

MARK FLEMING

EVIDENCE

STOPPING IN THE MIDDLE OF ROUTE 19, I pushed open the passenger door and waited. Snowflakes of significant mass and discernable geometry swirled in and settled on the upholstery. Though my old Saab has this exceptional Swedish traction, I could see a long delay wouldn't be prudent. I was beginning to wonder what the big holdup was when he continued past my door. Didn't glance over, didn't so much as wave a hand in dismissal, just pushed on for the bridge, the open door chime beckoning.

If it'd been raining and the Fourth of July, I would've been out of there. But it was Christmas Eve and a snowstorm and not just any bridge, but the New River Gorge Bridge in West Virginia. The abyss it spanned would swallow a major airport. I eased ahead, door still open, until I was alongside him.

"Break down?" I called out. His eyebrows and beard were snow-plastered, his thinning hair, frozen wisps, his ears, raw pink. He wore a tweed sport coat, jeans and green rubber boots, the non-insulated kind. He trudged through the deeper snow outside the last swath of the plow.

"I could give you a ride to the nearest gas station," I said. "Save you some frostbitten toes." Had I missed the car tracks veering off the highway, headlights at the bottom of an embankment? Last year on my way to a party I'd spun three times across an icy bridge on I-79, and I'd moved in a daze all that night. People thought I was stoned.

Dropping back until the right front fender was even with his left knee, I decided to act as escort. Safely across, I'd say my regards. Let Santa give him a lift.

We mounted the bridge, the cut rock walls on either side of the road receding as a featureless void swelled around us, our crawl and the snow hushing the usual whine between tire and concrete span. I peered into the darkness. Parachuting to the banks of the New below was an annual event—for crazies. Here the Earth did the dropping and might never rise to meet you.

Taking both hands off the wheel, I unscrewed the cap on my thermos and steam rose in the dome light, along with the aroma of Viennese Cinnamon. If he'd only get in. I could be trusted. On the other hand, I could use the open door to shoo him up the snow bank and off the bridge. I sipped my coffee. About a quarter of the way, I popped a tape into the deck and turned up the volume. "For your listening pleasure," I announced. "A selection of holiday classics." Andy Williams' "Let It Snow" blasted the quiet.

The guy had to at least look back. But as he ignored me still, I started to sing. Loudly. Then it hit me—he meant to jump. What we had here was the Blue Ridge *It's a Wonderful Life*. He intended to dive and it was up to me to dive first, earn my wings.

I tapped the gas, cut the wheel, angled the Saab to a short sliding halt in front of him. His head thumped on the hood and he tumbled out of sight. Not the plan. Still in my driving moccasins, I ran around to the front of the car, found him flat on his back, eyes open, tongue lolling—not lifelessly, in the manner of roadkill, but as if he were catching snowflakes.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

He turned his head toward me, nodded, rotated it back.

"I didn't mean to run into you. I know what you were planning. It's Christmas Eve." Head trauma? I didn't see any other injuries. "Can you feel your legs?"

He raised one, the other. All satisfactory, but I feared a lawsuit.

"I'm going as far as Summersville," I said, extending him a hand. Summersville was about halfway on my trip home, and I always made reservations there in case of inclement weather. He thought about this.

As snow melted through the expensive leather of my moccasins, as it fell and collected in his lashes, built mounds on the toes of his boots, he gazed heavenward, content to expire at the foot of my bumper, to the accompaniment of "God, Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen."

"Well?" I asked. "Summersville then?"

"Summersville," he said.

He took my hand and started to his feet. But as he rose, his grip tightened, his body went stiff, jaw rigid. His hand crushing mine, I thought, What? Paybacks? No, I realized. Seizure. I returned his grip with both hands to let him know I wouldn't buckle. When the fit passed, I helped him—now shivering, sickly—into the passenger seat. I got inside, turned down the radio. Summersville wasn't far.

"Name's Bernie," I said after we'd crossed the bridge, when he appeared ready for introductions. It's not my real name—I wasn't about to give him that. "Heading home for the holidays, to a medium-size city in northwestern Pa. And you?"

His shaking, bony and rather aesthete-like fingers produced a pack of cigarettes from inside his coat. He thumbed the dash lighter—the first for that accessory. "The New is the world's oldest river," he said in a hoarse and nasal drawl. "The Blue Ridge was once underwater. Ironies I can't never get over."

