



2014 Honorable Mention

## Murder as Rose *by Andrea Poniers*

**Elsa Fritch snapped off the morning news, wondering why there were so many words for murder. Lynching in Haiti. Fatalities in Spain. A slaying in one big city or the next. In the end, they were all dead at someone else's hand. Change the word but it didn't change the fact.**

She settled her teaspoon inside her cup, blotted her lips with a paper napkin, and knew it was time to return to Welter, Nebraska.

She could see how it would be. She would park in a visitor's space in front of the county courthouse, probably a nice stone building in the center of a downtown square. She would ask the receptionist for directions to the sheriff's office, since more and more she was having trouble reading signs. She would stand before a desk with a balding man in uniform and say, "Hello, I'm Elsa Fritch. I killed a man in 1953, and I'm ready to pay for my crime."

She would not dress it up with fancy words. Not "accident," not "unintentional," nothing about fog or fear or "didn't know." She had killed a man. She would pay.

"Who's that you're going to visit?" Her neighbor's voice on the other end of the phone was so loud that Elsa had to hold it away from her ear. "I don't remember you talking about family in Welter. Never even heard of Welter. Who's that again?"

"My cousin Theresa's second boy," she lied. "Cancer. Probably the end. You know." Elsa was sure they would let her have one phone call from jail, but this way Dorothy wouldn't be so surprised when Elsa called to ask for one last favor, a big one, to pack up the house, to sell it, to sell it all because she would not be returning. "It's the least I can do," Elsa said in voice she hoped would put an end to the questioning.

"Well, of course," Dorothy agreed. "It's the least you can do. Cancer and all. Cousin and all."

Elsa cancelled the newspaper and put all the potted plants in the middle of the yard, even though there wasn't a prayer for late summer rain. She tied up the garbage in a tall kitchen trash bag that she set beside the curb, three days early, but at this point she couldn't



worry what the neighbors would say. She walked the two long blocks to the post office and signed a card to have her mail held for thirty days. It shouldn't take longer than that for the sheriff to settle the matter and then she didn't care what they did with her mail, lean as it was, mostly ads or pleas for money or receipts from her health insurance company marked "this is not a bill," like a diary of her ills come back to haunt her on a monthly basis.

Elsa didn't travel much, in fact, hadn't traveled at all since Martin died. She wasn't sure where they had stored the suitcases, so she inspected the orderly shelves in the garage—Martin's doing—before deciding they must be in the attic. Entering the house, she made sure to close the doors, between garage and kitchen, between kitchen and hall. Mice were thinking about the indoors at this time of year, thinking about places that would be warm and safe. Best to keep the doors shut tight.

The attic stairs were steeper than she remembered. Her knees had not been tested in this way for a long time and she paused once she gained the second step. Martin, he had good knees. Even when he was old, not as old as Elsa, but old by common standards, even then her husband could scale a ladder like a squirrel and stand at the top, steady and fearless. She gripped the handrail and raised one foot to the next step, paused again, then applied both hands to the railing to hold her weight while she pulled her left foot up to meet the right.

At the top of the attic stairs, she steadied herself against a rough and slanted beam. Shuffling, she made her way to a discarded kitchen chair,

the orderly caning of its seat disturbed, holes here and there, and loose ends. She sat with effort, her heart missing a beat as the chair swayed beneath her, but held.

A layer of dust covered the cityscape of boxes built close to the walls, with cobwebs strung like electrical wires between the stacks. The late afternoon sun stabbed through the dirty dormer windows, illuminating a haze in the air as if the attic were beginning to smolder. She looked at the neat labels on the cardboard cartons, but the words were unavailable to her at this distance. She supposed her life, in some way, was cataloged in those boxes. Things she, or they, had once cared about, had once thought were important enough to keep, to name, maybe to retrieve someday.

Elsa spotted the suitcase. She struggled up from the chair, dragged the bag over to the gaping hole above the steps and pushed it down. It hit the steps only once before bouncing against the wall, leaving a scar in the fading yellow paint. Her first instinct was to fret, but then she remembered that the wall would not be hers to worry about any more. She stared down at the suitcase. Packing would be easy. She wouldn't need much.

