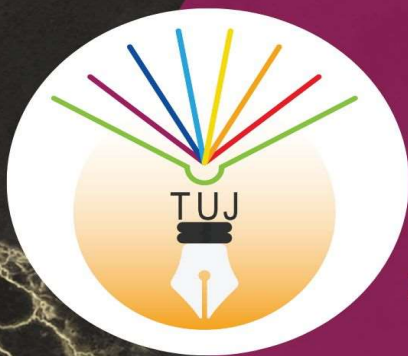


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Recaptured cattle

Haritha T Chandran

Browbeaten and profusely skimmed cattle once in a while makes a run for it in hope of finding meadows of profound freedom. They wait in anticipation of oversight of rancher and when the moment arrives, sprint onward perplexed of which way to take. World mushrooming around her to horizons in each side, play tricks in her head, dampen her advances, and tire her till she halts in exhaustion. In this moment of weakness, the rancher recaptures her and brings her back to the shed and her brief adventure comes to an end. Her momentary cunning and her long waiting for the escapade do nothing but expedite her recapture.

Haven't it for the absence of the nose ring and the rope, Riya could easily pass for an unfortunate cattle. She was found at the dirty old bus stand in the city, her escape at an impasse due to lack of proper planning. Her lover was getting slightly irritated at their idiocy. She didn't need to guess how they found her. Walls and the very air around the city spied at the whiff of girls like her, her cheap mascara running rivulets of black streams in her cheeks, curls colored honey gold flying in the air, tee-shirt she bought from vendors carpeting the roadsides for two hundred rupees with a bit of luck and haggling clinging tight to her bosoms in the April heat. She stood up like an elephant at Pooram (a local festivity in Malabar) in this crowd. She was meant to be eyed, probed, and found by the eyes of men that incessantly followed her around. Riya should have known better, she should have known she stood no chance.

Her rescue mission consist of four men, her father, uncle, a distant relative she called Chacchan, and a middle-aged man she barely knew of. Her lover was beaten abundantly before disposing at the site of her capture. She could make out a black eye and could tell the ramification involved a Brocken rib. Riya stared at her rescue mission team in the home of clemency, and none was given. Something in the way

her lover shoot a sharp eye at her when they were leaving told her she will not be seeing him again in the near future. Something told her that it could matter very little to the course of her life because more calamities were in store for her.

The rescue team and the reclaimed traveled back home in an immaculate white Innova car. Her parents do not own any vehicles. She assumed by the look of the men around her, the car probably belong to the man whose relation to her and her parents, she doesn't know.

Her father was sitting in the front seat and had refused to look her in the eye so far. His hands were reverberating as if it's itching for a thrashing. But Riya knew she was safe from all physical altercation till she reach home. The presence of the strange man was in a way a boon to her. She was also very well aware that this is not going to save her for long. Her father's body was dissipating copious amounts of heat around them. She could sense it's his anger silently dispersing into the air. But he was not the only one sweating. Everybody inside the car was sweating gallons of water from their body. The turned-on ac had very little effect in the April sun. But she could tell her father was brimming with anger. She slowly tabulated the reasons he is angry.

1) She ran away with a busboy she met on the internet (Her father hates romantic relationships and specially eloping) and brought shame to her family

2) She was wearing make-up that her father really despise.

3) she had no shawl on her neck which was strictly prohibited even inside the house by her father.

4) She involved her little sister in her even worse expenditure, teaching her sister waywardness, and also by running away, she tainted the good name of the family which could affect her sister's future. (Who is going to marry a girl whose sister ran away?)

The list grew longer as long as she thought about it. She knew better. It's better not to think about it. Maybe back home, she would be thrashed with her father's belt, maybe she would be left starving, maybe her phone will be taken away from her. It's

not like that's not been done before. But what troubled her more is the impossibility of vindication for her in the eyes of people around her. The very thought caused tremors that threatened to cause nausea in her body. She remembered the shine in the eyes of onlookers at the bus stop when she was captured. The mob grew restless with the elation of finding bait for their pecking. There is something erogenous about finding others in disgrace. She had felt that in moments she was the fortunate observer and another unfortunate had a day of bad luck. She could tell the story of she transgression would travel the society like wildfire and burn her down with it. For years now, gossiping women would mutter behind her back of her fallen virtues. There is no escape from it, she was to be burned alive, she could tell.

