

Summer 1991

An Easy Thing to Remember

Blair Oliver

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Oliver, Blair (1991) "An Easy Thing to Remember," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 36 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss36/12>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

An Easy Thing to Remember

It happened on a Saturday, late February. A she lion wandered down out of the Flat Irons, made tracks through Lost Gulch into my old back yard, and left with my ex-wife's poodle hanging from its mouth.

I know this because my phone rang.

She said, "You're going to pay for this one."

I didn't doubt it. Not for a moment.

"Your son loved that dog," she said.

Our son's been dead for two years. He was stillborn, and it came between us. Instead of making us stronger and closer and more for each other, it was a bomb. My ex, Carol, continued to make a life for our son, if not for the three of us.

At first when she did this I thought nothing. Or post-something. I thought she was like one of the women you see on television, on Phil Donahue. Then I made small fun. After three months I got to figuring we needed easy laughter if we were going to lead a life at all. I might've been wrong. But whose call was it? It was mine.

So she kept buying things. Rubber toys and boxes of diapers began forming piles in the bedroom, walling us in. When I tried taking the crib down she cried. I held her and said we'll be OK and she said she better get started on a pair of booties. I told her I loved her a lot.

And when the knitting went on and on, she agreed to get help. I'm talking a psychiatrist. Our life was made better, but then she started sleeping with him. The three of us had it out. I went to jail.

I live in a studio in west Boulder, in a place built for the college students. It's one mile from my old house and Carol expected me to head over and see what happened, so I went.

Walking. In Boulder you don't mind. The red and brown stone pours through your senses, the colors running in you like they do the landscape, the buildings and even parts of the sky, to the south above Denver. This is the eastern edge of the Great Divide. The Flat Irons loom stark and hard to the west and north, half topped in sun-glazed snow. The Rockies here are splintered and sharp, and they were behind me.

Evergreens grow fat on the outskirts of town. And on up. Which made my walk red, brown, white and green. The blue sky was thick as midnight.

She was waiting on the front steps with the outside light burning soft in the daylight. Maybe she didn't want me passing by, or maybe it shined in warning. She sat there and looked pretty in a red sundress underneath a gray sweatshirt of mine. Her straight dark hair just touched her shoulders—short, not the way it was when we first met. I struggle to think literally.

Carol stood when I walked to her. The yard needed work. She stood and pulled me close and I let her. Her body felt right against me, familiar in a good way. For a few moments I thought I could take this forever, like it was all a bad dream, the stuff before. But women do that to me. We kissed a little.

My old house, I worked and cared for it. It was a step forward in life. I'd be lying if I said it turned heads. But that doesn't matter. It doesn't. I left school after high school to work at the Rocky Flats Plant installing fuel assemblies. I secretly protest the place I work. But money is money.

And I pushed aside my own convictions to buy the house and

make myself a decent husband in the most obvious way. I'm still at the plant. I don't make excuses. The house is a shingled brown colonial, shaded under a bent arm of trees and mountain. Now it's hers. The payments are mine.

"Step right in," she said.

She was barefoot. I kicked off my boots and followed her. The way she smiled, turned and walked, you would think she had my number. I do admit I enjoyed watching her, the way she always looked clean. We sat on the couch in the den, the sun slanting in through the front picture window. Everything was the same except for her hair. A smell of burning pine and coffee hung in the air, and a women's magazine lay closed on the end table. On the cover it promised fifty ways to leave your lover. A skinny model smiled at me. Carol leaned into me on the couch, her head against my chest, hot breath and all. I tried controlling my heart.

"It's knocking," she said.

Talk. We needed to talk.

She squeezed my thigh and turned her face up to mine.

Goddammit, I thought.

Carol worked for the house too. She's not the type of woman who'd own a poodle. She works full time as a legal secretary for the local firm specializing in motorcycle accidents and divorce. She did the decorating and planted the herb garden the dog always ate. The lawyers are her aces in the hole. She carries their names like Colts.

"We owe that dog a proper burial," Carol said.

"It's gone," I said.

"We've got to find it."

Now I'm not one to take dead dogs seriously, particularly that one.

"I'll call the police," I said.

"Go right ahead. You take the easy way out."

