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## **Eating Rattlesnake**

He didn't own the cabin on the cemetery road, half a mile from any other house, but he had come to be the one who decided who could live there. He said I could move in if I shaved my beard off. That seemed cheap enough rent, so I scissored it close and borrowed the tools, shaved my face clean.

I hired out to help him with the foundation for a house he was building back from the paved road down the ridge, at the edge of the canyon, away from all the other houses along the ridge, that had been built close to the road. During that two weeks' work, neither of us said anything about the hair that grew rapidly on my face. We both knew what he had said.

Virginia said I had saved her from suicide seven times. Nobody else on the ridge wanted to talk to her much; she seemed so crazy. Her husband loved her, but he thought she was pretty crazy too. Sometimes, he looked like he thought this late-in-life marriage was too hastily begun. He could have had peace and quiet at seventy.

The eighth time, I was down in the valley. She asked Dutch where his pistol was. Since he had hidden the ammunition and was tired of arguing with her, he told her. He didn't know she had two bullets in her purse. She called him to come in, and he said he would as soon as he got the mail. When he got back to the house, she was dead in the doorway, a bullet in her brain.

I went to the graveside service because I thought Dutch might need me to be there. He was very pale that sunny afternoon, but he nodded at me and smiled.

I've spent parts of many days in that cemetery, two hundred yards from my cabin. Some of the graves are more than a hundred years old. Farthest from the gate, there is a father, mother, and four children. They all died the same day, late winter, 1886. There are fourteen graves marked "unknown," no dates, small concrete headstones.

Children died, a year, two years apart, four years old, six years old, eleven years old. Those from the same family are buried side by side. Near the gate is a concrete headstone marked, "Baby Person."

Geese at a distance sound like hounds baying. They flew up

the canyon and directly over me, just visible twenty feet above me in the fog. I tipped the camera up and released the shutter.

I developed the film that night and printed the pictures the next day. Gravestone, gravestone, gravestone, geese silhouettes against the fog. Airplanes still have so much to learn.

I saw Dutch only once more, just before he sold his place and moved to the city to live with his son. He said, "She couldn't help it. Did you notice? The last few months, her forehead bulged out. I think she had something growing in her brain. She wasn't so crazy when I first met her."

"I did notice that."

"They say people who kill themselves don't go to heaven." He waited for me to say something.

"How would they know that? I think you're right. She couldn't help herself, so who could blame her? Who could hold it against her?"

There's a spring below my cabin, boxed in so the water flows from a pipe. When Joe lived there, he laid plastic pipe up the hill, worked on the fifty-year-old ram pump until he got it working, and piped a slow trickle of water up the hill into the water tower above the cabin so he had running water. I didn't care enough about it to keep the pump running and the pipes and tank patched and clean. I packed household water up to the cabin. I bathed in the water flowing from the pipe. Very cold water, but why carry that much more water up the hill?

Andrea stayed with me three days a week there. The rest of the time, she attended college in the valley. We had thought I would stay with her during her times in the valley, but that quickly dwindled. The city, the people, the college, all were more and more alien to me. I didn't feel comfortable there. I stayed on the ridge most of the time. Pines and fir, locust, white oak, black oak trees grew there, and manzanita, whitethorn, ceonothus brush, grass, flowers, Oregon grape.

Purl and Dutch and some of the other old timers said sixty years ago, you could start at the top of the ridge and walk to the floor of the valley in a day, unimpeded by the dense brush that grows there now. Workers logged off the forest, and the brush grew in thick. Now, even though the second-growth timber is tall and sometimes dense, the brush still grows there, impassably thick in many places.

There are two Indian burial grounds here on the ridge, one of them only a few hundred feet from my cabin. The graveled road to the cemetery bisects that one. Every heavy rain washes dirt out of the cutbank and leaves beads exposed. Mostly glass

trade beads, but a few bone and shell beads that the Indians made.

