

Short Story / Prose

“Here There but Nowhere” By Diane Walsh

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Glittery décor on pink houses in small-town America...certainly not the dream anymore. Not April Swath's dream life anyway. That much was clear to her now.

Sometime near Christmas, a forty-something Middle American femme with her nose out of joint, sat upright at her marble kitchen island.

Something has got to give, she thought.

Earlier that day, it seemed, Nepal had come knocking.

Out of the clear blue, April began forming a plan of escape—to go anywhere but here. She was determined. She fought her surroundings. No. Not here. Kathmandu perhaps? She zeroed in, choosing what she believed to be an exotic land, fixing on that place of all places. April smacked herself. *Nowhere could be more ridiculous than here.*

She toyed with her newfound plan, shaking her head, neck outstretched as she looked over the dirty sink. To a far-off land she promised herself she would go, pausing with a squint in her eye.

Oh. Back to reality, her duty-bound inner voice reminded her. *This cotton-candy suburb.*

“I had better call that Mick fella on the blower to let him know I'm done.”

Tap, tap. Dring, dring. Phone pick-up sound.

“Hello, Mick! It's April here.”

“Hello there, ah, April! You... feeling well?”

“No, no I'm not,” she said, feeling like dropping her news on Mick with a vengeance. Not wasting a second, April laid it out in one breath. “So sorry to do this to you. I know how much you just love coming to my Christmas party every year. But you'll have to take it all up from now on, cuz I'm handing it over to you, Buckaroo. I'm out of it as of—today.”

Her usual splendid and splashing year-end neighborhood party would, disappointingly for Mick and the others, not take place. Apparently: *Never again*, April muttered quietly to herself, proud that she had finally asserted herself. Mick, of course, could not see her pride over the phone.

“Ya tellin' me you're not just stoppin' the party temporarily, you're quitting as community-hostess permanently? What brought this on?” Mick drilled.

April thought Mick sounded inappropriately aghast, almost over-the-top with horror at her absence. Inwardly, however, Mick was pleased—he had no intention of becoming the “goodie-goodie” neighbor April imagined, standing in for her. He scornfully thought, *You know the kind, the party mug, accommodating other people's expectations of free holiday celebratory dinners.*

There was a pregnant pause on the call. April, ruthless in her assessment of Mick, muttered only to herself: “You'd think Mick had come to be ashamed of his reputation on the block—the

jolly-jolly single guy who globs on to the friendly couple, gaining nothing but the privilege to attend and eat an April turkey, each year drier than the last. Everyone complained. But Mick was neither ashamed nor up for being the new host. He was just a happy parasite.”

With April so high-strung, Mick knew he needed to tread carefully now, not wishing to exacerbate things.

He tried again. “Did you convince Bill that escaping for a couple of weeks to a foreign land was the antidote for suburban misery?” he asked, struggling to sound interested.

“Yah, actually, I’ve come to the conclusion I need more than just a tan from down South. I need a radical change in environment. Not only do I need to leave this forsaken place, but Bill’s not coming with me,” April said in a disturbingly nonchalant manner.

Mick, seriously curious but careful not to appear nosy, inquired delicately, “Can’t he get the time off work?”

“Nope. He’s left me. He packed one suitcase, strapped it to the back of his bike, and simply rode off. He said he’d have a better life without me. A Bertrand Russell copycat, I understand, who did the very same thing to his wife more than a quarter of a century ago!”

“What!? That doesn’t sound like Bill. You’re joking surely! I didn’t know he even had a bike!” Mick responded, sounding like an idiot.

“Afraid not, Mick. It’s no laughing matter. It’s Bill, alright. In any case, I was getting tired of the phony disguise—our supposedly happy life together. But it was he who decided to do something characteristically inane. This time... leaving on a bike,” April burst out, bitterness spilling over.

Exasperated, Mick said, “But I saw you together just last week. You seemed fine—a perfectly normal married DINKY couple.”

“Good actors, like everybody else ‘round here. A cheesier version of Wisteria Lane! Look at you, Mick—who the heck are you anyway?” April suddenly turned on him.

Irritated by the heightened switch in her temperament, Mick worried; he had never seen April so raw. It... actually kind of turned him on. He proceeded carefully: “I’m going to ignore that remark, seeing as you’re obviously under severe stress. Tell me, with whom are you going to your new destination?”

“The girls from work. We’re off to Kathmandu,” April scoffed.

