

Refuge

by Kenneth Gulotta

Roberta scraped her chair across the boards of the little back porch off the kitchen, moving closer to her coffee cup on the table. Back at the old house she would have had a nice ceramic ash- tray, something green and leaf-shaped, maybe, for the outdoors feel, just something small for her morning cigarette. But not here: no ashtray, be- cause no morning cigarette. That was one of the first things they put an end to when they moved her in here with them, her grandson Paulie and that wife of his, Robin. Paulie kept making jokes about her getting along with Robin because their names were so similar. Like three letters were enough for two grown women to talk about.

They had moved her to this place and sold her old house out from under her—sold it and used the money to buy the new wood paneling and carpets and plumbing and what-have-you to fix up their house. They did let her have the bigger bedroom, but she knew, just knew they were making plans for it after she died. She knew they were doing that—thinking about their To Do list for the day after.

Roberta picked up her coffee cup, took a sip, and winced: she had left it sitting there too long, and it wasn't coffee anymore. It was whatever cof- fee turned into after it stopped being hot. Dead coffee, maybe.

The screen door yawned open, its spring pro- testing.

"Getting you some sun, Grandma?" Paulie asked.

"A tolerable amount," Roberta said. "Not too much. People with sense step out in the morning when it's easy."

"I know, Grandma. That's how you always liked to do."

"Stay out in the hot sun too long, without a hat or nothing, and you'll fall out. And you two, with your beach tans, you're just crazy. Look like you're farmers, but you don't even grow any- thing."

"Well, it's just the style these days, I suppose. Anyway, I'm heading off to get boards for the windows. I get back, and put them up, and then we'll be hitting the road."

"Never had to evacuate from my house."

"Yeah, but down this way, we've got to ske- daddle for anything category two or up."

"Don't know why you'd move down here, then."

"You know why. You know. We've gone—for my work. I've got to be in New Orleans for work."

"Oh, stores can be anywhere."

"Stores can be. That's true. But galleries can't—they've got to be where people who buy art will be."

"Art. Nobody painted it. They're just camera pictures."

"I'm going, Grandma. We'll be leaving in two, three hours."

The screen door hung for a moment, inched a bit, and then plunged, slamming against the jamb. Thumps sounded and faded as Paulie walked through rooms. The house took a breath as the front door opened and huffed some air back out as it slammed.

Then the screen door creaked, creeping open. Robin came slowly into view, pressing a hand against her lower back. She stepped a foot or two outside, holding the door open with her free hand.

"Grandma, I thought you were looking forward to this," she said. "To spending some time with Carl, in his house, I mean."

Grandma.

"I am looking forward to going to Carl's house. But I can't say it makes sense to have to pick up and leave your house every time it's a threat of rain."

"I just—I wish you would take it easier on Paul. About his work and all."

"Missy, I've known him a lot longer than you, and it'll be a cold day when I have to hold my breath around him. So you'll just have to live with it. Just like I do with all the . . . improvements you've made around here."

The screen door trembled in the sunlight.

"You better shut that," Roberta said, "before you let all the skeeters in."

"There aren't—it's—"

The girl shook her head and shuffled right back in, the screen door letting out a series of little creaks as it dipped slowly shut behind her.

Roberta turned her chair an inch or two to the left, away from the little table with her cold coffee. Across the street, at the house one corner over, a woman moved about on a high porch, bringing potted plants inside one by one. A station wagon stopped in front of the house, and a bald-headed man stepped out. He stood with one foot on the road and the other inside the still-running car.

"Miss Emily, how you doing?" he called.

The woman on the porch peered at the street under her hand. "Who's that? Oh, Peter. I had a real fun time at that party."

"Did you have a good time at the party? What are you up to?"

"I did. I had a real good time. I'm just getting ready for the hurricane."

"You getting ready for the storm?"

Roberta levered herself up from her chair. "Good God," she muttered as she limped to the door to go inside. Across the street, the woman was calling, "I am. I'm getting my plants in before the weather hits."

"Going to stretch out a bit," Roberta grunted as she passed Robin, who was sitting on the sofa watching the weather station.

She slid her right foot against the polished wood floor with each step to her bedroom, refusing to wince at the creaking and twinging of her right knee. Years back, when she was twenty-two, so . . . fifty-six years back, her son Jimmy, Paulie and Carl's father, started screaming in the back yard like he was dying, and she ran to the back door and leapt down the steps and the knee just popped and crunched as she went down. It was never the same. After a time it strengthened enough that she didn't have to limp, though it sometimes let out a single pop, like a knot of pinewood exploding in a bonfire, which her left knee never did. Now, though, she seemed to have crossed over some hill in the healing process, and her knee was returning to its former state: each day she limped a bit more; each day it took her a bit longer to make sure that her leg would support her after she woke in the morning.

