

The Man from Lowville

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In August of '44 I was seventeen years old, sitting on the bench seat of my dead granpop's Dodge. I could still smell him, my granpop, even though he'd been gone for a year by then. Pinesap and old cigarettes.

Gary, my uncle—who ever since I can remember told me to call him by his first name, said “Uncle” made him sound old—was lounging behind the wheel. We were idling under beech shade a quarter mile east of the Saranac Railway. The windows were rolled down and a thick breeze moved throughout the truck, the head of a storm falling south from Ontario. Gary reached underneath the seat and grabbed a brown paper bag, his bicep swelling as he did. He was pushing his forties back then and his build was strong, even if he had put on a good bit of weight since the war started.

I took out three dollars of change from my trousers and handed it over for the Old Crow. I had saved up by doing yard work for the Schillings and the Murphys. I'd done it for Jane.

Gary pocketed the money. “I'll take my fill now,” he said. He grinned, uncapped one of the fifths, and topped off his flask. “That's plenty,” I told him, but

he just ignored me, and when he finished, I took hold of the whiskey, shouldered open the passenger door, and stepped down to the dirt. To the east was where the trestle stood, where Dust, Big Henry, and Jane were waiting for me.

“Thanks,” I said through the window.

Gary turned to face me, and as he did his left eye took an extra second to catch up with his right. It was barely noticeable, his bad eye, but I knew the story behind it, and ever since I was a kid I’d watch for it to flare up.

He killed the engine. “You know what? I think I need to check the spot out, see if it’s anything like my old firepit in Remsen. Driving you out here got me thinking about it.” He stepped out of the pickup and slammed the door shut.

“It’s not really a good day for that,” I said.

“Well, if that’s the case, just go ahead and hand back that whiskey I got you.”

I laughed, waiting for him to tell me he was only kidding.

“If you’re going to act like a boy,” he said, “I’ll follow suit.”

“I already told you, it’s Jane’s last night.”

“I’ll only stay for a few breaths. A drink or two.”

I looked east toward the trestle, at the tracks that cut through the Adirondacks like a steel vein. No trains had ridden them since the war began. The bend to Holland Patent was still unfinished, no men around to complete it. No one to put in the subgrade or the sleepers. No one to throw down the ballasts or bolt together the new fishplates. Throughout those months, I’d been hearing reports that if the war didn’t end soon, there’d be a company of women arriving from North Creek to complete the southside line.

“Just promise you won’t do nothing to embarrass me,” I said.

Gary laughed, thick and deep. “There can’t be anything more embarrassing than wearing Oxfords into the woods.” He nodded down at my shoes. “What? You think that’s gonna impress her?”

I shook my head, gripping the neck of a bottle in each hand. And then the two of us left like that, stepping into the brush, under the spruces and hemlocks, to the trestle, to Jane.

She had told me her plan the week before. “I bought a ticket to Yonkers. I’m eighteen now. Ma can’t stop me.” She’d be heading south for Sarah Lawrence College. When she first read the acceptance letter that April, she told her mother about it, and her mother said she wasn’t allowed to go. Jane had to stay home and watch over her younger brothers while she slaved away at Walt’s Diner, working graveyards. Her father was already out of the picture, a chaplain who’d died from dysentery while stationed somewhere in Africa. Morocco, maybe. Either way, none of this stopped Jane from accepting the offer behind her mother’s back and buying the bus ticket to Yonkers. She’d be gone by tomorrow.

It was a couple of hours before dusk when Gary and I reached the wrought-iron bridge. The currents of the Magaskawee were calling out below us. Born from the Fulton Chain, the rapids ran east until channeling into Hull Lake over in Lowville, the town where I’d met the man three years earlier. I thought about him as I listened to the river breathe: the grease stains on his neck; the sharp whiskers sprouting above his lip; the fox tattoo on his bicep, the way it mocked me.

