

Wyoming · *Miles Wilson*

MCGRATH HAD BEEN DRIVING three days, I-80 all the way from Indiana into the breadbasket of an ugly blizzard that gave him something to think about. One day to Council Bluffs, one more to Cheyenne, and now sluicing in the wake of a Redball Express rig somewhere west of Laramie. He had caught the truck on a sweeping climb east of Elk Mountain and decided to tuck in behind. Now, even with chains, he wouldn't be able to get around; the north lane had drifted in to wall him off.

McGrath checked the gauges. It seemed prudent, but he knew that probing invited bad luck, his attention wiring the Volvo into the socket of his uneasiness. Skip, a philosopher-mechanic in Bloomington who worked only on Peugots and Saabs, had debugged the electrical system as a favor to a friend. More precisely, Skip had promised only to induce the bugs to migrate into adjacent circuitry where, left undisturbed, they might remain. Skip was of the opinion that Volvo built a good marine diesel and that their electrical systems had been designed by a German engineer who subscribed to Gurdjieffian electrokinetics and had never forgiven the Swedes their neutrality in World War II. Skip had spent three days drinking akvavit and reading Schopenhauer in preparation for the job.

The Volvo belonged to McGrath's wife who now belonged to someone else. They had bought it from a colleague in the English Department at Bowling Green to which McGrath also no longer belonged. He was driving to San Francisco, to the MLA Convention, for an interview with Jenijoy LaBelle—Vonnegut, Fielding, Margaret Mitchell?—about a one-year replacement position at Long Beach State.

The Redball's logo was right in his face, and McGrath dropped into second as they squared off with another hill. McGrath had figured wrong. A Brown Ph.D., six years of carving up his dissertation into articles, servicing the Department, tight with a couple of senior professors and cordially suppressing his gag reflex with most of the rest. Even that last year when suddenly, inexplicably, it all hung in the balance, sending off to that outfit in Boston that filled in, at five dollars a whack, blank student evaluations in a variety of inks and handwriting and with whatever comments you sent along. And it had come to this: adrift in academe, out of it now for a semester, willing to take even a migrant

labor job, stooping over rows of freshman essays: "In our modern world of today everyone has their own opinions about life." Jenijoy LaBelle—Poe, Tom Robbins, Ringling Brothers?

A cornice of ice broke off the back of the truck and McGrath swerved sluggishly, missing the chunk with his tire but taking a thick whump somewhere around the oil pan. The oil light remained blank and oracular. Had it worked when he started the car after gassing up in Laramie? McGrath took a slow drink of rum to shore up where the blow had caved part of his stomach in.

By one o'clock in the afternoon McGrath had made Rawlins, driving with his knuckles the last twenty miles, dervished by a ground blizzard. Snow-dazed and ringing from the slap of chains, he followed the Redball into a truck stop. Inside, he spread out the map. A hundred miles in three hours. He'd given himself two days' slack, and that was gone. He'd have to put in, say, thirty-six hours in the next forty-eight to make the interview. Already, the ache of the road had gotten beneath the husk McGrath folded into whenever he needed to make good time over long distances.

The waitress set down a cup of coffee without asking, and McGrath ordered a hamburger. He poured cream into the cup and loaded it with sugar. When the burger arrived, he layered it top and bottom with catsup and covered his mound of fries with the rest of the bottle.

Road-stunned, McGrath's eyes wandered the map. West of Rawlins, a state highway went north and stopped. No town, just stopped. A cartographer's error, bad planning, a metaphor? In Wyoming? McGrath combed his memory. No writer he knew of had ever come from the state. Pound? No, that was Idaho, or maybe Washington. Wyoming, a wind-sucked vacuum in the literary map of America. What if he took that road?

He saw the dress before he really saw the girl. An electric floral print: orchids, hibiscus—McGrath's grandmother had raised them—and half a dozen other improbable tropical exotics he couldn't name. The girl's hair was long and straight and the color of, well, almost the color of parchments he had seen once in the British Museum. The rest was ordinary: plain face, serviceable figure, maybe twenty-five, a springiness in her walk as she approached the register, her center of gravity not yet migrated to her hips. She paid her bill and passed across the room near his table. She saw him watching her, but he was too weary to look away. Her eyes were ash-gray and yes, she flickered a smile and went on

through the doors into the entranceway that buffered the room from the weather.

