

## Greg Hollingshead / TWO STORIES

### YOU NEVER KNOW

1904's the first actual date Dut can remember, and he's remembering it now, very clearly, asleep in this straw. It's the kind of memory that'll be gone five minutes after he wakes up, but it'll be back, since that fact too has just occurred to him along with the memory itself and if after 55 years the memory can come back pristine like this in a dream, why not the accompanying knowledge that it will again? . . . And so the memory again, eh? He's pulling a sled up a hill and he turns to the kid beside him and says, is this 1905, or 1904?

1904, says the kid, superior.

Later, maybe next run — unless he's telescoped events — Dut's sled (wood runners a fuckup on a sheer ice patch in shade) passes through 180 degrees and whumps him *whamp!* against a frozen clay embankment (so that there in the straw he's wheezed out for breath, just remembering it) and it's like that proverbial delivery room slap on the newborn's ass that says: *All change!* (The first time he heard that order over the speaker in the subway system the whole trip so weird to him he looked around for the passengers to start doing Lon Chaney Jr.'s, anticipated there for a moment a carful of folks changing — werewolves — and him not knowing how.) *All change!* and the newborn, his lifeline clamped cut by an arbitrary man in a smock, *has* to get in there and breathe, his very first choice taken away, and no consolation either from mother, too groggy from painkillers to feel up to demanding to hold him more than a few seconds if that. Or so Dut's son Jim, Dieppe hero who's a highschool principal and was present for three of Dut's grandkids' arrivals, told him. Not for the fourth because that time Jim (who had balls then) objected to the use of forceps, grabbed the doctor's arm, so they threw him out, two orderlies in smocks and another guy in the corridor with sedative needles on a tray. *Whamp!* and little Dut's initiated into calendar time, one day after the other. Looking back on it he felt like the dog they taught language, who said, I've suffered a terrible fall.

This birth business is at the heart of Dut's concerns right now because a funny thing's happened to him and he wants to know what it is. This winter he's been working the river with Arnie Rabb cutting ice

Arnie excited today about a break-in last night his cellar window pried off its hinges his wife Ruby's ring, a ruby ring, taken not worth fifty dollars while the TV, the gramophone, the mantel clock, have all been ignored. Can Dut make it out? Sure he can. It was kids. You scared them off. They don't know things' values. Dut turning the ring over and over in his own pocket

It's their lunchtime nap now, a .32 revolver in Dut's other pocket, he's back to back with Arnie in a womb they made in this barn's straw, straw being female, hollow, and so warmer than hay which, thin and solid, male, is cold . . . but back in the summer it was septic tanks, the digging of. Arnie in hip waders, eternal red polkatrapezoid handkerchief in his overalls back pocket, pencil on his papery ear, down in the hole . . . while something's occurring to Dut, a sort of opium clarity peeling veils off his literal and mind's eyes — he's feeling outright *trepanned*. Teetering mildly ecstatic there on the clay muck edge of that hole, he gets his notebook out to check the current calendar, 1959, taped inside, with the moon's phases indicated, and sure enough, counting back, it's the fourth day before the full. His headache's due tomorrow: he always feels this way previous to it. But this time Dut's eyes, little minds of their own, are gazing at the hand that's put away his notebook and now is back in view, flexing, hair on it, cracked palms. Now, 'minds of their own' is right, because what Dut thinks they're doing they're not. What he thinks he's thinking looking at that hand he's not. Asked, he'd tell himself he was looking for new callous, at an old man's veins, Martian viaducts, how thin, like a bird's foot, his hands are growing. In fact, Dut's looking at his hand and seeing its shape, surely, but also something else about it he's never . . . what should he call it? its what? its form? its *form* he's seeing for the first time? Attending now, Dut's noticed his hand's form is altogether different from its shape, in the same way that the *form of Dut* is altogether different from his shape, which is an apt comparison for him to be making, because what he's realizing as he gazes at his hand on the edge of that hole they've spent the morning digging, with Arnie now darting curious upward looks, is that *the form of his hand is the same as the form of himself*. Whatever

'myself' is, ever-cautious Dut footnotes, his eyes resting on the backyard's willow tree, one of whose roots (thick as his leg) he's holding an axe in his other hand for passing down to Arnie to chop through. And that's when Panic drops in. Because Dut sees right away that that willow has the same form as his hand, as himself . . . But Dut's eyes are already back fascinated on his hand again and it's here that something else uncommon happens. Because suddenly he's a baby in his crib warm sunlight through dusty windows an alcove on the second floor, wooden rattle away half under the lacy pillow, wood bars to his crib he can bang on but just now he's motionless staring at his hand not a workcracked old man's at all but a baby's, pink and flexible, checked out in wonder as steps of mother now approaching to lift him surrounding a dome of blue sky and Dut's an old man, himself in future years, or his own grandfather, standing in a vegetable patch in the greenhouse shadow almost, blue sky overhead, pausing a moment to check for blisters the hoe too new he's not used to it resents it perspiration beading under the hat's hot brim shadow the scene fading . . .

