

Terrence Takeshorse

4078 Words

HERMINA opened Monday night's register with a grand and imperturbable smile. She had not spoken to him in a day, but Deke could tell she would soon. Deke loved her for many reasons, but most recently for tolerating the unlicensed matches he ran between kids from Akwesasne, most of whom he coached, and Fort Drum meatheads on leave. The betting was fast and usually the skinny Indians kicked ass and everybody in the know made out pretty well. Deke counted his proceeds into stacks on the bar.

"You are a worthless excuse for a husband," she said. Hermina. She was a good egg. He had learned from his brothers that when a fight went to the ground (and all relationships are groundfights) there were two basic positions — cowgirl and missionary. From the top you had good punches but from the bottom you could wait while your opponent tired, feeling out weaknesses and slowly letting him trust your support until, when the moment was right, you snatched it away and levelled him. Hermina was more sparring partner than opponent, though. She was actually quite understanding

"We remain unhitched," he observed. They hadn't married even after coming to the States and though Deke could have been naturalized, he liked the still, vanishing fact of illegality. No one was checking, anyhow.

Deke had fought his whole career on variations of the missionary school, content to weather humiliation while deciphering his opponent's confidence. At the rented gym where he

taught the abrupt, finalized martial arts popular on American television, he tried to instill that abiding tactic in the boys. “Let him think you’re just a part of the mat,” he told them. “Disappear into the ground.”

“You dirty little man,” she said. He could never tell where she got all those nice dresses.

“Tell me about it,” he said, and she lit into him while he made automatic resistance to tire her. “Please don’t be that way,” he said, and, “Can’t you just take it less seriously?”

Hermina’s lodge was the finest in town. Deke had helped acquire it four years ago in a shady transaction beyond the scope of this story. Its large, single-paned windows opened onto a deck over the lake and it had the only elegant rustic furniture that Deke had ever seen. The nose of a honey-colored Chris-Craft protruded from wainscoting by the bathrooms where a Kennedy, possibly Robert, had kissed a local girl. The purchase also included a cellar with calvados and a chef who could braise quail to pair with camembert, all of which was abhorrent to, not to mention overly expensive for, the local taste. The lodge did well in the summer, but in winter their only reliable customers were out-of-towners on ski holidays and Lyell, an indefatigable bum in love with Hermina.

Deke transferred fistfuls of peanuts from a SYSCO bin to two antique galvanized buckets on the Chris-Craft. He was five-foot eight and in top fighting shape had weighed one-seventy. After the accident he had stopped eating well and lost muscle. He felt skinny and very sorry about it all.

“It’s time for all that to change,” Hermina was saying, but he could tell that her steam was already running down. His mind was on Lyell, who called earlier to say that he’d met an Indian at the gas station who wanted to go fishing and he had agreed to take him but the more he

thought about it he wanted company for this strange request and wouldn't Deke like to come fishing?

No, Deke hated fishing, along with other obscure American obsessions, like shopping and cooking. "I'd love to," he had said into the antler receiver. "I'll bring some beer." It was high time that he gave Lyell a little talking-to.

Lyell Carruthers. Of a long-standing North Country family, genetically predisposed to lumberjacking and unemployment, though only a handful were alcoholics. Lyell kept his large round head under a large round hat. He was in the two-twenty, two-thirty range. His white moustache was somewhere between dictator and tug-boat captain, though the latter calling was probably beyond Lyell's cognitive abilities.

"You think this doesn't hurt me," she said. "That you're above this? Look at me!"

She was sharp as the day they'd met. Unchanged, really. He cracked a peanut and chewed the papery bean. He had filled both buckets so there was no place for shells. He stuck it in his back pocket. "You look quite regal tonight," he said. She was, by birth, as close as Americans had to aristocracy. Deke had been dredged up from the gutter to offend her father, but Lyell was from some sub-guttural sewer.

Lyell had subsisted on bullhead and foodstamps until Hermina had, in her ungentle manner, suggested that he could no longer drink on credit without a paycheck. Within a week he was stocking plywood at the lumber yard and had stuck with it to impress her. His crush seemed harmless and possibly even positive, at least in terms of employment. All the same.

