

# CutBank

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## Boxes

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## BOXES

TWO WEEKS AFTER MY girlfriend Brenda died, men in a delivery truck rolled up, leaving three enormous boxes outside my door. The boxes were extremely heavy. My friend Steve helped me move them into the TV room, where they sat unopened for too long in front of the couch. Pretty soon I got in the habit of resting my legs on them whenever I watched my favorite shows. The tops of the boxes softened so much, I couldn't set my food or drinks down on them anymore. Friends came over, Steve for instance, and asked me questions about the boxes. "Are these from *her*?" "How come you still haven't opened them?" "Do you have any idea what's inside?" Enough time had passed that it was reasonable for them to pry. And by then, splattered like blood on the surfaces of each box, were spaghetti and pizza sauce stains. Not to mention all of the spilled drinks: a glass of merlot, a large coffee, a German beer, two bottled waters, and a Mountain Dew. It got so my friends were leaving notes on the sides of the boxes. I think it was Steve who scribbled this one in big black Gothic letters: *You have a backward way of expressing love.*

One day I sat down to watch M\*A\*S\*H. I'm a big Alan Alda fan. His face makes me smile even before he says anything. Even if he's involved in something serious, as when he's tending to a patient with a particularly massive war wound, I can't help but go on smiling. Anyway, I was thinking how comforting it was to have Alan Alda's face there in front of me, when I discovered a hole in the side of one of the boxes, a little dark hole, the size of a quarter. During a commercial I stuck my finger inside of it and felt what was there. Steve let himself in without knocking and sat down next to me. "Thank God for Alan Alda," he said.

After the episode of M\*A\*S\*H, Steve leaned forward and stuck his finger in the hole. Steve doesn't have a face like Alan Alda's, but it's a good enough face, round and kind. When

he pulled out his finger the lines on his forehead disappeared. He said, "That's what I thought was in there."

"Me too," I said.

"Do you want me to leave?" He said.

"I don't want anyone to leave," I said.

Later on we rode over to Steve's house, picked up his tools and some wood he had left over from when he built his deck, and we brought them back to my place. We worked steadily for five hours—sawing and polishing and measuring and drilling. Afterwards we had a fine set of bookshelves hanging on the wall. We sat back down on the couch and downed a couple of beers. Steve's forehead was damp and his face was red, but he wasn't breathing hard, like I was. Another episode of M\*A\*S\*H was on. There was a festival or some shit going on—forty-eight straight hours of M\*A\*S\*H. During the opening credits I told Steve I thought he would've made a good wartime surgeon—a nice enough thing to say to someone, I suppose, though I wished I had waited for the opening music to fade. The music had cheapened the moment a bit, and I tried to make up for it by adding, "You're really great in a pinch." Which was another way of saying, "I am not."

The week before Brenda died had been a whirlwind. She was living with her parents by then, resting in the single bed of her childhood. Hospice nurses came and went in shifts, bravely talking to her as if she wasn't sick at all, as if she wasn't really lying there bald with her teeth clenched, waiting to die. I'd visit her, and there would be in her room an entirely new nurse I had to introduce myself to. "I'm the boyfriend," I would say. Each time I said it a razor sharp line of guilt would slash at my heart. Her parents had wanted us to marry and couldn't understand what was taking so long. And now that there was no chance of their dream ever coming true, they greeted me at the door and escorted me out each night with a firm handshake. I found that when I was in her room, I lost my voice. I couldn't speak to her or touch her or even look at her face. I felt that I had no right being there, in her childhood room, with her parents looming behind me in the open doorway.

Four days before she died, one of the hospice nurses, a



woman named Vera, called me at my home and said that Brenda had asked if I would come read to her. Right away I went to her apartment and grabbed a book off one of her many shelves. The book was a collection of short stories by Alice Munro, one of her favorites. I drove it over to her parents' house, feeling close to how I imagine the deliveryman must feel when he sets foot out of the helicopter and runs the fresh new organ up to the patient awaiting a transplant. But when I got there, Vera was gone, and there was a new worker in her place that I had never met before. Brenda's parents were in her room, sorting through her things, dusting off swim trophies and the collection of glass animal figurines that were neatly arranged in rows on top of her bureau. When I entered the room her mother said, "Look, Bob. He's brought her a book. Isn't that nice?"

"Indeed," said her father, though I saw by the way he went back to dusting that he couldn't see much use for a book at a time like this. What he wanted was for someone to make his baby well again. Anything short of that was cast aside with the flowers. I was the boyfriend with a book tucked under his arm. Even I could see at that hour how ludicrous I must have seemed to them. So, ignoring what I had originally came there to do, I set down the book on her bedside table and left the room without uttering so much as goodbye. Back in my car, I realized I should have stayed, that I was wrong to leave without reading her "Labor Day Dinner," the story she loved most, the one with her favorite line: "She must get away, live alone, wear sleeves."

I used Steve's box cutter to open the first one. When I pulled back the flaps and looked inside, a warm musty breath of air blew on my face. There was a note taped to one of the books. *Brenda said you would take good care of these for her.* The note was signed *Love, Bob and Katherine.* I crumpled up the note—not out of anger or shame; it was just one of those sad things that was too hard to look at right then. I stuffed it in my pocket where I would feel it against my leg the rest of the night. Steve was on the couch watching some more M\*A\*S\*H. Every time Alan Alda spoke, Steve would say, "How sweet was that?"

I unloaded the books one at a time, setting them down gently on the new shelves. The books still vaguely held some of

the smells of Brenda's apartment, hints of cigarette smoke, fresh basil, and Dove soap. In her apartment she had had the books arranged in a particular way, but I couldn't remember how. I only knew that the red ones belonged together. She didn't like to see the color red all scattered about. One pulsing area of red smack in the middle of her library was how she preferred it. Now and then I paused at a title, recalling how she loved to sit up late, telling me all about a story she had just read. The ones she loved best were about people who managed to escape the impossible situations they were in. She was always asking me if I thought a particular character had made a right or wrong decision. She was always measuring herself against the fictional people she read about.

After all of the books were unpacked and the red ones gathered together and lined up on the middle shelf, I was left facing the three empty boxes. I asked Steve what I should do with them and he said to cut them up into pieces and bag them for recycling. I didn't like the sound of that. Empty boxes cut up to make more empty boxes. It sounded so *empty*. For a minute I considered taking the books off the shelves and repacking them, but then Steve got up from the couch, dug out a second cutter from his toolbox, and started slicing into one of them. My stomach felt sick. The television was still on. A wounded soldier was being rolled in on a gurney. He had a bandage wrapped around his head, and there was a bloodstain soaking through. The soldier was passed out cold. Alan Alda was looking down at him with that sad and funny face of his. "Listen here, kid," he said. "I promise this is going to hurt me more than it will you."