

LORI MCNULTY

## BATTLE OF THE BOW

TWO YEARS AFTER MARCUS DIED, a man arrived in a blue sedan.

It was like watching the Flood in reverse, Noah spilling out from his Ark, extending his peachy-pink flesh to the prairie faithful assembled on the old stone church steps.

Four men in city suits and soft jowls climbed out into the Alberta cold, glassy-eyed as mounted deer, blinking frost from their lashes.

They came in a blizzard. Sinking in a foot of fresh snow, the Reverend and his supporters leaned hard against the frigid November wind, while the church committee circled them, cupped hands around powdery hot chocolate.

They came in a vision. Needing to bring his lagging congregation back to life (barely a trickle above twenty on a chilly Sunday), Pastor Sherman had sent his prayers south from Vermouth County along the latitude of the Lord.

On a stream of perdition and penance came the answer: the Reverend Evan Nack.

Welcome to Vermouth, I hear Pastor Sherman say, extending his poultry-pocked hand to the Reverend, leading the young man and his supporters to the church basement. We crowd around for a closer look. The Reverend's buffed oxfords clack, clack along the polished floor where I mop up after Thursday Bingo. He can't be more than thirty-four, slim, his tawny skin bright as a new penny. His eyes are as clear as the Bow River. His smile, nearly sacred.

Beneath his long wool overcoat, the Reverend's cotton shirt is buttoned low, revealing an unwelcome wilderness. Pastor Sherman averts his eyes, but I can guess what he's thinking. No burning bush here, but maybe salvation's not out of his reach either.

They say Pastor Sherman arrived here as a young man with a group of believers who drove west from Alberta's Bible Belt, hitching a ride from

Highway 21 to heaven. Setting up on the south bank of the Bow, they built the church Gothic style with front-gabled roof, one circular stained-glass window. They were pioneers, eager to bear witness before God. By the time the droughts hit in the thirties, membership had begun to wane, then a resurgence filled the pews back up in the fifties, spreading east to Saskatchewan. Marcus gave the town a reason to stray for good. His parishioners' faith worn thin, grown weary from the town's trials, Pastor's taken to purchasing ready-to-deliver sermons with his meagre offerings, steadying himself on his righteous pulpit. A mail-order mini sermon runs \$6.99, postage paid. I call it a revelation at any price.

The crowd gathers around lace-covered refreshment tables. I get back to the mopping while, after a short tour of the adjoining rectory, Pastor Sherman leads the young Reverend through the dusty facts. These are perilous times on the prairies, he intones. A decade of drought. Last summer, the worst dry spell on record. Farmers forced to sell their cattle or face a shortage of feed grain. No good, sir, no good.

Then the impatient herd erupts. Joannie Peen, with her "Praise the Lord" and "Peace be with you," just one everlasting wail from the Pentecostals, steers the Reverend toward her tray of pinwheel sandwiches. Sampling the tuna and pickle, he smoothes a dovetail of fine auburn hair along his nape. I notice a white strip running along his hairline, betraying the golden edge of a Utah tan. He's got a sunny sheen, his skin newly minted. Moving away, I slide my dirty mop into the kitchen drain where it coughs up a deep belching sound.

Always nice to see a caring Christian woman, the Reverend says, smiling as he turns my way.

I see you've met the Widow Thérèse. Miss Morris steps in between us. She hated Marcus. Blamed him, like all the rest. She and her Divine Judgement, calling Marcus out as some eternal sinner. This from a woman married three times. When Marcus died, she showed up at our house with a half-eaten macaroni casserole. Told me to repent, told me to pray. Told Zane his father had failed us all because Marcus could not summon the faith. A closed casket. Marcus' face torn away. And here she is telling me about the blessed Father. Not the father that came up bloated and raw.

