The Long White

SHARON DILWORTH

The Iowa Short Fiction Award

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For

Charlie Baxter

and

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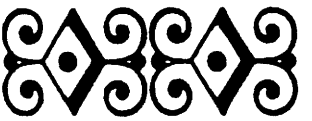
Contents

Winter Mines



Everyone's heard by now that Barbara Wyatt swallowed a half can of Drano. My husband says, in this town, news like that doesn't need any help getting around—people just want to talk about it. Nancy Whitney was in the supermarket on Third Street this morning and she told me she heard Barbara did it in front of a full-length mirror. They found her on the bathroom hamper where she had ripped off her sweater and torn her blouse trying to release the burning pain in her stomach. By the time they got her to the hospital, her lips, which had touched the can, had swollen black.

Nancy was sweating in her down jacket in the supermarket. She rubbed her pregnant belly in circular motions.

"I knew Barbara was depressed," she said. "But I didn't see anything like this coming. I don't think there was any warning at all."

"I didn't talk to her that much," I said. "Not since she moved back to town."

"It's the winter," Nancy said. "I know it's the winter. Fifty-seven inches of snow fell last month alone. And the winds have been coming off the lake at such high speeds that everyone's having trouble just standing up."

Nancy and I tried to hug good-bye, but her eight-month pregnancy wouldn't let us get very close. She went to stand in the ten-item-or-less line with the bag of birdseed and a gallon of milk and I pushed my grocery cart to the household supply aisle. I picked up a can of Drano. The red cap is fastened so tightly that a knife is needed to break the seal. On one side of the can a skull is sketched next to a poison warning: "Contains sodium hydroxide (caustic lye) corrosive. May cause blindness. Always keep out of reach of children. Store on high shelf or in locked cabinet. Harmful or fatal if swallowed."

I wondered how much of the can Barbara had swallowed and I wondered if she knew how much it was going to hurt. Had there been a moment when she wanted to stop what she had done?

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WINTER MINES

My husband doesn't want to hear about Barbara Wyatt. He can't think about anything depressing.

"Please," he asked me this morning. "Don't talk about her in front of me. I don't see why you keep talking about her."

"Barbara was a friend of mine," I said. "I want to talk about her."

"All right. But not with me. Not right now. I can't listen to other people's problems," he said. He brought a roll of paper towels to the kitchen table and folded two separate sheets in half and then again so the coffee mugs wouldn't mark the wood table. He spent yesterday afternoon scrubbing the table with toothpaste trying to get the ring marks out of the wood. I can still smell the mint.

"I don't have time to get involved with everyone else's problems," he said.

"I'm not asking you to get involved with anything, I just want you to listen to me."

"Let's talk about normal things. Nothing depressing," he said. He drank his coffee in long swallows.

"It shouldn't affect you."

"I don't want to talk about someone's suicide."

"But you don't talk to me about anything else," I said. "Everything depresses you."

"A lot of bad things have happened this year," he said. He spooned some jelly on his toast and spread it out evenly with his knife.

"What? What bad things have happened to you?" I asked. I got up from the table and dumped the rest of my coffee down the sink. He refuses to keep coffee with caffeine in the house. He says it aggravates him, but I can't get used to the taste of coffee with nothing in it.

"I'm not going to fight with you," he said.

"Nothing in your life has changed." I repeated the same thing I've said to him since Christmas. "Your life is exactly the same as it is every winter."

"Don't be ignorant." He got up from the table and left the kitchen, leaving the toast on the plate.

"What's so different about your life right now?" I called.

"I won't fight with you," he shouted. I could hear him walking around the living room.

"We're not fighting. I just want you to talk with me."

He didn't answer, but I continued. "You're making everything up in your mind. You're the one that's making yourself depressed. Nothing's happened. Nothing's changed."

When we fight, he shuts up. He won't argue with me. He says it's just a waste of time, because I refuse to look at things the same way he does. In the mornings he makes a list of what has to be done around the house. He spends every weekend scrubbing with bleach and ammonia. During the week he works on projects he finds for himself, like mending holes in the summer screens or rearranging the boxes of junk in the spare bedroom.

Even though he won't answer me, I know I'm right. Nothing has changed. The mines closed the same time they do every year, the week before Thanksgiving. There's a lot of talk about the mines not reopening, but that goes on every year. I don't think it's any worse than it was last year. Someone said something to my husband and he's convinced that the mines are closed forever. He's acting like he doesn't have a job. During Christmas vacation he decided not to leave the house. He says when he goes out he runs into people, like the bartender at the Third Base Bar, who ask him what he thinks about the mines. Last time he went out the guys at the liquor store bet him fifty dollars that the mines would stay shut once the snow melts. My husband says it's too hopeless to talk about.

The woman at the checkout counter asks me if I was a friend of Barbara's.

"In grade school," I tell her. "We were real good friends in grade school."

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WINTER MINES

"I thought I remembered you two coming in here." The woman sits back on a stool she has behind the counter and shakes her head. Her sweater is buttoned up around the neck and she wears brown driving gloves to punch the cash register keys. The front door of the store automatically opens and closes, letting the wind in. I button my coat.

