

SLIDING

No doubt about it, the floorboards in the dining room were buckling. Ben could feel the decline as he walked to the window and looked out at the downpour. The wind frothed up blotchy whitecaps on the river. It was already dark, and the big river (more than four miles across on a fogless day) was defined only by those foamy speckles. In the light from the street lamp, Ben watched the rain fall in gusty sheets, and listened to its drumming on his roof. With its crescendos and diminuendos, the rain sounded as if it might go on forever.

With an odd smirk, Ben stared down on the flow of mud (formerly his front yard) which had squashed up against the expensive new siding of Dr. Wolbers' house. Since no one had been injured (merely frightened and confused in the middle of the night), Ben experienced a rush of devious satisfaction from the mudslide which had surged like a chocolate river down the hillside and chased the doctor from his home. Ben laughed out loud as he recalled the swearing he had heard coming from Dr. Wolbers' house that night.

And there it rested--a heap of mud, still wet from the rain, pushing with all its might to shove Dr. Wolbers' house into the river. Like the whitecaps, the mud had its own night presence. Luminous. Shiny. Ben pressed his face close to the window to look straight down. It appeared that he had no yard left at all.

Ben walked up the gently arcing slope of his dining room and into his son's bedroom. He had had two children with his wife. Both were accounted miracles, but Ben knew that only one was a true miracle. Was it his wife who was confirmed barren by the doctor's charts? or was it he who had had the problem? He couldn't remember. He only remembered that, after years of planting dead seeds in a dead ground, his wife gave birth to a stone. A hard stone--despising love, and lacking ordinary human compassion--perhaps lacking humanity itself. Its name was also Ben, but at fourteen, it rolled away and never returned.

Then, when his barren wife (or was it he?) seemed surely past the hope of child bearing, the real miracle happened. His name was John.

Ben looked at a photo in the light of his lantern.

"You have to get a doctor," his wife shouted. She was hysterical. Ben tried to soothe her with a touch, though he was near to hysteria himself. "You can't let this happen!" she screamed at him. "It can't happen! You have to let me know that this won't happen!"

"I'm trying! I'm trying!" Ben assured her. "I even went for Dr. Wolbers, but he's not at home."

"I don't want that man in my house."

"I know, I know, but I didn't know what else to do."

A cry from John. A stab.

"He's in pain."

"He's delirious," Ben explained. "We don't know if he's in pain, or what."

Ben held up the Coleman lantern and looked at the stuffed animals that circled the room like a protective spell. The bed was made, and everything was as it had been.

On the night John died, Wolbers had come too late. The fact is, he had not come in his capacity as a physician at all. He had come to inform Ben and Bonnie that he was suing them over a property line dispute.

Ben walked to the window (the floorboard's in John's room were not buckling quite so noticeably) and looked down at his mudslide. "Well, Wolbers," he said. "There's your land."

He held the lantern up to the window, and, like a ghost gazing down on the Doctor's disputed property line, he placed his face against the glass. Streaks of water trickled like tears down the pane.

"Ben!" he heard a cry from below. "Open the damn window!"

It was Fat Andy, the sheriff, standing below in glassy, yellow rain gear—shining a big police flashlight up at Ben. The beam barely penetrated the heavy rainfall.

Ben opened the window just a crack. "I can't open this window. Look at the rain. It'll blow straight in."

"Your house is on the verge of falling into the river, and you're worried about rain coming in through your window?"

Ben realized that he had been careless with the lantern. He shouldn't have brought it so close to the window.

"You gotta get outta there," Fat Andy said. "Your place has been condemned. I can't have you staying in that house any longer."

"I just came to gather a few things together, sheriff."

"There was a police padlock on the door. I ought to arrest you for breaking in."

"Breaking into my own house? I just came to get a few things," Ben pleaded. "I'll be out of here pretty soon."

"Well, OK then," Fat Andy said. He didn't like standing out in that rain, and he had done what he could. He got into his car, poured some hot coffee from a thermos, and drove off.

Ben blew out the lantern. From now on, he would have to remain in the dark. Even in the dark, he could see the accusing bright eyes of the stuffed animals.

"Please! Daddy!"

The floor shook a little as another foot or two of dirt slid from beneath the house. Ben stood on the precipice and stomped on the floor. "Go then! Slide like a beaver into the old river! And take Dr. Wolbers' fancy showplace down with you!"

The rising river battered against the pilings on the waterfront.

The river couldn't flood like it used to. The dams on the Columbia can control the flow to a certain extent; but with a rain like this . . .

Ben felt his way to the railing and climbed the stairs to his bedroom. The odd sensation of walking at a slant was magnified on the second story. The roof had split in a couple of places, and there was water on the floor; but the only puddles were up against the wall. The bending, straining floorboards provided an effective system of runoff.

