

# CutBank

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## Weathering

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## WEATHERING

The old woman watched the road ahead as if she were the driver; her left hand braced against the dashboard. She turned slightly toward Leon.

“It’s unforgivable, Leon,” and she put her hand to her throat, “what that woman does to you.”

Leon looked straight ahead at the stream of red tail-lights, at the occasional white headlights of an on-coming car. The heat from the floorboard was too much around his ankles; his socks were hot. He opened the vent in the window.

“What’s her spell, Leon? What she got over you? Is it them kids? What?”

Leon heard the old woman but kept the lyrics to a sad Hank Williams’ song going in his head. They were more important to him at that moment than anything. More important than his wife leaving, more important than trusting his neighbor to look after his hawks and more important than anything his mother could ever say.

He shook his head. He listened to the cracks in the road clicking, to the hum of the snow tires on the back of the camper.

Morning light was just beginning to illuminate fence posts and alfalfa fields and the gentle roll of the countryside. The mustard yellow center-line seemed to glare with a power of its own as Leon blinked his eyes and searched the dial of the radio to keep himself awake. His stomach was all messed up. He would be all right when he got something to eat.

The kids were asleep in the back of the camper. They didn’t mind the drive at all. They enjoyed missing school; it was like a vacation. The frightening confusion of the week before didn’t exist now. They were on their way to get their mother. That was all that mattered.

The past week seemed a blur to Leon. The days blended into one long monstrous day. Only two things stood out in his memory and even they seemed more like stories someone had told him than what actually happened.

He had written a check and the bankteller told him he had no money in the account; all the money had been withdrawn. Leon said

it was impossible and that someone had made a horrible mistake. The teller then showed him the check in his wife's handwriting that had been used to take out all the money. Dazed, Leon rushed home. But she wasn't there. She had called his mother to watch the kids and she had left. No one knew where she had gone.

He remembered that. And the call he received last night from his wife, interrupting the drunk he was on, telling him she was in Nashville and that she wanted to come home.

That was all Leon knew of the week before. But he didn't like thinking about it. Ever so often it crept up on him, though. When he was driving and everything was quiet, or maybe when he was alone in the bathroom of a truck stop, it hit him like a gas pain. The adrenaline would tingle in his stomach. For an instant then he was terrified.

Inside the cab there came the sounds of crunching gravel, the popping of rocks thrown up against the fenderwelds, as Leon turned off the road into the driveway of a cafe.

Jackie, the youngest, with ebony hair like her mother's pecked on the window separating the camper from the cab. "Where are we?"

"Just crossed the line into Tennessee. Come on. Get your brothers up. We're gettin somethin to eat."

Jackie was the first one out, wondering where the bathroom was, shivering with her arms around herself. John, the eldest, followed. Bobby next, rubbing his eyes, trying to get the sleep out of them.

"Where are we?"

"Tennessee," answered Leon. Vapor flowed like smoke from his mouth.

"This where Mom is?"

"No—we're gettin somethin to eat."

"Oh."

Leon felt wide awake after the breakfast and coffee. His mother sat beside him in the cab with a brown grocery sack full of sandwiches and fruit at her feet, working a cross-word puzzle. Leon's neck was tight. He rolled his head around, then stretched his arms out as far as he could in the driver's seat.

He wore the green wool shirt he always flew his birds in. He felt some anxiety wondering if his next-door neighbor would look in on them like he said he would.

Leon kept a pair of hawks on the property he rented. He had built a

mews with chicken wire over the windows a short distance from the back of his house. Most nights after work, near sunset, he would stand at one of the wire covered windows, squinting to see the hawks perched high near the roof of the mews. On weekends when he weathered the hawks on stumps in the backyard, he would spend hours in a chaise lounge watching them. They sat on stumps in the open sun and would take in the whole sky above them as they moved their heads smoothly to either side. They bathed themselves in a small tin of water he placed near the stumps.

Leon thought of the last time he had flown the red-tailed hawk. He remembered reaching a bluff overlooking a small glade; the setter was poised by his leg. Beech trees and a light scattering of maple surrounded the glade like an amphitheater. With his free hand, Leon wiped the perspiration off his forehead. The other hand, steady, held the hawk while she adjusted her claws to get a better grip into the gauntlet. The sky was overcast. A cooling breeze ruffled the silver nap of the bird's feathers and sent a soft, swift chill over Leon as he continued on over the bluff; his gaiters attracting beads of moisture from the ankle-high grass. The setter scouted ahead. His coat was like red brushed aluminum in the dim sunlight.

