

## Cripple Creek

Ken should have known it wasn't going to be this easy. He should've known it months ago when his wife woke up feckless and cheerful the day after the appointment, making jokes about his chin and nose, her teeth and eyes. Apologizing for being damaged goods as she swatted him with a towel while he shaved. Should've known it when he came home that same evening to find her telling her mother all about it, spewing the acronyms of hormones and blood tests, running off numbers and statistics like she was quoting something she'd heard on public radio. She had laughed and then would intermittently go very quiet, comforting her own mother with, "it's all right. I'm ok, I swear," while she put all of those books in a cardboard box marked "Free" in large, black ink letters on the flap where they would sit at the end of the driveway, watching him pull off to work each morning, the pile dwindling, until, finally, they were gone.

But when he came home on a March evening to a dark house and no sounds of pans banging around the kitchen, he knew the worst, the inevitable, had come. She'd left him.

Ken set his gym bag that doubled as a briefcase by the door, his keys in the wooden bowl on the plant stand under the mail slot. He tossed his coat over the couch, and the cat, sleeping on the arm by the window, woke, stretched with a gape-mouthed yawn and jumped up to curl back into a doze on Ken's coat, settling onto the permanent swirl of grey fur that occupied the left arm and side.

Trying to absorb his wife's departure, Ken lifted a hand to pet Miles' ears. "Evil prince," he said, softly whispering the cat's pet name. His wife's pet name for the cat, which Ken had pilfered, and she eventually stopped using. He was not sure he could move farther than this.

From upstairs came a sound, a single, muted note and then the scuffing of a chair. A door opened.

"Up here," Lori's voice fell through the slats of the stairwell.

Ken's knees nearly went out from under him. Not gone, not gone, he repeated as he climbed the steps. Not gone.

The door to the second bedroom, what they jokingly called her study and never referred to as the baby's room anymore, was slightly open, letting a widening shaft of light fall across the pale pine floor. Another note floated out to him. A single note, played on a stringed instrument.

Inside, Lori sat in her workday clothes: black skirt, grey suit jacket, and hose. Hair still pulled back in a tight pony tail that made her look older and sterner. The buttons of her white linen shirt were opened down to her stomach, revealing a matronly beige bra, and her shoeless feet were crossed at the ankles under the dining room chair she had hauled up from below. To the side stood a black, gleaming music stand with the price tag dangling from the ledge where a book with large print and diagrams lay open to the first page. And on her lap sat a banjo.

She plucked a single string and grinned up at him as the sound faded into the room.

“Pretty neat, huh?” she said, turning a page in the book on the stand and looking from the hand hovering over the strings, up to her fingers fumbling at the neck, to the book, and back again. Finally, she plucked another string and her face cracked into a smile.

Ken rubbed the back of his neck with his palm. “Neat,” he said. He stood there for a minute, watching her go through the same ritual again - look to book, then right hand, then left, then book, and pluck! “I’ll get dinner going?” he said, and when there was no answer, he turned to leave.

Lori’s voice followed him like an afterthought. “I’ll be down soon. I just want to get through the next page.”

While boiling spaghetti and warming sauce from a jar, Ken decided he wouldn’t badger Lori about this. Badger - the word she used when he thought they were just talking. He decided this would be her thing and he’d let her tell him about it in her own good time. That lasted until the second slice of garlicked bread.

“So,” he began, “a banjo.”

Lori tore off a hunk of bread and popped it all in her mouth, cheeks bulging as she chewed with large masticating pumps. “Yup,” she said.

He waited. Miles jumped onto the table, and together they shooed him away, synchronized, both saying “Miles, down!” in the same deep, stern tone and flicking their hands at him as though to swat him, though they never had. Miles only gazed at the empty gesture, flattened out his ears, and jumped down, running off as if late for an appointment.

This was the moment when Lori, affecting her interpretation of Miles' voice, would exclaim, "Oh my god! It's nearly seven and I'm not on the window ledge!" Then they'd both laugh at the superficial imperiousness of felines.

Instead, Lori began stacking their plates, though Ken's fork was in the middle of winding his pasta from his mound. "The banjo," she said. She stood at the sink with her back to Ken's back. "I figure I've got the time now."

