Dr. Celia Diamos's Magic Elixir

By Corey Jefferson

The kick took the fight out of Cody Jeffington. He and the others were tied up, legs sticking out like the four points of a compass. The man who delivered the kick, Reverend Paxton, tossed the gun that had belonged to Cody's father onto a table and gave his own gun to the shaky-looking man by the front door.

"Keep an eye on them," the Reverend said. "I'll be back with the Doctor."

Todd O'Malley, the shaky-looking man, held the gun on the rope-bound quartet. It was good for Todd that they were tied up properly. Cody gave it even odds that, in the event of an escape attempt, Todd shot his own dick off rather than put down the insurrection of his charges.

Cody considered the unexpected company in which he found himself, especially since he had thought he was the only person left in Ellettsville, Maine who wasn't either missing or committed to their bed like Charlie's grandparents in that Roald Dahl book.

He felt a tinge at guilt about the boy who sat back-to-back with him. Cody had dated Tim Chalmers' mom, Jennifer, and it hadn't ended well. The guy to his left was the old black dude who lived down the street from Tim and Jennifer. Roger? Was that his name? The young woman to his right he knew only as Tim's sometimes babysitter, Nancy.

Todd watched Cody take stock of the situation through twitching eyelids. He wondered how he had gotten into this position and his mind wandered back to less than an hour before.

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Todd had been leaning against the locked door of Dr. Celia Diamos's Magic Elixirs, Tonics, and Tinctures. Now, he stumbled backward and fell on his ass as the door to the shop opened. A tall, black-clad man stepped onto the sidewalk, squinted down the dark road, first left, then right, and sucked air in through his teeth.

"Todd O'Malley," Reverend Paxton said. "What brings you out such a dark night?"

"I need more elixir."

"The Doctor decides what you need. We've had complaints from the community about some of your words and actions. Your supply of elixir has been cut off."

"No!" Todd wailed. "You can't do that! What are you talking about?"

"You have committed multiple community standards violations involving hateful or threatening speech, particularly to protected categories of people based on their race, religion, gender, orientation, and disability."

"Just because I called someone a ****** or a ******? I'm just joking when I say shit like that! I just like to trigger idiots!"

The Reverend drew in a long breath. "Well, if you think you can clean up your language, the Doctor has authorized me to make you a bargain."

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Cody watched Todd's dull stare. He couldn't be up against too strong of a force if this pants-pissing man-child was the best they could do for a sentry. Although… Cody had seen the effects of Dr. Celia Diamos's elixir, first in his friends, then in his own mother. The elixir gave users visions of the worst in each other. They shunned one another, eventually drawing away from humans entirely.

Cody looked up and saw that the ceiling/floor separating the first story of the shop from the second had been removed. Above him was a thick tangle of white webs, which looked like something out of a Stephen King novel (or maybe a Dean Koontz). Then he saw it, and it was all he could do to convert the scream into a low groan. There was a person-shaped wad of webbing and sticking out of it was Jennifer's blue, terror-frozen face.

"Friends!" A sultry voice greeted them as Dr. Celia Diamos emerged from the back of the shop with the Reverend following. She glided around them, a beautiful, glowing young woman with a bright sundress billowing around her.

She continued: "I know you've come with hate in your hearts, but I hold no animosity. In fact, I offer you my magical healing elixir! Reverend, help our friends take their first step on the path to enlightenment."

The quartet resisted, but the Reverend forced the blue liquid down every single throat. After the vial was emptied into Nancy's mouth, the Reverend untied their bonds. Cody jumped up to take a swing at the Reverend, but sparks erupted in his head, covering his vision. He saw/felt the others having the same experience. Then he saw/felt/knew the sparks were coalescing into a vision, and that it would be a scene from his life. He pleaded, "No, no, no."

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Cody sat with Jennifer Chalmers. They had been dating since he moved back to Ellettsville. She was caring and lively and warm, but now everything she did annoyed him. It was probably his own issues, but what did it matter? This is how it was. Nobody's fault, really. He was just wired to get bored and restless after a few months.

Jennifer said, "Hey, I thought maybe this weekend, we could go up and spend the weekend in Bangor."

"Jen, you know I have to finish the manuscript."

"I know. I just thought-"

"Please. Just listen." Her face fell, but it was better to rip off the Band-Aid. "The past few months have been great. Great! I just- It's something with me. It's just going to be best if I cut you loose now rather than drag you along."

She stared at him. Ten seconds passed. Twenty.

"Say something." Cody said.

"What do you want me to say?" Jennifer asked. "I don't know what this is. What can I possibly say about it?"

"How are you feeling?"

Jennifer looked up at the ceiling. "This is shitty, Cody. For you to be as great as you've been and then turn around and say such cruel things... Why don't you just go?"

“I don’t want you to feel bad. I just-”

“Get out of my house.”

“Fine!” Cody stormed out the front door, but before it slammed behind him, he saw little Tim watching from around the corner.

