



Routes 1&9

Ivan Robertson

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Summer Houses

It was a particularly trying time in my life.

If I had to account for my actions that winter, if it had come to that, I would've explained that times weren't great. Not that there hadn't been hard times before, there'd been many. When my father died, for example, I took it really hard. But that was years ago, before I was married, and at any rate that time was lost in an alcoholic haze. Like most young men, at least the young men around here, I would tend to keep my head down and drink my way through a crisis. And it seemed like there was a crisis every winter. Even in the first few years of my marriage to Amy, I'd find myself acting cagey and distant whenever winter rolled around. I'd surprise myself with the amount I was drinking.

All of that came to an end once Amy got pregnant. There were no ultimatums, no rock bottoms or breaking points. It wasn't like that at all. In fact, I almost didn't see the changes taking place. I'd hunker down to my job, come straight home at night, and watch my wife swell up. She got huge, and I felt undeservedly lucky. I was glad to take on the mantle of responsibility, even eager. I felt like an adult. That fall we were excited beyond words. We'd look at each other and just start laughing out loud. It was as if Amy was carrying our whole future in there along with the kid, and I fully

expected a brand new glorious life ahead, like nothing we'd ever known. I don't know how uncommon that is, really.

Then the bleeding started. We were eating in a Mexican restaurant along 211, it was a Friday night and the place was packed with high school kids, shouting and carrying on. We were talking about her sister or something, I don't remember. She grew quiet and I didn't even notice until she whispered that something was wrong, something was happening. It was too early. We went straight to the hospital, we were there in ten minutes.

And we had a daughter, her name was Emily Rose and she fit in my hand and she lived for nine days, but I can't really talk about that.

And ever since then, things have been hard. Our lives weren't going to be so different after all. Amy wasn't carrying anything anymore, she was barely there herself. I stuck to the habits of my newfound maturity, I continued to work and stayed sober, but it didn't mean a thing. When they asked me at work to switch to nights I didn't care and I don't think Amy even noticed.

In fact, I jumped at the change.

Our stretch of the state is mountainous on one side and flat on the other. The Adirondacks run like a wall straight across the southern half of the state, where the granite buckled under the relentless force of the ice age. When the ice retreated north, several thousand years later, it left a basin-shaped flatland, filled at least a little by the Great Lakes and

countless smaller ones. We live amid the smaller ones; Lake Oneida, the Delta Lake, the Kayuta, surrounded by pine trees and thick birches. The mountains are a dark presence on the southern edge of the landscape, always in the corner of the eye.

In the summer, because of the lakes and the trees and the mountains, and because we're not too far from the Thruway, we get a lot of part-time residents from downstate. All lakes are ringed by summer houses and the county's population more than doubles. When they get older, some take it into their heads to live up here year round, never having spent a winter here. They decide it would be nice to spend their days reading, or they take up painting, and spend their nights drinking scotch by the fire. When fall first turns to winter, they bundle up in wool blankets and look forward to the adventure.

But it's a different world up here come December. A thick crust of ice forms over the lakes and the Canadian wind starts to bear down with real force. At night it whistles and howls. A lot of the retirees make it through one winter, bundled up in their blankets, staring out their big picture windows at a frozen lake and a mean landscape beyond. Their books are all read, they have no talent for painting, they're sick of their records. They start drinking earlier every day. They usually last the first winter and then go back to their homes downstate, swearing never to make that mistake

again. Anybody from up here, anybody that can afford to, retires to Florida.

I'm an emergency medical technician for the county. I took the job soon after leaving college, and I'm good at it. I'm proud of that. I'm teamed up with Bill Hachaus, and Bill does most of the driving. We're not an exceptionally busy district. We're not near any towns of considerable size. What we deal with, pretty much, are auto accidents and house fires.

Shifts last eight hours, with an hour in the middle for dinner. The night shift ends at four and it usually takes me an hour to get home, sometimes longer. The drive takes me across dark roads, lit up by my hi-beams. I cradle my plastic coffee thermos between my legs, keeping me warm. I listen to the early morning news and sports round-up on my way home to bed. In the winter I'm out before the plows, and I can hear the snow crunching under my chains.

I'm just about always alone on the road.

Like I said, for personal reasons I tended to associate crisis with winter, and my stomach would tighten as the weather turned and the sky closed in. I could feel the muscles in my back and neck bunch up against the cold, but it didn't go away, I just got used to it.