This was the most she had ever said about what happened those few months ago at the fertility clinic. At least this was the most she'd ever said to him about it. To her family, her mother and sisters, she had gone into detail, discussing hormones like they were psychedelic drugs and listing levels like Olympic scores: "A five-point-oh in FSH is good, but anything higher and it's game over. With AMH, you've even less wiggle room." When her family would push her to consider treatments, she only ever responded with "oh, no, that's not for us." She would talk like that with him around, though her voice might drop or her chin, hair falling like a shade to hide her profile, but never with him directly. With him, she never brought it up and he never asked. His mother still broached the subject now and then, asking if they'd thought about "other options" and talking brightly, disaffectedly about a young couple from their church who adopted twin boys from Ethiopia. But when he replied "I'm not sure she's ready yet," his mother told him to let it be. "Let her pick her own time," his mother would say, and Ken would nod, though his mother couldn't see that over the phone, and their conversation would drift to other topics, like his work editing for the city magazine or his father's retirement or how his youngest brother was doing with his theatre design program, all to avoid stating outright that there never would be "a time," that as deeply certain they had been, especially Lori, that this would come easily, naturally for them, so too was the depth into which she had

fallen when they learned, crammed tightly in the doctor's office, their knees nearly touching the doctor's knees, that it would only ever be so much dust materializing into a twister in field before all those particles drifted apart on the next breeze.

Lori turned back from the sink, gave a shrug and an impish grin. "Oh, I don't know. I'm just messing around," she said. She left the dishes to soak and went back upstairs to pluck and twang on her banjo in her crumpled suit until she drifted into their bedroom long after Ken had tired of waiting up for her.

"I'm just messing around" became the theme song for the next season of their lives. After the first six-week banjo course at the community college, Ken had asked if she was going to keep it up, to which Lori replied "Oh, I don't know. I'm just messing around." After the second class, this one called Intermediate and comprised of the same instructor and largely the same group, he'd asked the same thing, to which she'd replied the same.

As spring gained traction, Lori took to walking to the acoustic music store on Hawthorne to look through their banjo method books, their straps. She took off whole days at work to do this. She came home talking about different styles and makes of banjos, about the banjos made from old cigar boxes, and banjos that could be electrified to amplify their sound. She would stare wistfully at the small shed in the back yard and say that one day she might turn that into a workshop and make her own banjo, make hundreds of them. She printed off brochures and checked into prices for a Grand Ole Opry trip.

She took to picking up banjos at thrift stores and pawn shops. She couldn't pass even the greasiest pawn broker without going in to see if they happened to have a banjo. And if they

did, she couldn't leave without buying it. It wasn't that Ken begrudged her these impulses or was tight-fisted; they'd always had plenty between them and always would. He simply had difficulty understanding why his normally frugal wife saw the need for a dozen banjos in various states of dis-playability. If he should ask, always casually, how much her newest banjo cost, her response was always "Less than a crib" or "less than a changing table." Always in terms of that other thing but without ever actually talking *about* the other thing.

She became proficient. Her fingers danced over the five strings, playing forward rolls, backward rolls, alternating rolls. Pinches, hammer ons, and slides. Ken's mouth became populated with words both foreign and homey.

She took off in the evenings to meet her banjo buddies at the same acoustic store that doubled as a live venue with a full bar and old pine chairs set around small wooden tables, like some kind of bluegrass speak-easy. Ken went with her a couple times, but after a while decided to attend only on weekends when there was no work the day after, no stacks of papers he needed to plow through while his mind still reeled from the frantic pace of too many banjos, too many mandolins, too many fiddles fighting for a place in the bluegrass jam pulsing through his mind.

And so spring gave way to summer, with its warm, sly heat and evenings spent on the porch. After two classes, Lori had become a central member of a core group that continued to meet once the classes were over, replacing the few friends they had had. They began coming over on weekends once a month, and then more frequently, to drink wine and play their banjos, someone occasionally bringing a guitar or a kazoo for the hell of it. Lori searched out an old djembe from the attic that they had bought on a trip to Kenya, their last major trip before they intended to start a family and vacations would become distant dreams of theme parks with

grown adults dressed-up like cartoon characters. Looking at the drum that particular night, the first night it had been brought down, Ken's mind fell into the memories of those two weeks: days spent in a lift-top jeep, scanning the horizon for elephants and giraffes; evenings spent eating chapatis and stews, drinking Tusker and Nile, already reminiscing about the very trip they were on and imagining themselves bringing their children back someday, as though the future were more real to them than the present, a distant orb of light they couldn't get to fast enough. Now, the drum sat out in the front room as though standing in command of the two battalions of thrift-store banjos fanning out to each side.