"You don't seem to grasp the gravity of your situation," Hermina said.

“Indeed not,” he countered. “No. In. Deed.” Though Deke had never liked teachers and didn’t think of himself as a good one, some of his students had grappled the national circuit. These successes weren’t from any special methods or drills, but in demonstrating that he, Deke Barber, took this shit absolutely seriously. A certain type of kid did really well with that. He offered them a chance, anyway, to believe in what they were doing. A rare opportunity.

“I’ve had enough of your games,” Hermina said. He glanced over. She appeared to be balancing a green, leather-covered checkbook. Well, they still had plenty of money.

“I don’t play games,” Deke said with indefinite truculence. He ate another dry peanut, grinding it to butter with his molars.

“Are you even hearing me?”

“I can’t help but hear you. What was it?”

She sighed and snapped the little book closed. “Nothing. I’m afraid to even say.”

They had been strong partners for many years. With only this very liveable level of protest, she accepted him. Also, she had maintained, in one form or another, an honest business to cover for Deke’s unlicensed bookie work, mail-order placebo supplements, and other cons that had kept her in silk underwear for their shared decade.

Despite her upbringing, they were well-suited. Mutual tolerance is key. She was attractive, well-dressed and, though obtuse, reasonably intelligent. All the same, he had never feared that she would leave him. She was too used to victimizing him, and he had no qualms about that role. Good luck to other men with that one!

There had only been a few times when his patience had worn thin. After his accident with Vince Vaillancourt there had been a bad, frustrating year when the kids didn’t have any faith in

him. He'd never made much money teaching young men to pummel and molest one another into submission. At one point he even decided, God forbid, to give it up and took it out on her. He had been, in a word, *mean*.

Then, two years ago, Kermit O'Connor had come to train in the Barber Method and went international, even onto cable broadcasts in Canada. More students had come. Most were still useless, but a handful had become very good or had the potential to. And he and Hermina had settled back into their comfortable push and pull.

The new students were mostly Kermit's younger cousins. Kermit's brother had attended briefly, but the father died, the uncle was in jail, the family needed help and he'd stopped. Deke had wanted to help, if only to keep the kid in classes, but didn't know how. Maybe this was the boy who wanted to go fishing. Or someone like him.

"So what are you going to do about all that?" she asked. Oh, Mina! Her passions were so sweet. With only a little provocation she attained a pitch that wearied her in minutes. Her high spirits balanced what she called Deke's *emotional low blood pressure*.

"I just don't quite know," he said. She was a fine sport, and charmingly oblivious.

Lyell's white truck pulled in just after 5:30, hitched to his everpresent jonboat, *Marcia*. Deke leaned across the bar to kiss Hermina's scowling cheek, grabbed a sixpack from the fridge and went out.

"He said he wants to grow the corn, beans and squash his people used to eat," Lyell reported. His smoker's voice was skeptical and drawly, borrowed from the Western movies he loved. "He said he feels like a heavy sack of dirty liquid. He wants to fill it with good things and

over time become made of fish and deer and vegetables instead of fritos and booze. I said we'd go meet him but I think he's gonna roll us," Lyell said. "His name is Terrence Takeshorse."

"That's a fake name he got from a movie." Deke leaned against the passenger window. The engine was burning oil. He couldn't remember which movie.

"Too damn polite. Fancy red car and a silver necklace." It didn't sound like Kermit's brother, who had the guarded sharpness of poverty that Deke liked in himself and couldn't help but admire in others.

"Huh." Deke said. Terrence Takes Horse. You don't forget a name like that. Did anyone back home remember the name Barber? Probably not fondly. He smiled.

Lyell looked in the rearview mirror and scratched his moustache. "I'm just gonna go in and use the restroom." He made a show of jogging up the stairs, probably to sweet-talk Hermina. Bug-eyed and brilliant as a cocker spaniel. Deke climbed into the idling Ford and opened a beer.

