
FICTION | SPRING 2016

QUIET, QUIET ROOM

By ANDREW BODEN

Holt threw his nitroglycerin pills into a pile of freshly plowed snow. Let them find him frozen to the handlebars of his quad. Let them rouge his cheeks and suture his lips into a bogus grin. Let them bury him in the cold, hard loam of his alfalfa fields. He retched steam and pink saliva. *Them* — there was no *them* in back of beyond Gold Creek. Pearl, his wife, had died ten years ago from emphysema. Georgia, his 50-year-old daughter, would find him hours from now with his Stetson mounded over with snow. She'd wander outside in bare feet with her quilt wrapped around her stained blue nightie and ask his corpse if it could get her flute down from the oak shelf, because alive Holt had never let her stand on a chair? Or could she have a cigarette, it was almost Christmas time? If it was a bad day, she'd explain that the little black man in her head wanted her to cut herself again — could she borrow the pinking shears to wrap her Christmas presents?

The pain in Holt's chest, neck and jaw felt seared into him by a cattle brand. He gasped the frigid air. *Georgia, alone — god.* He rolled off the quad and inched towards the plum-sized hole in the snow. *Georgia, Goddamn.* He pawed around until he touched the old yellow tin in which he kept his pills. The antique tin was his idea of a joke — *Gin Pills for the Kidneys: Take one or two pills four times a day before or after meals.* Snow melted under his tongue with the first nitroglycerin tablet. He waited 5 minutes and, when his agony didn't subside, he sucked down a second tablet and a little more snow. The pain eased just enough for him to stagger towards his farmhouse.

"Georgia?" He couldn't hear himself yet. He couldn't call 911. The phone in the living room was still dead, as it had been since an old ponderosa, bent by snow, took out the line two days ago. The phone company wouldn't send out a crew until the snow let up god knows when. He forced himself a couple steps up the stairs to the second floor and leaned against the railing. The fire under his sternum cooled to a crimson glow. "Georgia?" He took a third pill.

The single bed in her room hadn't been slept in, the curtains were closed. He lurched down the hall to a heavy, steel door, the kind that kept people out or in — the door to the *quiet room*. He'd built the room 25 years ago modeled on the ones in the psychiatric emergency department at Royal Columbian Hospital. Georgia had run away to Vancouver and when the police found her naked at the quay, they took her to RCH. Her quiet room in their house had a mattress, pillow, blanket and a stainless steel toilet he'd plumbed in over about a week. He'd boarded up the casement window and painted the walls a soft pink colour, because he'd read that pink was the colour they used in prisons to reduce aggression. He opened, by habit, the sliding panel in the centre of the door, so he could look through the little Perspex window into the room. Georgia lay on the mattress under a blanket with her back to him. The heavy padlock still hung on the outside, unlatched.

The room smelled of the shit in her toilet.

“Georgia,” he said, “get up.” His voice left him in a rasp. He pushed at her with his boot. Last week, she’d spent four days in bed, until the foul-mouthed little black man in her head shut up. If she got too bad – throwing furniture around or stalking him until she attacked him — Holt had a couple hundred Ativan pills, because he’d gone to his GP and said that he was having panic attacks and needed something to calm his live wire self. He hadn’t let Georgia take antipsychotics since 1984, when a South African psychiatrist in Cranbrook almost killed her with Haldol. Back then, his daughter’s body had gone rigid and v as if she were plugged into an electrical socket. She’d sweated herself dry and the nurse told him that her white count had gone into low orbit. Her heart raced and slowed. She hyperventilated and gasped. They took her off the Haldol and wanted to fill up the spaces in her brain with chlorpromazine, with death.

Pearl had yelled after him as he carried Georgia from the psychiatric unit. “You think you have the right, Holt Worliss? Show us your MD then. Show it to all these nice people staring at you.”

He had sworn at Pearl, because he couldn’t tell the mental health system to fuck itself in its cold, fossil heart. All those times the psychiatrists wrote out a prescription and sent Georgia home with them and he and Pearl did all the work of forcing antipsychotics into her and watching for the least signs of a cutting episode, though they had lives and jobs and educations that stopped at grade ten. The TV news had called toil like theirs *community support*. There was nothing else.

