

HAY MAKER

CULLENE BRYANT

*Be still my soul for God is on your side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.*

SIX MEN BELONGING to the Mennonite choir stood by the fireplace and sang. Jeans freshly washed, shirts buttoned right up to the neck. They stood apart, but their heads leaned into one another as they sang in close harmony. The Mennonites lived on the other side of the highway just before Milk River. When Hans phoned and said they wanted to console her with music, Ethel had hesitated. She belonged to the United Church. Yet she was moved by the word “console.” That they wanted to commiserate with her was a kind of balm.

“How very thoughtful,” she said.

Ethel had been stirring soup when the call came. Even though money was no longer a problem, she still boiled the chicken carcass overnight. She wouldn’t throw away bones when there was another meal to be eaked from them. In the morning, she had washed and peeled carrots and potatoes from her garden and added them to the broth. She was measuring herbs when the phone rang.

“There’s been an accident. Come quickly,” said Hillary.

“What’s happened? Is it Greg?”

“He’s been knocked out. A concussion.” Ethel heard the panic in her daughter-in-law’s voice. It only took a minute to find her car keys, sling on her coat and run to the garage. She pressed the gas pedal to the floor.

Her granddaughter Janet met her at the entrance to the Emergency. “I found him behind the hay maker. Something must have gone wrong. He must have gone back to look. Turned off the switch, but left the engine running.” Janet led her behind a white curtain, where Greg lay on a steel cot.

“Is he asleep?” There wasn’t a mark on him. They had cleaned him up.

“The ambulance driver said that the hay maker’s arms were probably still rotating. Clipped him on the side of the head. It would have been so quick; he couldn’t have felt a thing.”

Ethel nodded as Janet appeared with a tray of fresh sandwiches: tuna, egg salad and sliced beef. The ladies from the United Church Women had prepared the food. The gathering was supposed to be just family. Then it grew to include close friends. Now the room was full of people. She watched Janet set the tray on the coffee table and glance at her mother, sitting upright and stiff in the chair, shoulders back, hands folded, long tapered fingers resting in her lap.

Janet’s gaze moved to Joe, her boyfriend. He stood near the china cabinet, talking with some men. His father owned a small farm and the hardware store in town. As soon as Joe finished college, his father was going to hand over the family business. He caught Janet’s eye, left the circle of men to stand behind her chair and squeeze her shoulder. She tried to smile up at him, then fled to the kitchen. Joe went after her. Ethel smiled inwardly. He’ll be good to her.

She lifted her eyes to the faces of the singers. No one could tell that she wasn’t concentrating on the music. She looked past them to the big picture window, through which the purple hills in the far distance were lit by an early setting sun. The scene has always quieted her soul.

Greg had been a breech delivery. Instead of having him at home, as planned, Ethel had to be driven into the city. The labour room smelled of disinfectant. The sounds of a woman screaming in another room unnerved Ethel as she tried to practise her deep breathing. When she moaned with pain, the nurse treated her with diffidence. Returning from the hospital, she held Greg closely and cried, his soft four-day-old cheek pressed against hers. One day he would have a beard. She drew away and traced his skin with her fingers. The underside of a rose petal.

When her husband died, Greg took on the responsibilities of the ranch. Ethel stayed on even after he married and brought Hillary home. It was years before she consented to move and buy a small house in town.

“You don’t need to work so hard anymore. Take it easy.” Greg lifted her heavy brown suitcases into the back of the truck.

Ethel climbed into the passenger's side with a sense of relief. "Hillary will take good care of you." She meant what she said.

At first she had worried. Her daughter-in-law, raised in Calgary, had never lived on a farm. The first time Greg brought her home, Ethel noticed Hillary had painted fingernails.

"Look at the silver medal she won in the jumping contest." Greg flashed it before Ethel's eyes.

"At the Equestrian Centre." Hillary retrieved the medal and put it carefully in her purse.

"How lovely." Ethel tried to sound impressed.

The first time Hillary had joined them on a cattle drive, it rained endlessly. Her horse slipped in the mud and needed to be prodded past the clump of trees near the creek.

Water leaked into her riding boots, dropped from her yellow plastic hood on to her chin. "Can't we just rest under a tree for a moment?" Ethel and Greg plodded on. At the end of the week, Hillary was nursing a cold. Ethel put her to bed with a hot toddy of scotch and honey.