Elsa Fritch couldn't read a map, not with these eyes. With Martin at the wheel, she had been the one to follow how one snaking line fed into another, and always keep her mind's eye on which way was north, regardless of the turns. But it had been years since she could see the detail on a page, and besides, turning her attention from the road as she drove was out of the question. So she set out for Welter in the Buick Skylark, determined to find her way by reading only the big green highway signs. She reminded herself that connections were easy since the Interstates had been built, feeling confident that knowing where she needed to be was enough to get her there. Her single suitcase tottered on the back seat. A brown bag with apple slices and red licorice rested on the passenger seat beside her. She would be at the courthouse before dinner, and she was sure they would feed her after they locked her up. It was the law, wasn't it?

Those there—see 'em?—those are Herefords. She could hear it as clearly as if Martin were in the car, his inventory of herds as they drove up the arched spine of Colorado. Herefords, Angus, Highlands, fancy names for cows that Elsa would have called brown, black, furry. That was Martin, always collecting, naming, keeping things in order.

They made the drive from southern Colorado to Nebraska every year, then every few years later in life when their legs had grown stiff and their minds more prone to naps. Elsa had family in Grand Island, her favorite sister Hannah, several years older and always anxious to see her. Martin and Hannah's husband would go off to do what-

ever men did when they were together, while she and her sister stayed back in the kitchen or the yard and talked the way they wished they could the whole year long.

Elsa and Martin didn't talk much. They lived their lives the way most husbands and wives did, as far as they knew, taking care of business and riding the ups and downs of the undulating track of life without much thought about whether that was the track to be on. But on these long drives things came out, things they sometimes didn't know were there, things that stayed in the car but also in the backs of their minds. In the car, staring straight ahead, driving along fields and through towns that were not their own, that were not a part of their lives and had no connection to home, they

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could talk of sadness or hurt, of slights at work for him, of children never known for her, of what might have been, for both. Sometimes they spoke of love and affection, and thankfulness, for him, for her, for them together.

Elsa looked forward all year to the drive, to time in the car with Martin, and to those special days with her sister. But they hadn't done this in a long while, not since three or four years before Martin passed away. For Elsa to make the drive alone, after that, was out of the question. And then just a year after Martin died, with no more warning than a phone call in the bleary time of night, her sister passed away too. Then there was no purpose.

She tightened her fingers on the wheel. The Buick was deep into Denver, approaching the city center where

the traffic ran thick and fast. The overhead green signs multiplied, growing large and complicated, with numbers and directions and final destinations. Elsa startled as a dark vehicle, tall and broad and almost the size of a truck, cut quickly from behind and swung close to her door. She tapped the brakes when she caught sight of the intersecting roadways ahead. They were stacked like dishes in a sink, with cars pouring like tap water around the different levels. Fort Morgan, she told herself, just follow the road to Fort Morgan. She saw the words on the signs, but there were too many arrows, some straight, some curving, and she didn't know which one was hers.

Elsa lifted her foot from the accelerator. She needed time to sort this out. Cars were forming a solid mass around her and it was hard to think. She tapped the brake pedal again and focused on the big white lettering, trying to line up the arrows with the cars. She thought she needed to be one lane over. She pressed the accelerator this time, then tugged the steering wheel to the right, slipping over the white line toward Fort Morgan. Horns blared, but somehow she was in a space and flowing with the other cars, down and under and out of there.

By the time she released her grip on the steering wheel, she was back into views of full-grown corn and those cows, now what were they? She couldn't remember which colors went with which name, and what did it matter anyway, now? Elsa relaxed, knowing that she had made the last turn on the highway. It would be a straight road from here, all the way until the exit at Welter where, for her, the road would end.

There was just one other time, back before any thought of Interstate highways, that Elsa had made this drive alone. Her family had moved from Nebraska to Colorado, with her beloved Hannah staying behind for a job, a fiancé and the life ahead of them. Every summer after that, Elsa's father would take her up to the station in Pueblo where she'd catch a train to Grand Island, the way people did in those days. But one year, the only other time she made the drive by herself, the year she was engaged to Martin and planning a big January wedding, the summer that Elsa's father was laid up and couldn't drive, she dared to ask him if she could drive his car to Nebraska. It wasn't that far, she argued, she could do it in a day, and it would be daylight the whole way at this time of year. She would take a lunch, she told him, wouldn't stop except to relieve herself, she promised, and would call collect as soon as she arrived at Hannah's.

Young Elsa left the house just after sunrise, too excited to sleep much on the night before her trip. She had studied the map carefully, her finger connecting the big circles her father made in grease pencil across Colorado at the places where Elsa needed to leave one road for another. Once she got to Grand Island, she knew exact-

ly how to find Hannah's apartment.