The Pastor tugs at the Reverend's elbow, turning him around to face the expectant crowd. Blessed friends, Reverend Evan Nack says in a voice that seems to call out from the canyons, we hope to see you all at the Meet-

ing tomorrow. Bring your friends! Then laying his hands on the elder man's sloped shoulders, the Reverend promises the Meeting will change things.

Change comes when you're looking sideways. Or thinking you're sailing along doing just fine. Sometimes it comes towing an old utility trailer. Marcus streamed into my life in a half-ton Ford truck that looked like a grain elevator peeling paint. I was a seventeen-year-old mess of a girl pouring coffee in a busy highway truck stop in 1962. He was thin with ragged, worn black bangs, his slate blue eyes swallowing the light. He ordered fried liver and bacon with fries, ate looking down, not once bothering to pick up his fork. Figured his leather boots were older than me.

There are men who move mountains. Men who conquer the world, soil clinging to their boots. Marcus was a battered bridge over a spent creek. He held the hum of misery in his hands. Told me terrible things. I knew wherever Marcus had begun in this world, there were surely fields of fire. But his heart song was pure. So true he kept it knotted in a burlap sack and pitched to the river bottom. In his wind-bitten skin, in his coarse, flecked beauty, I hoped to find something of my own.

We followed the Bow River to Vermouth. Vermouth County was named after Vern Clempt, whose people had first settled the region in 1897. Running south along the Bow River, the land was wide and flat, enticing farmers from the Ukraine, from England and France, cattle and plough-born folks, too root-bound to catch the oil fever that later gutted so many southern Alberta towns. They put them together—Vern, the river mouth—and clapped their hands.

That's when the river began rising.

The Bow is a steady mountain river pouring like an icy-cold drip from the Bow Glacier. Along the river's mid-section, the current cuts through rolling foothills, across grain fields, the water stitched together by criss-crossing bridges. We settled into a small house on the east side of the river screened by wild shrub and old poplar. We were 2000 strong then in Vermouth, close enough to know your business, tough enough lend a hand with harvest. We told folks we had married in Saskatchewan where my parents had a row crop farm. I invented a wedding in their huge vegetable garden, complete with ribbon-wrapped carrot bouquet. When Zane came along, pale-headed, hidden beneath a leafy cover of lies, we called him our cauliflower boy. I knew when I crossed that divide, there was no turning back.

In a faith-forged remote Saskatchewan town, whispers of a girl gone wrong. Once the truth catches hold, you go. Any wickedness but the wickedness of a woman. Life before Vermouth County dissolved in me like the silt-bottomed Bow shedding its glacial deep into the mouth of the South Saskatchewan River.

We dug in for the long haul where I poured some of my darkest secrets into Marcus. He did not speak to me of angels. Did not ask me to crawl on my knees before the crumbling gates. Never mind, he said, sink your hands into the minerals and mud. No sacrifice in soil and sun. They say the Lord only punishes those he welcomes as his children. But if God disciplines us on earth, does that mean we're legitimate? Children of God? Children of mercy? Until Marcus passed, I didn't know.

Thirty-two of the faithful arrive for Meeting Day One. Some curious—the novelty of a Revival revved up the town—others close to tears. Miss Morris takes a deep whiff of the ammonia-slicked basement floor and topples back on her folding metal chair. We right her, she's fine, enough to send a bitter glance back my way. The room holds over one hundred chairs, so I pass the time counting the empty seats between me and salvation. Seventeen. Empty, then saint, saint, empty, sinner, saint, empty. Beside me, wool-bound in his rusty brown-checked suit, Zane sneaker-drums the seat ahead of him. He's a mini Marcus, right down to his brooding eyes. He can feel the town's coldness creep in. He's come bearing crosses and looking for truth. What would Marcus say seeing Zane now? Driven to please, eager to praise, so sure he is meant to restore the fallen glory his father left behind.