He and Pearl had fought over Georgia in the few silent moments they had. Everything in the house had to appear calm, because Georgia’s breaks came when her stress rose. They learned how to stitch skin if she cut herself, how to take a blow if she hit, how to pin her down and give her Ativan without hurting her. Pearl bought Georgia a vibrator from a shop in Calgary, because there’d never be any boys. “It keeps the stress down,” she said. Holt was pretty sure she’d bought one for herself, too. Pearl had smoked two packs a day and most days he caught her looking at him as if he was the crazy one.

“Georgia, get up now,” Holt said again.

She rolled over in the little bed and opened her eyes. She didn’t see the pink ceiling or Holt. “Dream?” she asked.

“Real. Got to go.”

“Where?”

“Town. The hospital. My heart.”

She laughed. “He’s here.”

“Don’t listen to nothing he says.”

“I can’t not. He tells me not. These are knots.”

“Get your go bag.”

“Dream?”

“Real.”

He waited at the wheel of his truck. The agony in his chest had always stopped after two nitroglycerin pills and he’d taken three. He’d fallen off a horse, once as a boy and impaled his sternum on a fence post. That’s what his chest felt like now. He shoved open the truck door and vomited on the concrete floor of the garage. Another pill.

He couldn’t remember how long it took her to come down. She wore his old ice-fishing parka, which came down to her knees, pink pajama bottoms and her Kodiak boots. She had the little red backpack full of the things he’d packed for her if it came to this: two changes of clothes, toiletries, a little photo album of him, Pearl, Leonard and Georgia when

they'd gone to the Calgary Stampede in 1975. Leonard was Georgia's older brother. He worked for Total on oil well research in France. He called once a month when Pearl was alive. Not again after she died. Not ever.

Georgia slid in beside him. He might have mistook her for Pearl at fifty, except Pearl dyed her gray hair its original auburn colour and her cheeks didn't sag under the weight of too many scowls. Georgia should've been a mother herself now. Children in college. A husband Holt would've hated for the first ten years.

"You forgot the chains," she said. "On the tires."

"We'll go without them."

"I can put them on."

"We're going."

She looked straight ahead at the two feet of snow on the long gravel driveway winding through the pines out to the Gold Creek Road. She nodded and whispered her thoughts. Holt no longer heard them, because they hadn't changed since she was fifteen, when the little black man arrived in her head. "Fucking asshole thinks he's better than everyone else. Fuck fuck fucking asshole."

Holt started the truck and had to use both hands to shift the lever for the four-wheel drive. "Remember how to lock the hubs?"

She nodded. "On the wheelies."

She turned the hub locks on the wheels and got back in the truck and blew on her cold fingers. "Did I do okay?"

"Fine."

"Is it your heart?"

"And everything else."

"You should get a new one."

"Pig heart? Or a ticker machine?"

"A new truck is what I meant. Locking the hubs outside is pitiful."

The Chev's rear end fishtailed back and forth, because he didn't have enough sandbags in the box to weight the rear wheels. He stayed in first gear and maneuvered the truck through the trees, not because he could see them all, but because he'd driven this route for 55 years. Sometimes in the dark, with the lights out, with Georgia on his lap when she was little. Sometimes drunk when he came home from the Legion. Sometimes he couldn't see at all and the trees let him know when he got too close. It was something he never talked about — that he could hear the trees late at night, like a faint radio station.

They neared the intersection with Gold Creek Road, the main gravel road to town. The grader that had plowed the road three days ago had blocked off his driveway with a three-foot high pile of dirty snow, covered today with light white fluff. He started to put his foot down on the accelerator, but his leg didn't have the strength to drive it down. "Push down on my leg," he said.

She pushed down on his knee.

"Harder."

"Asshole," she whispered.

The truck revved up and lurched forward and he cranked into second without the clutch and they hit the snow bank at 30 km/h. The truck bounced and shot through the snow.

"Flying," said Georgia.

He couldn't slow down, couldn't turn fast enough, couldn't stop the last few frames of his life. The Chev leapt across the road and hit the snow bank on the far side and rolled down the embankment, about ten feet, until the front bumper rested against an old fir.

"Is it your heart?" Georgia asked.

His voice was hoarse and sharp. "I said lock out the hubs."

