



2020 Second Place

TAKING THE BULL BY THE HORNS

Candace Simar

Widowhood was a mean supper.

Ada Edwards sighed as she shucked corn next to the barn. Amos's death left a hole bigger than she could have imagined. She had expected the children to grow up and leave, but she had not considered that Amos would die first.

Doctor Gamla, the old doctor woman, said that God alone understood why things happened as they did. Doctor Gamla was usually right about things, but Ada had a strong suspicion that God took Amos before his time.

Ada grabbed another ear of corn. She liked the feel of the dried kernels falling before her callused thumb and the sound they made dropping into the bucket. It was a necessary chore, but one that did not require thought. While shelling corn, Ada let her mind wander.

All summer long she had worked daylight to dark on the never-ending haystacks, field work, and gardening. Now their North Dakota farm lay snug and prepared for winter. Of course, there was always work to do on a farm.

Their son, Myron, took over the farm after Amos's death. That change had been hard enough, but when he took a wife, Ada's world spun out of control.

Caroline was nice enough but lacked ambition. A farm wife had to get her hands dirty once in a while. Not Caroline. She liked to sit in the corner and do embroidery work or read women's magazines. She made no effort to help with either indoor or outside chores. Lately Ada had been feeling like a servant. And feeling uncomfortable in her own home. Like she was in the way.

Rex made a ruckus. No doubt it was their neighbor, Elijah Anderson, coming to finalize the plans for winter work. Every fall he and Myron headed east to Minnesota logging camps for work through the dead of winter. It would be their first year going without Amos.

Elijah was a bachelor, a nice young man with a good farm under tillage. Ada wished he would find a wife—someone suited to farm life with enough common sense to help him through life's troubles. Someone to give him children and warm his bed at night. It was no fun to be alone. Ada wouldn't wish it on anyone.

She went into the house to fix coffee for their guest. She couldn't depend on Caroline to do anything right. Besides, Ada wanted to know what was happening. Lumberjacking in Minnesota was a leg-up, a way to earn cash money, and something Amos had done for years. Farmers were always land rich and cash



poor. Myron hoped to use this winter's wages to buy a new harrow and another milk cow.

Ada entered the house and hung her sweater on the peg. She filled the coffee pot with water from the bucket and added kitchen wood to the stove as she listened to the men

discuss their plans. Hiring out

the draft horses to the logging camp yielded extra money. Risky, though, to trust someone else with their team. A slip on the ice, an unstable load, or a careless handler meant injury or worse to their precious draft horses, Peaches and Brandy.

"Taking the train gives us a chance to arrive earlier and snatch those plum jobs," Myron said at the table. "Gets us there before the teamster jobs are taken." Ada refilled Myron's cup and passed the jelly, casting a disapproving look at Caroline who sipped coffee with the men as if she had not a care in the world. Any fool knew that the men were served first and the women ate later—of course, not when it was just the family, but always when there was company. "Not like the old days when me and Pa settled for whatever haywire camp we could find after a hard week on the road."

"Handbills say they're paying top dollar in Hubbard County," Elijah said.

"We'll take the train to Glyndon, and then find a spur line to Park Rapids." Myron wolfed another slice of bread and jam. "We'll ride in the stock car with the team."

Such expense! Ada caught her breath. If Amos were still alive, he would never sanction taking the cars. Young people didn't know the value of money. They hadn't lived through the dry years or survived the grasshoppers.

Her son did not ask her opinion. Ada swallowed hard. The horses belonged to her, after all, as did the farm. Myron acted as if he could make decisions without consulting

her. Of course, he would possess it all someday—but not while she lived. Amos had made sure of that with the bank and courthouse before he died.

"Good jobs go fast," Myron said. He looked at his mother as if in explanation. "Getting there early means a better chance of getting a job managing the team."

Ada prepared a diplomatic response. She began to speak, but Caroline intruded.

"You could be the boss of the whole operation." She looked at Myron with glowing eyes, interrupting Ada without apology as if she wasn't there at all. "You could do anything you set your mind to do."

Myron flushed and puffed out his chest. "I'd rather be a teamster than the bull of the woods. I'll make sure Peaches and Brandy are cared for."

"And it's easier to drive a team than swing an ax," Elijah said with a smirk. "Old Myron here is not too eager to break a sweat in the woods."

