

JUDGES' COMMENTS

November manages a narrative voice that is raw as life. Unsparing, funny, and heartbreaking at once, the story finds beauty in the forsaken, and it offers it to the reader in striking images with a fine balance of hope and despair.



November

By BENJAMIN HERTWIG Illustration by BYRON EGGENSCHWILER

KENDALL USED TO DRIVE ME really bloody crazy. The first time I saw him he was trimming his beard into the sink where I was supposed to be washing that morning's dishes. I yelled at him: he laughed. I told him to get his ass out of my kitchen, that I had work to do. From then on out he thought we were friends. He'd swoop into the shelter every day at 6:40, coming right to the back and shouting at me in his dried-out morning voice: *Frank, stop working so hard!* The fact that folks were hungover and tired of his routine, yelling at him from across the drop-in to shut the hell up, didn't change a thing. Every morning. But he'd say it like I wasn't working hard, when I was, and he knew it. I'd have been in the back all morning, slapping margarine onto three hundred pieces of toast, slopping porridge into three hundred little plastic bowls. I'd have been up since 4:30. It was hot like hell back there. Kendall was so full of shit.

BUNNY AND HIM would sit at the table right to the left of the serving window. As soon as I rolled open the shutters and started handing out food, Kendall would start telling Bunny these bullshit stories—especially when they were on the smash together—and he always spoke loud enough so that I'd hear. Bunny went along with it. Bunny went along with anyone, anything. Bunny had injured his head years earlier, and his eyes didn't look in the same direction anymore, probably from a beating, maybe from a fall. But who knows these things? Either way, Bunny wasn't so much full of shit as he didn't know Kendall's shit from the truth. Bunny was cheerful and glad to share breakfast beers with anyone who offered, and their conversations were like—

Kendall: I was in Vietnam, *wasn't* I, buddy?

Bunny: Oh yeah, you were in Vietnam, buddy.

Kendall: And what happened in Vietnam?

Bunny: You killed a lot of people.

Kendall: No, I meant *what* happened in Vietnam?

Bunny: You saved me, buddy.

Kendall: That's right. I *saved* you. Pulled you up into a helicopter when they were shooting at you, didn't I?

Bunny: That's right, buddy, pulled me up into a helicopter.

Kendall: That's right.

Bunny: That's right.

THEY'D TUCK INTO ONE another, smiling and satisfied at the collaboration like children—drifting asleep, head leaning up against head, oblivious to the world around them, not lining up for the porridge or the toast. Then Kendall would grunt awake and harass me for a coffee at 9:30, knowing full well that coffee is served at 7:15 and 10:45. That's it. Pre post-time wake-up coffee, he called it. At 9:45 he'd leave to cash in his cans, as the liquor stores open at 10, and he'd return a half hour later with a few full cans or a big bottle. He'd sit at that table, right in front of my serving

window again. He'd put the can under the table, secret like, and crack it. I wasn't official drop-in staff and it wasn't my job to enforce the rules, so I didn't say anything. Depending on his mood he'd share the beers with Bunny. More often than not his mood was good in the morning, before he started drinking, and Bunny would get some beer. They'd take turns sipping, Kendall looking around suspiciously, tucking the can into his coat like some kind of a mother animal tucking a baby into a fold of fur.

The thing about Kendall's fictions was that they weren't even good lies. You'd never feel like they were true enough to be true. I'd heard all the stories before—some days he fought in Korea, some days in Vietnam, once in Afghanistan, and some days he was too drunk and didn't fight at all. On those days he'd fall from the table and spill his beer on the floor, getting real angry—*motherfuckers*, all of you." Then he'd pass out, a five-dollar bill dangling from his pocket or coins jangling out onto the floor. I'd tuck the money back into his pocket, hoping he wouldn't get jumped for whatever he had left. There's only so much you can do. I couldn't exactly follow the guy around.

THE NEXT DAY HE WOULDN'T remember a damn thing, wouldn't even remember where he'd slept the night before. He'd want to talk to me about something real important like the place of Tyvek homewrap in keeping moisture out of a house's foundation, or he'd complain about Edmonton and the Oilers, say that he wanted to move back to Vancouver and cheer for those Sedin twins again, or at the very least find a place here in town where the drywall was the calibre of the Hotel Vancouver. He'd make outrageous claims—that he'd fought Muhammad Ali before Ali was a Muslim, or that part of Jesus Christ's robe had been found in an empty parking lot in Chinatown, or that he'd recorded an album with Neil Young in the '80s, the same Neil Young who had billions in his chequing account but still ate at Wendy's, just like a normal person.

"I KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT MUSIC to probably play on an album for

Michael Bubel-ay," he told me.

"Boo-blay," I told him. "Boo-blay. Two syllables, not three."

"Bubel-ay, like I said," he said. He was so full of shit.

I'd serve him breakfast five days a week, lunch on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. He hated anything dry and loved gravy and sauces. No matter what the sauce was or what I put in it, he'd always ask for double. "You'll be swimming in it," I told him.

"At least I'd know it's there," he said.

Kendall died in November.

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I HAD BEEN HAVING SINUS infections for a few weeks, just a throbbing above my eye, and the pain got worse as the day went on. It got pretty bad. I couldn't get into the clinic during the day because of my lunch shift, so I went to emergency in the evening, after work. There were all kinds of people in there: an agitated guy from the drop-in in head to toe Jordan gear. He kept walking by the security guard, saying things like "I'm gonna start self-medicating right away" or "this is *bullshit* man, *bullshit*." He'd sit down for 30 seconds, then spring up and start the pacing all over again. He asked me for a smoke at least three times, and I had to tell him that I didn't smoke anymore, which was true. There was an old toaster in the garbage can by the intake window. A woman was passed out in the corner, a bit of her belly exposed, a tattoo of a blue butterfly on her stomach, and there was a woman who asked the security guard if they could turn on the hockey game. The guard said, "They don't have

the channel," and the woman said, "Why don't they got the channel? That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

WHEN THE NURSE FINALLY called me in, they led me to a cubicle and told me to take off my shirt, but not the pants, and told me to wait. The nurse turned off the lights and for an hour I was alone in that space where everything is loud and quiet. I heard the rolling wheels of a bed and loud coughing. Someone said, "Don't you *fucking* touch me." Then he said, "Sorry about the fucking fridge."