The cab was quiet except for Jackie letting out an occasional muted yell fighting with her brothers and the tinny sound of the radio at low volume. They were forty miles outside of Nashville. Leon's wife was born near here. Leon had traveled these roads many times driving down to see her before they were married. This stretch of highway worked on him like the scent of an old girlfriend's perfume. He felt warm and lonely and sentimental.

His mother slept, snoring lightly with her head back and her mouth open, the cross-word puzzle on her lap.

They passed the dance hall. It was windowless cinderblock, pale green, a rectangle surrounded by blacktop that had been dusty gravel before. The second time they went dancing he had taken his wife there. No other girl he had even taken out had smelled so good. Every whiff of her perfume made his stomach go crazy. They sat in the car drinking the pint he brought along, listening to some country fiddler inside the dance hall. All he wanted then was to keep her beside him and to feel her warmth and the slight movement of her chest as she breathed.

By the time they had finished the pint, they were ready to dance. And they did, until the lights were turned up and a tall man in a white cowboy shirt chased them out of the place. They danced all the way to the car.

It was a warm summer night with the air cool and fresh enough to make Leon feel like he could drive forever. The moon was out and they were still a little drunk. Leon had his hand on her knee and she leaned her head on his shoulder. Leon took the long way home. He wanted to drive all night with her. They passed her house.

“Well, what do you think?”

She nodded with her head still on his shoulder. She squeezed his arm.

They kept driving that night, all the way to Elizabethtown, and stopped at the Sandstone Motel. They checked in as a married couple and giggled on the way to their room. They both woke early but stayed in bed until two in the afternoon. They sent out for a pizza when they finally got up and ate it in the room without any clothes on. Leon couldn't remember when he had felt better.

Leon's mother choked on something and turned blue; her knuckles were white against the dashboard. Leon pulled the camper onto the shoulder.

Jackie peered through the window going into the cab. “Is she dying, Daddy?”

A man was already in the phone booth. A cigarette burned in the hand that held his forehead. He occasionally gestured with the same hand. The windows were fogging. Leon stood with his hands in his pockets, waiting, his arms tight against his sides. His coat was open.

The man left, but the smoke from his cigarette lingered behind, sweet. Leon entered, shut the door and looked over to see his mother and kids watching him from the camper. He looked down at the tires. The dial felt cool against his fingers; the receiver smelled like smoke. Leon hesitated before dialing the last number. Vacant stares, a few nods; Leon traced the outline of the telephone with his finger. Then he hung up the phone.

After he got back into the camper, he said, “She says she's ready and he took off for a while.”

“It's not right, Leon. Goin right up there. And him. How you know he's not gonna show up?” The old lady lit a cigarette.

Leon shook his head and threw the one he was smoking out the

vent.

“She give you directions?”

“Yeah—it’s not far.”

The old lady sat back in her seat. The kids were quiet. Jackie lay on her stomach and the boys played cards. Leon held the steering wheel with both hands.

The red-tailed hawk was heavy. The muscles in Leon’s right arm tensed when he thought of the bird’s weight. He thought again of the day he had flown the hawk. He was at the north end of the glade by the edge of a cornfield. The setter was in point. Leon paused a moment and looked into the sky, then at a row of oaks on the other side of the cornfield. He walked into the corn to flush up a grouse. Three broke loose with an awkward knocking together of their wings and a brief rustling of the corn plants as they took to the air. Leon let them fly ahead a good distance, then released the hawk’s hood with his teeth. He lowered his fist, rolled it slightly, and then the bird was flying hard and fast in pursuit. He reached down and patted the dog’s shoulder.

One grouse lagged behind. It made a quick dart to the right, isolating itself from the other two. The hawk was above it now. She angled down from her high pitch, gaining speed rapidly in the stoop. The grouse looked back and tried one last time to dive out of the way, but was overtaken and knocked out of the air instantly with a blow from the hawk’s talons. The hawk followed the grouse to the ground, landed beside it and picked at the grouse’s feathers.

When Leon arrived, he extended his arm and the hawk hopped to his fist, planting its claws firmly into the leather of the gauntlet. He cut off the grouse’s head and gave it to the hawk. She picked at it daintily. He dropped the rest of the grouse into a leather pouch slung over his shoulder and replaced the hawk’s hood. He whistled for the dog. He came running low through the grass, his ears back. From his coat pocket, Leon took a feather and gently stroked the bird. The setter was panting.

The apartment house looked like a place out of a detective magazine where a gruesome murder might have taken place. It had a flat roof and black wrought iron railings peeling paint leading up cement steps. The apartment his wife was in was on the ground floor.

A white late model Cadillac parked near the door had the initials JHB on the license plate.

Leon stopped at the door. He looked at his hands. They were dry and the fingernails needed to be clipped. The wind was blowing. His neck was hot and throbbed and his ears burned. Leon stood there, looking at the door, looking at the number, thinking about his fingernails.

