SETTLED ON THE CRANBERRY COAST

/ Michael Byers

OUR LIVES IN THIS TOWN are slowly improving. When Trudi grew up, in the old reservation houses, the roads were dirt and the crab factory still wheezed along, ugly and reeking. In early summer the factory stayed open all night, and the damp dirty smell of the crab cooking in its steel vats blew off the ocean, all the way to Aberdeen, even beyond, for all I knew. I remember driving home from movies during my adolescence, the windows open; the sweet pulp-mill smell of Aberdeen was tinged with that distant damp cardboard of Tokeland's cooking crab.

But crab harvests withered fifteen years ago, the state jumped in with some money, and almost at once Tokeland plumped with antique stores and curiosity shops, and the old clapboard hotel became a registered landmark. The Indians, too, began prospering; three years ago, the local tribe sold their fishing rights to the Willapa and voted to put the money into CDs. Many have managed to live off the interest, and now buy fishing licenses like the rest of us. Their trawlers are easily the nicest, you'll notice them moored under the bridge in Aberdeen, the big sleek powerful monsters with aluminum hulls, blue-striped, the new nets, the new radar.

Neither Trudi nor I have ever been married. We went to high school together, years ago, but we didn't travel in the same crowds. She was from Tokeland, a half-breed Indian, and tended to hang with the toughs, surely tame by today's standards—the kids who wore leather jackets, the kids who smoked and overdid the hair gel. Trudi had long hair, unusually long, thick brown shiny hair that reached the middle of her back. Her crowd drove pickups instead of cars, and on Friday afternoons they'd motor out to the beach, pitching and hurtling over the dunes, then speeding down the long wide beach, big V-8s wide open.

I envied them, sort of, but didn't want to be them. Tokeland back then was not a good place to be from. It meant the clapboard shacks for the Indians, and outhouses, and pump wells instead of piped water, all of it on an open spit of land that caught the

worst of the ocean winds. Winters, Trudi says, the wind would blow all day, all night, until it was a part of your soul, an extra function of your body, like your heart, or your breath.

I lost track of Trudi for a while after high school. I went off to college, then lived in the east for a few years with a woman I thought I would marry. When she left me, I decided to come home for a while to recover. I took a job teaching high school history and kept at it for twenty-seven years, fishing during the summers and doing some casual carpentry. Occasionally in the hardware store I'd see one of Trudi's rough old crowd, most of them prosperous fishermen now, having inherited their fathers' boats, now walking with the casual swagger of money, wearing designer blue jeans and monogrammed dress shirts. Some of these men make two hundred thousand dollars a year, I know; and they've always got the newest trucks, slim wives (in matching blue jeans) with tousled hair and high heels. They recognize me, most of them, and I hear them worry about their kids sleeping on the beach, the girlfriends and boyfriends, getting into this or that drug, trouble at school, and sometimes they ask me about their child, though I make it clear I am retired from teaching. I try to assure them that the kids will grow out of childhood, as they themselves have done, and privately I wonder why they can't see themselves in their children.

When I retired from teaching, packing my classroom with utter relief, handing in my teacher's editions for the last time, I found I was restless. Fishing wasn't enough to hold my attention all year round; I'd never married, had had no children. I had some good friends at the high school but I was afraid to linger there, afraid someone might call me a sad old man. On a whim I advertised myself as an independent carpenter and plumber. Most of my phone calls were just friends; they had recognized my name on the sign, they said, and had just called to see if it was really me. Oh, it's me, all right, I told them.

One day last summer I got a phone call from Trudi. She, too, had recognized my name, but she had a job for me. "I just bought a new house," she said. "It's a wreck, and I need someone to help me remodel."

"Trudi? I used to know you."

"Yes, you did." Her voice had become deep and raspy with cigarettes; but she had always had an expressive voice that she modulated well, low secret tones and high ones.

"Where's the house?" I asked.

