

Fiction by Victor LaValle

I left my heart in Skaftafell

He was meek, homicidal, wore a long scarf tied once around his neck as must have been the style for trolls that year. I never saw him board the bus, but it may have been in Varmahlid, though I can't be sure since I slept so much in Iceland.

I was there at summer's end, meaning August. Most folks in their twenties had already scamped cross-country in July so I found myself with the elderly wanderers. On trails I passed couples catching breath and rubbing each other's knees through waterproof pants. The Germans regarded me with tacky detachment, snubbing me while wearing bright red boots and brighter orange parkas. I tried not to feel hurt by their disdain, told myself it was like being expelled from clown college, but you can guess how much it really bothered me.

Also, I had the amazing misfortune of sitting behind French people on every plane and bus. Minutes into a ride a pair, woman and man, brazenly checked that

yes there was, certifiably, undeniably, someone sitting behind them, then slid their chairs so far back I had a headrest against my gullet. This happened so much. Even when I asked, slapped, tapped, or pushed their seats they only gave that stare the French invented to paralyze the dumb.

Luckily the Icelanders liked me, even with being an American, because I was shy. Firm, polite, and quiet, a perfect personality for these reserved Northern Europeans. Many times I was told so. – Don't take this the wrong way, one girl in a candy shop said to me, but I explained to my coworker that here, finally, is an American who isn't boring. Being loud and asking so many boring questions!

Most Icelanders used English skillfully, but it was a quirk of speech that they said boring when they meant frustrating. Like, – This knot in my shoe is so boring! Or, – I can't reach my girlfriend, this connection is boring!

I heard it like that many times.

So this was me: an American, not boring, black, and alone in Iceland.

Being both a troll and a smoker he had little lousy teeth. When his mouth opened it was hard to distinguish them from his lips. Everything fed into a gen-

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eral maw. Once, he lit up right on the bus just as we left Akureyri so the driver stopped, walked down the aisle, and explained that those were the old ways and he could no longer smoke everywhere he pleased. Many places yes, but not here. I sat farther back, but we all heard the warning. There were thirty-one of us riding the bus, mostly couples. No one else was going alone, but me and the monster.

I'd describe myself as a nosy person because I can't turn away when someone gets in trouble. There's a level of decorum I can't manage so I, but not only I, watched the troll stub his cigarette out, though he tried to smoke again after we'd seen a waterfall called Godafoss, Waterfall of the Gods. So named because it was the site where Iceland's ruling chief tossed all their pagan idols when Christianity became the religion of the land one thousand years ago.

After that second cigarette flared, the driver, one big farm bastard, almost choked the troll, but the little one worked a humble, fawny apology. His plea, spoken in English, didn't affect me, but our driver relented. I was disappointed because now the driver didn't seem like a grown man. Big and strong, but what's it worth without a backbone?

By the way, this whole time, let's not talk about the Africans. They had no allegiance to me of course. Why should they? The white folks weren't hugging each other in Caucasian familyhood – still, fuck those Africans, and I mean that from the bottom of my pockets. In Reykjavik I went whiplash trying to get a little love from any one of them. Not even the faintest soul-brother nod. May they all enjoy another hundred years of despotic rule.

When I say troll it probably implies a smaller size. We hear troll and think dwarf, but out here trolls were enormous

according to reports. In a town called Vik there are three spires said to be trolls who were caught in sunlight and transformed to stone as they tried to drag a three-masted ship ashore. They're six stories high.

My troll was man-sized. He wore one beige sweater the whole time though he paid his checks from a fold of green and purple bills kept tied in a big red handkerchief. Wherever I got off, he got off. I'd see him walking around towns at night, moving with a predatory hunch, hands in his pockets and holding out the sides of his jacket as he moved so that when a wind got in there the fabric expanded and he grew wings.

I didn't come to Iceland to fuck white women nor to spin in the flash nights of Reykjavik. As far as fashion, what did I have on Europeans? People my age whose every kronur, lira, pound, franc had been deposited into some great shell-toed Adidas account. Only a Japanese college student was going to outdo those kids.