And so, it was not unusual when Ken turned onto his street on an exceptionally warm evening at the end of July to find it populated with a spackling of cars and trucks, mostly run-down and decorated with pro-banjo bumper stickers, which said Lori's banjo buddies had dropped in. One said "In my heaven, cherubs play banjos" and another "If God were a musician, Scruggs would be Jesus." It never ceased to amaze him that banjo players were both largely religious and atheistic at the same time. Lori hadn't called to let him know about the impromptu meet up like she normally did, and it surprised him to discover that he didn't really mind that much, even though it had been a long day and he was rarely fond of company. It would save him from loitering around on the sidewalk out front, hoping one of the neighbors would appear to water their lawns and engage in a few short spasms of speech.

Inside, he put his bag by the door and slipped his shoes off with the toe of one foot pressed tight to the heel of the other, leaving them there in that fashion, touching, but not side by side. He followed the smell of take-out through the front room to the kitchen and beyond. The sliding door was standing wide open, though it was hotter outside than in, even this late in the evening. On the wooden deck that opened to their narrow but long back yard, Lori sat on

the wooden railing, her legs swinging, feet bare. She was sharing a cigarette with the only other girl in the group, an amazingly tall, though skinny woman with short, blue hair who was Lori's age and named Something-Jo. Ken found an endless source of amusement that a girl banjo player was named Billie-Jo or Bobbie-Jo or Susie-Jo.

Lori held out her hand when she saw Ken peering into the opened white boxes on the counter, her fingers wiggling at him as the cigarette swiveled precariously between her knuckles. "Kenny!" she called, delighted. This was the only thing about Lori that Ken found both lovable and hatable at the same time: no matter if she liked you or not, Lori was always glad to see you. It made it impossible to tell where you really stood.

The rest of the group comprised a motley crew of three more men in various stages of aging who had found their passion for the banjo in the same spring as his wife, the only connecting factor to how these people could possibly end up on his porch on a summer's evening.

Ken took down a plate, the last clean one, from the cabinet and began dishing up rice and korma and tikka masala and naan. All the cold beers in the fridge were gone, so he had to pluck a warm one from the box by the stove and remind himself to put more in after he ate.

On the porch, everyone was tuning up. Rex and Dave sat on the two Adirondack chairs Lori had insisted their porch needed, while Josh opened up a camping chair that had as many bumper stickers stuck to it as any of the cars outside. He motioned for Ken to take that chair and slung his banjo over his shoulder, kneeling in between Rex and Dave to get his banjo resonating just right with theirs.

Ken nodded, raised his beer, and sat. "Salut," he said.

Lori and the other woman smoked the cigarette right down to the filter, then stubbed it out on the back of the porch railing, where the small black burn mark would be visible from the other side. There were a trail of them, in fact, at varying heights along the back of the rails, depending on where the women had sat, how many they had smoked, and who had stubbed it out. Looking at them from a distance when he mowed or completed other, hopefully nascent, yardwork, the marks reminded Ken of the sheet music he used to read for high school band – all whole or half notes, except for the occasional quarter or eighth where multiple cigarettes had been snuffed on one post. He was amazed that he could still read music though his fingers had long ago forgotten how to play the trumpet that sat tarnishing in the attic.

Though he hated the sight of those black ovals, and that one day a buyer might negotiate a lower price because of them – an odd thought since he and Lori had always talked about this place as their “forever home” – those marks-cum-notes seemed to form an anthem that might make their lives fall into place if only they could figure out which key it was in.

Ken finished his beer and had another, forgetting again to restock the fridge so that the next round might be chill. By the end of that one, night had settled across their shoulders. The light over the stove issued a soft glow through the still-open sliding door, dancing across the steel strings of banjos and flashing across Dave’s glasses and Rex’s lone diamond earring. As it got late, the players all took off their steel picks and strummed with just their fingertips to keep the noise under reportable levels. Josh sometimes took out a yellow and green kazoo from his pocket and hummed along in it until he made himself laugh too hard to continue.

Lori always counted off. Without even a word as to what they were about to play, she offered the count like a prayer, “and a-one, two, three, four,” then picked up a round of rolls. Within a measure or two, the rest had picked up the tune and joined in with their own

renditions. The songs were familiar, tunes he'd heard Lori play in endless variation for the last half dozen months. Each player brought something new, a different spin. Rex liked to play a lot of pinches. Dave killed the hammer-ons. Josh played clean and fast, adding in runs where you least expected them. Something-Jo played high on the neck, giving all their jams a soprano lilt. And Lori kept the pace. She strummed the first note of her rolls hard, reining the others in, calling them back to her, pulling them into her orbit and holding them there.