My route, Route 9, runs along between the lakes and not far from the Thruway. My stretch runs about sixty miles, with work in Brewerton and home in Stokes. Along Route 9, between those two towns, these little off-shoot gravel roads disappear into the trees, and if you take any of those little

roads up a little way you'll end up at a cluster of summer houses. There're usually two or three per little road, and they all have names like "Glenwood" or "Seven Pines." I never had any business turning off onto one of those little off-shoot roads and, up until that winter, never set foot in one of those summer houses.

Amy used to wake up when I got home, but it was hard for her to keep any kind of schedule. Sometimes I'd come home and she'd be asleep on the couch with the TV still on from the night before. I'd shut it off. I used to carry her upstairs but after a while I'd leave her where she was, making sure she was covered up with a blanket. She didn't really care where she woke up, it was all the same to her.

Some kid had fishtailed his dad's Plymouth into a ditch along Route 1, and they called us out. The nose of the car was sticking straight up in the air. The kid was sitting on the side of the road, cradling his right arm with his left one. It was broken, and he banged his face up a little, but besides that he was fine. We wrapped him up and sat him in the back of the ambulance.

"My dad's going to kill me," the boy kept saying. "He's going to kill me."

Deputy Aaron Landesman was standing next to Tad Sparks at the base of Tad's tow-truck. Tad had the front axle of the kid's car chained and was about to pull the thing out

onto the road. When I walked up to them, Aaron turned to me.

"How's it going, Russ."

"Fine. Good."

"How's Amy?"

"She's fine, Aaron."

Tad hit a lever at the base of the crane and the car pulled loose with a horrible scraping sound. It clunked down hard on the pavement.

"Good. Good to hear it."

"Anyway, we're done here."

"OK. Tell Amy I was asking for her."

"Will do."

"Me and Sharon."

"You bet."

My particular house, I guess you could call it that, was called "La Cienga." I don't know what it means. It wasn't any nicer than the other summer houses, anyway I don't suspect it was, but it was still much nicer than my own. And the first morning I didn't even turn off my engine. I just sat there in the car and looked out at it through the windshield. I'd never seen a house that still. I backed out of there after a little while, hoping not to see a car I knew when I pulled back out onto 9. The sun was beginning to come up by then.

For the first week that's all I did, but I did it every morning. It wasn't until the second week that I dared turn off my engine, and it was a few trips later before I got up the courage to open the door and get out of my car.

They had a lot of records, a lot of old jazz records all alphabetized and shelved in expensive oak cases. They had videos of classic movies, I looked for westerns but they didn't have any. I was hoping they'd have "The Searchers." They had a lot of liquor in their kitchen but I didn't touch that, it wasn't mine. It wasn't any of my concern.

Upstairs was basically one huge room. One corner of the room was a kitchen, but the rest was open. There were old wooden tables and overstuffed couches. There were paintings on the walls. There was a thick white carpet covering most of the floor, and smaller rugs on top of that. One wall of the house was made up of glass doors, and they led out to a wooden deck. No matter where you stood you could see the lake.

The bedrooms were all downstairs, along a central hallway. The biggest had a king-sized bed, a little bathroom of it's own, a fireplace, and a TV. Another room had bunk beds and an old clock radio. There was a poster of Keith Richards up on the wall, mouth open and eyes pinned. There was a second poster of W.C. Fields holding a deck of cards. The air in the room was stale.

My favorite part of the house was along the stairway between the two floors. There were family pictures all up and

down the stairs, in no particular order that I could see. Little kids at birthday parties, young couples at weddings, a teenage boy sitting with a Gibson guitar in his lap. An old woman sitting on the deck of this very same house, smoking. I'd make myself a cup of coffee and study the photographs.

There was a long picture towards the center of the wall. It showed a group of men lined up, facing the photographer, with their backs to the lake and their bare feet in the water. There were nine of them, and with a few exceptions they all looked alike. They all had high foreheads and narrow, delicate features. They were fit, but they weren't strong in the thick, heavy way of the men around here. These were ropy, long-bodied men with sun-bleached hair and white teeth. They stood close, some even had their arms around each other. They seemed comfortable with each other and, I imagined, with themselves.

I don't know these guys or any guys like them. I never saw them in town. The guys I knew would never feel that comfortable standing so close to each other, they'd feel foolish and self-conscious. As foolish and self-conscious as I felt just standing there, in front of that picture, with a cup of their coffee in my hand.