"But the train." Ada had to speak her mind or her chest would burst. "You have more time than money. Why not travel as you always have done to keep expenses down?" Someone had to think dollars and cents. She didn't know what train fare might cost, but any price was too much.

"No." Caroline clasped dainty hands before her face. "Take the train. It means leaving later and returning sooner."

Ada glared at the daughter-in-law but swallowed her words. Caroline would have her husband run the farm into the ground. She had Myron so addlebrained that he had lost all common sense.

"Here's a handbill from a camp in Park Rapids," Elijah said. He read aloud the list of men and positions needed. "They're looking for cooks. Come along, Ada."

Ada laughed. She had chores to mind with Myron gone. Caroline would not survive alone, nor would she be able to care for the other livestock. Besides, Ada was pushing fifty. No one wanted an old woman on their payroll.

"I'm serious," Elijah said. "Good food draws the best workers. It's the only difference between camps." He took a huge bite of fresh bread and closed his eyes in appreciation. "Mm...any logger would sign on just to eat your cooking."

"Don't be foolish," Ada said with a wave of her hand. She knew how to cook and manage a kitchen. She could do it, but Amos would roll over in his grave if she took a job off the farm. Amos would expect their son to take care of his mother.

"Remember that belly robber camp where we worked as road monkeys?" Myron said. He and Elijah laughed about cold soup, sour bread, and weak coffee. "Thought we'd starve before spring." Myron smiled at Ada. "Survived on prunes and hardtack."

Myron was a good boy. She wanted her son to be happy more than anything else in the world. In time, Ada would learn to

love his wife. She tried to ignore his lack of response to her comments about taking the cars.

Elijah and Myron would leave the next week.

The weather cooled enough that Ada kept a fire burning day and night. Grudgingly, she had to admit the value of the menfolk being home that extra week in mid-October instead of on the trail. Myron stacked hay around the foundation of the house and tacked tar paper over the north windows. Dark and dreary, but at least it kept out winter drafts. He cleaned the barn and chicken coop and spread manure on both gardens.

On his last day at home, Myron and Caroline took the team and wagon to Mad Dog River to gather a final load of firewood. They packed a picnic lunch to make a day of it. Myron predicted a cold winter because the muskrat pelts were extra thick, a sure sign.

They didn't invite Ada to go with them. Of course, the newlyweds wanted to be alone. Ada understood, but felt abandoned just the same. Doctor Gamla had said the cure for widowhood was to keep busy.

Ada hauled water and heated enough to fill the washtub. Then she scrubbed her dirty clothes and hung them on the line outside the house. With the wind blowing as it was, they would be dry in no time. No sense wasting hot water. She scrubbed Myron's overalls and work shirts, wondering the whole time if Caroline even thought about sending clean clothing with her husband.

Ada heated the flatirons and ironed her clothes, just off the line and smelling like the prairie. She left Myron's clothing on the line for Caroline to iron later. No sense in doing everything for the girl. Ada finished her last apron and fought back the urge to do Caroline's ironing. The sadirons sizzled on the stove. It would take only a moment.

Just then, Ada heard the creaking sounds of harness and team. She looked out the door to see Caroline driving the team, and driving them hard. Peaches and Brandy careened toward the house at reckless

speed. Something was wrong. Myron should be driving. Ada flung open the door, preparing herself for the worst.

Myron lay on the seat beside Caroline, his head draped across her lap. Caroline's petticoat wrapped around one leg oozing scarlet blood.

Ada shrieked and ran to help her son into the house.

"The ax slipped," Myron whispered. "An accident..."

Ada's joints weakened. Together, she and Caroline half-carried and half-dragged Myron into the house and laid him on the bed. He smelled of blood. Good God, what devil in hell had brought this upon them?

Caroline stood to the side, her face as white as flour. Her hair had blown into a wild mess, and her face puffed with tears.

"Don't just stand there," Ada barked. "Do something useful for once." Caroline must fetch Doctor Gamla from town. Ada would mind the wound as best she could until the old doctor woman, an herbalist really, came to help them. Doctor Gamla's salve worked miracles on wounds and risings of all kinds.

In retrospect, Ada knew that she should have sent for the old doctor in spite of Amos's protests when he got hurt. She wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

"Water the team, only a handful of oats," Ada said. "Then fetch Doctor Gamla—no more reckless driving. You could have ruined the horses driving so wild."