Gary and I veered from the tracks and walked in between the first trestle and the mouth of the crossing. The ground beneath the bridge fell at a slight angle for the first twenty yards before the slope to the river’s edge grew steep. This was where the fire was. I smelled smoke and heard voices: first Big Henry’s, then Dust’s. I waited for Jane’s voice but couldn’t find it. I walked faster, hooked around a black spruce, traced the bark with my palm.

Dust and Big Henry were sharing a log facing the river—their tents pitched fifteen yards off—while Jane sat on the dirt with her back against a stump. She wore an army green sweater and a beige skirt, and her brown hair was curled up on the sides. Her face looked soft against the orange glow of the firelight.

“What the hell took you so long?” Dust asked. His real name was Dustu, but the teachers at school abridged it for him. He was half Mohawk and his claim to fame was how his old man had been a skywalker during the construction of the Empire State Building.

I saluted to him and Big Henry, then smiled at Jane, but her line of sight slowly sank behind me. I turned around and saw my uncle standing there in his sweaty undershirt, the beige hue of a wet cigarette.

“I almost forgot, this is Gary,” I said. “He got us booze for tonight and wanted to check out the pit.”

Big Henry rose to his feet and walked over to Gary. Unlike Dust and me, Henry was already the size and stature of a grown man. He reached out his hand, his forearms veined and smooth, and introduced himself.

“I’ll tell you right now,” Gary said. “I ain’t no *sir*.”

Since Gary mostly stayed at home or hung around The Stumble Inn—his wife rigging parachutes all day to support them—my friends had never actually met him. But they had all heard his story, damn near everyone in Warren had. The way he was 4-F’d during the draft for his poor vision. How, as a boy, my father had tripped him, and the branch of a baby dogwood had caught his left eye and nicked the cornea. Even though Gary was still the best shot I knew, the army refused to enlist him. A week after he was 4-F’d, he tried to off himself by downing a bottle of Alpar’s Ache Drops. Granpop spotted him on the dock and somehow dragged him all the way to the lot, then threw him in the back of the Dodge. They raced over to St. Elizabeth’s, where the doctors pumped the poison from his stomach. That’s what the town heard, at least. And that’s what I heard, too, heard it from my own mother. But I never asked Gary about it and wasn’t planning to, either.

I took a seat on the log next to Jane and told her I was glad she came. She smiled and I asked her if she was still planning on heading out the next day.

“Long as Henry wakes up in time to drive me to Thendara.”

I wanted to know if she was scared, scared the way I was for her, but just then Gary stepped in front of us. The fire glowed behind him, halooing the heavy shape of his body.

“So this is her, huh?” he asked, staring at Jane.

She looked over at me, then back to Gary. “What all has Max been saying?”

“He told me you were pretty but *damn*.” He grinned, studying her body

with his eyes. “You know, you’re lucky I’m not a decade younger or you’d be in trouble.”

Jane laughed in a mocking kind of way. “Guess I am lucky then.”

Gary smiled and I passed him one of the bottles of Old Crow to shut him up. It worked.

“Isn’t he something?” Jane whispered.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I said.

After the booze made a trip around, everyone sat down and lit up Chesterfields. It was warm out, even away from the fire, but I could tell it wouldn’t last much longer, that fall was on its way.

As the first bottle of whiskey grew light, Dust started on with one of his dissections of the ’44 Yankees. He was talking about Stirnweiss, Lindell, Etten, and how Borowy was our only hope. And before long, Jane cut him off, told him we still had a shot at the pennant. Although I didn’t follow the game like the others, I was keen on a few things and said we were hurting with DiMaggio overseas.

“Christ, Max. DiMaggio’s a pansy,” Gary said. “Calling himself a soldier. He’s probably tanning on some nudey beach in Hawaii thinking he’s Jimmy Stewart. But he ain’t. Now Jimmy, Jimmy’s a real soldier.”

“Damn right,” Big Henry said.

“You guys see him in *Destry Rides Again*?” Jane asked.

