

The *Duprass*

by Robin Layne

“I’ve found a description for *us!*” Herb whispered to Marsha one morning as they sat together over oatmeal and eggs.

Marsha peeked over her newspaper onto Herb’s open paperback.

Herb pointed to one word on the page and read aloud, “*Duprass.*” He added the definition the novelist Kurt Vonnegut had coined: “A *karass* composed of only two persons.”

Marsha laughed. Herb had already read to her from *Cat’s Cradle* that *karasses* were groups of people that unknowingly do God’s will. She leaned in for a kiss. “I know what I’m doing,” she said. “Loving you—forever.”

“The concept fits us so well,” her husband said. “Who else do we have? No children, no pets. No close friends.”

Marsha chimed in, “You’re enough for me.”

“And you for me,” Herb pronounced, feeling like they were renewing their vows for the hundredth time.

They made sandwiches and packed them into a basket with cheese, rye crackers, fruit, and a bottle of wine. Herb hung the basket over his left arm and then grasped his wife’s shoulder. The two helped each other up the path to the beach. When they passed the old white sign whose headline read, “Beware of sneaker waves,” Marsha snuck her free hand up and tickled Herb’s armpit. Herb felt as if they were miles away from the danger of undertows or anything else.

Every morning, Herb and Marsha walked down the path to the beach, where they sat together on two padded dining room chairs and spent the day holding hands and looking out at the sea. Sometimes the waves flowed dreamlike in and out and gulls mewed overhead. Other times, breakers thundered and beachcombers fled the threatening rain. As long as weather allowed, the *duprass* stayed put through the subtle or brilliant colors of sunset. They took turns leading in a prayer: “Dear Lord, thank you for Your beautiful world. Thank You for saving our souls. Thank you that we have each other. When we go, please let us go together. Neither of us can imagine living without the other.”

Their days at the beach in their fading chairs ebbed as they struggled with increasing health problems. Herb had a double bypass but insisted on taking what walks he could to watch the waves and sky with his beloved. Marsha’s knee cartilages wore down; her doctor said she would have to lose forty pounds before a surgeon could replace them. But the couple loved sitting together, having their daily picnic.

On a sunny fall day, they picked their way through crackling fallen leaves past the sneaker wave sign. Both used canes with their free hands. This time, their food was meager because their appetites had worn thin.

When they looked at each other, their long-held affection stirred. They kissed as if they had never kissed before. A rare high tide crept in, lapping at the front legs of the two chairs. Then a breaker under the water slipped up and took the couple under.

It was all so fast, so unexpected. One moment they were in the shallows, Herb reaching for Marsha’s hand, foot, anything, slipping, and then driftwood knocked him deeper, oh, and lungs so aching, filling with water—something struck his head so brutally it knocked him out.

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The pain was also over fast. Herb was now in a shining new place. A glorious Presence permeated the air. He could move freely, without his body resisting or hurting. Without glasses, he could see for miles: People with auras of varying brightness walked on shimmering gold roads, smelling flowers more brilliant than any on earth; angels walked with them... but where was Marsha?

He felt a presence beside him, and turned to see an angel—breathtakingly tall and strong, with wings sweeping out behind his back. “Please, sir,” Herb said. “Where is she? I was sure Heaven couldn’t be Heaven without her. I can’t imagine the gates being closed to her. But—if for any reason she’s not here, I’ll go find her. I’d scour Hell to get my wife!”

The angel looked at Herb as if anticipating more.

“Do I—need to go higher up for an explanation? Or—permission to...” The beauty of Heaven was getting to him, but something was all wrong. He searched his own heart. “I don’t deserve to be here. Perhaps you can—put in a word for her? Tell them I’ll go down if she can come up here? She deserves a reward more than I do!”

A flicker of a smile from the angel encouraged him.

With deeper soul searching, he realized that neither he nor Marsha deserved Heaven. They had loved one another well, but they had shut everyone else out of their *duprass*.

Herb fell to his knees. “Lord, have mercy on a sinner!” he cried. “I thought we were good people. We didn’t cheat, lie, steal, or kill. But neither did we take care of the poor, the homeless, or the lonely. Why am I even here?”

At last the angel spoke: “By the mercy of God. He gave you the faith to trust His Son’s dear sacrifice for you. There was so much more He wanted to do *with* you and *through* you. God wants you to know He is a *karass* of three—less limited than a *duprass*.”

Herb was surprised that Heaven would use terms invented in Vonnegut’s novel.

“It was easy for you to love Marsha,” the angel continued. “Others who loved when it was hard to love now shine here like stars. Rise. Your Lord is coming to wipe every tear from your eyes.” He pulled Herb back to his feet.

Herb realized he had been weeping. He thought about the times Marsha had wiped his tears. Was it improper for him to inquire about his own wife? Even if it was, he had to know... “What about Marsha?” he asked.

“I’m here,” came a voice behind him.

He turned to see Marsha. She was sobbing. He took her hand.

Flanked by two angels, they made their way toward the brightest glow in the distance.

END of the Beginning