

## “Even the Furies Wept”

A Short Story

By T.D. Smith

I.

Buttercup gingerly twisted a spring into place, her third attempt at doing so, slowly and carefully turning her needle-nosed pliers clockwise, taking care to set the spring into the desired configuration inside a metal plate sitting against a geared mechanism. She resisted the urge to wipe the droplets of sweat that inched down her brow, tickling her skin. She was nearly done with her project, which she had been intensely working on for days now. She would have it soon, it would be complete, perfect, and most important, *operational*. As she worked, she reflected on the events of the last year, remembering.

The disease had not been AIDS. It had not been HIV. Her Wesley would never have been unfaithful, and the blood tests proved it. It was not cancer. It was not any sort of heart disease, at least not a typical one that had been encountered by anyone in the world before then. Wesley had been one of the first patients to be diagnosed. She had loved him so, for many years, and to see him wither away, to shrink from a man of his former glory, brain, and brawn so rapidly, and to deteriorate into the withered, wrinkled, sliver of a man that laid dying on that bed, lamenting in pain and gnashing his teeth had been, for lack of a better, more capable and adequate term, devastating to watch unfold.

The heart virus had no cure; at least then it hadn't. After Wesley's case, hundreds, then thousands, then millions became infected. Scientists and medical experts were in a mad scramble to develop treatments and a cure for the rapidly spreading, mysterious ailment that attacked people's hearts, (affecting more so men than women) and had quickly surpassed more traditional forms of heart

disease, cancer, and chronic lower respiratory diseases to take its place as the king of American-killing maladies.

The epidemic had become so severe, that travel in and out of America had become severely restricted. Citizens were required a thorough medical evaluation prior to departing the country, and anyone planning on traveling into America was significantly discouraged to do so. Thusly, abroad the disease had been more or less contained to the continent of North America; within the confines of that great landmass the infection spread like wildfire.

Sitting in her tiny workshop in the garage and wrestling with her invention, Buttercup wanted desperately to help. To change things. If she could just get this spring in place, she would do just that. She stood on the verge of total failure for yet another day, as she gazed through her spectacles beset with a magnifying lens at the tiny pieces of gadgetry with which she now toiled. She thought back to Wesley's final moments, his words of endearment and goodbye to her, his last breath, his lifeless shell lying pitifully on the hospital bed. As she did so she closed her eyes.

"In sickness and in health, til death do us part," she thought to herself, "well, I'll go beyond that, *far* beyond it, if I can!" and with that thought she gave one last desperate twist, and,

CLICK!

The tiny spring popped into place, causing the miniature contraption to make a tock-tick-tock-tick sound.

Buttercup sat dazed and surprised for a second. Then, she beamed. She had *done* it! She closed the back of the small analogue pocket watch and flipped it around to look at its face. It was only about the size of a sand dollar, made of sterling silver, with a white face with black painted numbers telling the hours, and several other circles of numbers depicting years, months, and days she had augmented

herself, each complete with a tiny set of hands. At its top sat a series of three knobs, the largest sitting in the middle and gilded in brass, imprinted all about its circumference like a crown.

The second hands of the watch now ticked backward, tock-tick, tock-ticking in Buttercup's hand. She looked up at the old-fashioned analogue clock on the wall, and then down at the digital one on her wrist, and her heart fluttered in excitement. Both time-telling devices in the room she glanced at were moving backward, second by second, in tandem with the silver pocket watch, her invention.

Rising and going to the garage window, she looked outside and saw that time had nearly come to a standstill. A hummingbird hovered next to her feeder, its wings moving incredibly slowly. As she stared, Buttercup saw the hummingbird slowly traverse the air backward, away from the feeder. A plane overhead moved backwards across the sky. An apple slowly made its way off the ground, into the air, and attached itself back to a nearby tree branch.

Buttercup smiled again. She really had done it. She sat her laptop computer in front of her, then she twisted the knobs on the watch clockwise several revolutions and pushed down the crowned knob with her thumb. There was a mechanical click within the stopwatch, and all its hands started rapidly racing clockwise, the opposite direction than they had been moving previously. The clock on the wall spun forward likewise, with great speed, and the numbers on Buttercup's digital watch were a racing, counting blur. Reality moved so rapidly around her that it was a confused mess of colorful streaks to her eyes. The world seemed to lurch, and Buttercup became queasy as she sped swiftly forward in time, by great leaps and bounds, into the future.