It was quiet when Ben came home. It was not unusual for his wife to be gone. She had shopping to do, and endless errands to run. But it should not have been so palpably quiet. Ben turned on the TV set, but even the chatter from the TV did not upset the quiet.

Ben rarely went upstairs to the bedroom until it was time to go to bed, but there was something oppressive--even the river was as flat and quiet as a marble slab. He went upstairs to take a shower. It was the only thing he knew to do for his nerves.

An objective observer (a voyeur of the recent, unraveling months) would not have been surprised by the letter Ben found on his wife's pillow. He would have said he saw it coming. But Ben took his wife's leaving hard. True, they had been constantly at one another's throats; but that was because of John's death. They each needed someone to lash out at for an unfairness that was almost unbearable. But they also needed each other if they were going to make it through.

The letter was lengthy, but Ben's soul was crushed by one line of it. (The details, the suggestions regarding a settlement, none of that meant anything to him). "When you've loved someone for a long time, and then it all falls apart, love gets turned upside-down. And the underside of love is hate."

Hate. Hate? It's a word that doesn't go away, no matter which way you turn it.

Just before midnight, Fat Andy returned for one more look. He shined his spotlight on the window where he had seen Ben standing, but he wasn't about to go into a house that would surely crumble in the mud before morning. All that rain.

"This is nothing to you, Fat Andy," Ben said as he watched the sheriff drive away. "Just an alibi. You can tell them how you tried."

Ben remembered that he had not eaten all day. He took a cheese sandwich out of his pocket and nibbled small bites without tasting.

A million fingers of water pulled at the helpless foundation of the hillside. Ben watched them sparkle in the streetlight as they strained to tear down the tired-of-struggling, old hill.

He laughed again to remember that the initial slide had pushed right through the bedroom window of neighbor Wolbers. "I wonder what it's like to wake up to something like that. I could hear his swearing way up here--clear as a bell."

Ben went down to the kitchen and took the bottles of medicine from the table. He opened the door and flung them out into the mud.

"When a man is so afraid of losing his mind that he checks himself into the hospital . . ." Ben heard someone telling a nurse in the hallway. *"We didn't have much choice. Did you see the shape he was in when he got here? He doesn't know where he is half the time? And what he says makes precious little sense."*

Everything there was so white. And the outside was kept locked outside. That was the amazing part: wherever you went there, the outside was always outside.

Ben was sick for a long time. Not sick in a way that he could understand or talk about. Not sick with a bowl of soup or a hot water bottle. No cancer or pneumonia. No bug to blame. Just life.

For several months after coming home, Ben did not dream at all. He was very much aware of that jarring deficiency. He had never felt so out of control. When he tried to write a check, he could not even hold the pen in his hand. He was embarrassed by the slips of his pen. Roving marks everywhere. He was ashamed. His illness could be seen through his disguises.

He couldn't even keep his own thoughts in check. Wild, dangerous, frightening, black thoughts--and they came and went as they darn well pleased.

He took pills to sleep. He took pills to eat. And the pills that were supposed to make him want to get up in the morning only made him feel heavy and lethargic. He lost weight without the pills and gained weight with the pills. And it went on and on . . . like his old friend the rain.

Sometimes, he could not concentrate. There were lost moments of his life. It was like reading every other paragraph of a difficult novel. There were pieces, but the pieces did not connect. They were not pieces from the same puzzle.

It rained that winter . . . and rained . . . and yet the old house stubbornly stood its

ground.

Ben went to the hall closet and tried to open the door. With the whole house leaning on its flank, bending toward the river, the closet door had wedged itself shut. With all his might, Ben pulled at the doorknob. The door broke free with a violence that sent the doorknob banging through the Sheetrock as the door swung wide.

Without bothering to examine the cavity in the wall, Ben took a scrapbook from the shelf and felt his way, with a stiff arm in front of his body, to his chair. He sat down with the black scrapbook in his lap. He couldn't see the scrapbook in the dark. He could only hold it.

The rain continued to fall--like an hourglass of gravel steadily releasing its contents onto the roof. The lights of a tanker illuminated the wild whitecaps on the river. Another sliver of the foundation crumbled, and, as the old house creaked, Ben stood up to stomp.

Had Ben retained his old sense of proportion, had he been able to hold onto that tether of acuity, he would have perceived his activities in a different light. Had he been able to stand apart and look at himself engaged in such foolery with older, healthier eyes, he would have laughed out loud at the sight of it. But with the rain coming down, and the whitecaps whipping up, and Dr. Wolbers in a cozy seaside hotel . . . it all had quite another color to it.