And after all that, Jimmy's screaming had turned out to be part of some fit because he had buried some marbles and forgotten where. Playing treasure hunt and then crying over it.

She made her way to the bed and lay on her back. The morning sun fell through one of the bedroom windows in a cluster of slanted, defective squares across the bottom half of her bed. Her knee lay under the patches of light; it warmed slowly as they crept across it.

She watched the ceiling for a while, and then she closed her eyes. The television mumbled about storm tracks and wind speeds through the closed bedroom door. A door slammed outside, and a few minutes later there were bangs and grinding on the other side of the house.

She breathed more slowly. She imagined the sunlight moving like molasses over her knee, dripping down the bed and across the floor. Then, with two muted, casual cracks, the joints of her leg seemed to release and let the blood flow through, bringing pinpricks to the sole of her foot.

The light disappeared with a thud. She opened her eyes and dimly saw the plywood across the window. The wood scuffed from side to side, and then the grinding, louder now, began again, as Paulie, outside, drove the screws to hold

the board in place.

"House looks the same," she said to Carl as he closed the front door.

"Yeah, well, I haven't been doing any remodeling, like these two," he said. He tugged on the doorknob as he twisted the deadbolt key. "How's it coming over there, anyway?" he asked as he turned into the living room.

"Pretty much done," Paulie said. "You'll have to come down and see it soon."

"Well, if I can get away. And it'd have to be during the daylight. I don't like going down there at night. Just the other night in the news they were talking about those carjackings down there?"

"Come on, Carl, it's safe. You know it is. Long as you lock your doors. It's just like any other place—you just have to use your basic sense."

"Well, I don't know." He sat in an easy chair next to the sofa; the vinyl cushions hissed.

"I wouldn't bother coming right over, anyway," Roberta snorted. "They always got something else they want to do to that house—you're liable to come and see it, and then it'll just be different a week later and you'll have to come again."

Robin put her hand on Paulie's, lacing her fingers through his and digging them into the top of his leg.

"Y'all made good time," Carl said. "I was sure it'd take you till midnight to get here."

"It would have, but Paul knows all the alternate routes," Robin said. "All the back roads and side streets and everything. From when he worked for the antique store."

"Which makes a better living?" Carl asked. "Are you making more running that gallery than you did for the antique shop?"

"Usually, yes," Paulie said. "It just depends on business. I was driving for the antique store, so I didn't make much money, but it was always the same amount. At the gallery, my pay can go up and down depending on how many prints I sell and what kind of commission I'm getting and so forth."

"It's that old story—you can go for the steady money or you can take a risk and maybe get you a bigger payday."

"What I don't know," Roberta said, "is how either of those places make any money. One place they're just selling other people's old junk. The other they're selling snapshot pictures. I mean, I had a houseful of old furniture, and I can snap a Polaroid. Seems like I should be rich."

They all stared at the spaces before them. Robin's hand tightened slightly over Paulie's.

"Anyway," Carl said. "Let me get you folks settled in your places for the night."

The power went out, and branches scrabbled as the wind whipped through the trees, but otherwise the night seemed as quiet as any other.

"This far back from the city," Carl said—he called the four-stoplight town six miles from his house a city—"a night like this can actually be kind of pleasant. The wind takes some of the heat off, and we're far enough up from the creek we don't have to worry about the water. As long as you stay out from under big tree limbs—which side of the shed did you park on?"

"This side," Paulie said.

"Well, then, we're all okay, then. All we got to do is wait for the power to come back on."

So they settled into their various beds, lying on top of the sheets in the warmish but not unbearable air—Carl had run the air conditioner at sixty for the last two hours before the power went out—and they all ended up sleeping through the night, waking to the clear skies and light breezes that follow hurricanes, as if the storms scrub the paths they lumber through.

"That didn't seem like nothing at all," Roberta said at the breakfast table. "Seems like we could've set still."

"Up here is one thing," Carl said. "Could've been a lot worse down there, down in that New Orleans bowl."

"You got a radio?" Robin asked.

"Forgot to buy batteries," Carl said.

"When we finish eating, I'll go turn on the car radio," Paulie said.

"We may as well load up and head on," Roberta said. "Listen to the radio on the way back."

"What's the hurry?" Paulie asked. "You've been saying for months you wanted to visit Carl."

"Yeah, Grandma, you sick of me already?" Carl asked.

"I just don't want us to overstay our welcome, is all."

"Anyway, it doesn't make sense to load up yet," Paulie said. "Let me listen to the radio and make sure the roads are open first."

They chewed the pastries that Paulie had bought on the way out of the city the afternoon before—two jelly doughnuts for Roberta and chocolate croissants for everyone else. The kitchen door rattled as someone rapped on the other side of it.