McGrath finished his sodden fries and left a rueful tip. In the lee of the building, the Volvo's windshield had filled with snow. McGrath unlocked the car and ducked in. In the stunted light, the girl bloomed in the passenger seat.

McGrath woke up entirely. The girl was attentive but perfectly at ease. Before McGrath could imagine what to say, while card after card skittered face down from the deck—what kind of sucker was he being played for; was this unguessed good luck; hadn't he locked the passenger side and what about his manuscript, his Leica, his Slazenger (who would play in Wyoming, how could anyone fence it?), in fact, the whole affectionate debris of his adult life piled on the seat behind him?—before he could arrange any of this into a hand he could play, the girl raised a cautionary finger and leaned forward to blow on the windshield. In a sure and elegant hand, she wrote across the pearly film:

mute

Abby

from: Abora Wells

to: west

And on the evidence of the colons and the lower case "w," and because he could not think what else to do, when the girl turned from her writing and smiled again and nodded at the ignition, McGrath turned the Volvo over and they set out.

The first ten miles or so, he had to settle into the weather again and the little detonations of adrenaline as the Volvo yawed, even with chains and tethered in ruts, in a wind that had shifted and now surged against the car broadside. When he had fallen into the erratic rhythm of it, he reached under his seat and took another pull from the rum. He offered the bottle and the girl tipped it up, deftly blocking the top with her fingertips. She touched her tongue to them and made an exaggerated face.

McGrath laughed. "Old Paint Stripper, specialty of the house."

The girl breathed, spun the words out of her index finger.

Find another house.

The blizzard seemed to have let up some, but the wind came like a blind, enormous drunk, and the running snow had begun to drift into the open lane. It was colder now too; the Volvo's heater couldn't keep up with it. McGrath turned on the radio. KBOY gave him the price

of feeder hogs in Chicago, how many head of cattle had been shipped to Omaha last week. He walked the dial across the band, then switched to FM. Poised among the static was a strong station, playing an arrangement for flute, drums, and some stringed instrument he couldn't identify. It sounded like the score for a Kurosawa film. When it was over, the dj, his voice like a stoned dream of speaking (McGrath could be convinced that all FM stations in the country were plugged in to one announcer, operating from a Vaseline-coated sauna in Boulder, Colorado), produced the call letters, KHAN, and the radio went dead. McGrath spun the dial, hoping for static. The generator light hadn't come on, and he was about to pop the cover over the fuses when the girl pointed. McGrath had to lean above the wheel to follow her finger past the crescent of compacted snow that surrounded the wipers. The antenna had snapped off, leaving an ice-crusting stub.

McGrath shrugged and worked on the bottle again. They were not making good time; at thirty-four, McGrath was not making good time.

How did you get here?

McGrath turned to look at her. He had been wrong about her eyes. They were more green than gray, the iris flecked with amber. It must have been the fluorescent lights in the truck stop.

"I-80 mostly from Bloomington. Bloomington, Indiana. I was staying with friends."

No. How did you get here?

McGrath guessed. "I used to teach. I used to be married. She took off with a graduate student, some goofy leftover from the sixties. I'm going to see about another job in California."

The same thing?

"More or less."

The girl frowned at this and settled back. McGrath's thoughts idled ahead. He wondered if they would be sleeping together that night. He tried to erect the possibilities, but his imagination was chaste as a ghost. They topped a rise and McGrath looked north. Rail lines ran along the freeway. An empty gondola car lay tilted against a bank on what must have been a siding. The snow had drifted over the lower lip of the car and was filling the cargo space. Before today, McGrath could not have believed in such a wind. The Volvo seemed suddenly like a model of itself, set down by accident in a world where the scale was terribly wrong. Where only the distance of Wyoming was proportionate to the wind and the veteran cold. The thought of it made McGrath's teeth ache.

