

Michael Crummey / 32 LITTLE STORIES

This was before Confederation, so I don't know why we were being taught French at the school. We had a textbook called *32 Little Stories*. There was only enough to go around the class, so the teacher would borrow mine during the lesson and I moved back a seat to share with the person sitting behind me.

Kitch Williams would pronounce a word or sentence from the book and we were supposed to repeat it back to him, but I didn't bother opening my mouth half the time, it was all gibberish to me. Kitch decided he'd had enough of that one afternoon and got me up in front of the class alone. I guess I sounded a bit like a wounded animal trying to heave it out of me, it's a goddamn silly language anyway if you want my opinion, and the whole school had a good laugh about it.

Father had an old shotgun I used to take out hunting partridge on the weekends with Jeth Slade and Paddy Fitzgerald, a double-barrelled thing that hardly left enough meat on a bird to make a meal of it. The three of us went out over the barrens that Saturday and I took *32 Little Stories* along with me: opened it to the correct page, stood it up on an old tree stump, stepped back three paces and shot the fucking thing. Had to walk twelve feet past the tree stump to find it.

Next French lesson I moved back to sit at the desk behind me and Kitch Williams picked up my copy to start. The look on his face when he opened it: the book ripped by the lead shot, the paper melded together so you couldn't turn a page. The muscle in his cheek twitching, his eye glasses shifting on his nose. "My son," he said, putting the book on the desk in front of me, "if you're not going to take care of this text, it would be just as well to put it in the stove."

Mother always said it was a wonder I never got myself shot when I was a youngster. I picked the book up, walked to the pot-bellied stove at the back of the class and dropped it in. The crackle of *32 Little Stories* echoing around the room as I went back to my seat through the row of desks, the floor boards creaking under my feet. Quiet, my Jesus it was quiet, no one in that class had a word in their heads to speak, not of English and not of French besides.

FLAME

Breen's Island, Labrador, 1944

When we came home from the Labrador in the fall, we'd take down the stage head and cutting room to save it from the ice that raked the shoreline over the winter. Next summer then, the first thing you'd want to do would be to get the stage head back up and ready to go. There wasn't much in the way of trees in the tickle though and we'd have to take the boat into the bay to cut some timber and firewood. All day in the woods then with an axe, and the flies after your eyes the whole time; if you opened your mouth to speak they were thick enough to choke you.

Before we went in we'd douse our hands with gasoline and sprinkle a little on our hats, it helped keep them off a bit. All the same, when you came out of the bay there was a solid flame of blood across your forehead, behind your ears and along the back of your neck, as if someone had traced your hairline with a razor blade. The year Mike Tobin was up with us he soaked himself before we went in, he couldn't stand those fucking flies. I'd say he had enough juice in his hair to send the boat down to Battle Harbour, you could see the fumes rising from his head like heat over pavement. We split up into pairs then and walked in.

Joe Crowley was with him, he says they stopped for a smoke after an hour and Mike reached up to scratch the back of his head still holding the cigarette. We heard the yelling, and then we could see a small fire tearing through the trees toward the bay. He stripped off his shirt as he ran and he looked like a big wooden match, his head in flames above the white skin of his chest, a tassel of black smoke trailing behind him. It was funny as hell to look at but we managed to hold off until we got him out of the water and saw that he wasn't hurt bad. The hair was mostly gone and what was left smelled like piss on fire, but that was the worst of it.

Mike would've preferred if we never said a word about it afterwards, but it was too good to pass up. And Joe was the hardest on him. Every time he wanted a laugh that summer he'd take out a cigarette, wave it in Mike's direction and shout, "Hey Tobin. Got a light?"

HUSBANDING

I kept the animals until Aubrey got sick, there was no one to help with the haying after that. Everything else I could do myself, cleaning the dirt out of the stalls and milking in the morning, getting the cows in from the meadow before supper, it was something to get up for.

Spent a good many nights out in the barn too, waiting for the cows to calve in the spring. Sometimes you'd have to get your hands in there, the legs tangled behind the calf's head that was already hanging clear, a foot above dry straw, the tongue sticking out like a baby trying to get itself born from the mouth.