Chacchan, whose relation to her was a mystery to her turned around and gave a kind smile to her. But instead of mitigating her anguish, the smile had her mind burn a little more. Chacchan's words and smile always left her frail and weak in her knees. Though she acted as if she is undisturbed by his friendly advances, his sight had woken memories in her head she was trying to forget. In her juvenile years, Chacchan used to visit her home daily and gift her snacks with a coy smile. But while she devoured sweets, he would insist she sat on his laps and would fondle her in parts she was too shy to look at. She could feel fear shoot up in her collar bones. But surely Chacchan was being nice to her, how dirty her mind has to be to think bad, unruly things? But fear entrenched her every time she watched Chacchan enter the veranda of her house in the mid-noon summer heat. His body sprouting sweat every nook of his body, his eyes searching for her. By and by, she learned to avoid Chacchan. She couldn't tell why, but she knew she couldn't stand the glaze that Chacchan threw at her. She winced every time she thought of the long tentacles of a hand that Chacchan processes. Surely he is being nice to her and just loves her!

Riya was woken from her thoughts when the stranger asked her if she want water. She politely declined even though she was extremely dehydrated and withering in the heat. During the one-hour journey so far, no one other than the stranger has offered had kind words. No one had bothered to look at her, except for the stranger.

She could sense, her relatives were losing their composure out of their anger. She watched as they were slowly melting as if forming amorous blobs under the heat. Either that or they were heating up in anger. But the stranger carried a curious gait. He was neither angry nor disappointed. He was just amused. She remembered, there was something erogenous on watching others in their disgrace. Once the deed is done, he would go home and get to his spouse about how he caught a disgraceful girl who tried to elope with a busboy. What a fun story it would be!!

Her uncle was answering her relatives on the phone, grave disappointment visible in his tone. She and her uncle lived close by. He had a girl child who is only five years old. Devu was fun to play with. Devu loved Riya's company. But lately, the child had been refused to visit her and her daily life had turned drab. On one of the recent visits, Devu commented on her makeup and colored hair saying

"Ee! Chechi, why do you do this! My Achan says girls look pretty with long hair and shouldn't cut them like this. I think black color suited you better."

"Aye! Who told you this?"

"Achan did. Ammumma (grandmother) says so too. You should dress pretty as all other girls do. Amma told me to not learn things from you!"

The conversation had explained to her why the visits were not very frequent anymore. Maybe now that she was caught running away, she would see very little of the child.

The thought added more anguish to her body. Riya felt her body would burst with all the emotion that's been filling up in her for the last one hour. The last one hour had been torture. But it would be worse once she is home. She had to endure it. There is no escape.

As thoughts were sprinted in front of her mind's eye, the rescue mission team reached home. Riya was yanked outside and pushed into her room. She didn't resist a bit. She knew there was no point in doing so. Her phone was taken away and shattered into the floor. Within minutes, the door was shut. She sat still. More tribulations were on the way.

Sanctuary

Stephen J. Price

Her name did not register right away when I looked at the chart because names are not that important. They are known as the patient in Bed 2, Room 9 or whatever. I would not have looked at the patient's name until I checked the vitals. Eight clinical signs. 80% chance of dying.

Dahlia Mahikan.

I halted for a while then checked the birthdate. Everything matched.

"What's the story with Bed 2, Room 9?" I asked.

"You're looking at it," Wanda, my cohort on the night shift, replied. "That woman's story is over. Waited too long to bring her in. You know how those people are. We're just waiting for family to arrive to say their goodbyes."

"From where?"

Wanda shrugged and said, "Up north somewhere. Hay River, I think."

"Can't get much more north than that."

"Next stop, Santa's Village."

She had been admitted over the weekend and by the time my shift started on Monday night her condition had deteriorated to the point where the ventilator was only postponing the inevitable. No effort was going to be made to transport her to a larger hospital. I will be forever grateful that I did not have to be part of inserting the tube because I had been complicit in stifling her voice years before. Through cowardice or confusion, I am still not sure and I am not sure it matters.

In training we had to intubate each other in order to be more sensitive to a patient's emotions when breathing was no longer fundamental and an intrusive tube needed to be forced past the trachea and esophagus and into the lungs. Empathy, not sympathy, makes for better practice. Knowing it was a drill and I was not going

to die changed nothing. It was horrifying. One woman started screaming. The irrational side of the brain takes over and starts to imagine that the device will get stuck in there and they won't be able to get it out and my voice will vanish. Even the most stalwart student's eyes were wide with terror. I drank hot lemon and honey all night to try to soothe my throat. It hurt for days following. I did not sleep properly and stared into the darkness wondering what it would be like if I actually needed a ventilator because I am so sick that I am unable to breath on my own, that I have lost the most fundamental function to being alive. That I could not speak.