Iceland was my destination because there was nowhere else to go. The rest of the world was only getting hotter and, much to the shame of my sub-Saharan ancestors, warm weather was a torment to me.

Once there I paid a little over two hundred dollars for a one-way bus ticket around the island (excluding the western fjords). Get off in any town you want, explore, be both gawked at and ignored, then get on the next bus the next day to the next place. I couldn't pronounce any of the names so I'd point to one on my ticket, let the new bus driver say it aloud and then repeat it so that I'd sound well versed. Of course, the guy never cared if I was saying it correctly. But I did.

Not long before coming to Iceland I stopped wanting marriage. Not only

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with the woman I loved, but the rest of them too. While it's true that each family is unhappy in its own way, every married person's affair is monotonous and plain. At least according to me. I had friends who'd participated in a few, read about many, and the impression I had was that the wedding band makes you a member of one great dull secret society. I hated the men my friends turned into. Relentlessly horny for any woman besides their wives, angry at their wives for having just one pussy. I decided I'd rather be alone than unhappy. Despite the change of mind, it was me feeling all sad and longing for my ex. She'd recovered by making herself busy.

I felt so sexy over there. I felt sexy everywhere, actually. My signature had carnal appeal. Also the way I wore my wool hat with the earflaps tied around the bottom of my chin. Sexy. I'm not being self-deprecating in the slightest. Despite this feeling, I hadn't been to bed with a woman since my breakup, so I felt like a light socket hidden behind the bookshelf.

That was probably best though. Nothing worse than meeting a new woman when you're still organizing your heartache about the last one and instead of dating this new lady she's just keeping you company. What I hate are those folks who can't spend time alone in a room. They seem so weak. But of course that's exactly the kind of guy I am so the only way to get isolated was to run far, far away.

The problem with a trip like mine, and the reason I didn't full-nelson the troll on the first day he followed me, is that I kept seeing the same people in different towns. There was a stumpy Italian couple that I must have greeted eighteen times in four days. There was a woman from who-can-say-where who became

as uncomfortable around me as I eventually did around the troll. She and I just kept picking the same lifeless churches to visit, the same damn coffeehouses, until I must have seemed to own a map of her future engagements. I was constantly, accidentally, trailing her.

She had a lovely awkward smile because her teeth were concave. It was endearing to me, but by the twentieth encounter either she or I would always cross the street. Whenever I entered a rest stop and found her there I became flustered and took my meal outside. Having gone through that made me sympathetic, so the troll got an untold number of rides sitting in a seat near me because I wanted to be fair, to be fair.

I hoped for a few good days. Iceland was only dark four hours a night, so in the other twenty why not expect a few minutes of brightness? At Lake Myvatn I camped in a long cooled lava pool under a constant drizzle and, occasionally, downpours. The rain let up only when there was a forceful, misty wind.

I forgot the troll. I was by Lake Myvatn four days and never saw him. Rented a bike to go around the lake and, at one point, found fields of lava that had cooled into grotesque stacks.

Enormous columns of petrified ash two stories high. There were little holes dug into them that resembled shelves, up near the top, where, purportedly, goblins slept. That's the story.

When I walked into these endless fields they seemed to twist behind me. It was confusing, but not frightening. I imagined myself wandering forward until I found the Liege of the Goblins reclining on a throne made of sheep skulls.

I liked Iceland because they still had myths on their minds. Not that you'd find anyone under forty who'd admit to believing in goblins, yet even the most

skeptical refused to say so very loudly in a public place. After all, they might be listening. I needed to be around superstitious people, having recently become superstitious myself.

As I got back on the bus, after four days, the troll was there. I imagined he'd been sleeping in the hood of my jacket this whole time.

When I saw him I tried to remember that beautiful woman with her concave smile. The troll was probably only doing his own gamboling through the country. Why be paranoid? But then he looked up, turned backward and stared right at me until I turned away.

I wrote a postcard to the woman I'd almost married. In the note I described the guy, but then decided not to mail her the card because I'd been so damn sure I wanted to be single, yet at my time of fear whom did I automatically turn to?

Since the troll sat ahead of me the driver reached him first to check tickets and ask for a destination.

– Breiddalsvik, the troll croaked.

