

# A Fog Will Press Forever at Your Shoulders

*by* Michael Seidel

I stole a donkey. This was a Saturday, the day I make flapjacks for Colette, so I loaded the donkey down with a colander full of pancake batter and set off for where Colette lives.

Like it had tacks in its hooves, the donkey hopped and tumbled and grunted. To soothe it, I took a handful of the batter and offered it up. It licked for a few minutes, then looked away and began chewing grass from my neglected yard. I'd picked a bad donkey to steal. So I hitched it against a light post and hotwired a car instead. One with the dimensions of a refrigerator, but with no air conditioning, causing me and the batter to begin bubbling over right after belting in. That summer had been so lousy with heat.

I turned the ignition and the car went right up into the air. Unexpected, but the velocity was fine and my ears never popped.

I arched miles over the sun and worried of basal cell carcinoma. As protection, I scooped out more batter and smeared it over the length of me. It caked like a desert, pressing a corn maze tan into my skin. I watched the clouds dissipate as I passed through them.

The car landed minutes later in True, Wisconsin, population 291. Still a good distance from where Colette lived, but I thanked the car and set to walking.

Four miles out of True, I came across a Boy Scout troop standing beside a forest that was fully ablaze, acres of it.

"Where is your scoutmaster?" I asked them all as a group.

A boy named Clarence responded using American Standard Sign Language: "Down that trail, pissing on an oak." I looked and saw no oak. No trail or master either, in fact, just flames and a sea of red and gray ashes.

"You kids look hungry," I signed back.

Clarence promptly extracted a skillet from under his hat and began warming it on the ashes. I served flapjacks to that whole battalion of kids. I'd never reared kids and never even been one myself, so I didn't know the grotesqueness of their hunger. There is perhaps nothing so frightening in all the world.

After the last sizzle of batter erupted in the pan, Clarence signed, "Look, I've been talking with the other fellas and we want you to stay at our camp as cook, permanently. Our scoutmaster agrees."

I looked around. Still no master.

I told the troop I had to return to Colette. I signed too much, all the details. She played cello. Her hair had the color, density, and shape of a cast iron pan. We'd met on a catamaran and consummated on a pier. I divulged the brief, tortured affair she'd had with her butler, Pitty Pat, a Manx cat who'd been born on a shipwreck off the Ireland coast. Maybe Colette's love can only be buoyed by water, I hypothesized to those eighth graders as we stood surrounded by that dense landscape of flames. Never before had I made the connection.

During nap time, I quietly grabbed my empty colander and started walking in any direction. There was just fire, fire, fire, as far as I could see. Eventually I came to the end of it and there I saw Old Hippernoles, hacking at his tractor with a hatchet. His spelt field was lush, with a crisp river cutting through it.

"Old Hippernoles!" I greeted him, then set into explaining my situation. I'd run completely out of flapjack batter due to the donkey, the sun, and the scouts. I explained how Colette would re-catch consumption without the healing properties of my flapjacks.

"What do you say?" I asked him, looking out at his field, which stretched so far it eventually dropped into the sky's gutter.

"No can do," Old Hipperoles said, "It's all been account for."

He brought his walkie-talkie to his mouth and said three words in code.

"It'll be just a sec," Old Hipperoles told me as he waited for a reply.

Six years passed, years of fallow and fruition. After a final snowfall sifted through the land, a reply came back, just a single word. Old Hipperoles talkied back his thanks, turning to me: "My associate granted permission for me to grind this down for you." Old Hipperoles patted his green tractor, which had by now rusted in the spots where he'd inflicted wounds upon it with his hatchet.

"It'll have to do, but I need it ground down fine. Very fine, indeed." I told him. "Nine times finer than you'd grind the spelt. That's where the healing properties are derived - from the fineness. Don't tell anyone. That's my greatest secret in life."

The river was still frozen solid, so he handed me a plastic bottle filled with rare glacier runoff. He also handed me an oversized wooden spoon. I thanked him as I combined the flour and water in my colander, then offered him the spoon to lick. He held his tongue out where he stood; I moved toward him.

"Lord almighty!" he said, licking like a dog at its sore paws.

"I must go go go," I said as the flour slowly began to gob out of the colandar's holes.

The next field over, Georg's wife Sandy was in the pear tree, polishing the fruit, as she does, so perpetually mindful of the impression she casts.

Before Colette, I'd almost loved Sandy, and now, seeing her unstockinged legs up in that tree, I wondered why I hadn't. "Sandy," I hollered up at her. She looked down, almost losing her balance on the branch. She pointed up a little hill and said, "Georg is at work on his moonshine still. You can join him or you can climb up and help me!" she battered her eyes in a way that suggested weariness rather than desperation. I should have been nicer to her from the start, I thought. She was whistling now, a song from our youth that went Mmmmm, Bop! Ba do.

At that moment, I thought of Colette and the mournful sounds her cello made, not so much beauty as rotten notes played badly, a reflection, I saw honestly now in the gold light of day, of her very innermost being. I moved more into the shade, put my hand up to block out the sun. Sandy's face was as pure and clear as if it'd been sandblasted. The old feelings clawed their way rabidly back into me.

How many of my healing pancakes had I made for Colette, I wondered? Always, I'd mixed the elixir with such care and rushed it to her over the fields and dales that our occupations forced between us, only to have her drench it in syrup and butter, to terrorize it with a steak knife, then leave it half-eaten and a few hours later complain to me about the first stirrings of consumption aches.

When I'd arrive, Colette ask me, "Why have you taken so long, errand boy? I am hungry, chef!" Always these different names for me. Never my love, my pet, my one and only or even just Chet.

Suddenly a fog rose and I could no longer see Georg over the hill. His nose by this point in life had bloomed like a boozy rose, obstructing his ability to kiss Sandy as it was.

Would he really mind me doing so in his stead, I wondered? I wanted the kiss to vacuum all desire I had for Colette out my very being. I knew it could.

If Georg came for a second out of his own sodden fog and saw us, I'd right then kidnap Sandy from under him and we'd hide forever like bandits in downtown True, living out our lives in the modest bustle of that place. The idea ran through me like an icy stream. The fog was so thick, Sandy was invisible, but I heard her humming the lyrical melody from another song of our youth:

*I used to think I could not go on  
And life was nothing but an awful song  
But now I know the meaning of true love  
I'm leaning on these everlasting arms*

I decided on Sandy's weariness over Colette's bad notes and began feeling for the branches, thinking Sandy, Oh Sandy. I thought of the lazy donkey, the scouts, and Old Hipperoles's ground up tractor. As I pulled myself up Sandy's body began falling toward me, weighed down by longing, I knew. She was screaming my name. Love is many things, but it is never an accident.

Sandy lay motionless on the ground, death giving her a look only describable as "ancestral." I was still holding the colander. Flapjack batter was dripping all around. I felt like a priest at a baptism. I knew her soul would be ok to make its journey, so I continued on mine, toward Colette. I pictured the indescribable look on her beautiful face when she woke to the ineffable smell of my flapjacks coming alive in the pan.