She shook her head and looked as if she was about to cry. "I turned them knobs like always."

"You couldn't have."

"This whole time I wanted to be a music teacher. Like Miss Klassen. She taught me the flute. And not to lie."

There was no way the truck would get back up the embankment without a tow or the heat of spring. There was no one else back at the house who might help them. Mornings after he fed the chickens and milked the few cows he had left, he cleaned up Georgia and washed her sheets if she'd had a bad night and made her oatmeal with honey from his beehives. Since Pearl had died, Georgia stalked him around the ranch less, maybe once or twice a year, attacked him even less than that and he had to scheme to get Ativan into her not at all. She took the two pills when he said, "It's time for vitamins." His son, Leonard, wanted nothing to do with Georgia even in a world less Holt. As if her unnatural thoughts were contagious. As if the little black man in her head might reproduce himself, go public with their life.

The truck door didn't budge against Holt's shoulder. He lay back in his seat and tried to rub the pain from his chest. Chester Milner's place was an hour drive north and hardly anyone came up this way with two, three feet of snow on the road. Logging trucks wouldn't run again until after spring break up.

Georgia leaned over, turned the engine off and slipped his keys from the ignition into her pocket. She struggled to roll down her window with both hands and, when it hardly moved, she took his vise grips from the glove box and levered at the handle with the tool.

"Cold air will help," he said.

"Cocksucker."

She wrapped her long green scarf around his neck and face.

"You want anything from the house?"

He shook his head and fell to coughing. "Get *Lord Jim*." It was the novel he'd want to die with. He could read it over and over again as he waited for the Lord's judgement, the paperwork.

She pushed herself out the open window and flopped onto the snow like a grown seal ejected from a second womb. She waded through the snow up the embankment.

She'll go back to bed, Holt thought. And when I'm rested I'll walk back to the house and flush her toilet and change her sheets. She likes toast with peanut butter and honey. She likes loud, crunchy food. Dry cereal. Nuts. Apples and pears. The voices is silent. Daddy, the voices is silent. Pearl had corrected her. The voices are silent. Grammar is important if you want to go somewhere else. Leonard wrote half-decent sonnets when he was nine. Look at him now in France with his Algerian wife and fancy manoir. Kids in the Bordeaux International School. Vacations in Algiers. Perfectly lit photos. Not a whiff of madness. Only voices from mouths.

In all the years the little black man had spoken to Georgia, she couldn't tell Holt and Pearl what his face looked like. Once in town, outside Woolworth's, she saw a panel van, with the dark profile of an old time chimney sweep in a top hat perched atop a brick smoke stack. "That's what he looks like," she'd said. "He sounds distant. Speaks down a chimney into my

head. Coughs from the soot.” Holt spent entire nights, in the early days, when they first took her to the hospital, peering over his and Pearl’s origins in search of a broken gene (the first psychiatrist said madness was genetic) and, later, their rearing. He’d never hit Georgia, though he wanted to. Pearl smacked her once, though she cried afterwards. Holt’s Aunt Tam was eccentric: she painted wild, swirling canvases of muted colours (*that’s your father, that’s Mount Fisher, that’s the stars above us*) and when the money ran out in 1930, she painted alien scenes, like Lovecraft’s, on the interior walls of the barn, up to the roof.

The sound of a vehicle drew close. It sounded like one of the snow blowers from the city and then it stopped and purred. Holt punched as hard as he could at the horn, but no sound came out.

Georgia crawled into the cab again through her window and covered his left side in a sheet of dirty polyethylene. She waded through the snow around to the other side of the truck and said, “You ought to come out now.”

He shook his head. “Outside is — ” He looked out the window up at the sky as if he expected a thunderstorm, darkness. “It ain’t pertinent no more.”

It took her three blows with the hammer to smash his driver side window. The glass slid down the sheet of plastic she’d covered him with. She grabbed him by the collar of his sheepskin coat and yarded his thin frame out onto the long wooden toboggan they used to ride when she was a girl. “Here’s your reading.” She stuffed *Lord Jim* in the interior pocket of his coat and gave him his Stetson to hold in his hands. She wrapped her green scarf around his torso and the sled to secure him to it and tied a thick manila rope around the curved front of the toboggan.