"Just outside of Grayland. We're moving. I'm dumping my Tokeland house."

"So how have you been?" I asked.

"Oh, getting along. What about you? Married?"

"No."

"Divorced?"

"No, nothing. No kids," I said.

"I saw you retired from teaching last year. I saw you in the paper."

"I've gained a little weight since you knew me," I said. My picture had been on the inside front page: I was on stage, receiving a plaque from the principal and superintendent. My suit jacket had been open and my stomach loomed out in its striped shirt, my tie barely reaching to the third button. I had been shocked by the picture, unpleasantly, but strangely fascinated, too, as if I were seeing myself for the first time in years. "I'm on a diet now," I said. "All that cafeteria food." This was a lie. In twenty-seven years I hadn't eaten in the cafeteria once.

"We're none of us getting any younger. Do you want me to call you Mr. Thomas? You must be used to that."

"Ward is fine," I said.

"How about Frosty?"

I smiled. "Frosty's fine, too," I said. "You've got a good memory for someone you didn't really know."

"When can you start on my house?" she asked. "I've got my granddaughter living with me, so I need to get settled pretty fast."

"We can start tomorrow if you want. What do you need, a roof? New floors?" I pulled a notepad to me.

"Everything. There's nothing right with this house except the location."

"Where is it?" I asked. I wrote *everything* on the pad, then underlined it twice.

"Behind the post office, just over the bridge. I'll be there in the morning. I'll have a white pickup parked in the yard."

"All right," I said. "What time do you want me there?"

"Eight," she said. "Andrea's daycare starts at eight, and I've got work at nine."

"Where are you working?"

"The state park. I'm a ranger."

"A ranger? As in a park ranger?"

"Right."

"You wear one of those hats?"

Trudi laughed. "I'll have it on tomorrow."

"I can't wait. I never imagined you as the law enforcement type."

"Things change," she said.

"No kidding."

Twin Harbors State Park sits right on the main highways in and out of the area. It's got hundreds of campsites on both sides of the highway: one side is forested and mosquito-ridden, the other side is scrubby and dry, patches of sandy clearing among the scotch broom and shore pine. The campsites sit right alongside one another, children spilling through the campground, the four pit toilets hidden in the brush. Many years ago a friend of mine from college came out to visit me and insisted on camping there. I tried to dissuade him, but he was an Easterner, determined to experience the Pacific firsthand. When I picked him up the next morning, the camp was littered with beer cans and broken glass, and in the camp next to his there stood the blackened skeleton of a small pine tree, sooty dark, the soil around it burnt brown. This is where Trudi worked.

But I know, from working at the high school, that even the dirtiest and least engaging places can grow on you. The high school was a one-story yellow-brick building set down in a dirt field. The classrooms, unbelievably, had no windows—ostensibly to keep the kids from becoming distracted by the traffic going by on the highway. It was just an ugly place, institutional, unlandscaped, with pine trees around the edges of the athletic fields all dead of some sort of beetle blight, standing there for years, brown and dead, waiting to fall on the soccer players.

But the kids were usually interested and articulate, and they had mornings when they were thinking, their hands were raised, or I'd have a sweet kid in a certain period who always understood my jokes, or pretended to. In my fifth year there, a math teacher named Jack Patani, a little Italian guy, married one of his students. People were very understanding. I don't think I could have done it, but as a teacher I knew why *he* did. She was one of the sweet ones who adored him, and who, as he grew to know her, gave him good conversation and a nice young body. How can I blame him?

My house was about three minutes north of Trudi's, on the highway. As I drove, I felt my nerves rising. I've always dreaded reunions with old friends; they have something to compare you against, or they have grudges against you that you've forgotten.

Her house was just behind the post office, and her backyard border on a cranberry bog. She was standing in her yard, unloading lumber from her pickup. The first thing I noticed: her hair was cut short, like a boy's. She wore dark green work pants, like a mechanic's, a white tank top, and her face had deep wrinkles in it, I assumed from smoking. She stood straight and peered into my car. She had changed—but it was her, and her full smile I recognized. "Hello," I said, and we shook hands.