The girl was at the windshield again, but not writing. Breathing and working, first with her finger, then her nails, and finishing the foreground with her hair spread between her fingers like a brush, she unscrolled a panorama of plains and beyond them a forest folding back into domed mountains, all of it bisected by a great river that flowed improbably from the plains away through a rift in the mountain line. McGrath scanned the detail, then took the scene in whole again. It was stylized, a pure act of imagination, yet it seemed absolutely right, more credible than a *National Geographic* diorama. It felt a little like he thought Kenya might. McGrath realized he had been holding his breath.

“Are you an artist?”

The girl leaned close to the windshield, puffed her cheeks, and blew over a spot at the river’s edge. She drew a stick figure, then added an outsized head, a caricature of McGrath. The head was set on backwards, and an amplified toe of the stick man was dipped gingerly in the water. The girl put her whole face into a smile that had no referent in his inventory of expressions.

He watched the scene as little rivulets of condensation began to run and the cold ate it all away. The whole thing remained clear to him long after it was gone.

They gassed up in Wamsutter and McGrath asked the girl if she was hungry. She shook her head and they went on, into the deep afternoon, scuds of thinner gray breaking through now and then above the ground blizzard. Later, the light failing steadily, McGrath caught sight of something off to his left and no telling how many hundreds of feet up. Broadside to him, it was flat and rectangular, metallic, about the size of a house trailer. Tumbling, it disappeared until the wide surface came round again. It veered extravagantly and, before McGrath could point the girl to it, was lost in the driving snow.

The light had been gone for some time when the girl began to play. The instrument sounded like a harmonica, but with greater range and resonance. Call it a mouth organ, thought McGrath. She built the piece layer by layer, and McGrath sifted the memory of his wife’s scuffed collection of classical music. Nothing stuck. When the girl was finished, he asked her.

Me

“No, I mean the composer.”

Me again

“What do you call it?”

Anything you like

“But you must have a name for it, something to call it when you want to remember.”

I just made it up. You give it a name for me to remember

“Wyoming.”

The girl tooted her instrument like a circus calliope.

Sometime around midnight they broke over a summit after an imperceptible climb. Ahead, a rinse of lights made McGrath squint. He couldn't remember the last light he had seen. The snow was banked so that even whatever eastbound traffic there might have been was shielded from view. Closer, a gargantuan American flag stood out straight in the floodlit wind; closer still, a sign above the drifts: “Little America.” McGrath played a flashlight across the map. Such a thing did exist, confirmed by Texaco.

He pulled in to gas up again. The place looked like an outpost on the moon, snow-chromed and antiseptic as an operating room. The boy who took his money told him to shuck his chains. The road west was spotty with bare pavement; he'd chew up his tires in no time. As McGrath unraveled the chains, he wondered how the place got any help. A two-story, multi-wing motel that must have had hundreds of rooms, a coffee shop the size of a school cafeteria, rank upon rank of pumps. There wasn't a town, nothing for at least fifty miles. Did Wyoming have gulags? McGrath seemed to remember that it had been a Republican state for a long time. And James Watt. Maybe Little America was staffed with bureaucrats who had fallen from his grace and been posted here—the extremity of the interior.

McGrath had to take off his gloves to manipulate the chains. When he got back in, he could barely curve his fingers around the wheel. The girl took his hands in her own, guided them under her dress. She didn't flinch when she took her hands away and closed her thighs on McGrath's glacial fingers; she didn't stiffen when he began to move them as the feeling came back. There had been something so attentive in her doing this that it drained the act of all erotic content. Bowed toward her, both palms facing away from him like a mendicant, McGrath thought he was going to weep.

When his fingers tingled, he withdrew them and felt around under the seat for the rum. And because he couldn't trust what else he might have said, he left it at “thanks.”

Unchained, the Volvo skittered less than McGrath had expected. The

wind had settled in at a steady 20 mph or so, and the blowing snow sheeted across the road. The moon had broken out behind them, and McGrath could see patches of pavement, like a dark arctic sea, that appeared wherever the plows had gouged through the snowpack. McGrath relaxed a little. Unclenched, he felt the weariness in his thighs and back, tasted the peculiar tarnish, the transcontinental casing in his mouth. On wobbly legs, his prospects teetered west: Jenijoy LaBelle—Barth, Pynchon, Borges?