When I met Amy my father had been dead six months, and I was living at home with my mom. The night we met, I was sitting at the bar in Pat's Tap with a bunch of guys from

high school. They never left town and I had just come back, and we were hanging around a lot in those days.

My father was sixty when he died. He was a high school math teacher. He was my high school math teacher, one year. And when he was sixty had a heart attack in his car, he drove up into somebody's yard and died. When it happened I was in college down at SUNY New Paltz, in what turned out to be my last semester. After my finals I took a leave of absence from school and drove back home. I was over at Pat's every night back then.

I wouldn't have said anything to her. I saw her, certainly. I saw her whole group of friends. They were sitting in the back of the bar, drinking pitchers of beer and singing along with the jukebox. She was on a date, she told me later, a sort of a date anyway. A date with a bunch of friends in tow. I didn't recognize that at the time, and anyway to me they were just a loud table of college kids. Mostly I was watching hockey on TV.

Bill drove and I looked out at the passing houses. The radio pinged on the seat between us. We could hear people talking in the dispatcher's office. I could hear Patti gassing around with somebody in there. It was a cold, quiet night, and we were just killing time. I'd look out at all the houses and try to imagine the people inside, sleeping.

When I started the job, I'll be honest. There were things I'd see that would really rattle me. Hurt kids, dead parents, grieving husbands and wives. Families in shock, they were fine and then suddenly they were ripped down the middle. I'd go home full of stories, I had to tell them. But after a while Amy really didn't want to hear them anymore, and I could understand that.

Over at "La Cienga" I'd lie out on the white carpeted floor. I'd lay there in my uniform, hands locked on my belly, and I'd watch the dawn light stretch across the ceiling. I'd close my eyes and imagine the life lived in this house, the smell of food and the sound of people laughing. I could see it in glimpses, I really could. People mixing drinks on the deck, with the red sun reflecting off the water, listening to Ella Fitzgerald and Tommy Flanagan over the sound of laughter in the kitchen. I could imagine the phone ringing off the hook, children running around, blenders whirring, tan skin instead of gray, and loose cotton dresses. White teeth. I'd just lie there like that, on the edge of sleep, until a particularly strong blast of wind would open my eyes and remind me of what I was doing.

Patti broke in over the radio.

"Oh, boys." She sang. "I've got a suicide for you, at 340 Deerborne. Hovell called it in."

"Thank you, my sweet." Bill said. He turned on the lights but left the siren alone.

By the time we got there the police had pulled up into the yard. All the flashing lights had a dizzying effect. Sheriff Hovell was standing in the driveway, smoking with his deputies.

“Hey, Sheriff. Hey, Boys.”

“Russ, Bill.”

Everybody nodded.

“Whatcha got for us?”

Sheriff Hovell nodded in the direction of the house.

“Suicide down in the basement.”

Bill had gone around to the back of the ambulance and pulled out the stretcher.

“Messy?” He called over.

“Hanged himself. Think he did it last night. Aaron’ll take you down.”

“Good deal.” Bill said. He left the doors open and carried the stretcher. I took the back end and we carried it past the smoking cops and into the house. Aaron followed.

“It’s just right there.” He pointed towards an open door in the hallway. “It’s kind of dark down there.”

I followed Bill down the narrow staircase.

“Oh, Jesus!” He bellowed. “Jesus Christ!”

The hanging man was right at the bottom of the stairs and he was swaying a little. Bill had stepped back from him fast.

“What happened?” Aaron called from behind me.

“I walked right into the fucking thing, Aaron. Thanks for the fucking warning.”

“He won’t bite you, Bill.”

“Well, he scared the shit outta me.”

There was a single weak light bulb in the middle of the basement, but Aaron had trained his flashlight on the body. He was in his fifties, maybe. It was hard to be certain with his face so swollen and the room so dark. He was dressed in trousers and a v-neck t-shirt, no shoes or socks. He had used a thin white rope, clothesline rope, and he was still swaying from Bill’s collision. Bill was eyeing the dead man warily.

His bare feet were dragging the floor. The ceiling was only six and a half, seven feet high, not high enough to hang oneself easily. The man had to let his knees go slack for the rope to go taut. He could have stood up any time he wanted to.

“You know him?” I asked Aaron.

“Nope.”

“Any note or anything?”

“Didn’t find one.”

“That’s too bad.”

The three of us stood there and looked at the man for a minute. Then Bill reached out to Aaron.