"Tell whoever that is to knock softer," Roberta said. "My heart pretty near stopped."

Carl got up and peeked through the window over the sink. "It's just Chick," he said. "He didn't mean nothing—that's just how he knocks." He went to the door and opened it. A roundish man with a brown beard stood on the other side.

"Y'all know about the road?" he asked.

"Which road?" Carl asked. "You mean our road to the big road?"

"Yep. Blocked. Trees're in it—damn near the whole woods, looks like. Tornadoes, they saying, Bull and Pearl and them. We're trapped. Everybody's meeting up there where it starts, just a hundred feet or so up."

Carl turned back to the table. "Paulie, you better come on with me so we can see what this old guy is talking about."

Paulie got up and walked to the door.

"Have you heard anything about the rest of the roads?" he asked as he and Carl stepped outside. "Back to New Orleans?"

"New Orleans is gone, man," Chick said as Carl closed the door. As the three men walked away, his voice came faintly through the kitchen window. "They're saying it's completely under water, or washed away. Saying different things. No one's going back, anyhow."

Gravel crunched softly into silence. Roberta wiped some jelly from her lips. Robin looked at her and then looked away. She pressed a hand against her swollen stomach and shifted slightly in her chair.

“Man’s real name is Chick—that’s what he said, anyway,” Paulie said. “And get this—his best friend is named Bull.”

“Now that can’t be his real name,” Robin said.

“That I do not know. I didn’t ask him.”

Paulie was back at the kitchen table with Robin and Roberta, telling them about the people he’d met that morning, some of Carl’s neighbors who had gathered to talk about the blocked road. Carl was still out there with them.

“There’s more,” Paulie said. “These two guys have dogs—I mean, each one has a dog—and guess what they named their dogs.” He waited while Robin lifted an eyebrow, and then he chortled, “Bull and Chick!”

“Wait . . . they named their dogs with their own names?”

“Yep.” He swiped at the sweat on his forehead, leaving a streak of dirt just below his hairline. He got up and pulled a paper towel from the roll on the kitchen counter and mopped at his face.

“Uhh,” he grunted, wadding the paper towel. He looked around, found the trashcan, and pitched the wet lump at it. Then he bent over the sink to open the kitchen window. “Cold air is all gone,” he said. “We may as well start opening these to get some breeze, at least.”

“Are you rhyming on purpose?” Robin asked.

“No. Was I? I’m worn out.” He sat back down at the table.

“So which dog belongs to who?” Robin asked. “Whom, I mean.”

“What?”

“I mean, did Bull name his dog Bull and Chick name his dog Chick, or did Bull name his dog Chick and Chick name his dog Bull?”

“I don’t know. It didn’t come up.”

“Because that seems like a big difference. Either they’re full of themselves or they truly are the best friends ever. I mean, maybe they’re

more—maybe we're talking about something else here."

Paulie and Robin laughed.

"This is all so interesting," Roberta said. "But what I want to know is what's being done to clear the road."

"Well, Grandma, we spent most of the morning digging, but we didn't make much headway with crowbars and chainsaws." He turned to Robin. "Chick, at one point, he had me use a crowbar as a lever to lift a tree and get a block under it, so could get at it with the chain-saw, and afterward the crowbar was bent."

"So you just came on in while your brother stayed out there working?" Roberta sneered. "Just like always—old Carl sticks with the hard work while Paulie hightails it inside."

Paulie turned and looked at her for a moment. Then he said:

"Let me ask you something, Grandma. Why am I always Paulie, but he's Carl? You know I want to be called Paul. Why isn't Carl ever Carlie?"

"Oh, you've always been Paulie," she said. "And Carlie isn't a man's name, even. It's no name at all!"

"What about Carly Simon?" Robin asked. "That's someone named Carly."

"A woman, though, right?"

"Yes."

"So. So that's why."

"It doesn't matter," Paul said. "What matters is I want to be called Paul. I've been wanting to be called Paul since I was thirteen, but you've always just refused. I would think you could just call me by my real name when that's what I want."

She didn't speak.

"Anyway, Grandma, Carl isn't still out there working. He and his friends are having beers on Chick's porch, and I came back here instead to check on you two." He turned again to Robin. "I told them there was no way we were digging ourselves out of here, not with the tools we've got. I started climbing through, and the fallen trees were so thick I couldn't even make it. I just hope I didn't get into any poison ivy or anything. But I bet I didn't even make it a tenth of the way through. Who knows? I maybe did hear engines, though, just at one point. So I think the town, the municipal workers or whatever, must be digging us out. The others say there's no way the town would have

anyone out here, down this back road, this quick, but, I don't know, someone was moving stuff out there."