In the early years of their marriage, Ethel undertook Hillary's "post-graduate education." She taught her how to make bread, prepare a hearty spread for the ranch hands, and pack lunches that would fill a man's stomach and warm his heart on even the coldest days.

Ethel stood beside Greg's cot for a moment and then crumpled into a nearby chair. The scene felt as unreal as if she were at the theatre. She watched Hillary kiss Greg's forehead; pull back the crisp sheet drawn over his body; touch the muscle of his forearm; nestle her head into his shoulder the way she did when they watched TV. He would pat the cushion beside him and say, "C'mon, girl." He loved sports. Hockey in the winter, baseball in the summer. Hillary preferred comedies. When they were first married, they argued about their television selections right in front of Ethel. She tried not to notice, calmly knitting socks and sweaters or newborn outfits. Most of these she gave to the thrift shop at the church. The sweaters and socks for "the less fortunate." The booties and bonnets gifts for new mothers.

"Come sit near me," she had said. "I'll teach you how."

But Hillary wouldn't give up her place beside Greg and the warm comfort of his embrace. She never learned to knit or do the embroidery that kept

Ethel's hands busy and her spirit at peace. During the commercials, Ethel made popcorn or scones with homemade blackberry jam. The three of them would snack until the CBC news came on at eleven o'clock.

The nurse ushered a chaplain into the room.

"The doctor told me about the accident. May I be of some help?"

"I'm too young to be a widow." Hillary threw herself into his arms and nearly knocked him off balance.

"What happened?" The chaplain led her to a chair beside Ethel and Hillary told him how Janet had found Greg lying beside the hay maker. After a few moments, he invited them to stand together around the bed and hold hands. They said the Lord's Prayer.

Ethel couldn't reach the sandwiches on the coffee table. Her stomach growled. Her coffee cup was empty. She tried to lower it to the floor, but when she leaned over the arm of the sofa, the cup rattled on its saucer and the dregs spilled on to the carpet.

How could this happen? He was always so careful. Taught everyone to be safe.

Hillary stood up quickly and offered the tray to her mother-in-law. Ethel picked out a tuna sandwich and bit into the crust. She choked.

Hillary rubbed her back.

Ethel gazed again over the shoulders of the singers to the scene framed by the window. As a young bride, it had taken Hillary some time to win Ethel's confidence and affection. The second spring of their marriage Greg went to a rodeo in Montana, leaving the two women in charge. Ethel drove into town to pick up some mail and a surprise snowfall started. When she arrived back at the ranch, Hillary was nowhere to be found. Ethel checked the living room and the bedrooms, then ran outside, her calls muffled by the curtain of snow. In the barn she found Hillary kneeling by a heifer who had just delivered an early calf.

"I did it," she said. "I called the vet but he never came."

"They put the snow plow away too soon," said Ethel.

"I got the chains around its legs. I pulled it out all by myself."

The calf attempted to stand and fell down in the soft hay. The exhausted cow still lay on her side. "Good job. You're a rancher's wife, now."

The hymn filled the room. Ethel recognized the melody from *Finlandia*. How fitting. She continued gazing out the window, studying the shades of green: the stiff spruce needles, the lime-green of aspen leaves, the darker blue-green of the hemlock. One spring, spider mites killed most of the spruce trees that lined the driveway. They turned brown almost over night. Greg had to call in an arborist. They saved only a few of them.

Later that night, after the guests have left and Hillary has taken a sleeping pill, Ethel will notice Janet and her boyfriend strolling arm-in-arm. She will watch them from behind the bedroom curtains. She will see them linger by the barn where the accident happened, where Janet had found her father face down on the ground behind the hay-making machine. Her fingers clawed at his bony shoulders like a frantic robin after the first frost trying to wrest a worm from the hard earth. But he did not wake.

Ethel will watch the couple move from the barn to the Quonset where the tools are kept. Joe will unlock the door and Janet will follow him inside. Should she go after them? She never let Hillary and Greg sit too long on the sofa watching television. She used to flick the light switch, signaling that it was time for Hillary to go sleep in the guest room. Ethel will feel like a small twig on a dying tree. She will close the curtains and crawl under the bed sheets.

As the men began the final verse, the music rose to a crescendo. *Be still my soul, the hour is hastening on when we shall be forever with the Lord*. Ethel knew that the rolling landscape of his country inspired Sibelius. She scanned the room and realized that the only people present who did not belong to the land were the doctor and the chaplain. Some of her friends nodded and tried to smile comfort. The hymn ended. A hush fell over the assembly and all was still.