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from City of Trees

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Fred Haefele

from *City of Trees*

Ash
Flooding

Early March. The mornings were raw, damp and smoky. Ice fog hung in the canyons and coulees. Alex drove to Helena, a hundred miles through snow-squalls and black ice, to bid the pruning contract on the State Capitol grounds. Only three other treemen in the state bothered to show, and they all looked scruffy and winter-bit. With their styrofoam coffee cups and estimate pads, the little group shuffled along behind a sour-looking Fish and Wildlife ranger, pulled up their collars to the wind, craned their necks to the low flying snow clouds as they went through the whole job, tree by tree. There were fifty or so Marshall ash, stringy and brushy and broken up in the tops from the big storm of '82. There was a handful of sorry-looking box elders, and three big American elms, specimen trees that apparently had never been pruned. The ash trees ranged small to medium in size and were easy to get up, but the elms were massive and full of dead wood and Alex knew a climber could spend a full day in each.

Alex was thinking about his prospects when he found himself walking abreast of the sour-looking ranger. They passed a towering American elm, and in passing the ranger said, "Think your cherry-picker can reach all the way up there?"

"We don't have a cherry-picker," said Alex. What the hell, he thought. Why not tell him now, eliminate all the damn suspense.

"You don't?" said the ranger. "Why not?"

"We don't believe in 'em," said Alex. He didn't know quite where he was going with this one but he never missed a beat. *He*

sure wasn't going to be the guy to tell the little bastard AM couldn't afford one.

The ranger stopped, scowled. "What's that mean—you don't believe in 'em?"

"Well, the way I see it," said Alex, "*any* fool can work a big tree from a cherry-picker." He paused, scanned the top of the elm again. "But it takes a *real* fool to work one off a rope."

The ranger spat thoughtfully and said, "To tell you the truth, I never looked at it that way."

On a Thursday morning with three trees left in the contract and the motel room packed, Alex woke to a steady drizzle. The streets were glazed, the trees were sheathed in ice. He went out to start the trucks, slipped and fell flat on his back. While the trucks idled he chipped the ice off the windshields, watched them freeze back up. Water ran off the gutters and froze in midair. He went back inside and drank a cup of coffee while Stukes sat in front of the TV, still in his long johns, waiting for a forecast. They sat there till eleven o'clock, watched part of *Summer Lovers*, parts of *Jaws* and *Patton* and finally Alex realized what he was really doing was watching Stukes, watching how every time Stukes spit, he would hit the channel changer. It seemed to Alex to be the dumbest kind of reflex imaginable, and it dawned on him that after nine straight days together, this hard-working, good-natured, uncomplaining man was really beginning to get on his nerves. The forecast said it would only be worse by nightfall. Jesus, Alex thought. We'll be stuck in this room forever with three trees left in the contract. The next commercial he put his boots on and without a word, Stukes dressed too. They chained up the trucks and drove back to the capitol.

The trees were slick as popsicles and Alex spurred them all and climbed gloveless, in case there was an ice knob or edge of bark he could grab with his fingernails. On the next to the last tree, he slipped out of his stance in mid-cut and brought the chain saw down hard, bouncing the sprocket-nosed bar off his leg, just above the kneecap. Alex gasped, killed the saw and looked down in disbelief. His jeans gaped open and inside he could see a three-inch gash—gristle, flaps of skin. There was no pain yet and like most bad luck, it happened so fast Alex could scarcely believe he couldn't somehow reach out and snatch the moment back. He clipped the saw to a carabinier, leaned back in his harness, looked horizon to horizon beneath the heavy grey sky, looked back to his knee to see if it had still happened. This time he could see bits of long johns, oil and wood chips floating in the gore. A grey squirrel sat in a branch, the next ash over, looking down at him. "You little shit," Alex said with disgust. "You saw this coming didn't you?"

The squirrel flicked its tail, peered down. "Zeeep!" it said. "Chick chick chick."

Alex spat, cursed. He could feel his boot fill up with blood. Stukes had shut down the chipper and was looking up at him. Finally he said, "You okay, Alex?"

Alex sighed. "No." He'd nicked himself before but he had always been able to finish the day. One time he'd closed the wound with butterfly bandages. One time he'd used a strip of electrician's tape. He'd nicked himself before but this time he was cut.

Alex drove himself to the emergency room in the pickup. It had an automatic so he wouldn't have to clutch and this way too, Stukes could finish with the clean-up. The debridement took over

an hour. The intern was a woman about Alex's age. She had a big square chin and watery blue eyes. She wore cowboy boots and she chattered away about the weather and the skiing at Bridger while she sewed him up. "Hey," she said finally. "How the hell *did* you do this, anyway?"

"I was pruning trees," said Alex.

"Looks like you got a little carried away," she said.