When I see exposed beads, I brush them out of the road and cover them over with dirt again so no one else will see them. The other burial ground is a mile down the paved road, a hundred yards from the road. Seekers of artifacts have turned it into a trench a hundred feet long, with another, forty-foot long trench, growing at an angle out of one side, both of them from four to five feet deep.

Mrs. Edson has lived on the ridge for fifty years. She showed me four one-gallon jars filled with trade beads and six trays of bone and shell beads. She hasn't dug there for more than ten years. She disapproves of the people who dig there now, without filling it back in when they're finished. "Someone could fall in there and get hurt, and it doesn't look good."

Just beyond that burial ground is a five-acre place where a man collected disabled automobiles for twenty years. When he died, his son sold all the autos to a wrecker who came in and took the engines, radiators, wheels, all the most valuable parts, and left the sheet-metal bodies that aren't worth enough to make hauling them away profitable.

There is a presence on the ridge that is unexplainable in physical terms. Some of the local people have experienced it, and some of them call it evil. Old Annie Trembo, who lives down past the end of the pavement, says it's something the Indians left when they died. Throughout this area, they were shot on sight by the white settlers, even though these Indians, the Modocs, had no tradition of war and offered the settlers neither threat nor resistance.

Annie said, "It isn't ghosts, you know; it isn't spirits of people who died, nor any part of them. Why would they stay here? This world became very ugly to them, and after all their terribly hard times, when they died, they were released to something far more beautiful than they had known on this earth even at the very best of times.

"Most of the white people who live up here don't have the sensitivity to know of any spiritual presence. Without a better-developed attunement to spiritual presence, the white men, who so greedily coveted and took away the Modoc's paradise here on earth, will never experience the state of being the Modocs found when their spirits left this earth." We drank tea from small cups. We sat quietly, thinking about what she had said, about the ridge, about the Modocs, about the past. Sun shone in her windows and warmed us. I wanted her to tell me

more about the ridge, but I liked our quietness too much to ask her any questions.

I spent parts of some moonlit nights sitting on the bench in the cemetery. Oak leaves turned color and began to fall. My feet kicked noisily through dead leaves when I walked.

At the top of the ridge, just behind the cemetery, I found mountain lion tracks. One late night, I woke and heard it cough on the ridge behind my cabin.

Andrea called from outside in the early morning. "Do you want to see a big rattlesnake? Wake up and get out here if you do."

He lay across the driveway, watching Andrea. Our half-grown cat came out of the cabin and attacked the rattlesnake, just playing, but the snake took it seriously and struck at her twice, then started to coil for some serious cat-killing effort. "Get away, you stupid cat." I couldn't stop her nor catch her, so I grabbed the shovel and cut off the snake's head. For the first time, it buzzed its rattles.

"I don't know if I would have wanted it to live here anyway. Might make me pretty jumpy if I was walking around on a dark night. Now that I've killed him, I guess we'd better eat him." I scooped up the head with the shovel. The snake's fully-alert eyes fixed on me. He showed me his fangs. I buried the head below the fence.

His body was still active. I reached for it several times before I said, "I hate to admit it, but I just can't make myself handle it. Can you do it?"

"I think so. Let me have your knife." She gutted the snake and skinned it and cut it into five pieces. Then I could handle it, though I still jumped a little when the pieces flexed this way and that. I put the cast-iron lid on the frying pan to hold them in. "Hard to convince this one he's dead."

We pulled the flesh from the bones with our teeth. I said, "I've heard people say it tastes like chicken, but I don't think so. What do you think it tastes like?"

"Rattlesnake. Good, tough rattlesnake."

Andrea stayed overnight in the valley. I sat at my desk near midnight. The hair on the back of my neck rose. A chill ran down my spine.

I think someone stands somewhere behind the cabin and watches me through the window. I tell myself I'm having an attack of active imagination. Then my dog, Kylie, starts a low, steady growl from his spot under the corner of the house. If it were an animal out there, he'd be barking.