He knocked and stood with his hands in his pockets, his coat open. The lock rattled.

A big man in a red Ban-Lon shirt opened the door. He didn't say anything right away, then he called over his shoulder, "He's here." He walked away from the door, leaving Leon standing with his hands still in his pockets in the open doorway. Half way across the room, he turned and motioned to Leon. Leon stepped self-consciously in and pulled the door shut behind him. He stood there by the door while the man walked over to a red vinyl covered bar. He looked at Leon. "Want a drink?"

Leon shook his head.

The man fixed a drink for himself. Leon nervously scanned the room. The curtains were pulled and everything had a greenish tint. He noticed his wife's coat crumpled in a pile on a chair. He liked that coat; he had helped his wife pick it out. Now it looked unnatural, like seeing the same coat on a fat lady in a shopping mall.

Leon's wife appeared in a doorway of a room right off the one they were in. She didn't look right, either. Her eyes were swollen. She was wearing a new dress. She looked up at him. "Just a minute. Okay?" she asked.

Leon nodded with a blank stare. She disappeared into the room again. Leon stood there listening to the muted, airy rush of the highway in front and the TV mumbling in the background. The man belched.

"She's really got you. Doesn't she?" The man grinned and shook his head. He laughed. "That's too bad."

Leon stood with his hands in his pockets, looking into the room into which his wife had disappeared. He saw an unmade bed with yellow sheets. The floor was shiny linoleum and shoes were scattered under and around the bed. Leon was hot. He had kept his coat on.

"I guess you just don't have what it takes, pal, to keep her home." The man leaned against the bar holding his glass in both hands. A diamond ring in the shape of a horseshoe on his middle finger caught

what light there was in the room and sparkled.

Leon got a broader stance on the floor, looked down at his feet and back into the room where his wife was. He turned over and over in his pocket a lock-washer he had found on the floorboard of the camper.

"But I tell you, pal. I'm damn glad you got here when you did, because she's driving me crazy." The man took a drink. "She's wacko, pal."

Leon's wife walked back into the room carrying a blouse and a coat and some other things on hangers. Leon thought she looked childish.

The man pointed to her and shook his head. He said to Leon, "I wouldn't put up with it." Then he walked over to her and began to go through the clothes she had on the hangers. "I didn't say you could take that." He ripped a black dress from one of the hangers. Some of his drink spilled on the floor.

She looked up at him, her eyes wide open and starting to tear. She tried to stop herself. Her face wrinkled up; tears dropped down her cheeks.

Leon turned to walk out the door, his wife was behind him. The man poured himself another drink. He called after Leon. "You poor bastard. All I got to say is I'm glad it's *you*." The man made the gesture of a toast with his drink.

Leon paused in the open doorway, his hands on either door jamb. He stood there until his wife whispered, "Come on" behind him. He walked straight to the driver's side of the camper. His mother's and children's eyes followed the woman to the passenger's side and watched her get in.

"Hi Mom."

"Hi Mom."

"Hi."

"Hello Elouise."

Leon's wife reached through the window going to the sleeping quarters of the camper and tousled the two boys' hair and touched Jackie on the cheek. The old lady looked straight ahead.

Leon stopped at the first packaged liquor store on the way and left the engine running while he went in. He came back with a six-pack of beer and a carton of Coke. He handed the Cokes to the kids in the back and took a can of beer from the plastic ring for himself and offered the others to his wife and mother. His wife took one and handed the rest back. Leon slid them under the seat.



His wife sat up straight in her seat, her mouth firmly shut, staring out over the hood. Leon placed his beer between his legs and turned up the volume on the radio.

Leon's mother watched the road ahead; her leg leaned against his. The kids were quiet in the back. His wife held her beer in her lap with both hands.

Just outside Nashville, they passed a roadside attraction called the African Safari, a red aluminum pole building with lions and tigers painted on the side. Jackie pecked on the window and pleaded, "Let's stop."

Leon pulled into the parking lot. There were only two other cars. The old lady stayed in the cab while he and his wife and the three kids went in. They kept together while they looked at each exhibit. They stood in front of a giant python and the boys tapped on the glass cage. The only bird in the place was an ancient, badly stuffed golden eagle. When they got to it, Jackie said that it was just like the hawks he kept. Leon explained to her that it was an eagle and they all looked at it a while longer. When the boys went off to see the tiger, Jackie left too.

Neither Leon or his wife said anything as they looked at the dusty eagle. Leon was thinking that he would put the hawks outside to weather when he got home. It would snow soon and he would not be able to fly the birds again this season. He would pull up the chaise lounge close to the birds, maybe bring out a six-pack of beer. He was almost startled when his wife took his arm in hers.