

Fall 1986

When Baby Comes Home

William Yellow Robe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Yellow Robe, William (1986) "When Baby Comes Home," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 25 , Article 50.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss25/50>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

When Baby Comes Home

A man on crutches is walking toward a cabin. He stops at the bottom of a banked road. The road stands in front of the cabin like a scar. He looks down at the bank's bottom and the head on his long shadow nearly touches the top of the road. His eyes roam the blanket of snow for a starting path. Finding the path, he begins an upward climb by jabbing one of the crutches into the snow. Then he lifts his bad leg and plants it into the snow and the other crutch and foot follow. He does this repeatedly and climbs halfway up to the top. Beads of sweat run down his forehead and the watery trails of each head gleam. The sweat beads go into his blood-shot eyes which have spots and streaks of red near the pupils. Then one of the crutches slides; his body turns and he falls.

The man lies in silence. Slowly he gets up into a sitting position and swears at each crutch. With difficult blasts of breath he blows the snow from the hands. To warm his finger tips he places them two at a time into the mouth. He takes a deep breath and then hurls himself into the air like a pheasant. Once he is off the snow he quickly braces himself with both arms and the good leg. He slowly reaches out and one at a time he plucks his crutches from the snow and is now standing.

His fingers gently work the crutches' handle grips and then squeeze and turn the grips making the handles squeak. The man grunts and sucks the cool morning air through his nostrils causing snorting sounds. He starts the journey.

He smiles on reaching the top of the road and takes his time walking across it. He stops at the other side of the road and looks down at the bank. His eyes search for a possible route.

"To hell with it," says the man. He eases himself down into a sitting position and slides down the side of the banked road. At the bottom of the bank he waits to make sure the sliding is finished. He gets to his feet and goes on.

The cabin door opens several inches and stays opened for a moment. Then it closes. The morning sunlight makes a reflection of the man and yard on the cabin's only window.

When the man enters the yard he plants his feet deeper into the snow. He stops for a moment and looks at the yard to examine it.

The footprints of the man are now in a straighter line than they were. He goes to the door and pounds on it. Sweat and melted snow are running from the man's hair and stocking cap. Liquid mucous from the nose runs out and down to the upper lip. He uses his tongue to wipe up the mucous.

He raps on the door and stops. The man leans forward, listens, backs up from the door and pounds again.

"Opal," calls the man and he wipes the sweat from his forehead. "Opal. Opal, open the door." He rests on the crutches. Then he eases his left arm off the crutch

and rubs his arm pit. The man moves his head near to the arm pit and takes a sniff. He puts the arm back on the crutch and lifts the right arm for a moment and then sets it back on the crutch. He rubs his hand. On the sore hand is a large tattooed rose.

The noise of metal scraping wood causes the man to smile and he softly pushes the door but the door doesn't give. Then the door's bolt is pulled completely back and the door is creaked open.

"Rosy," says a woman's voice. "Rosy. Are you drinking?"

"No," says Rosy and he leans his head closer to the crack of the door and cabin. "I'm cold," he whispers.

The door is opened wider. A woman, Opal, quietly steps into the doorway. She wears bedroom slippers that are lined with sheepskin and have "Russlers" stamped on the tips of the toes. Her hair is cut short and she pulls it back from over her ears and allows it to rest behind the ears.

"You were drinking," says Opal. "And now you've come back again."

"But not anymore. It's legal now—you know." The tips of his crutches enter the cabin, but he doesn't. "Hey—move. Come on. I want to come inside."

"All right. But be quiet. You'll wake the kids." She takes one step back and watches him as he enters the cabin. Then she shuts the door without looking at it.

"I know. Don't tell me what to do—hey—woman." He bites on his lower lip as he hobbles across the wooden floor.

"Where were you?" And she goes to a wooden cupboard and opens one of the drawers and takes out a small hunting knife. "What happened to your leg?"

"Broke it." Rosy plops into an old chair near the table and the chair cracks and squeaks. He breathes deep and waits for a moment. "Get me something to eat—hey."

She takes potatoes from a sack and fills her dress pockets with them. Then she begins to peel one and lets the peels fall into a paper sack of swept dirt, cans, and packaging paper. "How did you break it?"

