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Attention

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Attention

Fiction by Marianne Rogoff

Tillie Olsen Short Story Award 2018 Top Ten Semi-Finalist

Milk

Will Green is outside in the dark with a chainsaw, cutting a cord of wood into logs small enough to fit the woodstove. His bundled body is tall in the long shadow from the porch bulb; outdoor Christmas lights color the ground around his feet. Familiar strength moves his muscles through tiredness as he works, and he measures success by the neat rows. He sweats. He sheds the wool cap.

Snowflakes land on his hair and glisten the woodpile, many-pointed stars whose edges dissolve as they gather. He's alone and it's freezing cold but he likes it. He likes seeing his breath in the air and the largeness of the winter sky as it drops snow that will accumulate to a couple of feet before this storm is over.

In the small, lighted house, through the window, he can see his baby and son and wife in the kitchen. The dog used to be there too, asleep on the red linoleum, but Blackie was killed last year by a Plymouth Fury taking the curve too fast on a slippery road. Will buried his best friend in the yard, near the stump of the oak tree struck by lightning the year before.

Will pauses in the rhythm of his work, reaches in a deep inner pocket, pulls out a pint of bourbon, checks for his wife watching then swigs it, fully enjoying the hot brutal rush in his throat as he swallows. He wonders if the sky goes black this early in New Mexico, where his father supposedly lives. Dark out by dinnertime, that's winter in upstate New

York. Which is why, though Christmas is long over and bills for gifts continue to arrive months later, Will leaves the colored lights up and turns them on every night. The festive strings illuminate the darkness and cheer him up, remind him of being a kid, believing in fathers, God, and Santa Claus.

The machine in his hands coughs into power, teeth glint sharp in the red-orange-blue-green glow. Sawdust flies, falls, and piles up at his feet along with the snow. Whiskey numbs. Twelve-year-old Raymond steps out on the porch to call his dad in to dinner, but Will doesn't hear the voice over the buzzing saw. He doesn't notice the sound of his son's footsteps in the damp mud and snow. As he swings the growling chainsaw away from the wood, it comes awfully close to the unseen figure that has crept up in the space beside him.

Will senses the boy there and shuts the thing off.

The sharp imagined vision of his son's red blood on white snow around his black boots—he came close—snaps him to attention: Nothing happened.

“Don't get so close, boy, I could hurt you.”

“Dinner's ready.”

“Tell your mother I'll be right in.”

Raymond retreats then stands in the doorway watching the mixture of shadows and snowfall surrounding his father.

Will examines the worn edges of his gloves in the dim light. Where is his father? Some frontier goldmining town in the high desert? Shiprock? Las Vegas? Will's mother has an address for the guy, but no idea if he's alive. Without thinking Will touches a gloved fingertip quick against the jagged edge of the saw's teeth until he feels it. He is

surprised and not surprised at all when blood appears through the cloth, and the startling sensation of pain makes him curse as feelings surface.

No man would want to hurt his own son.

He watches the blood seep. After a while he feels no pain. Will surveys the logs, drains the flask, pockets it, piles wood on an arm. He crosses the yard pressing a thumb against his wound, goes inside and drops the heavy load by the stove.

The rented house feels more crowded since the new baby was born. Same as the house he grew up in: laundry either overflowing the hamper, or washed and dried, waiting to be folded. Rarely is it all clean and put away. Now there is a dirty pile near the washing machine, a load on spin cycle, the dryer tossing jeans, zipper tap tapping—unfolded dry socks and underwear on top. The kitchen is steamy hot and loud.

His wife, Marie, reads the classifieds religiously. Since the dog died she has been searching for a puppy. She reads: “Free boat. You haul.”

“Can’t lose on that,” Will mutters, stepping out of the boots, leaving a puddle. “Free boat, imagine that.”

Marie notices the blood on his hand and the cuff of his jacket.

“You cut yourself?”

“I’m okay.”

“Okay?”

“Forget it.”

“Your brother Jon called.”