## II.

Buttercup spent what felt like days to her at it: moving forward by stretches of years at a time, then suddenly stopping the watch. Each time she stopped it, time itself would resume its normal pace, and out the window each interval she did this it would be a different season. Snowy white-covered branches turned to the reds, oranges, and browns of Autumn instantly before Buttercup, and then back to bright, luscious green again. Each time she jumped forward, Buttercup checked the time and date displayed on the laptop to see when she was. Eventually, the woman went so far forward that the vacant lot across the way had evidently been bought. Its trees had been torn down, and two newly built houses with cream-colored paneling had been erected in their place.

Every time she stopped, Buttercup would click refresh on her laptop, her typed words in the Google search bar still reading "heart virus cure." She would then scour the internet, watching news outlet video after video, reading articles, and checking social media for any news, any developments on a cure.

Then, one day, she found it.

A cure, a certain serum, had been extracted from an enzyme excreted from a rare tree frog in a South American rain forest, that completely eradicated the virus in infected albino laboratory mice. Human trials had shown the same effect.

Buttercup's fingers clacked away at the keyboard. She easily discovered the location of the nearest medical storage facility with vials full of the serum, the internet giving up these secrets freely. She then donned her boots and coat, picked up her bicycle that was stashed in the garage, opened the electronic door, and raced out into the world for the first time in ages. Neighbors turned their heads and gawked, some alarmed, others caught off guard and completely spooked to see the woman, the poor widow from the end of the lane, whom they had not seen emerge from her house in years, and never

seemed to be home when they went to check on her. She had not seemed to have aged a day, either! Some believed they had seen a veritable ghost, for it had been so long since they had seen anyone come out of that secluded house, and the woman looked no different than she had years ago.

Buttercup ignored both concerned, friendly callings out from her neighbors, as well as spooked exclamations of terror. She pedaled and panted and pushed her bike as fast as she could the entire 12 miles from her house, racing across busy intersections, up steep grades, and up and down rolling hills that wound through dense forestry hugging the road until finally the medical supply building was before her. When she arrived, she waited.

When a supply truck made its way up to the barbed wire fence and the heavy, gray metal gates, and uttered the proper incantation to the man on the other side of the microphone sitting in the small sepia-colored, square security hut, she held her breath. When the doors had slid open just enough for her to slip inside, Buttercup clicked her stopwatch once, and time slid to a standstill. She walked right through the gap in the doors and into the secure facility, undaunted and undeterred.

Rinse and repeat!

She pulled the very same trick when the doors were opened for personnel to enter the dull, beige brick building, unloading their cargo from the truck and transferring it into the facility. She searched high and low in the building while time was frozen, opening and unboxing crate after wooden crate until eventually she found what she was looking for: a cardboard box full of hundreds of vials of green liquid that could cure the horrendous heart harming virus. She only needed one, and that was all she took.

Finally, she turned and exited the premises exactly how she had entered, and gripping the handle of her bike firmly with her left hand, hit the crowned lever on her watch with her right thumb, and both she and the small vehicle propelled backward in time in what would have been a swirling blur

followed by a sudden disappearance to an outside observer. Buttercup sped down the lane leading back toward her hometown away from the medical storage facility, whilst simultaneously traveling back into her past.

### III.

First, Buttercup gave the vial to her late husband's doctors when Wesley was initially diagnosed. She didn't go when she knew Wesley and herself in the past would have been at their office; she did not want to run into her past self and spoil things. She went later, and she saw them. They required a good bit of convincing, too. In fact, she had to travel back several times, reversing time over and over, re-trying her conversation with them until she successfully convinced them. Finally, when she was able to demonstrate that one of their in-house lab mice could be almost instantly cured with the vial, which was necessary for her to sacrifice in order to substantiate her claim, they believed her.

