

protection from above to quail and
rodents, rabbits, which bring
proliferations of the bigger game.
Huckleberries fill the scalds
and seedlings kindle browse for deer.
Without destruction softwood
debris accumulates faster than rot,
and a uniformity of flora breaks
the foodchain, threatens the young
growth of trees, the health of land.

FICTION / RUSSELL BANKS

Escaping Christmas

1.

Ibo was the first to realize what was about to happen and he began to scream, running frantically from the living room down the narrow hallway to the stairs, scrambling up the stairs and into the room with the skylight where the others—Saya, Deek, Odum, and Wiksa, the ambassador—were seated in a square playing a four-sided game with black and white pebbles.

They had heard him coming, heard him shrieking the alarm, roaring out their names, and when he burst through the door, they met him by shouting, all four of them, angry, full of panic, bewildered. After a few seconds of bedlam, Ibo's high-pitched voice again dominated, and though there were still no explanations, he was allowed by the others to give orders and have them swiftly followed.

He told Odum to stay in the room with Wiksa and to bolt the door on the inside when they had gone out, to barricade it with the several pieces of furniture in the room and not to open it again until he heard the password from one of the other three.

Then, before leaving the room, Ibo had Deek break out a German handgun and 12 dozen rounds of ammunition from the chest at the top of the stairs, which he handed to Odum, instructing him not to fire the gun until or unless he could use it to kill a man. "Don't open the skylight,

don't draw any attention to this room. Use the gun only if the door is broken open! Kill whoever breaks it open!" he ordered shrilly.

"What about Wiksa?" Odum asked in a low voice, holding the weapon loosely in his left hand, the small, yellow carton of ammunition in his right.

Ibo didn't answer. He yelled at Deek to get the hell downstairs with one of the automatic rifles and a case of ammunition for Saya at the kitchen window. Roughly shoving Saya on the shoulder, he said to her, "Go on, this is *it!* You take the kitchen window! Deek and I'll be at the front!" Then he ran after them, down the stairs three steps at a time.

Odum quickly closed the door and threw the bolt and started shoving the dresser, chair, and cot against the door. When he was finished, he sat down against the far wall, opposite Wiksa, cradling the pistol in his two hands as if it were the corpse of a large, gray bird. Across from him Wiksa breathed heavily, but peacefully.

Downstairs Saya protected the back of the house. Ibo and Deek in the living room squatted beneath windows that faced downhill and across the wide lawn to the birches and the road. The house fell silent. It was Christmas morning.

"*There!* By the birches, on the right!" Ibo hissed, aiming his American-made M-16 out the open window, shoving the dark tip of the barrel several inches beyond the sill. A gray-uniformed figure darted behind a half-dozen birch trees, his image fragmenting, as light by a prism, and quickly disappearing from sight. "There's a bunch of 'em behind the birch grove," Ibo whispered.

Deek nodded silently, craning to see what had disappeared, seeing nothing from his position, until a flash of gray on his left, from behind the car parked down on the road, yanked his gaze away from the birches and fixed it directly in front of him. "Somebody's behind our car!" he announced. "I'll get him next time he shows."

"Wait till they make a move," Ibo ordered. "No. Go ahead, get the bastard! They've already made their move."

Deek obediently squeezed the trigger, firing off three sudden rounds, and the gray figure standing slowly behind the hood of the green Oldsmobile sedan flipped around and bounced onto the dusty road, bleeding large, scarlet bubbles from the throat and lower face. Two men ran from the birch grove towards the fallen figure by the car and Ibo started firing, killing both men before they reached the shelter of the car. Gunfire exploded at the back of the house, a barrage, Saya firing short bursts in answer. Then a fusillade opened up from the birch grove in front, shattering all the glass in the windows, splintering wood and crumbling plaster inside, flinging shreds of the curtains into the room as if by in-