Everything dissolved into sparks and the quartet shared a new vision.

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Tim stared at the phone number. He knew this was bad, but he also knew he was going to do it anyway. This internship was important to Nancy, but she couldn’t leave him. Who would stay with him when his mom worked late? From his dad to Cody, and everyone in-between, everyone left him. He couldn’t lose Nancy, too.

He dialed the number. When the man picked up, Tim suggested that Nancy be drug tested again. Of course, Tim knew that in celebration of passing her first drug test, Nancy and her friends had made sure she couldn’t pass a second.

Everything dissolved into sparks. A new vision materialized.

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Nancy sat in the U-Haul James had rented. She had a bad feeling about this and wanted to say something, but James shot her a look warning that she better not.

He hopped out and dragged something from the back of the truck. James pulled the large wooden cross onto Roger Murphy’s yard, stood it up, and set it ablaze.

He ran back to the truck and drove into the night, cackling wildly. Nancy never told anyone.

The sparks shifted to a new vision.

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Roger and John Jeffington were cruising backroads, blasting Steely Dan's "Deacon Blues" from John's Toyota Highlander. After a long, hard week at the warehouse tonight was for blowing off steam!

Roger took another swig of whiskey. His abs clenched and everything came up fast. He leaned his head out the window just in time. Whiskey and stomach acid covered the side of the car. That was when the seatbelt snapped into his waist, collarbone, and chest. Pain shot through his body.

Roger pushed the screeching door open and fell onto the road. He looked up and saw that the car was crammed beneath a semitruck that was parked on the side of the road. The car's roof was crumpled and peeled back.

He got up and peered into the car. Instead of John's head, Roger saw jagged flesh and spurting blood. John's windpipe was spasming, blowing blood bubbles that flowed and popped on jagged bone. The decision to act happened all at once.

He dragged John into the driver's seat and dumped whiskey onto the floorboard. He pulled John's Chesterfields out of his pocket, lit one, and tossed it in. He watched the flames engulf the cab before starting the two-mile trek to his cousin's house.

He quit the warehouse soon after that. He never faced official retribution, but plenty of people disbelieved his story, and he never quite felt like he ever stopped running away from that crash.

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The sparks cleared from Roger's vision. Cody was in front of him. Roger wanted to run away like he had all those years ago, but he was done running. He was done dishonoring his friend John.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was a coward."

He was ready for Cody to reject his apology, but Cody hugged him.

"It was an accident." Cody said before turning to Tim. "Tim, I'm sorry for the way I treated your mom. Neither of you deserved that."

Tim stood there, looking at Cody, then he turned to Nancy.

"Nancy, I'm sorry. I was selfish. I know I really hurt you."

Nancy stared at the ground. How could she own up to this? It would be so much easier to deny her part in it, to say it was just a joke, to run away from the responsibility. It took all her strength to stay standing there.

Roger stepped toward her, and she turned away, sobbing. "I'm a racist piece of shit! Who burns a cross?"

Roger pulled her against him. He said, “That really hurt me, but I forgive you. We all make mistakes. You know I have. What we did will never be okay, but if we can cop to it, we can do better.”

“Boring!” Celia cried. “Reverend, take care of them.”

The Reverend aimed his gun between Cody’s eyes. Then his face flipped from grim determination to distant puzzlement. A bang filled the room and a trickle of blood ran from the Reverend’s mouth. He collapsed. Behind him stood Roger with John Jeffington’s gun. He swung the gun on Celia.

“Wait!” She screeched and faceplanted into the ground. Blood and sinew erupted from her back as eight sharp appendages tore through the sundress and dug into the floor of the shop. The legs lifted the body of a spider out of the thing that had been Dr. Celia Diamos.

Roger raised the gun, and the spider grabbed Todd, wrapping him in webbing, and holding him in front of herself like a shield.

“I’ll make you a deal,” the spider said/thought in a simultaneously husky and shrieking voice that filled their minds. “Leave each other and run for you lives, and I’ll allow one or two of you to escape.”

The quartet stood together. Not one of them entertained the thought of abandoning the others.

“Fine!” the spider said/thought. She tore Todd in half and fled, crashing through the roof of the building.

The quartet ran outside. The spider climbed the cell tower atop the shop and scrambled across the street on the pennant flag strings. Roger fired and missed.

“Bring her down!” Cody yelled. He untied the pennant string from a telephone pole. Tim and Nancy followed. The string under the spider slackened and she fell to the ground.

“No!” She wailed into their minds. “You can’t do this!”

Roger jogged up, huffing, and put a bullet between her eight eyes. A horrible screech drove them to their knees as the spider flipped onto her back, legs writhing in the air. Then she curled in on herself and melted into a steaming, gelatinous glob of green goo.

Cody, Roger, Nancy, and Tim collapsed and sat in the middle of the street holding each other for a very long time.

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