A live microphone arcs out from a walnut-coloured altar that stands mid-room. I can hear the Grayson twins wheeze all the way to the back row; they tug on twisty blue-grey beards, making deep nests with their fingers. Along the opposite wall, a spotlight illuminates a billowing blue velvet curtain, a soft, blue tide against the prairie gray. The prayer room, the supporters suggest, is reserved for the lost-at-large.

Gospel notes drown the room in cherry tones, sweet, lustrous notes streaming from two walnut speakers positioned on tall wooden pillars on either side of the room. The paper-faced congregation begins to clap as if suffering a sing-along. I tap my fingertips to count the paydaydays in December. When the lights dim, Reverend Evan Nack strides down centre aisle, his copper face lit by a single spotlight.

Bring me your sinners. He holds his arms out, ready to carry his great burden. Are you a sinner? He glares at Zane, me, Miss Morris, Joanie Peen, the Greysons; his eyes stray across every wretched lap.

We hear a soft thump beneath our feet. Windows rattle, a purse drops from a nervous lap. Zane squeezes my hand. We turn to look out the frosted basement window, trying to spot the semi-trailer rumbling off the highway. But the road is clear.

The Reverend's face turns the colour of blanched wheat. He slips his right arm inside his navy blazer. Dear God, the man's having a stroke, Miss Morris gasps, leaping to her feet. We watch, too stunned to move. When the Reverend finally extracts his hand, an orange flame bursts from his palm. Fire! Pastor Sherman mutters, meekly. We all point to Reverend Evan Nack's hand as he staggers forward, then with a swooping arc, pitches the flame out.

Here, he says, fleshy palm facing outward, is the devil we cast out today.

It's a conjurer's trick, I know it. Zane won't release my hand. I don't want him to.

What's an unbeliever you ask? The Reverend's neck strains as he twists around to glance back at the blue velvet prayer room. An unbeliever is the devil's possession.

A spotlight hits a man who emerges from between the parted curtain. He shields his face from the lights, stumbles out toward the front of the room. His name slips through the crowd. Is that Daryl? I cover my mouth when I see that it's Daryl Jane dropping to his knees.

This decade has been your trial, the Reverend says, gesturing at Daryl, whose farm, whose life was the first to fail. The years have sewn despair into your hearts. It's time to welcome the Holy Spirit back in, he intones.

The Reverend's supporters take Daryl's arms, as they lead him into the prayer room. The crowd jumps to its feet. Drowning in a resounding sea of Amen, I haul Zane off his seat and out the church front doors.

Amen. A man. Dearly departed. Lost between sorrow and sleep that night, Marcus comes to me in a purple dawn. The Lord isn't here to heal you, he hisses. He's a menace with a master plot. You've got to purge the enemy, or pay for his crimes.

Until I met Marcus, I was half-done, like a foam cake bent on not rising, though you whip, you whip. A woman, nothing but air-beaten eggs to her. He was my power outage. Poof. He came in, and all the noise went out of my head. A current ran through his fingers, I could feel it when he held me. He would vibrate just sitting there. No one took any notice. They needed him. He could fix anything with an engine. Combines, hay balers, swathers, crop dryers, grain augers, manure spreaders, he would tune, test, overhaul, and tear them down without a bit of training. Farmers called on him day or night. Especially during harvest. Always in motion. Yet mostly he kept to himself, didn't much like when the work kept him indoors. One day when I came home early from my shift at the grocery, I found Marcus alone at the table, staring straight ahead. His knuckles had been ripped raw. Torque wrench splattered with blood next to him. Bolt blocked, he said when I drew near. His hands were shaking. Not enough tension, he repeated like a man hypnotized. There was blood all over the kitchen floor. Fingers twitching, a terrible knee-jiggle. I tried to hold his leg still while I worked the wound though his eyes drifted so far I could not call him back. Next day, word was he'd seen a hired man lose three fingers to a grain auger blade. That was the way it was with Marcus. Some days he just lost the thread.