She went on and on about Jimmy Stewart. The pictures he’d been in, how handsome he was, how much her father had loved his films. And even though I was a little ticked at Gary, listening to Jane’s voice made me forget about that for a while. As she talked about how brave it was for him to go off and fight, I pictured myself as a soldier. Not as one on active duty, though, but a soldier returning to the States. A war hero with a battle wound, a scar or two. I imagined getting off the ship, stepping to land after the long journey. I thought about the respect my pop—a lieutenant in the war—would give me, and how proud Ma would be.

I thought about Jane, too, standing on the harbor waiting for my return, and the kiss the two of us would share. Then I'd take her back home, back to the bedroom. When I reached this last part, I couldn't move beyond it. Sure, I could picture it and all, but it didn't feel real to me. I got to thinking about the playing cards the man from Lowville had shown me in the truck all those years ago. I pictured the seven of spades, the photograph on the back, the bare, redheaded woman sitting on top of the man. There was a grin on his face, a steel combat helmet on his head, a patch of hair on his chest so thick it looked like a sweater. Then I tried to picture Jane naked the way the woman had been. I tried to see it in my mind, but all I was left with was an image of the man, the one from Lowville, smoking a Lucky Strike.

Two hours passed and the sun got swallowed up by the tree line, and I was drunk. There was still that tightness in my chest—a tightness that might never leave me—but the rest of my body felt good and loose. My eyes fell over to the pile of firewood; it was plenty but I decided to get more. I asked Jane if she'd like to tag along and she said sure. As we stumbled off, Gary whistled at us lightly.

I led her along the Magaskawee. The pines walled us in and blocked the last bit of light from dropping onto the river, painting its current black. I set the Old Crow near the water's edge and turned toward Jane. She was walking across a fallen tree, a shaved spruce, balancing along the trunk with her arms out to the sides. I didn't put this together at first, so when I saw her from the corner of my eye it looked as though she was somehow suspended in air. It made me feel safe, seeing her up there. But when I turned the whole way and faced her, really *saw* her, I realized I was afraid now that we were all alone. I bent down, quiet, gathering a few sticks and branches to start a pile.

"Are we really getting firewood?" she asked, her voice falling from above, loose with whiskey.

"I figured we'd bring some back."

Jane shrugged and leapt off the tree. She bent down and took hold of a stick, a broken branch of oak, and rotated it in her hands, examining it as though it was a part of her body she'd never seen before.

“Toss me a rock, will ya?” she asked.

She raised the branch above her shoulder like it was a baseball bat, and I smiled and snatched up a smooth, black stone. I asked if she was ready and when she nodded, I tossed it to her underhand. She swung hard but missed.

“Another,” she said.

I nodded, found another rock, and tossed it her way. This time she made contact, and when she did, the branch broke and a piece of it flew right at me. I ducked as quick as I could, but a little wedge of bark nipped the top of my right ear. I cursed, rubbing the side of my face as Jane laughed behind me.

“Where the hell you learn to hit like that?” I asked.

She sat down on the leaves, still laughing, and propped herself up on her elbows. When she did this, I got the feeling she was inviting me in on something, so I joined her on the ground.

“Pitroff.” She grabbed a piece of the oak branch, peeled away a splinter of wood, and slowly drove it into the earth until it disappeared.

“The softball coach?” I asked.

She nodded and grabbed my hand right then, just did it like it was nothing, and went on talking.

“Did you ever hear what happened to him when he came back from Guam?”

I shook my head no even though I’d heard the story in Mr. Barrow’s gym class. She started on about how the coach, Pitroff, had lost it when he returned from the war. How he chopped off his wife’s hair to the style it was when they’d first met as children, made her wear an old dress from back in the day even though it didn’t fit her right, and played some silly record on the phonograph over and over throughout the night.

“How crazy is that?” she asked.

I said it was sad the coach felt the need to do those things, and Jane said it was even sadder that his wife agreed to do them. Then she stared at me for a moment, but for some reason it felt like she wasn’t actually seeing me, that there was something between us. Maybe it was all in my head or all the booze I’d drunk, but either way, that’s how it felt. Then Jane told me she’d rather have

her own pop dead than have him turn out like Pitroff. All I could do was nod. I tried to think of something comforting to say, something kind, but I couldn't find the right words.

