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Boundary Country

TOM WAYMAN

I WAS HEADED HOME through Boundary country when I saw the old guy standing by the road, thumb out, in the middle of nowhere—I mean, nowhere. I couldn't imagine who would drop off an old boy along a stretch of highway like this in December. Usually, I'm not quick to stop for hitchhikers. I just assumed his car had died, and hit the binders.

This was east of Osoyoos, on Number Three. You know how the highway switchbacks again and again up the practically vertical valley wall. Pretty dramatic views of the lake below and the distant mountains. Then suddenly you've climbed out of that Okanagan mesquite and broom scrub and are into pine forest, and soon after are passing through the usual Interior spruce and hemlock and fir. You're in the Monashees now and the road keeps rising toward Anarchist Mountain summit, whisking you in the direction of Rock Creek. Number Three was built mostly on the wagon track the Royal Engineers constructed in the 1800s to have an all-British route to the East Kootenay goldfields—too many Americans coming up from Idaho or Spokane. The highway hugs the border, though: the U.S. is never more than a few miles to the south.

At a certain point after Osoyoos the woods open up into a rolling plateau landscape. Patches of evergreens stand along some of the draws and gullies, and cluster at the top of the rises. But there are also these huge expanses of open range. From a ways off, the grasslands look flat—tilted, angled, but smooth. Sometimes the meadows have cows grazing on them, or somebody has plowed under an acre or three, or a tractor across a field is baling hay, although not this time of year. But as the road swings close to some field that you thought as you approached was an even grade like the prairies, you notice its surface actually rolls like the ocean—big swells and depressions all across it.

The geezer was standing on the shoulder back before the land opens up, maybe a quarter-hour from the summit. The highway at

this spot cuts through the woods: nothing around but pines, and a few cedars where a creek crosses. My hitchhiker didn't appear agitated or grateful or much of anything when he hauled himself into the van, bringing the smell of cold air with him. No snow yet on this part of the route—okay, a few patches of white were under the trees now and then; obviously it had snowed a few times already.

I picked up the old man about three-thirty in the afternoon. By the start of December the sun sets pretty early, which means the light was already getting a little dim. The day was cloudy, which might have added to my feeling that an hour later he'd be frozen stiff beside the road in the dark. As I say, it was nippy out—a degree or two above freezing. The poor soul wasn't particularly dressed for the chill, either: just wearing a thin jacket and a ball cap. Yet the weather didn't seem to bother him, or at least he didn't comment on it when he clambered aboard.

He was short but stocky. His face and hunched body carried that aura of negative intensity some people possess—a thick cloud of knotted rage or gloom or just disappointment. Whatever the energy, it wraps them like a portable environment, so they haul the same mood with them wherever they go. A closed container of a life, although I couldn't read right away what was inside this one.

"Car break down?" I asked after we'd gotten up to speed again.

"Nope."

I waited to see if he'd explain further. From back when I cut hair regular, I'm used to people who don't say much. Regardless of their outlook, some customers prefer to chatter while you're working, some don't. But I was curious, since the old boy had been standing on the shoulder miles and miles from any house, as far as I could tell. I waited a decent interval, then inquired:

"Where you off to, today?"

"Bridesville. You know it?"

I did, as a matter of fact. About twenty miles further. I'd never stopped there, but I'd seen the turnoff sign on the highway about a million times. Not a name you forget. I'd always wondered who would call a burg "Bridesville"? Was there once a "Groomsville" nearby? From the road the place looks to be a string of houses and maybe a backwoods general store or auto repair shop laid out along a street for a couple of hundred yards parallel to the highway—sort of like a siding next to a railway line.

Or maybe the main road used to go through town. Just to the east is a sign for "Bridesville Cemetery"; perhaps the hamlet was once

bigger—a mining town or cattle town, maybe selling across the border. Anyway, it's located on a bench in that open country I was mentioning, before you hit Rock Creek. Occasionally when I'd sped past, I'd idly thought that one day it would be neat to take a few extra minutes and drive through. I don't know why: a tiny adventure. Once in a while I get a notion when I'm driving: what would it be like to live in *that* house—some spiffed-up heritage mansion, maybe—and spend the rest of my life in Midway, say, or on some farm I find particularly appealing out in the boonies, or on an orchard near Keremeos? Not that Bridesville was inviting. Most of the cluster of structures appear tumble-down: obviously nobody has much money for paint or upkeep. At this season, however, I'd see woodsmoke rising from the chimneys so I knew these were somebody's homes.

"What takes you to Bridesville?" I asked.

"Live there."