Dut's eyes are everywhere now, checking the septic tank's environs for that form, and everything's got it, the peeled white back of the clapboard house, diagonally in shadow, its little venetianed bedroom windows, the never-painted screen door, the way the clothesline pole leans, the kids' swings, both of them, one's seat hanging vertical on one chain, the dog, chin across his left paw, dreaming in the sun, everything's got that form, *everything is Dut*. Nowhere else for him to look now he feels but the sky, where the afternoon moon's a white embodiment of himself, and the sun — Arnie's restive with the delay, his voice from down below, harsh, *the sound of it that same form* . . . Dut thinking the sun'll burn this bad knowledge from his eyes, but the pain's too bad he shuts them, and the sun's afterimage *is that form*. Dut steps back from the hole's edge and goes down on his knees. He lets the axe slide over the edge to Arnie, who knows the moon, has called out, Dut, are you alright? One of those headaches? It's a day early if it is . . .

Well that migraine's still due, and if it isn't it's because the energy it needed has gone into stamping Dut's soul on the world's contents. Suicidal with the weight of the whole world himself for a month, Dut, hands in his coat pockets, tried asking his son Jim — Jim in army surplus shorts, rolled up, washing his new secondhand Packard at the foot of a sod lawn browning geometrically — about it, omitting mention of the time travel and the fact that the form's his own signature. Blinking, Jim, gone to beef lately, bullocked, outlined the two possibilities. (A) It's an image, he said, Hypnotized, a man can see one shape simultaneously as triangle and circle. Of course, ask him to draw it and he can't.

It's not a shape, it's a form, said Dut, thinking, Cancel the high-school principal and there's nothing left. It took everything he was to become what he is now.

Different levels, eh?, said Jim, rubbing his neck with the chamois.

Dut shrugged. It's not a shape, he said.

OK Dad. Whatever you say, Jim irritable here, going dogmatic. The only thing else it can be (and this is (B)) is an endocept. Letting that sink in, Jim on his haunches, chamoising black fender where the paint had bubbled, Dut beside him thinking how easily he could push his fist through the rust spot under that shiny paint, thinking, I can wait as long as he can.

An endocept, said Jim, talking finally to Dut's silent reflection in the fender, is, simply, preconscious cognition. It's a mental experience you can't see.

Dut stood up. I see it alright, he said. I'm seeing it all the time.

But you can't verbalize it.

What do you think I'm talking about?

Draw it! said Jim, diving into the Packard for the glove compartment, rummaging through for a steno pad and pencil stub. These are my secretary's said Jim, handing them over. When Dut couldn't draw the form, Jim said, It's an endocept, and started polishing the hood, Dut fingering the .32 deep in his pocket along with his Sweet Caporals, matches, bus tickets, a blue handkerchief. Maybe he should shoot himself.

Actually, said Jim, straightening, and looking right at Dut for the first time that day, I don't think it's an endocept at all. It's a special kind of image, on a different level or something, and that means it has a real source. Find the source and the problem's finished.

A few days later Dut was making in his notebook an orderless list of possible sources for his self's form :

1. a terrible smudgy painting by my mother, a squat maple by a lake (thrown out)
2. the asshole of my first dog (dead)
3. a gouge or design or dirt spot in the wall by my crib (torn down)
4. the front door of my parents' house, the doorknob, octagonal door sections painted blue and tan (t.d.)
5. an English half-penny I found digging in the dirt along the side of my parents' house; the little shovel? (both lost)
6. a map, of an island (?)
7. a ruby (?)

For a long time he'd got no farther than the list, his soul's stamp not diminishing in power. It was like that vague translucent blanket possession drapes over things, except that Dut didn't feel he owned the world, only offended it, convinced it had better things to do with its existence than reflect him. He looked through a coin collection at the fair at Thanksgiving; at precious stones, cut and uncut, in the nature museum when he got a chance; at islands and continents in the atlas at the Public Library; and always he kept a peeled eye on dogs' assholes: Nothing. Finally he'd remembered Ruby Rabb and last night swiped the ring he'd given her when she was sixteen and starring (before Arnie'd given her a clown's name by marrying her) in Dut's dreams. Seeing the ring again, Dut knew the form preceded it, went deeper, and he couldn't even tell now if the form had ever had special attachment to it.