visible hands. Deek and Ibo were now firing without pause, except to slam a fresh clip into place, firing again, emptying the clip, ejecting it, and slamming in a fresh one, firing again. Ibo slipped, turned his ankle, and fell to the floor. Jamming a fresh clip into his rifle, he looked up and over and saw Deek slide down onto the floor, a hole the size of his own huge fist in the middle of his face, the area from his mouth to his eyebrows filling with bits of bone and awash with dark red blood. Then, looking up to the doorway that led to the kitchen, Ibo saw Saya walk stiffly into the room, hands flopping loosely at her sides, as if trying to shake off leeches, her dark eyes rolling back into her head, her mouth and teeth chewing the air, a bloody orchid spreading swiftly between her breasts as she crumpled at the knees and fell, face first, onto the floor.

Ibo looked out the window one last time and saw the yard flooded with armed men in gray uniforms. They were charging from the road to the house, halfway there, a hundred guns hurtling fire ahead of them. Without hesitating, he kicked off one shoe, jammed the barrel of his own gun into his mouth, and with his big toes, squeezed the trigger, splattering the top of his head against the ceiling. The door to the house came crashing in, and in seconds the room was filled with dozens of angry, milling, shouting men who, clutching their smoking rifles, poked at the three corpses with the tips of black boots, rolled them over, studied the faces with anger and disgust.

2.

Plan A:

Three of us make a run into the city, Deek, Ibo, and me, Deek driving, me sitting in front next to him, Ibo in the back. Ibo is jabbering continuously, whether we listen or not. Bumming cigarettes from Deek, he is trying, as always, to apply the theories and teachings of his leaders to the lives, to the pains, pleasures, deprivations, and fantasies, of every human being he has known, seen, or sees now as we glide in the big, green Olds along the causeway into the city.

The city is crisp today, seems almost new beneath the wind-washed, cold, blue sky. It's the day before Christmas. Along the sidewalks everyone moves briskly inside overcoats and scarves, bright-faced people puffing small clouds of breath before them. Ibo is telling us how, when the air of summer finally, *inevitably* (for Ibo, *everything* is inevitable) becomes too heavily laden with industrial filth for winter to wash it clean, when that happens, the people will have to give up this last delusion and the respite it provides. "And *then* you'll see some action," he promises us.

Deek farts slowly, switches a toothpick from one corner of his loose, red mouth to the other. He snorts through hairy nostrils, as if remembering something funny, and stops the car at an intersection. A traffic officer is standing at the center of the intersection, facing us down with upheld, white-gloved hand, his black holster and the belt around his thick waist suddenly dominating our field of vision. The hammer and handle of the gun and the holster shine dully blue in the pale morning sunlight.

A throng of shoppers and workers, clerk-types clutching newspapers and briefcases, hustles across the street in front of us, when suddenly, pointing left, reaching between Deek's nose and the dashboard with my index finger rigidly extended, as if pushing a button, I say with abrupt alarm, "My God, is *that* who I *think* it is?"

Deek and Ibo quickly gaze in the direction I am pointing, into the glut of anonymous faces and hurrying bodies, and as Ibo, with rising intensity, whines, "What the hell are you talking about? *Who?*" I yank open the door beside me, step out, slam it shut behind me, and dash into the crowd of people flowing swiftly around the front of the car to the right side of the street.

Reaching the sidewalk, I stop in my flight and face the traffic officer, diagonally across from me. "Officer!"

He notices me, his curiosity pricked by my loud, ambiguous call from this slight distance. Dropping his gloved hand, he waves for the line of cars to continue on. He waves again, this time with annoyance, as Deek hesitates to move.

"Officer!" I repeat.

"C'mon, Mac, get the lead out!" he snarls at Deek, whose puzzled, round face peers through the windshield, first at the traffic officer, then at me, then back over his shoulder at Ibo, who, crimson-faced, is shouting soundless orders at him. Then, at last, the car pulls ahead, passes through the intersection and moves slowly down the street, Ibo's dark red face glowering back at me from the rear window.