Zane is in tears, pitching a fit all morning until I agree to go back to the Meeting. He is full of rancour; the only child of a man blamed for drawing the town into despair. Redemption is luring him out to sea. Okay, I say, I'll take you. But I'll be damned if I don't drag him back if he strays too far.

Sixty-one file into the church basement for Day Two. The Reverend calls sinners to come forth. No body rises, no soul divides. Then Mavella hobbles toward the Reverend, keeping a tight grip on her walker's sheepskin handles. She is one of the sanitizers, the Sunday best. First in line for prayer, last to claim penance, her thoughts only calmed by communion with her Lord.

Keeping one hand on her walker, she places a tentative hand on the Reverend's waist. He looks up at her as if she's just appeared to him from a painted sky.

The Holy Spirit is in you, he intones. Mavella's head begins to loll with joy. He leans in, lightly touching her sleeve. And the devil is in you too!

My Spirit. My Saviour. My Lord. My Life. Mavella's lost in an incantatory rhythm. She can't recite a recipe yet here she is summoning the sacred in velvet tones. The Reverend takes her face between his hands.

You want to heal, but are you ready to hear? Are you ready to invite the Holy Spirit back?

We watch Mavella crouch, impossibly, to join the Reverend on bended knee. It's only a bad hip, but still—

Praise Him! Save her! The crowd chants from mouths they hardly move. He's the lion tamer with his terrible whip, beating her demons down. Zane is spellbound. I want to snap the whip. Wake up! Wake up!

Mavella crosses her arms, holding herself together. The devoted begin clapping a rhythmic confession. Mavella struggles to her feet. A sound like the whisking pull of a broom in my ear. A voice. Are you listening? Can you hear?

Deception loves its disciples, Marcus whispers. If the Lord is a fisherman, he's strictly a catch-and-release man. Soon as he grabs hold of your love he'll let go.

The Reverend chants, he's folding Mavella's sins tight to his chest. When she reaches full height, the Reverend collapses.

Was it ice on the roof, or tree branches groaning at dawn? The first signs of a coming harsh winter are easy to spot. Bees build their hives higher in the trees, apple skins are tougher. Corn husks grow thicker than a large man's bicep. Folks here say Marcus brought the desert to town when he died. Say his wanting soul left us drowning in sin. But it was away from my soul I ran when we moved to Vermont.

Some of this I tell the Reverend Evan Nack when we meet in the lobby of the Travelodge for private counselling. Two cream coffees, matching plaid recliners, a frosted dish of pillow-shaped mints between us.

I don't know why I'm here, I tell him. But those are some fancy tricks you learned.

He pushes the tissue box toward me, then folds his hands in his lap. When a man dies without calling the faith to him, the Reverend begins.

You don't know anything about him, I interrupt.

He lowers his head. Matthew says make a tree good, and its fruit will be good. Make a tree bad, and its fruit will be bad.

Are you saying my Marcus was rotten fruit? That he had no right to seed?

The Reverend relents like a boy shunned. In a Christian land, he begins again.

Your Christians didn't come. No one came. Mrs. Dodd showed up with her Bible and basket of bruised peaches. Joannie Peen with her burnt

casserole. And me, alone, with my boy to raise, needing a break on the mortgage, a beef stew without freezer burn. So don't lay your piety at my table, Reverend. Don't go telling me these pilgrims are making progress.

The Reverend removes his jacket, folding it in his lap. Lingered over his strong shoulders I look down, notice my hand in his. His golden eyes flecked green, are deep tunnels, they bore breath from me.

You were left with your brave heart, your boy.

Hold the fear, he squeezes my hand, find the shore. And suddenly I see to the bottom of the Bow, river rock at my heels, a steady stream in my ears, a current circling my hips. Quick. I want to kiss him, catch my breath.

Marcus was far away from his faith, Evan Nack says. Separated from Him by his thoughts and deeds.

Separate, yes, but Marcus could see, I think.

He is the Word.