Dahlia had no problems. The tube was inserted and withdrawn and she didn't even flinch. Afterwards, she met no one's eye, almost as if she were ashamed and I have often wished I had talked with her about the experience. I was blind to so much.

It was never my intention to work in a small hospital in a town no one has heard of, but one thing I have learned for certain is that there are no certainties. We are nothing but a place to fix someone up so that they can get transported to a hospital in Calgary or Edmonton or even Fort MacMurray. We have two ICU beds. The night shift has two nurses and one doctor on call. The 10 pm to 8:00 am shift and I are a perfect match. I have no wife nor children, not even a pet. I like walking through the ward and seeing the rooms darkened.

I did not want to ask any more questions and raise suspicion so I returned the chart and walked down the hall to room 9 and looked through the window. The patient lay still and propped up at a 45-degree angle to prevent ventilator-associated pneumonia but it would make no difference now. Long, straight black hair, streaked with pewter grey, flowed over the pillow and lay next to her body, reaching her waist. The sheet was up to her chest with her arms at her side. A deep sadness filled me when I saw her.

Two young men wearing jeans and workshirts sat in chairs at the foot of the bed and when I entered they both roused and sat up straight, but did not

acknowledge me. They spoke in a language that I did not understand, but could pick out a few words that I had been taught years earlier.

“Is this your mother?” I asked and they both gave me a curt nod but did not offer any further elaboration and I did not seek any. The ventilator kept its suck and three-thump beat. I stepped close to Dahlia Mahikan, under the pretense of checking monitors, and peered down at her still face and took note of the closed eyes beneath the arc of her brow, the set of her cheekbones and the curve of her jaw. They reminded me of the last time I had seen her.

“I’m very sorry,” I said to the boys as I turned to leave. They did not stand or even shift in their chairs, but one of them gave me another brusque nod. Under the pretense of making rounds, I crossed to the patient in Bed 1, who was in a similar state but on her own. I did not tell the young men that I knew their mother many years ago.

#

The proposal was clumsy. I imagined it to be romantic but it was not thoroughly planned and I had not actually rehearsed what I was going to say. It was one of those cold days in the mountains that made the sky look like it could shatter with just the tap of a tuning fork. It seemed impossible that so much snow could cover the peaks by dropping a snowflake at a time. It coated the mountains as if poured on. Snow piled high on the edge of the highway. The crispness of the day spoke to me of clarity and opportunity. We were half way through a 75-minute drive from Calgary to her aunt’s place and for the last part she began to teach me words in her native Cree.

“Okâwîmâw,” she said.

“What’s that?” I asked her.

“Mother,” she answered.

My stiff Anglo Saxon tongue muddled its way through the supple inflections of her language like a three-legged dog trying to play with the rest of the pack. She

laughed at my inept phrasing, bending forward and then rocking back with her head tipped up.

“What?” I pleaded, quickly taking my eyes off the road to look at her. “What did I say?”

Through her laughter, she said, “Nothing in my language.”

I laughed too, sneaking quick glances at her as I drove. Her hair, straight and hanging to her waist, bounced as she mocked me and her teeth shone forth from her dusky skin.

“Are you ever going to learn this?” she asked.

“I’m terrible with languages,” I answered. “I failed French in grade 4. Who fails grade 4 French?”

This made her laugh even more.

I had hidden the ring case in the glove compartment, placing it on top of a map, bracing it on either side by the owner’s manual and a clutch of napkins. My plan was to tell her to get out the map when we were getting close to make sure we took the right exit and when she unlatched the door, she would see the ring placed strategically on top. I was feeling good. We had been dating for nearly a year. We were both 23 and nearing the end of our training and it felt perfect and I saw no reason to put off the inevitable. I took her teaching me the Cree word for mother as a positive sign.

“Let’s have a quick look at the map,” I said. “Make sure we get the right exit.”

Dahlia laughed at me again and said, with an exaggerated redneck inflection, “I don’t need no map, Billy Boy.”

At the time, the foiled plan struck me as comical, a funny story to share later on in the life we would build together, and chose to wait until after our visit to tell her about the ring.

#

A few other people had already arrived and were sitting in the room when a hulking figure stepped out of the elevator and began to walk the length of the ICU,

checking the room numbers as he went. Silver hair hung to his shoulders and he held himself straight and strode ahead with purpose and did not stop at the desk to ask for directions or to check if he had the right place.