"Whaddaya want, Mac?" the officer asks, casting one final, irritated glance at Deek and Ibo.

I take a careful step or two off the sidewalk onto the street. "I . . . I have a heart condition, officer. I'm feeling . . . faint. Where should I go, could you help me?"

He claps a beefy hand on my shoulder, and I smile wanly into his broad, paternal face. "You want oxygen?" he asks in a low voice, as if offering contraband.

"Yes."

"Okay, pal. Just go over to the wagon there, right there, halfway down the block, and tell the officer there, he's sittin' inside in back, just tell him

Officer Nooli sent you down for a shot of oxygen. Think you can make it that far all right?" he asks solicitously.

"Yes, yes . . . yes, I think so." I turn and start slowly away, turn back for a second, smiling weakly. "Officer Nooli? Thank you. You've just saved my life. Merry Christmas, Officer."

He grins expansively, waves me on my way, and strides proudly back to the center of the intersection, as I slowly, with great care, walk down the block to the blue station wagon.

The oxygen is delightful, a genuine lift. Hoo boy, I'm *free!* (Like that.) Twelve hours later, I'm recently arrived in a small town in the mountains of the south, signing a new name in the register of a rundown rooming house located two tree-lined blocks off the almost deserted main street. The soft, round-topped mountains loom darkly around the town. The sky, like a rose-colored plate, glides swiftly, with serenity, before the oncoming night. I talk all evening with the landlady and the other roomers about how I've had to come here for my health. We talk slowly and drink iced tea and rock in our wicker chairs. Not bad. Safe.

Plan B:

I become two people. Easy. It happens while I am sleeping, and while the others are asleep also. It's Christmas Eve. The house lies in total darkness—a moonless night, overcast, the still air laced by the rough brushings of the bare branches of the birch trees around the house. I am wearing an elaborate disguise, a black, curly wig that makes me look Greek or possibly Arabic, with a thick moustache, also black. My teeth have been stained tobacco-brown, my complexion dimmed with theatrical makeup, and I am wearing a dark green, mechanic's shirt and trousers with *Rollo* sewn to the flap of my left breast pocket, *Schuman's Garage* on the other. My pockets are filled with tools—pliers, screwdrivers, a file, a flashlight, et cetera—and my hands are stained with grease, as if I have been fishing through the innards of an automobile engine. As a final touch, I cover my blue eyes with brown-tinted, wire-rimmed eyeglasses and find myself standing in the center of the darkened room, a natural-born auto mechanic sent out tonight on an emergency call by Chub Schuman. My English is not so good, which is why I am the one who, in addition to working six days a week, must be on standby for emergencies six nights a week. And especially on Christmas Eve. But I don't mind. I want to make good and become foreman.

Guiding my steps with the beam of my flashlight, I cross to the cot in the corner. I pull a screwdriver from my pocket and plunge it straight down into the sleeping man's heart, letting go of it at once and clapping my hand over his wildly open mouth to stifle any possible last cry. Then,

sliding the screwdriver back out, wiping it off with a greasy rag from my back pocket, I walk quickly to the door at the opposite side of the room, and with the same screwdriver, carefully spring the latch without breaking the lock.

I crank open the door and check the hallway outside. Darkness, silence. Then I am outside the room, closing the door soundlessly behind me, carefully leaving it locked. Nothing discovers or even delays me as I stroll from the house, jump the crushed-stone walkway to the grass, and hike the dirt road three miles to the main road, where Schuman's Garage, like a deserted, concrete bunker, squats behind two Epco gas pumps. It takes me a moment to jump the ignition wires of the battered, blue, German pickup truck that's parked next to the garage, and ten minutes later—the red beacon flashing from the top of the cab, headlights splashing chalky light across the frost-covered lawn, and the bulky Oldsmobile sedan parked outside—I have pulled up in front of the house. I leave the motor running, the red light flashing madly. Stepping from the truck, I crunch along the walk to the front door of the farmhouse and bang on the door with my fists with wonderful abandon.