You could throw it away—let it all go

McGrath muffled the flashlight against the seat but did not turn it off.

“What?” He was afraid that he knew.

You must decide. Now, I think

“Yeah, well, I don’t know.” McGrath tried to pick his way. “Sure, I suppose. Why the hell not.” What was a promise to her?

The cold clamped him like an imperative from the end of the earth. The girl had rolled her window down. She leaned around the bucket seat and brought up his overnight bag, setting it on the hump behind the gearshift.

Jesus, that’s what she meant. She was calling him on it. McGrath swerved wildly, then leveled at once into a lunar calm.

“Why,” he said steadily, “the hell not.”

The girl did not respond, and McGrath drained the last of the rum.

“Well, go ahead.”

You must do it

“I can’t throw and steer; you drive?”

Yes

McGrath didn’t need the flashlight anymore. The moon had broken through altogether and he could read by its light. He stopped the car and they squirmed around each other. McGrath looked back, checking for traffic. Only Wyoming, thirty-four years of it. And the moon, hanging like a wild ace for those whose luck had run out.

The girl went through the gears a little mechanically but without hesitation. He was, McGrath saw, in capable hands.

The whole thing went quickly. He had no urge to linger, did not look back, even as his manuscript flapped away behind them, giddy at the thought of some cowpoke turning up a weather-beaten page: “As J. Hillis Miller suggests, the self-referential nature of all structures—indeed, their deconstructive plasticity—has called into question the *logos*

of 'beginning, continuity and end, of causality, of dialectical process, of organic unity, and of ground.' " The air was at him like a bibliography of pain, burning his nostrils, blurring his sight, the ache coming back to his fingers. And it was all so light in his hands as he lifted it up and turned it loose in the slipstream. He was rolling up the window when he felt her hand on him.

Everything

McGrath checked the back. "That's it."

Not quite

It came to him that he was all that was left.

The girl twisted in the seat and in a quick sweep had her dress off over her head. Under it, there was nothing else. She handed the dress to McGrath and he caught the scent of cinnamon as he let the wind take it away. Turning, he watched it blossom above the snow.

He came out of his own clothes reflectively, handling each piece as though he had been a manikin dressed for a costume ball.

Done, McGrath leaned back in the seat and let his weariness have him. He warmed up quickly, and soon even the little spasms in his legs went away. Beside him, the girl's torso was lit like a crescent, curving into her thighs and away in the dark.

"What do you do?"

The girl arched above the wheel.

This

McGrath rode the answer to sleep.

He woke once. The moon had shifted and was pouring over her shoulder into her lap. Sleep-sluiced, McGrath registered the amber thicket that arose there, spreading down her thighs as far as the moon lit them. He went back to sleep.

He woke again at dawn, the perimeter of light widening at his back. When she saw that he was awake, the girl eased the Volvo to the side of the road and stopped. She was wearing woolly stockings and a sheepskin coat that she must have hidden under the seat. She smiled at McGrath and was gone. He scrambled into the driver's seat and was half out the door calling "Abby, Abby," when she turned from the median and stopped him with an imperial motion of absolute command. She turned again, at the top of the driftline, and made another gesture of, what—permission, benediction, regret?—and disappeared down into the eastbound lanes.

Pure foresakenness sucked at McGrath, and when it was done he feels

like uncirculated silver, untarnished by handling. As he drives away, accelerating west—the Volvo skating, freelancing it over the patches of snowpack—the instrument panel lights up like a slot machine and McGrath cups his hands for the payoff. The lights go out and then McGrath is past the border station—welcomed to Utah by the governor himself—and he fogs the windshield to write his name across it, his vapors retrieving part of the scene of mountain and plain, and with more of his breath brings the whole thing back with the stick man, yes, now out in the current astride a raft. And singing JeniJoy LaBelle, McGrath cups his hands again for riches, claps for the luck of Salt Lake City as he passes through, naked and shining, a vision out of the east, and then the lake itself, the salt flats, the high desert and the Sierras and on down, all the way to the edge of America.