise us.” Joe nuzzles her neck.

Clare’s stomach, filled with churning butter and chocolate, rises up in rebellion. “I’m going to be sick.”

“Tomorrow, then?” he asks. “Maybe tomorrow?” Pleading now, his hand clutching her arm.

The shades are drawn, but it doesn’t matter. Outside there is only darkness. Inside her home, spiders spin a dark web of secrets and lies. Her husband, her only friend, traffics in weapons and drugs. Her daughter’s life remains a mystery. What choice does she have but to accept comfort from this man who has shared her bed for so long?

On Clare’s seventieth birthday, Leann arrives with gifts: an Apple TV, a new, large flat screen television. As her father looks on, she shows Clare how to stream TV shows, Side by side on the couch, the family spends the evening watching episode after episode of a harmless drama, no stopping, the TV telling them the next episode starts in five, four, three, two, one second.

At midnight, Leeann says she has to get back to work. Even though she faithfully answered her e-mails all evening, her team requires her presence.

“In the middle of the night?”

“When the creative juices flow,” Leeann says. “And the beer.”

“Honey,” Clare asks, “You can tell me. Are you in trouble?”

“Mom,” her daughter answers. “I’m fine. As a matter of fact,” as if delivering a pronouncement, “I’m happy.”

Before she leaves, Leeann gives her mother one more gift, a small hand-held device. She has installed Wunderground, among other useful apps.

Now, first thing every morning, Clare looks into the future. Outside, maple trees huddle in the last remnant of night, but inside Clare settles into her recliner, turns on her reading lamp, spreads a bright red wool blanket over her legs, and turns on her device. Wunderground instantly updates. The previous night’s predictions disappear, the rain-snow line adjusts, and the icons,

symmetrical snowdrops, isolated drops of rain, and brilliant, radiating suns illustrate the next 10 days.

While her husband sleeps in, exhausted by nights stalking the dark web, Clare taps icons, evaluates their usefulness. She checks the weather forecast on the hour, tracing winter's retreat. She analyzes the highs and lows with particular attention to the forecast for days seven through ten. In an hour—or two—the sun will rise and Clare will embark on her day. Clare is prepared, whatever the likelihood of disaster. Sophie stretches out in front of the window, belly full, and blinks a cat smile, Clare heads out into bright sunshine. People depend on her.

At the Stop and Shop, the middle-aged clerk with the limp asks her if it's going to rain. At the Package Store, the proprietor asks when he should roll out his awning. With Wunderground as her guide, Clare is as reliable as a weather vane.

People need to know when it will rain. Whether lightning will hit the ground or hail pummel their car. Clare can tell them exactly what they want to hear.

End