Elsa had come to associate the trip to Nebraska with the constant rocking of the train, the pulling side to side as it strained against the tracks. She had never questioned the movement of the train before, its order, its single-mindedness, the lack of choice. In the car, for the first time by herself, she was aware of the pull forward, of her foot against the accelerator that made it so, and the pressure of her own hand on the steering wheel

that determined her direction. Her heart lifted with the hills, her laughter fell onto

the yellowing fields, and she sang to the horses and cattle along the way, for whatever reason was there not to?

Elsa's mood prevailed through the week with Hannah in Grand Island. She felt as big and open as the West itself. Looking to the future, her life held the promise of turned fields on the plains, the energy of mountain streams running high with spring snow melt. She was filled to overflowing with love for Hannah, for Martin, for life. When it was finally time for Elsa to make the trip home in their father's bulbous black Ford, the sisters stood on either side of the open car door, each with her hands cradling the other's face. "The next time I see you I will have a new baby and you will be married," Hannah had said. "Your life will have changed." With that, Elsa got in the car and reversed the directions on the map as she headed for the border into Colorado.

The summer heat had been stunning that year and the morning she left Grand Island was no exception. But as she drove, Elsa could feel a change. Cooler air blew against her arm, almost cold, so she cranked up her window to seal in the remnants

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of summer. The map of Colorado was spread on the seat beside her and she silently memorized the next turn: Highway 138, left toward Ft. Morgan.

Farther down the road, the air turned to liquid. She found the switch for the windshield wipers, but their clumsy motion was helpless against the fog that obscured everything except the ten feet of roadway in front of the car. She tried the headlights, but they only glared back from the solid wall around her. The last thing she remembered seeing, other than that continuous patch of asphalt right in front of her, were the block letters of a small road sign: Welter 3 miles. Highway 138, she thought hard. How far past Welter? She looked down at the seat and traced her finger along the black line on the map to make sure she wouldn't miss her next turn.

In the total isolation of the fog, Elsa found it impossible to believe that a person was standing in the ten-foot clearing in front of the car when she raised her eyes back to the road. In the seconds it took to register the figure of a man, she felt the thud and saw the front fender cast him into the darkness. Elsa didn't slow the car as she worried over this image because it couldn't be possible. I must have imagined it, she told herself. But in her mind's eye she could see the navy trousers, a belt at the waist where the top of the fender made impact, the white shirt and the tip of a tie. I should stop, she thought then, and did—right in the road—but just for a moment. Because in the womb of the fog she saw Martin and her January wedding and Hannah's baby and the rest of her life that would begin as this old Ford returned to her father's driveway in southern Colorado. And in that instant she lifted her foot from the brake and began repeating aloud, "Highway 138, right toward Fort Morgan," loud, loud enough, louder than heartbeats or the rushing of blood in the silence of the car.

There was no stately stone courthouse in Welter, as Elsa Fritch had expected. She had never actually been there, of course; she knew it only from that sign on the road: Welter 3 miles. One simple main road defined the small town. When she stopped a boy on a bike to ask where she could find the county sheriff, he raised a grimy hand toward a glass and metal building resembling a department store or the modern high school they built in Elsa's neighborhood. She parked her car in front of a shiny sign that read Welter Police Parking Only and sat for a moment with Martin, who never knew about Welter or the fog or the trousers. In her mind, she kissed him gently in a silent goodbye and reached for the door handle. She wondered what would happen to her car, once she was behind bars and not going anywhere. Not anymore.

Her suitcase was light, but she still had to pause and catch her breath before she could explain herself to the young woman at the reception desk. "I've come to confess," she started, then waited while the bank of electronic equipment behind the receptionist

flashed and cleared its throat. "I killed a man," she said when it was quiet again, "and I'm here to make it right."

"Is there a warrant out for your arrest?" the young woman asked, seemingly unconcerned that a man had died.

Elsa considered the question. "I don't know," she said finally. "I can't say that I know."

It seemed like a long time before someone—an Officer Garcia—came to usher her from the lobby. The young man had hair that was shaved above the ears and around the back, but long on top. She thought it might stand out straight if he spun around quickly, like her skirts when she was a girl.