Frustratedly, she went back to retrieve another vial for the doctors. In what was only a few seconds for the doctors, but an inconvenient half an hour for Buttercup, POP! She reappeared with another green vial. The doctors promised to give the treatment to her suffering husband the next time they saw him, and they swore to secrecy. They could maintain confidentiality with her, if it meant saving lives on the scale her aid implicated. This was music to her ears, and she was ecstatic. It was also the way it had to be. Wesley would *never* have approved of her actions, manipulating time, messing with forces she did not fully understand, and altering the natural flow of events just to save his life; she would never have been able to convince him to use the serum on his own knowing she had obtained it in such a clandestine manner!

The doctors administered the treatment to Wesley the next day, and he was cured instantly. The news of his healing spread quicker than the heart virus itself had. Word of two local doctors in a

backwater city in a far corner of America and their breakthrough discovery of a cure was plastered all over the news and internet, much to Buttercup's delight. She stuck around in that time for a few days, keeping a low profile and spending much of her time in an isolated hotel room searching the internet and watching the news, just to watch events unfold. The serum was quickly reverse engineered from the residue of the original vial she had given the doctors, and it proliferated hastily throughout the continent, until every single person suffering from the ailment was cured, all in less than a week. Buttercup's actions had not only saved the life of her beloved Wesley, but also those of countless others.

She wanted to see him desperately.

She knew she could not. At least not now, or in this *particular* now. If she went inside her house and ran to Wesley, surely she would run into her past self, too. Who knew what kind of universe-ending calamities that might cause! She did not know *much* about time travel or paradoxes, but Buttercup was certain she had at least a good grasp on the rules. Instead, she would travel back to exactly the point when she left. That way she would surely avoid any awkward, odd, and potentially cataclysmic egoistic encounters. It took some math that hurt her head, but she eventually determined exactly how to wind her watch in order to travel to the time she needed. She twisted and turned the dials, then punched the crowned knob, and with reality swirling around her once more, veered forward in time one last time.

"Wesley, oh Wesley, my love!" she called, when she had arrived in her original time. She watched as a past version of herself swirled and disappeared from her station at the workshop, embarking on her maiden voyage, as she entered the garage from outside, plopping her bike down on the gray cement floor. She did not notice that as soon as her doppelganger had disappeared, so did the workbench and all its trappings, for her single focus was on her intent of running to her love, embracing him, feeling his touch and his warmth on her again.

She burst into the kitchen and called for him again.

“Yes, dear? I’m here!” called Wesley, pleasantly. She threw her arms around him, and then her entire body into his muscular arms. He was surprised at first, but then enthusiastically returned the embrace and kissed her, long and passionately. When at length their faces parted, he held her slightly away from him and they gazed into each other’s eyes.

“Oh Wesley, how I’ve missed you, my darling!” Buttercup told her miraculously once more present husband.

Wesley looked confused. “It was only a trip to the grocery store, dear.”

Buttercup smiled and rolled her eyes. Wesley didn’t understand. Didn’t know what she had been through, what she had done to be here. In Wesley’s memory of this newly established timeline, his version of her must have been off at the grocery store just before she, the time traveling one, had arrived. Surely that version of herself must have disappeared when she, the *real* Buttercup, had arrived! She stood positively beaming, her white teeth glistening in the kitchen light as she gazed up at her husband’s face. She had done it. The mission was a success. She could only begin to imagine what the following years held for the two of them, the new adventures, the pleasures of growing old together.

Suddenly, Buttercup’s blood ran cold. Her blissful thoughts of she and her reinvigorated husband’s future dissipated instantly when she heard something she had not been expecting at all: the creaking front door opening, followed by a feminine bellow.

“Oh Wesley, darling, I’m home!” called a woman’s voice identical to hers.

Confusion and alarm sprung over Wesley’s face. Buttercup pulled away from his embrace and ran out of the kitchen and down the hallway. Rounding the corner, she came to the living room, and, approaching the front door, she came face to face with herself, identical in every way, only holding a bag



of groceries in each hand. Unable to control her momentum and come to a halt in her state of intense dismay, Buttercup slammed right into herself.

As soon as the collision occurred, it happened.

Time stood still. Deep, dark shapes that resembled cracks formed all about, seemingly in midair, but appearing distant to Buttercup at one glance, then right in front of her in another blink. The cracks lengthened and widened, and reality itself seemed to go haywire, chunks and slivers of the room, the scenery outside, fragmenting, fracturing, twisting, turning, and flying outward from the epicenter that was the two Buttercups colliding like glass from a funhouse mirror that had just been destroyed with a hammer.