"Frosty! God! You look great!" She shook my hand firmly. Her voice was thick and raspy.

"Thanks, you too," I said, though I regretted the loss of her hair. "What have you been doing all this time?" I asked, and then winced, realizing this might sound as if I had expected more of her.

"Raising a daughter, working at the park. I've got my granddaughter with me now, I told you," she said. She smiled again and her eyes crinkled at the corner. Her face was weathered and sunbeaten, like an old man's, and her eyebrows were thick and black. "She's in the back, playing in the pool. I got the water hooked up today, and there's power, but I don't think the wiring's too reliable."

"A pool?"

"Oh, you know, a little wading pool, one of those plastic things you can buy. Come on back." We walked around the corner of the house. Trudi's arms were strong, her triceps bulging like a weight-lifter's. "I know, I know," she was saying. "It looks like a dump. But I could buy it for cash, and look—" she pointed over the back fence at the bog, misty and green. "That's a nice view. And the yard's big enough for Andrea to play in."

"I've seen a lot worse," I said.

Andrea was leaping in and out of a plastic wading pool. The pool was printed with alligators and hippos, and had maybe six inches of water in it. The little girl was wearing white underpants and was shirtless, so her belly hung out like a trucker's. She was four, maybe five, and had Trudi's thick grainy black hair. Trudi a grandmother? It would take some getting used to.

"Andrea, come say hello to Mr. Frosty. He's going to be helping us fix up our house."

Andrea stopped jumping, stepped carefully out of the pool, and walked over to us with the forthright gait of a topless dancer.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello," she said. I held out my hand to shake, and she plopped her hand solidly in mine—how small that hand was! It was wet and warm, like a little frog in my palm. She asked, "Is your real name Mr. Frosty?"

"That's what your grandmother calls me."

"Why?"

"When I was young, my hair turned gray, so I looked like I had frost in my hair."

"Oh." She looked a little uneasily at Trudi and padded back to the pool.

We went inside to check on the house. It was small—two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen and bathroom. It had been built well, and from the look of the wiring and the moldings, it had probably been built in the twenties. The light fixtures had been replaced, probably after the originals were stolen, but the sink was definitely original equipment, a deep brown water stain under the hot tap. The tub, though handsome and claw-footed, had lost its enamel in spots, so sitting in it would be like sitting on sandpaper. The floor had a couple of rotten patches, but it was oak, a surprise. The ceiling was a total loss, sagging and stained—the whole thing would have to be replaced. "We're looking at four or five weeks here," I said. A tractor ran noisily along the fence, tending the bogs.

"That's not so bad. How much will it cost?"

This was difficult. She was technically a friend, and I didn't really need the money. "I'll need to price the materials before I can really know for sure."

"Well, roughly," she said. "I just want to know what I'm getting into." She was sweeping dust and nails out of one of the bedrooms. The nails pinged along the floor—you could see the ghost of a carpet.

I gave her a figure, a pretty low one, I thought, but I suppose she felt obligated to bargain me down. She said, "You're not a professional carpenter, now, are you?"

"I do it for money."

"Yeah."

"What I've given you is an estimate. The materials might come to more than that."

She shrugged. "Well, get me a list of the materials you'll need,

and give me a work schedule. I want to do a bedroom first so Andrea and I can move in." She swept the nails into the dustpan and poured the mess into a plastic trash can. "I've got to go to work."

At her truck she pulled out a green ranger's shirt and buttoned it, tucked it into her pants, and then put on her ranger's hat. "The hat looks good," I said. She looked tough, not somebody I'd want to mess with if I were a kid shooting off fireworks on the beach.