Only lost one cow in forty years of husbanding. Sat out there with her for hours that night and I knew things weren't right, the cow shifting on her legs in a queer way like a lady with a stone in her shoe, and shaking her head when she moaned. Around midnight she still hadn't started into birthing but she was bellowing loud enough to wake half of Riverhead, and trying to kick around her big belly. I sent Aubrey after Joe Slade to have a look at her, he came into the barn with his shirt tail out and boots not tied; he didn't say much, just went away and brought back his gun and a knife. You can save the calf, he told me, or you can stand aside and lose them both.

I couldn't shoot her, but I used the knife after she fell, cutting away the belly to haul out the calf and rub her clean with straw. Aubrey brought a pail of milk he'd warmed on the stove and I fed the calf with an old baby bottle, the jerk of her head when she sucked almost enough to pull it from my hand. The blood, now that was something I'll never forget, we had to rake out the stall and burn the straw in the garden next morning.

Too much for one person though, the haying, three or four weeks in the fall to cut it and get it into the barn after it dried. Sold off the cows a couple of years before Aubrey died. I was sixty-one years old the first time I bought a carton of milk from a store.

STONES

A lot of it was learning to live with cruelty. Learning to live cruelly.

We always had a couple of cats in the house, and the males you could do something with yourself. Father cut a hole in a barrel top, pushed the cat's head into it and had one of us hold its legs while he did the job with a set of metal shears. With females though, you had kittens to deal with once or twice a year. I drowned them in shallow water once. I didn't think it would make any difference, but I can still see that burlap sack moving like a pregnant belly only two feet out of reach; and I had to force myself to turn away. Those kittens were barely a week old but they took a long time dying.

The worst I ever saw was the horses. You'd get a strap around their waist with a ring underneath, and tie the fore and back legs to the ring with ropes. Then you'd back the animal up nice and slow so it would fall over in sections like a domino set, hind end first, then the belly, shoulders, head. Once it was on the ground you'd wash the bag with a bit of Jeye's Fluid, slit the sac open and snip the balls right off.

The cats bawled and screamed through the whole thing, but the horses never made a sound, they were too stunned I guess. Their legs made those ropes creak though, like a ship's rigging straining in a gale of wind. It would be a full day before they came back to themselves, standing out in the meadow like someone who can't recall their own name. Their wet eyes gone glassy with shock, as blind as two stones in a field.

THE TENNESSEE WALTZ

Ingredients:

- 1 quart of dandelion flowers picked from the meadow garden
- 4 gallons of water carried up from the brook
- 2 and one half pounds of sugar from the winter store
- 1 teaspoonful of cream of tartar, the rind and juice of 2 lemons

Boil the works in the beer pot for twenty minutes, turn it out into a pan and let it cool. When the liquid is new-milk warm, add four table-spoons of yeast and let it work for about a day, until you can see the tiny bubbles start to rise. Boil your bottles and siphon the beer from your pan, then cork tightly. Keep them in a cool place or the bottles may burst, the small explosions like rifle shots in the middle of the night, your shoes sticking to the floor for weeks, the house stinking of yeast and alcohol.

Fit to drink after two days in the bottle. A glassful will straighten a crooked spine. Three bottles enough to put a song in your heart and the heart of your neighbour come for a visit; four enough to light the flicker of dandelion flames in your sorry eyes. Five will set your head on fire, have your neighbour dancing around the kitchen with a broom, singing the only line he knows of *The Tennessee Waltz*. Send him home with one less sock than he came with. Wake you early with the tick of a cooling engine in your skull, your face the colour of ash. Your neighbour's wife wondering what became of that missing sock, and he will never find an explanation to satisfy her.

Makes about 3 dozen.

BONFIRE NIGHT

Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the English Parliament Buildings with a basement full of explosives and got himself hanged for his trouble. Burned in effigy on the anniversary of his death in every Protestant outpost in Newfoundland. No one remembers who he was or what he had against the government, but they love watching the clothes take, the straw poking through the shirt curling in the heat of the fire and bursting into flame.

The youngsters work for weeks before the event, gathering tree stumps and driftwood, old boxes, tires, and any other garbage that will burn, collecting it into piles on the headlands or in a meadow clearing. The spark of fires up and down the shore like lights warning of shoals or hidden rocks. Parents losing their kids in the darkness, in the red swirl of burning brush; teenagers running from one bonfire to the next, feeling something let loose inside themselves, a small dangerous explosion, the thin voices of their mothers shouting for them lost in the crack of dry wood and boughs in flames. They horse-jump an expanse of embers, their shoes blackened with soot, dare one another to go through larger and larger fires, through higher drifts of flankers: their young bodies suspended for a long moment above a pyre of spruce and driftwood, hung there like a straw effigy just before the flames take hold. Guy Fawkes a stranger to them, though they understand his story and want it for themselves.