Meeting news spreads fast as prairie fire. More than just farmers and wives now. Working men from the Keegster Dairy, managers from the Co-op feed store shuffle in clapping the cold from their fingers. Zane and I find the last free seats in the third row. The Graysons shift over to make room.

With a cupped hand to his ear, the Reverend tells us the trumpet is beginning to sound. Zane tugs on his right earlobe. Examine yourselves, he thunders. Who among you has chosen to do the devil's work? An old rancher from Wellpley in dungarees shouts, It's the devil that done us wrong! You see any rain on the horizon, Reverend? Go ahead and look into your crystal ball. We'll wait.

Evan Nack raises his head, as the crowd erupts in laughter, an eerie smile spreading across his face. He walks up from the the back of the room, squares himself to the other man's barrel chest. Without a word, he lays his hand firmly on the back of the man's neck. The rancher shakes it off.

Think you can see the horizon? he asks the man. Not with your fear. Not with your curses and complaints. Now the Reverend begins to sway slightly on his heels. What is seen is temporary, he says. What is unseen, eternal. Fix your eyes on what is unseen.

He conjures moist fields, soil rich between our fingers. Fields of beef cattle, their bellies heavy with feed. Row crops doing a storm sashay before a flash afternoon shower. Tingling and tight, the wind whips up across our necks, so our heads tilt a little with him when he leans away from the rush of cool air coming up the aisle.



He can see the storm, just like Marcus, I think. Marcus could dab his tongue into a palmful of earth and tell the exact measure of sand, silt and clay. Taste the alkaline in garden soil. When my nightmares hit, he tasted my tears before they wet the pillow.

Maybe it's the rattling church pipes, or the Reverend's heels, but I swear even the old ranchers can hear a drum-tap of rain. When the Reverend finishes his sermon, the Greysons walk straight into the arms of the supporters who guide them back into the blue velvet prayer room. No one sees them again that night.

In the grocery the next day, the Greysons tell me they're going to build a barn come late spring. Are going to auction for more feeder cattle. The rains will come, they utter, with a bewildered grin. The whole town's hearing a clatter on their rooftops, and shouting from them, too. Talk is turning from reducing stock to expanding the herds with yearling and young Red Angus.

A terrible gamble, I say. *Old Farmer's Almanac* has been calling for more long-range dry spells, I remind them. One of the Greysons looks down at his feet. A wounded look crosses the face of the other. You can't always tell what's coming, Thérèse, he says, patting my shoulder. Look at what happened to Marcus.

Zane slips his arm around my waist, leaping up and down. Jesus is on the phone again, Ma! he says. Reverend Evan Nack tells me he wants to meet my boy. Says he's got saltwater taffy Zane can stretch from Vermouth to the Utah Valley. I imagine the Reverend's fingers spread wide, want to lick them clean.

When we sit with coffee by the fire after Zane's asleep, I tell him we're struggling to make ends meet. He tells me to have faith. Sitting up with my imperious haze, I tell him this town may be full of the hope he's peddling, but we're not looking to buy. Can't drive drought-stressed cattle across the field with a swing of the good book. When the sun beats down on our backs again next spring, what good will come of this?

Evan replies, faith isn't something you visit, like your Aunt Alice in hospital after a bad fall. You've got to hold your faith loosely, like this. He slips his hand inside mine. My body bends to his like a young poplar, my lips grazing his ruddy cheek. I bury my head in neck, his skin smelling of pine and baby powder. We cannot ask for answers, he says, cannot count the reasons when there is so little time left to repent.

I want in the room, I tell Evan the next morning before Zane wakes up. I imagine the blue velvet prayer room covering me in its quiet cape, the ache of a river mouth gone dry. Evan declares firmly, you're not lost, only lonely.

You don't know, I think. All the secrets a dark spirit can raise. All those crimes in-the-name-of. The brutal dawn rising in me, the past, my stained crucible of creation.

