cottonwood

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William Virgil Davis
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cottonwood 70

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CONTENTS

Author	Title	Page
Doug Ramspeck	Jamaican Snow	7
Rita Rud	An Opportunity	23
Claudia Ricci	Nailed	35
William Virgil Davis	A Visit to San Gimignano	47
Slobodanka Strauss	The Mystery of Love's Watery Death	48
Perie Longo	Autumn Song	49
Brad Johnson	Stretched to the Snap	50
Emily Sims	Grandma	51
Anthony Fife	Ars Simpatico	52
Rawdon Tomlinson	Influenza, 1918	53
Carol A. Amato	In Sicily on the Road to Gela	54
Jeffrey C. Alfier	Upon Your Return to Savelletri Harbor	55
Lesa Williams	The Flagellant	56
Helen Wickes	Another Saturday Night	58
Patricia Corbus	Warning for a Daughter	60
Joan Colby	End of Days	61
Shelly Sanders	Except for This	62
David James	The Invention of Happiness	63
John Talbird	Tattoos	64
Tyler Keevil	Scalped	73
David Salner	The Story of the Two Cows	94

Doug Ramspeck

JAMAICAN SNOW

It was the story they always told, usually at parties or weddings. But on this occasion in September, Ainsley and her husband shared it with Robert's childhood friend, Mark, and his new wife, Melissa, at a Thai restaurant on State Street in Chicago.

They ordered drinks: Thai iced tea for her, Singha beer for the rest. Melissa was unexpectedly tall—she'd played basketball once upon a time at Indiana University—and asked, almost at once, the standard question of how the two of them had met. Robert, instead, launched into the more interesting honeymoon story, setting the romantic scene of the tropical Jamaican beach, the generous jungle mountains, and the hotel room balcony overlooking Ocho Rios Bay.

Ainsley's role for the moment was to lean against her husband's arm, pretending to swoon a little, and then—they had worked it out over the past two years into a little choreography of narrative—to jump in with the punch line. Summoning what she hoped was a slightly wistful expression, she announced that it had been the perfect romantic getaway until they were driven up into the mountains and robbed at knife point on the banks of the White River.

The questions arrived fast and furious after that. Since Mark was Robert's friend, Ainsley let her husband take the lead. He launched into the full narrative, starting on the morning when rain had derailed their plans to take the hotel van to Dunn's River Falls. From her vantage point by the restaurant window, Ainsley could see the pedestrians blurring past, a great tumble of frenetic heads bobbing by as flotsam. Robert, who still commuted each day, carried some of that same adamancy as he walked, though she herself had long since grown accustomed to the more leisurely rhythms of Highland Hills, west of the city.

The drinks arrived just as Robert was reaching the story's turning point when they had first begun to realize something was awry.

"Robert figured it out before I did," Ainsley said. "I was focusing on the scenery and narrow roads. People living out of shacks and vans. We saw an old man urinating at the side of the road."

"Don't forget the dogs," Robert said.

"They were everywhere," Ainsley agreed. "You could see the ribs trying to poke out of their skin."

Robert, then, launched into the meat of the story. From time to time Ainsley considered contributing, but, for reasons she was having difficulty articulating to herself, she was feeling suddenly a little miffed. All she could figure was that the conversational staple she'd been expecting to have come out by now—invariably it arrived early on in a social evening—had been bypassed and, apparently, abandoned. Earlier when she'd asked for tea—no caffeine—she'd glanced at Robert, waiting for him to ask, as he always did, if anyone could guess why his wife had been avoiding alcohol for the past couple of months. But somehow the opening had withered on the vine. Robert had begun talking, instead, about the laminate wood flooring they were considering for their dining room. A debate ensued with Mark about the pros and cons of fabricated wood.

Indeed, not until Ainsley and her husband were on their way home in her husband's Miata did she appreciate the precise degree of her annoyance. It perplexed her. She'd been looking forward to the evening, after all, had been enjoying herself. And yet, practically the entire time—all through dinner and then, afterwards, at a small piano bar on Michigan Avenue—the conversational trajectory had rarely varied from the twin topics of house renovations and great places to vacation. Robert had made a passionate case that, despite their experience, Jamaica was a lovely locale, no more dangerous than many sections of Chicago, perhaps less so. He insisted on the friendliness of the people— despite the crushing poverty and hawkers on the streets straining to sell you anything and everything, including illegal marijuana. She'd laughed over his rendition of the handful of words he'd learned of Jamaican patois, most moderately obscene.

So why the resentment? Robert, as always, was driving. From the passenger side, Ainsley watched the headlights zooming to-

ward them then retreating, watched, in the side mirror, the receding lights of the city, which reminded her, this time of night, of an otherworldly dreamscape, undoubtedly post-apocalyptic.

Robert said, "I never would have guessed Melissa would be Mark's type. What do you think, Ain?"

Ainsley felt the same—though, somehow, despite that, the two fit together nicely, like two pieces of a puzzle you don't imagine at first might mesh. But her husband appeared so utterly pleased with his remark, so clearly eager to launch into some analysis or another—on the walk to the piano bar he and Mark had gone on endlessly about how often they'd gotten their friends, often girls, utterly hammered back in high school, usually on bourbon from the bars of their respective fathers—she felt compelled to deny him, though, once again, to her own surprise.

"Was there a reason you didn't mention I'm pregnant?" she asked.

Robert shot her a look. "That didn't come up?"

"No, it didn't."

"I thought I heard you and Melissa talking about it."

"No," she said, adding, "You probably thought it didn't fit with your stories about getting high school girls drunk in basements so you could take advantage of them."

The obvious rancor in her tone took Ainsley aback, almost as much as it seemed to her husband. His hands sprawled exasperated on the wheel.

"What's going on, Ain?" he asked. "We didn't take advantage of anybody. Mostly we just passed out or got sick. And where is this coming from? Why do you sound so mad?"

"It just seems to me," she said, "you might bring up being a father-to-be before going on for an hour about different kinds of kitchen floor tiling." She added, "And why did you say that thing about the dog?"

"What thing?"

"You claimed the driver ran over one while we were heading up into the mountain. That never happened."

"What are you talking about?"

"Did you think you needed to embellish the story? Do you really think it needs embellishment?"

Her husband unglued his eyes long enough from the unspooling road that she could tell he was deciding whether to broach a certain topic, and in that instant—one infuriating instant—she knew what it was.

"Don't you dare tell me it's my hormones acting up," she said, unable to stop. "Yes, I cry over stupid TV commercials, but that doesn't mean you weren't being an asshole tonight."

"Because I exaggerated the story? Are you serious?"

"He never hit a dog, Robert."

"Are you sure, Ainsley? I think I remember he did."

"It didn't happen. We both remember all of it. Every bit. We saw a lot of dogs, but he never hit a single one. You know that."

And with that—and with, to be honest, enough dramatic flair she almost didn't recognize herself—she reached down to flip on the radio.

In Ainsley's mind, in stray thoughts that arrived in empty moments of a day— driving to and from work, unloading the dishwasher, folding laundry—and particularly in the days following the regretted dispute with her husband, she returned again and again to the events of their honeymoon in Jamaica. This was not unusual, in fairness. Her thoughts had had a way of circling back, for almost three years now, to that uncomfortable geography. To be precise, it wasn't the entire honeymoon itself on which she focused but the one single day, though even with that there were two parts: the portion she was fine with remembering, and the portion she figured was better off left to its own devices. The part she liked, if that was the right word, and, indeed, played again and again in her mind the way you might with a movie you watched over and over until you could mouth every last line of dialogue, began always with her and her brand-new husband awakening to the sounds of tropical rain.

The plan for the day had been to take the hotel van to Dunn's River Falls, but when they stood from bed and went out on their tiny balcony, dressed in matching terry cloth bathrobes provided

by the hotel, leaning against each other with that just-married unmitigated affection, they watched storm clouds drifting everywhere. The gray-black formations seemed to be trying to sever the lush jungle mountaintops to their right, and the ocean directly before them was awash in slanted assaults of rain. The entire world was trying to hide its secret face in a veil. Ainsley and Robert dressed, in any case, in the bathing suits, cover-ups, and water shoes suggested in their guide book, then went down to breakfast. The concierge assured them they would be getting utterly soaked as they climbed the rocks to the fall's summit. When the time came to make the final decision about stepping aboard the van, they selected to put off the trip for the next day, when the forecast was infinitely more promising.

And as always when Ainsley turned her thoughts back to that moment, she concentrated on that decision to postpone, how easy it would have been to make the opposite selection, to give herself, even now, a little retrospective nudge the other way, as though that were possible. How close, indeed, they had come to choosing the van and thus altering for the better their own personal histories.

Instead they unpacked the umbrella from the brown suitcase and left the hotel huddled contentedly beneath it, arm in arm. They were newlyweds, after all, and their appreciation for the other had never been more openly present in the air. They walked up from the beach toward town. On their provided map were directions to Ocho Rios Plaza, Taj Mahall Mall, Island Plaza, and the Craft Park. It seemed a perfect day for browsing— however short the budget might be—and, despite the rain, there was the unambiguous pleasure of a temperature hovering above 80, in mid-December, and of walking together with exposed arms and legs. They joked as they passed another sprawling coconut tree how it was beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

To Ainsley's way of thinking, whenever she remembered that morning, there were so many moments that might have made a crucial difference. First they became lost in searching for the Ocho Rios Plaza and ended up, instead, at the Taj Mahall Mall. Then they spent an inordinate amount of time picking out postcards and T-shirts for family and friends, all of which might have

gone more quickly had not a strap on Ainsley's sandals snapped. They bought a new pair from a friendly clerk in an open-air shop, a clerk who kept lowering the price even though they made no effort to bargain.

Afterwards, they noticed something remarkable: the storm clouds that minutes earlier had dominated the entire sky in all directions, claiming the whole of the island as an empire, had vanished. The Caribbean sun had ensconced itself above and was making its steady ascent. Ainsley could recall standing with her husband in that perfect light, both of them enjoying themselves, squinting, and trying to decide whether to keep shopping or to head out to Dunn's River Falls after all. They were, at that stage of the marriage, still in that hyper-considerate place where neither wanted to stake out a strong position, at least not before uncovering the secret preference of the other. Ainsley loved her husband—it literally hurt sometimes, the feelings so visceral within—while still recognizing a certain flaw or two, including that he was more than capable, with small matters, of being remarkably indecisive. In larger matters—at work, primarily—her husband prided himself on making firm and instantaneous decisions, trusting his instincts, so to speak, taking charge, but on the island they both hedged and delayed, making desultory efforts to list the pros and cons as a way of gauging the preferred stance of the other.

The truth was—and this is the part Ainsley couldn't help revisiting endlessly— she thought, herself, it made more sense to put off the trip until the next day, to get an early start and have the convenience of the hotel van. But here was the complication: she suspected her husband felt the opposite. Shopping, for him, was more ordeal than pleasure. And she supposed that if they went climbing up the falls that day it would be, to his taste, the kind of adventure he enjoyed. Shopping could always be put off.

So she made up her mind. "It's so beautiful out, Robert," she said, "let's go today!" And that, of course—not to put too fine a point on it—set everything in motion.

And because twice during their leisurely walk from the hotel to the shopping center, taxis had slowed near the sidewalk and a driver had called out to ask if they were looking for a fare, it

seemed a simple enough matter to get to Dunn's River Falls. Only later would they read in their guide that they should select only JUTA cabs with license plates displaying PP or PPV. For now, though, it seemed to them that finding a way to the falls should be as straightforward as merely walking out toward a reasonably busy street.

It was. When the cab stopped at the curb and the driver leapt out to open for them the back door to his sedan—they agreed almost at once on a price—traffic was whooshing past in a kaleidoscope of twisting lines, colorful as pinwheels. And that was where Ainsley liked to leave matters in her thoughts. Here was the final instant, in truth, when things might have taken a different course. What if they'd wandered out to the road a few minutes earlier or a few minutes later? What if the driver hadn't spotted them gesturing at the curb? It wasn't that Ainsley couldn't remember what happened after that—it was that there were some memories without any profit. She preferred the summarized and sanitized version of events they reserved for social situations with friends.

Not until the fifth long day of the tiff with Robert—beginning on the drive back from the city—did Ainsley begin to wonder, grudgingly, if perhaps a wash of estrogen, progesterone, hCG, and HPL were playing some small and unwelcome role after all. It was late in the morning and Ainsley was looking out her office window. It had a view, unimpeded, of College Avenue and scores of Wheaton students milling to and from class, many appearing almost achingly youthful and expectant. Usually she found the sight invigorating, even inspiring—college, in many ways, had been, for her, a favorite time of life, open to so many wild possibilities she had joked with friends she had kept changing majors to extend it. Most days, in fact, she sat at her desk and thought how grateful she was to have a job that still kept her connected to that heady life. She thoroughly enjoyed her work in Admissions, after all, even if it wasn't the kind of high-powered or prestigious position her husband claimed as an attorney in the city. They had both found what they wanted, thank goodness, and that was what counted. But the truth was she hadn't enjoyed much of anything

over the past few days. For reasons she couldn't say, and for reasons that made no earthly sense, she had grown increasingly furious with her husband.

It was completely unfair, she knew. Could it really be because he'd overlooked mentioning the pregnancy? Why should she care if her state hadn't come up in conversation? It didn't change the fact. A child was growing inside her—little alien or tiny bundle of love, depending on her mood, depending on whether she was joking or serious—and no amount of talk changed the truth of how pleased she was about it. What actually bothered her, she decided, what filled her like one of those hot air balloons ready to lift from the earth and not come back, was that stupid story about the struck dog. Robert claimed he saw the driver swerve to hit it. He said he'd felt the tires bumping over the creature, had heard it yelp. And what annoyed her so utterly, it seemed, wasn't even that he'd felt the need to exaggerate, but that he'd deviated at all from the standard and predictable route of their social story. That was it, she knew, as crazy as it sounded. They'd been telling the same exact sequence of events, in the same exact way, for three years. Now her husband had thrown in, for no earthly reason, a murdered dog.

So what was the big deal? About that Ainsley had no clue. She stood from her desk and walked to the window. A young man and woman were playing Frisbee in the grass. The first stray leaves of the season were floating their passage around them. The girl's hair sailed its dark wing behind her as she ran. It was easy to imagine the couple walking back later to a dorm room and falling into each other's arms. Ainsley, watching the Frisbee spinning in air, tried to summon her own days on college lawns, her own days of falling into Robert's dorm room bed; but, despite herself, and despite trying to will a more appropriate response, what she mainly felt was a seething heat of anger.

"Aren't you ever going to let this go?" Robert asked that evening.

They were watching, on demand, their latest addiction, *Shameless*, based on a British version of the same show, which, by chance, they'd seen a single episode of while visiting London

fourteen months earlier . . . the only other real vacation of their marriage.

"I didn't say anything," Ainsley said, but she knew, for all that, what he meant.

"That's the point, isn't it?" he said. "You sit there like I don't exist."

"I know you exist, Robert," she said, her words appearing in air without her intending to say them, "because I can't hear what Fiona is saying."

Lifting the remote, he pressed "pause," so that Fiona froze with a bewildered expression. Robert said, "Let's have this out once and for all, okay? So I forgot to tell Mark and Melissa you were pregnant. Do you want me to call Mark on the phone and make the announcement?"

"That's not it, Robert."

"Then what is?"

And that, of course, she couldn't answer, not really.

"How many times are we going to go over this same ground?" her husband asked. "I'm sorry I didn't mention it. You could have mentioned it, of course, but apparently I'm not supposed to point that out. Apparently it's my sole obligation to bring it up or else it proves I'll make a miserable father."

"I never said that."

"Please, Ain, let's get past this. I don't know why it's such a big deal."

Ainsley, watching his fingers as he spoke, saw his thumb begin to edge slightly toward the "play" button on the remote. She saw him hesitate, unsure, considering returning to *Shameless*, and it was that hesitation that put her over the edge even though she didn't want to fall past it, even though she felt *sorry* for her husband and knew she was utterly in the wrong.

"Go ahead and watch your fucking show," she said, rising and storming toward the bedroom.

Her dreams—nightmares, really—had been in many ways the worst part of things after the traumatic events in Jamaica, persisting for more than a full month. Dreams, Ainsley knew—if Freud

was correct—were supposed to be wish-fulfillments, but not these, not by any stretch of the imagination. In some the dark face of the driver swam up before her as though out of a muddy lake or a dark tangle of leaves, and that was enough to catapult her free of sleep. She felt guilty, of course, that the man's dark skin played a central role. He loomed before her with the black continent of his skin, far darker than was probably the case in life, and the racist implications troubled her almost as much as the feeling of his hand when he reached out for her vulnerable shoulder or to grab her by the hair, two things that hadn't actually occurred in life. She wanted the lights on then, of course. Lots of lights. And preferably a radio or television going. And she wanted not to sleep at all, not if she could help it.

Robert, somehow, seemed less fazed, though she suspected that was partly for show, which she well understood. They didn't talk much about what had happened, and when they did it was to reassure each other how lucky they had been, how things might have been far worse. But Ainsley couldn't stop herself—not in those first weeks—from repeatedly calling up memories of the day. She hadn't yet learned to box them away, to bundle them in a closet or drawer. They had free reign and did what they wanted.

And even when she was awake, the man's face would suddenly appear before her. Often he was smiling—which had actually been the case. He was a tall man, with wide shoulders, clearly athletic, most likely in his late twenties, wearing a red T-shirt with a design neither she nor her husband could recall afterwards. At one point Robert said it might have included a song title by Bob Marley, which she didn't think was correct . . . that would have been memorable for her as well. He had on gray shorts and sunglasses not covering his eyes but looped around his neck with what appeared to be shoe-lace string. But when, later, they provided the Jamaican constables with these details, the officers didn't seem to find any worth recording. The man had called himself Jimarcus, they had explained, but the constables didn't seem overly impressed by that either.

And while the man had been driving them ever higher into the mountains— whatever his name truly was, since surely he al-

ready knew what he was planning—he kept turning sideways and regaling them with stories about the Arawak natives, the ancient slave trade, and various landscapes they were passing. He was amused to point out the razor wire atop the walls surrounding the gated communities they passed before heading up the steep road. The higher you went, apparently, the less money you had. The extremes didn't sound that far removed from Chicago, but the driver spoke about such iniquities with enough high humor there seemed nothing ominous in it. Indeed, the only time his spirits seemed to sink was when he told the story of an old blind woman who'd been run over two days earlier by a rich man not far from the Lady of Fatima Roman Catholic Church. And the rich man, our driver said, hadn't bothered to stop or to even drag the dying woman from the street.

By that time Ainsley was mostly noticing how narrow and treacherous the mountain road had become. Their driver didn't seem to think it was necessary to put much effort into watching where he was headed—he preferred to twist about to face them—though he did think it was necessary to honk his horn every time he approached another sudden jog in the road. "We can't both fit," he said, shrugging. Later he made a lame joke about the many potholes as a Jamaican form of massage, though he did promise to try to maneuver around most of them.

The worst part for Ainsley, in retrospect, was how thoroughly she *liked* Jimarcus at that point. His philosophy seemed not unlike the Bob Marley ethos in the island song they kept playing in the hotel: "Don't Worry, Be Happy." What's more, the local accent was endearing beyond all get out. Jimarcus asked them a few questions about where they were from in Chicago, and when they mentioned they were newlyweds he pulled the sedan for a moment to the side of the road. Even after rain, the dust rose otherworldly into the air.

"Did you have curried goat at the reception?" he asked, winking. "And what about rum cake? It couldn't have been a real wedding without rum cake."

Later Robert would claim he was already feeling suspicious, not because of anything having to do with Jimarcus but because

of their ever-increasing elevation. Robert had read in the guide book that the tour up the falls began at beach level, so he couldn't for the life of him understand why they were forever heading up. Ainsley, meanwhile, was more distracted by the occasional great chasms off to the side, with no railings. Jimarcus slowed his vehicle as he went around them, leaning on his horn at every turn, but she couldn't help envisioning tumbling off the side to lie dead in a jungle gully.

From Ainsley's point of view—and this was the worst part, in some ways—her first moment of suspicion came only when her husband finally spoke his thoughts aloud.

"We're headed to Dunn's River Falls, right?" he asked. "We want to start at the bottom and climb up. Are you taking us to the top?"

"Almost there," Jimarcus said.

"At the top or the bottom?"

"Almost there."

For a long while there had been old cars, trucks, loitering people, and ramshackle houses—some with broken-out windows and missing doors—and the ever-present stray dogs, cadaverous and slinking. But now there was simply the density of jungle, the sounds of birds, and the isolation of a foreign land.