“Everything okay?”

“Says it is.”

Raymond sees how his father massages the cut then crumples the news and stuffs the paper in the woodstove. Will stacks kindling in a neat pile and strikes a match. Flames turn the paper black as it surrenders to the fire.

Marie says, “We’re out of milk.”

The fire has caught. Will latches the door. “C’mon, Ray, we need milk.”

Will puts the boots back on and Raymond bundles up. He loves crunching through the snow in the twinkling Christmas lights, climbing up onto the seat of the pickup. He savors the edgy nervous feeling of being alone with his father.

“Strap in,” Will says, presses the gas, turns the key.

Nothing.

“Goddamn it to hell.” He repeats the action several times before the motor catches and the truck lurches into gear.

They travel through darkness at least a quarter mile and Raymond can’t imagine that his father can see, though he keeps going.

“Dad, headlights,” he says.

“No wonder I can’t see a goddamn thing.” Will rummages to light a cigarette. In the darkness he neglects to see the stopped car at the corner and has to slam on the brakes. The cigarette drops on the floor near the accelerator as tires slide across slick, snow-covered asphalt and the seat belt pulls Raymond against the seat.

The boy studies his father's face, illuminated in oncoming headlights: stubbly beard growth, scars from old acne and chicken pox, shiny forehead, fear. The truck spins out in a wide half circle then the father takes charge, gets back on track, and they keep driving.

Plan

They tow the free boat to their yard and park it on cinder blocks. Will and Ray will restore it then sell it for profit. On cool spring evenings they're outside working past dark, "building the nest egg." They glean parts from everywhere, recycled discards from broken machines and unfinished projects. They sit in the parked boat constructing an engine, imagining journeys: riding waves, battling squalls.

Days in his garage, whenever he uses the hydraulic jack, Will is reminded of working with his father (the brief period he lived with them). The guy had taught him how to change a flat tire and spray ether on a carburetor to jump-start a dead car, the same man who boxed Will's ears once so hard he busted an eardrum and left Will deaf in that ear. Will wonders about him, if he's alive, where he might be, then turns the radio up so he can't hear himself think. He drinks and hides it, lip syncs to heavy metal, and moves around doing his job; today he's repairing a neighbor's vacuum. He works at his own pace and every now and then feels unconscious peace in the details of labor.

Nights, he has the same nightmare. At first he is purposeful, undaunted. *He is with his brother Jon, they face steep hills and climb, gather what they need as they go, on a picnic. Jon carries food; Will brandishes a knife in each hand. He has not seen his brother in a long time and they forge dense woods and thickets, cross bodies of water,*

looking for their brother Tommy's grave. They are sure it's here, where it's always been; they just have to find the way. They need a father, or guide. Looking for Tommy, they come upon throngs of people in a fiesta mood, lighthearted shuffling parades, music in the air, meat being grilled. They can walk and eat at the same time: move, chew, swallow, speak many languages, laugh with their mouths full, engage with the living. Not a care in the world, just this constant feeding, mingling, jostling, oblivious to the graves beneath their feet. All the dead loved ones, centuries of anonymous dead, and the fiesta hums: chicken on the grill, beer, the smell of hot skin, bare arms collide in passing, a whiff of bodies, so close. Spicy flavor goes down easy in the heat. One big carnival.

The dream stays with Will all day as he replaces rubber belts and metal screws shaken loose by the sucking rumbling. Tommy drowned when Will was nine and where was their father? Can a man be forgiven, even if he is guilty, drunk, or absent? Not everything is someone's fault. Will feels a man could never forgive himself if he couldn't keep his own child safe. Will is not a perfect father or man either, and he hates himself for it, but he should not run away.

I'm restless, he thinks as he works. The nightmare leaves him no rest, day or night. What does it mean? He tends to business, pays attention, reads whatever crosses his path, comes upon this phrase, *follow thread through a labyrinth*, doesn't know what it means, but it keeps popping into his head.