"Can I get you some coffee, ma'am?" he asked, then came back from somewhere with a steaming Styrofoam cup and a handful of packets, powdered cream, sugar, and artificial sweetener. She was seated at the side of his desk, which was in the lee of three short partitions, so short that the officer's head showed above the top. When he asked Elsa why she was here, she imagined her story flowing over the short walls and out of the cubicle for anyone to hear.

"I'm Elsa Fritch," she said. "I killed a man in 1953, and I'm ready to pay for my crime."

The young officer's pencil hovered above the yellow legal pad. "1953," he said and wrote it down. With his pencil poised and the kindly expression on his face dissolving a little, he asked, "Can you tell me more about it, ma'am? Why do you think you killed someone?"

Elsa bristled at his choice of words, as if this might be a figment of her imagination, as if she hadn't lived every day of her adult life with the secret knowledge that a man was dead at

her hand. She would tell him, would provide all the evidence that proved her guilt. But this was the first telling, the first time she had said the words out loud and so they did not begin the way a police officer might like or could understand at first hearing.

"I saw his belt," she began, insisting on this truth. When Officer Garcia didn't react, she said it again. "He was wearing a brown belt. How else would I have known that?"

The officer laid down his pencil and sat back in his chair. "Who was wearing a belt, ma'am?"

Elsa felt the question more than heard it. In all these fifty years, she had never allowed herself to think about the man in the road, whether there was a wife, children, a life beyond his presence in the fog that night. Now the question required an answer, and she gave the only one she knew. "I don't know," she said plainly. "He was in the road. I don't know who he was."

"So you killed a man in the road. In 1953. Okay." The young man picked up his pencil again and continued with questions, small questions with short answers that eventually stacked up to recreate Elsa's crime.

As she took the last sip of coffee, Officer Garcia turned his chair to a computer screen and poked at the keys, letting loose a cascade of images. "There's no warrant out for your arrest, Mrs. Fritch," he said, turning back to face her. "Give me a few minutes to see what I might find in our older files. More coffee?"

Elsa shook her head. She knew better than to drink coffee late in the day, and now her stomach medication was locked in her suitcase which she couldn't possibly open in this tight space with anyone able to look over the top of the walls at her things packed neatly inside. I'd better get used to this, she thought, as she watched the officer's head and shoulders pass along the other side of the short wall. Privacy was a thing of the past, to be sure. She would probably never spend another minute alone for the rest of her life. And she sat back and folded her hands over her gurgling stomach to wait for the officer to return with the files that would make it so.

On a corkboard behind the computer Elsa noticed a picture of Officer Garcia with a girl about his age, and a big-headed brown dog. They looked as if the force of the flash had bowled them over and the camera caught them just before they fell into a heap with the dog on top. Maybe the man was his grandfather, she thought, since the question still hung in the room, unanswered in any satisfactory way. Maybe that was his grandfather's belt. Martin always liked those police shows, she reflected, figuring out the mystery. But she quickly rejected the idea that the man was related to Officer Garcia and what did it matter anyway? Whoever he was, he was dead at her hand. She would go to prison and she would live out her days without a minute of ever being alone and would fill her mind with something more than speculation about things that couldn't be

changed.

After a while, she didn't know how long, the young officer returned with a manila file folder. "Well, Mrs. Fritch, I've got good news for you." He resumed his seat behind the desk, in that space that barely fit his bulk, and fingered through the papers in the folder. "There was a report filed on a hit and run on Highway 30 just east of town on August 25, 1953. Seems to be your man. He was injured but he wasn't killed, ma'am." He was smiling now. "In fact he owned the real estate office in town until he passed away a few years ago. His name was Joseph Leeman and he lived a good long life. You're not a murderer." He laughed as he said these last words.

"This isn't a laughing matter, young man," Elsa said, her voice reinforced with the concrete belief of fifty years, of what she knew then and especially now. "A man is dead. I didn't kill him back then, I understand that now." Here she paused for a moment, perhaps to listen to what she had just said. "But I committed a crime, all the same. He was hurt, he was in the hospital, I'm sure, wasn't he? His wife was alone. His children, his grandchildren, maybe,"—she glanced at Officer Garcia—"they missed him, they were scared, weren't they? That's a crime." Her voice cracked. "That's such a crime. I should pay. I need to pay. I need..." And she dissolved into a private weeping that stayed within the three short walls.