"That's a big boy," Wanda said after he had passed and entered room 9. "He could park his boots under my bed any time."

The two young men who had been sitting in the chairs sprung to their feet at the same time when they saw the man approach and before he had a chance to get into the room, they were upon him and hugging him. I could hear one of them crying. The large, silver-haired man held one in each arm. He kissed one and then the other on the neck and muttered something to them.

It took no power of deduction to know who he was.

"Jesus, Wanda," I said. "That's her husband."

"Nope. That's her widower," she said. "Open season."

#

On the exit, I pointed to the mountain ahead of us and said, "I have an uncle lives on the other side of that mountain. We should go visit him some day."

"Sure."

"I haven't seen him in years," I pointed out. "He's a bit of a black sheep of the family. I remember him being really fun."

"Sure."

"You know that old gas plant on the 1A? He just lives up from there," I said and added: "There was once this bully in the neighborhood named Doug Shewchuck. He stole my bike and it was Uncle Derek went and got it back for me. My parents weren't too pleased by the way it was handled. All I knew was that I got my bike back."

"That's what counts."

We crested the top of the hill and she directed me onto a narrow, freshly ploughed side road.

"Since I'm meeting your crazy aunt," I continued, "you could meet my crazy uncle."

"That sounds like fun," she said. "Like I said, she's not my aunt. I lived with her for a while when I was a teenager. She acted like a mother. Sometimes we fought like mothers and daughters do."

"I guess family takes all sorts of forms."

"I guess."

We followed the narrow township road to get there. Spread out beside us to the west, a mantle of snow flowed across the foothills with copses of spruce and birch trees popping up like captured chess pieces, isolated from the action of the board. The entrance to Dahlia's old home was a tall timber arch with iron gates propped open. Dahlia fell quiet as we pulled in and followed the driveway to the main building. Gone was the jocularly of the trip and she was focused as if she now had to fix her attention on writing a test and when I stopped the car, it was as if she had been transformed from the person she was before.

We were greeted by an old King Charles spaniel that hobbled over to us wagging its tail. Dahlia squatted down and massaged his neck and jaw, losing her fingers in its fur.

"Oh, Louis," she said. "What happened to you?"

The air was frigid and our breath rose in thick ivory mists. A woman, wearing a hooded parka stepped out of the side door and greeted us. She was shorter, but not frail. Her face was open and friendly and yet there was a guarded quality to her eyes as if she expected trouble.

"You must be brave souls to visit the mountains on a day like this," she said to us as she stepped forward. "I see Louis remembers you."

"Auntie Gladys," Dahlia said. "What happened to him?"

"The same thing that happens to all of us. The only thing worse than his hearing is his sight," she said and then focused her attention on me. "I don't know where this young lady's manners are. I'm Gladys Evans."

"William," I said and shook her hand.

Dahlia offered no apology to Gladys for failing to introduce us. I was so enamored by what a perfect day this would be to ask her to marry me that I did not pay attention to how stiff she became in her sort-of-aunt's presence. I can see now that when she stood from rubbing Louis, gone was the effervescence in her face, replaced by a stillness that betrayed a feeling of isolation.

"Gladys, please," she said. "I came here because I wanted you to meet my boyfriend."

"Then we should go inside and get to know each other," Gladys said and led the way. Louis sauntered in behind us.

Her house was a traditional log structure with a woodburning stove in the middle. The warmth was enveloping. The central area was the kitchen and dining room and a couple of hallways were added for extra bedrooms. Dahlia looked about a bit but kept most of her attention focused on Louis who went to lay down on a rug beside the door.

"Is there no one else here?" she asked.

"Not these days. I live alone," Gladys said, setting a pot on a trivet in the middle of the dining table. "The last girl left about a year ago."

She retrieved a cutting board of crusty bread from the counter and we joined her at the table. Bowls and utensils had already been arranged.

The meal was hot and welcoming and the conversation, if a bit forced and unsteady, continued unabated. Gladys showed a polite interest in our lives. We spoke of how we met and that we were both studying to be nurses. Male nurses were uncommon back then, but she did not enquire further. As lunch progressed, I got the sense that neither of them wanted to venture further into any detail.

At the end of the meal, bowls empty and stray crumbs of bread discarded on side plates, tea poured, Dahlia finally asked, "So, if it's just you out here now, what do you do with yourself?"

"Well," Gladys answered. "I have a new project."