"Thanks. I'll be home around six; you can bring the list by any time after that. Come on, Andrea, put your shirt on." She started her truck and waited while Andrea dressed slowly, stepped into salt-water sandals, then climbed into the truck. Andrea's wet underwear showed through her pants. They waved as they drove off, Trudi glancing behind her as she backed down the driveway.

My sister Jody has wanted me to get married for years. She's the principal of a high school in Raymond now, and every week or so I'll stop by and take her out to lunch. On her office door there's a bumper sticker that says, "As long as there are tests, there will always be prayer in school!" She is religious.

I have no way of explaining this—we weren't raised that way—other than to say she's always been an optimist. She started going to church in high school, perhaps at first as an excuse to dress up, but she came back glowing, just exploding with happiness. She'd pull the pins out of her hair, saying, "You've got to come, Frosty! It's so refreshing!" And I would gaze at her, and shake my head as a little brother does.

After I made the list of materials at Andy's Hardware (Andy, a big, horse-faced kid whom I taught, an unnerving person: he couldn't spell to save his life, but I'd glance at him in class, and he'd be shaking his head as if there were something I just didn't get), I drove down to Raymond to see my sister. She was ensconced behind her desk in her cinderblock office, plump, a new perm. On the wall hung a plaque: "Lord, give me patience . . . and I need it now!" "Hello," I said.

"Hey, Frosty. I've got one thing left to do before we go. Just a second." She held up a fat finger and dialed the phone.

"I'll be out here," I said.

I walked into the outer office, jingling my keys. I walked down one of the tiled halls. Scraggly worksheets were stapled onto

bulletin boards—the kindergarten hall. A smell of pee from the bathroom. I peered through a window in a classroom door. Inside, I saw a young, blonde teacher sitting on the carpeted floor, leading a kindergarten class reciting days of the week. With each word, she moved her hands: clasped her fingers together for Tuesday, settled her hands on her shoulders for Wednesday, folded them over her breasts for Thursday. This woman couldn't have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four and the children's baby faces were set in earnest, their hands moving in grave imitation from shoulder to breast to cheek.

"Frosty?" Jody appeared in the hall, waving to me. "Ready?"

"Sure. Busy day?"

"Oh." She laughed. "The usual. Parents who don't think their kids should have homework."

"Should I come back tomorrow?"

"Oh, no, I'm happy to get out of here." We crossed the parking lot to her car.

"Do you remember a girl named Trudi?" I asked. "From Tokeland, sort of hung around with the Indian kids?"

"Sure. Her daughter came here to high school for a couple years."

"Her daughter?"

"Yeah, Carolyn. She was in the math magnet program for the Indian kids. She dropped out after tenth grade."

"Trudi hired me to fix up her house."

"Really? Hired you?"

"Through my ad, you know." We swung down into her car and nosed out onto the highway into town. "She bought one of those old bungalows behind the post office."

"I'm trying to remember what happened to Carolyn," my sister said.

"I think she must have had a kid," I said. "Trudi's got a granddaughter living with her now."

"For some reason I want to say she went to California. I think she worked with the migrants for a while, just picking," she said. She shook her head, then laid two fingers on her temple. "I've got too many people up here. They're all starting to look like one another."

"Time to retire. Get the hell out of there."

Jody smiled. "People in town remember you," she said. "I introduce myself, and they'll mention you, and they'll start talking about you—your poster of Jane Fonda on the Harley?"

"That was a joke."

"Well, sure it was a joke! They loved it! God, those idiots up there didn't know what to make of you."

We drove in silence for a minute, then Jody asked, "Does Trudi ever hear from her?"

"From who?"

"Carolyn. Her daughter."

"I don't know. Why?"

"Just wondering." She pulled into the parking lot of the Lamplighter. "You don't have a problem with that?"

"With what?"

Jody said, "With Carolyn abandoning a little baby like that."

"Oh, Jody, come on."

Jody shrugged. I followed her into the air conditioning, the dark.