For a solid week it rained. The trees shone bare and slick and the power lines hung dripping against the leaden, smoky sky as the rain pounded away at the snow, the ice, and finally at the rock-solid ground. Alex sat in his office, tried to keep his leg elevated, watched the rain pour down, watched the long-legged spiders at play on his ceiling. After what seemed like a flying start to the season, the phone had stopped ringing altogether. But it didn't matter anyway, it was too wet to work and even if it wasn't, he was an invalid. He tried to see this as a form of good luck, the two things coming together at once, but it was too great an effort. He was embarrassed for getting hurt, especially in front of Stukes, and he worried about his business to no particular end, and he found himself thinking about Tom Sweeney, that big strange fool. If Sweeney'd been there, they would have been out a day earlier. They would have missed the rains and Alex wouldn't have sliced his damn leg. Alex spat. If only Sweeney this, if only Sweeney that.

On a drizzling Tuesday afternoon, Alex found himself searching in the back seat of Sweeney's Dodge, rooting around with a kind of feverishness in the potent, smoke-tainted stillness, looking for the journal. He tried to think of what it would be he'd tell Chris if she were to show up just then. Really, what the hell would

there be to say? Jesus. The things you have to go through, once you start sneaking around.

Seven years pass. I turn thirty in the treetops. I work for World Tree branches in Portland, Natick, Cos Cob and Peekskill. I can't stop moving. For a time I work alone in the hurricane season, follow the low pressures down coast, from Cape May all the way to New Smyrna Beach. I work the big storms, when the streets are littered with branches, shingles, downed power lines and the great live oaks heave over, splinter the roof tops like matchwood. I live in trailers and cheap rooms, climb a thousand trees. I'm up them when they flower, so they wrap me in blossoms, garland my beard. I'm up them in full leaf, so they rush and whisper with a sound like water. I'm up them when they're hard and bare, knocking bone to wood while the north wind cuts through the twiglets with the hollowed-out sound of a chord that's struck and fading on the strings.

Alex rolled the piece up, jammed it in the cookie tin, locked the Dodge and went back to his little TV.

The sixth day of rain, in a fit of boredom, he rolled up his pantleg and snipped his stitches with Chris's cuticle scissors, picked them out with her eyebrow tweezers. He salved the scab with a bee pollen ointment he bought at the health food store, covered it with gauze, wrapped the whole business with an ace bandage and walked stiff-legged out back to his shop. He opened the door and stood for a moment in the damp gloom before he switched on the light. The far wall was hung solid with harness and bull-ropes, snatch blocks and come-alongs and a half dozen tightly coiled nylon climbing lines. He shivered, split up a larch

round with a couple whacks of the maul and lit a small fire in the sheet metal stove. The shop warmed quickly and the heat brought up the smell of parts cleaner, tree systemic and the acrid tang of high-nitrogen fertilizer. He walked to the Stihl calendar on the wall above the workbench, ripped off the month of March and studied it for a moment. It had a picture of a chesty young woman in a hardhat and hotpants, stroking the handle of a long-barred chain saw. The month of April featured a chesty woman with a flannel shirt, open to her navel, ogling the new top-of-the-line brush hog. Alex had to laugh. In all the ways that counted, the calendar was just about the dumbest thing he'd ever seen. It was amazing, he thought, the way it seemed to fit right in to everything.

He lined up his saws on the bench, broke them down, blew them out with the compressor. He kept his saws running crisp, with fresh carb kits and performance plugs so they started on the second pull and rapped out high and clean. He kept his rakers low, the cutters razor sharp, so they pumped out clouds of big square chips. He loved the weight and feel of them, loved the way a good running saw felt in the cut. He even loved the way they looked, so sleek, businesslike and lethal. It's just too bad, he thought, the way they tended to turn your hands to mush.

He dropped Emmylou Harris in his Radio Shack tape player and set to work dressing his chains. The saws had fared well in Helena, except for the one Stukes dropped nose-first out of a box elder. Alex had been right underneath it when it fell. He could have reached out, fielded it like a pop fly if it hadn't been running at full throttle. Now it was "parts." It lay in pieces in a box at Alex's feet. After fifteen years in the business, Alex had a whole lot of "parts."

He was looking out the window when there was a sudden break in the cloud cover and the back yard seemed to blossom with light, and it struck Alex that while he was down in the basement, staring at the walls and talking to spiders the ground had thawed, the snow line had risen and the forsythia was green at the buds. It would soon be spring, he thought. At least, it was a real possibility. Alex had a picture of Chris stuck in his mind—a picture of her standing in the driveway by the caragana hedge, about the time the seed pods were bursting. It must have been July. She stood, sweet and cool-looking in her rough-out boots and snap-front shirt, her skinny hip cocked, talking to Sweeney. Girlishly, she'd swept a long strand of hair from her eyes while the carageena pods snapped and burst like popcorn behind them.