That was when she told us of her new venture. She was in the process of creating a wolfdog sanctuary. Before that afternoon I had never heard of a wolfdog. It is exactly what the name says it is - an animal that is the product of the union between a wolf and a dog.

"City people," Gladys said, her words dripping with disdain, "get one of these creatures to show off to their friends. I suppose to satisfy the image they have of themselves as rulers on their thrones with a magnificent, natural killer by their side."

It did not take long to learn that the wolf side of the equation is difficult to manage. Justifying to themselves that their pets were essentially wild animals, owners drove out to the mountains, found a small backroad and set them free, relinquishing responsibility.

"But they have no survival skills," Gladys said. "They might as well abandon their own children."

"So you're creating a sanctuary for them," Dahlia said.

"Always the skeptic," Gladys responded, with a tone that physically tightened Dahlia's jaw as if it were on a drawstring. "Yes, I am creating a sanctuary. There is a whole process. Community meetings and such. Sometimes things get a little heated but I can take it. You know me. I can't stop caring for things."

She then invited us to come look at the space, assuring us that if we were patient, the wolfdogs would appear. We stood from the table. I was drowsy from eating and, coupled with the warmth of the room, did not relish the thought of heading back outside into the frozen landscape. Seeing us putting on our boots and coats, Louis pushed himself to standing and meandered over.

"Is he coming?" I asked.

"He'll sit in here and howl if he's left behind and the wolfdogs won't come," she told us. "When the snow is this hard, he's able to follow the crunch of your boots."

Before stepping outside, Gladys grabbed a shotgun from the closet next to the door. I was taken aback at first but then assumed that it was needed for protection. Bears, cougars, coyotes. Those sorts of things.

Once outside, the cold biting at us, we followed Gladys along a trail that bordered a barbed wire fence that stretched all the way around a meadow with a wooded area at the north end. There was a second length of fencing inside but it was only a few wooden planks nailed to posts. She explained how she was going to construct a sturdier fence with an enclosure and observation stations. Louis trotted behind us. We stopped at a rolling gate that she unlatched and pushed aside. It gave a horrible scrape, resistant to any movement in the -30 cold. She ushered us in, with Louis at our heels, and slid the gate back. It screeched just as badly as the first time.

"We'll walk along this track for a while," she said. "Keep your eyes on the woods."

The bare trees were sparsely populated so I did not expect the animals to sneak up on us. I imagined that it would be easy to see them, but suddenly, like magical creatures they were there. Four of them wove their way towards us through the barren birch trees, blending in with the black and white patchiness of the bark. They moved stealthily on the fresh snow, leaving only paw prints as evidence. There was not a lot blocking us from the wolfdogs, just the waist-high wooden fence, the sort of thing that would be good for keeping cattle and horses in, but did not seem particularly effective for wild wolves. I was nervous at how easily these animals could slip through the barrier and be upon us. It did not bother the owner and Dahlia stepped forward as the animals approached.

Gladys said, "They are without a habitat."

That is the last thing I remember her saying before all hell broke loose.

#

The large, silver-haired man was not the last to arrive. Several others joined within the hour and crammed themselves into room 9 and pressed together around

bed 2. Some had drums and they carried sacks with them. The patient in Bed 1 remained unconscious, a sort of blind and deaf guest to the ceremony.

"What are they doing with those?" Wanda asked.

"They are waiting for her to die," I told her. "And then they are going to perform a tea dance."

"What is that?"

"When someone dies, they dance," I said. "And drink tea."

"They can't do that," she said. "This is a hospital."

"I'm pretty sure they are aware of that," I said and wandered over to the room. The large man and the sons remained at her side as more people arrived and gathered around the bed. The silver-haired man held the woman's hand to his forehead. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be praying. I was pretty sure he was a shaman.

The doctor was called and he consulted with the family. After everything was arranged, Wanda and I entered and together we removed the ventilator. We untaped the device from her mouth and Wanda held open the jaw as I extracted the tube. There is a moment right after when the patient appears to be choking and it is important for nurses and doctors to react as if everything is normal because everything is normal. We had taken over her breathing and she was getting used to doing it on her own again. But it would not last.

We left the family alone and on the way back to the nursing station, Wanda said, "He's vulnerable. Time to make my move."

"Christ," I said. "When they were handing out decency you must have been away that day."

Wanda scoffed. "Must be nice to be superior to the rest of us," she said.

Dahlia died within the hour.

#

Leaving the sanctuary, we drove home in silence and every time I looked over at Dahlia her face was motionless and fixed on the highway and a swell of

frustration grew inside me that a day with so much promise was now swirling into despair. I was desperate to retrieve the potential of earlier which was my first mistake. There was no way to do that.

