

Hunkered Down

By Ellis Conklin

On a late-April evening, the 46th day of the shutdown, Gladys Pavitz remained hunkered down in her tiny white house on a clear-cut hilltop in Nehalem, a sad depleted little town on the northern Oregon Coast.

A stiff mean-spirited wind rode in from the sea. The stars were bright and plentiful, splashed across the blue night sky. From her window, Gladys watched a fishing boat, its portside lights beaming yellow, trudge across the bay toward Kelly's Marina.

Gladys was plain tuckered out. It had been a long hard day, what with all the feverish calls she'd been making to police, most of them grouching about people in cars with Washington, or worse, California plates, driving about or walking around as if pretending they actually lived in this sad little town.

At one point that night, her husband stomped out his cigarette and yelled, "For Christ's sake, Gladys, you gotta chill! Cops are going to come and haul your ass out of here."

Fred calmed himself for a moment, then went on, an octave lower, all soothing now, "They were probably just wondering how to get to Manzanita."

Gladys just nodded. "I'm going to bed, Fred," she sniffed, and off she limped. Damn gout. Grimacing, she turned back to Fred, a pair of binoculars still wrapped around her scrawny neck, and hissed, "I did see one car with a family in it. Couple of little kids in the back. And they had volleyballs! Can you believe that? I'll just bet you they were from Seattle."

"Just some day trippers, dear. Maybe, you know, they wanted a change of scenery," Fred purred. "Try and get some sleep now, Gladdie."

Poor darling, that Gladys. She was getting old, so old, in fact, that Fred had begun to tease her that she looked better with the mask on.

This old gal wasn't made for quarantining. She sorely missed those late-afternoon hours she used to spend down at the Bayview Tavern, wolfing popcorn from those paper trays, and gulping down a few Coors Lights with big beautiful shots of Jack and strongly talking shit with Beth, the bartender who always dressed head to toe in black, and seemed proud as a peacock that she never did watch no TV news and didn't know squat about Donald Trump's latest vulgarity.

Gladys drank to fill a lack. Sobriety, she'd tried, but it disappointed her. Made her feel lusterless. Maybe she'd try again – maybe, if she and Fred made it through this mess.

Damn pandemic.

For weeks now, Gladys was sleeping poorly, plagued by bad dreams.

She dreamt of that desperate shattered barefoot bleeding frantic mother at Falcon Cove, whose two young children had been sucked into the sea in January by a monstrous wave, begging with breathless might to the woman who answered her pounding to call for help.

Oh boy, that one sure did leave her wrung out to dry.

The Donner Party occupied another dream. Here's how that one played: She's alone in a large farm house. It is yellow, cozy as a puppy, with a white wraparound porch. The high ceilings are ablaze with lovely light fixtures. From an icicle-draped window, she can see them slogging through snowdrifts.

She rushes to the door and calls out to them, "Come in, come in!" She feeds them hot bowls of chili and buttered rolls. Not a one of them says a word. Later, she watches them sleep, and in the dream, Gladys thinks how deep and aching must their hunger have been not to have noticed that they had entered another century.

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Just after 9 p.m., Fred is slouched on the couch, watching FOX News. Trump's boy, Hannity, is at the helm. He can hear Gladys snoring. Fred smiles vaguely and reaches down to pet Abner, the rescue dog, an Aussie, he and Gladys retrieved at the animal shelter back in early March. Seems a hundred years ago.

The house is orderly and clean, like Dealey Plaza. On the fireplace mantel is a picture of him as a minor league ballplayer in Toledo. He's wearing his Mud Hens jersey and looking proud and happy. Standing next to him is Gladys' brother, Alvin Dark, all decked out in his San Francisco Giants uniform. It's 1962, and later that year, Dark's Giants will take the Yankees to a seventh game.

It's a fine memory, one that ambushed him with nostalgia, and Fred is pleased to have it. Dipping a big slab of banana bread into a steamy mug of Sleepy Time tea, Fred picks at his large square teeth with a tooth pick and whispers, "It's a Thursday night." He's almost sure it is, though it could be Friday.

When Fred looks up from his thoughts, Trump appears on the screen. He's looking fat, sweaty and smug, and loaded for bear. Nothing new about that.

Why he and Gladys had come to look forward to Trump's afternoon pandemic polemics. Good way to kill a couple of hours before fetching a pepperoni pizza with extra cheese from the Lighthouse.

Fred, who used to run the dump until they closed it, often cackled like a school girl when Trump went lashing after a reporter.

Gladys saw nothing funny about it. "I got no use for this man," she'd say. She tuned in mainly to see what Mike Pence might bring to the table. "He's such a toady," she'd say until Fred shushed her. "He

reminds me of those white rats with those little pink eyes that my little brother Alvin used to keep in a cardboard shoe box.”

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Trump seemed different tonight, like something was ready to burst out of him, some kind of true and honest thing. It did occur to Fred that something surprising and inevitable was about to take place, incongruous perhaps, like seeing a Porta Potti in the middle of a forest.

But Fred found it odd that the president was eating a cheeseburger the size of a small dog, chowing down on it like there was no tomorrow. Stranger still, reckoned Fred, was that he kept yelling for Jared to bring him more ketchup.

What really got Fred’s attention, though, even more than the ketchup and pickle juice and dinky dribbles of cheese that covered Trump’s giant pulpy face was the expression Trump showed as he ripped from his enormous head the MAGA cap and tossed it toward the camera man.

It was as if Trump had come at long last to the realization that he himself was the hoax, the fake, the imposter. Fred stared slack-jawed at the TV.

“Glayds,” he screamed. “Wake up! Wake up! Trump’s gone off the deep end.”

Glayds, bedraggled and drowsy, stumbled into the living room. “So, what else is new, Fred?”

“No, you’ve got to watch this. Something is very wrong with him.”

Trump glared at Hannity and turned to the camera. “They were right all along, Sean. I never wanted this. I was never ready for this. And I never thought you could possibly elect me as your president. How stupid could you be?”

Fred thought Hannity was going to cry. “Please stop it, Mr. President,” Hannity urged him. “You’re tired. You need to rest. All of this is too much for any one man to deal with.”

“Shut the hell up, Sean,” Trump fired back.

Gladyds’ mouth flung open so wide that her false teeth came nearly tumbling out. “Jesus, Fred. Jesus!”

“The witch hunt is over, and I am the witch,” Trump thundered. “You have found him. Now, I must leave. Let Pence have at it.”

And with that, Trump barreled out of the FOX studio. In the parking lot, a red, white and blue hot-air balloon stood at the ready.

Trump climbed into the basket. There was no one there, not even Melania. Still, Trump saluted. He saluted the air.

And off he flew.

“Aren’t you glad I woke you up?”

“Yes, Fred,” Gladys replied. “I think I do need a drink.”

“I’ll join you, Gladdie.”