



2015 Honorable Mention

Grabbing Hold *by Evelyn Hess*

She sat deep in velvety moss, her back against a Douglas fir. Furrows in the tree bark seemed continuous with those on her face; the hoary froth springing from the edges of her wool hat blended with hoary lichens splashed along the tree's trunk, and a metallic wrap bundled her body. Scattered rays from the low morning sun penetrated the fog, spotlighting moss on tree branches, dewdrops on spider webs, and the woman's hair, turning them to gold and silver. The world was awakening, and so was the woman.

Martha, for that was the woman's name, leaned her head against the tree and lifted her eyes to watch tiny birds busily scouring branches, gleaning their breakfast. A nuthatch, its black eye-line drawn through its white face like a bandit's scarf, blue-gray back barely visible against gray tree bark, flashes of white defining its rusty-red belly, picked its way head-first down a trunk. On a nearby fir, a brown creeper propped its tail against the bark, intently examining the crevices as it poked and reaped, circling round and round the trunk, up the tree. Among the moss and sword ferns near Martha's feet, mats of shiny leaves no bigger than the tip of her little finger flaunted wiry Y-shaped stems with buds of twinflower, one of her woodland favorites. In another couple of weeks, they would perfume the woods with a spicy fragrance touched with a hint of anise.

Martha smiled and sighed a deep, happy sigh. It was only her third morning in the woods, but it had been years since she had felt so alive. It was kind of like love—this noticing—this awareness—this being so attuned to the sounds and smells and motions of something—of anything—outside of herself. She thought back to early hiking trips with Hank: sleeping under the stars—beneath a blue-black bowl ablaze with glittering dots; watching trees dance in the wind; smelling honey-sweet poplar buds in the spring and fir resin warmed by summer sun; seeing for the first time the bright red crest of a ruby-crowned kinglet, its bold white eye ring making it look as startled as it probably felt, staring up at her from deep within a thicket of wild rose.

Those first trips had all been such a revelation to her, the city girl, barely out of her teens, venturing into the wild of the northwestern woods with Hank, him so at ease and comfortable there. At first she would start at every rustle in the leaves, every quick movement at her feet, every shadow or hoot or hiss. But she fell in love with this magical new world. She read and studied and dogged Hank's steps until she recognized the language of songbirds and owls, of frogs and crickets, and could identify flowers, herbs, and butterflies. That was long ago, but her heart beat faster just remembering the thrill of discovery, the quickened senses, the feeling of belonging in this natural and still somewhat wild world. She sat still against the tree, smiling, reliving, as thin streams glistened from her eyes, down her cheeks, and slid along her chin.

It was on a camping trip that she had first begun to worry about Hank. Ordinarily, he exuded energy, activity, and plans. One moment he would be clambering up rocks and the next, jumping twenty feet

into a deep pool. He would hike and swim, boat and climb, then bubble with ideas for the next trip as he whipped up an elegant meal of green peppers, potatoes, onions, and eggs over their Primus canister stove.

He wasn't non-stop. There were contemplative times too: quiet, listening, or romantic times—long talks sipping wine beside the campfire, reading alone or to each other, lying side-by-side naming the constellations. But this day was different. He seemed *too* quiet. Or differently quiet. Preoccupied. After they hiked in, before they had even set up camp, he lay down on the grass. Martha lay beside him and they looked at clouds, laughed at their shapes, gazed at birds as they floated by on thermals. It was nice, but it was odd. Uncomfortably odd. And Martha felt something large, heavy and hot taking form deep in her gut.

Her disturbing premonition became reality. They went on only two more outings after that. Lovely outings, but subdued. Little more than car camping, really, punctuated by strolls.

Still, though she remembered well that quivering nearly always present within her, she could close her eyes even now and picture the meadows painted with a tapestry of wildflowers, and thrill to the music of the wood warblers as they returned in the spring.

Then Hank was diagnosed with advanced bone cancer. The doctors gave him two years, but said treatments

might lengthen that somewhat. Spending whatever time he still had fighting the inevitable for only a possibility of a few extra weeks didn't sound like good odds to Hank. He opted out. His not having treatments helped Martha ignore it. Deny it. No,



no, no. This isn't happening! She clung to him as he held her close and tight, but just once. Then they seemed to come to an unspoken agreement to maintain their normal lives, ignoring any possibility of change.