He lay there for minutes, hours maybe. “Read my book to me at least?” he asked the sky. He knew the beginning by heart: *He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull.* “I forget the rest. The point of it — of this.”

An engine revved a few times and Holt was dragged up the bank onto Gold Creek Road. She untied him and said, “Get up now.”

“What for? I die here or in the house. Here has a swiftness to it.”

She pulled him to his feet and eased him on the seat behind her on the quad. The green scarf went once around his waist and then, when she sat in front of him, around her own. A couple overhand knots tied them together.

He wondered out loud where she learned to drive the quad. Oh she’d driven the tractor at 14 and the truck at 16, but in the years since, nothing real.

“You taught me to ride,” she said.

“Horse, wasn’t it?”

Sugar, the grey and white mottled mare who broke out of the corral every night, until Pearl noted she never went farther than the fence line. He’d led the mare around the yard with Georgia on her back. The little laughing girl wore a white party dress and a purple birthday hat — *happy birthday I’m 8!* She took swiftly to riding their hundred acres. Georgia never let Holt lead her and Sugar around by the halter again until Georgia’s 23rd birthday, a few days after they brought her home from the psychiatric facility. She’d forgotten how to ride, how to talk. He’d led the horse and the remains of his daughter — slouched, sullen, clothed in pajamas and a light green bathrobe — around the hoof-beaten corral. Around and around.

The quad clunked into first gear and Georgia let out the clutch too fast and they lurched forward.

“Slower,” Holt said.

She didn't hear him. The snow blower was still secured to the front of the quad and they drove maybe 10 km/h, as they blew out a path in the deep snow in front of them.

Georgia turned, not to head back to the house, but up the road to town.

"Tank's less'n a third full," Holt said. He struggled to think how far that would take them, but his sense of distance had vanished along with his sense of time.

The pines and firs pressed in on both sides of them, as the road narrowed to little more than a lane wide. Holt stuffed his bare hands inside his jacket and leaned forward against Georgia's back to shield his face from the cold air and to steady himself when the quad hit a bump. If it wasn't for the scarf she tied around them both, he would've fallen off, because he didn't have the strength to hang on.

He slipped in and out of sleep or death, he didn't know which, but it felt the same, at least at the start. He dreamt of turning Pearl into the RCMP, for an unknown crime for which he collected \$300. He dreamt of waking up as a boy in his mother's powerful, sunburnt arms. She smelled of naphtha soap and prairie winds. She told him he was dreaming — he had his whole life before him again. He could be anything he wanted — a doctor, a farmer, a reed-framed son of a bitch. Maybe all three. He could have Georgia back. She'd be unbroken. She'd be a music teacher in an elementary school. She'd have his grandkids. Musically-inclined sons of bitches.

When Holt came to, the quad sat dead in the middle of the road. The engine was silent, but for the ticking of the cooling exhaust pipe. They must have run out of gas, he thought. Or life, because they'd both taken too much. He peered at the gauge — under a quarter tank left.

"Dream?" Holt asked.

"Real," she said. "I gotta cut. He says you're going to put me in jail."

"Just don't listen to him. Go on."

"He won't let me."

Holt felt her body shaking against his. For the last thirty years, he'd wished the little black man was a flesh and blood creature, he could brain with his fists. He had Ativan on him, but Georgia would be asleep in ten minutes and the yellow marker nailed to one of the firs read 24, 24 clicks until they hit pavement. It was just as far back to their house.

The sun dropped behind the western ridge. A long gray shadow crept across the valley that began with Holt's ranch and ended 20 kilometres away at the city reservoir. The light on the road grew dim. Cold.

"Turn on the lights, Georgia."

She started to untie the green scarf that joined them. She started to wail and shake.

"I can't drive," he said. "It's got to be you."

She was getting off the quad, about to bolt, smash her head against a rock in the darkened forest and freeze to death. Because she obeyed. That was her greatest fault: she'd obeyed a malignant, sweet-voiced fucker all her life.

He called out to her, but she'd already crossed the road to the ditch. In another few steps, she'd be in the woods. Gone.

"Gimme your hand."

She looked at him, at the buck knife he was struggling to pull out from the pouch on his belt.

"Put it on the seat."

"Dream." She started to run.