Jimarcus pulled suddenly to the side of the road, bumping down a narrow rut of tire tracks, then brought the vehicle to a stop.

"Here we are," he said.

Still—still—Ainsley believed there must be a mistake. She could see, to her left, the twisting line of a river with water so pure and clear you could follow the contours of the rocks along the bottom. Strange Jamaican trees draped themselves over the water's passage and enclosed it almost entirely in dim shade. The current moved its slow dream.

"Do we walk to the falls from here?" Ainsley asked.

"No," Jimarcus said.

And this was the part—probably less than three or four minutes total, the tiniest sliver of an hour within the tiniest sliver of a year within the tiniest sliver of a life—she dreaded most remembering. Out of nowhere a knife appeared in the driver's left hand—

that was another thing they had emphasized to the constables . . . he was left-handed. It wasn't much of a knife—a steak knife, surely, the sort they might offer you at a cheap steak house—with a narrow wooden handle.

"Everything valuable," the driver said. "Money, credit cards, cell phones, jewelry, watches. Be quick."

Now—even now—Ainsley waited for the grin, that widening smile Jimarcus seemed to pull from his body like a bird taking flight. They would all laugh, surely, and then he would guide them down the path to where they were headed.

"Are you serious?" Robert asked.

Their driver simply nodded.

Even thinking about it now, even remembering, Ainsley felt her chest tighten, her stomach fumble into knots, as though she were somehow transforming to stone . . . if stone were capable of breaking into a damp blush of sweat soaking through a blouse. "What's happening?" she heard herself asking.

"Throw it all on the front seat there," the man said, pointing. "Don't leave anything back. Wedding rings, too." He waved the knife—his wand. Some little spell was being cast. To her he added, "The purse. All of it. Don't empty it . . . toss it."

They did as instructed. Of course they did. Certainly, in one sense, an entire lifetime had passed since they'd pulled off the road. The engine was still running, the car trembling. She was trembling, too. As far as she knew, the whole world was trembling.

"Get out," the man said, pointing.

"Don't hurt us," Ainsley said. The words arrived of their own volition. They made no sense, of course. Either he would hurt them or he wouldn't. It was no different than rain falling, rain that came out of the sky and all you could do was watch.

But before they could climb out, however, something happened that she and Robert never discussed after the fact, not once. She heard the words sometimes whispered in a dream.

"He's not much, is he?" the man said, inclining the tip of the knife in Robert's direction. "He sits there."

No one else spoke. The air inside the car couldn't breathe.

The man said, “Maybe we should have him get out and you stay.” He was grinning now, that flash of unexpected wings, but they seemed darker now, like crows’, despite the white teeth. “I’ll show you what it’s like. He doesn’t know. He’s nothing. Someone beautiful as you . . . I’ll show you a thing.”

And then they were out of the car—she could never remember, actually, climbing out. But she did remember standing at last in open air, the sound of the moving river beyond her. Remembered the wind winding out of the mountain and jarring them back into the world.

And the car sped off. Gone. Disappeared around the bend, back the way it had come.

And the rest of that morning was a blur, unimportant, even though, at the time, it had seemed an ordeal in its own right. They wandered as best they could back to the main road. Not sure whether to wave down a passing car or truck. Not sure who to trust—if anyone. Not sure if they should knock on a door of some hardscrabble shack they passed.

Then a pickup stopped, driven by a young mother and her infant child. No infant seat . . . just a mother’s lap to sit in. How she drove them all the way back down to town. How they promised to leave gas money for her later at the front desk of their hotel, which they did. How she dropped them at the police station, though advised against it. How the constables in their ridiculous bright uniforms told them the man probably hadn’t been serious anyway. No actual danger. All ended up fine. How they walked back to the hotel—staggered really—then entered the front lobby to see fake snowflakes falling from the ceiling, a great swarm of them tumbling down. Christmas music blaring from the piano. “Don’t eat them,” the children were warned about the falling flakes, apparently made of soap shavings.

It was another full week—regardless how much they both at this point clearly longed for an end to things—before, on Sunday afternoon, Ainsley and Robert went out together to the grocery store, both agreeing grudgingly to the joint excursion. Ainsley pushed the cart and her husband went ahead to a different aisle.

She was searching for bananas—organic—but couldn't find any that weren't green. Robert came back into view, carrying Heineken, hot salsa. He liked it hotter than she did, though in any case her appetite was unpredictable these days, so anything was possible.

"You know this bickering has to stop," he said.

She couldn't help but flare at the remark—truly, she couldn't control it—but she forced down a deep breath, nodding.

"We can't keep fighting forever," he said.

"I know that," she agreed. "I don't want to either."

"I'm sorry for whatever it was I did."

"I know, Robert."

"I know this is a hard time for you, Ain. I can't imagine what you must be going through since we found out you were pregnant. But I want things back like they were."

"I do, too."

"So we're okay?" he asked.

She set down the green bananas in the cart. She wanted to tell him how much she loved him, wanted to explain how sorry she was, how she didn't really know why she'd been acting this way, but that wasn't what came out.

"Don't take this the wrong way," she said, "but I want to ask a favor." She hesitated a beat then added, "Please stop telling that Jamaican story. I want us to keep it to ourselves."

She could see him starting to respond—surely he was going to ask why, what reason she might have to require such an unexpected promise—but then his mouth fell closed.

After a moment, it opened again, more carefully. "Fine," he said.

"I mean not ever, Robert. Okay? It's over and done. There's no point dredging things up."

"If that's what it takes," he said.

"It does."

"No problem then, Ain. I didn't know it upset you so much. That's the end of it. Really. It's no big deal."

"Don't forget, Robert. I mean it. Don't start drinking some night and forget."

"I won't. You have my word."

So that was that. She looped an arm through his and leaned for an extended moment against him, right there beside the produce. Though a little nagging thought did follow Ainsley later down the aisles—like the one stubborn wheel of the cart that kept turning in aimless circles—that she wished he'd put up a little more of a fight.

Rita Rud

An Opportunity

He always kept his eye out for one. You had to, he often told his mother. If she felt uneasy about such opportunities—the flush of sudden money, the electric shavers, radios, cartons of cigarettes that came in and out of the house—she never said. Just as she never said that his fair hair was thinning, or that she noticed how he combed it over the patch of pink scalp on the crown of his head. But he had seen her glance at the spot when she stood over him.

"If you're not born with a silver spoon in your gob," he went on, "given something for nothing." He sat across from her at the square, Formica-topped table in the kitchen, slurping down the tea she had just poured from the old brown Betty.

She nodded but said nothing. In the past she would have argued that's most of us, son, and gone on about being honest, being a good person, a good Catholic, but lately she had stopped saying stuff like that. Maybe she had given up, he thought, now he was older. Perhaps she thought it was no longer worth the effort.

"Will you come straight home after your round, Kev?"

"Why?"

"There's Bingo this afternoon at the church hall."

"So?"

"I need a ride, son."

"Okay, Ma." It was damn depressing, he thought. He had a bald spot, and she couldn't walk far with her bad hip anymore.

At 5:30 he pulled the door shut to their little terrace house. His rusting old Morris, parked on the street, had a layer of frost on its windshield. He zipped up his jacket tight against the wind, muttering as he scraped the windows, Freeze the fucking balls off a brass monkey!

"So, how did it go with Tracy last night?" Terry Watson grinned from the window of his milk van as Kevin came out of the depot with his crates.

"Who wants to know?" He could throttle the redheaded twit.

"Not so well, boyo?" Terry laughed, revving up his van's engine so the exhaust blew in Kevin's face.

"Piss off, Terry." Kevin loaded the last crate into his delivery van and slammed the doors shut. Damn little wanker. Terry had touched a raw nerve. Things hadn't been going so well on that front. Maybe he was losing his touch. He looked at himself in the rearview mirror. The cold air had flushed his pale face so that his green eyes glowed. Nah, he smiled at his reflection, adjusted his white peaked cap with *Daltons Dairy* on its brim, started up his van, and turned on the radio. He whistled to the tune that was playing as he turned out to the street.

Hilda Yaxley knelt by the fireplace in her living room. She was cold, shivering in her thin robe as she set a match to a strip of old newspaper and laid the flame quickly on the kindling in the grate. She needed oil for the heaters but didn't want to go out—didn't want to be seen. Perhaps the village store would deliver if she called. The old paper smoked a little, its edges curled and blackened, but its flame caught the dry wood pieces soon enough, and the fire flared up to where she stood over the hearth willing its heat to her large belly.

In the kitchen she toasted two slices of bread and filled her kettle with fresh water for tea. She ate the toast reverently, like a communion wafer. She had not had communion in over a month. Father Murray had called.

"I'm a little under the weather, Father." No, he didn't need to visit. "You will be in our prayers," he had said.

It was gray outside, a raw February day without sun but with a bitter wind that had set the chimes on her porch into a jangled frenzy. She expected it would rain by the afternoon, that slow, unrelenting drizzle that chilled one to the bone. She shuddered and bent back to the fire, and thought how soon the first snowdrops would push up through the hard earth in the small beds each side of the back door, and then all along the path from it, the lilies of the valley Father had planted for Mother years ago. In the borders and small garden out front, the daffodils and tulips, crocuses and

hyacinths would erupt with vibrant color to delight her, like a gift from an old friend. The kettle whistled and she opened the refrigerator for milk for her tea, but there wasn't any, and she remembered she'd finished it with the glass she'd had last night before bed. She must wait for the milkman. She sat by the fireplace and pulled the rosary from her robe pocket. Once her grandmother's, its rosewood beads were worn smooth from use and warmed her cold fingers.

"Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus . . ."

Tracy was on Kevin's mind as he carried milk to his customers' front doors. Some left their empty bottles with a note telling him how many pints to leave. At others he rang the doorbell. He had fancied Tracy right away; he liked her laugh and her large, bright mouth, how her heavy, dark hair lay on her shoulders, and the way her skirt rose on her thigh when she crossed her legs. He heard she had been married, living in another town, but her husband fooled around and she'd left him. At his local pub he watched her. She was close with her female friends and bantered easily with the blokes, obviously pleased when she beat them at darts. Last night he had asked to walk her home.

"Going to invite me in?" he said when they got there.

"No."

"A goodnight kiss then—a little one?" he'd asked, making it sound like a joke. She had kissed him quickly on the cheek and pulled away when he tried to kiss her.

"Don't. I'm not ready for this." She'd wrapped her arms around herself like a shield. Stepping back, he'd mumbled, "Okay, okay, sorry," and she had gone inside. He'd walked away, upset and a little angry in his disappointment.

But no matter, he thought now as he walked up to his first customer—Doris Sprack—on Langley Street. He'd bide his time until Tracy was ready. He bent down to take the folded note stuck in the bottle: *Four pints today. Please cover milk with the newspa-*

per. Tits pecked through the tops yesterday and took all the cream. Thank you, Mrs. Sprack.

"Uppity bitch," he muttered. He couldn't stand her stuck-up voice—totally put-on. She was as common as he was, but married up to a bloke with an insurance business. She was worse than the real hoity-toitys, he knew—he'd had run-ins with her before. His dairy delivered eggs, cream and yogurt if customers special-ordered the day before. She'd call in an order after he'd already left on his round and want it delivered that day. Put on that posh voice so the manager at the depot was intimidated and agreed to send Kevin back with it. When he went back one time with eggs, she'd said, "Now, Kevin, I hope they're *really* fresh."

"Just came out the chicken's arse, love," he'd said, and she'd called in and reported him. He had fingered her house for a break-in after that to the boys who rewarded him for such information. He wouldn't do his customers' houses himself—deliverymen were the first suspects. When he passed on tips, he got himself a tight alibi the night of the burglary. When the Spracks took their cruise to Majorca, he gave the lads a nod, but they found the house rigged with alarms and couldn't find the wires to cut. Then the neighborhood watch set came by, and they had to scarper, fast.

Thank God she slept in, or she'd be on the doorstep every morning. He took two bottles from his basket and placed them out on the stoop where the birds could see the silver caps glinting in the early light. He took yesterday's paper she'd left back to his van, where he checked the football results then threw it on her lawn as he drove off.

Hilda was still waiting for the milkman. She dressed after a quick wash in the bathroom, rubbing the damp cloth hurriedly over her body under the robe. She refilled the sink with hot water and soaked the cloth for a moment, then wrung it out and held it over the sharp bones of her face, pressing the heat against her closed eyes. How good it would feel to lie in a hot bath. But she might get stuck. Back in her bedroom she opened the wardrobe and in the long mirror on the door saw her old cat wind itself

round her ankles like an old fur on the floor. She'd always been tall and bony, without any of the rounded flesh and curves of womanhood. Her skin seemed too fragile for the large bones it covered: the bumps, angles, and jutting edges of her limbs, her hips, her shoulder blades. She had not been attractive to men, though they had liked her gentle manner and kindnesses. She grimaced at the image of her swollen belly in the mirror, her thin skin stretched tight and shiny across the width and weight of it—growing bigger every day.

She had not felt a quickening, not that she could tell. Yet her belly was so large she should have felt movement by now, according to the old book on midwifery she found in the bookshelf: notes penciled in her mother's hand in the margins, descriptions underlined. She'd read the book cover to cover. She could see it was old-fashioned—out of date. Birthing was more modern now, usually done in the hospital. She'd heard young mothers talk at church. But Jesus was born in a stable, among the straw and droppings of the animals. There had been no midwife for Mary. God had taken care of it.

Kevin parked his van off the road, lit a cigarette, and thought about Tracy. Was it time to settle down? Would she want him? She wouldn't want a bloke who'd cheat on her again. Could he be faithful? Let's see what happens, he could say. But she'd not be interested in that. He took a long drag and exhaled slowly. Either he'd get what he wanted with no strings attached or he wouldn't. He hadn't had any trouble on that score before. They always gave in eventually, especially if he started ignoring them for a while; and besides, marriage, a house; all that cost money. What he earned was barely adequate now. Course, he did work the short shift: four hours each morning, Monday through Saturday. The married milkmen worked six- or eight-hour shifts and Sundays for overtime. Could he stand that? Tracy likely wouldn't approve of his other opportunities: the break-ins, the stuff that fell off the back of lorries, the lead from roofs. But if she kept working, maybe he could let those go.

*

Hilda put on a soft jersey dress that had belonged to her mother. Though a couple of sizes too big for her, she had been unable to part with it when Mother died and had hung it in a spare closet with a sachet of mothballs. The odor still lingered but she found it comforting, and the deep violet-blue suited her coloring as it had her mother's. Coming down the stairs she held on to the banister, off-balance with her large belly. She peered through the narrow pane by the front door, but no sign of the milkman yet, so she sat again by the fire. She reached into the knitting bag by the side of her chair for the piece of white wool she was working on and the pattern. A chubby baby smiled from the front of the worn paper. A boy or girl, she didn't know, just as she hadn't known when she made this outfit years ago. Flashes of memory still erupted, though long ago she had put them firmly from her mind. Whispered words in the dark, *You're special.* He had kissed her and pulled her down on the grass. *Please, please*, his hands inside her clothes, her breasts bared to the stars, *Just let me touch you* in the place she must not touch herself, the nuns had taught. When he pushed himself inside her, she had held her breath against the pain. His breath was hot and damp on her neck, and after, he cried out and shuddered against her. He had walked her back but did not hold her hand or kiss her again. She did not speak and what he said she could not remember. Even though she suspected it had been a dare, a planned seduction of an odd plain girl—a virgin who had refused the ones who'd tried before. But he was the golden boy who could not be refused. It was an old story. And after that, all the trouble and sad things that came of it, she bore and pushed down into that big, dark hole of silence.

Now she smoothed out the knitted piece of wool on her lap, then placed the loose needle in the first stitch and started a new row, pulling up a length from the skein in the bag. Stirred by the jerked strand, the cat watched for a moment, then returned to his dream.

Twenty minutes later Kevin had finished his deliveries on Selby Road and turned on to Avon, a street he liked with smaller

houses; older and more modest than those on Selby, but its long street was lined with oaks and beeches, and it was like driving through a tunnel when the trees were in full bloom and overhung the road. At Number 17 he looked for an empty bottle on the doorstep. He delivered only once a week here usually, a couple of pints. As he walked up the path, she opened the door to him. He was surprised—he rarely ever saw this one—Hilda Yaxley her name was. Had been the bookkeeper at Bryant's for years, he'd heard, the department store in town where his mother bought his school uniform. He loved going there as a kid. Trays of knick-knacks laid out that you could reach and rumble about in when your mother wasn't looking. Only buttons and thread, ribbons and thimbles and the like, but it was fun. His favorite thing at the store, though, was when his mother paid for the stuff she'd bought. The shop assistant took the money and wrapped it in the invoice she'd written, then put it in a round metal ball with a lid that zoomed around the store on a cable until it reached the accounting office above the shop floor. There a clerk took out the money, put back any change needed, stamped a receipt, and sent it whizzing back to you. One time a young assistant let him pull the wire to send off the ball. After that he wanted to do it every time they went to the store. The older, senior assistants wouldn't let him until he'd make a fuss: tell his mother he didn't want the clothes the assistant had wrapped and put in a bag, and stamp his foot.

"Could he, please?" his mother pleaded, and they'd give in, afraid the store manager would be brought by the disturbance.

"Morning," he called, "just one pint, love?" She was a strange bird. Looked like one too, the tall ones that ran around on long legs with a small head. He wondered if there were any valuables in her house. The old people who lived alone often invited him in; wanted to talk to someone. And he could turn the charm on when he wanted. But this one wasn't like that. She'd never invited him in, preferring to leave the money out each week in an envelope under the empty bottle.

"Just one?" He held a bottle out to her. Emu or ostrich, the bird. It just came to him.

"Another one, please," she said, taking the first, but as he turned to his basket, she cried out and keeled over in front of him He grabbed her to break her fall. The bottle she'd taken shattered on the step, splashing milk on them as he tried to hold her up. She groaned, her eyes shut.

"You'd better lie down, lady."

When she didn't respond, he pushed her front door open wide with his foot and pulled her in to the sofa in the living room. It was a nice room, if a little shabby with age. A fire burned in the hearth. Shelves of books lined one of the walls. He cast a practiced eye around: a nice antique clock on the mantle, some porcelain figurines that looked worth something, a couple of silver picture frames. He checked to see if she was wearing any jewelry. She wasn't. She was coming round now, opening her eyes, but still groaning.

"Shall I call someone?" he asked. "Or will you be all right?" Her eyes shut again. God, he'd never seen anyone die. He was scared. If she did and someone had seen him drag her in, they might think he'd killed her. He leaned in close, spoke loudly in her ear.

"I think you need a doctor, Missus." She opened her eyes then. Her belly was huge, stuck out from her skinny body like she was about to deliver.

"Jesus. What you been up to?" he said, then muttered to himself, "But you're too old for that, aren't you?"

She mumbled something.

"What's that?"

She didn't answer but started moaning again, holding her big belly. A dark tortoise-shell cat jumped up next to her on the sofa and hissed at him. He backed away and looked around the room for a phone. There wasn't one.

"I need to call, Missus. Where's your phone?"

She kept her eyes shut, still groaning in pain, but lifted a hand and weakly waved toward another room.

He rushed in that direction, panicked. When he found the phone on the kitchen table, he grunted with relief, grabbed the receiver, and dialed 999.

"There's a woman here," he told the operator, "in bad shape; in awful pain, it seems like. She collapsed on me on her doorstep. I'm the milkman.

"Yes, she collapsed. She's got a huge belly, like she's pregnant, but she's old.

"I dunno . . . sixties, I'd say. No, I'm not joking. You'd better send someone quick before it's too late." He gave the address, then poured a glass of water from the sink and took it to her.

"I can't," she said when he put the glass to her lips. "I feel sick."

He told her an ambulance was coming. "I'll stay with you till it comes, okay?"

She nodded and reached out her hand for his. "Thank you."

He sat on the arm of the sofa and held her hand until the doorbell rang, and the ambulance men came in with their stretcher. He was so afraid she might croak on him that he forfeited the opportunity to take anything. He realized that as one of the ambulance men shut the door behind them on the way out and checked to make sure it locked.

"You've been so kind," she said to Kevin as they loaded her into the ambulance.

He patted her outstretched hand and put it back under the blanket. "Good luck, love," he said, thinking probably that wasn't the right thing to say.

