

JESUS HARDWELL

## Grebec

EARLY OF A MAY MORNING the old man swiped the curtain and looked out at where it happened. He saw that it was spring.

The last flitch of snow had given up overnight, and the forsythia was back, the tight buds bright as bees and set to flare, and there in its branches, like a stashed piece of sky, preened the jay that had lured him, silent now. He yanked at the sash, yanked again and it gave. Drips off the eave pocked and slow-woken flies batted about the pane. One whirred on his wrist, righted, crawled the bole of his knuckle broke, when Charlie Ross clipped it with the maul that time, and into his palm. He wiped it on the sill and kept looking, breathing the earth in the air and staring at the lawn, the scars and gouges, the hog wallow they rucked it to that pit of a night they drove on it wild, wailing the banshee.

A year ago now. Didn't seem so long, another way did, as though his life right there had split in two and as one part went on and the other dragged with it, neither one moved.

He'd get to it today, start filling the ruts; the ground was loose enough, and he could see at the drive's end the mailbox post listed more, so he'd straighten that too, because there might be a letter from the girls, they were each of them due. He'd stake it tonight, maybe he would, when he went for the bills and the other trash, as he did now from habit in the eyeless relief of the dark. Had since the two times there was a bag stuffed in and a note he didn't read because the heft was shit and the notes would be no different.

It was when he came back, just after. He didn't tell Cora, but she saw the sticks set up. It was struck in the lawn, alongside the forsythia, the stark white cross like a slap he should have seen first to spare her that. He burned it in the stove and she cried, and he didn't know what to do when she went that way, never had.

October that was, leaves flying and the first flurries, soft as chick fluff. There was work to be at. Storm windows, and the sump had burned out. And the roof needed doing, some shingles. Had it most done, then getting up he stepped wrong. The ladder threw, he leaned to counter but it was going over and in a second he was scrabbling, hanging from the chimney strut. Anyone could have seen, driven by and marked him shamed. He knew he'd drop, break his legs at least, but didn't somehow. He kicked and kneed and scrapehauled himself up and, armcords jumping, laid his length out of sight on the roof. He laid a good while, then finished the shingling.

He didn't tell Cora that either. There was the phoning then. Any hour, supper or the middle of the night, a man he didn't know, or a woman sometimes, her voice the worst, like a wasp in a bottle. If he let it ring it would a hundred times, louder the longer, and even when it wasn't them still it was until he answered, so he turned the ringer off, and no one called.



Behind him the fire they wouldn't need much now ate a knot and hissed a scoot of blue flame. It wasn't low but he went over to poke it and laid another log on, leaving the door inched for draft. Squatting there, the ache in his knee worked a blade beneath, and his back seemed a plank.

Spring would limber him, but he'd miss the fire smoke in his clothes and chopping the wood, skimming it in on the pallet sled. It was something needful and he could go out to the barn, foxfoot those first weeks as though robbing his own place; he'd go split some wood and have a smoke then and be alone. He was tasting that when, from the kitchen flung down the hall to ferret him came Cora's voice calling *Carl, you there? Carl?* Her odd strained voice that had been all their time sweet to hear, a ruckle he told her, a mourning dove—they were laying in bed with the Sunday sun, before the girls that was; they were new-wed young and the loose of her hair in his hands shone, same as the sun, and his name in her mouth rose and filled his with the sounds of love—but what hit his ears now was a blackbird's bitter one.

He shook his head and sighed and, forbearing any sliver of the harshness she'd search for, sent back *yeah*, he was here, he hadn't stepped out. He was here where she knew he was and he had to be, inside the house or about it not far, nowhere with people much. That suited him now, they'd turned their backs. The Bartons, Vaughans, and Margaret Ross, they'd turned. Hemphills of course, and the feed and hardware men the one time he went in shied like a quail covey, so the hell with them. Estes too. But he wouldn't have thought that of Spurge. They'd shared some times, and hadn't

he gone over when the pied foal came twisted and they'd pulled together, slickthrust past their elbows with the mess of birthing, and blown into its nostrils his own breath until it startled and lived?

And the Church. He didn't mind about that, he'd had his fill of pews. Cora did, though, she minded, she'd lost the Auxilliary, teas and suppers and such and it was hard on her, the lack of that to go to, no dressing up and no one coming round.