His voice was even sleazier than his appearance. The way he whispered the name it sounded like he was about to crawl up the inside of the driver's leg and bite him in the thigh.

– Djupivogur, I told the driver breezily.

When we reached his stop the troll had changed his mind.

– Not here, not yet.

Our bus wove through sharp mountains. Big basalt cliffs with little plant life on them because winds eroded them too quickly to grow much. Sheep and cows grazed in the meager fields.

Djupivogur. Fishing village of four hundred. Four hundred and thirty-one once the bus parked.

Couples disembarked. I took my pack from below the bus. The troll took his single hefty black bag. It was a good size,

but not enough to carry camping gear, sleeping bag, change of clothes, toiletries. Big enough to hold a human head, I thought; by now my thoughts were getting macabre.

The only hotel in town was beside a tiny harbor. Two rowboats were anchored nose to nose in the water, thirty feet from me. There were other boats, a more modern fleet, moored in tidy rows at the other end of the harbor, three hundred feet farther. Of the twelve vessels there, ten wouldn't fit more than four people. The last two were big, for tours to the island of Papey, famous for its puffins. The clumsy little birds with adorable faces and multicolored bills were the reason I'd stopped here. I wanted to eat one.

I let the troll register first because I kept making this mistake of thinking that if I caught him in a lie it would be enough to stop his plans. I'd confront him, yell: You said you were getting off in Breiddalsvik, but you got off in Djupivogur! And he'd buckle under the weight of my keen observation. He'd screech, then disappear back into the realm of haints and phantoms.

– For one night, he said to the young girl behind the desk.

– A room? she asked.

– Oh no. My sleeping bag will do. English wasn't his first language, that was clear, still he didn't stammer between each word as a novice would. His hard consonants had no sharp edges. Instead of 'bag' it was 'bay.' Not 'sleeping,' but 'sleppen.' But I understood him.

I was on that same plan. Iceland was expensive, even here in the outer reaches. A single room was sixty dollars and wouldn't be much better than a homeless shelter. Sleeping bag accommodations, a tiny cubicle with a flat cot and a shared bathroom, cost only twenty.

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My room was 8 and the troll's was 9. When I went to the front desk later, alone and unwatched, to switch, the clerk told me the rest of the rooms had been reserved by a team of Norsemen off hulking around an unpronounceable mountain. Climbing it with their bare hands, probably. I was relieved. A hall of Vikings was enough company for me to feel safe, even if I was directly next door to the fiend.

But they never came. The next day I asked the teenager at the desk, the same clerk, where they'd gone. She told me they'd slipped away. A towrope gave out in their climb and they cascaded into a pyre of bones, flares, and ice axes.

I went back to my room to sleep away the rest of the morning, listening for the sound of the troll packing up and leaving. From his room I heard throat clearing and much coughing. He'd hack so hard I swear I heard the wet tear of his trachea. Rolling around his bed he bumped the wall, he kicked the wall, then back to coughing. I didn't go out to the communal toilet. Just peed in the room's small sink. Fell asleep.

When I woke up it was 2 p.m. The day was pleasant, overcast, and gray. I wanted a baloney sandwich. Deli meats were all I could get. Actually, there was smoked lamb but the taste was like having someone empty a full ashtray on my tongue. You'd think there'd be mass varieties of fish delicacies, plentiful as blintzes in Borough Park, but they must have been exporting the marine life and keeping not a fin for themselves.

I sat around in my plain white room and did fifty push-ups just to make myself move. Seventy-five sit-ups to get my stomach working.

After buying a ham sandwich and two small packets of orange juice at the only convenience store in Djupivigor I came back to my hotel, sat at a small desk un-

der a picture window that looked out at the tiny harbor.

In the communal bathroom the troll was shaving at the sink. I was actually feeling terrible right then. Too lonely for fear, I soldiered over to the troll, stood three feet away, and said, – Hey look. Are you following me?

– Yes.

What kind of boar's hair was he growing? I wondered as I listened to his razor run across his neck and below the chin. It wasn't some disposable either. An enormous contraption. It wasn't electric. Actually it looked like one of those settler-era plows. With a pair of lurid blades that formed the two upright sides of an acute triangle. As it pulled across his pinkish skin the sound was a crackling fire.