"You're home late, Kev. Will you still take me to Bingo, when you've had your dinner?" his mother said, taking his plate from the oven. He nodded and ate the sausage and mash in silence, then mopped up the gravy with the bread she'd put out for him. He didn't tell her about the old woman.

His mother watched as he ate, waiting for his dirty dishes. A gift from God, the nuns said when she and Harry had picked him up from the Catholic orphanage. Father Patrick had put in a good word when it was found they couldn't have a child of their own. A merry boy he was, with dimples and golden curls; her great joy and comfort after Harry died, so young. In her prayers at night

she gave thanks for her boy, but deep in her heart she felt for the woman who had given him up.

Kevin tapped his foot impatiently as she washed his dishes in the sink. She'd put on one of her best skirts and jumpers for Bingo and her good shoes, as she always did when she went out. At home she always wore a flowered housecoat over her slip. The cotton housecoats shrank after so many washes and her slip showed underneath. He didn't say anything. Years ago she'd been very particular about her slip showing, got all flustered if Dad said he could see it. But Dad had been gone nearly twenty years, a heart attack at forty-five. Worked himself to death, his mother said, in the quarry. She hadn't wanted Kevin doing hard physical work like that, and he didn't fancy it anyhow.

When he dropped her off at the church hall, he asked what time he should pick her up, and he could see she was pleased as he usually left her to find a ride home with someone else.

"Around four, before it gets dark," she said. "The older folks like to get home before dark."

He went home to nap in front of the TV but fell into a deep sleep and woke up a few hours later from a bad dream he couldn't quite remember, but that left him nervous and unsettled. He remembered the old woman—Miss Yaxley—and had half a mind to call the hospital to ask after her. To tell them he was the one who'd found her and called the emergency, the one who'd saved her; he might get his picture in the newspaper or on telly. He decided against it. He didn't like talking to official people like that, bossy buggers in uniform.

It was almost four; he'd better get to the church hall. Driving there, he thought about his mother. She was getting on herself but seemed all right. She did get out of breath going upstairs and couldn't walk far anymore with her bad hip. He ignored her most of the time. Well, she did fuss too much, or used to, and she repeated herself a lot, which got on his nerves, but she had always done her best by him. She'd always given him stuff and done without herself. You did that for your kids, and he was all she had. He was all she'd had for a long time. He suddenly wished he could give her more.

He didn't want to go in to the Bingo game, have all those old people stare at him. He asked an old bloke going into the bathroom if it was almost over.

"One more game," the old geezer croaked, starting to unzip his fly out in the hall. Jesus!

On her bed under the starched sheet, Hilda thought she was on a vast white sea drifting toward a great darkness. She recited a psalm silently from her scriptural rosary, imagining the beads in her fingers.

Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deep waters; you lightning and hail, snow and clouds, storm winds . . .

But all was calm. Quiet. She had slept, she was sure, sucked down into a deep drowsiness. She'd had medicine for the pain through an intravenous line that still dripped cool fluid into the back of her hand. A doctor had spoken to her and gently held her other hand.

"A malignant growth on your ovary, my dear," he had said. "I am so sorry." Tears had come then from a great sorrow inside her. He had patted her hand.

"Don't be afraid, we'll take good care of you. We will operate tomorrow."

She wasn't afraid, she had wanted to tell him. The tears weren't from fear, but from a great loss.

"It's so big," she'd said, pulling her hand from his and pointing to her swollen belly.

"Your abdomen is full of fluid—from the growth," he'd said then. "We must drain it before surgery. You will feel a lot better."

Later he came and injected another drug into the tube in her hand.

"This will relax you, my dear," he said. More gathered around in white coats. He talked to them and to her, but she couldn't listen. She closed her eyes before he pierced her belly with the long needle. She felt the flood burst from her to their cries as its force splattered and stained their white coats. Quickly the doctor in-

serted a thick tube to channel the dark fluid to a steel bucket on the floor. There was a putrid smell, like something rotten.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," she prayed, "pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

Outside the church Kevin wandered about for a bit. He thought about having a smoke, but he was on church grounds and he couldn't see any fag ends lying around. It was damn cold. Shivering, he pulled on the church door and it opened; it looked warm inside with the lights on. He hadn't been in this church for years, since he was a kid. He'd forgotten how fancy it all was: the vivid colors of the statuary and stained-glass windows, the crimson cloths on the altar, and the bright gold of the candlesticks. Must be worth a bit, all that stuff; not that he'd ever knock off a church, no, he'd never do that. He knew blokes who would, though, given half a chance.

He stopped in front of the Holy Mother. She stood out above everything else; her robe blue and vast, like a perfect sky, bare pink feet on sculpted flowers, her hands together in prayer. He stepped forward to see her face under the hood, looked up unabashedly as she looked down on him. She had a warm smile that seemed to be in her eyes as much as her mouth. The old woman had smiled at him like that, even in her pain. He stared at the Holy Mother, at the burning candles all around her, flickering in the air that moved up and down in that great space.

Claudia Ricci

NAILED

Somebody is staring at me from outside the window. Somebody I don't know. I believe it is a woman, but her hair is so short it is hard to tell. She has a small pale face and soft features and a crush of reddish blonde hair that fits her head like a helmet. Her hair looks as though it has been clipped like a hedge. Her nose has a sharp arch and her eyes are mournful and the color of mud. She is holding up a sign that says 'Please Help Me, I'm Not Dangerous at All. I Promise!' The face behind the sign is as plain a face as I have ever seen."

Okay, so that's what I've written so far. But I've got to keep going. Somehow I've got to finish it by tonight when my father arrives.

Well actually, he's my stepfather. My stepfather is a doctor, a rather well-known research psychologist named John L'Aujure, who lately seems to be turning into a kind of New Age witch doctor. He has spent the last six years studying shamanistic healing practices in a variety of indigenous cultures, most recently among the Navajo in Arizona. He called me a few days ago from Phoenix, where he is at a conference on transpersonal psychology and spirituality. He told me that I am suffering from a disease of the spirit.

I didn't really want to hear that. I know there's something wrong with me, but I keep hoping it's something that plain old medicine can fix.

My stepfather would rather think in terms of energy and spirit however. He claims that when I became sick last year—and I was sick all right—it was because my energy channels were "blocked." He says that if I want to cure myself for good, I need to unlock my heart chakra and deal with my fear. He made me promise that I would write something, anything, by the time he arrives. That way, he said, he can work with me. Clear my energy fields and help me move forward and find balance again. Or, as the Navajo say, "walk in beauty."

Sometimes I wish my stepfather would just ignore me. But he is not the type. Anyway, I'm all for curing myself. And so I am doing my best. I wrote the first paragraph about seventeen times and threw each version away. But then I wrote that thing about the woman staring at me through the window.

I think it has potential. Meaning I haven't yet crumpled it up and thrown it out. I even have an idea where it goes from here.

I suppose I should admit that the woman at the window has hair that looks just like mine. Except my hair is the brown of an almond.

Before I tell you what happens next in the story, I should explain about my illness. I feel like I have just emerged from a prison. Or a dark tunnel. Last June, I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, a form of lymphoma, which is a type of cancer of the lymph glands. The doctors discovered that I had a tumor the size of a cantaloupe in the center of my chest, pressing on my heart and lungs. For months I suffered intensive chemotherapy and then radiation. I am now in remission. I have begun to get my appetite back. And my hair. But I am depressed. I wish sometimes that I could bury myself beneath a rock. I am locked up inside. Ironically, now that I've beaten back the cancer, I can't decide what makes life worth living. I don't give a damn about anything. I can't work up much energy to call my friends or go out. I can barely get myself up to go to my adjunct teaching job twice a week.

I suppose that's why my stepfather is so dead set on coming to visit. His original plan was to come after the conference in Phoenix ends Monday night. But then he called back and said he was really worried about me and so he was going to leave the conference early and be here Sunday afternoon. Then he called back again and said he would be here by midnight tonight.

He would be coming with my mother except my mother has been dead for five years. When she was alive, she and my stepfather made quite a team. They seemed very happy. My mother had one job her whole life, as an editor for a university press. After she married my stepfather, she retired so that she could travel with him. Meanwhile, she would read and revise all of his papers. They went all over the world together.

My real father disappeared when I was born. Or before. My mother was always a little vague about the circumstances surrounding her "encounter" with my father.

Anyway, I'm pretty sure that I am better off not knowing who my biological father was. As far as I'm concerned, my stepfather is the only father I've ever had. He married my mom fifteen years ago, when I was only six.

When he learned that I was depressed (he guessed it in our phone conversation the other day) he asked me if I needed medication.

"I'm on Zoloft," I said, and before he could ask the dosage, I added, "a hundred fifty milligrams a day."

"So?"

"So what?"

"So is it helping you?

"Apparently not," I said. "But my shrink says she thinks I've got to stay on this dosage for the next month to see what happens. She told me it's natural that I would be depressed after what I've been through."

"I think you need to start writing again."

"Yes, I know I do. Except for one thing."

"What?"

"It makes absolutely no sense to me to write anymore. What is the point?"

"What's the point of anything?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I said after a moment. "That's what I'm trying to figure out."

That's when he said he was coming to see me as soon as he could get away. He said the cancer treatment had eaten a hole in my spirit.

"Are you sure you really want to come all this way?"

"Susannah, sometimes you say very silly things. But that's okay, I love you anyway. I will be there shortly. Now go and write something."

So here I sit full of fear and dread.

I have this dead dead dead feeling inside. I worry about every ache and pain too. I worry that I will wake up with another tumor

in my chest and that I might not be so lucky the next time. I mean, lots of people get cancer and die. I do not want to be one of those people.

Yesterday morning, after I had thrown at least fifteen balls of crumpled paper into the wastebasket, it occurred to me why I can't write anymore. After the battle with cancer, it seems rather absurd to set a bunch of words on paper in the attempt at making something fake seem real. I mean, I'd much rather try to make something real, i.e., the cancer, seem fake, as in it never happened.

But that's one of the worst things about cancer. Even after you've had the treatment and you're in remission, you can't ever go back. You can't ever say, "Oh good, it never happened." You can't take away the fact that you had the disease. You are, in effect, marked for life. You are forever a cancer survivor. Or worse. You are not a survivor.

I spent most of yesterday wrestling with that realization. But today I am on a roll and I am determined to write. I want to see what happens next with the woman at the window.

So here it goes:

"I am staring at the woman and her sign out the window. Behind her the landscape is dying in one last blast of gold, yellow, and brown. All of the trees except the one huge maple in back have lost their leaves. Suddenly, the wind whips up and the woman must be cold because she folds in on herself. When she looks up again, her eyes have fallen shut. Her face looks even more pale. The wind is sailing through her reddish blonde hair. I'm not sure, but I believe she is crying out there. What shall I do? I go to the door and open it. The wind blasts a thick little tornado of leaves and dust and dirt into the house. I put my arm up to shield my eyes, but I am blinded. I begin coughing. I slam the door and when I turn around, I hear someone else coughing. The woman is behind me.

'Oh, my, it's you,' I say.

'I hope you don't mind,' she whispers. 'But it was getting kind of scary out there.'

'Oh, well yes, of course I don't mind.'

I think of offering to take the woman's coat, but she has nothing on but a sweater. A grey sweater with a white fur collar. An odd little sweater to be sure.

'Can I make you some tea?'

'Do you have milk?'

'Milk?'

She nods.

'Sure. Sure I do. Come into the kitchen.'

I pour her a glass of milk and as I do, she asks me if I will warm it up for her. I transfer the milk to a mug and set it into the microwave for a couple of minutes.

'Do you have vanilla?' she asks when the milk is warm. I add a teaspoon of vanilla and as I do, I smell the alcohol. That smell stings me deeply—it reminds me of the chemo, which was full of alcohol.

She sits at the counter and begins to sip the milk. I offer her biscotti, chocolate with hazelnuts, but she refuses.

'Are you just passing through?' I ask her.

'Not exactly. I may be moving back to town after a long absence.' She squints at me. The grey of her sweater seems to cast a shadow over her face. And I notice now that there are shadows below her eyes, shadows that are a deep charcoal color. Suddenly I feel as though I might have made a grave mistake letting this waif in the door.

'You travel light,' I say, my voice croaking. The tumor in my chest last year affected my vocal cords, and sometimes when I am stressed my voice gives out.

'Yes, I have everything I need right here.' The woman pats her large black canvas handbag. She reaches inside and pulls out a large black journal. It is chock full of newspaper clippings.

I am tempted to ask her if she is a reporter, but then I think why would she be a reporter?

She finishes her milk. I ask her if she wants more. 'No, thank you,' she says. "I wonder though if I might use the bathroom?'

'Oh of course,' I say. 'Down the hall to the right.'

Naturally, I assume that she is going to pee. But soon I hear that she is filling the bathtub. And the next thing I know I hear wa-

ter swishing around. Is she really in my bathtub? Who does such a thing? I glance at the black handbag and the journal lying on top of it. I take a step toward the journal, reach out and lift the cover.

I gasp. I sink onto the stool at the counter.

I am staring at my own newspaper photo. There is no text, but it looks to be . . . an obituary. I am frozen to the seat when I see the date. The date of the newspaper: exactly one year from now. 'No,' I whisper. 'This is impossible.'

I slam the journal shut. I get up but my legs feel like water balloons. They don't feel like they will support me. I force myself to walk to the bathroom door. I bang on the door.

'Hello?' I yell.

No answer.

'Hello, I would like to know what you are doing in there?'

No answer.

'Excuse me, but I want to know who you are,' I scream. 'I don't even know your name.'

I hear the water sloshing against the side of the tub. I hear a deep throaty laugh.

'Please?' I say, my voice croaking again. My heart is pounding. 'I didn't get your name.' I turn the door handle. It's locked.

The water starts to drain from the tub.

'Bee,' she says, and I hear another peel of laughter but this one is light, like a bell tinkling. 'Call me Bee if you'd like.'

I rattle the handle. 'Well, Bee, I think it is rather rude of you to take a bath without asking.'

'I'll be right out,' she says.

And she is, almost immediately, out the door of the bathroom. She is fully dressed and her hair isn't wet. And she is smoking a cigarette, a cigarette attached to a plastic holder. She tips her head back and sends large wavy circles of smoke into the air.

'I . . . I would appreciate it if you wouldn't smoke,' I say, coughing and choking. 'I have just recovered from a serious illness.'

'I know you have,' she says, her eyes gleaming. 'Would you like to talk about it?' She pivots on her heel and walks down the hall to the living room. 'Here, have a seat on the sofa,' she says, as if she now owns the house. 'Get nice and comfortable.' I stare

at her. She has her black sneakers on my coffee table. And she is still smoking the cigarette and flicking ashes on my pine floors.

'I don't allow people to smoke in here,' I say.

'Well, I thank you for telling me that, but I think you will just have to put up with me the way I am,' she says. 'I'm kind of a chain smoker.'

I am stunned. And irritated. But mostly I have waves of fear creeping up from my gut, fear that feels like it will shut me down. What do I do? Who can I call?"

The phone rings. It's a good thing too, because my heart is pounding. That happens sometimes when I get all wrapped up in a story. Before I know it, I lose track of reality. And time.

As I pick up the phone, I'm thinking I have to write more to figure out what happens. I have to figure out how I—I mean how my narrator—will get rid of this evil character.

"Hello," I say, half afraid that I might hear the woman's voice on the other end.

"Hey, Susannah, won't you cry for me?"

"Hi," I say, recognizing John's favorite line for me from my childhood. "Where are you?" I glance at the clock. "Oh my God, it's four thirty. I . . . I totally lost track of time."

"That must mean you're writing."

"Yes. But the story is quite weird. Rather morbid. In it I read my own obituary."

"Just keep reminding yourself that it's fiction."

"Right."

"Anyway, I really hate to do this, but it turns out I absolutely have to stay here one more day. Is that okay? I'll be there tomorrow night. Promise."

"Of course it's okay," I say, thinking, ah, a reprieve.

When I hang up, I print out what I have written and I read it. That part about the obituary is scary. Why would I dare write such a thing? Why should I finish it?

I sit in my chair for a while. I look into the black wire wastebasket where I have thrown so many previous attempts. I can't throw this one out.

I go to the kitchen and pour myself a glass of aloe vera juice and add cranberry juice, as I always do. The aloe vera soothes my esophagus, which was scoured raw by all the radiation on my chest.

As I chug down the juice, I hear a sound outside the window. It sounds like a wicked laugh.

I freeze. I'm not sure I want to look out the window.

But I do. All I see is a grey squirrel with a white tail swinging on the bird feeder, chewing away on the black oil sunflower seed that I set out there this morning for the birds. The squirrel is making a weird squawking noise.

"Okay," I say. "Okay."

I call my friend Karen and ask if she is free for dinner.

"Sure," she says. "How about the Tin Plate? They have a jazz trio there tonight."

"Sounds good," I reply. And I shut off the computer. I open the linen closet and set the story on the shelf. And leave it there. And close the door.

Sunday dawns with a dusting of soft new snow. I sit at the window watching the blue jays poke at the sunflower seed. I have taken the story out of the closet and set it down here before me, but I am uncertain what to write. My stepfather is now supposed to be here late this evening, and maybe he can tell me.

Or can he?

I am staring out the window when I see what looks to be a dog. A rather obese brown dog with a large head. But wait. He sits on his hind legs and swipes a paw at the birdfeeder.

"A bear," I say, breathless, rising from my chair and pointing. "That's a bear."

He is standing upright now and he is my height at least. His head is blocky and his snout is square and narrow at the end. But it's the eyes that galvanize me. The eyes are soft, the gaze dull and piercing all at once.

With one swipe, he has the birdfeeder on the ground. He pokes at suet and brings the whole chunk of it to his mouth as if it is a cookie.

I have my binoculars trained on the bear. I can see the pink wet curve of his gums and his sharp teeth, up close. I see the nostrils quiver, and out of them come white wreaths of breath. The chocolate-colored ears flicker. I am still astonished that I am staring at a bear. And now he is staring at me. There is dead certainty in the red-rimmed eyes, a power of concentration. I feel my heart pounding. My mouth goes dry.

Calmly, he consumes the suet. The blue jays watch from a safe perch in the trees, and they are squawking their protest the whole while. The chickadees are even higher and further away.

The bear stays about a quarter of an hour. When he's finished the suet and dumped all the sunflower seeds on the ground, he lumbers off. He's smashed the birdfeeder in the process. I watch his hind side disappear between the spruce.

Something is loose in my chest. I don't know what it is. I would call it fear but it isn't that. It's not clear to me what the bear has transmitted, but it is some power of raw being that makes me want to write. I put the binoculars down and go to the computer. I write:

"'Stand up,' I command the woman. 'Stand up and go! Get the hell out of here.'

She laughs. 'Not so fast. We should talk.'

'Talk? What could we possibly have to talk about?'

She sucks on the cigarette. 'You know very well.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. You fill your notebook every night. You write and write and write. You are frightened about this, and that, and the other. You wonder if you did something to bring on your illness. Am I correct?'

My eyes narrow. 'You have no right to read what I've written . . .'

She yawns, examining her fingernails, which look surprisingly long and tapered. One of her pinky nails is painted black, and from this angle it actually resembles a real nail, the kind you would hammer into wood. 'Well, it's not like I had to look very hard. I've

found with folks like you, it's always so easy. You take so much pleasure in punishing yourself, you make my job a breeze.'

I inhale. 'Look, I want you to leave. I am asking politely, but I'm not going to be polite much longer. So get out. Now.'

'No, I think not. We've got to talk first.'

I cross my arms. 'Talk then. Say what you have to say and make it fast.'

'Okay, but first, may I have a sandwich?'

'A sandwich?'

The woman nods. 'Peanut butter and jelly will do.'

I make her a sandwich on the only bread I have, a hot dog bun. She follows me into the kitchen and sits at the counter, one foot tucked beneath her rump. The other she swings back and forth. She consumes the sandwich a chunk at a time. I busy myself at the sink, but all the while I'm glancing at her sideways. She licks peanut butter from her fingernails.

'Where did you say you were from?' I ask.

'I didn't.'

'Oh. Well, where are *you from?' I sponge the counter.*

She laughs and wipes a glob of stray jelly off her chin. She laughs harder, and I think she says, 'Baja.'

'Baja?'

'Aha! Yes, sure, Baja.' She keeps laughing, and now she is standing and stamping her feet. She is wearing black high top sneakers but they are only laced to the ankle. She keeps on laughing but now it's starting to sound forced. Her face is garish and her teeth are stained and a couple of teeth overlap on top.

'STOP!' I croak. 'Please stop right now!'