Endless the rooms, I think. Endless the passageways through which we walk blind. Endless the nights when Marcus comes to me, tremulous, tired. Endless the perilous judgment, the anxious swim back to earth. Endless the disease that's spreading across these prairie souls like clubroot to cruciferous crop. Endless the nights in Evan Nack's room when he covers my sins with kisses, his hands exploring my body in His name. In his name, I pray. Praise will shake the rhythm of these rooms from me.

There are things no man can understand. Why life will never be the same for me in Vermouth. The holy waters are rising, Marcus is warning me. Oh how easy it is for a woman to part for a man of god. Marcus will eliminate anyone who tries to make me clean. The Reverend answers: Let him come.

He's no local man, now is he? Miss Morris complains while I run her order through, bologna, on special, a two-pound bag of Russet potatoes.

That doesn't mean he isn't raised right, I say. He's half a mile from his people in his heart.

She draws forward so her red basket is wedged against my waist. Tell me, Thérèse, who leaves his heartland behind? Who drives all the way up from Utah in a blue sedan to some nowhere town like Vermouth? He's got the Greysons building a new barn. My Charlie's talking about adding a heifer to the herd. This keeps up, we'll probably wind up eating her before she calves.

I grab for her basket to throw it on the pile, but she refuses to let go. She grabs hold of my wrist.

And what's all this about the Reverend helping you nightly? People talk, she says, shaking her empty basket at me. This town is no place for private, Thérèse.

Easy to preach, harder to pray, I mutter. I know what I believe.

I believe some surrender to wickedness.

I believe the gates of hell are built by man, and guarded by him.

I believe next to this reckless soul, lies the Devil in dungarees.

On Saturday morning before the last Meeting Day, Marcus's mother invites me to tea. I leave Zane with the Greysons, take the bus up to Wellesley. Her son was her sweet summons, her reason to face the day. She hardly leaves her house anymore. We sit in the living room on a plastic-coated couch. She serves chicken vegetable and barley soup on two TV trays side by each, offers me homemade wheat bread buttered on both sides. Since Marcus left, she confides, she sees stars in her soup. Not floating noodles. Movie stars. Ernest Borgnine, Tallulah Bankhead and such. She sifts through the broth, shows me Borgnine's broad nose surfacing amid the chopped parsley, his pie-mouth stretched wide, all gap tooth and grin. See it? I tell her I can't make it out. So she spoons out each parsley piece to show off the profile. Oh yes, I say, I see it now. You know Marcus watches the TV with me. He sits right next to me on the couch while I watch my shows. Yes, I say, I see him too—in Zane's sad smile, in the dented red toolbox we keep in the kitchen. He is the wind calling in my ears. Well, she had the double pneumonia you know, she replies. Who? I ask. Tallulah, she answers, star of stage and screen! See how her full lips part here? She dunks a spoon into the broth, pointing to the constellation in her bowl. I rip off a heel of bread, nodding my head, while she stirs and sways. No doubt she wants the winter to drag on, bringing more soup. More signs.

Roundup Sunday. Hundreds settle into steel chairs, more line the back wall, in dungarees, toe-battered workboots. Farmers, shopkeepers, homemakers, knit-one-pearl-two-ers, seed sellers, bankers, colluders and crooks, all streaming south off Highway 21.

Hope clings to their worn faces like frost to the branch. The Reverend tells us today is the day. Today, we'll finally see what remains of those who sin.

I watch the farmers' faces strain under the weight of readiness. Each one asks, how far am I prepared to go? Where is redemption, if not here, if not now?

Let the droughts come, the Reverend exhorts, let the wind blow and batter your houses down, still you will not fail if your foundation is rock. Evan Nack strides up the aisle, his body, lit by a blue-tinged light, is beautiful, can hold all creation.

Those who lose faith harvest the consequences of decay. Those who call the Spirit to them will harvest everlasting life. Drop in on your brother Daryl Jane. Home is your harvest. Come home.