I switched on the wipers. Some drops were splattering against the windshield—a shower of those large wet plops that are almost snow. "How come you were hitching away out here?"

The cloudburst lasted a minute or so and then dribbled to an end, or we drove out of it.

"Calendar."

I thought I misheard. "Say again?"

"Calendar."

I looked over where he slouched in his seat. From his lap, he lifted a slim envelope and flourished it. "Bill Markin's motel in Osoyoos has calendar. Each year, I like to have."

"Oh yeah?" I didn't quite comprehend.

"I go every December to pick one up before they are gone."

"You hitch all the way for a *calendar*?"

No answer.

"Do you have a car?" I asked him.

"What for? My neighbor gives me ride into Rock Creek if I have to see doctor. Or I hitch. People stop."

We drove back into rain. I glanced across once more. From his accent and Slavic features he seemed Doukhobor. I tried to guess his age, as I used to do when I worked a chair. I still style occasionally if one of my shops is short-handed at a peak time: school break, say, or right before Christmas, or August back-to-school. We make much more from the products, though, than we do styling, these days: conditioners, rinses, tints, lotions, you name it—retail and refill and even bulk.

That's what puts me behind the wheel. We could have the products shipped from the franchise warehouse in Van. And the wife is always after me to agree to that, to not be away on the road so much. But I like to visit each shop in person. Delivering product monthly gives me the excuse. Unload, have a coffee with the manager, nose through the mall or the downtown a little, get a feel for what's happening at the store and in the community. That's how I headed off a problem in Trail a few years ago. Everything on paper appeared fine—sales up, all that. But my manager was never around when I arrived. Shop didn't feel right, somehow. After a couple of coffees over a couple of months with a woman I knew there, Sharleen—used to work for me at the salon in Nelson a while back—I got the picture. I eventually figured the right questions to ask her, and bam, that guy was out of there. You have to draw the line. It's a happier crew now, and my accountant found the guy was skimming me. I always remind the wife of that experience when she needles me about my runs to Van and back. Truth is, I *enjoy* driving around, appreciating the country, connecting with people. I'd go stir-crazy if I just sat at home or in the office. What's the good of finally being my own boss if I can't do what I want to?

So I sized up my hitchhiker and estimated early 70s. With these old boys it's tough to tell. Sometimes a life spent working outdoors wears them down; you guess they're 80 and they're only 70. Other times the outdoor work leaves them in great shape: you estimate 70 and they turn out to be 80. This guy had his right hand on the dash and was staring through the rain down the highway. Looked as though his hand had done a lot of hard work: the first finger ended at the first knuckle. Carpenter? Logger? Grey stubble on his cheek, like my Uncle Don after he retired from the Trail smelter and would only shave every few days.

I was about to point-blank my passenger about his age, because the question often gets these fellows yakking, and also gives me a chance to learn how close I've come in my estimate. No big deal, yet I kind of pride myself on my ability to factor everything in and guess right. But something swung into view ahead I'd been curious about for a while. Since my hitchhiker was more or less a local to this stretch of road, I decided to ask what he knew about it.

On the north side of the highway is a crazy jumble of decrepit buildings and fences and badly daubed homemade signs: "Native

Crafts," "Gold Paning"—spelled wrong, "Fresh Keremeos Fruit," "Acers"—spelled wrong—"Of Gemstones." And always a huge "Open." Behind and under and around the forest of signs it's a real Dogpatch. Split-rail fences, board fences, some barbed wire, and even snowfence, all with tilted posts, haphazardly circle a cluster of structures. Three or four weathered sheds have planking you can see daylight between. Most of the window panes in the sagging buildings are smashed. Next to the shacks is an ancient mobile home, with a wooden roof partially completed over it. Lots of housetrailer in the Interior have a roof erected over them because mobiles aren't really built to handle a snowload. But the roofing here is half mossy shingles, and the other half only has bare trusses evident—not even sheathing over them, let alone shingles. Paint is peeling from the exposed top of the mobile, and from its side panels, too. A dilapidated shed nearest a gravel parking area is open-fronted, with rough plank counters that slant downwards, presumably intended to display some product. Clumps of high grass sprout everywhere across the property.

The biggest sign might perpetually say "Open," but I've never noticed any vehicles parked in front. To me this eyesore is more a roadside *distraction* than any kind of a commercial *attraction*. Yet I'm no longer amazed about what people will spend their money on.

What's visible at this spot accumulated over three or four years. I recall when there was nothing. Then a shed or two. After that the fencing started, and next the housetrailer appeared. I knew somebody was at home because lights showed in the mobile's windows and even in the sheds' when I powered by some evenings. I could see smoke from the trailer's chimney, too, on a cold day.