After a minute inside, Lyell wrenched the truck door and jumped in, more bouyant than necessary. His dry hands meant either no restroom or no hygiene. "I think it was *Short Defiance*," Deke said. "Where the Indian got his name." Sometimes on slow nights Lyell brought Westerns to the bar and the three of them ate popcorn from crystal bowls. They weren't bad, actually.

"Don't remember that one," Lyell said. "I said we'd be at the boatlaunch at six." The trailer hitch clunked the curb as they accelerated from the parking lot.

Lyell held forth on what, other than fishing, this Terrence fellow might be up to. He was smuggling drugs through the rez. He would steal *Marcia*. He was part of the gay mafia. "No one

asks you to go fishing on Rainbow Lake,” he concluded. “Except as a cover for some underhanded cock-and-bull.”

Even if it wasn't Kermit's brother, they should help this idealistic young man. *A heavy bag of dirty liquid!* Christ. Deke had fought his own way out of a small town and wanted to show the reservation kids what was possible. “Sounds like he means well,” Deke said. In the end you can only offer a hand and hope the inscrutable laws of karma compensate for times when you can't help yourself.

“He's going to try some sacred shit. Like scattering the ashes of his ancestors.” They reached the loop road and Lyell turned away from the boatlaunch. “Let's just pull into Yuri's cabin for a minute and drink a beer,” he said. “We can see the ramp from there and get eyes on this guy before he scalps us.” Lyell cut the corner into the driveway, jarring the trailer on some rocks that Yuri had placed to keep Lyell from cutting the corner.

“Where's Yuri?” Deke said. It was exactly six on the dashboard and Lyell's clock ran slow.

“Gone 'til Tuesday.” Lyell parked in the pines with a view of the far shore, where the only discernible object was a two-story fiberglass squirrel in a red-and-white-striped leotard at the Rainbow Lake KAMP-A-LOT.

Some of the maples by the water had turned red but everything else was still green. Sometimes the transition happened slowly but in dry years the leaves just turned brown then fell all at once. It had been a dry year.

Lyell reached between Deke's knees to open the glovebox, which dumped torn envelopes, a picture of a dead deer, a bent cigarette, hat and gloves, two knives, pink flagging tape and one barrel of a pair of broken binoculars into Deke's lap.

Lyell selected the binocular with his fat fingertips and held it to one eye. Deke herded the escaped objects between his feet and latched the still over-full glovebox on the third try.

"I'm trying to get a look at him," Lyell explained. He held his breath with his chest puffed out. The moustache quivered obscenely and Deke wondered if women, generally, enjoyed oral sex from men with moustaches. Doubtful.

"He's not so bad, right?" Deke said. There was no point in spying on the kid.

"I don't think he's there yet." Lyell said. He set the lens on his knee and shook foam from the bottom of his beer into his throat. "I don't even know why I go to work anymore."

Deke squinted. Was there possibly something red at the squirrel's feet?

"I work my ass off for that guy and I'll never get ahead with what he pays. He's out to get me. I wish I never had to see him again. I should quit." He gave the steering wheel a glancing palm-heel.

"You should do that." Deke reached for the broken binocular. He brought the far shore into focus. A red beach umbrella. The red car of Terrence Takeshorse was not apparent at that moment. A line of people knotted at the snack stand. Deke thought he could distinguish black hair and sunglasses.

"We're gonna take him out to scatter the ashes and he will, mark my words, after his phony Indian ritual, do something unbelievably bad to us." Lyell's face was red. Maybe he'd already been drinking.

“Why do you like her,” Deke said. He spoke casually. There were many reasons to like Hermina, of course, and he wondered which Lyell had found.

“It’s against the commandments to covet another man’s wife,” Lyell said.

He’d forgotten that Lyell was an avid fan of the Presbyterians. They observed the squirrel. It had, Deke saw through the lens, a fiberglass sword in its paws labelled EXCALIBUR. It was an Arthurian campground with a pressure-treated playcastle where children acquired impressive splinters and who knows what psychological ailments.

“She’s not married,” he said, finally. “And?” It was quarter-after and high time to meet Mr. Takeshorse, who was probably parked behind a shrub waiting hopefully for his chance to go fishing.