Instead, I lit up a Chesterfield, giving myself a reason to be silent for a little while longer. We passed it back and forth, and I watched the smoke snake through her fingers and up her forearm.

We'd been sitting like that for some time when she put out the cigarette and told me to come closer. I moved over and before I knew it, she was kissing me. It was the first time I'd French-kissed a girl and I thought I was screwing it up somehow. It was strange, how even tight from whiskey, I felt in my chest every single thought crossing my mind.

We went on like that for a while until she reached for my belt. I told myself this was what I wanted, but when she moved onto my zipper, I grabbed her hand.

"What is it?" she asked.

I could hear my breath and a river I couldn't see, moving east, to Hull Lake.

"You're hurting my hand, Max."

I let go.

"Tell me what's wrong?"

"It's just not right," I muttered.

"What's not?"

Jane stared at me. Even in the dark I could make out her face. She looked so young, her features smooth and glowing under the moonlight. She waited for me to answer, but I couldn't.

"Why the hell are you looking at me like that?" I asked.

Jane let out a mean laugh. She told me I was something else and left, heading back to the pit. I called out her name, but before it could reach her, the river's current took it east.

I let my head fall back and watched the red spruces leaning over, remembering what the man from Lowville had said when we first got out of the truck, when he led me into the woods, through the knee-high ferns, humming some

endless melody under his breath. Beads of dew slid off the fiddleheads, and I could feel the dampness against my shins and on the insides of my thighs. That's not something you forget, that feeling.

You can never trust a girl to give you what you want.

That's what he told me, the man from Lowville.

I grabbed the fifth of Old Crow and bottomed off what remained.

I was stumbling by the time I made it back to the pit. Gary stood on top of a stump, reciting the story about the smoke bomb and the '24 Chevy Coupe. I could tell he was drunk by the sound of his voice and the way his left eye would lose itself every minute or so, drifting out into the dark woods behind us, staring at something not there. I sat down next to Jane and scooted over until my knee touched hers. I wrapped my arm around her shoulder, but she shrugged it off.

"Hell, I don't even know how it works," Gary said. "*Fire.*" He took a long pull from his flask, swallowing half of it and spitting the other half into the embers. Where the liquor landed, a flame grew. But Gary overshot some of the whiskey, and a few drips splashed off one of the rocks from the firewall and landed on my Oxfords. I wiped the liquor off with the palm of my hand, nearly falling over, and cursed him.

"Oh, ease up, sergeant," he said. "That's what you get for wearing heels into the woods."

Big Henry and Dust laughed, and before I knew it, I was telling Gary to leave.

"You want me to do what?"

"Aunt Barb's probably looking for you by now," I said.

Gary grinned. "You know what I think?" He took another pull from his flask and spat at my feet. I had to stop myself from sprinting headfirst into his chest. Even drunk, I knew there was a difference between the body of a young man and the body of a grown one.

Instead, I told him he was a good shot, that his aim was on point.

"What the hell does that mean?"

“Means your eyes seem to be working just fine.”

Dust tried to change the subject, but Gary cut him off. His right eye twitched while his bad eye stayed still. He jumped down from the stump and stepped toward me.

I laughed. “So now you wanna be a soldier? Now you wanna fight?”

I waited for Gary to lunge, but he never did. He just stood there breathing loud. Big Henry got up and walked over, standing taller than the both of us. Gary bent down, picked up his flask, and walked away without saying a word, down to the Magaskawee.

I grinned and took a pull of Old Crow. “He’s a sonofabitch, isn’t he?”

Jane said maybe I should call it a night, but I ignored her and pictured Gary tripping into the river, getting snagged up by the undercurrents.

“Yeah, Max,” Big Henry said. “Maybe you should hang it up.”