There was Norman, he'd stood for him, but he couldn't drive since he put the pick-up in the ditch. Gliding from the Legion home, damn fool, in a snowstorm, and him with the eyepatch. He was a walking man now, except he couldn't walk, not far, so he'd called him a couple times and there was said a few things that needed saying. But Norman was part deaf and they had to shout, and they were never much for the phone anyway. So there was only Doris and Bill when they could, an hour or so, and the grocery fellow, if that's what he was, his hair pulled behind and tied in a ribbon. None but them, and the fat man from town, every other Friday come to gape and pester, checking he hadn't fled yet. What did he think, where'd he guess he'd be, gone to Florida? Cora liked the visit, it was that for her, she could lay out biscuits and make the tea; she plumped the pillows and before he came cleaned, on her knees even, wiping the corners. All for the fat man.

He knocked the stove door wide, spat into the fire, then clanked it shut and straightened in stages. He was weary, and he hadn't done a thing yet. Rusted lugs, he thought, and chuckling at that switched the ceiling fan to high and eased into the wingback under the lave shoved down. There was nothing beat wood heat.

But he'd been glad for the winter, the blunt days and long darknesses, and for the wind even, the clout of it, every night across the field singing the wires high and smacking the house. And glad too for the cold. Twenty, thirty below a fair stretch, never much over—ice beading the walls, and the pipes froze: he bathed them with the acetylene—but that was all right, winter stilled the world down and let him breathe. And the freezing cleared the sky and there'd be stars, the colder the more stars, always the Plough most called the Dipper and the Hunter's stud-belt, and over up the North Star's ingot his own father with an arm that touched it singled out, saying a hand's spread meant twenty degrees and a thumb was two, look there boy, see it and don't forget, so when you found the bright one, the lantern light, you couldn't be lost, yes, they'd be there, and the broadcast sparks of all the rest he'd forgot, outlasting anything done under them.

So when he went to the barn, breaking through the drifts to his hips heavy as feed sacks, the wind switching his face and he had to bang

ice from the hasp, if it wasn't peace he felt then it was something near, an unweightening and loosening, the shell of his age cracked and sloughed as he drove the axe through the hardwood, good dry maple and beech, cleaving the blocks neat through the heart, he had the eye for that yet, though his wind lacked, and splitting the kindling finer than needed so he could keep there longer, turn out the light and sit on the shed stool in the calm absorption of the black, wind creaking the beams and the mice ramping.

He'd listen to that and roll a smoke, because Cora couldn't stand it in the house, not since it happened and she changed, as everything had, the solid breadth of the farm and him on it, the wide feeling gone, and her bothered now by what she'd never minded before, him smoking some and any little sound she didn't know right away, any silence either. The radio had to be on and the television all day, filling the house, every room with yammer and what was music now, so it was the barn and shed left, but the freedom of even that was less, he couldn't be long out or she'd fret herself raw, and when he came in he'd have to take it, that bit between his teeth. He couldn't much grudge her. There were nights yet she'd wake moaning from the dream they were back, screaming and waving the torch.

She'd be heated like a griddle, and her neck wet. He'd turn on the light, leave it on and soothe at her, touch the salt runs from her face, he owed her that. Not to be angry or show the hardness, the vising he felt to see her so. But he'd warned them, how many times stood on the porch, shook his fist and warned them off, by god how many? They chunked rocks and broke the window out, two hundred for the new one, and hailed bottles on the roof, Cora trembling as they smashed, they did all that and laughed.



What choice did he have? It was stand or be driven, and thinking it even now his jaw rippled and he was gripping the armchair. Then the wall clock Cora hauled from a yard-sale home clicked eight and the damned whatever it was inside there trapped started to bong. He pushed from the chair and went back to the window. The jay was gone, and the flies. Nothing stirred. Just across the road a quarter klik the sun flashing Stott's roof and the chimney smoke straight up. Yes, spring was late this year but here to stay, and Stott would be well on to shearing soon. Now that was a job, and he could have it, those oily old Shetland ewes reeking of wet rag.

Stott was all right, though. Bought the place after Dodge Murray dropped dead haying, switched it to sheep, and made a go of it. And a day after New Year's Stott saw him shoveling and tromped over. They'd only spoke a few times, but he just wanted to say if he was him, maybe he'd've

had to. That was it exact, and he was the only one, save Norman, the only soul in the whole of Grebec understood.