She does stop. She drops back onto the stool and quietly places her folded hands on the counter. She assumes a very serious demeanor and she simply stares at me.

'I bet you think I have some serious psychological issues,' she says, cocking her head to one side. She begins tapping her fingernails on the counter.

'Honestly, I don't care what your issues are,' I say. 'I just wish you would leave. Right now.' I point toward the kitchen door.

She slumps forward and sets her narrow chin into her folded hands and looks up at me. Her face is a picture of innocence. 'But don't you see, you are the one in control here?'

Her eyes gleam brightly, and now I realize—I was wrong about the color of her eyes. They are not mud-colored at all. They are much darker, and the look far more glassy. And her hair is threaded in dark red strands. How did I not notice this? And her eyebrows too. Oddly penciled in.

I stop pretending to sponge the counter. I glance at the rack above the stove where my frying pans are hanging. I am trembling inside, but part of me is tempted to take one off and . . .

'No, no, no, no,' she says now, sitting up straight and wagging her finger. 'You hate all forms of violence. You really don't want to use that big ole pan on me.'

'Get out!' I seethe, slamming my hands flat on the counter.

'You don't think you can get rid of me that easily? Admit it: you don't want me to go and you know it.' She stands up and instantly begins twirling through the kitchen, her arms out to either side, a wild dervish circling faster and faster. Finally she lands right next to me. Laughing, her face is inches from mine, a pale skull of unrestrained glee.

Something comes over me.

I pivot around to the sink and turn on the water full blast and then I pick up the spray hose and point it at her.

She screams and raises her arms to protect her face. I keep spraying her and now she is laughing and there is water all over the place and I half expect to see her melt into a soggy puddle right in front of me. Finally she screeches one long hysterically loud cry and then she flees out the kitchen door.

I drop breathless onto the stool at the counter. I am thoroughly soaked. The kitchen floor is flooded. The curtains are hanging wet and limp at the window.

'I never liked those damn curtains,' I whisper. Hearing myself say that at this moment strikes me silly. Instead of cleaning up, I go upstairs and run a hot bath.

Lying in the tub I close my eyes and smile, thinking how proud I am that I hosed down that impossibly obnoxious little waif.

Then I try to picture the new curtains I will buy. Then I imagine painting the kitchen cornflower blue. And then I realize that my bedroom could use painting too. Maybe I will have my Italian friend Mauro paint a mural on one wall.

I smile, imagining Mauro dabbing yellows and ochres and pale greens, creating the golden hills of Tuscany. Deep greens for the rows of pointed juniper. A mural I could stare at while lying in bed.

I sit up in the tub. I have a better idea. I could take a trip to Italy."

A car pulls into the driveway sometime after eleven p.m., but I don't hear anything until the front doorbell rings.

I get up from the computer. "It must be John," I think, glancing at my watch. "He's early."

When I open the door and snap on the light, I gasp. She is standing on the front porch with her back to me. She turns just enough so that I can see her profile. That arched nose. That spooky penciled eyebrow. She has one of my red bath towels like a cape, swaddling her shoulders.

She looks annoyed. Turning slowly to face me, she pulls something out from beneath the cape and drops it at my feet. I pick it up.

The newspaper. That same newspaper. The obituary.

But wait. This is not my photo.

It's hers.

"I hope you're satisfied," she says.

Her back is to me now. She never turns around.

William Virgil Davis

A VISIT TO SAN GIMIGNANO

The cypresses flamed on the hill,
framed the small town of towers.
We'd seen it from afar and wound
with the winding road toward it,
circling, until it almost seemed
as if we were closing in on a baited
creature about to be captured or killed.

There, in the towers, if anyone was
watching, they would have seen us
coming, not like an enemy, more like
a friend to be welcomed with open
arms, with hands held out for money—
money we were happy to spend. We sat,
that evening (after dinner and a stroll

through the steep streets, the shops,
with dogs half-asleep on their doorways,
still open in the early evening and the eyes
of the old women, tired and sad, turning
toward us like unanswered questions)
on the wide balcony and watched
the long shadows touch the tips

of the cypresses, climb quickly down,
then suddenly sweep out across the low
rolling hills, through vineyards as ordered
as columns of armies marching again
toward this old ancient city half-way
around the world, where we had been
very happy for a whole day together.

Slobodanka Strauss

THE MYSTERY OF LOVE'S WATERY DEATH

In her knapsack lay uninscribed books
She did not like her given name, "Love"

She did not stop grooming her long black hair
She kept the only brush she owned

She was habitually neat
Her mother would not have to vacuum her room

Or wash her clothes—she was still Love
She went to class as usual

And when saying goodbye to her friends
She left with a shy smile, stopped

By the kiosk to buy a pack of gum
To leap into the Danube from the bridge

Perie Longo

Autumn Song

for my sister

Quick, before colors vanish, I photograph
the woods thick where I walk, just beyond
your house, though you say drought
has robbed them of their beauty.
What do I know? the one who beat it
from the bitter cold to seek what I thought
was coastal bliss. Ha! time's sneaky brush
does its number even in the mildest climate.
As leaves circle and swirl, I admit
missing what made me who I am, lift
from the downing this leaf and that
to press and keep when I return home
to my seasonless place far beyond the end
of the road where vision dims. Always
the younger sister, I rush to share my pictures
with you standing at the window, waiting.
Remember dancing around sharp corners
of our family home, music loud enough
to drown our parents' storms? Especially
you love the close-up of the leaf collage,
a patchwork quilt of sorts, memories that lap
and overlap, collide, settle in the shine
of last night's rain. Behind us, geese weave
across the lake, oblivious to the coming cold,
the tree at the edge on fire no match for you.

Brad Johnson

Stretched to the Snap

My Jewish mother-in-law tells her friend
all doctors are cheap. Then she remembers
I'm there and says she doesn't mean my father,
doesn't mean my brother. When I tell my wife
I love her before she leaves for work she says
she loves me too. We've been comforting
each other with these words for fifteen years
yet how can the early morning *I love you*
intending *good-bye; be careful; I'll think*
of you during lunch contain the same weight
of feeling as the post-coital *I love you* expressing
thank you for touching me; for allowing me
to touch you; for choosing to create, with me,
a brief bridge of respite over the quotidian machinery
of suburban solipsism? How can anything mean
the same every time? When I tell my neighbor
my grandfather died she tilts her head to her shoulder
and says she's sorry which I interpret as *this is how*
I pretend to care; this is my sympathy face.
But how can I judge her absence of sincerity
when I resent Alabama though I've never been
to Birmingham, when I click from war coverage
to Comedy Central, when I considered crying
instead of actually crying after my daughter returned
from school asking how God removed the shofar
from the ram? The universe expands, stretching
to the inevitable snap. Silence is a rebuke,
a loneliness filled by small acts, like licking
the length of my wife's long neck, which mean
as much as the wind's whispers that turn to screams
as westerly gusts blow through back door screens.

Emily Sims

GRANDMA

Water rushes beneath my body,
seeking crevices in my aged timber—
the gunwale, the keel, the ribs—and finds none.

The creak and rock and hush of a cresting river
waves me away, and away, and away.
No oars here, no throw line,

only clarity of mind and motion in the cool,
smooth spaces of my thinning hull.

Drift, and glide, and move.

These evening skies are not familiar, not warm,
not quite reaching into and of me.

Finally, a drop of salt in the mouth,
a promise as fog kisses my bones:
The ocean is near.

Glass cutter, time stopper, drifter and poet:
The ocean is near.

Anthony Fife

Ars Simpatico

Hawks big as any dusk
circle open fields at suppertime.
I write letters to their wings
& watch them dive.

Yellowing corn fields broad as any day
teach me to grow into a ripe
old gal, but I am dumb
to tell how beautifully they die.

Little difference. There'll be reams
of falling hawks that circle wilted
fields and loafer's tricks to bend
the scene into a rhyme.

Rawdon Tomlinson

INFLUENZA, 1918

For Dr. George Joiner

Again, helplessly failed,
you would have left them

in the one room house
in the field,

the mother rocking the child's
too heavy head, with a toy,

the father walking circles,
praying,

and you would have driven toward
the town's line of feverish star light,

while the gray behind you faded yellow,
opening a grave—

the black/white flashing
your headlights,

a nighthawk flitting
from the still warm road

hunting a safe place
for the day.

Carol A. Amato

In Sicily on the Road to Gela

By summer, they had grown into masses
of tall ragged opium poppies mostly
red but here and there pink and purple petals
fluttering below the sunflowers.

Here, on the road to Gela
stinking town of chemicals and tangled steel
she sits on a wrought-iron stool
by the side of the road
short black shorts, bosoms spilling from black lace,
red stilettos defining her smooth black legs.

A car slows.
The few words are negotiated.
She slides next to him and through the window
looks toward the blanket of poppies,
thin crepe skins folding too easily into themselves
fragile, she thinks, and without substance
unlike the firm succulence of lilies
or even the brave peonies crashing to their deaths
in the sweet blush of life.

Lying on her back in that numb drudgery
she can see the impossible stars
and in the deeper dark behind her eyes
the old greenhouse
dried poppies in a pot
the tiny black seeds escaping
through the holes.

Jeffrey C. Alfier

UPON YOUR RETURN TO SAVELLETRI HARBOR

Make known to us the sea, *vecchio.*
How it summons you out past
the cobbled promenade,
its undulation through your dreams.

Tell us once again how cuttlefish
would darken the cracks in your mother's
plates, how flour wintered her knuckles,
her beauty the ragged scent of coming rain.

Cause us to glare at your bay
to see it warp the late light,
how it brims the silver-scaled wealth
of your nets.

From your night window, measure
the moon-splashed sea
as you tell your sons the virtue
of salt abrading your eyes.

Consider us, we pray, *vecchio,*
as your prow trolls beyond daydreams
of bluefin. Return, show us your hands
and give us their memory.

Lesa Williams

The Flagellant

He comes garbed in guilt, dark,
luxurious as mink.
He walks the streets
under respectable eyes,
crying out I'm sorrys,
lashing himself with her
braids, soft when loose
but drawing blood when he wants
punishment, the right and proper thing,
what he craves.

His sin—black satin
pulled across his skin
with the feel of a tongue—
is what he really needs,
darkness to plunge himself into,
teeth to bite him, nails to scratch him,
feminine voices cursing,
a witch-hag riding him through night.
He might move himself to Salem Town
in another century, except
goodwives fail to satisfy
his need—his lust—
for punishment, desiring
a dark lady instead of pure
blonde virginity, smiled on
by all his world.

Thieving fire from God was wrong;
he'd suffer on a rock forever, heart eaten
by crows, for her black hair
brushing against his face.

He pays for his crime, loving
his control of the lash's speed,
how deep the blows cut him.
His virgin abides in ignorance,
his dark one lives in shadows,
and the braided silk of both abrades his skin,
freed blood hot as semen.

Helen Wickes

Another Saturday Night

One coyote, fat and bold,
rushing uphill, turns to look back.
Evening plays a chordal descent, a delayed backbeat,
a Sam Cooke sunset, the coyote a copper smudge
behind the manzanita and oak.

The tulle fog gropes the valley,
low to the ground, as if waiting
to be pulled under, sucked back
through any roadside ditch.

The whole week gone, like a partially eaten meal
whisked away before you've placed the cutlery
at three-fifteen, to signal *I'm finished.*

Out of the plowed field,
a flock of starlings, dark sprouts
sprung forth. Buddy Holly,
notes by the mouthful,
that trick of heat and youth.

Raving on. The famous critics say
that poems now are all *anecdote with epiphany.*
They'd dislike me. Let them.
Right now I'd settle for epiphany,
with or without the anecdote.

When you can't get to the thin edge
of your own living, when you can't sharpen it
and run barefoot, it hardly seems worthwhile.

The cold sneaks in, a clingy, seacoast cold,
a joint tightener, heart toughener.
A black cat, out of nowhere,
young and greedy, jumps to my lap,
wants all of me. What's left for tonight
is subject to fits and lives on thin air.

Patricia Corbus

WARNING FOR A DAUGHTER

Not to inflict this presence on you,
this terrible heat running hot orange,
bubbling, eddying, carrying stones
and logs, spurting unexpected jets
all over your mountain, spewing stones,
tossing volcanic rock for miles,
spoiling your careless meadow
where time seems cool and hazy.
My lust for your soul especially, your
body, spirit, this horrible yearning—
obsession fixed forever now,
even as I hear my footsteps receding
on the bridge. Do you understand?
The universe is a cheap, wind-up whizzy
toy, a duck that walks, if you are not
with me. The father cannot be happy
without the son, and that is the whole
of religion. I do not know now which
of us came first—you made me Mother
and now I am your own insatiable child.
Even now I am reaching rivers of fire
toward you, above the timberline
where your pockets of snow stretch white
in the sun. See, even the clouds
are rolling toward you. Run for your
life, I say, run for your life.

Joan Colby

End of Days

Flush with twilight
The farmhouse settles into its miasma
Colonized with mosquitoes.

Fireflies carry their lanterns,
Love letters inscribed in blinks
Like the click talk of savages

Or the crickets invoking their cymbals.
The sad question of the mourning doves.
The bats emerging like tracers.

A slow breeze anoints us.
Observe the willows, how they have been stricken
with the shaking disease.

Shelly Sanders

Except for This

A boy on my swim team killed himself.
He swam the fifty in twenty-two point four seconds.
Other than that
the only thing I remember
is that once we were alone together
in a pool.
We just happened to be at this pool
alone together
on a day like any other day
but it was the day before the day.
I said hi
and he said hi there.
I watched his smooth calves underwater.
I watched him spit into the gutter.
There is nothing I can say to you
nothing about the way that I . . .
There is nothing for me to say about him
except for his smooth calves underwater.

David James

The Invention of Happiness

Covered in blankets in a dark room;
sitting under a make-shift cardboard home;
standing alone in a burning field;
driving out of one life into another,
we sweep away the doubt of doom
and, if lucky, settle into a happiness of sorts.
Whether we're chewing our last meal
or frozen in awe on a cliff at Big Sur,
we choose to be the wave or the foam,
smashing down on the port
or floating away in the sun.

We can find happiness in a glass of bad liqueur,
in the Book of Revelations, in an old catacomb
along the river. But what hurts and what heals
may be uttered by the same tongue.
Like a cardinal dropping out of the sky,
lured into our palms
by some good seed, happiness comes when the shield
falls to our feet, when the past blurs,
when stars light up our eyes.

John Talbird

TATTOOS

I hear they're going to start tattooing fruit.

On my left shoulder I got a tattoo says, "Johnny 4-Ever." He lit out six months after I got it. Summer after high school he hooks up with a dancer over at the Mouse's Crowd, girl we went to high school with, Paula Peckham. Called her Pecker-head in school. Gets contacts and breast job and thinks she's the shit. Johnny was my first love. I've had others, but none that stuck. They always want to know why I went and tattooed a son of a bitch's name on myself (I can't say nothing good about Johnny). Ernie didn't care, even asked me to marry him, but I didn't like his breath, couldn't imagine kissing him forever. He was a truck driver. I haven't been laid in a long time. They got lasers that take off tattoos, but it's expensive and I hear you got to go back and get them to do it over again until it takes.

I'm a cashier down at the Home-Co on University (Funny guys call it "the Homo"—can't tell how many times I've heard that. Ha. Ha. Ha.). They're about to give me my thirty-year pin. Never thought I'd be at no job for thirty years, specially not this one. People come and go, mostly high school and college kids. Some, like me, stick around. The pay's not awful and if you work full-time you got benefits which for some reason don't pay to get an unfortunate tattoo burnt off your back.

Right now they got stickers on the fruit and vegetables. Stickers got a code we punch in so the machine knows how much it costs. Old ladies complain, say by the time they get finished peeling them off, the fruit's bruised so it's not good for much beside fruit salad. I say they're lucky they got such piddling things to worry about. Not to their faces, of course. One lady we call House-coat said it took her thirty minutes the other day to take all them stickers off. Then she woke up with them in her hair next morning. I felt like saying, "Lady, you shouldn't be living on your own."

They don't realize the stickers are for their own good, so they don't get overcharged. I been here forever and still have trouble

telling the difference between a Fuji and a Gala. Don't even start with the organic and minimally treated and genetically modified and suchlike.

Back when I started, we had to punch everything in by hand. It was more work then, but also a bit more interesting. We'd communicate all the time instead of just gossiping when it got slow. "Hey, Bernice, know the price on the Tampax? Big size?" "Hey, Tommy, be a hon and price-check the eggs in the blue carton." They said it would be faster and more convenient for the customer if we switched to the barcodes, and I suppose it's true. But I also suspect it's cause if you burn a code right into a turnip, then the customer can't switch stickers and get an organic one for forty cents cheaper. Suppose that kind of theft adds up after a while when you're a big grocery chain.

I kind of miss when we had to use our noggins. Soon, we won't think at all.

"And then?" I say. If I don't prod Kelly, she loses the thread.

"Oh, right. Then, he says, 'Honey, you know I want to get married, but I want some money in the bank first.' And I say, 'Why can't we just live in your trailer?' And he says, 'Aw, honey, that place ain't castle enough for my princess.'"

At this she pauses and smiles so that I want to tell her *Don't you hear what a load of horseshit that is?* She's awful pretty, close to twenty years younger than me, eyes like blue glass, even if she could use a little meat on her hips.

"*Ladies*," Bruce, our front-end coordinator, says, a prissy look on his fake-tan face. It's slow, but we're supposed to just stand here silently at the front of our registers so any customers who wander up with a cart won't wonder if we'll service them or not. He looks at a clipboard and nods importantly to himself, writing something and wandering off toward register one, where Lavanda is smacking gum and sliding cans and vegetables down to the new boy what's-his-name with the big head and staring eyes. Kelly sticks her tongue out to Bruce's back. He wears a white button-down and slacks and tie, what all the boys here wear. Us girls have

to wear these itchy green polyester uniforms. Even that Indian girl Lily wears one, although she's the only girl stock boy. I tell the assistant manager, Mr. Fleming, that's sexist and he tells me, "Well, if you don't like it, Missy, I guess you can just get yourself another job someplace." We both say it with smiles, but there's something ugly beneath. He's a mean little man.

"I wonder if I should have slept with him," Kelly says, that fake sad pout on her face.

I'm watching Bruce talk to Lavanda's back while she blows a pink bubble, keeps ringing up her fat customer, a lady who smacks her brat on the side of the head for climbing on the railing. "Did you think that sleeping with him would get him to marry you?" I ask.

"Well . . . no," she says.

"Is he good in bed?"

She waits too long. I look at her and she smiles slightly, looks at her sneakers. "He needs practice."

"I knew it. Pretty guys think that's enough. If you want to regret having sex with him, *there's* your reason."

I mostly work the night shift, and when I get home to my apartment where I live alone, I like to sit on the couch with my feet up and watch the news, maybe drink a beer or a bit of whiskey, smoke a cig or a joint if I got one. Then, when I get to yawning, I go ahead and take a shower— can't seem to sleep unless I have a good hot shower whether I been dirty or not. I don't much like to stare at myself in the mirror these days as I'm feeling fat. I had such a nice figure in my teens, but I guess I thought I was fat then too. I can't get in the shower, though, without looking over my shoulder at that tattoo. The words are in a fancy cursive, black which is blurring and getting more bruise-like each year. They curve in and out of a fruit bowl so that you wouldn't know they were words unless you got up close. Johnny said, when he saw the tattoo, "People are gonna say you think I'm a fruit."

The old pothead who stitched it was covered with pictures in black and blue and purple—tigers and girls with axes, laughing

skeletons and barbed wire. There were two swans floating over his collar bone, beaks touching. He tried to talk me out of the tattoo, told me to look through the big binders they had full of pictures on the front tables, but I was set. There was a song playing on the radio, "Two Tickets to Paradise." I always thought that was a fun song, though now it just kind of pisses me off.

Johnny didn't have a very active imagination. I would say, "Hey, look at that cloud. Don't it look like a mushroom?" And he'd say, "No. It looks like a cloud. Wish I had me a whole handful of shrooms though. I'd trip my balls off."

It was his adventurous spirit which lured Paula Peckham away from her fireman's pole, I suppose. That same spirit which made me get a tattoo that the first time Momma saw it—at the beach years later, Johnny long gone—she actually cried, said, "You don't scar your body on purpose, honey. You just don't do it." I felt myself blush and the sun went behind a cloud then and I stared at my thighs, which were day by day turning to cottage cheese.