Women cry, men tighten their faces. Evan closes his eyes. Root still, his branch arms thread into every weary soul. The crowd stands to join him. And the tall grasses of those prairie fields stretch out, each rolling hill a footstep, a fateful climb toward the blue velvet sky.

Let us strip off every weight, every sin that slows us down, he urges, removing his jacket, like a man intent on leaving no soul behind.

One by one they come. They come to him.

Only God can free man from the penalty of sin, Evan Nack shouts. It's time to awaken the Holy Spirit within.

No one was awake the morning Daryl Jane set off to round up his cattle. Another Alberta freeze-up. Three days running. Temperature had dropped to minus thirty. Then the season's spell softened. Wet snow came drifting in on Chinook winds, soft as steam, silent as sin. A thin layer of ice formed across the Bow, insulated by a thick coat of wet snowfall. The radio announcer reminded cattlemen wintering their herds to check on them regularly to make sure they had enough water and feed. The winds were fierce, everyone could tell a storm was on its way. So when Daryl rose at dawn to pull on his boots, his wife told me later, he braced for another hip-deep crawl in wet snow to the dugout.

Daryl had built the dugout with a hand from Marcus a few years back. A wide, deep basin, about the length of a skating rink, the dugout kept the large herd watered in summer by collecting runoff from the creek. When the ice froze in winter, Daryl would auger a hole in the ice with help from Marcus. They would set up the sump pump, hook up the generator, and lay a water line out fifty feet to fill two bathtubs of fresh water for the herd. Every winter, the same ritual. While Daryl kept an eye out for leaks in the hose, Marcus would fill the tubs. That winter, though, full of flu, crippled by a greasy bowel, Daryl had let the herd roam free a few extra days. Snowfall in the fields was clean enough to drink, the herd would be okay awhile.

Over the hill Daryl climbed that morning, headed for the dugout's end slope that dropped fifteen feet down to the basin. When he reached the first clearing, Daryl told his wife afterward, he saw what looked like shorn stumps in the distance. Said he thought it was the snow glare, so he pulled down his ball cap, and crept on ahead.

It was after seven when Daryl's wife called our house, saying her husband wasn't well. He had been out too long, baby at her breast, could

Marcus come? Of course, I told her. Marcus went after Daryl. No one went after Marcus.

This is the story as I heard Daryl tell it later: Marcus followed Daryl's path to the clearing while the wind kicked up a fury behind him. He must have been snow blind, Daryl explained, because it took nearly a half-hour before Marcus reached him. Daryl was on his knees at the dugout edge, looking out. Hundreds of cattle had plunged through the ice, torsos partially submerged. Desperate for water, they had wandered out into the middle of the dugout. Daryl said they must have struggled for hours to get out, terrified as ice began to coat their shivering bodies, a filmy haze slowly covering their eyes. He described the scene as a floating mass of death. All two hundred and fifty head had frozen to death in the night.

When they returned to the house, Marcus sat beside Daryl in silence. In his anguish, how could Daryl have known? Marcus was already in too deep. Couldn't tame his tremulous hands.

Leaving Daryl at the house with his wife, Marcus jumped into his truck. Daryl's wife said he sped off like a man on fire. Two lanes, no traffic. When the road split, a fork at the Bow River, wheels pointed straight ahead. Truck went in clean, never came up.

Waist deep in supplicants, Reverend Evan Nack drifts through the crowd, which parts to make room. Are you listening? Can you hear? comes the voice in my ear. My body floats up toward the front of the congregation. At the altar, one of the supporters lifts me up to the Reverend, then lowers me to bended knee.

You can love the lost, I think, only so far. Only as far as your own weakness. Evan Nack bends, his voice soft in my ear. Do you hear the trumpet call, Thérèse? Listen. Can you hear?

God's Word, infinite, infallible. Forever.

I kneel before Evan, bury my head in his worthy hands. Cross my heart, I'll pray, when my holy spirit drags him under.