Ken had had too many beers, too many warm ones, and he lolled between drunk and nauseous like a rickety boat at sea. Looking out into the backyard, two small apparitions began walking toward them from the depths of the property line, where a very small, dusty creek ran between the houses, ending in a drain at the road. He was so drunk that he began to believe they were the ghosts of their children, haunting the place where their souls should have found corporeal sanctuary. Ken began to rise from his chair, a look of horror screwing his mouth into a rictus of fear and rage, until they put their faces up to the porch slats and grabbed hold with two grubby hands. Not apparitions – children!

Something-Jo slung the banjo off her shoulder and leant it against the arm of Ken's chair, kneeling down in front of the children, their faces level as she knelt and they stood, each on one side of the anthem railing. She spoke to them softly, licked her thumb and wiped away something on the younger child's face. The other child pretended disgust, though Ken imagined that what he really felt was disappointment that it was not he who would be blessed by spit on a mother's warm finger.

The other four continued to play, but the pace lagged. Rex and Dave began to miss. Josh started picking out a different tune, his face bent low over the strings, as he plucked softly. They stopped. Joined again, but could not follow Lori's haphazard pace. Finally all the banjos

died away, Lori's fingers occasionally slipping across a string but not to any tune or rhythm, discordant notes drifting out into the night like lone icebergs.

"Sorry," Something-Jo said, a smile belying her apology. She mumbled something about their father's turn to have them and a shrug. Then, "got to get these guys home and cleaned up." She turned to Ken. "Thanks for letting them play in your creek," she said.

"Anytime," Ken said. It was the normal thing to say, but odd because he hadn't even known they were there until he mistook them for the ghosts of his own children, and off-kilter because it had never occurred to him that any of the people who occupied his porch randomly might have children waiting for them at home, and certainly not Something-Jo with her wild hair, endless smoking, and humorous tales of one-night stands. He had never really thought about it being *his* creek before, either, but just *a* creek that ran behind all the houses on this block, and yet he liked the sense of ownership that it could be his and something that he could offer to quarter-sized versions of himself as a playground.

Lori seemed frozen, hands hovering over the strings, as she stared at Something-Jo and her two children gathering their things and exiting through the side gate, Something-Jo swatting at their backs and bottoms to release the dust. It seemed impossible to Ken that she did not know they were there, but perhaps she had forgotten, caught up in the food and company and hours of picking that became a veil falling over her tear-weary eyes. Rex and Dave and Josh rose and left as well, their trucks and hatchbacks bumbling to life on the street in front of their house.

Ken started to load the plates into the dishwasher, but couldn't finish. He was suddenly more tired than he had ever been before, and all his parts – hands, feet, head – felt disconnected

from the rest of him. He could see two hands clutching at the cream ceramic plate, but he could not answer with any certainty that they belonged to him.

He climbed the stairs, eventually crawling up the last few, needing his hands to pull him along. He showered, again with a sense that he was being washed, not washing himself. He fell into the bed, too hot to slide under the sheets. Through the window, solitary notes rose into the night, each deliberately and slowly plucked.

That night, Lori pulled Ken to her. She lay on her side, facing the open window, her back to him, but she pulled him against her, wrapping his arm around her waist. She slid a hand down the front of his boxers and made him hard. He tried to turn her onto her back, but she resisted, and instead slipped the band of his boxers down and pulled her underwear to the side, arching her back as she guided him in.

Their movements were truncated and furtive, the space to maneuver in limited and restrictive. Ken grunted into her hair as he made his shallow thrusts, and she moaned softly into his forearm, which she had draped across her neck and jaw. Her fingers danced along the soft inner skin of his arm as the tips rolled forward and back, alternating rolls, playing a song he almost thought he could hear resonating from his body.

He came first but kept going, wanting her orgasm more than his own, but unable to hold on. It had been so long. He grew soft and she moved her hips forward until he fell out, then nestled back against his body.

"It's all right," she said, when he reached down to touch her with his fingers. "Just hold me."

And he did. But though he held her body there tight against him in the same position as which they'd made love for the first time in as long as he could remember, he sensed that she was far, far away, soaring out through the window, up above the city – to the mountain or the beach, perhaps – out away from him and their house and the crippled banjos in the living room and the broken-dreams djembe and the anthem she would never play for him though he could have read the notes, could have transcribed them into chords for her to play back to his waiting ears.

#the end#