From Trudi that night I learned this: that Carolyn made it to California, just barely. Trudi tracked her down at a strawberry farm, where she was earning two dollars a flat with a two-year-old Andrea slung on her back in a blue shirt. Trudi brought Andrea home for the summer, then for the winter as well.

Carolyn didn't come back. She wrote twice from Mexico a year later, and on Andrea's fifth birthday, the mother was present only in her two letters tacked to Trudi's fridge, in one smiling photograph of her with Andrea on her back, and in Andrea herself, who when asked about her mother remembered only the heat and shady hats, the months of sunshine, and the easy dip and rise of Carolyn picking beans and fruit beneath her.

"This is you, isn't it?" Trudi pointed at a crowd picture, all banners and letter jackets.

I leaned over her shoulder, holding a half-sawed PVC pipe. "That's me. Pre-gut days."

"Can I see?" Andrea padded up to the card table, her feet swooshing in the grass.

"Sure, hon. That's Frosty."

Andrea took the big book in her arms and tilted it into the last of the light. She glanced back and forth a couple times. "How old are you?"

"Now? I'm fifty-two." I hear the tractor churning around the edges of the bog.

She lifted the book back to Trudi. "Where are you?" she asked.

"Here." Trudi hoisted Andrea onto her lap and began flipping the glossy pages. "Your grandmother was not a very good girl."

"What do you mean?"

"She didn't do her work in school."

"You didn't?"

"I thought it was more important to be with my friends." She glanced at me, then at the tractor coming toward the gate.

"Was Frosty one of your friends?"

"Sure he was," Trudi said.

I laughed and began picking up clutter—pipe elbows, nail bags, the netting off the bathroom tiles we'd put in that day.

"I knew Frosty pretty well," Trudi said.

The tractor stopped at the gate. The red-haired driver stood in the seat and waved, then sat down and gunned the engine. The sound was huge and rough, and Andrea cringed in Trudi's lap. "See what that guy wants," Trudi said.

I dumped the garbage in a steel can and walked up to the gate. "What do you want?" I called up to him.

"Open the gate!" His face was long and prognathic, his front teeth gapped.

"Why?"

"I have to get my mail!" he shouted.

I pushed up the latch and swung the gate back. The man gunned the tractor again, smiled, and rumbled through the gateway. Halfway to the road he stopped the tractor, stood, dropped his baggy jeans, and peed in a long yellow arc into Trudi's driveway. Then he sat down again and drove off.

"Oh, god," I said. "That asshole."

Trudi threw her head back and laughed, her leathery face wrinkling around her eyes. She put Andrea gently on the ground, still laughing, and walked to the driveway to kick dust over the mark. "That's the kind of thing I did in school, honey," she called across the yard, and I thought she might have been talking to either of us.

About three weeks into Trudi's job, we took a day off. I'd finished the roof, both bedrooms, and the wiring. We drove up to Grayland to watch the kite festival. This happens every summer, a friendly competition to pull in the tourists. The highway was lined with parked RVs, and a couple hundred people had gathered

on the beach. Andrea gave a little gasp when she saw the kites, big fancy ones this year: tandem boxes, dual-stringed stunt kites, black and rippling, and my favorite, one long rainbow tube kite, huge and dignified, hanging in the wind like a blimp. "You like the kites, Andrea?" I asked.

She shifted uncomfortably toward Trudi and stared out the windshield. She's not used to having a man around, Trudi had said. She doesn't know what you're going to do. I don't know what I'm going to do, I'd replied.

"Look at the little black ones," Trudi said.

"I like the rainbow one," Andrea said.

"Good choice!" I tried to smile, not make any moves toward her. "Andrea, you and I agree on which kites are the prettiest." She just nodded seriously.

We parked by a hot dog stand. Merle Merrington, a retired deputy now working as a cook, was barbecuing the hot dogs, wearing an apron. "Hey, there, Frosty," he said. He had mustard in his mustache.