Officer Garcia closed the file folder, began to rise then sat back in his chair. He reached his long arm to Elsa's shoulder and rested his hand there. After a minute or two he said, "Mrs. Fritch? We'd be hard pressed to

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charge you for a crime that happened so many years ago. And now that Mr. Leeman's dead, well, we can't do anything anyway. Do you understand?"

Elsa raised her eyes. "Officer Garcia, do you have a grandfather?"

"Yes, ma'am. My one grandpa is still alive. Lives right here in Welter."

"I bet you visit him a lot, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. He lives with my sister, so I see him all the time."

Elsa was silent then, long enough to make the young man shift in his chair and finally say, "Mrs. Fritch, I think we're done here, now that we cleared things up for you. Is there anything more you need from me?"

"Where should I go?" she asked him.

"Ma'am?"

Elsa glanced at the photograph again, of the two young people about to topple from the force of their young lives. She looked back at Officer Garcia, his eyebrows still raised from the question. "Would you help me with my suitcase, please?" And she pushed her arms against the desktop to raise herself from the chair.

The sun was dropping as the Buick crawled down the main street of Welter, Elsa's foot barely resting on the accelerator. At this slow pace, even in the dim of evening, the big sign caught her eye. She made a wide arc into the parking lot of Leeman Real Estate and brought the Buick to rest in the space farthest from the street, across an alley and over the fence from a house with a light in its attic. When she turned the key the engine quieted but the headlights bounced against the white block wall of the building. She flinched at the familiar blankness before switching off the lights. Then she rested her hands on her lap and closed her eyes.

There were many things that could have awakened Elsa the next morning. A gang of starlings argued in the large maple tree on the opposite side of the parking lot, children's shrieks carried from the street beyond the houses, and garbage cans clanged against a truck that labored up the alley. But Elsa slept until a sharp tapping sounded just beside her ear. Slowly her eyes focused on a man's belt visible through the glass, then a face bending to peer in at her.

"Can I help you?" the man shouted through the window. "Are you all right?"

"Can I help you?" the man shouted through the window. "Are you all right?"

Elsa wasn't sure what she should do, wasn't actually sure where she was or why. Her stomach burned and her bladder was full, that

was what she knew. She had trouble releasing her hands from where they were clasped on her lap.

"Ma'am," the man spoke again. "Are you lost?"

Her mind began to clear and now Elsa remembered it all. She had not killed a man, she was not going to prison for the rest of her life. "Yes, I'm lost," she said.

The man helped her out of her car and into the real estate office, where a stately woman brought her a glass of water and a donut covered in chocolate frosting and chopped nuts. "That's all we've got," the woman apologized, "until we can get something better from the diner." The two of them, the man and the woman at Leeman Real Estate, cooed and coddled her until finally the man sat at a desk across from her and asked, "So, where were you going, ma'am? When you got lost?"

The only place Elsa knew was no longer available to her and so she said, "I'm going to visit my sister in Grand Island. She's having a baby soon. I promised my father that I would only stop to relieve myself." Which she did, without ever leaving her chair in the real estate office.

When Elsa Fritch celebrated her 80th birthday, the staff at the Welter Rest Home draped pink streamers around the fixtures in her room and let her have a piece of cake, even though she was borderline diabetic, they reminded her, and shouldn't be eating sweets. Frank Leeman was there, along with his pretty wife Mary who had retired from her job at the real estate office and now spent every Tuesday and Friday at Elsa's side, chattering happily over her tireless



crochet hook. Johnny Garcia was there with his new girlfriend Penny and for the occasion they let his big-headed dog Pogo into the building too. Johnny's sister Angela came, just as she came every Sunday since their grandfather died a year ago. She missed him, she told Elsa, and it was good to have somebody to talk to besides her ornery teenagers who didn't talk to her anyway.

As the guests were arriving, Elsa made sure to keep one seat open, shooing them away from the chair nearest her own. It's for Hannah, she told them. Her sister would be here any minute. And as always happened when she spoke of Hannah, one or another of them would pick up her hand and squeeze it or tell her how pretty she looked today or wink and promise in a voice too low for nurses to hear that they would bring red licorice the next time they visited. The truth was, as long as her sister was visiting—or even expected—Elsa would never spend a minute alone for the rest of her life.

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**ANDREA PONIERS** moved to Colorado from Michigan in 1997 and can't imagine ever leaving the Intermountain West. She has published several short stories and is currently working on a novel. She is a brand new member of WWW.