Rebellion. Risk. Fire.

ROOT CELLAR

A mound of sod like a single upturned breast beside the house, a three foot doorway staunched out with logs and two steps down into darkness. Dusty pungence, the warmth of must and dirt, the mossy odour of stored vegetables, that dull smell like an ache in your joints. The walls lined with barrels of potatoes, turnip, shelves of carrot and cabbage, a few beets, parsnip, radish, a sack of onions.

The men away in Labrador over the summer, planting and weeding done by the women and any children old enough to lift a trowel. My grandmother trenching half an acre of potatoes, carting wheelbarrows full of caplin to the garden, the slick silver bodies shovelled over the vegetables as fertilizer, the stink of rotting fish breeding a noisy pelt of bluebottles.

The late summer harvest stored in the root cellar and that was what kept people going through the end of the winter, potatoes still coming out of the cellar in March and April, brown skin thickened like a callous and sprouting wild white roots; the starchy flesh gone soft, gelatinous, like the eye of a dead animal. Potato and scrunchions, french fried potatoes, boiled spuds and pork fat, potato hash.

When Nan came home from the hospital the first time, she went straight to the pantry and peeled half a dozen new potatoes, put them on to boil and ate them plain, just a little butter and salt for taste. She hated hospital food, wanted something prepared by her own hands, something the earth had a claim to. The dry sweetness of them in her mouth. Feeding her body, feeding the tumour. She was seventy-one years old, her belly distended by cancer: six months they said, a year at the longest.

No one uses them anymore now, there's a refrigerator in every kitchen, a grocery store on every corner. Abandoned root cellars still standing up and down the shoreline: hollow skull of sod in a meadow, a blank eye of darkness staring behind the doorway's empty socket.

OLD CHRISTMAS DAY

My father, yes.

Father died on Old Christmas Day, January 6th, 1946. We thought he was getting better, he'd managed a decent meal that Sunday for the first time in months, salt beef and cabbage, peas pudding, he ate the works. Mother used to make fruit puddings in the old Baking Soda cans, Hollis and myself carried one up to him for dessert. He took three or four mouthfuls from the can and then he slumped over in the bed, never made a sound. I ran across Riverhead to Uncle Wel's and burst in saying Father was dead, I don't know what I expected them to do.

Anyway we buried him. Had to take out the kitchen window to carry the coffin from the house and it was cold enough to skin you. Then we buried him.

I'm not saying this like I meant to.

He used to run a sawmill up the brook, it was something to do over the winters when there was no fishing. Mother made a fried egg sandwich and corked a bottle of tea for him every morning, we'd carry it up there together. It was warm inside from the heat of the machines running, and the scent of pine and spruce in the sawdust, I never smelled a place as clean as that mill. Father sat me up on the cutting table while he had his lunch and I usually ate more of the sandwich than he did. The first mill he had burnt down, the second one there weren't enough trees around to keep it running and he had to sell off the equipment or let it rust.

He worked hard is all I'm saying. The only summer that man didn't come to the Labrador he was having cataracts taken off his eyes. That was the year before he died, when he was sixty-two.

No, that's not it, nevermind, nevermind now.

Nevermind, I said.

BREAD

I was twenty years younger than my husband, his first wife dead in childbirth. I agreed to marry him because he was a good fisherman, because he had his own house and he was willing to take in my mother and father when the time came. It was a practical decision and he wasn't expecting more than that. Two people should never say the word love before they've eaten a sack of flour together, he told me.

The night we married I hiked my night dress around my thighs and shut my eyes so tight I saw stars. Afterwards I went outside and I was sick, throwing up over the fence. He came out the door behind me and put his hand to the small of my back. It happens your first time, he said. It'll get better.

I got pregnant right away and then he left for the Labrador. I dug the garden, watched my belly swell like a seed in water. Baked bread, bottled bakeapples for the winter store, cut the meadow grass for hay. After a month alone I even started to miss him a little.

The baby came early, a few weeks after my husband arrived home in September. We had the minister up to the house for the baptism the next day, Angus Maclean we named him, and we buried him in the graveyard in the Burnt Woods a week later. I remember he started crying at the table the morning of the funeral and I held his face against my belly until he stopped, his head in my hands about the size of the child before it was born. I don't know why sharing a grief will make you love someone.