If there had not been an accident on the highway on that day and at that time, the end would not have been so messy. I learned later that a transport truck had slid on ice and rolled into the ditch and taken a couple of cars with it. The smart thing to do would have been to embrace the opportunity presented by crawling along the highway at an unbearably slow rate and talk about what had just happened at Gladys's place and the sudden impact it was having on us as a couple and be grateful that we were not part of the tragedy up ahead. I did not do that. Instead, I took the next available exit with a plan to get on the secondary highway.

"What are you doing?" she asked, the first words she had spoken since the ranch.

"Let's go visit my uncle," I said. "It's better than sitting in traffic."

"You want to do that now?" she said. "You are going to introduce me to your uncle now?"

"It'll take our mind off things," I said and thoughtlessly added, "I met your aunt today."

"She's not my aunt," Dahlia snapped, refixing her gaze on the road ahead. "She's just someone who took care of me. Someone had to take care of me and she did it."

"You'll like him. He's a fun guy," I said and took her stony silence as acquiescence. I even thought that if I could salvage the day maybe later I could reintroduce the ring. My callowness knew no bounds.

I did not remember Uncle Derek's place being so isolated. It was easy enough to find because of the gas plant. It was two turns up the road, but when we got to the gate it was closed with a camera on top of the arch and an intercom system on a post. It was close to 4:30 and the gloaming was beginning to settle in. I was not expecting such security so stopped the car too far from the intercom to reach once I

rolled down the window. Puzzled, I stepped out and pressed the buzzer. A light came on above the camera and it tilted a bit and there was a buzz as it zoomed in. Two spotlights shone on me that I had not seen on either side of the fence posts.

A voice came through that I recognized as Uncle Derek's even though it was guarded. "Yes," he said.

I leaned over to the intercom. It was cold and I had my arms folded across my chest. Opaque, frosty mist lifted from my mouth. "Hey, Uncle Derek," I said. "It's your nephew, William."

There was a long pause and I wondered if he had heard me. "Hello?" I said.

The pause went on a bit longer and then there was a buzz and the gates started to open inwards.

Dahlia watched me get back into the car and when I was seated, she pleaded, "Let's just turn around."

"Why?" I said, shifting the car into drive and moving forward. "He just buzzed us in."

"Let's just turn around," she answered.

"It's just security," I told her. "They live out here by themselves. They have to be careful and he hasn't seen me in ten years."

The driveway was paved and long and bordered by barren birch trees. As the twilight started to transition into night, they began to look like captured soldiers with their arms raised and all shackled together. We turned a bend in the road and came upon my uncle's house. It was much bigger than the farm style bungalow that I remembered from the times we would drive out here to spend the day with him. It was now a sprawling place with several additions. Uncle Derek was a silhouette standing on his porch beneath two large lights that shone onto the driveway as we approached and stopped in front of him.

"Will," Dahlia said as I shut the car off. "Please, let's just turn around."

"We can't just leave now. We'll only stay fifteen minutes. I promise," I said. As I stepped out of the car, I was starting to share her apprehension. I had to hold my hand up to shield my eyes. "Uncle Derek?"

"William," I heard him say and he held up his hand and the large lights went out, leaving just the porch light. Through the window of the front door, I could see a figure that I assumed was Aunt Terry. "How long's it been?"

"Ten years, I think," I said. "You've done a lot to the place since then."

He had put on some weight and was bald on top, but looked much the same, with a thick beard and wearing a plaid shirt and jeans. He shifted his gaze to the car and said, "You got someone with you."

I half turned and signaled for her to get out. "That's my girlfriend," I told him.

Dahlia stepped from the car slowly, easing the door closed and stood motionless.

"This is Dahlia," I said, urging her to come stand next to me which she did like a shy child.

"Hello, Dahlia."

"Sir," she answered.

"Sir," Uncle Derek said and chuckled. "I like that. You should have called. We'd've had dinner ready."

"It was impulse," I explained and told him how we had been up at her aunt's and that an accident was holding up traffic. Through the whole explanation, he kept his eyes fixed on Dahlia. "We won't be staying long. Just wanted to say hi because it's been so long. I was telling her about you and how you got my bike back once. That might have been the last time we saw each other."

"I remember that. Showed that bohunk who's boss," he said "It's colder than a witch's tit out here, so you better come in."