"They oughta know there's a lion loose in the streets."

"Don't be so dramatic," she said.

She called the newspaper and reporters surrounded the house. Carol greeted them at the door and detailed the gruesome event. She called it that. She gripped their attention and was more animated than I've ever seen her, even while I was falling in love. And for the first time I thought, there was no lion.

She glowed. Because that's what did it. Carol had a love for life that grabbed you by the hand and said run with me. I can mark the first real day of my life as the day I met her. Before, I now know, I was simply going through the motions. She taught me to feel.

I met her on a ski lift at Beaver Creek. She talked about possibilities, and I was thinking in terms of love by the time we reached the summit. I looked out over the hard-lined mountains, the sky icy and blue, punched with clean clouds, and I smiled at the world. I'm saying it was the first time I ever felt like doing that. For miles in each direction, white peaks shot above the tree line and slid back down into deep green. I couldn't imagine anything beyond them. Carol took off and said catch me if you can.

The snow flashed, champagne powder mixed with grayer, man-made crystals. I thought skiers could lie as easy as any other sportsmen, could talk long about the big one that got away. And I decided I wasn't a sportsman or a dreamer but just a guy whose luck might be about to turn.

The trail ran like a tear track down the face of the mountain.

Ponderosa pine, Douglas fir and juniper crowded the edges, the resort having been cut through the heart of the White River National Forest. There stands aspen. And fluorescent clad skiers whizzed by and I tumbled after her like a Rumanian teenager. I pinwheeled down and saw my end. Carol helped me up, the cold snow burned in my nose. I insisted my rental equipment was faulty and skiing too geometrical. That seems like years ago. We laughed in slow motion.

The reporters left with huge smiles and a story. One said, "This will certainly help with my diet. I'm on the NutriSystem."

Carol laughed, pleased with herself. She asked me to stay for dinner, and I said I'd like that but I've got something to do. The truth was I had no such thing.

"Oh, too bad."

"I'll call the police first."

"It was there. I made nothing up."

They seemed happy to hear from me, and like old drinking cronies I told the sergeant to be on the look-out. He said thanks for the tip and thank you for being a solid citizen. I said it was my pleasure. He said don't push it.

There were no sounds in the house so I lit a fire before leaving, using the driest logs I could find from the stack in the yard. The fire fizzled some before the wood began to crackle. A potato bug popped. Carol watched me from the couch, and I knew there had been a man here.

"So," I said, hating I said that.

"Leaving?"

I slid my hands into my pockets, the fire at my back. I felt a wad of laundered money.

"Who's been here?" I said.

"Ghosts," she said.

This talk put me in a bad way. But . . . It's always but with me and her. We're divorced a year, thirteen months and I'm only twenty-four. What holds me, draws me to her against all reason, I don't know. Can anyone know? I'll call it love. I will.

She cooked lamb and rice, and we drank a bottle of California wine. It was dry and we toasted that food, that company. We heard the wine.

"Do you miss our son?" Carol said.

"I don't think about him."

"That may be a problem."

I stood, went to her and kneeled at her side. I took Carol's hand and pressed my lips into her arm.

"No. It isn't," I said.

"Stop talking about it," she said.

We went to bed in the room we once shared. I always give in to the moment. It is reckless, for better or for worse. Cry tomorrow.

"A plan of action is what we need," Carol said.

Morning was close, the gray light staying outside the window, not coming in at all. Airy snow fell around and down, holes in the gray. Daybreak would bring glare and you'd need sunglasses to keep a straight face. It would be as most days are, here in the Colorado west. Like a billboard scene along an eastern highway. Say the Marlboro man is on it.

"We'll go up Flagstaff," I said. "We'll look for that lion. The dog is done."

"Do you think I'm OK? Honestly."

"No."

"You're a bastard," she said.

"I'm more than that."

"You just love the image."

"Image?"

"You love acting down and out. Being the guy with broken dreams, a victim of happy hours and wanted by the law. You're struck by what you could be. And it is all very desperate."

I took time out. Some passed.

"Do you think that, Carol, do you? Is that what you're thinking?"

"I love you," she said.

Then nothing else. I didn't think about it. She could say those things, which at times I feel might be true, and then forget she had even spoken. I let it happen because I wanted her to love me, to keep telling me that.