At dusk Will chainsaws and carries armloads of cut wood into the house. During sleep he walks over graves, brandishes knives, looks for his father. He has read that knives in dreams mean "cut through bullshit." A feeling surges through him: *an uncontrollable urge to flee*.

Raymond stands under a tree watching his father work, feeling his usual yearning to be close to him, be more like him, but also feeling frightened or worried.

Will says, "Help me, boy. Don't just stand there."

Ray likes being bossed around. He and his dad create order from chaos, cut wood, pile kindling, heat their house.

The free boat is parked nearby, almost ready.

Impulse

What seems unimaginable in the first glimmer of planning a desperate act becomes routine, normal, once the decision is made. Will suffers the dream all winter then wakes up one morning in spring and, in an ordinary way, packs a few things, hitches the free boat, starts the pickup, and drives away. At the last minute he gets Raymond from school. The truck engine coughs, the radio plays old songs; they drive the same roads they have traveled for years. Everything familiar, nothing extraordinary, Will is following thread through a labyrinth.

Summery weather is turning leaves to extravagant shades of green. Thompson's store has local strawberries and Jersey corn, shelves stocked with fresh bread, plenty of bourbon and beer. Old Toby at the gas station shuffles making change and they talk about the price of gas, up again. Will's neighbor Buddy is outside mowing the lawn as Will drives by. Buddy waves but Will doesn't stop. Buddy might try to talk him out of it. Will had mentioned the idea once, driving out west to track down his father, see his face, and Buddy had warned he'd be disappointed.

“The guy won’t even know who you are.”

“I’ll know him.”

“What do you want?”

“One night of rest.”

The road is endless, with infinite variations on which way to turn. The interstate carries Will and Ray along for days. The boy looks out the truck window at lofting, fast-moving clouds, fluttering maple leaves, how tall the pines are. He is overwhelmed by the beauty of everything and feels small and wants to cry but doesn’t.

“Road work ahead,” Ray reads the sign out loud to caution his father to slow down. Around the bend they’re forced to a stop and the two of them watch as a dump truck unloads a load of dirt intended to shore up a crumbling mountainside. The workers appear inadequate to the task; the land is so huge compared to them, even with their big machines.

They cross state lines and everything changes. The landscape alters, trees are not the same wood, soil not the same color, grass different. The air. The feeling. West of the mountains he’d never crossed before, across the Mississippi, cutting diagonal borders south, Will feels like himself, confident in his own sense of direction.

The shape of the truck is duplicated on the side of grassy hills and tracks their traces. The shadows of himself and Raymond’s smaller silhouette, faces forward, look almost jaunty, bopping along. The image stays with them for many miles then in the last sunlight, fades.

“Headlights, Dad,” Ray reminds him.

High beams point the way through hundreds of miles of darkness.

Arrival

They follow maps all the way to Shiprock, New Mexico. Oil pumps plunder earth for black gold along Highway 64. Nothing is like Will expected. Through Bloomfield, Farmington, south of the Aztec Ruins, New Mexico is green in spots. Generations of men passed through here, searched, found, spent, moved on. Stories of gold discoveries are told on plaques. The territory is illusory; Will sees how the light can lead you to believe that gold might be found in the barren land. You want to believe it's there then one day some man comes up with it, swearing it's true. *The gold is there! I saw it with my own eyes.* The man holds out a rock of solid nugget and it shines, sun bouncing off it like daggers.

Shiprock is a weather-beaten town found by following signs. The people look grounded, either born here or ended up here, not heading anywhere. At noon, no one in a hurry. Dust blows around them and lands in their hair and on their skin. Living under the same penetrating sun, everyone's skin has become the same color. Will searches faces for someone like himself, a man who could be his father. He studies hairlines, jawlines, smiles, gestures, the ways men stand, what they're wearing, looking for something familiar, that might make him feel like he has come to the right place.