Buttercup frantically struggled with her pocket watch to no avail. No matter how she twisted and turned the dials, or how many times or with what force she hit the primary button, nothing happened. Time, space, and all of reality continued to fracture all around her.

Without warning, there was a loud crunching noise. Spinning around, Buttercup saw a foot wearing a white tennis shoe with red laces protrude from one of the “cracks.” A leg attached to it wearing a black suit pant leg followed, and then an entire figure of a person stepped out of nowhere and into that fracturing reality with Buttercup. As it stepped into the world, the figure’s shoes crunched as if it were stepping onto broken glass.

He appeared to be a man, tall, with dark skin, wearing black trousers and a blazer, a black button-down shirt, with a bright, white plastic priest’s yoke tucked neatly under his collar. The man’s head was large, round, and flat. He had no face at all, except for that of a clock, with 12 hours painted on an ivory surface in ancient, stylized Roman numerals. The face of the clock had no hands defining the hour or seconds, but instead a large, triangular protuberance in its center that resembled that of a sun dial, that slanted down to a point, looking oddly like a great nose. A great, bushy, gray beard protruded

from the bottom of the clock, under the VI numeral, coming to rest in curly strands just above the priest's yoke.

The man stood silently, not saying a word. Though he had no eyes and no distinctly human facial features to speak of, Buttercup somehow knew he was staring at her. She could feel unseen eyes piercing her soul, judging her.

At some length, the man raised a hand. A long, dark-skinned finger pointed at Buttercup. Flabbergasted and butterflies swirling in her stomach, Buttercup pointed at her own chest.

"M-me?" she stammered. The man nodded, then made a beckoning motion with his hand. Buttercup cautiously stepped forward until she was right in front of the figure. It then held out the same right hand it had pointed at her with, palm turned upward expectantly, communicating that he wanted her to give him something.

She knew exactly what it was he wanted. Her cheeks turning crimson, she reached up and plopped her silver stopwatch into his hand. He closed his black fingers around it, and then placed the watch in the pocket of his blazer. He turned around. Reaching upward, he took this and that sliver of fractured reality in his hands and pulled them back together. After that he produced a spool of golden, glowing thread from his pocket. The figure was stitching time back together! He worked at this for some interval, until all but the crag from which he had entered was mended.

Then, the man walked toward the dark crag. He stopped before stepping into it and turned to face Buttercup a final time. Once more, he beckoned her to come to him.

Buttercup gulped. The bottom dropped out of her stomach. Now, at the end, she understood: she had made a fatal, embarrassing miscalculation. By undoing her husband's demise, she had also undone the need for the stopwatch, and the lack of necessity had caused her to never create it, to never

set up the workshop in the garage in the first place. And yet, she had, and there she was. The resulting paradox, the same atoms trying so hard to occupy the same space at the same time, and the resulting forces of the two Buttercups' being crashing had literally fragmented time itself, causing reality to begin disintegrating. Now that everything was nearly patched up, she was out of place; she no longer belonged. She could neither stay in this, nor any other reality.

The man moved his hands and wiped Wesley and the other Buttercup, his Buttercup's, memories of their interaction with the time traveler. He glided his hands over reality, smoothing it out, and removing any other impurities, any other paradoxes or out of place things in time. Then, he extended a hand to the woman. She took it, and hand in hand, she walked with him. She was the last piece, the last glitch, to be smoothed out, removed. They walked together and stepped into the dark crag that led from reality to God only knows where and when (if those concepts even applied!)

When she had stepped one foot into oblivion, Buttercup took one last glance back at Wesley, gazing at the face she loved and had gone to such great lengths to save. It was then that a thought occurred to her. Love is sacrifice. Bringing a loved one back like she had required a life for a life. She herself was that sacrifice. This figure, whoever or whatever he or it was, was taking her away as the obligatory oblation. She beheld them now, Wesley and the other Buttercup, and the perfect life she had helped create for them. Though tearfully, she fervently and calmly stepped forward with the clock-headed man through the black crack in reality into the void of blackness, a somber and accepting smile now on her lips. With one last movement, the man turned and pulled the hole shut, finishing off his repair job and closing the gap, the last fault line in the fabric of the universe, and the two of them were gone.

The End.