– I'm not going to play dicks with you, I explained. If that's what you're about.

– No, he agreed and very firmly. He slapped the side of the sink once.

He seemed so offended by the idea that it threw me into a state of juvenile confusion.

– So what are you doing? I asked him this straightforwardly, but my voice had all the man knocked out of it.

– I'm going to kill you, he said. There was still shaving cream on the right side of his face. Then I'm going to eat your flesh and put your bones into my soup.

– You really are?

– I am.

– So you're a cannibal?

He stopped shaving, but didn't turn to me. I looked at him though he only looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. – How can I be a cannibal when we are not the same species?

I stumbled into the men's toilet. It was where my feet directed me. My room would've been more sensible, but I went to the shitter instead. It had a full door

so that I was on the inside and, at least nominally, safe from him.

He went on shaving that prickly neck for fifteen minutes longer. Out of fright I had to pee, but was too scared to pull down my pants. The sound of metal on skin went for so long that I thought he must be regrowing the hair he'd just cut.

My hirsute pursuer eventually ran water in the sink and after that he came to the toilet door. He knocked as if I was just going to open up for him. – Hello, he said. Hello?

I pressed my hands against the cool, blue concrete walls on either side of me. If he bashed through the door I was going to press myself up and kick him straight in the teeth and then do a backflip out the tiny window behind me.

– Why be so afraid? he whispered. I could tear this door down, but I don't want to be boorish. My name is Gorroon. I can smell your blood from here.

Because of Gorroon I never saw the puffins. I rolled my sleeping bag, deflated my air mattress, changed my clothes, and turned in the key. The teenage girl at the desk was sad when I told her I was going. She really wanted me to see Papey.

I asked her to have lunch with me, but she said she couldn't so I went out to that deli, bought another ham sandwich and orange juice, and came back to her. She accepted half the meal. I leaned against the reception counter.

– Have you been to Papey?

– I haven't, she admitted. But I've seen many puffins.

She had a dimpled, wide face and couldn't have been more than seventeen so she was safe with me. I've never been attracted to younger women. Forty-five minutes until the bus arrived. I would've played jacks with children just to have company during the wait. As she and I

talked I leaned with my back to the desk lest Gorroon rush the office with a paring knife and surprise me.

The girl's work schedule was seven days a week, eight hours each day. When I commiserated she corrected me. – I like it so much, she told me. What else would I do today? My husband is at home without a job.

– You're married?

There was gold on the ring finger of her right hand, but you'd be excused for missing it. The metal was whiter than her skin, thin as thread.

– Does everyone here get married young?

– No, no. A lot of women have children and raise them alone. The father might live nearby, but not in the same home.

– We've tried that in the U.S., I said.

– And what did you find?

– The boys all grow up to be crybabies.

She laughed. – How boring that must be!

The bus arrived. A white one with many blue stars painted across the body. I stayed at the desk with the girl, who had finished her half of the sandwich and then taken much of mine. She even drank my orange juice, but I didn't care. The girl let me pay my bill and offered the receipt, which I declined.

– There's still time to stay and see Papey, she offered.

Considering that I was being chased by a brute I could have read her insistence as providence. Protection by an unseen force. Except that this had been happening to me for the whole trip. Icelandic people who really wanted me to see every part of their country. More so, I think, because I was a black American. They all hated the weather, but loved their land.

As a souvenir I gave her my pen.

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She looked at it, but was too kind to sneer. As soon as it was between her fingers I understood how silly I'd been. I mean, it was a blue pen. They cost about eighty cents. The cap was chewed.

– It's very nice, she decided.

I laughed so then she laughed. Me with humiliation and her with relief that I wasn't going to press her for a kiss.

– Let me take it back.

The girl put my pen in her pocket.

– Nay, she said, which was the way they said no sometimes. It's mine now.

– Do your people really believe in elves and all that? I asked her.

I wanted her to both confirm and deny the idea. Sometimes I placed so much weight on random conversations. You can't help but occasionally wish there was a thing like destiny, it's why I can't stop reading my horoscope. As if fate was always trying to reach us, if only we would listen. At that moment I expected some teenager to tell me, definitively, what I should believe.