"Do you hear me?" she said.

The light was coming up. From the east it came.

We set out to find a mountain lion, riding up Flagstaff in Carol's black Silverado, a truck that looks even better caked with mud and snow. Throw in some rusting metal.

Carol packed a lunch we'd eat sitting on an Indian blanket on the rocks over Lost Gulch. We'd search a while, find nothing because there'd be nothing to look for, and eat that lunch and maybe make love under the sun and wind. I knew this. I know my weaknesses.

The truck ground up the narrow, dirt road, Carol driving in low gear. We passed a man in a dark suit, standing outside his car,

looking south over the hills toward Denver. There was no smog line. He stood with his hands deep in his pockets and face rigid. He looked at us, waved and pointed a finger to his head as if to blow himself away. It cost him his rhythm and a little balance. He had to stop. Rest. Fear?

No, I didn't feel that.

Rock and dirt grated beneath the truck tires. Carol drove five miles and we pulled off the road, high in the hard rock at Lost Gulch. Two paths led into the trees, and a sign said there were some rules there. It said beware of mountain lions and told you what to do if you encountered one, however unlikely.

Carol forgot about searching for the dog. Or chose not to, thinking better of it, feeling all right about things. I wasn't going to remind her. Do you think I'm crazy? She seemed to snap in and out of something like depression, but something more slanted, more sideways than that. You grab the good times, hold hard and hope she does too. There's always hope. There is always that.

We walked the short trail through pine and knotted juniper, and climbed the cold rocks. This was winter and it was warm, fifty-five and the air dry, snow and ice clinging to edges. We climbed to a flat terrace over the valley of trees where we could see sections of trail below, quick streaks of emptiness.

I put down our pack. Carol took out the blanket, slid to the rock rim and spread it neatly, pressing the folds. The worry line was woven near the corner of the blanket to ward off spirits. It was a black band striking across a field of turquoise, and we liked to think it would always work, always give us a one-up, although we bought the blanket from a Mormon in Salt Lake City. Superstition doesn't impress me as much as the dollar. I'll allow it was the right price. We pretended.

I breathed in the air. Miles across the valley, arcing with the horizon, the range pierced the deep sky. Long's Peak reaches over fourteen thousand feet and towers above Nymph Lake, clear and cold. I thought Pike's Peak or bust as I often do.

"Why so close to the edge?" I said.

"It's close to nothing."

Carol pulled me down onto the blanket. She slid a hand inside my thigh and told me to look at those ripping hills.

"I'm not certain why I'm here," I said.

"You love me," she said, pointing to our right. Black Crow's Nest broke its surrounding blue. It was in the clouds and is where you go to be at the center of the universe, or to watch birds. Eighteen miles of quartz lies encrusted between the peaks, and some believe this is more than geology. It's the roof of America, and it smelled clean.

"I do," I said, smiling, thinking only of the snow, sun and evergreens, and Carol right there with me. It was the stuff of postcards and sentimental poetry, always reduced to that in the telling. So I say it. And call me, you, call me a liar.

"Cliches," she said. "This is wonderful. I can die here. I'd be happy to die in these mountains."

"It wouldn't be hard," I said. "A good stretch and you'll fall right off."

"You go ahead."

"I have to eat first."

A breeze blew on us. We watched a red-tailed hawk circle wide and soar through open air until it was gone. We shared sandwiches and drank beer, and I let postcard thoughts get the best of me because she remembered I hate mustard and the sandwiches were dry. It's all right to think in this way for short min-

utes. It was the time I couldn't get right. For short minutes.

We undressed, held each other and made slow love. At first I remembered the edge. Then I didn't care. We were alone, in the mountains, in the world. Me and my ex-wife.

"I've put the baby behind me," she said. "It's strange, but I have. Just like that."

I listened to the wind running over the rocks. Carol shivered.

"It's OK," I said. "You don't have to talk right now."

"I've been angry, and I know so hard on you. I wake some mornings aching to cut the past. I can't always do it. The baby, though, isn't me anymore."

"Then why did you bring it up?"

"That was before."

I knew I needed to say something else. I wanted to believe her. I felt close but couldn't speak. So I held tight.

