

# The Protectors

By Rachelle Reese

*Sylvia*

The heat shimmered over the rows of tomatoes, peppers, and beans. “It really needs weeded,” Sylvia told herself. But she was too hot to do it. As a younger woman, she would have waited until evening. Now in her eighties, she would most likely end up paying someone to do it.

She looked at the bright blue sky and prayed for rain, then lifted the pump handle of the well and watched the water jet upward from the sprinklers. The lawn soaked it up thankfully. She’d come out after the sun was lower to move the sprinklers to the vegetable garden. For now, she’d pick some vegetables for dinner.

“What are *you* doing there?” she asked, eyeing the long green hornworm in the tomatoes. “Sorry, but you’re going to be duck food today.” Sylvia plucked the worm from the nearly bare stem, wincing as it wriggled against her hand, just sticky enough to make its touch uncomfortable. She held the worm out and called for the ducks. Frasier waddled forward and snatched the worm from her fingers. Several other ducks gathered around to try to take the worm away. Frasier gobbled it hungrily before they could snatch it. “Your fault for being slow,” Sylvia scolded. “You know what they say about the early bird.”

Sylvia went back to her tomato plants, picking a few ripe tomatoes and holding them in her oversized t-shirt. She’d have tomatoes and beans for dinner tonight, she decided and walked toward the beans. As she reached toward the vine, she felt a pain burn heavy in her chest. “Maybe my time has come at last,” she thought, but knew that wasn’t it. The coyote’s howl confirmed her fears. Another soul had passed before rising. Another protector had been taken. A cold hand tore at Sylvia’s chest. Another howl, and then another. Birds screeched mercilessly. The ducks were in an uproar. In that moment, Sylvia knew the death had not been kind. The soul had not been freed.

*Joanne*

Joanne rushed out the door of her office building. She was already nearly half an hour late picking up her daughter Deborah at school. Luckily she’d been able to reach her friend Matt on his cell phone and he had agreed to pick Deborah up and take her home. At twelve, Deborah often protested that she was too old for a babysitter. Joanne figured this was as good a test as any. Still, she was anxious to get home. Tonight was the band concert at Deborah’s school and Deborah had a solo on the clarinet. Joanne pulled onto the freeway and cursed. Wouldn’t you know it, bumper to bumper. Probably an accident up ahead. Joanne pushed the relaxation CD she’d bought after she found out she was pregnant. Something else she still needed to tell Matt. Joanne pushed the thought out of her mind and concentrated on her breathing.

*Sylvia*

Sylvia opened her eyes and stared up at the blue sky. A single hawk circled. Everything was silent. How long had she been unconscious? She checked the position of

the sun. It was sinking, but not much lower than it had been when the first coyote howled. Perhaps there was still time. She gathered her strength, knowing transformation would take everything she had. "Wait for me," she called to the hawk. Then she willed her skin to take another form. She felt her arms twist into wings and her skin prickle sharply as feathers sprouted from the hair follicles. The pain was almost unbearable as her arthritic legs shrank down to spindly bird legs. She cried out.

The hawk stopped circling and swooped down to the ground to join her, grooming her newly sprouted wings, soothing her pain. "You'll always love me, won't you?" Sylvia asked, amazed once again at the sounds she made. The hawk continued grooming her furiously. "I know. We don't have much time. Let's fly." They lifted off the ground at the same time and soared up into the deepening blueness of the sky, seeking the struggling soul.