When I was a freshman in high school, the art students took a field trip to the Atlanta art museum to see the Cezanne exhibit. I remember this one painting, *Turn in the Road.* Mr. Abbey was going on about the three dimensions of the piece, about what Cezanne had done with space. But all I could think about was the flatness of it, how it was like a windowpane separating me from a world: curving road between the shrubs, slate sky, hills with pretty little thatched-roof houses. To its right there was *Still Life with Soup Tureen.* I didn't even know what a tureen was—turns out it's what I thought it was, a covered dish for holding soup. On the table with that tureen is a basket of fruit, a corked bottle of wine. It's quiet in the museum, even my classmates have shut the hell up for a second, and I get the feeling I must be inside one of those thatched-roof houses next to the curving road—not just the pretty little table with things to eat and drink, but all that museum quiet. It's like I'm looking at a world five thousand miles from my own where Momma yells at Dad until the words lose meaning and he watches TV, red egg-yolk eyes, my sister on the floor,

sneaker going *eeeee, eeeee, eeeee* against linoleum while she rubs her thumb over a big old wooden "G" block. I wanted to touch one of those paintings in that museum, feel the brush strokes which I was seeing for the first time, but you're not allowed to handle the art. You don't see brush strokes when your teacher's giving you a slide show on a cinderblock wall. I remember after Johnny and I had been together for a year or so and I was sleeping at his house. The TV was on, but with barely any sound cause we didn't want to wake his momma. It was that bunch of colored rectangles after the shows. I couldn't sleep. "Johnny," I whispered, and pushed his shoulder.

"Mmm?"

"Johnny, do you think I'm a good artist?" I was doing paintings, mostly oils, though sometimes watercolors and acrylics. He smiled in the dark and it made me happy for a second.

Then he got on top and said, "Yeah, you're an artist of fucking." He caught me so surprised I didn't have time to get wet. He fucked me anyway and I bit his shoulder to keep from crying.

It's only now when I think about then that things seem ugly. I loved him so much and he was a free spirit, and everything I knew—songs and movies and books and even paintings—seemed to say that two people should find each other. I thought, with him, we'd be gone as soon as we graduated. We'd be out of here. We'd get hence like they say in the Shakespeare plays we read in high school. I didn't give a damn how, I would have been happy to jump a train. I could see me and Johnny heading down the tracks with our stuff wrapped in a handkerchief on a stick like back in the day.

Instead, he did a bunch of drugs and me also. All but heroin. I told him I'm not sticking a needle in my arm. Although I did snort it once. It scared the hell out of me. I liked the sleepy pleasure so much I could see how people would lose the taste for anything else.

Johnny lost his construction job, got kicked out of his rock band, crashed his car. I said, "Honey, you sure you want to live

like this?" His nose was broken, and I was holding his fingers cause the rest of his hand was in a cast.

He was crying and said, "Yeah, baby, I want to get off it right enough." And he looked at me kind of funny, a peculiar look that made me look away. I kissed his fingers and his arm where I could feel the puckered skin from the needle.

Then he was at my door and the moths were batting against the overhead light and he said, "I'm off it." Paula Peckham was leaning against his Trans Am and smoking, and her blond bangs were blocking her eyes. I hadn't seen her since the operation and had trouble looking away from her tits—they were huge on that skinny girl.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, TV in the next room humming and Momma ranting, idiot sister's shoe against linoleum.

"I told you."

"What?"

"In the hospital. Nose all bust up." He touched his nose which was crooked now, forever it would be. "I said I was going off it. What'd you think?" He leaned back on his heels and his fingers were in his tight pockets and there was a trace of whiskers on his chin. There was something nasty in his face, but all I could look at was Paula Peckham's tits.

"What?" I said again like I was hard of hearing.

"I said I wanted off *it*," he said again like it meant something.

"Heroin?" I guessed.

He looked at me then like my brains were shit, the way he looked at my sister. "Us, baby. *Us*." He was gesturing back and forth. "I'll always love you like crazy, but you're killing me."

He was talking again but I don't remember what he said. I punched that fucker in the nose, tried to re-break it. I think I saw Paula's eyes go wide, those fake red nails up against his white Trans Am, titties up in the air like maybe they might airlift her to safety. But that's probably my brain filling in gaps, cause that boy punched me in the mouth so hard everything went black. Later,

Daddy was breathing his beer breath in my face and tapping my cheek and there was a tooth under my tongue.

This story should end tragic. Johnny and Paula driving all night, drinking Jim Beam from the bottle. Johnny rebel yells as he tries to slip around the dropped arm of a railroad crossing and they're nothing more than a stain on the road, bits of metal, hair and fingernails. I should be floating in a warm tub going red, hands at my sides, incisions lengthwise like every kid knows is the way to kill one's self, TV on in the next room, sister's shoe: *eeeee, eeeee, eeeee.*

It don't end exactly that way. Don't end at all. I hear tell Johnny and Paula are in Ocala, not forty-five minutes away. She's probably too old and fat to be a stripper now. They got kids. He drives a glass-bottomed boat at Silver Springs. I never seen them again, but it's hard not to know what your classmates do when you live in a small town. I try to act happy for him to whoever tells me his news. I had planned to leave town with Johnny and didn't care if I hadn't seen twenty-five. I wouldn't of cared if we'd ended up like the Donner party (my high school history teacher, Mr. Pathe, had a morbid mind and liked stories of blood and gore; his breath would come quick, teeth wet). I would have been happy to eat that boy and then laid down in the snow. I hear it's like going to sleep. I've been in Florida my whole life and never seen snow anywhere but on TV.

There was no word from Johnny after that punch in the mouth. No late-night phone calls, no *How you doing?* His name is on my left shoulder blade and I never get to say it to him again and when I look at it in the mirror it's backwards. I never get to say, "Johnny, how you doing?" or "Johnny, you son of a bitch." The phone rings late at night and no one speaks sometimes, but I can't pretend it's him anymore—I'm sure the same thing happens to everyone. And even if it is him, it's not really if he don't say anything.

After my shower, I sleep in the nude on top of the sheets cause my air conditioner is busted. I lay on my back, legs spread toward

the bedroom door, pussy getting air from the turning fan. I imagine Johnny standing in the doorway watching me while I pretend to sleep. After a bit, he comes to me and looks like he did in high school: tan and thin, arms veiny, a laughing skull tattooed on his shoulder. I'm like then too: thin and curvy, blue eyes, and a playful gap between my two front teeth. I can go into a split when I want, toss nuts in the air and catch them in my mouth. I spike volleyballs and wear sneakers, skate backwards and suck Johnny's dick until he quivers. The red and black of my tattoo is bright as wet paint, crisp as freshly washed fruit. I know my body now so it doesn't take me long to come.

Sometimes, though, I fall into the chair at my desk when I get home, too tired to shower or even make it to the couch, too tired to pour a glass of whiskey or light a cigarette. I stare into space in my green uniform with its white stripe along the shoulders like some kind of military getup. I got a gold chain Johnny give me I wear outside my costume, gold seashell earrings Momma give me—jewelry's the only thing I can wear at work that says I'm me (we even got to wear white sneakers they order from a catalogue). My haircut even seems standard. No matter how stylish I think I look in the chair at Greta's Salon, twenty-four hours later it ends up looking like what it is, the haircut on a middle-aged cashier. When I was sixteen, my hair was true blond, feathered, the comb going through it like some kind of sex. Johnny's fingers in it felt the same.

In tenth grade I started painting abstract. Mostly oils, unprimed canvas. Priming is when you paint a canvas with white gesso before you do the picture. It gives it a smooth look. I wanted to see what my paintings looked like rough. I painted one that was almost completely black. Just a red streak running jagged-like across the top and dipping down. Another tiny gash of purple near the bottom. Another of green near the top. This last one looks like a tear in wallpaper, a gap showing rotting wood. The painting made me dizzy. Johnny said, "What's it supposed to mean?" then

"Girl, you're odd." Momma said it depressed her. Anyway, it's the only one I hung in my apartment when I got my own place. It's the last painting I made.

Sometimes I sit down to write Johnny a letter. It would take a day, less, to mail from Gainesville to Ocala, one forty-five cent stamp. Somehow, I can't get the pen to make letters. I fill a whole page—a face with dark glasses, rising wave, a gun, some things that might be Chinese letters but aren't. There's no sense in it. If I were to send it to him, he'd scratch his head, ball it and toss it in the garbage. So I tack it to a wall. My apartment is filled with them.

I don't know why they got to tattoo numbers or barcodes on fruit. They're taking something beautiful, something artists turned into art, and making it just like anything else you sell. Barcodes on packages, that's one thing—they're manmade and naturally ugly. Barcodes are worse than a child's angry scribble. Even that's got passion behind it. Barcodes remind me of a newspaper that's been rained on and its ink is running. Gibberish.

If they got to tattoo something, why numbers or words at all? Why not pictures, why not tiny drawings on each in different colors? Or nothing? Is that so crazy? Would it be so bad if they trusted us to ring it up right without any stickers or codes or anything? Would that be so horrible if now and then we charged a customer too little or too much if that meant we could hold a Granny Smith in our hand, fingers never touching a sticker anywhere, eyes not seeing ink on skin? We could wash it and bite it while it's wet, slurping juice and white flesh, skin tough and good and loud against our teeth like it's supposed to be. We could put it in a wooden bowl with other apples, oranges and grapefruit. We could step back and just look at it.

Tyler Keevil

SCALPED

Today's my last day on the barge, and I've been consigned to the ice bins. Roger's got me oiling the chains that pull the rakes. I'm spraying them down with an industrial-strength lubricant. What I do is this: I shake up the can, making the widget clack, and hose down a series of links. Then I wait while the lube leeches in, foaming and sputtering and creating a kind of lather, stained brown by rust and grease. Afterwards, I slot the end of my crowbar into each link and bend it back and forth, back and forth, slowly freeing the pins up. Every herring season the salt air causes the chain-links to rust, and every year we go through this ritual to loosen them and prevent them from seizing up. I've started with the starboard bin. All the ice has been cleared out—we did that a few weeks back—but it's still cold and damp as a cavern in here, and the leftover moisture is oozing down the walls and pooling on the fiberglass floor. The power has to be shut off, for safety reasons, so my main light source is a halogen work lamp, strung in on an extension cord from the lower deck.

Roger and I were supposed to be doing this together, but last night he got a call from our supplier. The new alternator for the motor in one of our ice-making machines was ready, and he had to go pick it up—way the hell out in Delta. That was his reasoning, anyway. But I figure it's also partly my punishment for telling him that I'm leaving, for abandoning ship.

He seemed to take a certain satisfaction in explaining my duties to me.

"You'll be on your own in the bins, greenhorn," he said.

"I can handle it."

We were up in the lounge: me on the sofa and him sitting in his big reclining chair, his captain's chair. Doreen had already gone to bed. In the evenings she likes to retire early.

"I'll be back later on. Until then, you're in charge."

"Captain for a day, eh?"

"That's right. Just watch yourself on them rakes."

"I'll be careful."

To do this work, the chains and rakes have to be at head height. Each rake is a steel girder that covers the whole width of the bin, and each is studded with two-inch steel spikes for combing and flaking the ice. I am very wary of these spikes hovering at the edge of my vision, glinting in the half-light like the claws of a hawk. I've always had a thing about the rakes. Now that we're back in dock the nightmares have settled, but I won't fully relax until I'm safely ashore and have put some distance between me and them. For now, for today, I move very carefully, ducking and stooping and lurching about with a hunchbacked gait.

At around two o'clock I run out of oil. We have more canisters up top, in the storage cupboard in the breezeway. Leaving my crowbar on the floor, I crab-walk sideways toward the ice-bin door—keeping my head tilted at an angle, bending low beneath each rake. I've left the door open for the extra light it affords, and the entrance is a pale square in the dark, like the far end of a tunnel. Against it, the rows of rakes stand out in stark silhouette.

At the last rake, right near the door, I misjudge my step—or maybe the rakes lurch a bit, making a sudden movement just as I duck under. The tension in the chains causes them to do this occasionally, and in this case it's like they're reaching out for me. Something connects with my head and my neck crackles and then I am on the floor. There is this searing, scorching pain in my scalp, atop my skull. I clutch at the spot, twisting and squirming and arching my back as if the pain is electrocuting me, coursing through my whole body. I don't cry out—there's nobody to hear me cry—but what I do instead is make these soft whimpering noises. I haven't made noises like that for a long time. For a moment, in my pain-addled panic, I have the crazy thought that what I've always feared is actually happening: the rakes are coming for me, lurching into life and slowly descending, to break me and mangle me before I can get off the barge for good.

I'm so convinced of this that I open my eyes to check. But the rakes aren't moving—they just hang there, glistening like obsid-

ian. Eventually the scalding pain dulls to something more tolerable: a kind of scorched feeling, like when you've burnt your hand on the stove. I sit up slowly, testing my neck. It's kinked and I can feel the tendons creaking, but it seems okay. Then I shake off my work gloves and feel my head. The hair is wet and matted, and when I inspect my fingers they are sticky-slick with red. The sight makes me think of a phrase Roger is particularly fond of: *bleeding like a stuck pig.*

I'm bleeding like a stuck pig.

"Hell," I say, and the word bounces around me in the darkness. "Aw, hell."

Eventually I pick myself up. Just outside the ice-bin doors, on the lower deck of the barge, there's a bathroom that we use while we're on shift—delivering ice or servicing boats. I stagger in there and splash cold water over my head, then scrunch up some toilet paper and press it to my scalp, trying to stanch the bleeding. It stings like acid. I perch on the toilet and have a bit of a think, debating just how in the hell I'm gonna explain all this to Doreen.

When I come into the galley, Doreen is standing at the stove with her back to me. She's got potatoes bubbling on the hob and something—a crumble, probably—baking in the oven. On the counter she's kneading a mound of dough the size of a bowling ball, massaging it with her small, firm fingers. She hears the door and greets me without looking back. She knows it's me since we're the only two on the barge today.

Then she says, "Thought I'd make us some bread to go with your meal tonight." That's how we're referring to it: my meal. Not the last meal, or the goodbye meal. It's just easier all around, I guess.

"That's great," I say. I hover in the doorway fiddling with my work gloves, bending the empty fingers back and forth. Then I clear my throat and say, "Uh, Doreen?"

Finally she looks my way, and her expression changes when she sees the blood on my shirt, my dripping hair, the ball of scrunched-up tissue stuck to my head like a wilted flower. I start

explaining that I had a problem, a little problem down in the ice bin. A bit of an accident. But she can see that. She smacks her palms together, striking them once, twice, to dust the flour off, and puts her hands on her hips in a teapot pose.

"What did you do?"

I explain about the rake, about misjudging my step. I don't tell her I think the rake moved because that would sound crazy, paranoid, maybe even a little insane. But Doreen, she's real understanding. She reaches behind her back to untie her apron and drapes it on the counter, then motions me over. She's nearly a foot shorter than me, and I have to kneel down in front of her, like a penitent, so she can take a look. First she peels away the padded tissue— the sting making me stiffen—and then I feel her exploring around up there, pushing my hair to one side. She makes a slight sound of affirmation in her throat.

"That's a war wound, all right."

"Is it bad?"

"It's not good."

"Will it need stitches?"

"Come and see."

She makes an elevating gesture with her hand, palm up, and leads me from the galley into her and Roger's bathroom, which is at the back of the cabin. During season, Doreen doesn't like the deckhands using it. She's always saying, "You grease monkeys have your *own* toilets to dirty up." It's got square floor tiles, a shortened bathtub, and a vanity mirror above the sink. She gets me to crouch in front of the mirror. Fresh blood is leaking from the cut, not just in my hair but over my face: a single streak snakes down my cheekbone and jawline like Indian warpaint. Doreen takes up position behind me. She's holding a small make-up mirror—the kind in a clamshell case that snaps open. I can't read her expression. It's almost sly—like she's eager to share a secret. She asks me if I'm ready and holds the mirror up behind my head so I can see the damage to my scalp in the double-reflection.

"Right along here," she says, pointing with a forefinger.

The gash is about six inches long and an inch or so across. The skin on one side of the cut is buckled and peeled back in a

flap, like when you slice the tip of your finger while chopping vegetables. Underneath, in the crevasse, I see something smooth and pink, which is either a layer of fat or maybe my skull. Seeing all this I make a small meeping sound, like a mouse or a baby bird. That's all that comes out.

"Yep," Doreen says cheerfully. "I'd say you'll need some stitches."

I still don't say anything. My face has gone very white, like porcelain.

"But don't you worry—we can see to that right here."

I look at her in the mirror. "Shouldn't we go to the hospital?"

"What for?" She's frowning now. "I was a nurse for twenty odd years before joining Roger on the boats. I'm not just the cook around these parts—I'm the first aid officer, too."

"It looks pretty serious."

"Don't be a nervous Nelly. Nothing to it."

I turn my head—feeling the tendons clicking in my neck—so I'm looking up at her, face-to-face, rather than at her reflection in the mirror. She's got her arms crossed and peers down her nose at me from underneath her spectacles, waiting while I decide.

"But if you'd rather I drive you down to A and E, and make a big deal about it..."

"No, no," I say. "It's okay. Let's do it."

She beams and pats my shoulders. I can still smell the flour on her—that comforting scent of cooking and home and wholesomeness. "That a boy. Now the first thing we have to do is get this cleaned out properly."

She tells me to take off my blood-spattered workshirt, and directs me to kneel beside their tub. There are two bath balls next to the taps, and the tub smells of lavender and Epsom salts. The shower head is the kind attached to a metal hose. She removes the nozzle from its holder and turns on the cold tap. Then she instructs me to lean forward and lower my head. I kneel like that, as if I'm praying, with my chest pressed to the edge of the tub, and wait. In a moment I feel the cold water wash over my scalp, making the cut sting.

"That's it," Doreen says, "You're okay, there."

The water spattering into the basin and swirling down the drain is pinkish. Doreen lets the shower run for several minutes, until my scalp goes numb from the cold and the water clears. Then she twists off the tap, straightens me up, and pads my hair dry with a face cloth.

"You hold that there," she says, guiding my hand up to the towel to replace hers, "and apply pressure, while I fetch the field kit."

She leaves me perched on the toilet seat. Beneath the towel, the cut begins to throb again as the blood returns to it. There is a fan in the ceiling—tucked away behind a vent—and I can hear it rattling around and around. I feel dizzy, dazed. I'm staring at a spot on the tiled floor, worrying about this whole scheme with the stitches, these do-it-yourself stitches. It's the kind of thing you hear about going horribly wrong. The wound gets infected, and turns septic, and then some poor bastard gets blood poisoning and dies, like that. Or, at the very best, the stitches are a botched job, and you end up with some hideous, zigzag scar.

It's not the kind of thing I ever thought I'd experience, really.

When Doreen comes back, she's carrying the big green first aid kit that we keep on the barge. It's the size of a fishing tackle box, and has the same flip-up lid and fasteners to snap it shut. Doreen stands in the doorway surveying the bathroom critically. She tells me there isn't enough room in here—there's not much counter around the sink—and that to do this right, to do this proper, we'll have to go into her and Roger's bedroom, across the hall.

I follow her over there. I've glimpsed their room in passing before but I've never entered it. All of us deckhands sleep in the bunkhouse across the breezeway. Their room is bigger and more spacious, with a proper double bed and furnishings. Like everything else on the barge, it is functional, tidy and well-maintained. The bedclothes are tucked in and pulled taut as a trampoline. Next to the headboard is a small table and on the table sits a lamp, an alarm clock, the King James Bible, and a Louis L'Amour paper-

back. Against the far wall, adjacent to the window, stands a dressing table. That's where Doreen sits me down. On it there's another mirror. This time when I look in the glass I see a goofy, frightened face.

"Sorry about this, Doreen," I say.

She plonks the first aid kit down on the dresser. "You didn't do it on purpose."

"No," I say, thinking back. "Reckon not."

"Then you got nothing to apologize for."

"Feel like a damned fool, is all."

I don't know when I began talking like this: saying things like "I reckon" and "damned fool." It's happened sometime during these three seasons I've spent with them. It's like their words and phrases have been slowly sinking into my brain, becoming part of my vocabulary.

"Wasting your time, is what I'm doing."

"I'm still getting paid, aren't I?" She thumbs open the clasps on the kit, flips back the lid, and starts rooting around inside for whatever it is she needs. "Ain't no skin off my nose if I'm patching you up instead of cooking and cleaning and tending to the barge."

"No—it's just skin off my scalp."