"I was walking around town two days ago," says Rosy. He uses his hands to re-enact the accident on the table. She looks over at him while he tells the story, and she continues peeling potatoes. "I was going to cross the street, and here, this big green Ford, a real nice looking one, pulled out of nowhere and smacked into me."

"From here?"

"The car?"

"Nooo- - ."

"Oh. No. He was a Canadian. He even took me to the hospital at the agency. Kept on telling me how sorry he was, and about how shocked he was that the hospital here in town wouldn't take Indians."

She looks at him and then sets the peeled potato on the cupboard and begins work on another.

"Anyway. They put a cast on me and let me go. He was still upset—that's what he said, and here, he went and gave me money," says Rosy and he smiles.

"So you have any money left? We owe Clark for this food," says Opal.

"Christ! Is that all you're worried about? I damned near got killed—hey!"

Opal doesn't respond and sets the last peeled potato on the cupboard. She quietly

walks over to the stove and, using a potholder, she opens the stove's door. The air going into the stove causes the flames to jump higher and the gray ash to swirl around. She feeds small pieces of wood into the fire and waits a moment and then adds a larger piece of wood.

She takes an iron skillet from a shelf on the wall and sets it on the stove, and then goes to the cupboard and removes a can of shortening that has "US Government Approved" written on it. She reaches down to the stove's door and closes it. Then she removes the plastic lid from the can and uses her finger to take out a white glob. She wipes it off on the edge of the skillet. In a few moments the glob slowly melts into a clear liquid.

"I wish you'd hurry up—hey—Opal," says Rosy. "I'm hungry."

In another room of the cabin two children sleep on the floor side by side. They lie on and are wrapped in faded star and patch quilts. In their sleep, the two boys fight for space on the large star pillow where they rest their heads, tugging on the corner of the pillow, and pulling on the quilts.

The grandparents have the other half of the room. They have an old paint-peeled dresser. On top of it lie two braids of sweet grass, burnt on one end. Next to the dresser is a bed made of two mattresses. The grandparents lie on the bed, covered with one JC Penney blanket, two star quilts, and two used gray wool Army blankets. The grandfather blinks his eyes. He eases his hand from underneath the blankets and scratches his ear and listens.

"I don't even know why we let them kids stay—hey. I don't. How come? We should send them off to school," says Rosy. He reaches his hands into his coat sleeves and tries to remove his coat, pulling and tearing at the sleeves.

"No. They can go to school here," says Opal. "They're my boys."

"Are the old ones up?" Rosy waits for a response. "Huh?" He still receives no response. "Hey—they up?"

"No. Be quiet." She slices up the potatoes and puts them into a bowl.

"Damn it. Don't tell me to shut up woman. Hey! You. You getting mouthy—huh?" Rosy removes his coat and as it rises over his shoulder a pint bottle slithers out of one of the pockets and bounces on the floor and comes to rest in the light from the window. The sunlight makes the brown liquid glow and sparkle.

The grandfather slowly eases the blankets off with one hand. He slides his legs off the mattresses, and he reaches over to the dresser and gently opens one of the bottom drawers. His hand eases into the corner of the drawer near him and comes out with a .22 cal. pistol. The pistol's hand grips are worn and on one side there is a small chip missing. The grandfather stops for a moment to listen. Then he pulls the blankets forward as if to tuck in the grandmother. "Nuah," says the grandmother and she grabs his hand and doesn't let go.

Rosy grunts and wheezes as he tries to stretch and get the bottle. Opal stops slicing the potatoes and drops them into the bowl. She sets the knife on the cupboard. Slowly she walks over, picks up the bottle from the floor, and takes two steps back from Rosy. Rosy's face is covered in sweat.

"I thought you said you weren't drinking! Huh! You weren't drinking?"

"I'm not—hey—Opal," says Rosy and he holds out his hand for the bottle.

"Honey—I'm saving that. I need that so I can taper it off."

"No. Not in this house." Opal walks to the door, opens it, and throws the bottle out the door.

"Hey! Why did you do that—huh?" He blinks his eyes as beads of sweat slide into them. Without looking he tries to snatch his crutches that are resting against the table, but only knocks them to the floor. "Help me—hey."