"Hey, Merle. Give me a couple dogs." I gestured behind me. "You know Trudi Fraser?"

"I think we've met a few times." He nodded at her. "Still working up at the park?"

"Yep."

Merle glanced down at Andrea. "Don't look now," he said to Trudi, "but I think you've got a big dog following you around."

Andrea giggled. "This is my granddaughter, Andrea," Trudi said.

"Looks like a big dog to me." He stared at her and barked, his boozy eyes red and haggard. Andrea barked back. "See?" he said. "And all this time you thought she was related to you. I bet you've been feeding her and everything."

"Nope," Andrea said.

"Ups! A dog that talks. Does the big dog want a hot dog?"

"Yes!" she barked.

"I thought so." He handed her a hot dog in a paper napkin; she took it boldly with both hands. This made me feel envious: the easy way he talked to her, and her smiling for him.

"Who's the guy with the tube kite?" I asked.

"Don't know. Some guy from out of town." Merle turned the hot dogs. "He's been here before."

We walked over to the man—short, bald, no more than thirty. His eyebrows were pale and bushy. "Nice kite," I said.

"Thanks." He held a plastic disk in his hand. Twelve plastic strings led to the kite.

"This little girl'd really love to try it," I said.

He glanced at us skeptically. "It's kind of difficult."

"I'll help her out."

He watched the kite.

"Just for a minute."

"Don't let go," he said. He handed me the disk, which tugged up and away from me. I knelt down and put my arms around Andrea from behind. She was sweaty and smelled like sun, and dirt, and meat. She grabbed where I told her, and we made the tube shiver and dive as it hung majestically above us, in place, like a dream animal.

Over the next couple of weeks the house got sturdier. I found some old oak boards in my shed and used them to patch the floor. I gutted the kitchen and put in a new fridge, new cupboards, a new window over the sink. I was proud of my work. It was quick, cheap, and somehow I didn't make any mistakes. The new wall in the kitchen was solid, stronger than the original.

Andrea became a little more comfortable around me. Trudi and I worked well into the evenings, the TV on in the living room as we put up plaster or spread joint compound. Sometimes we woke Andrea, who would then come toddling out of Trudi's room and watch us work. In the TV's late blue light her hair was steel gray. "Want to help?" I asked once. She wandered over, peered into the joint compound bucket, watched me spread the stuff back and forth. I took a fingerful and laid it on her palm. "Don't eat it," I said.

"I won't." She smelled it, then pinched it and rubbed it between her fingertips. "Feels like cookie dough," she said.

"That's right. We use it to hold pieces of the wall together."

"Like glue."

"That's right."

She wiped it back into the bucket. "How long till it's done?"

"The house? About a week. Seven days."

Jody came up one night during that last week with a bottle of wine and a twelve-pack of Henry's. We opened the gate to the cranberry bog and sat down on the grass. The cranberries were

pale pink and small, hidden under the creeping leaves. "Here, have some of these with your wine," Trudi said, dropping a handful in my glass. "A touch of elegance."

"Fresh from the bog," I said, and drank deeply. The cranberries rolled around like ball bearings.

"So you're the principal," Trudi said.

"That's right."

"Look out, Andrea," Trudi said. "Frosty's sister is the boss of a school." Andrea said nothing, just crouched at the edge of the bog, collecting the brightest berries she could find.

"I like your house," Jody said.

"You may thank Frosty for that."

I said, "He *is* amazing."

"Yes, he is." Trudi patted my knee.

We drank the wine and began on the beer. A mist began wisping in from the ocean, squeezing through the pines and sliding past just about at eye level. Little tufts settled in the ditches, and scraps hung up in the trees like laundry. My sister said, "I taught your daughter, Carolyn." She was becoming drunk, and was making generous gestures. "No. Actually, no, I didn't. I didn't teach her. What am I saying? But I remember her."

"She didn't get too far," Trudi said.