We both laugh about that. I stop laughing when she begins taking out her equipment. She lays down a hand towel first, then places each item on it in a well-spaced row: a bottle of Betadine, a pair of scissors, some tweezers—which she refers to as the pick-ups—and another tool that's shaped like a set of forceps.

"What's that?" I ask.

"The needle-holder."

Next to the needle-holder she puts a small plastic package, about the size of a sugar sachet, labelled 4-0 nylon black monofilament. Then she continues poking about in the box.

"Wow-ee," she says, "lookie here."

She holds up a green flask. It's a small bottle of Napolean brandy—about half the size of a regular mickey. The label is faded and peeling, the glass filmed over with grease.

"Roger would flip," I say.

"He must have forgotten about it."

Roger keeps a dry barge, and has for years. I don't know if it's because of some accident back in the day, or if it's to do with their religion, or if it's just his policy. But he's fond of saying that alcohol and water don't mix—and enforces it whether we're docked or at sea. The deckhands all grumble about it, but not in front of Roger.

"Could come in handy," Doreen says, placing it to one side.

But she's still after something else. She keeps digging for another few minutes, and eventually shakes her head. "Gosh darn it," she says, which is as close as she gets to cursing.

"What's missing?"

"The needle. Can't suture a wound without a needle."

"Darn, eh?" I say. "Guess it'll be the hospital after all."

"Don't be silly. I got plenty of needles in my sewing kit."

"Sewing needles?"

"Yup."

She's already headed for the door. I call after her. "Don't you need a different type of needle for, uh, suturing?" I don't know much about stitching wounds, but I know that much.

"It's not that different," she shouts back.

I can hear her opening drawers in the lounge.

"But doesn't it have to be sterilized or whatever?"

"I'll boil it."

She says it as if we're talking about cooking dinner. An egg or a potato, maybe. I'll boil it. It's that simple. And maybe it is. But it's not making me feel any better about this whole operation of ours. I sit tense and still, listening to her and trying to deduce what she's doing. I hear the kettle whistle, followed by the pouring of water—into a pot, I'm guessing—and then Doreen returns to get the needle-holder and pick-ups, which apparently need to be sterilized, too. She putters around for a few minutes out there, and when she reappears she's got a tin of Tylenol in one hand, and a mortar and pestel cupped in the other. She tells me it'll only take a few minutes to sterilize the needle, and while we wait she's going

to fix me up something to take the edge off. That's the phrase she uses: to take the edge off.

"Do I need that?"

"In the hospital, they'd give you local anaesthetic—but we got to make our own."

"Makeshift anaesthetic, eh?"

"Worked for Roger when he almost lost his finger."

"Great."

"That reminds me—I need him to pick up some salad for your dinner."

She fishes her cellphone from her purse. It's a pink brick, a Nokia, with those big, easy-touch buttons. I helped her pick it out at the start of season, when we were shopping for barge supplies. She told me she didn't want anything fancy—no bells or whistles, she said—just a phone that could make calls, so the Nokia seemed like a safe bet.

"Let me just see here," she says.

She tips her head to peer over her glasses at the display, punching in the number slowly and deliberately with her forefinger, in the way older people do. She always dials, even though I've added Roger's number to her contacts. Then her phone is ringing, quite loudly since she has the volume turned up, and I can hear Roger answer it. She reminds him about the salad, and then starts telling him about my little run-in with the rakes. As she does, I stare at myself in the vanity mirror. I'm still holding the towel on my head like some kind of pantomime clown.

"That's right," she says. "I'm gonna patch him up here."

I hear Roger ask something, but I can't make out the words.

Then Doreen says, "He's holding up all right. He ain't blubbing, anyway." Another pause, and then, "Yep—he scalped himself good."

I can hear Roger howl at that, and I kind of chuckle, too. The way she says it makes me think of the Westerns Roger reads while we're at sea, and which he's got me reading: Max Brand and Louis L'Amour and Zane Grey. In them, the Indians are always scalping people, or collecting scalps. When a brave gets his first scalp, it's

a real big thing, apparently. Like he's become a man. I don't think it counts if you accidentally scalp yourself, though.

"Tell him I'll finish the rakes before dinner," I say.

"You heard that?" Doreen asks Roger. Then, "Uh huh. I will. Just you make sure you remember the things for my salad. And we'll see you later."

She puts down the phone and catches my eye in the mirror.

"Alternator's been delayed, but he'll be back for dinner. He said to make sure we check you've had your tetanus shot, because of the rust on them rakes."

"What happens if I haven't?"

"Then we'll get you one."

"At the hospital?"

"Or the clinic."

"So we'll be going in anyway?"

"Don't worry about that now."

She checks her watch. Apparently there's still five minutes to go. In the meantime, she starts preparing her anaesthetic. She taps four Tylenol into the mortar—the pills rattling like chips of ceramic—and begins grinding them up with the pestle. Outside the window to my left, a passenger plane is streaking slowly across the sky, leaving a stream of vapour. It's headed toward Vancouver airport, out in Richmond, where I'll be leaving from in two weeks time. I track its progress, trying to imagine that. The whole thing doesn't seem real just yet.

"There goes a plane," I say, just to be saying something.

Doreen glances at it, grunts, and asks, "You all set for this big trip of yours?"

"I got my work visa, and my ticket booked."

"No backing out now."

"No ma'am."

"And this girl you're going to see—you're sure about her?"

"I'm sure I like her well enough."

I haven't told her and Roger that we'll be living together. To them that would amount to a kind of marriage, a real commitment, and I'm trying not to think about it like that. We're just feeling things out, is all. Seeing how it goes.

"What's she do, this girl?" Doreen asks.

"She does what they call Theatre in Education."

Doreen frowns. "Like some kind of actress?"

She says it suspiciously, as if it might be improper somehow.

"More like a teacher. Working with kids, and doing drama."

"Well, I sure hope it turns out for you. The thing to ask yourself is: would she stand by you. That's all that matters, when it comes down to it. The rest is just . . ." She makes a waving motion, as if brushing away a fly.

I think about that. The plane has disappeared, leaving a line that divides the sky.

"I reckon she would," I say.

"Let's hope so," Doreen says, and checks her watch again.

To make her knitting needle more like a suture needle, Doreen has bent it with a pair of pliers, curling it into a kind of crooked, thumbnail shape. It's sitting in the bottom of the pan of steaming water, alongside the pick-ups and needle-holders, and also a turkey baster, which looks like a giant eye-dropper made out of metal. Doreen puts the pan down on a coaster so it doesn't burn the dresser. The steam fogs up the mirror, obscuring my face.

"Time to operate," she says. "How's it feeling?"

"It still stings something fierce."

"I'll bet. And it's gonna get worse."

Before we start, she dumps the powdered Tylenol into a glass tumbler and then splashes in a few ounces of the brandy and stirs it all around. She puts that in my hand.

"Go slow—there's two grams of Tylenol in there."

"Is that a lot?"

"It's enough."

I take a sip, tentatively. It has the usual burnt-fruit taste of brandy, but with a bitter after-bite, almost salty, from the Tylenol. Doreen tears open the pack of latex gloves, shakes them out, and snaps them on. She's humming to herself—one of her country tunes, I think—and you can tell how much she's enjoying this whole thing.

"The good news," she says, "is that the tough part comes first."

"That's the good news, eh?"

"Yep. We got to flush the wound."

She picks up the turkey baster and squeezes the bulbous end. Then, while dipping the tip in the steaming water, she releases the bulb to fill up the baster.

"This is salt water," she explains, "a makeshift saline."

"Seems like a lot of this operation is makeshift."

"Shush, you. Brace yourself—it's gonna smart like heck."

Using her left hand, she parts the gash in my head and peels back the flap of skin. I watch this curiously through the fogged-up mirror. Raising the baster, she squirts the warm saline into the cut in a long, steady burst. I jerk in my chair, slopping a bit of brandy on my chest, and make a faint, feeble sound—like I been stung by a bee.

"There you go," Doreen says, patting the area dry. "Not so bad, was it?"

"If you say so."

She's already moving on, reaching for the bottle of Betadine. She splashes a little of the ochre-coloured liquid on a cotton pad, dabs this on the area surrounding the cut—but not in it—and then fishes the pick-ups, needle-holders, and needle out of the pan. It takes her a few tries to thread the monofilament through the eye of the needle. When she's managed it, and tied it off, she takes up the needle-holders and I get to see how they work. They act as a set of tongs, pinching the needle. Holding it like that, she gets into position behind me. She asks if I'd like her to turn the mirror around, but I tell her no, it's okay—I'd like to see this.

"So long as you don't faint on me," she says.

I raise my glass obediently. I've knocked back an ounce or so now, on an empty belly, and I can feel the slow smoulder of the liquor spreading through my limbs. Doreen leans over me, holding the pick-ups in her left hand and gripping the needle-holder in the right. The line of thread dangles down against my cheek like a cobweb.

"I need you to sit still now," Doreen says, in the same matter-of-fact tone she uses in telling me about her recipes. "What I'm

going to do is stitch this left to right, using a simple running stich. Do you know what that is?"

I tell her I don't.

"It'll save us time." She places the tip of the pick-ups near the wound, to steady the skin, and then moves in with the needle. I feel the first prick as it pierces my scalp, and I wince instinctively. Doreen waits for me to get myself together before working the needle deeper, hooking it under the skin with a twisting motion of her wrist, talking calmly to me all the while. "An interrupted stitch goes sideways across the cut, like railway tracks, but you have to tie off each suture, which is a real pain in the petutty."

"I hear you."

"A running stitch crosses the wound at an angle, which means you can keep stitching continuously until you're done, and only have to tie it off once."

I can't see the site of the wound too easily, or what she's doing, but I see my scalp lift up under the pressure of the needle, like a tent canvas on a pole, before the needle breaks the skin and pokes back out the other side. She releases it, and uses the needle-holder to pull it all the way through, trailing a tail of thread. It's an odd sight, seeing that crescent of steel emerging from my scalp. I can feel it tickling, but it doesn't hurt much.

"If you want to get fancy," Doreen says, aiming the needle again, "if you want to get highfaluting, you can do what we call a running subcuticular, where the stitch is all under the skin—to make it less noticeable—or a vertical mattress technique, for deeper wounds."

The needle slips in and out, and she plucks at it with the pick-ups. I tip my glass back and forth, sloshing the liquid around. "Sounds like you sure know your stuff, Nurse Doreen."

"You didn't believe me, did you?"

"No ma'am."

As she works, she keeps talking to me. I know it's her way of keeping me distracted, putting me at ease, but that doesn't make it any less effective. I watch her face in the mirror. She's frowning slightly, and each time she sticks the needle into my scalp her eye-

brows raise and her mouth parts, in a hopeful tick of concentration. Her hands are steady and assured, a nurse's hands, and now that I'm able to sit still, the stitching motion is smooth: a piercing and plucking, entering and exiting, as the needle goes in, hooks under, and rises up.

This goes on for several minutes while Doreen maintains her running commentary. She tells me that the line has to be snug, to hold the skin together, but that it's also important not to make it too tight. "Choking the dog, they call that," she says and chuckles. She also tells me about the various other injuries she's patched up on the boats: Roger's partially severed fingertip, the deckhand who mangled his arm in the ice-making machines, the fisherman who tried to leap from his boat onto the barge and got his foot crushed between the hull and the bulkhead. I've heard most of them before. They're the war stories of the barge, which are always recounted with a certain relish. The worse and more gruesome the injury, the better.

"Compared to some," I say, "I guess I got off easy."

"This little cut of yours ain't nothing to sniff at."

"No?"

"No sir."

"How many stitches you putting in, anyway?"

"Eleven and counting."

Eleven. It seems like a lot. It seems like something you might hear about, rather than something that had happened to you. He needed a dozen stitches, people would say. He cut himself wide open. He bled like a stuck pig.

"How you holding up?" she asks.

"I'm fine, Dorie," I say, even though I've never called her that. It's what Roger calls her, sometimes. "I'm fine, Nurse Dorie. You just keep on putting in those stitches. Slap in as many as you like—as many as you see fit."

Her mouth twitches, like she's trying not to smile.

"Okay, Chief," she says. "Now go easy on that firewater, you hear?"

"It's going down easy, all right."

"I can see that."

My tumbler's nearly empty now. I sit with it resting on my belly as she finishes up. She's found a rhythm and executes each stitch with an expert flick, almost a flourish. She puts in three more stitches—fourteen in total—and then begins tying the line off. To do this, she wraps the nylon around the end of the needle-holders, making some kind of knot or bow, and then repeats the process twice before snipping the thread with the scissors.

"All done, Chief," she says.

She drops the needle, pick-ups, and needle-holders back in the pan—the metal rasping on metal, making that whisking sound—and holds up the compact mirror again so I can see. She tilts the mirror back and forth to show various angles, like a barber displaying a finished haircut. The crescent wound is stitched with a diagonal series of sutures, each one about half a centimetre apart. The surrounding skin is still stained by Betadine, but the actual cut looks smaller now that the wound is closed. The fierce, fiery burn has faded to a dull smoulder.

"Thanks, Nurse Dorie," I say, knocking back the last of my brandy. "You did a hell of a job on that."

"Language."

"Heck of a job, I mean. Heck of a job." I plonk the tumbler down on the dresser and stand up, feeling nice and loose, gangly as a rag doll. "Well, I better get back down there, eh? Back to the front line, right? As Roger would say, those rakes ain't gonna oil themselves."

"Somebody's had a bit too much anaesthetic."

"No ma'am."

"You come with me now."

I keep protesting, but she takes my hand and leads me into the lounge, where she sits me down on the chair—the big reclining chair that's usually reserved for Roger. It's a plush chair, soft and padded, with plaid patterns on the upholstery. I sink right into it like a dream.

"Now you sit tight, Chief," Doreen says, "I got us a meal to fix."

"And I got me a job to do."

"Your job is to sit in that chair, young man."

She's pretending to be cross with me, but I can tell she's getting a kick out of it.

"That's no job," I say.

"You're on watch, like when we're at sea."

She leaves me sitting there and begins puttering about in the kitchen. Roger's chair has one of those levers—like the handbrake on a car—that you crank to raise a footrest and lower the chair-back. I do this and lie down in it and gaze out the window. The south arm of the Fraser is massive and swollen and sweeps by like a freeway beneath a car. I imagine what Roger must feel sitting here at the helm of the Arctic King, buoyed up by the confidence of his experience, an entire life on the boats, on the water. It's a good feeling.

"How's it looking out there, Chief?" Doreen asks from the kitchen.

"It's looking mighty fine, Doreen."

My scalp is tingling again. I reach up to touch it, spider-walking my fingers around the stitches, which feel odd and knobby and foreign.

"Say, nurse," I say. "These sutures are starting to hurt again. I think that potion of yours is wearing off."

She comes to stand in the doorway, arms crossed, looking stern. She's got her apron on again. "You can't have any more Tylenol, Alex. You've already had about twice the recommended dose."

I wince and palm my head, as if it's really killing me. "Maybe just another ounce of that brandy, then. Just something to take the edge off."

Doreen shakes her head and I figure that's it, but she surprises me by going into their bedroom, where we've left the first aid kit, to fetch the brandy. I clap my hands and stand up and perform a wobbly-kneed pirouette. There's a stereo above the TV in the lounge with a stack of Roger and Doreen's music next to it: Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Emmylou Harris. I put on *Luxury Liner* and

settle back into Roger's seat, feeling just peachy, while I wait for Doreen. She's taken the brandy into the kitchen. I hear her getting out a glass.

"Say," I call, "why don't you have a little yourself, Dorie? Just to take the edge off."

"Edge off what?"

"Off our goodbye. I'm leaving, for god's sake."

"Language!"

"For gosh sake."

I hear her chuckle. "I haven't had a drink in six weeks."

"That's six weeks too long."

"Maybe just the one."

"That's right. Just the one."

I hear the fridge door open and close, the crack of ice in the ice tray, and the clink of cubes hitting glass. When she comes in, she's got a pair of highball tumblers filled to the brim with liquid. She hands one to me, and I sniff at it suspiciously. It smells like lemons.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Brandy sour. Figured you needed something to slow you down, Chief."

"Well, I'll be. Who would have thought you weren't just a cook, but a bartender."

She laughs and pats her hair in a gesture I've only seen in films—a kind of retro puffing of her perm. Then she takes a seat on the sofa across from me and raises her glass.

"Just don't tell Roger," she says.

"Alcohol and water don't mix."

"A dry barge is a safe barge."

"Good old Roger."

We both laugh, then settle into silence. There's a logjam floating by on the river, and on the stereo Emmylou is singing about some guy named Poncho who got shot in Mexico.

"What do you think he'll do?" I ask. "About the barge, I mean."

Doreen sips her cocktail and considers this.

"We got a couple more years left in us before we retire."

"Before you retire from your retirement."

"That's right. And of course Roger's been looking for somebody to take this old girl over after that." She glances at me, and then her eyes slide away. "But that's the company's problem, really. They'll find somebody who wants the job. It's good, honest work. Man's work."

"I know it."

She looks at me, and smiles, and it's a tough thing to see—so sad and understanding.

"What about you, Alex?" she asks. "Is this trip for good?"

"I wish I could tell you, Doreen."

"You sure are giving up a lot." She gestures with her free hand—a sweeping gesture that seems to take in not just the barge but the city outside the window. "But we all got to make our own way, I guess."

"I'll be back now and again."

"And this girl of yours—did she ever come out to visit *you*?"

The way she says it implies that any girl wouldn't be worth much if she didn't.

"She sure did."

"Well, maybe some time you could bring her out to the barge. Have lunch with us, and show her around."

"That'd be something."

The timer goes in the kitchen. Ding.

"That's your cake," Doreen says, but doesn't make a move to get it.

We're still sitting there, stirring the pot, when Roger gets back. We hear him on the stairs first—the iron rungs ringing out, anvil-like, beneath his steel-toed workboots. Then comes the familiar beer-keg rumble of his footsteps rolling down the breezeway. Me and Doreen stand up, like soldiers coming to attention. Roger has that effect on you. Nobody—even his wife—likes to be caught by Roger doing nothing. Being idle, he calls it. She slides into the kitchen, and I hear the sound of her dumping her ice into the sink,

then the tap running as she rinses her glass. My own brandy sour is only half-finished. I debate leaving it like that, then down the rest and tuck the glass behind the lamp on the side table, out of sight. Just before he arrives, I turn down the stereo and pick up a book—one of Roger's Westerns—and go to sit with it on the sofa, taking Doreen's spot.

The door opens in the kitchen, and Roger bellows, "Something sure smells good."

"Dinner's almost ready," Doreen tells him. "You got my salad?"

"I got it. Where's Alex?"

"Our invalid's recuperating in the lounge."

He comes on through without taking off his boots and pauses in the doorframe. It looks too small for him, that doorframe. At sixty-three he's still big and strong as an old boar. In one hand he's gripping a paper bag, the top rolled down to form a handle. I smile and stand back up, clasping the Western in front of me like a prayer book.

"Well, greenhorn," he says, "let's see this scrape of yours."

He stomps over to me and I bow my head for him to inspect. I realize I'm going to be doing this a lot in the weeks to come: for friends, for family, for total strangers. Displaying my scar like a new tattoo.

Roger takes my head in his hands. His fingers are thick and powerful, and it feels as if he could crush my skull like a walnut. I'm holding my breath, hoping he won't catch a whiff of the brandy. He whistles, long and low.

"That's a man's wound, Alex."

"Didn't I tell you he scalped himself?" Doreen calls.

"He sure did."

I laugh along with them at that. Roger lets go of my head, but he's still standing close to me. When I look up, his eyes are narrow, his jaw tight.

"You smell like booze, boy."

"It's the anaesthetic," I say. It's the only thing that occurs to me.

Doreen pokes her head in. "I gave him a little nip of brandy to stop him squirming."

Roger looks at her, hard, and something—maybe everything—seems to be hanging in the balance.

"Where'd you get brandy?" he asks.

"There's a flask in our first aid kit. Must be as old as the barge itself."

Roger glances once around the room. It's like he senses something's amiss. His gaze lingers on his chair, which is still laid flat. I forgot to set it right. Then he turns back to me.

"I take it the rakes didn't get finished either?"

"I figured we could do them together, tomorrow."

"You're leaving tomorrow."

It sounds harsh, the way he says it. Like I've committed a crime.

"Not until evening. We got the whole day, if we want it."

"Hmmm," he says. Then, raising his voice, he asks, "So he was squirming, was he?"

He's talking to Doreen, but still peering at me.

"He went a little green around the gills when I started stitching."

"It hurt like a son of a gun," I say.