She walks over near Rosy and picks the crutches up and is careful to stay out of his way. Opal walks back to the opened door and tosses out the crutches.

"Hey! Why'd you do that—huh?" Rosy tries to sit up straighter in the chair.

"Get out." Opal advances on Rosy.

"What? Me? You think you're that tough? Huh? Woman!"

"Get out now—Rosy."

"You're a big woman," says Rosy and he turns his head away. "You think you can find another man? Who would want you?" He sneaks a look at her. "You're not tough." He turns away from her and watches the cabin wall.

Rosy doesn't see the two large hands that come down and dig into his shoulders. He puts his hands on the table and pushes off of it. His body twists, but he can't turn around.

Opal drags him off the chair. He grips the table tightly as she pulls him off the chair.

Rosy pumps his good leg up and down as he tries to stand up and get his balance. But Opal uses this and it makes it easier for her to get him off the chair, and to drag him across the floor and pull him toward the door.

Near the door Opal uses Rosy's up and down motion and shakes him side to side like a dog playing with a sock. Rosy releases the table. While pulling on him she works her way behind him and starts to push with her knees. Outside the cabin she lets him drop. But he grabs her wrists and she tries to pry his hands from her wrists. Then she gets one wrist free, but he grabs it again when she works on freeing the other. In desperation, Opal kicks. Her kick strikes him in the belly and he yells. He lets go of her wrists. She runs back into the cabin as he rolls and groans on the ground.

The cabin door is banged shut.

"Opal. Damn you!" Rosy yells and crawls to his crutches. Slowly he works his way up the crutches and onto his feet. "I'll get you."

"Opal. Open the door!" He drags the leg cast through the snow to the door. At the door he slams his tattooed hand on the door and the hand's redness nearly matches the color of the rose.

He stops pounding and waits.

The sound of the bolt being pulled back is heard. The wooden door creaks open. Then it is pulled back.

The grandfather stands three feet from the door. The sun's light catches the gray hairs woven in the braids. The white streaks of his faded jeans stand out. The hands have deep worn lines in them and don't shake as they both steady a cocked pistol.

"Hello, Rosy," says the grandfather. "I told you not to come here if you're drinking. My daughter doesn't want you. I don't want you. You're no good. You'd better leave before I shoot you."

Rosy looks over the grandfather's shoulder. Opal is standing a few feet behind the old man. Her two sons are clutching their mother's legs and Opal holds a large piece of wood. The grandmother stands in the bedroom doorway leaning on a diamond willow cane for balance. "Nuah," she says and tears stream from her. She taps the cane on the floor.

"Better get going," says the grandfather.

Rosy licks his lips and slowly turns his back to the old man. Then he quickly spins and throws a fist at the grandfather's face.

The pistol gives out a crack. The door is slammed shut. Opal's screams drown out the sons' screams.

"It's all right, my girl," says the grandfather. "It's all right."

The two boys are hanging from Opal's legs, and tears cover their faces.

The grandfather walks over to Opal and the pistol's barrel is pointed downward as a small wisp of smoke escapes from the barrel.

"Come on you kids, come with me," says the grandfather.

Opal flings the piece of wood to the floor and makes the two boys jump. She kisses each of them and rubs their backs. She passes the two boys to the grandfather and the grandfather doesn't break stride as they reach out with their arms and clutch his pant legs. He walks back to the bedroom. The old woman grabs the small group as they pass by her. Her arms nearly engulf the three. She tries to ease herself and her two grandsons. Opal waits for them to leave the room and quietly walks over to the window to check on Rosy.

Rosy lies outside of the cabin. His hands cup his ears and slowly he removes his hands. He looks both ways and rolls on his back. Rosy sits up and begins to examine his body. After a moment he gets his crutches. One of the crutches is busted. He tosses the broken crutch at the cabin. Rosy tries to get up with the one good crutch. On his feet he takes a moment to re-examine his body. Satisfied, he begins to limp away from the cabin. When he is near the banked road he stops and looks for the bottle. He looks back at the cabin. "You never did know how to cook. Old woman! Bitch! And you could never satisfy me!"

He limps to the banked road. When he gets to it he makes no attempt to climb it, but limps alongside of it.