“Hmm...what girls? I never knew you were close enough to anyone at work that you’d want to travel with them.” Mick realized he might sound over-proprietary. *Had April found something out?* he wondered.

She reassured him, “You should know how they’ve suddenly become my best friends, Mick!”

Suspicious, Mick tried to puzzle out April’s story. *Where’s Bill? If he left, why didn’t he call or tip me off?* A sense of betrayal grew in him. As if reading his thoughts, April continued, “Bill will phone you, Mick. I’m counting on it. You guys stick together. The point is, I feel I’m entitled to some R&R and female bonding. Aren’t I? My husband just walked out on me. Blimey...actually he cycled out on me.”

Mick felt she was overemphasizing the bike exit. *Plus, her use of the term 'female bonding' makes me uneasy*, he thought.

Trying to conceal his emotions, he said, "Of course you're entitled to relax, considering the emotional whirlwind you must be going through."

Mick probed further: "But April, you don't seem upset. Is there another man?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"A logical one."

"Really? Supposed to be Mr. buddy-buddy?" April stalled. "Get real, Mick! Like I found some guy out of a hat, and he's taking me, a forty-nine-year-old cleaning lady, on a unicorn, and the girls are thrown in for good measure...basically I made them up."

"Exactly. I want to meet these girls."

"You can. One will be here momentarily. Why don't you consider coming with us? Then again... Bill was your favourite."

Ignoring her smearing remark, Mick quickly retorted, "That would be wrong. I can't go with you! Bill is my best friend. What are you trying to imply?"

"I thought you said I was your best friend," April said coyly.

"For goodness' sake...this is... I'm getting off this carpet ride right now! I'll call on you later." Mick slammed the phone down, utterly choked at what had just passed.

He didn't know what to make of the conversation. Could April know what he and Bill had been up to? He feared exposure and felt compelled to find Bill, to make sure nothing had gone awry in the heat of an argument. The thought of losing Bill horrified Mick. He dialed Bill's cell—ring, ring, nothing. Again, nothing. *Why wouldn't Bill answer? Mick wondered. Where is he?*

Night fell. Mick tossed and turned, haunted by a news report of a mangled bike near a ravine, fifty miles from Rockcliffe—his neighborhood. Panic surged. *Had Bill driven himself off the cliff? Had April confronted him?* The thoughts sounded absurd, yet he could not dismiss them. He waited for news at the top of the hour. The dreadful feeling lingered through the night.

Morning came. Mick skipped his shower and drove to Bleak City, where Bill worked as a smelter foreman. He arrived before 6:30 a.m. The factory lot was empty. Bill's office drapes were drawn. He waited. Ten, then twenty minutes. Still nothing. The receptionist had no news. Coffee in hand, he drove back to his office, then checked all Bill's haunts—nothing. That night he called April—she answered.

"Oh, thank God you're home. Bill didn't show up to work today—he never misses a day!" Mick squealed.

"Who?" April puzzled.

"Bill! Your partner!"

"I'm sorry, I don't know anyone named Bill."

"Have you gone completely mad? You told me yesterday he left with a suitcase!"

"I'm sorry, Mick...are you feeling alright? I don't know anyone named Bill."

Mick ran outside, jumping the fence to their house. Inside, the décor was entirely different—paint, pictures, everything. April answered, calm.

"Mick, what are you doing?"

"What am I doing...what are you doing? You think you can just eliminate Bill?"

"Mick, I don't know what you are talking about. Who is this Bill?"

"That's it—I'm calling the police."

"Why, Mick?"

"Because you've lost your mind!"

"No, Mick, I think you should sit down and tell me what's happened to you."

The next time Mick saw the light of day, he was in a hospital corridor, in a skinny bed against a dingy wall. He tore off the tightly fitted sheets, revealing a baby-blue gown and shaved legs. Horrified, he bolted, but a nurse intercepted him. "Mr. Larvae, you must go back...you are not in condition to be up."

"Go back where? I seem abandoned!" he exclaimed.

"I think you know," the nurse said, patronizingly.

Escorted back, Mick waited. When the nurse turned, he slipped again, down endless stairwells, into a muddy, drenched grassland, calling for a phone. An old man handed him four quarters. Mick reached a booth, dialing Bill's cell—*not an assigned number*. He tried the office—*no Bill Trigger there*. He called April—same message. Confused, exhausted, he slumped, feeling the ground ripple beneath him. Muddy ridges on either side. A crevasse beneath him. Sticky gunk. He muttered: *She's got the Bill*.

A nurse's bell sounded.