“Let me see your knife a minute.”

Aaron fished around in his pocket, found his knife, and handed it to Bill. Bill opened it and handed it to me. Then he grabbed the man in a bear hug and lifted.

“Cut him down, Russ. He’s heavy.”

I took the rope with one hand and sawed with the other. The man’s swollen head fell back onto Bill’s shoulder.

“Russ...”

“I’m cutting.” I said. The rope finally cut and Bill lowered the man to the floor.

“There.” Bill said.

I closed the knife and handed it back to Aaron. The man lay there on the cement floor with one end of the cut rope still around his neck. His face and neck were purple and swollen, but the rest of him was blue. His arms and feet looked thin and frail.

“Hey, Russ. Let’s go.” Bill had the stretcher laid out alongside the man. “Give me a hand.”

I bent down and took the man’s feet. They were cold. Even through the latex gloves I could feel how cold he was.

“Ready?”

I held onto his feet.

“Hey, Ace. You ready?”

I looked up and Bill was staring at me over the length of the body.

“Yeah. Yeah, you bet.”

“Good. OK, on my count. One, two, three.” We lifted him onto the stretcher. Bill was right, the man was heavier than he looked.

When we got back outside all the neighboring houses were lit up and there were curious faces in the windows. We

put the body in the back of the ambulance, and I walked back up to the cops, all huddled together in the cold. They were stamping their feet and breathing into their bare, cupped hands.

“Some kinda night, huh?”

“You bet.”

“Anybody know him?” I asked.

“Never seen him before.”

Bill slammed the back of the ambulance shut and made his way back to us.

“Goddamn cold, right?”

“Heyya, Bill.”

“Sheriff. Anyway, we’re all set. Shall we?”

We turned to leave. The policemen stood where they were.

“See you, boys.”

“Adios.” Bill called without turning around. He threw his arm up in the air. “Buenos Noches, Muchachos.”

We slammed the cab doors and Bill backed out of there. He hit the siren when he pulled out onto Deerborne.

“You OK there, Pard?”

I turned and looked.

“I’m fine.”

“I’m just asking.”

“Never better.” I said.

I started making myself breakfast there in the kitchen, and I'd sit at the table to eat it. I'd buy the ingredients on the way, the butter and the eggs. The coffee. I'd sit there and eat, watching the sun come up over the lake. It was nice.

One time, and just once, the phone rang. It scared the hell out of me. I froze there at the table and I didn't dare move until it stopped. That morning I hurried up and got out of there, but usually I took my time.

They had a radio in there, a little thing you could hold in the palm of your hand. It was automatically tuned to some station, some weather station. It would tell you the wind speed, the tidal conditions. It would tell you the times for sunrise and sunset. I'd turn it on and listen to it while I ate my breakfast. I'd listen to the sound of the man in his broadcast booth, reading out the same conditions every five minutes. The weather in Kingston and Sault Ste. Marie. The radio was permanently tuned to the Great Lakes shipping news. Huge vessels, weighed down with iron ore from Minnesota and cars from Detroit, had to navigate the rough winter tides of Lake Ontario. There were all sorts of ships out there, maintaining ballast. I'd listen to the sound of the man's voice calling out from some unknown location, over the static.

Amy wasn't on the couch when I came home. The TV was off and the living room was empty.

"Amy?" I called out, not too loud. "Honey?"

There was no answer. All the lights were off downstairs and the house was beginning to fill with a pale pre-dawn blue light.

"Amy?"

The kitchen was empty. Dishes were piled high beside the sink. I hurried up the stairs, two at a time.

"Amy?"

She wasn't in the bed and the bathroom door was closed. I knocked on the door and opened it.

She was lying naked in the tub. Steam rose off the water and her skin was red. She was in water up to her neck, and her hands floated, suspended, at her sides. The mirror and windows were fogged. She'd propped a radio up on the back of the toilet and two early-morning DJs were yammering away about something. I looked at her red body floating there in the tub. I saw the scar, whiter than the rest of her, stretching from her navel and disappearing into her pubic hair.

"Honey, I'm home."

She turned to me and smiled. Not a big smile, but a smile.

"Hi."

I wiped off the mirror and looked at my face.

"Jesus." I said. I turned the radio down so that I could barely hear it. It was the first time I'd looked at myself in a long time. My eyes were sunken in deep, and dark, but the

rest of my face just looked dead. Just dead. I opened the medicine cabinet and grabbed a razor.