Hank never complained. Martha would not have known he felt any pain except that occasionally he would flinch and catch his breath—and then laugh, as if embarrassed for the reaction. Through the years, he had always kept busy around their property, mowing, pruning, tilling, and planting. Now he continued his work, though for less sustained sessions. And he kept his pattern of reading late each evening. But now he seemed distracted. He would look up from his newspaper or book—look across the room or out the window. Just look. It was as if his form was still with her but his spirit wandered. She desperately wanted to call it back. He was beginning to check out, a “perfectly normal end-of-life stage,” according to the books. But she wanted to scream, *Hank, don't leave me!*

They, who had always excitedly shared plans, natural history sightings, philosophical musings, still talked, but only about the kids or the neighbors or what to have for dinner, not about deep things. Not about tomorrow.

Then he began picking at his food. As long as Martha had known him, Hank's appetite had matched his endless energy. She could even count on him to finish off her own over-large servings, and he never gained an ounce or an inch. But now he would serve himself barely more than a dab, touch a morsel or two to his lips, push the rest around his plate and apologize. *Sorry. Just not hungry. Guess I loafed around too much to work up an appetite today.*

Next, insult of insults, a stroke stole away his speech. For years, she had loved their conversations, but now, he couldn't even tell her how he was feeling. Or that he'd like some water. Or that he loved her. His eyes would lock on hers. *Oh God!* How she wanted to decode their message. Then they would shift away, or close.

If the seasons changed or the neighbors called, Martha didn't know about it. She was grateful to see their family when they stopped by separately or together, but she couldn't really connect. Her focus was Hank—what he needed, what she guessed he could possibly need, what he might be thinking or feeling or wanting to tell her. Months slipped by; people came and went; she bought groceries, did the wash, fixed the meals. She sat with her husband, walked with him when he could walk, talked with him when he could talk, talked and read and caressed his brow when he couldn't. And now he was gone.

She moved through her customary routines on autopilot: Fix a meal. Sweep the floor. Answer the phone. The kids—funny to think of them as kids, both of them in their fifties by now—the kids had been faithful and caring, calling regularly, stopping by as often as possible, their smiles bright beneath eyes of concern. But Martha felt dead inside. A zombie. An automaton. Why go on?

She was not one of those widows who now considered her late husband to be perfect. *Of course he wasn't, and thank God for that*, she thought. Neither was she. And they'd had their share of problems. She'd grown up beside him, barely more than a child when they met. They'd said dumb things; hurt each other's feelings; taken the other's problems personally. But they had felt their way through all that and come out the other side stronger for it. Stronger together. Together they made sense. Together life made sense. But nothing made sense now.

Day followed day, and weeks, and months of existing. Of not living. Hank had been gone for over a year when one day Martha bolted upright from her daze and thought, *Enough! No more of this!*

She rifled through the bottom of the closet and pulled out her backpack. She folded a lightweight wool blanket and the Mylar space blanket she had managed to keep away from the mice these thirty-five years since it had been wrapped around her shoulders as she crossed the finish line of her first marathon. She grabbed an extra pair of socks, an extra shirt, her long johns, some work gloves, and Hank's Leatherman. A steel sharpening stone would double for starting fires; she found a finger-shaped chunk of quartz in their rock bin she could use as a flint. To the growing pile she added two short candles, a small magnifying glass, a few plastic bags, two small towels, an aluminum trowel, three sizes of tin can to serve as a stove, a pot and a bowl, a spoon, four snack packs of

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home-dried fruits and vegetables, and a sandwich bag stuffed with almonds. With Hank's tin snips, she cut a hole toward the bottom on one side of the biggest can for

adding fuel, and another hole near the top of the other side for a cross draft. She nested the cans together, easily fit everything in the pack and headed for bed, feeling that at last, her rudderless ship had found a direction.

The next morning she polished off the end of the yogurt and muesli, dressed warmly, filled her water bag and emailed the kids:

Taking off for a week or so. Won't be available electronically. Love you! Mom.