It made no sense. Grebec was a right place, always had been. It mattered whose well went dry, what was doing down the road. Where'd that go? Time was there were pound parties here and shivarees, and you could raise most of a barn in a day or two, everyone showed and pitched in. And when you went over it wasn't your ass on parade, some hospital, and strangers paid for the handling. Your own laid you out. After the washing you were shaved and dressed and they got you proper in the best room, parlour if you had one, so those who should could come and see and remember who you'd been all your life. The linen was clean, they half-dollared your eyes and there were candles lit, and they wrapped your jaw in a scarf like you needed to go out and it was storming there. They did it right in the old times. His mother had for his father when the oak he was felling kickshanked and he was under. The neighbour wives helped, he was seven then and saw, and John was nine and still alive before the typhoid. Mrs. Bates brought the candles with a rabbit stew and his mother thanked her and they ate, not looking at the headchair until his mother moved it. She lived on thirty years getting smaller, as though the sun that day had made its slip toward evening and she was the shadow of something tall going down slow.

Now they gut you quick like a beefcow and ship you off. A lot don't even get the ground, just bone and soot and thrown to the wind, that wouldn't be for him. He'd paid for the spot in Allendale kirk, on a rise where an elm the Dutch blight hadn't got arched over, so there'd be green above and a mat of colour when the leaves fell. It was fine enough there but he'd rather it here, for himself on the farm if he could, maybe down by the pond where the bullfrogs twanged and deer came to drink in the cover of the alders, and wildflowers fought the grass and ran like a fever, that'd be all right, but the law wouldn't let it, and there was Cora too. So he chose the knoll plot away from the road, in the back with the meadow view. He'd get the stones set soon, now it was spring, and give the carver their names and the two dates, he'd nick them in and leave the spaces after smooth for the rain to polish until the day that was his, because he'd be the first, he felt that for certain, he'd get there ahead and warm the bed for her. Plenty folks used to say that and it was good to think of, tucked in at the last as at the first together.



There was that at least theirs. And the farm. He smiled and ran his fingertips on the screen, and still smiling, for no reason he knew poked

where it was torn and tore it more. The farm, sure, how long? They could sell, he was mulling that, for Cora he was. It was always there, clung like a web astride the run of his mind, the queer dread thought of moving off. But who'd buy, what price would they get? When he auctioned the back acres, the baler and the tractors with it, the harrow and the rest, he sold high or he wouldn't have done it, or if he'd had sons. But none of the young wanted a country place, it was too far from lights, and the old were too old. If they did sell, where then? Into town, or some other town, a box somewhere in a kennel of boxes, he couldn't take that.

But Cora, though. She'd went to her sister's when he was away and should have stayed. They'd have let her, kin has to, she could have knit with Doris and had some chat and Bill would tease her. There'd have been better, or with one of the girls. Darla most like, she had the big house, but that was the prairie and she wouldn't leave him anyway. So she was here too, paddocked in with him on this shunned scrap of earth she hated now, not that she'd say, but he knew her heart bare and every day saw it how she hated now. And him too, she must a little, in the beaten part of her apart. Because if he mentioned the land, any plans he might have, raise some chickens maybe, a few to keep his hand in, the hung look she got then, and in her eyes the farness, showed him plain it was no use anymore hoping what strangered her would pass and she'd be Cora again.

It was the trout pond settled it. He could smell it yet, seemed he could when the wind was fresh, the sweeted grab of the fumes when he went out that morning to feed them and they were belly-up floating in the rainbow colours of the gas, a hundred live fish dead because that was their pleasure, to ruin and waste. He called the Mounties again and they came, two with the leg stripes, down their backs more like, and he told them who did it, same as before, everyone knew. The Gibson boys, and Lucas Hemphill's son Cecil, the big lout he'd let ride the black horse when he wasn't big, only a gangle kid like any other, happy to be let ride, and the other one with them from the new family up the road, Ontario people he didn't know the name of then. He'd told them who it was, that it had to be ended.

Didn't mean a thing, not a rat turd's worth. They just gawked at him blank and wrote it on a pad to forget it, because what did they know of him or Grebec and the way things were here, farming your heart out on the hard acres so they'd yield and make of yourself with it something strong and fine to befit a man's labour in his life. And then, then no-counts, punks like these, that was allowed now, was it?