“Still cold out?” Amy asked me.

“Freezing.” I said. “Freezing cold.”

I heard Amy splash around in the water but I didn't turn to look.

“Warm in here,” she said.

I covered my face with shaving cream and let the remark pass.

“Where do you go?” She asked me and I froze. She didn't ask me in an accusatory way, and she didn't turn her head. “Where do you go in the mornings?”

I lied to her. I told her that Bill and I ate breakfast together. That we got into the habit of grabbing breakfast each morning after work. Amy didn't seem interested in the answer. She didn't look at me once.

By now the sun was up. I put my hand in the water and pulled it out again immediately. It was hot as hell.

“Jesus, Amy...”

I went to turn on the cold water but she kicked my hand away from the taps, gently.

“Don't,” she said. “Leave it.”

I looked down at her, her skin red in the water.

She turned and she looked at me.

“I don't know who's more fucked up, Russ,” she said.

“You or me. I really don't.”

I forced out a weak little laugh and kept shaving.

“Six of one...” I said.

When I wiped off my face I looked at her. She was looking back at me, her eyebrows were lifted a little.

“Me,” I said. “I am.”

She smiled a little and turned her attention to the taps. I put my razor back on the shelf.

“Where do you go, Honey? Where do you go?”

I opened my mouth but said nothing. Amy turned to me finally and for a second there I was caught. I was caught wiping my face with a towel. I was caught there with my mouth open and my hand hovering over the hot bath water. I wanted to cry, just for a second, and I turned away.

“Russ...”

“I'm going to bed.” I walked out of there without looking back at her. I walked out of there and into the unlit bedroom, closing the door behind me.

By now the sun was fully up.

“Russ. Russ, wake up.”

I opened my eyes to see Aaron staring down at me.

“Jesus, Russ...”

He was in uniform and he looked really confused.

There was a kid in the room, too. A kid in his twenties. The kid looked at me, lying there on the white carpet, and looked over at Aaron. I was scared. I was really scared and I didn't know what to say.

“I was expecting a bunch of kids, Russ. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Aaron.” I said.

“You know him?” The kid asked Aaron, amazed. “You guys know each other?”

Aaron ignored him. He kept looking down at me.

“That your stuff in the kitchen, Russ? Jesus, you really moved in.”

“Aaron.” I said his name again.

“Get up.” Aaron held out a hand and I took it.

The kid was a caretaker. All these houses have caretakers, I found out. He saw my car sitting there in the driveway and called the cops. That’s how Aaron came to find me on the living room floor of the house.

“I didn’t break anything,” I said. “I didn’t take things.”

The three of us stood there, silent. The sun was up and I could see the ocean behind Aaron and the kid. Finally the kid shook his head.

“Well, shit...” He said. “This is weird.”

“Why don’t you wait outside?” Aaron asked him. “We’ll be out there shortly.”

“Sure,” the kid shrugged. “Whatever.”

When the kid left, Aaron and I stood looking at each other.

“How’s Amy?”

“She’s, uh...she’s OK.”

Aaron nodded and looked around the room.

“Some view.”

“Yeah.” I said. “Yeah.”

“Uh-huh. Some view.” He looked back at me. “You know, Russ, this isn’t good. You know that, right? This is breaking and entering.”

I stood still.

“I know.”

“It’s against the law. Things like that.”

I couldn’t move.

“I know, Aaron. I understand.”

Aaron and I stood there for a long time, saying nothing. I didn’t know what to say, and Aaron just shook his head and looked out the window. The lake and the sky were gray, and the nickel colored sun sort of hung there in the distance. The only sound in the room was from my little navigational radio. I had fallen asleep to it. Wind hit the side of the house and you could feel the house shake.

“Goddamn freezing in here.” Aaron said.

“Yeah.” I said. “It’s cold. You get used to it.”

“Ah, shit, Russ.” And then Aaron started laughing. He laughed and he looked down at the floor. “Forget it. You know, I’d say it was high school kids after all. Looking at this, I’d say high school kids have been hanging around out here. You follow me, Russ? I don’t think we’ll ever find out who was in here.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Go home, Russ.”

I never told Amy, or anybody else, about the house. I knew it wasn't good. I knew I couldn't explain it without causing worry, without causing Amy to treat me with caution, so I just kept it to myself. As far as I know, Aaron never told anybody either. And I never drove up by the summer houses again.

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collection of short stories

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