"That was a lot of years ago," she says without looking at my groceries. "Didn't she leave town for a while? I remember something about her getting a job somewhere else."

"She just moved back here." I pick up a newspaper for my husband. It is the newspaper from downstate which never writes about what's going on in the Upper Peninsula. It's the only newspaper he'll read.

"I feel so sorry for her family," the woman says. "What they must be thinking right now. It really makes you wonder."

I don't remember the woman changing over the years. I've been going to the store every day and she has always looked the same to me. Her gray hair frames her face and her glasses hang around her neck on a long black cord.

"It's just her father," I tell her. I open a brown bag and hold the box of spaghetti so the woman can see the price. She rings it on the machine and pushes the other groceries slowly down the rubber mat.

Barbara lived across the street from me when we were in grade school. We were exactly the same age. She didn't have a mother and her father let me sleep over every weekend night. My mother thought two nights in a row was too much, but she let me do it because she felt sorry for Barbara, being without a mother. Barbara and I would listen to her father's Harry Nilsson albums and would drink Coca-Cola out of wine glasses filled with ice cubes. She knew the words to the songs on all his records by heart and I would read them off the back of the album cover to sing along with her. Barbara loved to bake things—anything with sugar in it. One time we stayed up all night, waiting for a cake to cool so we could frost it with cara-

mel frosting that Barbara had made by melting a bag of old Halloween caramels. I remember the only time she talked about not having a mother.

"My father would love to find a new mother for me," she said. "But I don't want one."

"Maybe he's looking for a mother for himself," I said. I had overheard my mother telling someone that Barbara's father was out to get a new wife.

"No," she said. "He doesn't care about things like that. He worries about me. He can take care of me, but he won't. He thinks I should be a part of a family."

"But don't you want to have a mother?"

"Not really. I don't need one," Barbara said. "I'd like to have a mother for only one reason. If I had a mother then she could braid my hair. I'd grow my hair as long as yours is."

My hair in grade school was long and straight. It was thin and wouldn't hold a curl even if I slept in curlers all night. I usually wore it braided on the sides and tied the ends with kitchen rubber bands that snagged and knotted when I pulled them out to wash my hair.

"It's not so great having long hair," I said. "You have to spend a lot of time washing it. My mom makes me come straight home from school to wash it at four o'clock so it will be dry by the time I go to bed."

"But my father won't even let me have long hair. He says it's too much trouble and he doesn't know how to take care of it."

"I braid my own hair now," I said. "My mother just yells about my hair. She says she finds it all over the house."

"At least you know how to braid it. I don't even know how to do that. I never learned."

"I can teach you. You just have to practice getting the rubber bands in without knotting your hair."

We pulled strands of yarn out of an afghan Barbara was making for a Christmas gift. I showed her how to braid the thick pieces into one strand. I showed her how to turn the right

section over the left and then start to intertwine the middle section. She practiced on the yarn, then I untied my own hair and she braided a straight plait down my back. I had to put the rubber bands on the end.

I walk home down the center of the street, hugging the bag of groceries in both arms. The muscles above my elbows ache and I shift the weight of the bag down my arms, but it doesn't relieve the pressure. The streets are empty. I keep my head tucked into the collar of my jacket listening for the sound of a car. When I get home, my husband is sitting on the couch, not doing anything.

"Cold out?" he asks.

"It's freezing."

"You shouldn't go out so much. We have enough to eat right here. You're going to get sick if you keep going out in this weather."

"I thought you were going to get someone to help you jump-start the car." I rest the bag of groceries on the coffee table, while I take off my boots. The snow melts quickly, wetting the carpet. "I'd like to have at least one car running by the weekend."

"Why do you need a car this week?"

"It'd be nice to have one to run some errands. I don't like to go out at night without a car." His car is sitting in the driveway, out of gas. He says he doesn't need one, but last week my car died just as I was turning the corner of our block. Two kids from the junior high helped me push it in front of the house and it's been there ever since.

He won't talk about it. "Anything new happening out there?"

"Not much." I give him the newspaper. He tucks a corner of it under his leg without looking at it, which bothers me. I wanted him to read it. I take my boots into the bedroom, where I have compositions to correct. The principal at the school doesn't like us to use the public library because there might be students around. During the spring break, when the

high school is closed, I set up a desk in the bedroom. It's really a card table with a dining room chair pulled up to it and one of the lamps brought in from the living room. I work for a half an hour before my husband comes in and sits on the edge of the bed. He watches me correct the papers.

"Do you want me to help?"

"No. That's okay."

"I did compositions in high school. I know what teachers look for in them. Read them aloud. I'll tell you what grade I would give them."

The high school counselor talked to a group of miners' wives in January. She told us how important it is to have patience. She said the worst thing you can do is to argue all the time.

"You'll get bored," I tell him. "It's not a very interesting topic."

"Do you have any football players in this class?" he asks.

"Two."

"Read those first."