I slumped off my chair onto the floor, rolled to the switch, and shut off the overhead light, unplugged the desk lamp, then lay in the dark, listening. I crawled down into the kitchen and took a long time opening the door, rolled across the porch, onto the ground and over to the corner of the house, hoping to see where Kylie is looking, but it's too dark. The moon begins to rise over the ridge across the canyon. Something moves in the manzanita out at the edge of the bluff. Noisy. It crashes around in the brush.

The sun came up. I investigated every square inch from right behind the cabin to a hundred yards down into the canyon. I found a place in the manzanita brush where the leaves have been churned up. Some of the branches have been broken, smashed down, bark skinned off. I find no tracks to the place of disturbance nor away from it. A small pool of fluid in the dry leaves smells like, looks like a mixture of blood and oil.

The next night, I watched from my sitting spot on the porch as the moon rose above the pine forest across the canyon. Then Kylie started growling. He came from his corner under the house and lay down in front of me, looking out toward the manzanita, keeping up a steady, fierce growl. I look and look in the moonlight, but I don't see anything.

Kylie leaped up and ran snapping and growling out across the open ground, then circled back, obviously trying to bite and run off something that dodges him in a crazy zig-zag pattern, something he's biting down toward, so that it must be smaller than he is, but something that even in the bright moonlight, even as clearly as I see Kylie, who is mostly black, I cannot see. But I do hear something, and I do smell something, oil and blood and matted fur. Kylie finally chases it back into the brush and comes back to lie down, panting, in front of me.

In the morning light, dog tracks. Plenty of dog tracks, but nothing else. I talked to Kylie about it, but he just knew what he knew and kept his mouth shut.

Fall rains began. Heavy rain, day after day, all day and all night. I put on my poncho and walked in rain. Hard wind scourged the ridge. Pine trees bent so far over the cemetery road, I thought they would break or uproot. It might be dangerous to walk past them. I walked past them, past the cemetery, and down into the canyon, just walking in wind and rain.

On my way back, I walked into the cemetery. The gate had blown open. I didn't try to close it.

Virginias's grave had caved in. They didn't pack the dirt as

they filled the hole, or the coffin was flimsy and collapsed. Or both.

Development spreads up the ridge. Purl paid four-hundred dollars for his two-acre place in 1936. The corporation that's building mobile home and modular home parks farther down the ridge offered him thirty thousand for it. He refused their offer and told them to stay off his place. "Don't come back," he said.

Indian summer visited the ridge for a week. Then snow fell.

Andrea doesn't come up the mountain as much anymore. Even with the stove going full blast, most of the cabin is too cold to be comfortable. I said, "Try typing with gloves on." I want to help her, but I don't know what to do.

"There's room for you at my place. It's warm, and it won't cost you any more to live down there." I wanted to go, but I couldn't leave the mountain. I moved closer to the stove that burned wood and heated the cabin.

"I'm like Purl. Can't pry me off the ridge with a crowbar." I wanted to reach out and touch her. I was afraid to touch her. I didn't understand enough about what was happening to me to try to explain to her.

"His place is well-insulated and warm."

"He needs it that way. He's seventy-six years old."

I still bathe in the rush of water from the pipe at the spring. I used to wash my hair there, but I've eliminated that part. Every time I put my head into the fast-flowing water, my sight, hearing, and sense of smell are blocked, and I'm nearly overwhelmed by panic. Violent images of being brutally attacked fill my mind. I chide my active imagination but wash my hair in the cabin, with the door locked.

I walk along the ridge in the snow. It's quiet. Snow falls. My feet crunch softly into snow. I hear nothing else.

A large bobcat stands in the snow on the cemetery road, down by the turn. We look at each other a moment, and the cat disappears into leafless winter brush. Wind drifts snow over cat tracks. My dog stays close by my side and doesn't say anything.

I turn and look behind me. Wind blows snow over my tracks until all along the top of the ridge, there is only quiet, undisturbed snow.