"No, I remember that. A beautiful girl, though. Very pretty." Jody opened another beer.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I don't think we have to worry about seeing her around here any time soon," Trudi said.

Jody nodded.

"She is no longer a part of our lives," Trudi said, and something about the way she said *our* made us all glance over at Andrea, who now lay picking at the grass. I could imagine moving in with these two, sure, sleeping on the sofa at first—an urge to lend a hand, I suppose, to take on this little family—though they seemed whole and complete there at the edge of the bog, as if that *our* had sealed them off from me somehow. Trudi wore a strange expression, not of wonder, which you'll see on new mothers, but something closer to acceptance, and regret. But we don't live our lives so much as come to them, as different people and things collect mysteriously around us. I felt as if I were coming to Trudi and Andrea, easing my way toward them.

"Don't let it bother you," Trudi said, leaning toward me, her

hand on my thigh. "She's not even something I think about any more. She's gone, gone, gone. And now here's Frosty for us." She kissed me on the cheek. "Am I drunk?" she asked. Her eyes were bright.

"Probably."

"Oh, good." She rubbed her face with her palm. "Mm. Don't even think about her," she said. "No point any more." I sat holding my beer. What was she imagining? The migrants' shacks, the mattresses that swelled with the dew and rain between seasons? "No point." Her lowered voice, the finality of it. I imagined the orchards hanging full of fruit, a faceless Carolyn lost in the trees.

I spent the night on Trudi's living room floor, and—as I do when I am hung over—woke up at dawn not nauseated but with the feeling that a wind was coursing through my head, that I had created a few vacancies upstairs. I made coffee and sat on the front porch, facing the back of the post office. The flagpole was still empty—no one had yet come in for work. I sat there, retired teacher, gut on my lap, plaster dust all over my pants from Trudi's floor.

After a while, Andrea walked out onto the porch with a bowl of cereal. "Good morning," I said.

"Morning."

"Want to go to Aberdeen with me today?" I asked. "I have to buy some radiators for your and your mom's bedroom."

"How long is that?"

"How long is the trip? About twenty minutes to get there. We won't be gone more than an hour. Want to come?" I noticed the delicate point of her chin, a trait she shared with Trudi.

"Okay," she said.

"Really? Good. Go ahead and get dressed. We'll go in about fifteen minutes."

I left a note for Trudi: *Gone for radiators with Big Dog. Back in an hour. —F*

Andrea climbed into my car having by herself put on corduroy pants and a white t-shirt. I leaned over to point out her seatbelt, but she grabbed the two ends herself—I could think of nothing to say. Her presence in the car was palpable, her thick meaty smell. We were both tense. "We could get you an ice cream cone there," I said, and then remembered it was only eight in the morning. "Or maybe some pancakes."

She folded her hands in her lap and stared straight ahead, at the glove compartment.

"Remember where we're going?"

"Aberdeen."

"That's right. Good memory."

She closed her eyes and pretended to fall asleep, her hands clasped rigidly in her lap. I drove quickly, my window cracked open. What had Jack Patani said? He'd married her to give himself a few more good years. Still happy together, those two, and they'd had several good years. I admitted to myself, then, allowed myself to think for the first time, about marrying Trudi. I still hardly knew her at all.

Over the bridge in Aberdeen I nudged Andrea, who had fooled herself and really fallen asleep. She shifted a little in her seat. I walked around to the door, unbuckled her seatbelt, and lifted her against my shoulder. I carried her inside the shop. As we walked among the pipes, she spread her arms, her fat arms, to hold my neck; and as she rode I imagined that she remembered this strolling motion, and that more than any rocking could, or singing, this soothed her, and she let me hold her quietly in her sleep. I had the radiators loaded clanking into the trunk, and I sat on my hood, smoothing her hair with my hand, hearing her easy settled breathing.

Michael Byers is our Editors' Prize winner in fiction. This is his first published story.