He has to rely on instinct if he wants to find his father's house. The address his mother gave him is not on the map. Will navigates neighborhoods, eyeing faces, bodies, street

signs. They spend the afternoon this way, stop to eat in an air-conditioned coffee shop, resume the search at dusk.

“Mom must be wondering where we are,” Ray says. He came along because he trusts his father but sometimes he wonders, like now.

Will is lost in thought and does not hear himself say, “I’m wondering the same thing.”

“Everything okay, Dad?”

“Just about.”

The street sign “Coronado St.” is half hidden in overgrown oleander but a headlight catches the letters and Ray points it out. Will turns down the side street where people are outside in barren yards, working and relaxing as daytime air grows cooler. A boaty maroon Buick is parked in a driveway, hood up, and Will notes the stance of the man’s body as he hunches over the engine and leans thoughtfully toward the problem he is trying to solve.

“Is that him?” Ray asks.

Will can’t see the face in this light but he’s sure it’s his father.

“Can’t tell.”

Will drives closer, sees the face, how the man wipes his hands on his jeans, closes the hood, goes inside through a lighted doorway.

Lights out, Will pauses on the journey. He sits in the truck with his son and waits for a sign or clue: what now?

Nothing to say, after all?

Darkness crawls around and deepens until it engulfs them.

Just seeing him, that’s enough?

Will releases the brake and rolls forward. Ray exhales.

How long did they sit there? An hour? Two? Felt like forever.

The truck goes on its way, not knowing what's next, in spite of the hopeful pointing of headlights in a forward direction. The road is narrow and propels them back onto the highway.

Destination

In the starry darkness Will recognizes the volcanic landform that gave Shiprock its name. Navajo say "Winged Rock" to describe the fins of igneous rock that resemble wings; they say white men looked at it and saw the shape of a sailing ship riding the dusty waves of the desert.

In the middle of this mirage, Will imagines his father there, driving the ship, lost, and the rocking motion looks sickening. Then Will sees himself at the wheel and his perspective shifts, the scenario changes, the old image he had of himself starts to fade.

He seeks a spot to spend the night sleeping in the truck, parks in a roadside rest area. As Raymond settles to sleep with the seat down, Will reaches across the space that separates himself from his son and pushes a curl off his forehead. The boy sleeps his own dreams, breathes his own steady breaths; the heaving of the boy's chest and his body's adjustments to the uncomfortable position endear him to Will. Ray is changing before his eyes; in the glow of starlight Will sees how his son's face has chiseled into shapeliness that is his own.

On the map a dot marks the intersection of four states: Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado. An arbitrary coming together of borders intended to separate one place from another, it is the only such spot in the country. Yet it seems so plain, not the sacred place Will had envisioned. A sign in the desert: Teec Nos Pos. Four Corners. Tumbleweed, cottonwood, dust, cactus, boulders, souvenirs for sale, tourists. People jostle to arrive at the actual four-corners spot: so many people ...

Will's throat constricts. This is only a handful of the hundreds who have made the curious journey to Four Corners today. Tomorrow new throngs will arrive, while hordes trample the Grand Canyon a few hundred miles west and others climb the Rocky Mountains to the north. South, Carlsbad Caverns will be overrun with pleasure-seekers and back east there's Manhattan, subway crowds, Statue of Liberty visitors, thousands waiting on snaking lines to ride elevators to the top of the Empire State. Will thinks about Mexico, India, China. All the graves in every country in the world. His drowned brother Tommy's headstone lies flat against the ground in a New Jersey cemetery with hundreds of monuments, each one carved with the dates people were born and died. What any one life amounts to is the smallest number imaginable. In daylight Will sees where Tommy's face, too, has taken shape in Raymond's, proof of the mysterious links between us, each life a binding tie in the unwieldy, persistent cycle. Yesterday Will saw his own father's face once more and feels clear of the connection between them.