So to make them see, though it tarnished him to say, he said it was fifty years he'd worked this place, this forsaken ground right here under their feet redeemed all the way from those woods back, and a lot more besides,

bucksawing the trees and busting stumps, half lost a finger in the chain once and cracked his knee when the tractor reared. Still he bulled at it, hiring extra when he could, cropping alone in the lean times, hauling rocks by the ton and breaking the brick clay over and again to richness. His doing. And he built the house, he told them that, flush atop the stones of the old one, built it plumb to last and slung the porch around where Cora used to dangle in the swing chair, fanning while the chimes tinked, and the girls they'd raised played their games till they were married and away. All of his own sweat made, fifty years, more than fifty, and that wasn't nothing. But that was what they wanted, the four of them, to tear it down and make it nothing, didn't they see that? didn't they? and then he ran out of words.

One looked off at the sky, the other sucked his gut in and said they'd have a talk with the families and be around more, do what they could. Sure they would. They'd talk and talk and idle by blind and it would never be over, only ceaseless the same till he was beaten.

The Mounties left. He watched them disappear, and stayed a little after, just looking at things. When he turned to the house it was him alone against the taking.



He kept it in the shed. Hadn't used it since the coons. Or before that, with the coydog. When the coydog staggered from the woods, broad daylight, crossed the field jakelegged and stopped slathered by the barn, snapping its jaws at nothing there, not since then. He took his time with the rod, with the cloth and the oil, stroking it clean inside and out till the barrel shone like a trumpet, and the chasing and the breach gleamed, and the brass of the shells. He wrapped it in a horse blanket and stowed it by the porch door, in the wood box.

Cora was asleep. She'd taken the pills that gave her that, dropping her like a wader stepping off a ledge into deep water. He gentled the door and went out. Then he laid the shotgun across his knees and waited, three nights on the porch in the swingchair watching.

The first it rained, off and on, more mist than rain, and in the last slivers of burnish the air seemed to shimmer and some birch-hung fleece. He remembered that and how warm it was. The second the sky was a swollen bag split in one rush. The roof rang, the gutter choked and flowed over. He watched the spout cascade, the rain strafe the rail and jump. It was past two when he went in. The third he waited was starless, but no rain, only tar-black. A breeze flicked the chimes and it got late again. He had a thought to go in, he was bone-tired and they weren't coming, not tonight.

Then they came.

The grope of the beamlights showed over the rise so the sky glowed, then the dive down and up again fast, he knew it was them. They tore down the road and slewed into the drive, spun around and slammed onto the lawn and kept coming. But the ground was swamped and they were mired, gunning the tires. The eyes of the car stared direct at the porch, but he'd thought of that and was down, behind the swingchair crouched, riding the barrel on the little sway. They spilled out, stumbling and cursing each other, cursing him as though he was the dirt, him and not them, pig-drunk out front there on his own land, falling and getting up, then someone yelling they'd burn him out and laughing.

Came a blast of light. One waving a torch, that was all he could see, the flashloom of the shape huge by the forsythia, the loudest with the torch jerking it back and forth.

He fired quick twice, he remembered only one but they told him it was twice, two straight fists through the scuttery dance of the flames.

It shouldn't have been standing. But it was, a shocked animal thing wearing the mask of a boy, standing. Then the sap dark from its chest spread, and spread, and poured into the hands in a cup raised too small to catch it, then took a step. One step, and seemed from the inside to melt, as though it had no bones. The torch guttered out, and it toppled into the muck. The others ran. He heard the boots suck. It was dark and still. And the feeling then, god help him, the feeling then was the laden weight of a greed lifted and satisfied.

They took him cuffed. Through the night, fields flying by, to begin the gone time he won't remember. Jail and trial, the butterfly talk. That was all outside and trying to get in, prying where he wouldn't let it.

Then he was back, out because old, thrown back to the house and the farm and Grebec, and the pent second life he was living now.

He'd bear it out, long as was given, and wait for the day waiting for him among the years of days left. He saw those clear, as a dry stook of straw in the fist time was now. Some tomorrow on he'd come to that day and pluck the short one from the rest, and that would be forever. But a moment then, if he had the luck, he'd see it for a gift, like the coydog did by the barn when it stood and stared asking, he'd want that little time to know the rightness.

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He shut the window, banging it down, and before he turned his name came for him calling, Cora calling *Carl, breakfast's on, Carl*. He knew she'd keep on, rasping that file, so he started back to the kitchen, thinking on



what he'd say while they ate. She'd need him to talk, what of didn't matter, something pleasant and useless that would comfort her and be no part of him. So he settled on the spring, yes, he'd give her that before she asked. He'd tell her spring was here now because the forsythia was, new-risen out there where they could see it every year, every day this time of year, young and yellow and soon a fire of blooming.