– If you ever see one then you will have faith in it and if you never do then you won't. It is the same here like it is anywhere. And both sides will never accept each other.

The bus driver grumbled into the hotel lobby to ask if there were any passengers to board. She nodded. – These two.

The ride from Djupivogur to Skaftafell was three hours. I tried to write another postcard to my ex, but there was an unsteadiness to the roads that showed up in my penmanship. It made even a standard greeting look panicked.

We moved from the mountainous surroundings that I'd taken for granted into these ongoing fields of long-cooled lava. Evidence, on either side of the national highway, of an eruption that took place six hundred forty years before. Old things here. The fields weren't barren,

but growing bright green, mossy puffy tufts that made me want to roll around on them.

We stopped at the lake called Jokulsarlon where the farthest end of a glacier had crumbled into colored hunks of ice. Even these fragments were three and four stories tall. Some blue, others white. This glacier had been moving, incrementally, for centuries, dragging across the land; the ice was packed with brown and black earth in varied zigzag patterns. Our bus parked for pictures. I was one of the first shooting from the shoreline.

There was a mound that we climbed to get new perspectives. Twenty feet up, the lake seemed smaller, if only because the glacier was in full view. These dinky chunks were overshadowed by the endless gray sheet of the glacier, which led far back toward the mountains in the distance and right up over them. The glacier had frozen right over them. It seemed unlikely the mountains could ever struggle free.

My hands were cold (this was summer, remember) because I hadn't brought gloves. I stopped taking photos to rub my hands together, march around in a circle. In August it was usually fifty degrees, but this close to the ice fields the temperature dropped way down.

Gorroon stayed by the bus.

I wondered if he was afraid of the cold, or of getting too close to the glacier. How do you defeat a troll? Put salt on his tongue? Make him say his name backwards? If I knew a trick I would have used it.

Instead I watched him lean against the bus, right beside the bus driver. He didn't even have to stare back at me. We were past aggression and now I just understood that he was going to grab me. Women know the feeling I'm talking about.

Back on the bus we rode for another forty minutes until we reached a tiny white sign welcoming us to Skaftafell National Park. There wasn't much to it. One building, a parking lot, campgrounds, and a mountain.

I rented a tent, but didn't know how to use it. My whole life I'd been sleeping in apartments. Buildings manufactured by sweaty immigrants. I didn't understand an iota about driving little posts into the ground. When I camped out in Myvatn the tents were already pitched.

While other people raised their nylon homes in fifteen minutes it took me that long to read the instructions. I kept hoping a sympathetic pair would offer to help me, but once their tents were up the travelers went directly to the hills.

On my knees I counted every stake, stake loop, and fiberglass segmented pole. Snapped elastic strainers and tugged the guy lines. When I tried to thread the poles through the tent loops they kept coming apart in the middle until I learned to slide them in with the tent flat on the ground. It started to rain, but it rained every day.

I went back to the tent rental station and complained that I'd been given the wrong tent poles. I needed the curved models. The guy at the desk wouldn't even look at me.

After half an hour I figured out that those tent poles bend. It became much easier after that.

Once I got both poles in, the frame popped up naturally. From there it was an easy prospect to drive in the stakes on one side, then the front, then the rear. Only when I tried to push them in on the last side did I notice the enormous stones in the ground.

Then I had to take the structure down and replay each step at a location about ten feet away. When it was done I plucked at the top of the tent to see if it

was stable. No matter how I tugged or flicked, the green tent didn't move. I proudly snapped pictures of it from every angle.

– Took you long enough, said a man walking back with his wife. I'd seen them pitch theirs in seven minutes. They'd been up the mountain and back by now.

French.

With the sun up twenty hours a day there was still a lot of time to climb. I started moving at 4 p.m. Rain stopped, daylight was vivid. Foreign languages sounded profound around me.

At the far end of the campground there was a well-established path that slipped onto the hill, and once I was on it the land, the people behind me, dissolved. Buses in the parking lot, children calling to parents. Instantly there was only me.