Alex stood at the bench a long moment, paused with the file and shook his head. He couldn't get the picture out of his mind. What the hell had they been talking about, he wondered. Though Alex was nearly five foot ten, next to the flamboyant Sweeney he felt small. He felt balding and dull. He felt clean living. He had never been what you'd call a lady's man. As far as Alex could tell, he'd never been *anybody's* kind of man at all. The only people you could say took an interest in him were old guys, for whom he possessed a kind of supernatural attraction. All he had to do was arrive at a job and light up a chain saw and it seemed that any geezer within a ten block radius would beeline to him like a long lost father and procede to tell Alex whatever happened to be on his mind. It was starting to get to him. He was starting to believe that they saw him as one of them.

The phone rang and Alex stuck the file tail-first in the workbench and lunged for it.

A man identified himself as Randy DeLoach and asked: "Do you folks handle emergencies?"

"Sure," Alex said. "What've you got?"

"A bird in a tree."

Alex paused. Was it a goof? It got hard to say. Finally he said, "Okay. What's the emergency?"

"It's a pet bird."

"Uh-huh, okay." Alex waited.

"A two-hundred-dollar one," the man said, impatient.

Alex took his address, but after he hung up he was doubtful. How the hell'd you get a bird out of a tree, he wondered. And what would you charge for that?

He wondered if he should read a book on them or something but he figured he'd better get over there before it flew away. He put on his Ben Davis jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, grabbed a handful of sunflower seeds, drove up Hellgate Canyon, turned off into East Missoula. At winter's end the yards were littered with deer bones and loose sticks of cordwood. Log trucks were parked up on the curbs like great, mud-spattered beasts. Mongrel dogs roamed the streets in twos and threes and the air was heavy with wood smoke and the smell of frying meat. There was always something about the east side of town that reminded Alex of the set from a Barbarian movie. He drove a block or so to where a heavysset man on crutches stood by the road, flagged him down at the mouth of a trailer court drive. He wore a camouflage duck hunter's jacket. The crutches looked fragile, stick-like beneath his heavy body. Alex got out and without exchanging a word, the two of them walked over to the west side of the one-story prefab and DeLoach showed Alex the cockateel, sitting toward the end of a branch, halfway up a stubbed-off cottonwood.

Alex tugged his hat down on his forehead, buried his hands in his sweatshirt pocket and studied the situation. DeLoach stood next to him, wheezed, coughed, lit up a True, squinted into the smoke-streaked afternoon. He had a flattened-out nose and he was missing an earlobe and Alex got the idea things weren't going that well for old DeLoach. Just then the big man spoke.

"What's your line of attack?"

Alex scowled. "I was thinking I'd bring him down alive, Mister."

"What's your *plan*?" said DeLoach.

Alex brightened. "Oh," he said. "That. Well, I'll kind of sneak up the backside, climb up over his head, sneak back down on my rope and scoop the little pecker up with this"—he reached in the back of the truck and pulled out Chris's landing net. He hadn't really thought to bring it—it just happened to be there.

DeLoach looked skeptical. "Ain't that for fish?"

"I'm open to a better plan," said Alex. Really, he hadn't a clue how to get a bird out of a tree, but being a professional, he was determined not to let on. He knew what he was looking at here—a no-win situation. He didn't like the man, he didn't like the set-up and he'd only been there a minute.

Finally DeLoach pawed the air with a huge knuckley hand. "Have at it," he said, and stumped off back to the house.

"What's his name?" Alex called.

"Petey," said DeLoach.

Alex slipped into an old down vest and his shooter's mittens, hooked the landing net to his harness and quietly as he could, spurred up the back side of the cottonwood. He reached the top, tied in and descended till he stood lightly on the same branch as the cockateel. The bird's feathers were a dingy white. There were

clownish spots of orange on its cheeks and its topknot was flat, sulphur color in the late afternoon light. Alex thought there was something sad and cheap-looking about a tropical bird roosting in a trailer park cottonwood. Like a drag queen in a cowboy bar. When the bird saw Alex, it cocked its head, stared at him with bright black eyes. Oh God, he thought. Please don't let someone I know drive by and see me up here with this trout net and this stupid-looking bird.

Alex dandled the net behind his back and began talking. "Hi Tweety!" he said in what had come to be his rescue falsetto. "How ya doin', little guy? That's a good bird. A *real* good bird. Everything's gonna be all right. Everything's gonna be okay."

Alex slipped off a mitten, dug in his pocket for a sunflower seed. "Hungry Tweety? You want a snack, little buddy bird?" He ate a couple himself, smacked his lips, rubbed his stomach. "Mmmmm," he said. "Nummy-num."