"What about home?" Robin asked. Then, she said in a lower voice: "Was there any more about how bad it is? Like, word on which neighborhoods got it the worst?"

He shook his head. "They're saying all kinds of things. I think we just have to wait until we can get out somewhere we can get some real news, some real information, before we let ourselves get worked up about anything." He glanced over at Roberta, and then he looked back at Robin. "I didn't feel much like hanging out with those guys for beers. One of them—young guy, too, this—started going on about"—he altered his voice, injecting a twang into it, and crooked the index and middle fingers of both his hands into mid-air quotation marks—"jigaboos in the city going around looting everybody's houses."

"Really?" Robin scoffed. "Psh."

"Well, maybe they are!" Roberta glowered. "Maybe there are looters down there right now in that city, just doing whatever they want—whatever they're always wanting to do." She jabbed a finger at Paulie. "This is what you've done. You moved down into that city and you brung me with you. I would've been happy still in my own house, but you went and sold it away, and you used that money for your own place, and your own place probably just got washed away!"

"Enough!" Robin shouted, slapping the table. "Just stop it! Stop acting like we stole from you and forced you into something." She shook her head. "You asked to move in with us. You begged us. And your house was barely standing. There were rats in the walls—they were rotting, the walls were rotting and the roof, the inspector said, the roof was about to collapse in four places." She waved her hands above her head at

collapsing bits of roof. "You had to sell! And we didn't take your money from you! You offered us some money for renovations so we could give you your own room and bathroom. The rest of your money is in your bank account. We haven't touched a penny of it, and we won't, either!" She dropped her hands back to the table and pressed them together. Paulie placed one of his hands on top of both of hers.

"I don't have to just take getting yelled at," Roberta said, shoving her chair back from the table. "Not from my grandson's wife, I don't!" She pressed down on the tabletop, hauling her- self up. "I'm going to find Carl and see what he has to say about the road getting cleared."

She walked to the door, her knee ratcheting. She went out, leaving the door open behind her, and walked up the driveway. Her knee made less noise with each step; by the time she was on the dirt-and-gravel road, it was quiet and seemed to be back in some kind of working order.

She trudged around the bend in the road and came upon the wall of fallen trees. Chick had been right: it seemed like the whole forest was there, pressed all together in one clotted tan- gle. The strange thing was, the rest of the forest was still there. There was a forest's worth of trees where the road had been, but they didn't seem to have come from anywhere else in the forest— the standing trees looked just as thick as when they had driven past them the evening before.

She heard voices and laughter off to the right. She peered into the trees and bushes and saw another driveway going down from the dirt road. Carl's snorting laughter rose. The leaves seemed to shake with it. She could walk down that driveway, probably, and find him and his friends.

She looked around; there was a sawed-off sec- tion of log on the side of the road, standing up- right—someone had been using it as a stool, most likely. She trudged over to it and sat down.

She looked at the wall of fallen trees, won- dering what would happen. Who was right? Was that grumbling in the ground the township dig- ging them out, like Paulie (Paul) thought? Or were Carl's friends right? Would they have to dig their way out on their own, over days, weeks, or months, living in the meantime like pioneers back in this sopping little valley, no electricity, catching fish and drinking creek water? Living worse than pioneers, probably, because she doubted any of them had any pioneer know-how. Is that what was going to happen? Was she going to die out here in circumstances more pathetic than those of an old pioneer woman?

The grumbling in the ground grew louder and became coughing and snarling in the air. Cracks and pops began echoing in the trees. The coughing settled into a roaring that rose and fell, again and again, until the branches at the edge of the wall of fallen trees trembled and parted. A log spun slowly backward, and a pair of black metal beams pushed through the opening, fol- lowed by a set of orange metal boxes.

Some sort of backhoe worked its way through the trees and pushed into the clear por- tion of the road. A boy with blond hair was driv- ing the machine. He couldn't have been older than twelve or

thirteen. He looked around and saw Roberta, and then he reached down and turned the machine off.

"Do you work for the town, young man?" she called to him.

"No, ma'am," he responded. "My grandpa and my cousins and I are trying to dig as many people as we can out today. Lots of these dirt roads have got trees down, but this is the worst, seems like." He thumped the machine's side with his heel. "This here's my grampa's Kubota." He glanced at her again, and then he twisted around, looking for other people. "Do you live back on this road, ma'am? I'm sorry, I guess I don't recognize you. Do you need help back to your house or something?"

"No," she said. She bent forward to push up from the section of log, but then she let herself fall the few inches back onto it. It had been sawed unevenly, and a ridge near the edge dug through her dress, gnawing at the underside of her leg. "No," she said again. "I don't live back here. I don't live anyplace at all."

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