So Siamese here in the straw with Arnie he's started wondering what the world's first light's form might be from inside for the infant pushing headfirst towards it to be born. Except aren't their heads in *Life* magazine's pictures always bowed over can they see at all? Wondering, Dut's taken the .32 out of his pocket, hoping Arnie won't

wake with the oilsmell. He's tempted to fire it into the straw a little joke. Instead, there in that womb's murk (a lakebottom's winter sunlight) he looks down the gun's barrel gleaming dull and blue, and when he's staring directly down it, the sight at twelve o'clock, the butt spreading from four o'clock to eight, he realizes, This is it, my form's original. Death. I pull the trigger now. But instead of doing that, Dut snorted, reaching around to ease Ruby's ring into Arnie's overalls pocket. And hooted, because suddenly the ring, and Arnie's overalls, his huddled foetal outline, were, there in the murk, back themselves again, free of him, of Dut, of Dut's signature, Dut's stamp. And later, Arnie not having felt the ring yet in his pocket, still going on about the break-in (biggest thing lately in his daily life), Dut dropped the .32 into the hole they'd cut in the ice, having decided to see if he'd end up that old guy with the hot hat and the new hoe he resents a mean old bopper but alive . . . even if the memory's his penultimate, a revolution or a food shortage on and his ultimate of gazing, among vegetables, down a .32's barrel again. You never know, Dut was thinking

watching

Arnie the innocent magician pull a ruby ring from his own pocket amazed.



## MARY DUNCAN

Garrstown, Ontario. New Year's Day, 1896, white flakes drifting out of an iron sky.

Last night, no moon, the street below a violent darkness. Mary Duncan and Randy Gibbons drinking French brandy from Boston with the lights off, watching out their window in the Macdonald Hotel. Randy said:

"One hundred dollars, between now and say two o'clock."

"They'd rip you apart."

"They know me."

"They're running in gangs. We don't need money right now."

At seven o'clock they shot a horse; that is, a horse got shot. Mary and Randy heard the shot, the horse screaming, saw the two hotels opposite pour men, spilling clumsy shoving from the same doors as yellow gaslight, heard them spilling out the Macdonald Bar door too, a floor below, saw its light go widening across the street, and then heavy boots splash mud and down the boardwalks. Randy had time to get the window up and his head out to listen, too nearsighted to see in the night, before three more shots, sane, contemplative, the echoes dying after each one, and the horse screaming stopped. After that, shouting, a fight, the crowd's whooping, and Mary Duncan, very tired of people, sat back in her chair and put her hand over her eyes.

"Randy, close the window," she said.

And Randy Gibbons, a butcher by trade, with a child's face, a child's smooth skin that Mary Duncan loved, obedient to her, unless drunk, in all small things, did what he was told. Because Mary Duncan had been to Mexico, San Francisco, and to Vancouver on the CPR, and Randy had been to Toronto only, by coach down Yonge Street. Because Mary Duncan was thirty-four years old, and had stunned Randy Gibbons, who was eighteen-and-a-half, with a love for him beyond his imagining, and like a stunned creature he obeyed, aspiring to her approval and thereby her wisdom in all matters, except perhaps meat and whoredom, about which she, a vegetarian and were she a whore surely incompetent, knew nothing, having no interest, and therefore no wisdom concerning cuts and grades, concerning the sale of the temporary use of the human body.

"I got a gun," said Randy.

Upright on a bench that New Year's morning in front of Garr House across the street, a farmer snoring in a beaver coat, the snow turning it white. To wake up, thought Mary, with a mouthful of snow. Her eyes hurt. She took some medicine, crawled back to bed and curled there waiting. Randy came back at noon, and woke her up. He counted forty dollars onto the mattress by her nose. It smelt like smoke; his hands, she thought, like bleach; his breath when, being nearsighted, he looked at her close, garlic. She opened her eyes.

"After Christmas," he said. "Nobody has any left." The side of his face was bruised.

He took her downstairs for lunch, only drank an ale himself, looking around. She ate an enormous meal. The Macdonald Hotel dining room in Garrstown served the best dumplings in Ontario. And then she said:

"I'm going back to Vancouver."

He started, his eyes gone big at her, the pupils gigantic as ever. His chair thudded down on all four legs. His right hand, moving forward on its own, knocked his glass of beer on its side. When he left the dining room, the taps on his boot heels sounded loud against the floor. She set his glass upright and finished her meal off with bread pudding and two cups of tea. She talked to Mrs. Macdonald and paid up the room to the eighth of the month, this being the first. The coach left for the Holland Landing connection at seven-thirty the next morning. She went back to the room. Randy was there drinking brandy.

"I've been with you now," she said, "for two months."

"I'll butcher," he said. "I'm planning to. Not up here. In the city." He wasn't looking at her but at the bottle he was pouring from. She was standing by the window. The farmer in the beaver coat was gone, the bench only lightly snowy where he'd sat. It wasn't coming down anymore. A sled went by, drawn by a pony. She wondered how Randy could butcher with his eyes poor. They'd live down on Queen Street. She'd buy him spectacles which he'd never wear. In twenty years he'd have his own shop, two fingers remaining on his left hand. And her past fifty. Doing what? Writing poems for the magazines. Taking medicine, and lovers. Boys, children with smooth skin, restless between the bone squeezing of her legs. Asking for money.