Not that I was paying that much attention, but you know how when you drive a route often enough you kind of mentally note any differences—a new clearcut on a hillside, a road that wasn't there last time punched into a grove of trees by the highway, a barn under construction in what was formerly a field. Outside Cawston is a driveway that for years and years had a sign in bright red letters: "Nels and Sophie Olson." What caught your eye was how tidy the sign was: kept freshly painted, with the background a shade of blue that made the red letters especially stand out. Then one trip I made, the sign just read: "Nels"—and then a big blank space where the words "and Sophie" used to be—"Olson." Some line had been reached, some decision made, and somebody's wife

had been painted over. After that, I used to chuckle at the gap in the sign, although I was certain the missing words held a lot of pain for one or the other of the couple, or both.

At Dogpatch, the junk stopped accumulating close to a year ago, about the time I noticed there were no more indications of life around the property. At first I thought whoever stayed here simply was away whenever I passed. Then I realized there hadn't been any evidence for months that someone was occupying the trailer. They must have gone under financially and moved, I concluded.

"Bet *you* know the story about what happened at this place," I suggested to my passenger. I glanced towards him, to indicate what I meant with a nod at the approaching site. But he had straightened up rigid in the seat. His eyes were glued in that direction.

His right hand began to shake, drumming on the dash. "You think I lie?" he demanded.

"Say again?" I figured he'd misheard or misunderstood me.

His reply was louder than before. "You think I lie, too?"

"What do you mean?"

"I *saw*." He swung his left hand up to join the vibrating right, which he withdrew. The left hand remained on the dash, trembling, but not as bad. "Parkinson's?" I thought to myself.

"Jail is right place."

"Jail?" I said. "Wait a sec, I—"

"Right place for him."

I was confused. "Hey, listen." I tried to steer the geezer back to my question. "I just assumed you might know, being from around here, something about—"

"How many times *you* see Lucy's face? One black eye, or two black eyes. Or broke teeth."

"Who's Lucy?"

"Stitches to her forehead. They took her by ambulance in March. When she lost the baby. And again, after that."

"Whoa, old-timer," I attempted to break in. "I can't—"

"You heard what he yelled at me in court? 'You're next, Padwinikoff.'"

"Look, slow down. None of this—"

"'I'll be here when you get out, Lindstrom,' is what I tell him. In front of that Grand Forks judge and everybody. You think I did not see?"

“No, just a minute, I—”

“Anybody who says what I testify is wrong, *they* are the liar.”

I let the old guy have the last word, since he was obviously worked up about something. The location that prompted his outburst was behind us now. We crested the summit. As we began to descend, the precipitation which had thinned almost to nothing began to fall heavier, landing on the windshield nearly as sleet. I notched the wipers up and concentrated on my driving for a bit.

I can't claim that the disconnected babble from my rider was unfamiliar to me. Lots of people live happily encased in their own world, and then take it for granted you're in there with them. I get this in the chair. “Had a good holiday?” I'll ask a client who's in for a cut after a long weekend. “Oh yeah,” they'll reply. “I was over to Bob's, and then him and me went into town to see Angie.” Of course I don't have a clue who Bob or Angie are.

The highway started to drop steeply along a wooded hill; I had to gear down to accommodate four or five pretty abrupt curves. The sleet was sticking to the road in the lee of a couple of cutbanks. Then we coasted out into open country again, and the asphalt was wet and bare. I knew we were near Bridesville, and began keeping a lookout for that. Clouds lowered over the road, but eventually we drove through the patch of storm and I switched off the wipers.

I took the opportunity to reflect on whether there was any connection at all between my original question to my rider and his agitated response. A possibility dawned. I wanted to confirm whether my guess was right, yet I didn't want to send the old boy off on a tangent again.

“Do you mean,” I carefully broke the silence, “that the place back there is deserted because the owner was sent to jail?”

“Five years,” my passenger replied.

I chewed over that statement for a second, and puzzled out a link between my latest question and his response. “Ah, the man who owned it went to jail for five years.” I spoke this as firmly as I could.

“*Deserved* it.”

“Okay, okay. I just wondered why the buildings appeared abandoned. Now you've told me. Thank you.”

“Mister, I watch her grow up all her life.”

I figured I better shut this line of conversation down fast, or I'd be in the middle of another spasm of impassioned, if opaque, pronouncements. “Sure, fine,” I said. “But I've never met you

before, and I don't know the 'her' you're talking about. I had a simple question and you've answered it. Thanks."