“Not to mention a man’s code of honor.” Lyell took the binocular back and set it on the dash. A flight of ducks settled in Yuri’s cove and folded their wings. They floated like carved birds on the still water. “She says what she means and does what she wants.” He sipped from his already empty beer and frowned. “How did you meet her?”

Deke took a significant look at the clock and opened another beer. He had been twenty and not fighting well, even in the country circuits. His mother was asking him for money every week. Instead, he gone to stay in youth hostels in Spain, where he’d met and travelled with American college students. His first experiment in disappearance.

“In Spain,” he said to Lyell’s obnoxious hat, “there is a famous bridge across a gorge. I was there with friends eating lunch. There were police sirens outside the cafe and we wondered what happened. At one point the waitress put her head outside covered her mouth with a napkin.” Deke paused to drink.

“She’s Spanish? I thought —”

“No.” Deke paused. Another set of ducks circled and landed with the first. This was not the story he usually told, which was a version of the one the Hermina remembered: the patio of an apartment behind the museum, introduced by Claudio, green wine, small cookies, spring. This was the real first time they’d met. “After lunch, we went to the bridge, which is a one lane thing built in the Middle Ages. Two cars had both tried to cross and hit head-on. One of the drivers was a young woman and they already had an IV in her arm. They were cutting the door with shears so medics could get her out.”

Lyell nodded, looking sideways. He seemed unsure where the story was headed, which was a feeling Deke was glad to inflict.

“We went down into the gorge for a bit.” That beer had gone quicker than planned. He crumpled the can and dropped it to the floor. Terrence must be waiting, but it felt more important to dish it to Lyell. “When we got back to the bridge there was no sign of the hurt woman, or the accident at all. Cars went across like nothing happened.”

Lyell gripped the wheel. “I still don’t see the guy,” he said. “I thought maybe we’d ambush his ambush, you know?”

“Yes, he could be watching us, too.”

“Maybe he just won’t be there.” Lyell shifted his butt forward, then back, in what appeared to be an attempt to unstick a wedgie.

Deke tried to recall the woman in the wreck. Her face had been turned away, but he saw her hair, with green chunks of glass caught in the thin curls. “So, I said that I hoped the woman

was doing alright and how they had cleaned the accident up so fast. One of the girls we were with said, ‘What accident?’”

Deke used his feet to clear envelopes away from the sixpack and selected the last beer. “I told her it bothered me that there were people like her in the world, who could ignore suffering in others. This girl was planning to be a doctor. To go to medical school in the fall. And I said that if she ever had the chance to operate on me I would rather die.”

“Maybe she was thinking about something else when you passed the accident,” Lyell said. His neck was so sunburned it looked inflated and scaly. He rubbed it lightly. “Something in her family, or she was afraid of heights and couldn’t think about other people being hurt because she was too scared. You shouldn’t have yelled at her.”

“Maybe. I’m more inclined to think that now.”

Lyell held the binocular up, then set it down.

“What is it?”

“He just dropped something off the dock.”

“Who?”

“The Indian. Takeshorse. I recognize his jacket.”

Deke used the binocular but didn’t see anyone. “That was just some eco-unfriendly mom with a diaper,” he said. Thinking about this secret time with Hermina calmed him. They could hide under the pines all night. There was no hurry.

“No, it was him. That could have been evidence. Let’s go see if there’s anything in the water.”

“I’m not getting wet tonight unless it involves a lot of money.” The memory of Spain was intimate. He had chosen her in spite of that time, long before he’d started winning. Or because of it. Either way, their history felt like a sock full of sand that he could swing at Lyell.

“It could have been hundred dollar bills tied up with a rock. Or a bag full of cocaine that someone will find later by GPS.” Lyell spoke faster than normal, maybe revealing the man latent under his cowboy act.

“If it’s not a diaper full of baby shit it’s something equally revolting.” Deke looked through the lens again. A red car with tinted windows pull into the parking lot. “I saw that girl unexpectedly, two years later, at a friend’s house. We had been more than passing acquaintances. We had spent weeks sleeping in the same hostels. We drank wine from bottles that we shared around the bunks. I said, ‘Hermina! It’s Decker! We met in Spain.’ She looked at me and said, ‘I met a lot of people in Spain.’”

