

“She Heard the Plow First”

Extract from *Hillborn*

Author Richard Winters © 2021

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She heard the plow first in the thrum and shiver of the kitchen windows, and glimpsed the yellow hull of the county truck moving up the road. It disappeared behind the trees, the sound softened, and then came the engine’s strong thrum again and the orange blinking light going down.

They got into the truck, their breath filling the cab. He grunted, eying the wall of snow that the plow had left blocking the yard. He gunned the truck and it bulled through and spun wide onto the road, scattering snow. They lurched down, churning and yawing through snow, chains jarring across spots that were bare, he working the gears. Her face in the gray light wore dark shadows under the eyes, his was stiff and grave. She swayed with the truck, clinging to the handle of the door. Here’s the T where she picks me up, she said at the bottom of the hill.

Awkwardly they clanked through town, past lines of gray and brown houses, dull white snow piled beside cars, dark shapes of people walking, shoveling. Children pulled sleds and some boys threw snowballs at their truck. God damn, he said as an Oldsmobile slid out of a driveway and sagged to a stop just in front of them. Okay, he said softly, pulling the truck across heaped furrows of snow and into her mother’s street.

When he had stopped she leaped out, climbed over the mound of snow pushed against the curb and struggled to the house. Rushing up the steps she banged on the storm door with her bare white hands, and jumped and bounced on the steps, waiting, and turned and banged on the storm door again.

Meanwhile he had seen there were no tracks around the house, nothing had been cleared, there was no car, and no lights inside.

She waited eagerly on the step, trying to see in. She swung open the storm door and beat loudly on the inner door.

He came up the steps to stand beside her. She looked up at him worriedly. He

peered through the glass pane of the door. There are no lights, little bud, he said. And her car's not here. I don't think she's here.

She looked up and then stared at the glass pane and herself. There are no tracks, he went on calmly, and her car's not here. I bet she went away somewhere and couldn't get back in the snow; snowed out.

She looked stubbornly at the yard and driveway and only their own tracks.

I'm sorry, bud. He put his hand on her shoulder. She'll probably be back by tonight or tomorrow. I'm sure she didn't leave us.

She looked around frantically for hope.

That's why she didn't answer the phone, he said.

She silently walked down the steps and back to the truck as he followed.

She sat in the truck glaring forward at the street. I think we might as well get a few things while we're in town, he said, trying to sound cheerful. We can even get you gloves! But she didn't answer.

They drove slowly out of the street and back through town. He kept glancing at her as he drove but she just sat looking at the snow piles and gray houses, dark eyes in a pale, somber little face. She followed him gloomily through the grocery store. While he filled the truck with gas she sat watching the boys smoking inside the station, red-faced and lumbering. At the feed and hardware store they found her a pair of work gloves. He stuck them under his arm and tried a pair on himself. Let's look around while we're here, he said. Can I wait in the truck? she asked stonily. He looked down at her and nodded. I won't take long, he said, and she went out and sat in the truck. Other cars and trucks came through the parking lot, rolling over and flattening the snow.

Four o'clock, the light was going, the snow in the lot lay like waves and froth in the growing shadows. The cab was quite warm still. With the window open a crack, she heard the talking boys passing, the crunch and grunt of their boots on the snow. They carried brooms and shovels. A small tractor with a plow worked at the edge of the lot, pushing and backing, pushing and backing. Snow trailed from the lip of the plow, spread over the lot as a beach takes a white curl of sea.

The tide pushed, the foam washed, the tide pulled her tracks to the sea. Beside her a horn blew, she jumped in her seat, and she knew where her mother had gone, to the sea, the winter sea. The tractor plowed, pushing and back, pushing and back, with a sound like surf, and the snow curled in the dimming light like the white foam on the beach at night. She knew where her mother had gone, to the sea, to the winter sea. Though she was here.

Her mouth felt dry as ash. With a strange click the lights of the parking lot came brilliantly on. The tractor still plowed, pushing and back, pushing and back, and all their tracks were gone. She looked down, her nails seemed yellow with the lights, she heard a step and her father opened the door, giving her gloves to her with a thick yellow hand. She stared at him a moment and gave a rough cough, crouched against the door of the truck. He moved nearer, reached for her wordlessly and held her under a gray arm, and they sat, tensed like bows, under the lights in the truck. I'm sorry, he whispered.

Be a face on the mountain, he whispered. Have eyes of rain, Be dried by sun, And in cold nights be lit with stars. Sleep white under the snow, And dream, till the mountain wears away.

She heard his breathing beside her. Grimy wiper lines streaked the windshield like comets in front of her. He closed his eyes, she relaxed against him, she watched the light drain slowly from the sky.