The fire was dying out again. Dust sat there quietly poking the embers with a stick, trying to build it back up. “Let me get it,” I said. I staggered to a nearby sapling, grabbed its thin trunk, and began to rip it from the ground, bending it back and forth until the roots became exposed. I dragged it over to the fire, and the dry needles caught and the sap cracked like gunfire. I stumbled backward and watched the sparks. The storm from Ontario was finally coming in on us, but when I looked up to the sky, I saw only concrete and steel.

The next thing I remember is walking toward the tracks. I wasn’t sure where I was going exactly, just knew if I stayed at the pit something worse would happen. Jane called out my name, but Dust told her to leave me be. When I reached the top, I knelt down and grabbed the lines of the railway and vomited. My eyes watered, my ears clogged, and sweat the smell of booze seeped through my pores.

I could just make out the deep rolling of the river, violent, stronger than usual. Stronger than the times I’d fished for brown trout with my father as a child. Stronger than the times I took off my shoes and let the current bend around my feet. And somewhere below the sound of the river, I could hear Jane and the guys laughing. Gary, too. He was back from the river, singing a tune, his drunken voice crooning low like a cradle song.

I lay down, my eyes shutting on their own, and dreamed about floating down the Magaskawee, to Hull Lake, all the way to Lowville.

When I woke, it was already dawn. Fog was lifting to the pine-crowns, and the sky was the color of steel. The left side of my face was resting against an oak tie of the railway, and a gentle rain was falling. I rose to my feet, rubbed my fingers over the dried saliva stuck to my cheeks, and watched it snowflake off my skin to the ground.

I worried about Jane, that something bad might have happened to her after I'd fallen asleep, so I headed straight to the pit, keeping my eyes low, studying my Oxfords as I walked the slope.

About ten yards out were the tents—the shadows of Big Henry and Dust inside them—while the firepit lay just ahead. It was nothing but a small field of ash, wind blowing every few seconds, raising soot into the air, then evaporating into the sky. The rain had picked up by then, but the bridge suffocated its sounds. Underneath, everything was still except for the river crawling below.

I moved forward, and on the other side of the log I'd been sitting on the night before was Jane's leg. I stepped over and there she was, dozing a few feet away from Gary on the dirt, her body perpendicular with his. Her skin was pale in the morning light, chest rising and falling with each breath. My first thought was to head back to the tracks, back to Warren. Keep her around a while longer.

Instead, I knelt down beside her, my knees moist from the rainwater that had begun to seep underneath the bridge. Stuck against her forehead was a single piece of hair. I tucked it behind her ear while staring at her eyes, making sure she was still asleep, still dreaming of her new life in Yonkers so far from her family, so far from Warren. It must be nice, I thought, to be that certain of what you want.

My eyes dropped some and studied the shape of her body, the bit of stomach creeping out from below her sweater, the subtle protrusion of her breasts. I wanted to feel a warmth begin to grow inside my cold body. But none came. So I reached out, my hand lingering above her chest, the booze from the night before keeping it steady and still.

As my hand slowly lowered toward Jane, a branch snapped near the tracks. For a second, I thought I could see the man from Lowville. As though he was somewhere up there watching me, wearing his loose-cut overalls, the rust-colored cap, his neck stained with oil and grease. I thought back to that day, walking through the forest with him. The way my breath grew shorter and my heartbeat quickened. The way my muscles tightened. How it all felt good to me. That fear. And I thought about when he first dropped his trousers, standing in front of the creek, and how I refused to look away. How it was me that walked over to him, and not the other way around.

By then, the storm water was rushing underneath the bridge, and the low rumble of a train could be heard screaming down the unfinished railway, its sounds growing louder, closer, shaking the trestle, shaking Jane's eyes open. She stared at me, my hand suspended above her as though on strings. She mouthed some word, trapped between a dream and real life, and I turned away, still searching for the man from Lowville somewhere above the tracks. Searching until all I could see was a blur of pines, the heavy rain hammering them back into the world.