Lights go on all over the house—but not, of course, in the room directly above me, the room with the skylight. After a few seconds, the door is opened halfway. It's Ibo. Shirtless, barefoot, his trousers only partially buttoned, thin black wisps of hair sticking out from his narrow head like a dark crown accentuating the startled expression that swarms across his face. Wide-eyed, his mouth open and stammering, he finally gets a question out. "What . . . what's the matter, whaddaya want?"

"You got trouble. Right?" I am grimly serious. Businesslike. "Schuman's Garage. That's the one?" I ask, pointing with my chin in the general direction of the Olds. With the headlights on, Ibo and I both can see Schuman's pickup and can read the bright red and white lettering along the side: *24 Hour Emergency Service & Towing*.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ibo says to me, his face tightening into that fist it makes when he gets angry.

"You Mister Eye-bow?"

"Yeah. *Eee-bow*," he corrects me.

"Somebody here called. For getting the car started." Stolid, unsubtle foreigner.

Ibo rubs his head in puzzlement, then suddenly shoots a look behind him and yells, "Deek! Check upstairs!" He turns quietly back to me. "Listen, somebody's made a *mistake*. Was it a *man* called you, anybody you know or maybe could recognize?" he asks in a patronizing voice, that greasy, false, utterly illegitimate voice of his.

"Naw. Mister Chub Schuman calls me. The phone for the night emergen-

cy over at his house. I am only the mechanic for at night, you know. Mister Schuman, he always tells me when to go out and when to forget it and stay sleeping.” I grin brown, rotted teeth at him, dousing him with garlic-breath. “Maybe Mister Schuman made a big mistake tonight. Some other one named Eye-bow lives here, maybe? Maybe that one called for help to get started?” I’m trying to be helpful.

Deek, jamming his shirttail into his pants, appears at the bottom of the stairs, white-faced, horrified, his red mouth gray from the shock. Taking one look at him, Ibo growls at me, “Nobody here called you. *Nobody*. Sorry,” he snaps, closing the door, clicking the lock on the other side.

I roll across to the truck on the balls of my feet, a huge smile spreading across my face. Climbing into the truck, I flick off the red beacon, back the truck out to the road, and drive away.

In less than an hour, I’m in another province. I don’t desert the truck until daylight, and by that time I’m in yet another province. I leave it in a shopping center parking lot in front of a men’s clothing store. After breakfast, I’ll be able to pick up some clothes there, a suitcase from the leather goods shop next to it, and across the street, in the men’s room of the filling station, I’ll wash, shave, and change clothes. I glimpse a long-distance bus as it hisses to a gradual stop in front of a small, yellow-brick building a short ways beyond the filling station. Great. By noon at the latest, I’ll have made my escape. I’ll tell wonderful lies to the person sitting next to me.

Plan C:

I become three people. Two of the people burst into the house on a night when Deek and I have been left behind, a night when the others—Ibo and Saya—have made a quick run into the city, to attend a Regional Group-Leadership Seminar. Deek is quickly overpowered, shot full of scopolamine (so that later, when he has been told what happened, he will recall nothing that will betray my rescuers), and the three of us hurry into the night, laughing, slapping each other on the back. Together again, and on Christmas Eve! Who ever would’ve thought it possible?

Plan D:

I pray to a god, fasting while I pray, mortifying my flesh during this period, a week, then two weeks, a fortnight, with my face pressed constantly against the floor, the bones of my face as they gradually shove through tissue to skin bruising from the unbroken force of my prayer, until, at last, on the twenty-seventh day, the god touches my spine and I am made invisible even to my own eyes, invisible and lifted through the roof across the lawn to the woods and down to the spongy, moss-covered

stump of an ancient oak, where I am made visible again, so that I may watch myself as I fall forward onto my face, to resume my prayer to the god, this time a prayer of thanksgiving.

