



ALLYCE'S ATTIC

by MARY ALLYCE

DEUS EX MACHINA

"*Deus ex machina*" is a literary term. I see eyes glazing over, but bear with me. Translated literally as "God from the machine", it's a device conceived to solve sticky plot points and requires a completely unexpected and largely implausible circumstance. It's not used often and it's seldom successful, going all the way back to Euripides, whose use of it was roundly criticized. The film "*Adaptation*" applied it to great effect when a problematic character was gobbled up by an alligator that comes out of nowhere. Since "*Adaptation*" is a tongue in cheek film about writing, this is one time it worked in a double entendre sort of way. Greek theater used a crane (*machina*) to lower actors portraying gods (*deus*) sent to get a plot back on track.

And therein lies the problem. Audiences and readers expect writers to have better control over the plot than to send in alligators, cranes and what-have-you to settle a conflict that should have a much more believable progression to resolution. *Deus ex machine* is considered lazy, a far too random and insupportable way to wrap up conflict. We want neater endings, preferably with meaning and moral and in a way that makes sense – showing us life as we want it to be.

The thing is, real life is all too often an unapologetic exercise in *deus ex machina*.

In less than one year ago this time – my favorite time of year, I might add – I lost no less than six close friends and family. All but one of the deaths were the essence of *deus ex machina*. Car wrecks, a heart attack, cancer so fast moving even doctors' heads were spinning. All of them came out of nowhere. All of them were, in their own way, as implausible as that alligator in *Adaptation*. If they had been plot points, they would have been dismissed as all too convenient. Except this was real life. I still can't quite wrap my head around any of them and I wonder how life can be so arbitrary while accepting that it is.

Writers ponder life and then try to make sense of it by writing about it. Art imitating life. I thought about that while writing this column and it occurred to me that life also imitates art. Apparently this occurred to Oscar Wilde as well, who wrote, "Life imitates art far more than art imitates life." A circular puzzle and one that can get away from you pretty quickly if you follow it down the rabbit hole.

It does seem, however, that *deus ex machina* might have been a plot device developed to help us make sense out of the indiscriminate nature of life. How nice would it be to have a crane poised overhead to drop angels down to halt the inevitable – to stop the fatal accident, the slyly encroaching cancer, the heart attack that hits as you read your morning newspaper.

So last year at this time I was looking forward to fall as I always do. Cooler weather, Halloween, fall colors, Thanksgiving, happy gatherings with friends and family. I'm looking forward to all of that this year, too. None of the people who left my inner circle would want it any other way. It's my belief we are put here to learn and love and grow. But this is also a time of year for reflection and there will be plenty of that, too, for me and many others. If the past year taught anything, it's not to get complacent. Expect the unexpected.

Watch out for the alligator.

I might even toss the *deus* into the *machina* of my current writing project. Why not? Life and art do imitate each other. Sometimes they overlap, bleed into each other a little too seamlessly. God from the machine.

God's will be done.

For Carol and Nancy and Carl.