In the sun-drenched landscape a circle of Navajo and Hopi booths sell arts and crafts in bright, chaotic profusion. The handwoven wool rugs of Teec Nos Pos have patterned borders they say are a kind of family signature of the weaver. Ray is drawn to the ones

with twin geometric designs at the center, surrounded by bows and arrows, clouds, lightning, corn. Diamond-shaped spots of red, green, orange, blue make the rugs sparkle like gems to contrast with the traditional gray, black, camel-colored backgrounds. Will buys two blankets plus a beaded necklace for Marie. Ray watches the artists paint kachina dancers and carve stone bear fetishes, uplifted by the colors, designs, and suggestions of otherworldly powers. The boy can't name his feelings, only knows these objects seem magical.

Ray follows his father through the parking lot. Wearing the blankets draped like serapes, they take pictures of each other in front of the Four Corners sign. The two sit on the free boat like they used to do at home, parked on the trailer, sun a glaze, skin ceramic. They sit without talking, there is too much to say. Ray twiddles a string on his shorts, Will closes his eyes and meditates against yearning.

River

When they were teenagers Will and his brother Jon went camping once, the year before they grew up and moved apart. They called it *running away from home*, and disappeared a few miles into the woods behind their home in central New Jersey. They got rip-roaring drunk on Ripple wine and Miller High Life then stayed overnight on an island in the middle of the river where Tommy drowned. Will and Jon told stories about their brother, what they remembered about him. He was always in the hospital, and came home to live with them when he was nine, but he had catching up to do if he wanted to be like other

boys. Tommy never swam before in his life and he was no good even at simple things like throwing and catching.

As it grew dark, Will told ghost stories.

“The neighbor boys and Tommy did *one potato, two potato*, to see who had to jump in first, and Tommy lost. He took off his shoes and tested the water. Cold, he pulled back. The boys either pushed him, or Tommy jumped in; no one could say the truth of what happened but, either way, Tommy got swept up in the current then his legs got tangled in tree roots. He must have opened his mouth for air, and water rushed in, and he swallowed it all.

“Suddenly,” Will paused to build suspense, though Jon already knew the ending, “the whole tree broke loose and pulled him downstream. Catching breaths, aiming up, Tommy gulped buckets of water, eyes focused on sky and clouds as the river rolled over him, his skinny body weaving downhill in the rapids along with the fallen leaves, branches, gnats, pebbles, grains of sand. ...”

Beyond where the brothers swapped stories in the woods that night long ago, the tumbling river roared. Closer, the fire they had built was crackling and shot sparks skyward as Will fed the leaping flames. Jon reminded him, *Not so high*. Will responded, *Wouldn't want to catch a chill*. Jon said, *Wouldn't want to burn down the island*. Will kept adding logs, flames flying at overhanging branches, to lick, then die. Flirting, testing, almost, not quite, out of control, Will and Jon got drunk till they puked, afraid of ghosts and the dark and their feelings, stayed up all night and faced their fears, in the woods on an island in the river, a long time ago.

By daylight the boys swam, wild and cautious, in the same river where their brother drowned, then stopped and got out before the gentle stream turned into whitewater, deferring to the wisdom gained by Tommy's death. They never went *too* far, that's the dead brother's role: to test the limits and make real clear how you can crash into them like a brick wall.

Oasis

Will and Ray camp out on the desert, where everything Will touches falls apart in his hands. The ground is looser than he thought; the rocks are not as smooth as they look, they crumble in the palm of his hand; cactus thorns are not as hard or sharp as his fingertips expect. Nighttime colors change before his eyes as the moon drops behind a cloud and casts a wide shadow. Will's pupils adjust to shifting streams of light and dark on dust in the air; he senses microscopic insects at work under the top layers of earth where he stretches out in a sleeping bag beside his son.

Everything is out of balance in this carnival scene. Will carries knives through his nightmare, in search of his brother's grave. A voice penetrates silence, shouts from inside his sleep: Pay attention. Hushed quiet surrounds Will's heaving sobs as ancient grief spews projectile vomit, and the carnival crowd separates around him. Will brandishes the knives and becomes a target of mass hysteria: openly grieving, he embodies everyone's fears; the sharp edges of deep-felt mourning threaten community tranquility. The crowd gathers to subdue him but Will's slicing blade cuts the silence and his voice erupts: Pay attention!