Plan E (a desperate, last resort . . .):

A complex, utterly secret plan (secret even from myself) culminates with my slaying everyone in the house, and burying the bodies under the gravel walkway, one at a time and immediately after each killing, while the body is still warm, until I am finally forced to realize that I am the only one left. I try calling my murderous acts “escapes,” and my solitude “freedom.” I try and I try, but consistently fall into confusion.

3.

Except for the crunch of their boots against the floor and the squeak and clank of weapons, the soldiers and the several officers heard nothing. No groans, no cries for help, no stammered, frantic surrenders, none of the sounds they would expect to hear after a battle has been won. Before them, torn and bleeding slowly onto the bare floor, lay the bodies of Ibo, Deek, and Saya. A young, blond lieutenant pushed his way through the crowd of gray-uniformed soldiers that had formed around the corpses, sending the men to the sides of the room. He got down on one knee next to Ibo’s destroyed face, grimaced with disgust, and went quickly through his pockets. A roll of paper money, some change, American cigarettes and a butane cigarette lighter, a Swiss army pocketknife, a plastic comb, and a passport with Ibo’s picture and physical description and the name *Swim Nagle*—nothing else.

“Check out the rest of the house,” he ordered, and immediately the soldiers started to scurry through the downstairs rooms, ransacking closets, cabinets, bureaus, emptying the contents onto the floor as they went. Most of the soldiers were young, not yet 20, and they grinned with curiosity and evident relief while they worked. It was Christmas Day. They’d made it.

After having searched the pockets of Deek and Saya, both of whom were dressed in khaki blouses and trousers, the lieutenant stood up, and with a slender baton, pointed at four of the soldiers, men slightly older than the others, probably professionals. “You four,” he said crisply. “Check upstairs. Our informant says there’s only one room up there. Some kind of attic. If anyone’s up there, remember, he’s in a corner. Be careful.”

The four nodded and started slowly up the stairs, singlefile, rifles cocked.

Behind them, a colonel, followed by his driver, had just entered the

living room and now was being apprised of the situation by the young lieutenant. Both officers looked grim but somewhat bored.

"Are these three the lot of 'em?" the colonel asked. He was a ruddy-faced man, gray-haired, about fifty-five, with a moustache and slightly overweight, dressed in an impeccable uniform festooned with war ribbons. "I'd expected to find more of the bastards."

"From the firepower, so did I. But it all came from down here, sir. And they were well-armed," the lieutenant pointed out, touching a black-booted toe to the stock of Deek's M-16. As his toe reached the chocolate brown wood, the hard, flat sound of a gunshot flew through the house. Everyone swung around to the stairs, and the four grizzled soldiers who had gone up suddenly came scrambling back down to the first landing, where, to the colonel's cry of, "*Charge!*" they regrouped and charged back up, three steps at a time. When they reached the top, a second shot went off, and the four ran, two abreast, down the hallway towards the door at the end, hurtling the combined bulk of their bodies against the door, smashing it with shoulders and ejecting the four soldiers into the room, weapons ready to fill the small space with gunfire.

The force of their entry had scattered the few pieces of furniture that had been stacked against the door, spilling the bureau, cot, and chair into the several corners of the room. In the exact center of the room lay the bodies of the two men. One was somewhat younger than the other. Both men were dressed in the plain khaki blouses and trousers of the three downstairs. Both men were dead.

One of the soldiers walked back to the head of the stairs and called down. "It's all right, sir! There were *two* of them up here. Both dead now, sir."

The lieutenant followed the colonel up the stairs at a respectful distance and entered the room slightly behind the older man, noting with surprise that both bodies were bleeding profusely from the mouth. A closer look led him to surmise that both men had shot themselves. Presumably, the older man had gone first, then the younger man. His left hand still clutched the stock of a German pistol. Later on, powder burns on the hand of the older man (eventually identified as Wiksa, the ambassador) would support the lieutenant's conjecture that he had, indeed, taken his own life, as had the other, somewhat younger man. This second man was eventually identified as Odum, a member of The Group.