Gregory and Alice

By Joseph McGuire

It was Friday, so Gregory went out to do his errands, as he always did. He took his medicine, as he always did. He carefully put his shirt on around his bad arm, as he always did. He said goodbye to Alice, as he always did. And he went about his errands as he always did, Haircut, Bank, Lunch, Post Office, and Pharmacy in that order.

His day went normally, almost perfectly. He only had to talk to a few people, and they were all people he was accustomed to. As he left the Pharmacy he was excited to return home and have a pleasant afternoon with Alice.

“Gregory? Is that you?” shouted a woman’s voice from behind Gregory. He turned around to see the face of a woman he clearly knew, or was supposed to know at least, but her face did nothing to remind him of who she was supposed to be. He stood where he was in front of the pharmacy while she walked down the block to meet him.

She was pretty, but age had done it’s work and had worn the edges of her face. She looked to be about the same age or perhaps a little younger than Gregory. He mused that as pretty as she was, she was likely stunning ten or fifteen years ago, whereas he had always looked roughly the same. Even age did little to alter his decidedly plain looks. He assumed she was one of Alice’s friends, after all, Alice had so many it was hard to keep track. The people that Gregory knew himself were easy to keep track of. He didn’t like crowds and that had only increased in recent years.

“Oh my God, look at you, you look exactly the same!” the woman said after she had approached Gregory. “What have you been up to? I haven’t seen you or Alice in ages, not since my son’s Bar Mitzvah! He’s at Columbia, studying medicine, it’ll be so nice to have a doctor in the family. Gary wanted him to be a lawyer but I said that was too clogged of a field nowadays…” Gregory stood silently as this woman rambled on about things she assumed Gregory should know. She discussed her brilliant children, her bitchy in-laws, and her pets which apparently rivaled Einstein for intelligence and the small kitten from Looney Tunes for cuteness.

Gregory smiled and tried to nod at the right intervals all the while longing that she would stop talking and let him go home and take his medicine. His arm was aching and he was tired from doing errands. Why is it, he wondered, that when all you want to do is go home there’s always something to stop you?

The woman was expounding her theories on why her cat was so moody lately when she finally noticed Gregory’s arm. “Oh my God, Gregory? What’s wrong with your arm!?” It was made of stone.

“It’s made of stone.” said Gregory, this being the first thing he had really said during this encounter.

“Well yeah, obviously! Why is it made of stone? What happened to you?”

“Well, I was bitten by a basilisk a few years back”

“A basilisk?” she said, clearly ignorant of most animals not featured in animated GIFs.

“Yes, it’s a kind of like a lizard except it has eight legs and kind of a beak-like face like a bird or a turtle. Its venom is really dangerous and even its breath can be toxic. When it bites you, the skin and flesh petrify until it’s the same as normal stone. I heard the venom works that way because it’s easier for them to digest or something.” Gregory had taken the liberty of learning a great deal about Basilisks. He felt a need to understand the creatures given how one had irrevocably altered his life.

“Where did you run into one of those?” she said with concern, “You don’t usually see something like that walking down the street.”

“Well, a basilisk is born when a rooster incubates a snake’s egg. Apparently, teenagers like to breed them for fun. They get big really fast though so they’re hard to handle. What we think happened was that some kids in our neighborhood bred one and then let it go once it got too big, or it escaped. Anyway, Alice and I found it when we were doing some yard work, it startled me something fierce and bit my hand. By the time we had gotten to the hospital, most of my arm had already been petrified. It could have been worse, If the doctor hadn’t helped me in time, I’d be a complete statue. They were able to stop the progression though. Now I take these supplements to keep it in check.” He showed off the small orange bottle he had just purchased inside the pharmacy. He had several other drugs and supplements in the plastic bad draped around his dead, stony arm but felt no need to divulge every facet of his personal health to what was essentially a stranger.

“Jesus, that’s terrible.” She said shaking her head dramatically. “I could never imagine dealing with something like that. How is Alice doing? It’s got to be tough on her too, having a husband with such a debilitating condition? I don’t know if I could do it. That Alice is something special.”

“Yes, she is.” Gregory said with complete sincerity. This was the first thing the woman said that he had agreed with without reservation.

“You’re so brave for dealing with this, I think it would really kill some people. My sister, Jan? Well, her husband killed himself after he was diagnosed with ALS or MS or something like that. I just can’t tell you how proud I am of you.” Gregory hated the implication that simply living was a courageous act. He didn’t feel courageous. He was bitter and sad and had a large useless lump of rock hanging from his shoulder which he managed to keep from getting worse by putting twelve pills a day in various orifices. He didn’t feel brave and he wished people would stop telling him he was.

“well…thank you.” Gregory said, trying not to betray the resentment in his voice. “It means a lot to have you approve of how I’m dealing with this disease.”

“Don’t mention it,” said the woman clearly oblivious to the sarcasm Gregory had let slip out. “I’ve got to get going, I need to get home and make dinner. You know what? You and Alice should come by sometime? Does that basilisk thing give you any diet restrictions?”

“Not really, but I’ll have to take it up with Alice, I don’t go anywhere without her say-so”

“Haha, as it should be.” she laughed, “I’ll see you later, it was nice chatting with you Gregory.”

“Thanks.” Gregory was thankful that she had finally stopped pestering him and he could finally go home. He noticed that throughout the entire encounter, the woman never once inferred that he did not know who she was.

Gregory returned home. He carefully juggled his groceries to free up his good hand, as he always did. He struggled to open the old and busted front door, as he always did. He set down his groceries on the coffee table and went into the kitchen to make some tea, as he always did. He kissed Alice on the cheek, as he always did. Her cold, stony skin made his lips tingle, as it always did.

Alice stood motionless and silent while Gregory told her about his day as she always did.