I was pregnant again by November. I baked a loaf of bread and brought it to the table, still steaming from the oven. Set it on his plate whole and stood there looking at him. That's the last of that bag of flour, I told him. And he smiled at me and didn't say anything for a minute. I'll pick up another today, he said finally.

And that's how we left it for a while.

INFRARED

A picture that was never taken, infrared photograph of the square wooden house in Western Bay, a record of heat and its loss. Most of the building sits in darkness, a shallow haze of escaping energy pink above the shingles, deeper and more insistent where the chimney rises into the night air.

Downstairs, the kitchen is a ball of flame, the draughty windows spilling fire. The wood stove at the centre, as dark as a heart, stoked full with birch wood and throwing heat like a small sun. The family sits as far back as kitchen walls allow, shirt sleeves rolled to the elbows, sweat on their brows, the temperature pushing 85 degrees.

In the next room, behind the closed kitchen door, a film of ice forms on water left sitting in a cup. Steam rises from the head of the woman who walks in from the kitchen to retrieve it and in the photograph her neat bun of hair is haloed by a shaggy orange glow.

Later, the outline of sleepers under blankets in the upstairs bedrooms mapped by a dull cocoon of warmth, a bright circle lying at their feet: beach rocks heated in the oven and carried to bed in knitted woolen covers. The outrageous autumn-red pulse fading as the house moves deeper into night, the incandescent warmth of it slowly guttering out into darkness.

JIGG'S DINNER

Out of bed by seven to leave plenty of time to dress for church. The salt beef in soak overnight to take off the brine: put it on to boil in the largest pot in the pantry. Drain off half the salt water and replace it with fresh every hour. Clear a spot on the counter, run the knife across the whetstone to keep the edge. Begin the vegetables.

Potatoes

Potatoes are inevitable, like grace before a meal. They're as passive as trapped cod fish, sitting in cupboard darkness below the sink, waiting to be baked or boiled or thinly sliced and fried with onion and scrunchions.

You'll want a spud for everyone eating, two if they're smaller than your fist. The skin is mottled brown and spotted with eyes, the flesh is white and damp. The taste is neither here nor there, like its colour, it complements everything you serve. Cut the largest in half or three to avoid stony pits enduring after everything else is ready to eat. Serve individually, or mashed with butter and a spoonful of fresh milk.

Carrots

Carrots are the middle child, no one's particular favourite, but well-enough liked by all. A good rule of thumb is to cook more than you think you need. Never worry about leftovers: a carrot holds its flavour like no other vegetable, it tries so hard to please.

Turnip and Parsnip

Flesh of the turnip turning like a lobster shell when boiled, washed-out yellow to something darker, something just short of orange. The parsnip is white but not as pale as a spud. They're predictable vegetables, sturdy and uncomplicated, tasting of the winter root cellar, the warmth of darkness smouldering beneath snow. Turnip is served mashed with a tablespoon of butter and a pinch of fresh pepper. Parsnip served like carrot, the beautifully tapered torso laid naked on the plate.

Greens

Leaf and stalk of the turnip, boiled until tender. The dark green of deep water shoals. As tart as spinach and better for you, the limp stalk wrapped around your fork like a spaghetti string, a spill of green liquor on your lips with every mouthful.

Cabbage

Similar to lettuce, but heavier and more densely rounded: the quieter and more secretive of two siblings. Too firm and fibrous to be eaten raw, boil the cabbage whole until the inner leaves have paled almost to white and the rippled outer layers part before a fork like the Red Sea before the staff of Moses.

Onions

Slip the pocket of tears from its papery shell. Do not bring the knife near the flesh. Drop two or three whole onions into the pot to cook the tang from the core. Eat them by the forkful, the translucent layers soft and sweet as orange sections, every bit of bitterness boiled away.

When the church bell peals, place all vegetables to boil with the salt meat. The peas pudding is wrapped separately in cheesecloth or a piece of rag and placed last in the pot, before leaving for church at a quarter to eleven.

By twelve-thirty everything is ready. Take up the vegetables in separate dishes and people will serve themselves as they please. Ladle a spoonful of the salty liquor from the pot over your food, or dip up a mugful to drink with your meal. Protect your Sunday clothes with a linen or cotton napkin. Bow your heads before you eat.

Be thankful.