The cell phone would stay home. So would the whistle. No emergency communication or GPS necessary. If she got in trouble, so be it. If anyone came looking, she would hide. She was sure she could manage for a week. Probably for a month. Or many months. Eventually, who knows? Now mid-May, they'd have no more cold weather for a half-year, more or less. And even then, here in the Pacific Northwest, it rarely got unbearably

cold. Meanwhile, there were lots of edible plants in the woods and even more where the forest met the clearing.

She strode up the hill, eager to make quick distance between herself and the house, but then stopped abruptly. The car! She had to get it out of sight. So back down the hill, toss the pack in the back, and roar down the driveway. She checked the rearview mirror repeatedly to be sure no one had seen her leave. She couldn't justify her need for subterfuge, but this was her week. She didn't want anything or anyone to derail her venture.

As it turned out, she'd gotten away clean. Less than ten miles away from home, she ditched the car in a wide spot off a logging road, and started hiking. She pulled out a plastic bag for collecting edible weeds as she walked: dandelion, curly dock, plantain, sorrel. She would have an elegant salad for dinner.

This first day, she wanted just to scout around, see where she was, what plants and animals had come before her. A plan might take form eventually, but for the moment—and perhaps for much longer—she wanted to look and listen, to open her senses, not to do, but merely to be.

She passed by a stream and small pool, and noted the cattails and arrowhead. They would make good eating when she needed them. Nearby, a swale grew a dense colony of nettles that would become delicious greens when she was ready to build a fire. As the woods got deeper, she was delighted to find fierce-looking devil's club. Its young leaves, still soft and spineless, would be a tasty treat. Wild ginger and Queen's cup were plentiful, and beside a patch of salal, she found a colony of the odd cone-shaped parasitic plant some folks called "poque," whose potato-like lower stem she could eat raw. Some native people considered this ground cone to be a good luck charm, and Martha took finding it as a positive omen.

As the sun got lower in the west, she decided she'd done enough exploring for one day. She found a protected place to settle in, munched her greens and some nuts, sucked up some more water and leaned back to watch the real world prepare for night.

That was the first day. On succeeding days she would continue to explore, collect, nibble. She fell into a rhythm of waking just before first light, taking afternoon naps, and sitting very alert and still both in the early morning and from dusk until late at night. Twice already her attention had been rewarded: Shortly after sunset one evening, in the dimness of pre-dark, she heard a rustle in nearby brush and held her breath as she peered toward the sound. Its mottled fur barely visible in the equally mottled shadows, a bobcat stopped and looked directly back at her, then turned its tufted ears forward and trotted away. Wouldn't Hank have loved to see that!

Her second evening spectacle was probably near midnight, the shadows moonlight-sharp. Once again it was the sound that caught her attention—a crackling and whispering like an isolated mini-windstorm, high in the trees. Silhouetted against the light of the moon, flying squirrels leapt from tree to tree. She had always always wanted to see flying squirrels, but had to run away from home at age 75 to make it so.

Perhaps it was time now to make a plan. Some First Nations people went on vision quests for answers to life's questions. This would be the perfect time to fast and meditate to see what the spirit world could tell her. Or was it already communicating? Of course she could go home at the end of her week and hold this experience in her memory. She didn't want to worry the kids—her own or theirs. Yet in truth, her family had been worrying about her since before Hank died, and would doubtless continue to do so,

wherever she was. Probably it was an unavoidable hazard of her age and their relationship. Sort of the way she and Hank had felt when the concerns were reversed—when their son and daughter were in their twenties and went off to explore the world. But now, as they didn't know where she had gone, perhaps they would picture her swishing ice in a glass somewhere in the south of France, and be happy for her.

She would love to see them, though. Peek in their windows. Know how they were doing. She could go home for a while and come back later. Still, she wondered what else she might discover as she practiced being truly awake in the woods, what she might learn about the creatures she shared the world with, and about herself. She turned to go deeper into the woods and had a sure sensation that Hank was right beside her.

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HESS's
*Building
a Better
Nest* was
released
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June, 2015. Her previous book, *To the Woods* (OSU Press 2010), won a WILLA Award for Creative Non-fiction. Evelyn weeds and writes in Oregon's Coast Range Foothills.