He turned and then snapped up a rifle that rested on the railing. I held Dahlia's hand and led her up the stairs and into the foyer. The house was a shroud of warmth and we stood pressed up against each other.

"Terry," my uncle called out into the house. "Come see who it is."

Aunt Terry came out from the kitchen and acted surprised even though it was her figure I had seen in the window. Her hair was now grey, but she looked the same. "William," she exclaimed and rushed forward to hug me. I introduced her to Dahlia.

"Ma'am," Dahlia said stiffly.

"My," Aunt Terry said. "She's a polite one. Look at you. All grown up. Can I get you a beer?"

"No," I said. "We really just stopped in to say hello because it's been so long."

"They been up to the wolfdog place," Uncle Derek said.

At that, Aunt Terry took a step back and asked, "What are doing up there?"

"Dahlia knows the woman," I said. "We were just curious and wanted to take a look."

"That woman is crazy," Aunt Terry said. "Batshit crazy."

"Best thing to do with a wolfdog is kill it," Uncle Derek said. "Nothing you can do for them. One of them wanders onto my property, I'll blow its head off."

Just then another set of headlights came up the driveway and the car stopped in front of the house, idling and leaving its headlights on.

"Don't worry about that," Uncle Derek said, nodding his head at the car. "I called reinforcements before I knew who you were. We get some unwelcome guests up here every now and again."

"Are you sure I can't offer you a beer?" Aunt Terry said.

"No, really. We have to get going."

She then turned and looked directly at Dahlia and said, "What about you? A little firewater."

I was struck mute, not so much by the words but by the way she waited for a response, blankly like she had done nothing more than offer an apple juice for the road.

“No,” Dahlia said after a pause.

“All right, then.”

“You better let me go out first,” Uncle Derek said. “These two are known to overreact.”

We followed behind him as he stepped out onto the porch and waved his arm and shouted out that everything was fine. My knees were weak and I had to take the steps slowly to make sure that I did not miss one and fall. Dahlia kept pace next to me with her hands buried in her parka and when we got to the car, she dashed inside and slammed the door shut. I had one foot in when Uncle Derek called out to me.

“Call next time. We’ll have dinner ready for you,” he said. “Feel free to bring your squaw.”

The car followed us out onto the road and stayed behind us the whole way until we got to the highway, where they turned in the opposite direction to us. On the way home, it was as if all my words were tied to bricks that dragged them down inside me every time I tried to say something. The silence in the car was an entity. It was a life force. When I pulled up in front of her residence, Dahlia rushed out of the car and the silence held me hostage.

I did not see her again until it was with a ventilator breathing for her.

#

Inside Room 9 the drums were beating and the chanting was low. The cedar wood drums’ rhythms were pounded out by three men and two women’s voices ululated in a high-pitched harmony. From the desk I could see the crowd swaying together in unison, heads bowed and muttering. The silver-haired man and his two sons remained next to Dahlia, their bodies draped across hers.

“Jesus,” Wanda said. “I’d die just to get away from that noise.”

"It's not noise," I told her. "It's a prayer. They're helping to ease her journey. They're offering her comfort so that she won't be afraid."

"I don't see how she could get any comfort from that racket."

"That's because you don't want to hear with their ears," I answered. "That's because you only want to hear with your ears and think that what you hear is all there is."

"Sorry, did I miss an email," she said. "Did someone die and make you King of Correctness."

I left her and walked down the hall.

I stood on the other side of the window and watched the ceremony but it was not long before all my attention focused on Dahlia. Easily and without warning we are separated from everything we know and that the familiars we surround ourselves with are nothing but illusions designed to make us think we have some ownership of our lives. I have seen so much death and know that it is the great mediator. It settles all arguments. Everyone has their opinions about what happens after death but there is no denying its reality. The shell that held the woman I wanted to marry nearly thirty years earlier lay motionless and pristine under a hospital sheet that gave a slight hint of the contours and delineations of her middle-aged body. She was gone and there was never going to be any hope that I could redeem myself for my silence on that frigid day all those years earlier. I feebly attacked the narrow thought of my colleague in an attempt to offer up some sort of solace to myself that I was a man who knew right from wrong and put moral courage above all else. But I had about as much impact as Bed 1.

The silver-haired man lifted his head and caught me watching from outside of the room. He effortlessly stood from where he knelt and it was then that I saw how he towered over everyone. He began to walk towards me and, laughably, there was a part of me that wanted to run away like a child, but this man moved with a sort of force that kept a person fixed as he approached. He ducked his head to get

through the doorway. It was not necessary as the arches are quite high in the hospital, but it was probably a force of habit for him.