"Can't *ever* get over," I corrected.

"Bullshit," he said. "Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit."

I'd hit a nerve. A Johnny Reb, he resented a Yankee faulting his poetic revelry. Even worse, he'd somehow guessed my former educational aspirations—a Ph.D. from Chapel Hill until dissertation-block set in—and no doubt saw me as some kind of literary carpetbagger. We Yankees might've won the war, but in literature we got trampled. No Faulkners or Flannerys ever came from north of the Mason Dixon. It was a familiar grad school argument. Wouldn't know real prose if it beat us upside the head.

"What's done is done. I've forgiven y'all," I replied—more bullshit, true, but I'd also learned that Southerners were helpless in the path of higher morality.

He guffawed, started to cough and cough hard. I *had* done extensive

damage with the Saab. Then he was coughing and grinning, reaching for the coffee in my hand.

"Name's Breece Pancake," he said, trying to sip through the spasms. "On my way home too. For forgiveness." This admission started a new round of coughing and laughter. He was beginning to thaw.

BREECE D'J PANCAKE, 1953-1979. That was actually his name; the D apostrophe J is a typo he liked and adopted. He drank, died young, and wrote hard-wrought stories about his home state. A bona fide shooting star, dressed exactly as I had last seen him—on the jacket of his posthumous collected stories. And as the foreword to the collection declares, he had a penchant for "bullshit."

"Breece D'J Pancake? *That* Breece Pancake?"

He shot back the last of the coffee. Among a select group of us he'd been that rare find, a brilliant but little-known author whose work was replete with significance. The dash lighter popped and he lit a cigarette, taking a drag and sighing the interior full of smoke.

"What are you doing in my car?" I asked, waving the cloud from my face. "In the larger scheme of things, besides the fact I ran you over."

Breece cracked the window, leaned back, aimed his exhalation into the slipstream. Digging his hand into the flap pocket of his coat, he pulled out a palm-size fossil of a trilobite, a major symbol in one of his stories.

"Remember your end," he said, setting it on the dash. You could see this pleased him. He tapped his cigarette outside the window, contemplated the petrified bug. He put it back in his pocket. I wasn't getting any straight answers.

"If it's your fate to wander in search of someone to forgive you, you're forgiven," I said. "There. Done. What now?"

"Milton's the other direction," he replied. His birthplace. I wasn't to be rid of him so easily.

IT WAS ELEVEN when we reached the newly developed strip along Route 19 that heralded Summersville. The snow deluge had ceased, leaving the parking lot for Food Lion and Wal-Mart an unblemished expanse of white, when only an hour ago it must have been a menagerie of last minute shoppers. The Comfort Inn was on the imme-

diate left of the plaza entrance. After checking in at the front desk, I returned to the Saab to pull it around to my room. Breece leaned against the car, enjoying another smoke.

"I told you I'd take you as far as Summersville," I said. "This is Summersville."

"What's that Wal-Mart there? Never recall having been in one."

"They're just like K-Mart," I said, popping the hatch. I fumbled with my luggage, figuring if I ignored him he'd lose substance and vanish on the spot. But I was fooling myself—his grip during the seizure had been substantial. At least he wasn't one of the dangerous undead. No chance he could sue.

"Look, it's been a pleasure," I said. "First encounter with someone from the Great Beyond. First tormented spirit in search of eternal peace. My ex-Ph.D. buddies would be most impressed. But I've got a long drive tomorrow." With a firm whump, I shut the hatch. I'd delivered his spirit to Summersville.

"Bullshit," he replied, flicking the cigarette and walking off around the corner of the motel.

Good riddance, I thought. Geniuses were impossible to get along with anyhow. Terribly insecure about their reputations. So how much worse would it be if you were incorporeal?

But later in the motel room, I thought I could at least get the final word on the shadowy circumstances surrounding his death. Most suspected suicide—he'd stuck a shotgun in his mouth—but some hold out for foul play. In either event, the truth would make an excellent dissertation. I could go back, finish my degree, give the finger to my present employer, a trade publication conglomerate that had me proofreading flight magazines. I laced on my boots.

