

Storm Chasers

by billy robinson

Cal and I got stuck on Route 9 surrounded by fields of corn, stalks barely three feet tall, New Jersey's pluckable yellowed-ears still months away. Cal's Plymouth, his radiator, steamed up, so he cell-phonned for help, but after forty minutes it was obvious nobody was coming to get us.

The small town is about a mile back, a twenty-minute walk through motionless air, past the boarded-up George and Elaine's Fruit Stand. Cal, now ten feet ahead of me, slaps his neck. Another greenhead. I haven't been bitten once. "Fuck," he says, smacking one on his left arm a few seconds later. "What the fuck?"

"They love you more than me," I say. The story of my life, I could add but don't because he'd think I was trying to get a reaction. He might be right.

What I say instead is, "Remember that movie where Kurt Russell's car breaks down in the desert and his wife is kidnapped and because he loves her so much he risks his life to find her?"

Cal punts a stone. "Didn't see it."

Cal hates movies, maybe as much as I love them. He didn't even know who Hugh Grant was when I told him he was him to a T. Dark, wavy hair, ocean blue eyes, made bluer against his green sweater. I love Hugh Grant. Rented every one of his movies, a habit I haven't been able to kick for three years. Four Weddings and A Funeral? Gimme a break. Scintillating, smart characters. Just like the tart-tongued Andie McDowell, whose mannered sexiness masked her crushing loneliness.

“Even if it meant dying,” I continue, “I’d take a bullet for someone. Or jump in front of a train.”

“When would you ever need to jump in front of a train?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“I do,” he says. “Because it wouldn’t happen. It’s stupid.”

“Okay,” I say, “but my point is the only way you’d ever know if someone really loved you is if they put their life on the line when it counts. Otherwise you gotta take their word for it.”

This time he stops, turns, and eyes me like I just crawled out of the lagoon.

He used to look at me like I just stepped out of the shower, dripping and exposed. That first night at Casey’s, when he cornered me down the long corridor to the ladies’ room, even then, boozed up and smelling of Pall Mall, he looked as if he could devour me alive. That’s what people don’t understand: it’s the little things that make a person think there’s still something to wait around for. Like the time he told me that he loved me once.

The first place we find is a bar. More like a bunker with dim lighting and mirrored walls. Glassed dangling by their stems on racks above. Mid-day drunks scattered about.

As Cal heads to the can, I head to the counter. The bartender is flipping around the TV above him when I yell Stop! Because wouldn’t you know it, right there on the screen, *Music and Lyrics*, starring Drew Barrymore and Mr. Hugh Grant himself.

I say to the guy next to me, slumped over his beer, *The best time of my last fifteen years was sitting at that piano with you*, and she

says, *That's wonderfully sensitive. Especially from a man who wears such tight pants*, and he says, *It forces all the blood to my heart.*

"You know earthworms got five hearts," this guy says.

"That's too many," I say back.

"Cut 'em in half they can still make themselves whole again."

"Hearts?"

"Worms. But hearts, too, I suppose. After Katrina they were all over the damn place. Wanna see?"

"Why not?" I say, and take a bar stool.

Out of his jacket he pulls this small photo album with plastic sleeves. All the pictures in sepia, of storm ravaged homes, wounded land, hard, lost faces. And page after page of close-ups of spittlebugs and earthworms popping up through mud and sludge. "Think they're any good?"

I tell him I like the destruction and then how, against all odds, life still figuring out a way to break through.

"Name is Hank," he says.

"Abbey," I say, and we shake on it.

"I've got photos of 'em all. Andrews. Hugo. Gustav. I used to go where the storms go."

"Some kind of storm chaser," I say.

"Yep."

Just then Cal is back, zipping up his pants. "We need a tow," he says to the bartender.

He's wiping out a glass with a rag, and stares at Cal. So Cal goes, "You know, tow truck? Mechanic? DO YOU SPEAKY THE ENGLISH?"

