

Jerry McGahan

an excerpt from

Reclamations

Whoever is in charge of Johnny's calamities—earth, fate, God—has a fondness for September. Four years ago, two weeks after 9/11, his favorite dog of all time, a seven-year-old Lab in the prime of his life, chased a pheasant across the county road, got hit by a truck, and died curled up in a culvert. Three years before that, Johnny's ex-wife was diagnosed with breast cancer, node involvement. Two years before that she'd left him, and nine years before *that* his infant daughter, Jasa, almost died of an intussusception, a telescoped intestine.

Now, this September: as a sophomore safe at the university, Jasa's applying for a job as an accompanier in Guatemala. *Accompanier* is a word his dictionary rightfully excludes, a made-up word, a hand-holding euphemism for a witness-protection program. Johnny's daughter has volunteered to live among 150 witnesses to village genocide, testifiers the accused powers would like to snuff. Jasa's small presence is supposed to make that more difficult.

Jasa? Jesus Christ.

And of course this is when bears return to plunder. September is their month, too, although ravages can leak into October, if these marauders get thwarted about anything they wanted but didn't get in September. So bears, of all things, are what he brings up when Ramona from the Tribal Lands arrives. She's there with the morning sun, eight on the nose, just like she said, so he hasn't had time to clean up the mess, to clean out the culprit he's just discovered.

"Bear?" she says.

"Yeah, or I would've been ready. I've got the papers you sent right here." He's rustling in his desk. She stands in the doorway. "Coffee, you want coffee?"

"The bear is still here?"

"Yeah, I was just about to blast him."

"Blast him?"

Johnny stops digging, rubs his face with one hand, pauses the hand over his nose and eyes as if it were a curtain that might change the scene. "You want him?" he asks. "You can have him."

"Where is he?"

"In the backyard. About a hundred feet up in a ponderosa."

"Can I see him?"

"Sure. I'll see if I can get him down for you."

"How do you do that?" Her waist-length black hair ripples down—waves left behind, he's thinking, from braids she's just unplaited. She has a wonderful nose, with an arc that reflects the same filet-blade line of her stance: long and clean and easy, relaxed but bright.

"I told you." He goes to the corner behind the couch and draws out the gun.

"You're not doing that." Her voice skids.

"You're the one who wants to see him." He goes out the back door.

She rushes behind. "Quit messing with me. I just wanted to see him."

"So there he is." Johnny points up. "Just below the top."

She shields her eyes with one hand. "I can't see. The dark part, you mean?"

He backs away from her, cracks the gun, slips in a shell. He backs up farther until he has about an eighty-yard sighting of the bear's body humped around the tree. The bear's sitting on a limb, his head behind the trunk. She's right—there isn't much to see. Johnny aims and fires. The bear sits upright, whoofs, stands on the limb, climbs to a higher limb, and then backs down, still whoofing loudly. The pink of his mouth shows, the reflection from an eye. But he isn't going anywhere; Johnny can see that.

Ramona rushes at Johnny again, yelling about what he can't do, about reporting him. He breaks the gun slowly, slides out the empty shell. Ramona's open mouth is startlingly large, but it fits right with that nose, those long cheeks. She has a husky voice full of command and authentic rage. He holds up the shell. "What?" she shouts.

"Look . . . birdshot. It won't penetrate at this distance. Just stings."

Ramona's eyes glitter, her lips pressed tight, that large mouth clamped. She steps toward him. "Why are you trying to get my hackles up?"

"It's not you. I'd like to get him out of here."

"Why should he come down when you're shooting at him?"

“Seems sensible to me.”

“But if he comes down, it only brings him closer to you and your gun.”

Johnny’s still thinking about her remark that he was doing this to raise her hackles.

“Leave him alone,” she scolds. “He’ll come down and leave, won’t he?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“It’s a little complicated.”

“Complicated?”

He turns away. “You’re here to arrange an easement, aren’t you, not to defend my bears?”

She doesn’t say anything, and they trail back into the house, stand on either side of the kitchen table. “People who want conservation easements,” she observes, “aren’t usually the type who shoot at bears.”

“I’m not a type, and bears are a pain in the ass. You never said whether you wanted coffee.”

“I’m all right.”

“That means no?”

“Right. Is that your daughter?” She’s looking at the picture taped to the side of the refrigerator, Jasa walking on her hands on the flower garden path, nasturtiums up to her elbows. He nods, turns, runs water in the teakettle and puts it on the stove. “She’s at the U.”

There’s a long gap. “You must be proud,” she says finally, softly.

“Why’s that?” He turns to glance at her, catches what looks like a dusting of pain. She sharpens, gathers, but it’s lousy cover for a blast that’s hit her from somewhere. “How about a piece of pie?” he follows.

“Pie?”

He turns again, studies her. He’s lived on the rez thirty years now, enough time to cultivate a decent appreciation for the reticence common to many of his neighbors, an appreciation he may have once confused with indifference. “Raspberry pie.”

“All right,” she says.

“So maybe you’ll go for coffee now that you got pie on the way?”

Maybe she doesn’t like the playing, or maybe she does. He sees her mouth move, a flicker she can’t hide. “All right,” she says again.

He goes to the fridge. “Go ahead,” he says, “lay out your stuff. Give me your spiel. I’m listening.”

She complies, pulling up a chair and opening her folder. "First thing," she says, "this easement obligates the tribe to make sure what you donate stays donated. So long after both of us are gone, the tribe has to go on as protector. Which means they don't want to take on something like that unless the donation is worth all the trouble."

"You want my house, too?" He licks the knife after he's made his cut. She watches until he puts it in the sink, goes for the spatula.

"Quit jabbing at everything I say," she says. "No more development, or not much anyway. We'd have to agree to a limit. That's the point, of course: no subdividing, and it has to stay one-family. No commercial logging, no mining, and no grazing since the acreage isn't that large and the river bottom is so sensitive. You don't have livestock anyway, do you?"

"Just bears." The pot whistles. He pours the water in the press, gives her a fork and a slice of pie on his red Fiestaware, sits, and then gets up again for napkins.

"We'd like to stipulate what the place can be used for—economically, I mean. Bed and breakfast, that sort of thing."

"Nope, not that one. I saw that in those attachments you sent, but I can't do that. No stipulations on how to make a living. The rest I'll do, but whoever's here has to make a living, and it isn't right for me to lock them out of situations I can't even imagine. You'll have to figure out if the rest is enough. That and the easement on the road I don't have yet."

"The lane in, you mean?"

He likes the way she holds her head up only partway, lifts her eyes so that her gaze ricochets off her brow. "Yeah," he says, "that access. It's revocable. They got all the papers and stuff for a regular one, but I haven't heard a thing. It isn't supposed to be any problem. I give you all the development rights, and you give me a road easement. I think they forgot, that's all. They built me the road, for Christ's sake. If you can figure that out."