I listened to my pants. I wore slacks that swished. They kept me company. Counting my pace not by how far I'd come, but by the tempo of my khakis.

These trails weren't even steep, it's just that they went on for so long. I took pictures of a waterfall called Hundafoss, another, Magnusarfoss, then Svartifoss, and after that I'd had quite e-damn-nuff of cascading water.

Past the range of waterfalls the ground lost most of its grass. Just dirt and stones. Mostly stones. Walking on them made my ankles hurt. Another forty minutes and the pain reached my knees.

When I turned around I could see, far below me – even beyond the campgrounds – a hundred little streams, run-off, faint melt from the glaciers behind this mountain that bled out to the sea. They crossed each other playfully. Then I saw the troll walking toward me. Using a cane.

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His beard had grown in. Down to his collarbone. His scarf was tied below it. He didn't wear a hat. The stick was small, but store-bought, redwood. He waved to me. He didn't hurry. I turned toward the peak and went up that way. If I could have run, I would have run, but my legs were aching.

I didn't even come to Iceland for anything. Iceland came to me out of a dream. Not one of my paranoid racism dreams that, my being black, occur about once every twenty-eight days. There are a few versions, most of them forgettable.

But one night it was different. I'm transported to the future. Still in New York. I'm by the water. Sort of. The Gowanus Canal. Around me thousands of black people wear yellow rain slickers because the day is overcast. We have boats. Or rather, boats are docked. Catamarans actually. Those cruiser types used for whale-watching tours. A hundred of them taxi up against the docks in Red Hook.

Black people climb on the catamarans to capacity. Once full, the boats go out to New York Harbor and from there, the sea. Those of us on the shore cheer and those on the ships excitedly wave. No one carries suitcases, but I know that we're leaving. Not being deported. Forget that. Choosing to go.

And where are we off to? Iceland. All the black folks in the United States are taking to Iceland because no one lives there anyway. This was a dream, remember. So finally I get on a catamaran. Stay out on deck even though it begins to rain. The engine is so powerful that I feel the vibration up through my shoes, strong enough to shake me.

The drawbridges have been lifted, not so much for clearance, but to wave goodbye. As our boat pulls off we pass the

garbage transfer stations and old warehouses that have yet to be refurbished. They're slagged apart, walls falling, broke down and decrepit. I can see into each one as we go by. I'm overjoyed. We all are. Imagine that, a happy story about black people.

As we seek larger bodies of water our boat passes a warehouse ramshackle as the last ten, but this one's full of gold. Not gold, but honey.

In jars and bowls. Two hundred clear containers. Honey spread sticky across the wooden floorboards. Yellow candles are lit and flickering. I hear the wind against the side of my face. Rain slaps my temples, but I am warm. It feels like we are making a break from all accumulated human history to be brand new.

Gold coins are gathered into piles two feet high and just as far across. I want to sit inside that warehouse, but know the heat would kill me. Seeing it from the catamaran is close enough to dry my mouth out. Yellow fabric is strung up on the walls. Yellow fabric, tied into enormous bows, sits in the puddles of honey. It is majestic and reassuring. A send-off, not a sayonara.

I saw it. The boats were going to Iceland, and I couldn't have felt better.

Almost at the top of this mountain, called Kristinartindar, Gorroon fell farther and farther back. Maybe he was heavier than he looked. My own thighs were boiling from the exertion. I was nearly jogging to the top.

There were actually two peaks. You ascend either one and from those points see the southwestern end of the country. But I couldn't look backward. I went around the peaks instead, on the well-marked trail. Passing no one. A ribbon of clouds descended over me. I stopped to watch it happen. A gray mist came down from the gray sky until it touched the

highest peak of the mountain. Then it descended. Consuming the earth, quietly.

I crouched to keep clear, but the cloud overwhelmed me. Then I was inside. I expected to cough, but there was no real effect except that the trail behind me was obscured. There was still the trail ahead. Around the rounded curve of Kristinartindar I came to view the glacier. Skaftafellsjokull.