I'D RECOGNIZE THOSE FUCKS anywhere: Kendall.

A thick plastic curtain was separating me from him and the medical people, but I could hear what they were saying: "He has pneumonia, both lungs." Kendall was responding to them with words that I could no longer understand and it just sounded like blabbering. "Hook him up," the doctor said, "I'll be back in a bit." I could see the reflection of their shoes on the floor as they walked away—someone turned off the light and it was quiet again.

"Kenny," I said. "Kenny, is that you?" He didn't respond.

"Kenny," I said. "It's me." He coughed. "Sorry," he said, and didn't say anything else. I heard him breathing, deep-like.

I WOKE AND THE LIGHTS WERE on and a tall nurse with a red face was in my cubicle.

"How are you feeling?" she said.

"That was Kendall," I said.

"Who?" she said.

"Old guy, tattoos on his hands," I said.

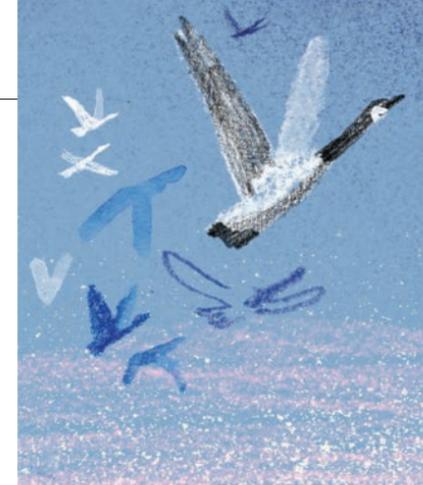
"How did you know?" she said.

"I heard him," I said. "I heard him. Where'd they take him?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "Nurses can't say those things. Has to do with the privacy."

She changed the IV bag and pushed her gloved hand up against my forehead. "He's not gonna make it," she said.

THEY PRESCRIBED ME A BIG bottle of horse-pill antibiotics, sent me for a few more tests, then sent me home. A few weeks later I saw Bunny downtown



by Rogers Place, the new Oilers arena. All the folks in their Connor McDavid jerseys were shouting and jostling and walking together to the game. Some of the men in nice shoes and fancy haircuts were sharing a joint and one of the guys tugged on the beard of a man who was sleeping on the bench. He was new to the neighbourhood and I didn't know his name. The man woke up, confused and sad. I would have liked to see those slick assholes try that on Kenny. The cops were roaming the side streets in pairs, and trying to keep the hockey crowd away from the homeless crowd, and everyone was getting all rowdy. It had just snowed, the first real snow of the year, and cars were getting stuck all over the damn place. Bunny had snow in his hair and a beer in his hand and looked at me and said, "Kenny's dead." Part of me had known it already for days.

I DON'T MISS KENDALL AT ALL, I really don't. He used to drive me crazy. Seven years of driving me up the wall—right into the wall, more like it. I still serve lunch on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. I've stopped serving breakfast and serve dinner instead. It's a lot quieter now without him. I sleep 'til six most days and have lots of time to myself. It's good. Life is good. Time doesn't stop for any of us but some things have even gone back to the way they used to be. There's this large slop pail underneath the water cooler just to the right of my serving window, for instance. Every day it amazes me, like an obscene, bucket-sized Kinder Surprise, the sort of thing that Stephen King writes whole books about. I started placing the pail

there a decade ago so that folks could dump out their coffee and juice dregs and put the empty cups in the bucket for pick-up and washing. It works—sort of. But it also ends up collecting used Kleenex, great gobs of multi-coloured phlegm that rise to the top and join together like the islands of ocean plastic I saw on TV. Chocolate bar wrappers and yogourt cups, half-eaten sandwiches, condom wrappers, condoms, the little orange stoppers from used needles, one time a large leather work boot. I got so used to Kendall grabbing the bucket at the end of the day and emptying it that I forgot for a few years how nasty it was. Every day—drinking or not—he'd haul it out back and strain the sloshing swamp water through the sewer grate in the alley, then bring the empty bucket back for me to rinse out. This one time he came back into the drop-in and had spilled half the thing all over his shirt. He asked if he could go into my kitchen and clean himself off. I said he could. He took his shirt off and threw it right into the damn sink and started scrubbing. As he scrubbed he told me a story about hitchhiking out of Calgary and sleeping in a farmer's field when no one would pick him up from the side of the road. The wheat was stubble and sliced up through the soles of his runners. There was frost on his sleeping bag in the morning and the trees were white with it too. Just after sunrise God flew down and visited him as a flock of geese, he said. They swooped down and dotted the field all around his body. The geese didn't honk at all and he felt warm, like he was sleeping next to a fire. When he woke again in the afternoon the field was empty and there was a tuna sandwich in wax paper by his head, a can of coke by his feet, a wool blanket over his body. "Must have been the geese that left it," he said. "And the sandwich was good too." Then he left the kitchen with his wet shirt in hand, bare-chested, and to the hoots and hollers of half the drop-in he gave a deep bow and walked out of the building and into the sunshine. ■

Benjamin Hertwig's first book of poetry, Slow War, was a finalist for a 2017 Governor General's Literary Award.