That quieted him for a moment. "If you don't know me," he offered slowly, "why did you say I lie?"

"I didn't say you lied," I emphasized. "I only asked if you knew what happened back there."

"Mrs. Relkoff said to me on the street, 'Alex, before God, you must not bear false witness.'"

The sign for Bridesville was drifting toward us. "I'm going to turn here," I informed my passenger. My comment didn't register.

"She said, 'Whatever the man did, Alex, that is up to God.' I told her: 'Why couldn't I have seen? The judge believed me. I say I hitch by Lindstrom's. If you know something different, you go to court and tell them.'"

I swung onto the access road and pulled over, engine idling. "Do you live in one of these houses? If so, I can run you right to your door."

He stared ahead through the windshield. "She says: 'Oh no, I would never go to court. But God's Word is plain: on this side is right and on that side is wrong. And God sees, Alex.' 'Then He sees what I saw,' I tell her."

I asked him again if this was where he lived.

He faced in my direction, but I'm not sure he was focusing on me. "That lawyer, too, he tells me. 'You've sworn an oath,' he shouts. He says, 'You cannot prove you were on the highway Wednesday.' I say to him: 'You cannot prove I was not.'"

I gave the geezer a choice. "I can let you out now. Or, I'll take you home if you live ahead here. Do you?"

He nodded.

Up close, Bridesville was no different than I expected. The houses are mainly two-storey frame homes, most in poor shape, but a couple better maintained. There are four or five heritage wooden dwellings, one of which is about the most decrepit of any house along here: a boarded-over window in the upper storey, paint flaking from the siding and trim, a partially caved-in porch, the roof more moss than shingles. The community hall probably was once a church, to judge from a tilted steeple affixed at one end of the roofline. At least three driveways had older logging trucks in them; a gleaming new rig was parked on the street in front of somebody's home.

After a few hundred feet, I asked my passenger: "Which place is yours?"

He gestured forward.

Half the front yards had wrecked cars, or engine blocks, or heaps of used building materials in them; people's piles of heating wood ranged from fastidiously neat to toppled-over. A few old-style large satellite dishes were visible. There's no sidewalk, and only a couple of trees on anyone's lot down the whole line of settlement. Low piles of dirty snow had been left by the plows at intervals along the route. A store advertises itself in unevenly painted letters as "Store," with "Groceries Organic" smaller underneath. I tried to think who around here would insist on organic food. A faded metal sign on a side wall faintly proclaims the virtues of Orange Crush, with the bottle design the one I remember from my youth. Suspended from a pole sticking out at a right angle from the building is a modern Coke sign that a city convenience store might display.

Where the street begins to curve back toward the highway is a row of smaller dwellings, single-storied, like motel cabins. I guessed they were once miner's shanties, by the size of them.

My hitchhiker indicated the third on the right. "That's mine."

I eased the van over in front of it. My rider made no effort to climb out, though I kept the motor running.

"That is Mrs. Broughton's." He gestured at the cabin west of his. "I have coffee every day. She was like a mother to Lucy. Lucy stayed whenever her husband hurt her."

"Sounds bad," I murmured. I was forming a hazy sense of what the old boy's story might be.

"I saw what he did to her," he said simply.

"I'm sorry for your troubles." I tried to extricate myself with a small joke; I learned long ago at my job you can't take on other people's difficulties—some boundaries you don't want to cross: "Hey, I better roll, or I'll be in trouble with the wife." Streaks of rain drizzled down the windshield. I flicked the wipers on.

My passenger suddenly thrust his maimed right hand toward me, and we shook. He gathered the envelope with his calendar in his left, yet made no move to leave.

"I'm sure you made the right decision," I soothed. "But I should be on my way."

"There are those who think I lie," he responded.

"Yeah, you've mentioned that." I felt he wanted something from me, wished to confess something, maybe. People at times seem compelled to reveal amazingly private details of their lives to stylists—information I don't believe they ought to share. Even in a

small town, we're regarded the way I hear bartenders are: as sort of professional strangers a person can blab their secrets to without fear we'll pass them along to anyone they know.

So I asked him what I knew damn well was none of my business. "Did you lie?"

He recoiled from me as though I had punched him. His head lifted high over his shoulders, a stance unlike any I'd seen him show since I picked him up—the posture was one of haughtiness, of pride.

He fumbled for the door latch and swung the van door wide into the rain. He waved his fist toward me.

"I speak the *truth*," he yelled, and was gone.

I had to reach across to shut the door. I sat and watched the water pour down onto that burg's sorry roofs. Then I put the vehicle into gear, and a minute later was back on the highway.

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