"Don't be mean, Ma," Myron said. He stretched out a hand toward Caroline, and his wife flung herself down on her knees, sobbing beside him. "I'll be all right," he assured his wife. "Do what Ma says."

Caroline mopped her face with her apron, glared at Ada, and stomped out of the house. Ada lit the lamp, the room dark as night from the tar-paper-covered windows. So precarious was life. A simple slip made worlds collide and destruct. Ada took a breath and yanked away the petticoat bandage.

"Damn," Myron said with a moan. "That hurts." Ada held the lamp higher and examined the leg wound. No sudden gushes of blood. It had missed the artery. Thank God. If mortification set in, Ada would insist the barber take it off. Hell, she would amputate the leg herself to save her boy's life. Tears slid down her nose. Shaking hands placed the lamp on the table. She couldn't bear to lose someone else. She couldn't bear to lose her son.

"I'll be all right," Myron said. "Don't cry."

She shook her head and pulled a clean towel from the ironing basket, ripping a corner with her teeth to tear a bandage. The wound gaped in the front of his thigh. The flesh lay back, exposing a white strip of bone, a layer of yellow fat and red muscle. Blood oozed.

His leg was the limb of a grown man, hairy and muscular. It had been years since she had seen him undressed. The sight unnerved her. It seemed impossible the years had passed so quickly. Her life slipping out of her hands. She could lose him. She could lose everything.

Ada couldn't speak. She grabbed the whiskey bottle saved for emergencies and made Myron guzzle from the bottle.

Then she took a swig herself. She reached for the brown turpentine bottle kept under the dry sink. She took a breath and poured turpentine into the cavern of wound, sopping the excess with the towel.

"Stop!" Myron screamed. "You're killing me."

She closed her ears to his cries and poured more of the burning liquid into the wound. That's what Doctor Gamla said should have been done for Amos's injured hand. She wadded a bulky compress and wrapped strips of cloth as tightly as she could to hold it in place. She fingered a thready pulse in his lower leg, assured that she had not wrapped it too tightly. It didn't matter that it was her best towel. She didn't care that Myron begged her to stop. Doctor Gamla had taught her these things, and the old doctor woman knew what she was doing.

Ada would not lose another loved one to neglect.

Ada propped a pillow under Myron's leg and pulled the quilt over him. Sweat dripped across his ashen face.

"Rest yourself." Ada's voice came out in near whisper. She would trade places with him if she could. She would give her life for her son. If only it were possible. Her life was over anyway, and his stretched out before him.

They had all believed Amos would survive. It was only a finger, after all, nothing to worry about. Most farmers lost a finger or two. Amos had caught it in the gears of the windmill when he was trying to fix a broken slat. It seemed to get better, but then his hand swelled into a small cabbage. Red streaks bloomed up his arm. Ada insisted they call Dr. Gamla, though even then, Amos resisted.

"Don't need that old witch woman," Amos had said. "I'll be fine in a day or two."

Doctor Gamla arrived after dark. Amos burned with fever. His hand had swollen to the size of a small ham.

"It has to come off, Mr. Edwards. Blood poisoning has set in. Stubby the barber can take your arm." Doctor Gamla bent low to sniff the suppurating wound. "He was an orderly in the War of Rebellion and knows how to amputate a limb."

Amos refused, of course, not believing he would ever die. Stubborn old man that he was.

"It's your arm or your life," Doctor Gamla said. Her shoulders drooped, and the old woman's voice sounded as tired as yesterday. "Your choice."

"How long will it take my leg to heal?" Myron said, pulling Ada back to the present moment.

"Ask Doctor Gamla," Ada said. "A month maybe, if all goes well. Maybe longer."

"Impossible," Myron said, "We're leaving for Minnesota tomorrow."

"Not this year." Ada shook her head. "You can't go now."

Myron widened his eyes. "We need the money," he said. "I've bought the tickets."

The missed income from Myron and the team would set them back. Ada calculated the money tucked away in the sugar bowl. Of course, they would survive, she chided herself. They survived the Indians, the bank failure, and the grasshoppers. They would survive, as they had always done in hard times. They would tighten their belts and delay the extra cow and new harrow. It wasn't the end of the world.

The worst part of growing older was knowing that it wouldn't be easy. It never was.

Caroline returned with Doctor Gamla as the sun drooped over the horizon. Caroline ran into the house without thought for the team. Ada went out to assist old Doctor Gamla down from the wagon.