A single set of boot tracks went around the back of the motel. The tracks circled the pool, a rectangular indentation in the snow, crossed the rear parking lot, bypassed the dumpsters, and entered a vacant lot behind the building. A sign read, "2.3 Mile Nature Trail. Guests Only."

I plunged into knee-deep snow, using his prints to gain on him. The trail curved uphill, hugging the edge of the vacant lot, a wooded ravine on the left, a desolate Food Lion on the distant right. Over the top of the rise began a stand of tall elegant pines, their snow-laden branches

luminous with light from the parking lot. But the trail descended into darkest-before-dawn darkness, and the thought of further pursuing Breece gave me pause. This was *his* element—he'd grown up in the wilds, had treed possum with hounds at midnight. I considered going back to get the Saab and further testing its front-wheel-drive capabilities. Driving up on him again did hold a certain appeal.

Instead, having caught my breath, I entered the pines, senses alert. Toward the bottom the trees began to thin, light from the parking lot filtering through like the Milky Way. Then I discovered why—a swollen creek ran behind and below the Route 19 plaza. Evergreen boughs brushed its obsidian surface, ice flows the size of swans eddied in its current. You wanted to stand and drink of the chilled, pine-scented air, think poetic thoughts. And Breece had done just that, as he'd left a set of parallel prints. I was closing in.

The trail stuck to the creek bank, and I could see where Breece's tracks skirted the uprooted end of a tree about ten yards ahead. As I was circumventing this massive root ball, which high water must have undermined, thinking I'd catch him soon because of the lingering cigarette smoke, Breece himself stepped out.

"Bernie."

I nearly leapt out of my boots. "Geeze" is all I could manage. He lit a cigarette as I composed myself.

W E MARCHED THROUGH THE SNOW, side-by-side, in silence. The creek, though it rushed deep and swift on Breece's left, didn't so much as gurgle.

"What?" I asked when I couldn't take his quiet any longer. "Maybe I'm not the genius you were, but I'm not dead at twenty-six either. I've got years to make something of myself, a whole academic career ahead of me. You've got one collection nobody but literary snobs have heard of. You know how lucky you were I came along?"

Breece picked up the pace. I hated to be cruel because I really did admire his writing. An amazing talent. But guys like him were always putting down guys like me. We're not tormented enough. We're not the double walk-in closets full of mental disturbances they are, not beings of pathos and justifiably outrageous behavior. We dress properly for the weather. Still I could see I'd stung him, his only fan on Christmas Eve.

"I've got to piss like a dog," he replied, stepping off the trail, toward the creek.

Actually, now that he mentioned it, so did I. After all the coffee I'd had, I was about to burst. I took a position next to Breece, unzipped.

Poor Breece was having difficulty, though, no doubt due to a bladder dead twenty years. While he rocked on his heels and supplicated to the god of urinary retention, my stream sliced through two feet of snow. While he cursed, I hummed "Deck the Halls." While he produced nary a tinkle, I roughed out an angel, halo, wings.

"So tell me, was it thugs or suicide?" I asked. "Your readers, not to mention your mother and faculty mentors at the University of Virginia, deserve to know. If you didn't do yourself in, don't you want it known? And if you did...."

I heard splashing. Mid-creek. Ten feet from where we stood. I traced a glimmering arc back to Breece who now wore a tremendous smile. He leaned back, aiming his stream high, shooting for the opposite bank. With an immodest thrusting of his hips, he sent it in fine loops across the surface. It was something to behold. My own output dribbled to a halt.

"Look at that!" he said. "*Look at that!*"

My next move was less than noble. In fact, it was contrary to my usual passive nature. I pushed Breece into the creek. Occupied as he was, it wasn't difficult. I shoved him forward and he put his left boot then his right boot through a snow crust and fell in, right arm extended to prevent total immersion. But the creek swallowed him whole.

I remembered to zip, and returned to the Comfort Inn.

CHRISTMAS MORNING the complimentary cheese Danish, warm and doughy from the microwave, was superb. I also had two glazed donuts from the tray beneath the sneeze guard and a tall glass of milk dispensed from a refrigerator on the counter. Replenishing my thermos with coffee—mindful to leave a half-pot—I paid my bill and departed. I didn't feel like I was wrong then and don't now. But I have to say that when he surfaced downstream, he thrashed like a man terrified of dying.