"I know we can't be like we used to," she said.

"We could," I said.

And then she heard something. I kissed her freckled breasts. We were at peace and she heard a noise, and it would have to be her that heard it. It couldn't have been me. I wouldn't hear beyond our last words.

But I followed her eyes and saw the lion on the rocks at the trail end, between us and the truck. It was golden brown, muscular and had watched us make love. It waited until the moment we were most vulnerable as if disbelief and Darwinism weren't already on its side. I considered that lion. I laughed.

It wasn't funny. It was there, and real, coat lit against the cool rocks. I could see the lines of its whiskers, straight needles poking air. I said put your clothes on and Carol said why. She said it slow. She was right.

Don't run, it likes the chase. Do not move toward the lion and do not crouch, it may think you plan to attack. Jump up and down. Wave your arms and legs. Make yourself look larger than you are. Do that. If the lion attacks, cover your neck and face. Hope it will pass you by.

So I leaped like a madman. Carol started in and we hopped and acted out, buck naked. In barrooms across the state I get in trouble defending the truth of this story. How it wasn't funny. How my entire life was down to this.

The lion stood ground, watching us. For a long time it waited us out. I can now think of those eyes—light, transparent as if we were not really important. I could almost see both of us reflected in them. The lion was testing us, and while I was jumping up and down I lost myself. A trigger was pulled. I knew if I went back to her nothing would ever change. I thought like the lion, daring it.

It turned, stopped, and its head bent to sniff the rock. My eyes were blurry, blood pounded in my temples. I knew Carol was standing next to me. The lion licked the ground, looked back at us one last time and then left, walking off the way it came.

"You can stop jumping," Carol said.

I slowed, then stopped. I saw the lion walk but for some reason I kept jumping. A feeling close to disappointment washed over me.

"Get dressed," I said.

Nobody spoke on the ride back. The light softened late in the afternoon, lifting west. The air went cold, and the moon was faint. I listened to the sound of the tires, and we both looked straight ahead.

"What are you thinking?" she said.
Nobody said anything.

My old house was lit inside. Lights were shining that shouldn't have been. A muscle in my stomach moved.

Carol stiffened in the driver's seat. She hit her hand against the dash and turned off the ignition.

"Damn it," she said, and laid her forehead down on the steering wheel. "You shouldn't be here."

I got out, closed the door and walked across the yard, up the steps. I saw new footprints through the snow. The closing of the truck doors played in my head. Thud. Solid like that.

She came behind me and touched my arm, the one holding the knob, my left arm. She said please, wait one minute.

"Please," she said.

I went in. Logs burned in the fireplace, and a man was lying on the couch, reading the women's magazine. His shoes were off, his dress shirt untucked and tie loosened, and a beer can rested between his legs. It was a Silver Bullet. He looked at me, and I didn't surprise him. He wasn't a big man. I saw that right away.

Carol edged by me into the den. The man stood up across the room from us, and my clock struck high noon. He smiled awkwardly at Carol then looked at me again.

"It appears we have ourselves a Mexican stand-off," he said.

I looked at him and he shut up. We looked at her.

Carol moved to straighten the pillows on the couch. She busied herself. I couldn't take this at all. There are things I understand. That I have to work in the morning, and that I will die. I understand occasional violence and the need to take for granted the sun will rise. I know work.

And there are things I don't understand. I shook the man's hand and walked outside. I shut the door and left. I still don't know why I shook that man's hand.

Who can I blame, who owes me? No one. Is that such an easy thing to remember? My real life. The beginning. It's always the beginning. My name is Wade, Wade Rust.

Outside, cars rolled by me in the dark. I walked toward town, to Pearl Street, then changed my mind and started heading for Gold Hill. Lamps burned behind closed curtains, and two shadows pressed in an upstairs window. I was almost out of the neighborhood and into the woods when this car, this station wagon, pulled to a crawl and began creeping next to me. My hands were buried in my pockets, and I walked faster until I realized I couldn't stay ahead. I turned my face to the car, still moving, and through my breath I saw a long-haired woman staring at me. She looked puzzled and began opening the passenger side window.

"Excuse me?"

"Wade," I said.