"How is he?" Doctor Gamla's joints cracked and creaked like an old harness. She was dressed in ancient widow's weeds, shiny with age. Her mouth shriveled around a few brown teeth. No one knew for sure, but the storekeeper said Doctor Gamla was pushing ninety. She held out gnarled hands for Ada to practically lift her down from the wagon seat.

"I don't know," Ada said. Her voice caught and she swiped tears spurting from her eyes and running down her face.

"Don't fret yourself," Doctor Gamla said. "I'm here now."

"I'll tell you," Ada said in a fierce whisper as she grasped the old woman's arm. "I can't take another death. Myron is all I have left."

"Hmph," Doctor Gamla said with a huff. "He's not in the grave yet." She straightened her bent back with a grunt of pain. Steely blue eyes looked right through Ada. "Some folks never get over a death. But I say it's better to face grief head-on, take the bull by the horns and march into the future anyway." She paused for a breath. "No sense dying before you die." The old woman reeked of camphor and garlic from an asphydity bag dangling around her neck. "At least that's what cured me."

The old woman hobbled into the house, clutching Ada's arm for support. She asked for another light. Ada raised an eyebrow as Caroline ran for candles. Perhaps the girl wasn't as hopeless as she had thought.

"Mighty foolish thing to do," Doctor Gamla said with a cackle. "Chopping your leg instead of wood." She wheezed a soundless laugh. "And you a lumberjack! Ought to know better. A man is stubborn when it comes to blades or axes."

Ada raised the lamp and Doctor Gamla unwrapped the dressing and probed the wound. Myron did not call out but great beads of sweat dampened his hair and shirt.

"Stitches, just a few in the middle," Doctor Gamla said. "And a good dose of my salve."

"I think you should go out and care for the team," Doctor Gamla said to Caroline. "And I hear your milk cow bawling to be milked."

Caroline looked at Myron's leg and then at Doctor Gamla. "Of course," she said, her voice as weak as paper. As thin as the shell of an egg. "I'll be in the barn."

She left. A gush of cold air blew in through the open door.

Doctor Gamla threaded a needle and set to work. Ada held the lamp and tried to ignore Myron's cries of pain as the needle pierced the tender flesh, as the knots were tied, and as the salve covered the path of uneven stitches.

"There," Doctor Gamla said. "If you don't mind, Ada, I could use a strong cup of tea. Then I will make a pallet on the floor and spend the night. I was at a lying-in until late last night, and I am feeling my age." She looked at Myron and nodded. "He'll be fine, I think, but I'll stay overnight to make sure."

All night Ada tossed and turned in her bed in the loft, worrying about Myron's leg and the lost wages. If only Amos were alive to take charge. But Amos had been dead for seven months. He wasn't coming back.

Ada finally got up and put the coffeepot on the stove. It was still black outside, but the gloom had lightened and soon the sun would color the eastern horizon. She liked being up early enough to see the first rim of light. Myron snored from his bed. Ada wanted to check his leg to make sure there were no red streaks aiming for his heart, but hesitated. She'd wake the whole

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It never was.

household, including Doctor Gamla who needed her rest.

As Ada waited for the water to boil, she glimpsed the handbill from the logging camps stuck in the kindling box. She picked it up and read the job descriptions. *Cook, cook's helper, kitchen boy. "Top wages for those willing to work."*

She was too old to learn something new. Not that cooking was new, she reminded herself. She learned to cook for threshing crews when she was just a girl. Kitchen work came as easy to her as breathing. She had ventured out alone before, but that had been before her marriage, before life taught her caution. She had nothing to lose back when she first signed on as a servant for a big farm in the Red River Valley. Now she had everything to lose.

Ada reread the handbill. Logging camps might not hire a woman, even a plain-faced widow old enough to be their mother. The loggers were young men mostly.

She and Amos had shared that first summer on the farm when they were young, before the hard times came. She remembered the sweetness of being alone, learning to love and get along. All their relatives had been far-away, and they were glad for it.

Caroline and Myron needed to be alone as well. Caroline would be forced to learn to manage on her own and grow up into the woman and wife that Myron needed. Ada had never considered their need, only her own need to keep the farm going. Someday the farm would be theirs. She wanted them to be happy. She wanted them to succeed.