He grunts. "I'll bet it did. I got you a something by way of compensation. I guess it's a little redundant now."

He reaches into the paper bag. Doreen is still hovering in the doorway, looking as anxious as I feel. It's like there could be anything in that bag. Anything at all. He unfurls the top, rolling it up real slow, and shoves one of his big bear paws inside. Then he tugs the bag away from the bottom, like a magician revealing something, and in his hand—dwarfed by his hand, really—is a six-pack of Kokanee, in bottles. Doreen actually squeaks.

"Well, Roger Laramie. I never thought I'd see it."

"It's the boy's last night, Dorie. And what with his head and all, I figured he could use a brew or two." Then he scowls at me—part mocking, part serious. "Didn't know he'd already gotten into the brandy, of course. I guess this ain't much compared to brandy."

"No—that's great, Roger. That's really something."

"Might even have one myself, if my old lady looks the other way."

"You men have a sit, now," Doreen says, disappearing into the kitchen. "It'll be awhile before dinner's ready. I got to put the steaks on and prepare the salad, yet."

I shuffle over there. Roger takes the time to adjust his chair, raising the back, and puts a new CD on the stereo. He chooses Johnny Cash. Johnny one-note, he calls him. Good old Johnny one-note.

Once we sit down, Roger uncaps his bottle of Kokanee and passes me his Swiss Army knife so I can do the same. In the process, I tilt my head, and Roger starts chuckling. Without meaning to, I've revealed my stitches again.

"It's like your scalp is smiling at me," he says. "That's gonna scar, all right."

"You think?"

"Does a chicken have lips?"

Through the door to the kitchen, I can see Doreen laying out steaks on a skillet. Each one hisses as it hits the pan, sending up a brief burst of grease-smoke. She glances over. "Now he's got something to remember us by."

"That's right," Roger agrees. He waggles his gnarled finger at me. "You got yourself a battle scar. Every fisherman needs one, see?"

"Even if I did it to myself."

"That's mostly the case, unfortunately."

He raises his beer, and I do the same. We don't clink bottles—we just raise them like that, in a kind of toast across the table.

"No matter where you go—Wales or wherever the heck it is—and no matter how big you get for your britches, you'll always have that there scar on your scalp. You're marked."

"Yes sir," I say. "I guess I am."

And once I say it, I imagine I can feel the burning scar beginning to cool, like molten metal, settling into something more solid and more permanent.

David Salner

THE STORY OF THE TWO COWS

CRIPPLE CREEK, COLORADO
1894

They were the same height now, although Frank was still a string bean compared to his brother William. He felt the muscles in William's shoulders tense under his hand. He wasn't trying to tell his older brother what to do, he just didn't want him to hurt himself. A mine is no place for a man who's been drinking. He'd never tell William that in so many words. But hinting at it didn't seem to be working much better.

They didn't often argue—and William didn't often show up drunk for work. Not often. Mondays William didn't need a drink because he got good and drunk Sunday. Tuesday, he could get through Tuesday without a drink. On Wednesday he could taste how bad he wanted it. But he usually got through Wednesday without drinking through sheer force of will. And always having to look at his kid brother, only fifteen, and the brightness and trust in his eyes almost blinding.

Thursday was the killer. They worked the midnight shift, and if anything went wrong at work—and that was guaranteed—it would chafe at William once he got back in the bunkhouse the following morning, once he got back and couldn't sleep. He'd roll over and look up into the rafters and hear the wind coming in. The wind put an icy edge on everything, little whirlpools of air starting up, blowing in one chink, out another.

This boarding house was no better than others they'd bunked at. It might have electric lights and heat from the steam plant, but it was still as leaky as a horse barn, and it was perched on the slope of a mountain, frigid and steep. In bad weather, it seemed to flap in the wind. To reach the mine from there, they had to descend fifty feet of wood stairs built against the incline. The timbers swayed with each step. And then walk across a huge deck surrounding the shaft house. The Cripple Creek railroad ran under the deck,

brought empty cars and went away full. He could cross the deck, pass the door of the shaft house, and descend another fifty feet of swaying stairs to reach a jumble of buildings in a narrow hollow between steep slopes. They called it Worthington, because that's who owned the saloon. He would've had to go more than a mile to reach Altman, the nearest town, but Worthington's saloon was good enough.

On that Thursday in late January, William had tossed from the time he tried to fall asleep, after breakfast, and into the late afternoon. He rolled over again and saw his brother in the next bunk, sleeping with a smile on his face. In Oklahoma, where they'd slept in the same room in their mother's cabin, his brother could sleep through anything. Ma used to say she could light a fire under him and he'd burn to ashes before he moved because he slept like a log. He has to be a fool, that brother of mine, William thought. Either that or he's the toughest guy around here. You have to be a hard-headed fool to be a hard-rock miner. To say mining is a tough business wasn't saying half enough. Whoever said hard work was healthy for a man never set foot in a mine. Half the time the roof was so low he had to work bent over loading ore. He bent over and shoveled himself into a backache at the beginning of the shift and felt it the whole rest of the shift.

He had to keep his wits about him all the time, but sometimes, when he lit a charge, he was almost too tired to remember the way back—was he in the mine surrounded by shadows and the light of candles guttering and flickering, or was he above ground in the bunkhouse, dark except for the play of sunlight through the logs and rough slats? Of course he remembered, but it gave him a scare to hesitate like that beside a burning stick of dynamite.

He had to concentrate every second, eyes on the roof, ears trying to catch the mood of the mine. Did he need to timber? He hated to spend the time—they were always driving the miners so hard to get the ore out—but he wasn't going to work under bad top. A judgment: Take a chance on not timbering and get hurt—or insist on putting in the timbers and have the boss on you next shift.

The dust was a killer; William knew that from hearing the old timers cough. Hell, an old timer might be thirty-five, might have ten years underground in silver mines before coming here to mine gold. But a hard-rock miner of thirty-five looked sixty and was just about done.

And the grime and filth. They ate in the same rock chamber where they relieved themselves. It was something he tried to forget about, but his nose reminded him.

William had had a good upbringing in Oklahoma. Poor, but strict and clean. Their mother saw to that. She was Cherokee and the two boys were half-breeds. She protected them as much as a poor woman can, and William had always figured it would be his duty to protect her, until he realized they'd starve to death unless he left home to find some real money. Because there was no money in Oklahoma, especially not now.

Then his fool brother, three years younger than him, decided he'd come along. A fifteen-year-old in the mines. Boys that young were few and far between underground.

In the first week of January, just a month after he and Frank had started at this mine, the Strong Mine, near Altman, the owners ordered a change in the rates. They lengthened the work day from eight to ten hours—for the same three dollars.

Three dollars a day. That wasn't bad money, damn good compared to what he knew in Oklahoma, and he could work the ten hours, but it was the insult that got to him, and William wasn't the only one. From eight hours to ten, with the same pay. The price of gold was soaring but their wage was going down. Talk about pushing your nose in it.

Day after day it wore away at him, and little things got to him even more. When he came home this morning, he lay on his cot and spent three hours on the edge of sleep, freezing and filthy. He rolled over, saw his brother sleeping like an angel, a grimy angel, and got up to get some hot water or raise some hell.

There was just enough water for a bath. He washed the filth off his body, enjoyed the warmth for a few minutes as he leaned back on the lip of the galvanized tub, and then dried off. After that

he felt too good to go back to sleep. What was the use? No sooner than he dozed off, it would be time to have dinner and go back to work. He pulled on clean clothes and his coat and braced himself for the cold—in these mountains in January, below zero wasn't unusual.

Down the stairway, across the deck in front of the mine, and down the next stairway, the wind howling around him, the anticipation of a drink doing more to warm him than his old felt coat.

Worthington, Mr. Worthington himself, was there at the saloon to pour him a drink. That grubby guy had sweat on his face no matter how cold it was outside. He gave William the first one on the house. Then he poured out another and William took it to the table where two mechanics were sitting with a man he didn't recognize.

The man looked tough, like a miner, but he was too clean, had combed his beard and slicked his hair. He stopped talking as soon as William came over, but one of the mechanics, whom William knew, nodded for the other man to continue.

The conversation was a good one, which is why William drank a little more than he'd planned. But he could still work, he knew that for a fact. He was a bull. Eighteen and he could outwork any man on the hill.

He got back to the boarding house for dinner. Breakfast, dinner, whatever the hell you called it. He'd already laid out the twenty bucks for his room and board, so he had a right to it. And he had something to talk about.

"Move your ass," he grunted and the men cleared a place for him to sit on the bench opposite his brother. There were nearly twenty men there, all night shift like him, elbows on the table, shoveling soup. They looked up as William joined them.

"I just talked to a union man at Worthington's." The men stopped eating their soup and stared at him. "He says if we all back the union, we can get our eight hours back."

Bitter winds continued to swirl around the mountains through the rest of January. By then, almost all the miners had pledged

their support to the Western Federation of Miners. Discussions about the union were taking place in Altman, Victor, all the towns that lived and breathed in the shadow of Pikes Peak, all the towns in the Cripple Creek District. In 1894 the WFM was an upstart in the labor movement, a union that aimed to organize anyone with dirt under their nails. Nobody had heard of it and the mine owners had a good laugh at the new organization. The country was still in the grips of a serious depression, and hungry men stalked the countryside, including the western mountains, looking for work. Hell, a strike would help the owners clean house, get rid of the troublemakers, and drive the wage down to two dollars a day.

But every ten hours of hell underground, the miners saw how much they produced. They saw the wealth flowing out on railcars, back east to the bankers. In the last three years, a modern rail system had been built to satisfy the nation's sudden need for this rock. Shafts were sunk. Rails connected the mines, the mills, and the refineries, and the whole area was modernized. The isolated mountain communities that made up this district were now a good sight more up to date than Oklahoma, more up to date than some cities.

Buckets, crushers, cages, compressors, cables, giant steam engines, and motors of all kinds— pieces of powerful equipment had been moved by river and rail, by mule sometimes, over mountains and through blizzards to be assembled at these mines, ton after ton of iron and steel.

Electric lights, telephones, water systems, schools and churches. From a wilderness to a beehive in under three years. According to the general way of thinking, it all depended on one thing, the gold. The panic of 1893 had swept away everything of value, had left the country in ruin, had undermined the value of everything people made or mined, especially silver. The value of silver had totally washed away, leaving thousands of silver miners out of work all over the West. Everything washed away in the deluge, everything except gold. The government was screaming for gold to back up the dollar. The banks needed gold. With enough gold, the economy could begin to move again. The nation had to get that precious rock.

Only the miners disagreed. It wasn't about gold or the dollar or the banks or the economy. It was about them, for without their aching backs and their skill setting timbers and lighting charges, that rock wasn't going anywhere. In a world that was screaming about the value of gold, it was their own value as human beings that the miners were beginning to think about.

And they were all coming together. Men walking from bunkhouse to cabin to saloon to dry goods store, all over these mountains, men who never even nodded at each other now smiled broadly, shook hands, as happy to meet and exchange news as gentlemen at a dinner party. If you asked any of these men why, they might tell you jokingly that a strike would mean we don't have to work tonight. But something else was involved, something deeper than the chance to avoid a shift of back-breaking labor, as welcome and necessary as that might be.

William stepped up on an empty wood box marked Explosives, steadied himself in the icy wind, and looked out as the seventy men on night shift drew closer and fell silent on a freezing February night.

"I got a letter to read you men," he told them, unfolding a sheet of paper. He held it up so he could read from the electric light outside the shaft house entrance. He'd just gotten the letter and didn't know what was in it any more than the men below him, all on midnight shift, a mass clad in felt, fur, and leather, clustered together, the Serbs huddled around their translator, the Mexicans around theirs. He waited for the men to find their places. He looked over their heads, past the railing at the edge of the deck, off into the Colorado night. To his right was Worthington hollow; in front of him, the long downhill slope to Altman. The snow-covered mountains with their ruffle of spruce gleamed in the darkness. It was a thousand miles from Oklahoma. He'd been here just a few months, but this was home to him now, these mountains and these men.

He held the letter up to the light and tried to read from the fluttering piece of paper. His voice cracked a little at the beginning and his hands trembled in the cold.

To the Brothers of Local 19, Western Federation of Miners:

Your Executive Board including myself have met with the major owners of the Cripple Creek District and presented our demands to them, namely, a return to the eight-hour day with no loss of pay and recognition of your union, the Western Federation of Miners. Hagerman, Moffat, and Smith laughed at our demands. They say they have made provisions for a long strike and will not talk to us again until we entertain their position, an eight-hour day for $2.00 or a ten-hour day for $3.00, the terms presently in effect.

At this point William paused and looked out at the men. Translation was going on, translation of what he had read into Finnish, Italian, Spanish, into several Eastern European languages. But these men already knew their demands would be rejected. They didn't need to hear it read out to them because they felt it every day by the way they were treated underground. Rejection was not news to these men. But what were the union leaders going to do about it? Were they going to piss away a perfect opportunity, when they were unified and the price of gold at its highest?

After bargaining fruitlessly for several weeks, only one option remains for our union. Beginning with the first shift on February 7, which is the midnight shift, work will be suspended in all mines until we win respect.

A cheer drowned out the last words William read:

With respect and solidarity, John Calderwood, President, Local 19, Western Federation of Miners.

William was a leader from the beginning. He wasn't afraid of a fight, and he was a bulldog for the new union. Frank was not going to be a leader, at least not right away, because he was so young. The other men liked him but laughed at how many questions he asked, gazing into their eyes, hanging on every word. The light-skinned boy, not dark like his brother, was a cub if there ever was one.

Back in Oklahoma, he'd talked with the men who travelled through the small town they lived in, the cowboys, the railroad workers. The summer before he and William had left, he'd seen

the families from Texas and Louisiana streaming through town, aiming to win a plot of land in the Great Land Race, which took place just north of their cabin. He looked into their eyes, offered encouragement.

"Good luck, Mister. I'm sure you'll win a nice piece of land."

He was the same with the miners, his newfound friends, who were years older than he was. And it didn't matter if you were a Finn, an Austrian, or one of the two black men who worked in the Strong Mine—this tall skinny boy paid attention to what you said.

Frank was surprised at how many immigrants came forward to volunteer for picketing shifts and other duties. Men from Ireland, eastern Europe, and every country in between, from Greece and Italy—and Mexicans, too.

"What about Chinese?" Frank asked one day.

"None left in the mines," he was told. Some of the men he talked to thought the Chinese were born scabs, driving down the wage of Americans; others cautiously ventured that it had been wrong to drive out the Chinese, but what was done was done. They were gone from the mines, and nothing could be done about it now. The Western Federation of Miners was a new organization that vowed not to discriminate—and not to back down when it came to fighting for miners' rights.

To the other union men, Frank and William had a special meaning to the strike. The scabs were mostly from the Missouri-Oklahoma area, desperate men responding to the same recruitment flyers the two brothers had found the year before in Oklahoma.

Most of the men had thought the strike would be settled quickly, because, as they saw it, they had the owners where they wanted them—until they'd noticed the first scabs going in and deputies patrolling Altman in groups of five or ten, a law unto themselves. Strikers soon learned to stay off the streets or face a beating.

It wasn't just three dollars a day they were fighting for, it was their freedom and their jobs. They were beginning to realize how high the stakes were.

All of these men had been in fights before, where you fought one on one over an insult or a threat. But now they were joining

forces with several thousand others, all over the mountains, and they were fighting a power that had more resources than they did. The recognition that a serious conflict was underway caused some of them to leave, to go back to their farms—mining was just a temporary job for them anyway. But most decided they'd stay and try to win this thing.

William was elected one of the picket captains from the Strong Mine, and Martic the other. Frank was on Martic's team, part of a force of around thirty. Their main responsibility was to keep scabs out of the Altman area, and to begin to take the area away from the deputies. They were on duty for eight hours or more, their eyes on the mountain roads and paths, the outcroppings where men could hide. If the would-be scabs made it to the shaft house, the deputized guards would protect them, and an army of replacements could be assembled. The mines would start producing, the strike lost.

It was mid-March. The snow was melting, the days warmer, the nights still cold. What Frank saw shivering before him was a gaunt, downcast man who peered around him at the circle of strikers like a cornered animal.

"Can I talk to him?" Frank asked Martic.

The shivering man tried to meet Frank's gaze, his face turning up into the moonlight, which exaggerated the ghostliness, the shadows in the gaunt hollows of the face. It was the same beaten look Frank had seen in the eyes of some of the men who'd trooped through Oklahoma on the way to the Land Race.

"What's your name, brother?"

"North, sir. John North," the man whispered.

"You want a job, don't you, John?"

"Yes sir."

"You need to send money home, I guess. Where's your home, John?"

"Joplin, Missouri, sir." He kept calling this boy, now sixteen and at least ten years his junior, sir. "I got seven back there all counting on me, seven if my ma's still alive." He ran his tongue over his lips.

"We're counting on you, too, John. We're counting on you to join our union. You and me can be brothers, and we'll all go back to work, together. We just want what's fair. Eight hours for three dollars pay, like we used to have. There's money to be made in gold but not for the miners, unless we win this strike." Frank reached out and grabbed the older man's arm, the skinny part below the elbow.

"When it's settled, we'll get you a job. In the meantime, you can eat with us—what little we have—and picket and share our lodging. Either that or you go back to Joplin. But nobody goes into the mines without our say-so. You hear that, John North? . . . Nobody."

"Yes sir," John whispered, trying to steady himself. The whole world had shifted under his feet. A boy as poor as him was standing on a dirt road on the side of a mountain, giving orders with the same authority as the richest mine owners in the world. John North had never seen such a thing.

"And one more thing, John," Frank added. "You're lucky you ran into me and not my brother."

Martic understood English well but spoke it poorly and with a thick accent. He let the good-natured boy step forward as the spokesman for their team. Of the scabs Frank and Martic caught, some joined the strike, became part of their picket squad. Most probably headed back to Missouri or at least somewhere away from the goldfields. But some were die-hard scabs, sorry creatures who would seek protection from Sheriff Bowers, might even sign on as a deputy.

Martic had become a legend among strikers. On the first day of the strike, he'd led a band of eastern European miners out of the Strong Mine. He was Serbian but also spoke Hungarian, German, and at least a few words of the Baltic languages. This enabled him to talk to the six men on his work crew about the issues of the strike, which was no easy task since they were under armed guard deep in the mine.

One of them feigned an injury. "He's hurt. No good for work. Get him out," Martic insisted to the guard in his thick Serbian ac-

cent. With the hoist on its way down, the miners overpowered the guard and took his revolver. After being hauled to the shaft house, they surprised the guard up there, picked up his revolver as well, and went outside to the cheers of the pickets. Martic had become known as a tough and daring leader who spoke little but got his point across.

This man who seldom spoke was teamed with a boy who didn't mind talking, not at all. Martic's natural reticence was no match for the inquisitive boy with whom he spent so many nights, scanning the mountains for scabs. While they sat there on boulders and stone ledges, the short man, gesturing with his stubby hands, began to open up, and Frank learned that his older friend was born in Hungarian-occupied Serbia, one of eight children in a peasant family. When he was about Frank's age, he was dragooned into the war against Bulgaria. During his first year of fighting, Martic learned to live in the field, which was easy for a peasant, and to carry out orders and handle firearms. And he participated in discussions with his fellow soldiers—discussions the Hungarian officers couldn't understand let alone suppress. After the war, he found himself in Belgrade, where he was introduced to socialist politics, went to meetings, argued and discussed with newfound friends. He slept on floors. Odd jobs augmented the last of his service pay and kept him from starving. Finally, he found a flyer—the Serbian equivalent of the one Frank had found in Oklahoma—and he decided to see the New World. The labor contractor sent him by rail to a ship that would carry him first to New York and then by rail again to this cold place in the mountains, where he found only men as poor as he was.

William, the other picket captain for the Altman strikers, was respected for his courage as well as his brawn. The conversations he administered to would-be scabs made a deep impression, but it was a more brutal argument than the one Frank presented to John North. More brutal, though possibly less convincing in the long run. But then, William had never looked long and deep into the eyes of the poor men walking beside their horses, traipsing through Oklahoma on their way to win a farm in the Great Land Race—or die trying.

*

"Your honor, can I speak in my defense?" Frank took his hat off—it was a Stetson he'd picked up during the strike. He'd topped out at over six feet, the same height as his brother; his shoulders had widened, but after three months on strike, he was nothing but gristle and bone. With his hat on, he looked like a roofing nail.