“Georgia, real, goddamn real. More real than anything. Go on, pinch yourself. You won’t wake up.”

“Real?”

He nodded until his neck hurt.

“Because you couldn’t before. Mama wouldn’t let you.”

“That was a dream. Pearl, your mother —”

She peered at him as if she was removing his skin layer by layer until she ended at his chest cavity, so she could judge the sincerity of his dying heart. She took off her mitten, pulled up the sleeve of her jacket and gave him her arm.

He could feel the old scars running crisscross up and down her wrist. There was a story to each one. A beginning and a middle and an end interrupted. By Pearl. Or him. Twice a stranger.

The knife shook in Holt’s hand. He couldn’t steady it enough to pull it open, even with both hands.

“Pull open the blade.”

She could snatch the knife from him and there wasn’t anything he could do stop her. He hadn’t let her near a knife in 30 years. All the ones at home were locked away in the cupboards. She took her meals with plastics knives and drank from plastic cups, in case she smashed them again and used the jagged pieces to cut herself.

She pulled open the blade until it clicked into place. She lay her wrist down with the arteries exposed and smiled. It wasn’t her smiling, he knew: it was what possessed her, what he and Pearl had fought against all their lives. He turned her wrist over. He shouldn’t — if Pearl knew. Pearl had said cutting Georgia would reward her, reinforce the sickness. He hadn’t understood the pleasure in it. He’d gouged his wrist once to understand cutting and Pearl had found him leaning over the bathtub with blood spattering against the white porcelain, against the tile surround. “Pills,” Holt said, “I can understand pills. Understand going to sleep. But this — what is this, Pearl? It’s like a river running out to sea. Is that it? She wants to go back to the sea?”

Holt steadied his knife and made a shallow, two-inch cut on the top of Georgia’s wrist. “Let’s go,” he whispered.

“One more.” She turned her wrist back over.

“It’s enough.”

She put her hand on his and used his hand to twist the blade, so the knife cut the meat of her wrist at an angle. He felt relief, because the blood that leaked out was red.

“Real,” she said.

“Too much blood, Georgia. The seat is damp with it. Take my handkerchief. Take it —”

Holt went to press his palm against the cut in her wrist, but she pulled away. She started the quad and tied their waists together with the scarf. The lights came on and he dropped the knife in the snow and retched out what life he had left inside him.

When the pines and firs grew sparser after the reservoir, they saw a farmhouse dark but for the white Christmas lights along the eaves. The pavement came already scraped of deep snow and he said, “Raise the blade with that lever.” They sped up to 30 km/h. There was no one else out on the road on this last Christmas Eve.

At the Hospital, Georgia held Holt up so he could make it to the front desk of the Emergency Department. The nurse’s station was festooned with gold and silver tinsel and

Bing Crosby crooned from a radio somewhere. The nurse at the desk wore candy cane studs in her earlobes and asked for the nature of his problem.

Holt and Georgia stood in the silence of a dissolving dream.

“Somebody tell me something,” the nurse said.

Nothing in Holt wanted him to say it, not after 30 years of doing better than the doctors ever had. Not after everything he and Pearl had done to save Georgia from the system. From herself.

Georgia said, “Daddy’s heart.”

“Sir, your heart?” asked the nurse.

“My daughter,” Holt said. “Georgia Worliss. Born March 18, 1963. She needs a psychiatric — one of those evaluations you gave her. A place to live, too. Leonard won’t take her. I can’t keep her no more. Pearl is dead. Everybody else I know, too. So it’s got to be you goddamn people.”

“I neglected,” Georgia said. “Forgot how to ride my horse.”

She showed the nurse her gouged wrist. “Real. This is real.”

Andrew Boden’s recent short stories, essays and poetry have appeared in *The Journey Prize Stories 22*, *The New Quarterly*, *Prairie Fire*, *Other Voices*, *Vancouver Review*, and *Descant*. His story “The Parts of Ourselves Without Names” was a recent honourable mention in *Glimmer Train*'s "Family Matters" fiction contest. In 2012, he co-edited *Hidden Lives: Coming Out on Mental Illness*, an anthology of personal essays published by *Brindle & Glass*. He lives and works in Burnaby, British Columbia with his wife and three calculating cats.

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