"That's not fair, if you know they're guys," I say. But I always look at the name at the top of the composition before I read or grade the paper. "Besides, you don't want to hear compositions. They're just as boring as they were when you were in high school. Why don't you go down to Vinnie's? I saw some of the guys down there."

"I know what they're talking about," he says. "It'll be boring to be with them."

"I think they're watching the hockey game."

"But they're talking about the same things. I can hear their conversation from here."

"You don't know that." I stop pretending to read the paper in front of me.

"Can't you hear it? The whole town is buzzing. Drano and closing. Don't you listen when you go out? Can't you hear what everyone's saying?"

"It's not true. The town is not that small."

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WINTER MINES

"Bullshit."

Without noticing, I have been writing on my hand with the red marker—tiny lines across my knuckles when I thought the cap was on.

"You know what I was thinking this morning?" my husband asks me. "I was wondering if all the color around the mines would fade."

"Color?" I am thinking about my hands and the pen marks. My husband is looking at my fingers too. But I know what he is talking about. The iron ore produces red particles which float in the air around the mines. The particles land on flat surfaces and dye them light pink. All the houses in the area are light pink—even the whitewall tires of the cars. My husband tells me the old guys who work at the security gate have pink teeth.

"No one said the mines are closing," I tell him. "You're just making that up. You're driving yourself crazy."

"Do you think I should call Lansing?" My husband stretches out on the bed. He pushes the pillow on the floor with his feet and stares up at the ceiling. He doesn't need sleep. He slept the whole month of January. He reminded me of a black bear. But not now. He has lost so much weight that his face has changed. His skin is tight across his cheek bones. He told me how much he weighs and it is just three pounds more than I weigh.

"Why would you call Lansing?"

"I want to talk to the governor about the mines. I have a right to know if I still have a job."

"No one's going to tell you anything you don't already know," I say.

"The mines are supposed to open on April 1. If they're not going to open, I have a right to know that now so I can start doing something about it." He talks to me with his eyes closed, his body flat on the bed.

"Last year you didn't start until April 14 and you were just as nervous about starting."

"There was a snowstorm. We couldn't work till then."

"You worry like this every year. The mines always open even after a winter of everyone believing that they won't."

His breathing has changed and I can tell he's sleeping. I stare at the papers in front of me, but the words disappear as I focus on the green petal of the flower in the bedspread. Someone told me that the ambulance driver thought Barbara had cut herself on glass, there had been so much blood. But the blood didn't have anything to do with the Drano. It was from her earlobe. She had pulled a tiny gold earring straight through her skin. They think it got caught in her sweater when she ripped it off her body.

I leave the compositions spread on the card table. I will do them later when he is not in the room. It makes me feel guilty to have things to do when he is around. I take my coffee mug from the drain board and bring it to the basement steps where there's a new jug of wine. I keep a gallon of rosé on the last step. My husband thinks it is the same bottle sitting there since Christmas but I have replaced it twice. I drink a glass of wine at dinner in front of him, but I want to have more. I think I could drink a whole bottle of wine and not feel anything. I sit on the bottom step, listening to the sounds of my house. Through my sweater I can feel the cold steel rim where the next step hits my back.

My husband and I argued the night before about money. He is getting nervous about spending money on food. He wants to start freezing meat so we will have something to eat in the summer months. He said it upsets him to see me spending so much money on groceries.

"We should start living on your salary," he told me last night.

"What about your unemployment check?" I asked him. "You're still collecting unemployment. You're getting your money every two weeks."

"I'm not going to cash those anymore. I'm going to open up another savings account."

"Why? We have enough money."

"Now. But we don't know about the future."

"You don't know that the mines are going to stay closed," I said. "You're just getting paranoid. Don't they always threaten to close?"

"To strike. Not to close. This is the first year they've really threatened to close for good," he said. "I just want to prepare for it."

"I remember last year. You were worried then that they were going to shut down. I remember because you started reading the classifieds in the Detroit newspaper. You told me you were thinking about moving downstate last year."

"This year I can feel it. Everyone's out of work this year. If I lose my job, we are going to move. I won't find anything here in town."

"How come you're the only guy in town who's dead sure they're closing?" I asked.

"I wish you could see things the same way I do," he said. And then he shut up. He refused to say anything else.

I fill the coffee mug again. The wine is bitter at first taste, but smooth as I drink more. I drink two refills and go upstairs when I hear my husband moving around. I have a head rush from drinking so fast. The sun's late shadows fall across the kitchen table to my ski jacket hanging on the back of the chair. My husband is in the bathroom. I can hear the pipes in the walls moan as he turns the faucets on and off. He has started taking long showers, sometimes up to an hour. Afterward his fingertips are wrinkled and swollen to a soft pink. He says they hurt because they are so tender. I don't want to be in the house anymore. I am tired of the day, the same as it was yesterday.

Nancy is surprised when she opens the door. "I'm so glad you stopped by."

"I was just up at the drugstore and thought you might want a little company," I say.

"You're getting stir crazy too?" she guesses. She smiles and