Demon layers unfold. His body pulses in the desert night. Conscious now, can he move, rise, walk? Follow the unrelenting thump of the world's fiestas and carnivals. *Join the party.*

Will rises, follows electric rhythms, wanders around, circles back. He knows he is awake by the shrill pain through thin socks, a blister on his heel. He conjures peace with every step, breathes, tunes his ear to the loud silence and simultaneous imaginary drumming.

An oasis is a place you come upon in a desert for rest, temporary shelter, calm, cool shade, or water. In the giant dry landscape its glimmer resides at a far distance, out of reach, blurry edges of leafy trees, ochres and greens of a fluid scene. Will sits on a rock and struggles toward daylight. The night outdoors has broken a wall in his psyche: his voice made a sound; in the dream this time he stood his ground. It took everything out of him, and after all that, quivery peace befalls him, as if he has opened a tomb to find a mummy and unraveled the gauze to find himself. He had not known how dead he was, how numb. The strangeness of being here, facing his father, remembering his brother, being with his son, has brought relief.

He sits up straighter on the flat boulder, alert to every nerve ending. Faces of spirits appear on red cliffs as the sun tops a distant mesa; twisting fates reside in the slither of invisible rattlesnakes, vulnerable hearts show up in mackerel skies. Sunrise on his back like the palm of a giant hand. The air smells fresh. Life is urgent and abides against the grave pull of death.

Will isn't cold; his son has thrown a blanket around him. Light, cool wool, woven in soothing colors, shapes, and patterns that attract his gaze. Agreeable order presents itself: the symmetry of design, red and gold and royal blue interwoven, connecting everything. Will traces triangles that resemble mountain peaks, follows images turned upside down, reflections of mountains in bodies of water, as nightmares rearrange themselves in morning's shapely brilliance. The voice of a warrior, the one in the dream, himself at full strength, tells him, *Your life is your own*.

Will untangles his thoughts and limbs from the crowds and graves of his stifling nights and stands up to daylight. It must be how a snake feels after shedding, to slide out and away from the old, played skin. Will fills his lungs with breath. No roof. No straight lines.

Now he imagines, or actually sees, nearby in front of a makeshift homestead, an older man, a father figure. Will is close enough to study the sun-browned hands, neck, and face—textured, wrinkled as tree bark, fingers thick and delicately nimble, at work making bead necklaces. The man's eyesight gravitates from fine close handiwork to the white expanse of sky. He sits on a low stool, no back; his spine supports him. Hair streaked gray-white-black flows down his back over a colorful plaid shirt. Occasionally he puts down the necklace to sip Coca-Cola through a straw in the red can.

Piles of infinitely small plastic beads are separated in clear plastic sorting trays according to color: turquoise, red, yellow, white. String and clasps are kept in 2-inch square plastic Ziplocs. The man sews one bead at a time, in patterns that evoke stars, circles, spirals, geometry. Patterns from heaps of tiny throwaway beads, bound together by hand to become bright bursts of synchronous colors that fit together like small pieces

of some big puzzle. He appears content in the singularity of his task. The hands never cease the precise work. String one bead, then another.

The oasis includes a river; it makes the sound Will hears running behind the dreams: mad ceaseless tumbling destruction. His body enters this river easily and it is both cold and warm, runs fast and slow, and he can either move along with it, or stand still against its persistent push: he does both. First he stands and tests his strength and is able to resist. He lowers himself and extends his legs behind him, hands against the bottom to hold himself afloat, steady in one place.

Raymond watches the water move past his father, who holds his ground in the pull then lifts his hands and allows the current to carry him.

Will goes along for a while then returns to where he started, working against the one-way motion of the river stream. Arriving, he reverses direction and goes forward again. He hordes the feeling of buoyancy as the deep cold river flows away beneath him.