"I'll butcher," said Randy. "In Toronto. I've been there."

"Haven't I?" she said.

"What does that mean. I'll bloody marry you." That was all he said. His lashes long and fair, beautiful the way their tips curled. He didn't care, though. Once in Woodbridge had sat around the room all evening talking to her with his eyelids turned inside out. And now Mary hunched on the edge of the mattress pulling her skirts tight over her knees. Butchering, poems for the magazines, medicine, boys. "Marry you!" he shouted and hammered the floor with the bottle for each syllable. But her answering was too slow. He pushed her into the hallway.

Mrs. Macdonald collected Mary's clothes and sent her son Jim over to Mary at Garr House with them. Mary told him to thank his mother and sent him along to the druggist for medicine. She was at the window watching the Macdonald boy cross the street, when the farmer in the beaver coat, a wounded expression around his eyes, came to her door with a bottle of Scotch whisky. His teeth were yellow and black, his nose thin like a blade. A snorer. He and Mary were having a drink when the boy returned with Mary's medicine. She gave the boy two pennies.

"What is that? Medicine?" said the farmer when the boy left. "Are you ill?"

"Yes," said Mary.

Later, when the bottle was empty, the farmer slipped his coat off and pulled Mary onto the bed. "Where your hand is," said Mary, "is where I'm ill." The farmer took his hand away and washed it in the basin. He drew a folded linen towel from the top dresser drawer and dried himself on it. He put his coat back on and left the room without saying a word. Randy shot him dead in the hallway with a shotgun held a foot from the back of his head.

"I couldn't trust myself with the .45," Randy stood in the doorway telling Mary, "my eyes being so poor." She was pouring medicine for herself, the bottle clanking against the tumbler. Randy locked the door behind him. Garr House was absolutely silent. The noise was coming from the street. For the first time, Randy took a pull of medicine when she offered it.

"I think you should surrender," she said. "You found him trying to rape me."

"In the hallway with his coat on," said Randy. He was pushing the room's one armchair up to within a few feet of the door. He sat in it, the butt of the shotgun resting not against his shoulder but alongside his ribs, against the chair. "It was Henry Henderson, a gentleman. Now he's splashed all over the walls. That stuff you take is bitter."

"Come out!" said the Chief Constable.

A fan of buckshot left Randy's gun and made blond pits in the door. Next he shot out the frosted glass over the lintel. "Jesus," Mary heard a constable say as she squeezed down between the bed and the wall. "That's opium you drink," Randy told her, "I can read too."

"What's that, Gibbons?" said the Chief Constable.

"I said I can read, Constable Duff," called Randy. "All I need's some good light."

"Gibbons!" said the Chief Constable. "Open the door and throw your guns out."

"Get us a horse or I'll shoot Ma'm'selle Duncan here," replied Randy.

Ten minutes later the Chief Constable said the horse was waiting in the street. As Randy got up and turned to cross the room to see it, he was shot twice in the neck and once in the heart by a deputy constable leaning from a ladder resting against the wall outside the window. The face and right hand of the deputy were bloodied by the pane burst by his own bullets. Randy fell against the door and forward onto the chair. The deputy descended the ladder slowly, and blubbered at the foot of it into his hand. Mary came out from under the bed and pulled Randy, blood welling up in his mouth, away from the door. The

constables and their deputies crowded in. She sat on the bed with Randy under a blanket the whole time until they carried him out. The Chief Constable asked her a few questions and went away. Mr. Garr-Thomas, the manager, asked her please, for the good of his establishment's name, to leave it. She went back to the Macdonald Hotel where Mrs. Macdonald showed more kindness, and gave her for the night a new room, away from the street.

The next morning at seven-thirty Mary Duncan left in a one-horse coach for Holland Landing, the only passenger. Two miles out of Garrstown the coach stopped and the Macdonald boy climbed in saying, "Ma'm" as he sat down across from Mary. She didn't recognize him until he'd finished unwrapping the scarf from his long face.

"Where are you going, Jim Macdonald?" she asked then.

"Don't know," he said, curiously final, not looking at her.

"Running away?"

"I might be."

Mary didn't say anything. The boy wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"Your mother's a good lady," she said at last.

"I know how good she is."

At Holland Landing Jim Macdonald sat next to Mary Duncan in a crowded room around a hot wood stove. When Mary pushed out a spoonful of medicine, Jim asked her why she took it. Mary looked at him with apparent great deliberation. "For no reason at all," she said at last and didn't say anything else until the coach arrived. In the commotion then she said, "You weren't kidnapped."

And Jim Macdonald, who was nearly seventeen, a dog-faced boy with long arms and a broad thin chest, said, "No, I wasn't."