I wasn't near it; the ice was still miles away, but I saw it clearly. Sunlight reflected against ice particles in the air, surrounding the glacier with pixie dust. I took pictures and waited for Gorroon. The view was pure mesmerism so I couldn't actually leave. It wasn't the troll that had captured me, it was the country.

Gorroon's beard had grown since I'd seen him an hour ago. Now it was at his navel. He stooped deeply as he walked, resembled the old Chinese women at the Canal Street train station. I always wanted to protect their fragile spines from injury; scoop them up in my hands, and carry them to a room full of cushions. For an instant I felt the same affection toward the troll.

Our breathing was different because his was loud.

– Not used to the climbs? I actually taunted the thing.

His cane had a blue stone imbedded in the handle, which he rubbed with his fat, yellowed thumb.

He admitted, – I'm having a hard time with this part. I really didn't expect you to go all the way up.

I took off my small backpack. The larger one was at the camp, in my tent. I'd brought a bag of nuts and two packets of orange juice. I drank one packet and had a few handfuls of cashews before Gorroon could breath normally again. Instead of waiting I should have sprinted some more, but at that moment

I felt, oddly, safe. It was all that sunlight on the snow: I stood in a dreamy field of gold. If you can't trust in a prophetic dream then nothing will ever soothe you.

Once he'd recovered, the troll stopped seeming like a fool. As soon as he could stand straight he was next to me. I didn't even feel the movement. Like water trickles through a closed hand. From ten feet away he'd seemed like an old man without the sauce to catch a cab. Now I could see his mouth quite clearly.

His teeth were tiny; splintered, bone fragments. I didn't think he'd be able to chew through my arm, but shred the meat instead.

– Hello again, he said.

He bent down. I thought it was a bow. Instead he grabbed my left leg and pulled it from under me so that I fell backward, landing in the stones and snow.

Wow. He had small hands, but a strong grip. One hand on my left ankle, one on my left knee. I struggled, but it was a cursory movement. Just to say I tried. He pulled my knee toward him and pushed my ankle the other way. The pressure was instant, amazing.

I looked down, thinking: will my knee pop out of the skin? Will my ankle turn to splinters? Gorroon patiently insisted that my lower leg snap.

My left hand moved into his long hair. I hadn't meant to do it. I wasn't thinking, just fighting.

The stuff on his head rivaled his beard for length. It wasn't as greasy as it looked. It cracked in my hands. I grasped closer to the scalp until I found a patch that wasn't brittle. My leg bled down onto my left shoe. He ignored my efforts and continued to press.

Once I had a tight grip I leaned back so all my weight was pulling at his skull. His skin tore away from his scalp, but the

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only sound was when he started panting. Had I hurt him?

The mountains, the glacier, they were waiting for an answer. Who do we get?

– You can't have it, I told Gorroon, but he wasn't listening. I don't think I even understood what I meant. There was blood on my shoe, yes, but there was blood in my left hand as well. His blood.

My right hand went for his beard and the left was doing so well that I decided not to intervene. My body knew what it was doing. You might even call my determination happiness. He'd take my leg, but I would steal his face.

As my right hand came near his whiskers Gorroon opened his mouth. I thought I was far enough away that he couldn't bite, but he had a jaw like a shark's and the teeth sort of popped past the lips to reach me. The outer edge of my hand was there for him to rip so he tore into the flesh and then pulled backward, peeling the skin and taking some meat. My right pinky curled down on itself and wouldn't straighten though I still had feeling in the rest of that hand.

I thought maybe I should just roll and take us both over the precipice, but the point wasn't to kill him, it was that I should live. I refused to die. If I had to I'd stay here with him, on our backs, for fifty thousand years. Locked in place until our bodies calcified, until we became another landmark, one more folktale.

My leg wouldn't break. It was obvious from the troll's consternation. He might have liked to scare me by appearing nonchalant, but when he attempted a laugh it made his shoulders buckle. It easily could have turned into a cry.

Meanwhile my grip had locked onto his scalp, all nine of my usable fingers pulling there. Who knew I was such a wonderful stubborn bastard? In my experience there seemed to be only two kinds of men: brooders and brats. I'd

come all this way to discover there was a third. My fatigued brain was commanding my hands to release, relent, surrender but, bravely, they refused.