When he reached me, he said, "Would you like to come in?"

"Oh no," I answered. "I was just curious. I've worked here for many years and this has never happened before. This is a private ceremony."

"Death is not private," he said. "She would want you to be a part of this."

Did he know who I was, I wondered, or was that just who he was? Someone who welcomed others easily into his life.

"Are you her husband?" I asked.

"You would call it that."

"Are you a shaman?"

"You would call it that," he repeated and then turned to go back into the room. "Please feel free to come in."

"Thank you," I said as he returned to the ceremony, but I did not enter. In spite of his assurances, it was not my place.

#

The event at the ranch was a chunk of salt on ice. Gradually it ate away at my understanding of our relationship. I thought love was enough, but when the underlying truth is revealed, love is the first victim. By the time we left my uncle's place, there was nothing there. It was all exposed.

Louis must have been confused by the sound of our footsteps. We had spread out along the track and stopped moving as the wolfdogs drew nearer and he wandered apart and into the enclosure trying to find us. There were four of them and only three of us and we did not notice as one of them, a sleek, ash-coloured beast broke away. I saw him make a dash for the old spaniel and I cried out and took a few steps forward until a loud discharge froze me in place and the wolfdog buckled forward and was lifeless as soon as it hit the ground. The side of its neck was torn open and it lay with its head half buried in the snow and its tongue lolling out.

The rest of the wolfdogs disappeared into the stretch of barren birch trees. I turned and saw Gladys prop the shotgun under one arm, wander over to Louis who had not heard a thing and bend over to scoop him up with her other arm.

After a few numbing moments, Dahlia said, "Why did you do that?"

"It was going for Louis," Gladys said, incredulous. "In case you haven't noticed, the old boy does not have a lot of defenses."

"You could have just scared it off," Dahlia said, almost breathless from what we had just seen.

"Some of them cannot be saved," Gladys said and stepped over to the gate. She put Louis down and rolled it open. "They're just too wild."

"You didn't have to kill it."

"It was too wild," Gladys repeated and put her foot out to steer Louis back through the gate. "It could never be trusted."

"No," Dahlia said, turning hostile like I had never seen in her before. "It couldn't be trusted to play by your rules."

"All you've ever done is judge me," she said, turned away and started back towards the house.

"Your rules. Always your rules."

"There have to be rules," Gladys said, pausing as the spaniel caught up to her.

"There are always rules. Just because they're not your rules doesn't mean there aren't rules," Dahlia said. "You brought a gun. You knew this might happen."

"Louis was not a sacrifice I was prepared to make."

"Then why did you let Louis come?"

"You make it sound like I set this up," Gladys responded. "You always accused me of having ulterior motives when, in fact, I was the only one facing reality."

"There was an alternative."

"There were two alternatives," Gladys said. "And I chose one of them."

"The one that shows you're in charge."

"Why did you come back?" Gladys asked. "Why?"

Dahlia straightened and stood no more than a foot from her and said, "I wanted to fix things. I didn't like the way they ended."

"I gave so much of myself and all you ever did was judge me."

We both remained motionless and watched Gladys carve a path across the snow, with the spaniel following her footsteps. After she and the dog disappeared into the side door, Dahlia stormed past me and I had to run to catch up to her.

A few steps from the car I called out, "We can't just leave it like this."

"Were you not listening," she answered and swung the car door open. "I'm not welcome."

She threw herself into the car and slammed the door shut. I looked back at the house and could see no evidence of movement. I got in and started the car. Dahlia was bent forward, forehead touching her knees and sobbing. I caught a glimpse through the fence of the lifeless creature and was unable to think of anything intelligent to say. "My God," was all I could manage to utter. "That was horrible."

Staring straight ahead, her face puffy, gulping back tears, she said, "They're abandoned animals. They belong to nobody. They have no home. What does she think was going to happen? They're going to worship her?"

Driving back down the hill, the sun was blinding in its downward descent towards the daunting crags of the mountains and long shadows now stretched over the landscape as if they were great tears in its fabric. I found it hard to breathe like a belt had been cinched across my chest. Dahlia did not speak. It was a hard thing for me to see her so quiet. The road was twisting and I had to focus so as not to drive off the edge, but occasionally I glimpsed across at her. She had stopped crying and her face was now still, cheeks and jaw slack. Her dusky skin was sallow and beneath her brow, darkened eyes stared at a point so far away that I was not sure there was any way to cross that inconceivable distance.