Doctor Gamla rose from her pallet and yawned to the table. "Smelled the coffee." She pulled out a chair and slumped into it. "I'm getting too old to be out gallivanting over the prairie." She yawned again. "Sometimes I think I'm ready for the rocking chair."

Ada poured coffee. Her thoughts about working at a logging camp popped out of her mouth. "What do you think Doctor Gamla?"

The doctor didn't answer. She poured a stream of scalding coffee into the saucer to cool, then sipped it with a loud slurp. She leaned back in her chair. "Sometimes I think I've let go of so much that there's nothing else for me to hang onto. Then something else pops up and I see more to release."

"Losing your man changes everything," Ada said. "A woman loses herself. Loses her voice. Loses any standing she had in the family or church or community. Buried with him."

Talking to Doctor Gamla always made things clearer. The old woman had cures for everything. Ada waited for the old woman's response.

"Why not give it a try?" Doctor Gamla said. "Go and have another adventure while you're young enough to do it. The world won't end if you're not here to watch over things."

Why not? Ada let the statement filter into her thinking. Give it a try. Take the bull by the horns. She wasn't in the grave yet. Look at Doctor Gamla still traveling over the prairie, helping out sick folks.

"That's my cure for you," Doctor Gamla said. "Don't quit living until you have to." She slurped her coffee and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Ada made up her mind. She would go to the logging camp with Elijah. When she returned in the spring, she would purchase the harrow and extra milk cow with her own money. She could do it. She had nothing to lose. If her health held, she might live another decade or two. She would give it a try.

Ada broke the news to Myron when Caroline took Doctor Gamla home.

"You're not going," Myron said, raising up on his elbow in bed and staring at her with a horrified look on his face. "What would Pa say about such a thing?"

"Your father was a prudent man who would see it as a sensible move," Ada said. "I'll take the cars and find work at a logging camp." Ada tried to sound more confident than she felt. "A cook is always in demand."

"I forbid it," Myron said. "I promised Pa I'd take care of you. You're my responsibility."

Ada's heart made a funny jump in her chest. Myron was her good boy. She had to leave. Myron needed time with his wife, and maybe Ada needed a change, too. One final fling before she took up the rocking chair.

"I've a few good years left," Ada said. "Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. You can't stop me." She scrambled for rational and sensible words. "I love to cook." She took a deep breath. "I'm not scared of work."

"They'll ruin the horses if you don't keep watch." Myron said. He moved his injured leg and grimaced. "Last year I went nose to nose with the straw boss putting too heavy a load on Peaches." He moved his leg again and Ada reached over and propped it on a pillow. "Better to leave the team at home than lose them altogether."

"They're my horses. Elijah can work with the team. We need the money. I'll risk it," Ada said. She clamped her lips together and stepped over to the stove where she threw a stick of firewood under the coffee pot. "I can do it. You'll see."

"There's no women at a camp." He shifted in bed, and the slight movement brought a wince of pain. "All those rough men." He paused. "You have no idea what it's like."

Ada snorted. "At my age? I am well able to take care of myself."

"You don't understand."

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it," Ada said. A quick worry intruded. "A clean hand in the kitchen can always find work."

Myron said nothing for a long moment. "What about the chores? I'm laid up."

It was the closest he had ever come to admitting that Caroline did not do her share of the work. Ada grinned.

"You'll have to boss her step by step," she said.

Later, Caroline returned from town. She pushed through the door with her face flushed and pretty from the wind. Blond curls escaped in all directions from her blue bonnet.

"Ma's going to the woods in my stead," Myron said. "Can we hold down the fort while she's gone?"

"Really?" Caroline said. "Of course we can."

Ada noticed the look of relief on Caroline's face. She tried not to be offended. Tried to remember being young and newly married, the sweetness, and the pure joy of it.

"It will mean more work for you until I'm back on my feet," Myron said.

Caroline's brilliant smile showed every white tooth in her head. It said everything.

Doctor Gamla's cures always worked. It was time for Ada to let go of her role as wife and try something new. She could do it. She knew she could.

Ada had a lot of living yet to do. She could almost feel the chug of the cars pulling her into her future.



CANDACE SIMAR loves to imagine how things might have been. Her historical novel, *Shelterbelts*, was a finalist for The WILLA Literary Award and her story, *Night Riding*, won The LAURA Short Fiction Award in 2018. Her work has also been recognized by the Western Writers of America, the Will Roger Medallion Awards, the Western Fictioneer, and the Midwest Book Awards.

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