Judge Killebrew looked up at the boy and spat into a bucket he kept by his chair. His black beard, which he scratched often during the court proceedings, hid most of his red face. A pair of black eyes darted over this barn converted into a court house as he slouched over a small table. He gestured for the boy to continue.

Frank took a half step forward and scanned the court, the seven deputies facing him and the twenty spectators standing in the back. His eyes met the judge's.

"The deputy told the truth when he said I hit him—and maybe I broke his nose—but he left out one thing," Frank continued. "He swung first. Where I come from, if someone hits you first, you better give it back to him harder than you got it."

"Where are you from, son?" Judge Killebrew asked. After Frank's answer, the judge rolled his black eyes and mused, "Oklahoma. I didn't know there were any union men from Oklahoma."

"Yes sir, me and my brother, William. He's a picket captain." Frank said this with obvious pride. When the judge signaled him to continue, Frank took another step forward and brushed his hair back from his face.

"Some deputies were sneaking around the mine, so we went to intercept them." He described how the pickets ducked into Myers Gulch and scurried, crouched over, to get ahead of them, jumped out of the ditch, and ordered the deputies to halt. That's when one of them slugged him.

"Then you hit him back and broke his nose," the judge interrupted.

"And broke his nose, if he says so. And then one of our pickets set off a firearm to keep a fight from starting up. The deputies would have gotten the worst of it."

"That's when you made the citizens' arrest?"

"Yes sir," Frank answered and outlined how he'd pulled out his Colt while four other pickets kept their rusty firearms trained on the deputies and marched them a mile down the mountain to the jail.

"And sir, I'd like to make one more point before I shut up."

"Go ahead, son."

"We don't mean harm to any man, woman, or child, but we have an issue and we have a cause. Our issue is the eight-hour day and our cause is dignity, respect for the working man and woman. With a union, we won't have to beg and we won't always have to take a beating."

More than a few of the spectators began to applaud from the back of the barn, but the judge slammed his gavel down.

"Order! Hang on and be quiet and I'll give you my ruling." He scratched his beard and jotted a few notes on a paper, spat again, and stood up. He was a tall, powerfully built man, which wasn't obvious while he crouched over his table. "Because the first punch was thrown by this deputy here, I can't entertain his charge of assault against the defendant, Mr. Frank Little. I do find the deputies were carrying concealed weapons without authorization of this court. I can see those weapons under their jackets right now. In case they have any ideas, they should take a look at the other citizens here . . ." With that, the spectators trained an assortment of firearms on the deputies.

"Now . . . where was I . . . I have to throw out Mr. Little's charge of concealed weapons as well as the citizens' arrest charges. If I go locking up deputies, even though they're guilty, who knows what kind of military force Hagerman and company will call down on us. Better we all just walk away from it and pretend it didn't happen."

Judge Ernest Killebrew slammed his gavel again and the deputies slunk out of the courtroom single file among the spectators, all striking miners armed with Colts and old hunting rifles.

Killebrew had been a silver miner in Utah and Idaho. He came to Cripple Creek after his last layoff. He was appointed to the court based on his education, which he never had to prove. When the strike started, like other newly appointed officials in the area,

he took out membership in the largest organization in the county, the Western Federation of Miners. In the barn that had been made over into a courthouse, he'd tacked up a union membership letter beside his court papers.

Among the people of Altman, his letter from the union had more weight than his official documents.

"Isn't Ditullio's body under these rocks? Isn't a little bit of all of us buried in this mine?" William's voice boomed out. A murmur of assent rose from the men crowded on the deck surrounding the shaft house and packed in the shadow of the mine entrance, overflowing down the stairs.

Mid-May, the day was warming, the snow on the peaks was brilliant in the sun. The drifts in the towns and meadows had melted away, and green was beginning to show through the winter brush. The deputies had been pushed back, but the owners had been organizing a counterforce, which had been arriving over the last few days and was camped just outside Altman. In response, the union had called a full mobilization.

"Whose mine is it?" William bellowed.

"Ours!" the miners hollered back, even those who spoke little English.

"And now that it's ours, will we let anyone take it away from us?"

"No!"

"Will we let Hagerman and the rest take it away?"

"No!"

"Will we let Sheriff Bowers?"

The miners screamed "No!" again, and then silence filled the mountains. The familiar sounds of work had been stilled by the strike, no ore cars, no charges going off, no mills or crushers rumbling. A silence warmed by the brilliant morning sun. The men had put away their winter coats and wore cotton shirts and denim trousers, work hats or Stetsons. They could have been vacationers getting away from the city heat, enjoying a bright mountain morning. They knew where to catch the trout and hunt the deer that vacationers would prize, but these men had a purpose and an

alertness that vacationers might not have. They'd just occupied the Strong Mine.

George Fuller, a black man, had been leaning forward with his elbows on the railing, peering down the mountain toward town, more than a mile away. He was facing away but turned his head every so often to catch the orders for the day and the makeup of the teams. George was the lookout for William's team, which would be staying at the shaft house.

Martic, wearing a red bandanna and broken straw hat, led a large team of fifty men down the rail tracks and into a stand of pine on the side of the road.

Frank wasn't among them, for today he had his own team of eleven miners. They picked their way to the slope where the steam plant was perched, just off the Altman road. When they got there, Frank spoke earnestly to his men. They listened carefully to this boy, half the age of some of them. His face was animated, the Stetson on his head bobbing as he talked. The men nodded back to him.

The remaining strikers stayed on the deck with William. Kneeling on one knee, George Fuller continued to keep watch on Altman. A native of Tennessee, George was William's friend, and a crack shot with a sharp eye. Right now, he had his eyes peeled for an army of deputies, including 125 overnight arrivals. They had set up camp around a cluster of railroad shacks on the edge of town, dozens of large tents and a corral for the officers' horses. They sang and drank by their campfires through the night, and now they were standing up, stretching, not quite visible except to George's sharp eyes. Sometime this morning, they'd be walking up the main road toward the mine. Their objective was easy to guess, to wrest control of the shaft house from the poorly armed strikers so they could run scabs in by railcar. They'd be marching up that corridor all the way to the shaft house, to the deck where William's team waited.

Frank's team, about 100 yards downhill from George's perch, had entered the steam plant.

Martic's men were stretched out along the road, opposite the steam plant and hidden by now.

The miners were armed as well as they could be, some with Civil War relics. One had a one-shot pocket pistol. Throughout Colorado and the rest of the West, most men had a firearm of some sort. Those without, many of the immigrants, had gathered piles of stones. Sheriff Bowers' force, on the other hand, was bankrolled by the mine owners, who'd purchased 100 Springfield rifles to augment the weapons their side already had. In fact, this was exactly what George Fuller thought he was seeing, sun glinting off steel twenty rows deep, just stepping out on the road.

To those who were on the owners' side, it would have been a beautiful sight. Steel in the sun presents an awesome spectacle, dominating in and of itself, exhilarating—all that well-oiled steel.

William saw George beckon and went over, leaning on George's shoulder, putting a face darkened by the sun down to the darker face of his friend. And looked through the glass. What he saw there caused him to exhale deeply. "They're all coming this way, every last one of 'em," he whispered to George. And then to the entire team: "They'll be here in fifteen minutes . . . if they don't get tired and fall out."

Most of the men ducked back into the shaft house, leaving William, George, and a few other men posted on the deck as lookouts. Five minutes went by—and the deputies were coming into focus, some in tan fatigues, others in work clothes, and a scattering of men who looked like they'd just stepped out of their offices, dressed for business. Their march had slowed a little as the incline steepened, but they came on, rifles on shoulders, their deputy stars now visible on shirts and coats. Officers on horseback joked with their troops as they stamped up the mountain road.

The other lookouts retreated into the shadows, leaving William and George probably visible to the troops as two shadowy figures if they bothered to look that closely. As the seconds ticked by, George gave an inquiring look to William, who gave a slight shrug as if to say he didn't know the answer his friend had silently posed. Another minute ticked by. Finally, behind them, the rest of the men burst out of the shaft house and the entire team hurried down the rear stairs, taking cover in the hollow that led into

Worthington. They were only a few dozen yards from the front steps but in a gorge angling back from the road. From where they were hidden, they could see under the deck, down toward Altman.

"That platoon of deputies is the best-armed thing in the West," one of the men whispered.

"Best-armed bunch of men since Custer got whipped by the Indians," another responded.

"Whipped, hell! We killed him," William added.

When the deputies arrived in the cool shadow of the mountain, they were sweating from the uphill trek. The rail tipple and the steps leading up to the deck were directly before them. By now, one of the officers had signaled for the horsemen to dismount, although he himself remained in the saddle. He breathed deeply, and the mountain air must have been doing him some good for he smiled broadly at his troops as they milled around, waiting for orders to climb to the deck and secure the shaft house and tipple, both unguarded. It appeared the miners, no fools, had abandoned their occupation—which was not only illegal but foolish—and had melted away.

The deputies had a way about them that was different from that of the strikers. For one thing, they were English-speaking to a man; for another, their swagger had the awkwardness of men who were not familiar with each other, who for the most part had never met—with the exception of a skinny blond-haired boy who turned toward a taller man, probably his father.

Then his eyes were distracted by the flight of an eagle into the clear morning sky. He brushed his father's arm in case he hadn't seen the bird glide through the still, blue air—when stairs, deck, and even the leaves of the trees exploded above him, knocking him to the ground. The blast came from somewhere in the mine and the whole deck blew away, timbers raining down on the terrified deputies, as well as belting, tools, cables. A man-cage was coughed from the throat of the mine and lodged in the shaft house door, high above the boy and his father.

"Look out for another blast!" one of the deputies hollered, but this warning was hardly necessary for they were already in full

tilt, careening downhill, those on foot stampeding worse than the horses. Surely some were injured—but not seriously enough to slow their arm-pumping flight.

Then the man in the saddle—it wasn't Sheriff Bowers, he wasn't even there, but some other professional lawmaker—got ahead of this mad dash and fired a gun in the air. William and George could see the retreat had been halted, could see that the man on horseback was barking orders, telling his men to shape up, stand your ground like men, the strikers on the hill have blown their wad. No danger from another blast—nothing left to blow. George and William could see them beginning to regroup just below the steepest part of the hill, by the steam plant. They looked around and grinned at each other, shaking their heads in an embarrassed way. The father and son had a good laugh, along with some of the others. Their moment of cowardice had passed.

Then the steam plant blew up, raining pipes and boiler parts all over them.

This time no one even tried to stem their flight. Martic stood up from behind a boulder to watch them go by, waved his bent straw hat as they disappeared downhill toward Altman. The road was clear. The battle of Deputies' Flight was over.

"What're you boys doing here?" William asked, as he approached his brother outside the train station. "You look like you're at a funeral."

"Picket duty," Frank answered. "Ten p.m. to two a.m. shift."

"Well, join the party and have a drink." William offered his bottle to Frank and Martic, who were standing, and then toward the other men, five of them, sitting on the platform.

"We don't drink until our assignment is over—we've got a bottle for then," Frank said.

"There's not a scab or a deputy in town, so your assignment is to join the party," William laughed. And all of Altman was a party, fueled by the burglary of a liquor warehouse as well as the defeat of the deputies. The celebration was as good-natured as it was wild, at least for now. Except for the warehouse, vandalism had

been minimal during the strike because almost all the merchants were extending credit to the miners or making donations to their soup kitchens. The boarding houses no longer served food, but charges for lodging were null and void until the strike was settled. Every landlord or merchant had let it be known they supported the strike.

"The union has to keep control of the train station, isn't that right, Martic?" Frank deferred to his picket captain, who had the same rank in the strike as William. They were the highest ranking union men in Altman.

"We stay. Party later. You have good time." Martic gave a friendly salute and grinned at William while the other train-station pickets looked on nervously. William was not always the best drunk. His face darkened. Then he shook his head at Martic like the little Serb was crazy, pivoted away from the station, and walked down Main Street to rejoin the party.

"Some party okay, too much bad for strike," Martic said to Frank and the other five men under his command.

Down the street, glass shattered in a window and a shot rang out. At one point during the festivities, a rumor spread among the partiers that deputies had started moving back into their old camp. Strikers loaded dynamite on a flat car and released it downhill along a rail spur toward the shacks and corral, but it derailed along the way, exploding in the darkness. Morning light showed the casualties: two cows dead on a rancher's rocky field. In law enforcement, business, and proper circles throughout the West, that one night of rioting—and the unfortunate cows—became better known than the courage and suffering of the miners.

President Calderwood got reports of what was taking place in Altman and sent a contingent of strikers to help Martic's team reign in the rioters, some of whom—like William—had little memory, other than a headache, of their abuses. From then on, military discipline gained among the strikers.

"We must be organized and orderly to win this strike," John Calderwood wrote in an executive order.

"Is what we need," Martic explained to his team.

"It's what we need if we don't want to have our asses handed to us," Frank said, and before long William reiterated it. He still outranked Frank, but Martic's crew and the role of Frank within it was winning deep respect among the miners.

The strikers set up a command at Bull Hill, near Altman, with a commissary so donations of food and money could be put to use, hungry families first. And donations poured in from across Colorado and as far away as Utah and Idaho, even from Chicago. When it became known that a force of deputies of over 1,000 had been assembled in Fort Collins, the strikers instituted a Home Guard, a cadre force of 150 capable of leading several thousand miners in combat. Guns poured in from miners in Utah. Rifles fell into the hands of strikers from a hardware store that never filed a complaint, despite the fact that its doors were broken in and part of its inventory lifted.

After the initial mishaps, the miners were organized from top down and bottom up. Fearing the deputies would start a bloody attack, a women's relief group took charge of an infirmary where bandages and other first-aid equipment were stockpiled.

It was located in a large canvas tent on Bull Hill, roped down against the mountain wind, still relentless though warm now. Frank pulled back the flap and entered the tent and walked toward one of the medical volunteers, a girl with sandy brown hair not much older than he was.

"I'm feeling poorly," he announced.

"Where does it hurt?" she asked, taking his arm and leading him to a chair.

"Right here," he said, patting his heart.

Her concerned look faded. "I'm sorry, but we don't treat that kind of ailment here." When she laughed, her mouth showed a missing side tooth. She quickly tightened her lips to hide the gap.

"I miss Ma and the folks back home. It would make me feel a whole lot better if you went for a walk with me, so I could tell you about them."

"You have a lot of nerve," she shot back at him. "Besides, I'm on duty now, and I don't get off until six this evening."

When she left the tent at six, he was standing there, waiting.

"Don't you understand what I told you," she yelled, as she put her fists on her hips and faced him.

"Ma'am, all you said was I had a lot of nerve." Frank backed away, a hurt expression on his face. "You didn't say anything about not taking a short walk."

She shook her head, as if she couldn't believe she was about to do it, and began to walk with this boy with the bright, questioning face. Frank learned that her name was Therese. As they walked, he tapped his Stetson against his leg, as if he was keeping time with a tune playing in his mind.

"This path leads up the mountain to where we can watch the sun set." He pointed ahead to the rocky trail and offered his hand to her. She accepted it and leaned on him a little as they climbed to a granite bench overlooking the tent at Bull Hill and the town of Altman, with a clear view of Pikes Peak as well.

They sat on a smooth shelf of stone and stared as the light was beginning to drain from the slopes, and darkness filled the rocky defiles. Moments crept by, filled only with their silent watching. Then Frank dropped his hand over hers. He could feel her knuckles and the fleshy part of the fingers. When she did not move her hand away, he spread the soft flesh of her fingers until they were interlaced with his. With his other hand, he put the Stetson down beside him.

"What about your Ma and that pain in your heart?" she asked.

Frank smiled as he lifted his hand off hers and began to explain. "It makes me sad, not to be sending her money now. But I know her friends are looking out for her." He told her about Mrs. Baxter and Colonel Reinhart, and slipped his hand back over hers. "I sure would like to see them. I'd sit them all down around the table and tell them about our strike. I think she'd understand. I know Colonel Reinhart would."

Therese told him that she would be starting college that fall in Colorado Springs. "I want to be like my Ma. She's a teacher and does volunteer work." Her father had died when she was a little girl, so she had to work to help her mother with expenses. She had a job as a saleslady, and her first day of work was June 1, just two

days away. "I wish I could stay here and keep nursing you strikers, but this volunteer work doesn't pay."

He let go of her hand and slid his arm around her shoulders. She slumped toward him and turned her face up to his. She wasn't exactly pretty but had soft, brooding eyes. Frank was moved by the longing for better times he sensed in this girl. It was a feeling he recognized in himself as well. The times were certainly rough enough now. He felt warmth spreading through his body and saw her lips curve tentatively in a smile that just began to reveal the gap in her teeth. He leaned down and gave her a light kiss, then extended it, feeling warmth in her lips. Then she pulled away, head down, studying her hands folded in the lap of her white uniform.

A few stars had appeared above Pikes Peak as they began to whisper again.

"How's that pain in your heart now?" she laughed.

"Now it's a different pain, because you're leaving tomorrow," he said.

"I'll remember you, Frank—and I'll remember what you miners are fighting for."

By the first week of June, the owners had agreed to settle the strike. The miners had won, but the deputies were still in the mountains and had begun converging on Altman, frustrated by the defeat of their cause. On June 6, there were thirteen hundred frustrated deputies in the town, drunk on their own disgrace. They dreaded returning to their communities, since their bullying conduct had been widely discussed throughout Colorado. They swarmed through the streets, the rail station, the saloons. In the face of this overwhelming force, Martic held a hurried meeting with other strike leaders. They all sensed the danger of individual strikers getting picked off by this mob. A bloody battle was entirely unnecessary, since they'd already won the strike. They decided to attempt to avoid such a fight by a peaceful meeting with the deputies, just the leaders and a few others.

Martic was trusted for his good tactical sense, and maybe there was no other option, nothing else they could do but walk

down the street following the short man with the straw hat in his hand, down Main Street toward a group of angry deputies, who let him approach. Martic extended his hand to a stout man, who smiled down at him and slammed the stock of a rifle into his gut.

As he crumpled to the ground, Frank ran to his aid, but he was silenced by a blow to the head.

Then William jumped in, laid out the deputy who'd nearly crushed Frank's skull and tore the other deputy away from Martic. The general melee stopped when a shot rang out. The fighting men parted and looked down at one man, George Fuller, lying in the street. The back of his head seemed to be pressing hard against the dirt as his neck arched and he gasped hard. William dropped down and cradled his head and listened for more breath. Miners and deputies alike watched a trickle of blood inch from the corner of Fuller's mouth. The silence that had suddenly fallen over the town was broken by a low, animal moan coming from William, who was holding his dead friend's head.

This lull did not last long. Martic, Frank, and William were wrestled into the Altman jail along with other strikers selected at random. The fate of some of the unjailed miners was worse than the jailed men. During the night, the drunken deputies stripped them and forced them to walk a gauntlet, beating them, heaping them with garbage and filth from an outhouse.

The fury of the deputies was brutal but it, too, couldn't last long. Their viciousness was totally dependent on the support of their masters, Moffat, Hagerman, Smith, and the other owners, who were not making any money until production resumed. By the next day, the deputies had begun to disperse and melt away by ones and twos, pulling a hat down over their eyes as they boarded a train or rode off down the mountain trails. Not very many days ago they'd been emperors, or at least the lieutenants of emperors. Now they were rehearsing the lines they would use to make their excuses to the friends and family they must return to. "Sheriff Bowers misled us; I was not part of the violence; I was only trying to keep order."

Around Altman, Victor, and the other towns, rebuilding had begun. The shaft houses and the inner workings of the mines were

being put back together. The miners worked as carpenters and mechanics assembling what they had played a part in tearing down. But the work went quickly. It was easy to pound some nails, to frame up a building, to hook sheaves to a beam, thread a new cable, test the steam engine that powered the hoist.

Curiously, Worthington hollow needed no repair. It was untouched, including of course the saloon.

They labored for three days, truing and aligning; that Sunday they stopped work. Gray clouds hung on the peaks and a heavy mist settled on the two thousand miners spread out in the meadow between Altman and Bull Hill. Delegations from across the Cripple Creek district were there to bury George Fuller.

William was in no shape to speak, and no one expected that of him. Frank stepped forward to give the funeral oration at the head of the meadow. The ledge where he'd kissed Therese was visible through rain clouds behind him. The wind blew wet air in his face as he tapped his Stetson against his leg, keeping time while he waited for the right moment to begin. He looked down at the crowd and saw his brother staring up at him.

"We're not going to mourn George Fuller," he began. "We're going to remember him and tell his story. We need to tell it, because the history books won't. They'll remember those two cows that got blown up by dynamite, but not George Fuller."

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