

The Great Bank Run of 1912

by Kyle Hemmings

She bought her first gerbil at the age of nine. She wondered if he would die from endless logrolling. When he died from natural causes, she refused to bury him and kept a distance from the first boy who kissed her--Thomas J. Hobbit. The next year a twister swept through her best friend's house, miles away on the plains. At school, she kept a close eye on the friend's empty seat. Walking home from the schoolhouse, no bigger than a barn, she imagined an eye severed from the head. Passing through clouds, the eye looked down at her, then turned hard, fell to earth as an acorn. She thought about the hard lifeless body of her gerbil and why she couldn't touch him. By the age of twenty, she felt like a bare tree.

At the Topeka dry goods store where she worked for Thomas Hobbit's father, a stranger smiled at her and made a rude joke about churning butter. She blushed a rosy shade of death. He kept talking as she swept the floor. The stranger said he lived out of a suitcase. "Really?" she said without looking directly at him. "And may I inquire what line of business you're in?" she asked. "Collecting things," he answered, "I attract riches." "You mean like antiques?" "Something like. I breathe new life into everything." His baritone voice was deep and magnetic. He then asked if she would like to ride in his motorcar and announced plans for the next three Sunday afternoons. She said in so many words that he wouldn't get too far with her. She was raised as a good Catholic gal. He said he didn't believe in God or gods, that he made his own. "What's the sense of believing in God?" he asked, with an ironic rise in his voice. "Everything dies here anyway." By his third visit, he admitted he had

seizures. Sometimes, he said, he woke up on the floor, unable to account for himself. In that aura of twilight, he had no sense of clocks.

They eloped to Spokane where she wrote to her mother and older sister that she was happy and in love. Her mother's replies were illegible. Sometimes the man was gone for days. She never asked what he did for a living but assumed he stole money or held up banks, causing them to fail. She liked that dangerous image of him that she nurtured within her raindrop of a life. When he brought home stuffed suitcases into their four room apartment, she'd giggle and later, think of the luggage under the bed, what was inside, how crisp new cash would feel. She never asked did anyone have to die? She assumed he was too clever to use a gun.

In their moments of love making, he would become a soft child and bury himself between her breasts. She'd stroke his hair and speak in a low sweet voice, the way her mother did before a mirror, combing her own hair with rigid motions, as if she were someone else. This, she imagined, was what she would do if he had a seizure. She would stroke and sweet-talk him. A seizure, she concluded, was nothing but a bad dream backing up, traveling downstream from the brain.

One day, the man brought home a suitcase of what he said were zebra finches. Or maybe some were waxbills. He said he saved them from the cold. They were all looking for a warm cage where they could sing. He told her to put her ear next to the suitcase. He said he was being serious and asked her to tell him what she heard. She listened for a long time and smiled. Then, she threw her head back and let out a long reckless laugh. Gerbils, she said softly.