"Up yours, Gomer," said the bird.

The seeds spilled from Alex's palm, spiraled to the ground. "Jesus Christ, you *talk*," he said. "Nobody told me you could *talk*."

The bird balanced on one foot, scratched its beak like a dog and ignored him.

Alex dropped the falsetto. "Let's try it again," he said. "Let me spell things out for you. Are you listening? You're in a jam. Life is cheap out here. For birds that look like you, it is, anyway. I'm risking my reputation trying to rescue you so just try to show some class, okay?" He flipped the net around behind his back, tried to practice his move. For a while he watched the bird watching him and then he said in his high cheery voice, "When the ravens get a load of you they will peck your sissy face right off."

"Jam it, Hank," said the cockateel. "Shove it up sideways."

"You know that it's rude to insult people who are trying to save you?" Alex snapped.

Just then the breeze died and it grew quiet. There it is again, he thought. One of those funny holes in the day, a kind of back eddy when the traffic noises die and the wind drops away and people stop talking and even the birds go silent. In that silence, the cockateel turned its head to Alex and made a low clucking sound. Alex was struck by the idea the bird was laughing. It watched him with unblinking eyes, as he began to bring the net around. The cockateel flapped its wings and hovered briefly above the branch, then dropped easily back down.

Alex began to sweat. He backed away, got ready to make another move. Suddenly the wind blew up again and the bird tightened its toes on the branch. From below him he heard DeLoach holler something.

Damn it, thought Alex. If he flies, he's gone. He looked down, put a finger to his lips.

DeLoach stumped around the yard, went back into his house, slammed the storm door behind him. "Asshole," Alex muttered.

"Asshole," said the bird.

Alex took another handful of seeds, held one out to the bird. "Come on," he said, "live a little."

The bird studied it, finally took it in his beak, worked it all around. Alex squatted in the crotch, bracing his back against a piece of solid-looking deadwood. He drew his knees up to his chest and flipped up the hood of his sweatshirt. Finally he said, "Can you really talk or do you just mimic folks?"

The bird continued to work the seed to his crop, made a clucking, belching noise and turned away.

"What a pair you are—you and your fat pal down there."

There was another shout from down below. Alex was fast losing his temper. "Hey," he shouted. "Lay off. I'm trying to grab your stupid bird."

"You'd best not be calling that bird stupid," said DeLoach.

"All right," said Alex. "He's a genius, then. I should have known he was smart. Name like 'Tweety.'"

"His name's Petey," said DeLoach, "and he's probably a lot smarter than you."

The bird turned to Alex, made that snickering sound again.

"Shutup," Alex barked and in an instant, snapped the landing net around and over the bird's head.

Frantically, the cockateel beat its wings in the string mesh. "Asshole!" it squawked. "Help! Help!"

DeLoach was waiting with a check when Alex got back down. "Well you got him down, Munday. I should tell you thanks though I don't much care for your methods. Hang on a second." He went inside, stumped back out with an insulated sack. "I want you to have this, too," he said.

"What is it?" Alex said.

"Paddlefish steaks. I caught 'em last summer."

Alex drove home in a bad mood. He'd forgotten to look at it, but the date on the check was wrong, the written sum was for forty dollars and the figure sum was for fifty, and Alex knew in his gut it would never clear anyway. From now on, he thought, it's cash on the barrel head. In advance.

When he got home the back yard bounced with robins while Chris worked the leaves from the beds with a bamboo rake and the dogs romped in the piles, fought over a stick.

"Where you been, Munday?" Her eyes were bright. Something

looked different about her, he couldn't say what, but just then he loved her with all his heart and he grinned foolishly as he approached. "You may call me a liar but I been up the Blackfoot on a bird call."

Chris grinned. "A bird call, is it?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. You're a liar."

Alex laughed. "It's for real. I went up and got a bird out of a tree. For this human badger of a guy."

"Munday, you've got it all over Orpheus."

"Who?"

"Orpheus. He's the guy who charmed all the animals."

"I don't know that you'd say I charmed this particular bird."

"Well then you charmed the customer. The human badger guy."

"I got his bird down. That's about it." He kept thinking about the way the cockateel stared at him. Something about it got to him. The sky was pale, bright, streaked with blue and a chinook whistled in from the west, bellied out the bedspreads hung up to air. He felt suddenly weary and heavy.

"What's in the sack?"

"Frozen paddlefish." Alex turned, hook-shot the bag into an empty leaf barrel. "I got a smart-mouthed bird out of a tree for a rubber check and a sack of old mudfish. I hope Orpheus made out better than that."

Alex knelt down, peered at the earth where she'd raked it clear, touched the green spikes of crocus. Chris grinned, leaned on her rake. "I've got news for you, Munday. Tom Sweeney's back in town."