Lyell’s face relaxed. He used a thumbnail to wipe suds from his moustache. “She didn’t become a doctor.”

“No,” Deke said. “She never finished. I didn’t see her again for another year, and she didn’t recognize me then, either.” Through the broken binocular, the door of the red car opened and a young man stepped out, unmistakably honest and hopeful, to lean against the hood and look around. It was six thirty five. “Ready, Lyell? Let’s go meet our guy.”

Lyell geared out of Yuri’s and headed around the lake. “I can’t be sorry about this,” he said with a puff of air. “You know what I mean?”

Deke was not sure. “I think so,” he said. Was he not-apologizing for something he’d done, or something he was about to do? “Don’t be sorry.”

“Mostly I’m not! Mostly I’m so happy I could cry!” He pounded the wheel once in a section made shiny by previous emphatic gestures. “I don’t even recognize myself.”

Deke wished momentarily for the mystery of self-recognition. He had learned to understand himself against the poses of others, but who was Deke Barber alone? Would he know him if they met? “You seem disguised by love,” Deke said.

“If you asked me a year ago if I could be this way, I would have been ashamed.”

The Presbyterian again. Could Deke be one way or another? If his opponent’s stance permitted it. Could he be anything other than ashamed?

“But I’d do anything to be with her!” Lyell’s voice was high and funny from such a large man. His recklessness seemed uncharacteristically Latin. Maybe he and Hermina were meant for one another. Ha.

Had he, Deke Barber, disciplined himself out of recklessness, or was it some spiritual deficiency that precluded flights of spirit? If anyone seemed too dull to host a soaring spirit, he would have pegged Lyell, but lo and behold — !

“You were right.” Lyell got control of his voice. “Terrence Takeshorse is a name I got from *Ready Run*.” Lyell looked at Deke under his hatbrim and really did appear ready to cry. Hadn’t seen that one before. “I just wanted to get you to come with me.”

Lyell — common, devout, two hundred and fifty pounds Lyell was deceiving him, but why? Just to bare his anguished heart? Or was the infatuated yokel up to something nasty? Deke waited.

“I need you to go away,” Lyell said.

“Asking or telling?” *Disappear into the mat*, he had told his students. *Let the ground absorb the strikes through you.*

“There’s no choice. I thought she talked to you about it.”

“I think I wasn’t paying attention,” he said. He settled into the rotten upholstery and felt peanut shells collapse in his pocket.

Murder? No. Lyell probably wanted something less definite. He would prefer for Deke, and the lumberyard boss, and the imaginary Indian (this inclination seemed to be a broad concern) to distill out of his awareness. Murder is for those who want to remember bringing their opponents to nothing. Lyell just wanted Deke gone, and in the broad space between “nothing” and “gone,” Deke felt his shoulders against solid ground.

Lyell reached into his front pocket. His thick knuckles stuck at the seam. He brought out the green checkbook that Hermina had been balancing. “I wish I didn’t have to be sorry about this,” he whispered.

They had something arranged, then. Wait and see. While he was telling Hermina’s story, that one that he had kept safe for her, Lyell was probably watching for a signal from some other moustachioed guy by the snack stand.

Deke regarded the checkbook. Why be sorry? They were going, perhaps, to meet border patrol and he would finally be deported. Or maybe Hermina had written incriminating things in the book and the police would send him away. He had underestimated them, but sorry? Was this about the accident? That one time he’d screwed up! Had he failed her too badly, then? He never pretended to know her mind.

“Don’t worry, Lyell,” he said. He liked vanishing, really. “Don’t be sorry.”

Marcia fishtailed a little behind the truck and Lyell brought the speed down. Yellow birch leaves swirled on the pavement. Deke would know his opponent. Soon, now, he would identify the weight and push of a body above him. He had taken many hits and could take many more to learn their patterns and when the moment was right, turn it all around.