"You got a drink in mind?"

"Sure, draft," Cal says, and I clear my throat.

"Oh yeah, make it two," he says. But not like *Oh, yeah, how stupid of me*, more like *Oh, yeah, I forgot you were here*.

We get our beers poured and then the bartender walks off toward the phone at the end of the counter.

Cal yells, "Sherlock, it's stuck up thataways. About a mile."

"Cal?" I say.

"What? I'm just joking with the guy."

I then say, "Look," and point to the TV. Hugh Grant is dancing in his tight black leather pants, playing up the has-been pop music star perfectly.

"She's gonna make your ears bleed with that stuff," he says to the guy he doesn't even know. "If I were you, I'd move down a few," he adds, and laughs hard, like a smoker. Then he sees the Lucky 7 terminal in the corner and walks over with his beer. I turn back to the TV.

"My boyfriend thinks I'm nuts."

“Are you?”

I mention my fixation with Hugh. How I like watching him play the heel and then coming through in the end.

“I hear ya,” he says. “Like something's got a hold of you and won't let go. Like that machine over there.”

He flicks a finger toward Cal as he drops another coin into the slot. We hear him say, Fuck.

“Phil,” he says, and now I know the bartender's name, “when you gonna get rid of that devil machine?”

“Not in your lifetime,” Phil says, back from the phone. It sounds like a conversation they've had a thousand times before. Cal and I've had a thousand conversations about the same things, too. Cal bolting up in the middle of the night, screaming about how shitty life is in Northfield, and me screaming back, “Just say the word and my bags are packed.”

Cal is suddenly at the counter again. Cashing in a couple of bills for coins.

“The guy's gonna be there in half an hour,” Phil tells him.

“Where? Here?”

“At your car.”

“Shit. Why not here?”

“Coming from the other direction, I guess.”

Cal steams off with coins, back to the Lucky 7.

"I used to play that," Hank says.

"Any luck?"

"Would I be sitting here?" He then takes a sip. "I'll tell you what nuts is. Going back to the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result."

I glance up at the TV. Hugh is singing on stage at Madison Square Garden. Cut to Drew, walking up the aisle, pissed that it's over between them. Then cut to Hugh, singing "Don't Write Me Off Just Yet," then back to Drew, who stops in her tracks, spins around, her expression a mixture of shock and awe.

"Great scene," I say, sort of teary-eyed. "You like Hugh?"

"He's okay, I suppose."

"Okay? You ever see Four Weddings and A Funeral?"

"Was he in The Flight of the Phoenix?"

"You're thinking of Dennis Quaid."

"Yeah. He's cool."

"Grant's cool."

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Maybe. Just the same act, it gets tired is all."

Cal is dropping a coin into the machine. The cards roll around and around on their spools. Fuck. He shoves in another coin, another fuck.

When he comes back, he throws down a few bucks for the beers. "Well, we're outta here."

"Wait," I say. "This is the part where they kiss." When I don't move or take my eyes off the TV, Cal says, "Well, see ya."

Hank leans back and tilts his eyes at Cal, says nothing.

After Hugh grabs Drew, I stand and tell Hank I'm from the mid-west where tornado season is fast approaching.

He smiles and says, "My dear, I'm getting too old to chase storms." Then he puts his hand over mine. It feels like a warm loaf of bread. I don't move it for a few seconds.

Outside, a surprise thundershower. Raindrops falling the size of nickels. And the wind is howling, bending me sideways. Cal is already out on the road toward the car, running as fast as he can. I lean into the wind and rain and run, too, though my head gets curious about what would happen if I let go. Would I be swept away, tossed across the fields like an errant tumbleweed? Would I roll on and on, circle the earth forever? Would Cal risk his life until he found me?

Rain soaks my face, a thousand tiny jabs. He's so far ahead of me now I can barely make out his figure.

So far ahead, in fact, I begin to imagine him not even there.

