

Word count: 2800

Lay It Down

by Cathleen Cherry

Roy sat in a creaky chair next to the bed. The old man unwrapped a flannel cloth to reveal his Smith & Wesson revolver. He glanced at Alma to check that she still slept, then reached into the box on the nightstand, retrieving a single cartridge. His gnarled hands shook as he loaded it into the cylinder of the gun. He sat for a moment, and then thought better of his failing eyesight and filled the cylinder, dropping two cartridges to the floor. They rolled under the bed. He muttered a curse and then pulled Alma's wheelchair closer. Roy placed the weapon on the seat, set the brake, and grimaced as he leaned his full weight on the chair. He haltingly pulled himself to his feet. He grumbled at the ache in his knees and hips, wishing he hadn't left his flask of bourbon in the truck. His hands began to shake again as he reached for the gun.

Tucking the revolver into his belt and grabbing his cane, Roy shuffled toward the door. His pants sagged, the result of few meals over the past weeks. The worn soles of his cowboy boots slid and scraped over the wooden floorboards. His dog, Hank, lay on the floor with his chin resting on his front feet. He looked up at Roy and wagged his whip-like tail, thumping the floor.

“Yeah, Hank. It's time.”

But the dog waited, letting Roy pass through the door first, then hopped up with the exuberance of his youth. He trotted after his master.

Six weeks before, Alma's doctor had given them the news. The bruising, shortness of breath, and fatigue were classic symptoms. They were confirmed by a blood test which left a blue-black mark that eventually wrapped itself around her elbow. At her age, there was really no treatment. Not that she'd want any. She wanted to live, sure, but on her own terms, in their own

house, on their land. When Roy had picked up the phone to call Luellen after the initial shock and surge of tears had receded, Alma shook her head. She didn't want anyone to know, even their own daughter. She didn't want a fuss made over her. And so they'd carried on by themselves. The idea of dignity was paramount for Alma, but Roy soon realized that there was no dignity in growing old, no dignity in trying to lift his wife's body so she could use the bathroom, no dignity in wrestling with her feeble body in order to change her clothing or the bed sheets. There was no dignity in trying, in his own pathetic condition, to avoid hurting her as he performed these tasks, even with his best intentions. But these things he would do for her. There was no need to involve anyone else.

Roy made his way down the porch steps, gripping his cane and picking up the shovel that he'd propped up against the house. Hank followed, a dutiful attendant. The wind blew from the northwest and the first cirrus clouds skitted high, warning of a storm on the way. Roy stopped and adjusted the revolver and zipped his black down vest up to the neck, then continued his slow trek toward the cottonwoods that separated the upper field from the creek's edge. He squinted into the cold wind, his eyes watering. Stopping again to find his handkerchief to wipe his eyes and blow his nose, he balanced himself with one hand holding the cane and the shovel. Hank gently nudged his hand, sniffed the revolver, and sat, patient. Roy ignored him. Hank nudged again, eager for affection and reassurance.

“Stop it, Hank,” Roy whispered, his voice gruff.

Pocketing the handkerchief, Roy trudged on. The week before, he had finalized his plan. While Alma slept, he'd boxed up their Limoges wedding china. Before carefully wrapping the first dish in newspaper, he'd traced with his crooked finger the diminutive pink roses that twined along the edge of the plate. He'd stacked them, the dinner plates, salad plates, cups, saucers,

each wrapped separately, into boxes lined up just inside the front door.

After stoking the fire, and checking on Alma, he'd eased himself into a chair at the kitchen table to write. When he had finished, Roy addressed the letter to Luellen in his shaky school-book script. Then, he had retrieved the gold watch from his jeans pocket. Pulling out the winding button, he'd wrapped the watch in flannel and placed it and the letter inside the last box with the china. There were no apologies, no explanations. There was nothing left to say.

Hank looked up at Roy again, prodded his hand with a cold, wet nose, and whimpered. Roy cleared his throat and carried on. Roy glanced toward the cottonwoods, their skeletal branches reaching toward the clouds. There, two metal garden chairs awaited, and Roy could rest.

Alma blinked, her breathing alternating between shallow and deep. Roy tried to look only at her face and away from her hands, which had turned a bluish hue. Earlier, when he adjusted the blankets, he noticed her feet were blue, the toenails a yellow contrast. He knew, then, that it would be soon.

"I'm cold," Alma whispered, her voice broken and hushed.

"I just put another log in the stove," Roy said, his voice quavering. He fidgeted with the goose down comforter that had warmed them many winters. "Remember when we made this? Raising those damn geese? Never seen a creature mean as them. Was a pleasure to wring their necks and pluck 'em." He smiled.

Alma nodded and closed her eyes.

"And you. I had no idea you were stitching away at this." He fingered the patchwork, made of plaid shirts, flannels, Luellen's little girl dresses, a tapestry of their lives together.

Her breathing was slowing. Grasping her hand, he was amazed at the way its cool smoothness still complemented his own rough hands.

Fifty-seven years I've held these hands, the old man thought. Fifty-seven years.

"Roy." Her eyes were open again. "Roy."

He nodded.

"Call Luellen. When I'm gone." She licked her parched lips, her voice crackling with dryness. "Promise me you'll go to her."

He nodded, but knew it was a lie. He would be here, die here. There was no reason to go live in a California suburb with their daughter. Luellen had created her own opportunities, and Roy was proud of her, lawyering for that big firm in San Jose. She worked too many hours. He was pleased with all she'd done, and all on her own. They shared a stubbornness that often made them clash, but Roy saw much of himself in her and knew he didn't have to explain his choices, just as she didn't have to explain hers.

He helped his wife sip some water, kissed her, and then rose and climbed into the bed next to her, panting with exertion. Her eyes were closed again and he took her hand and held it near her heart. The last of the sun's rays slipped beyond the hill, bathing the room in winter's last grey light. He wept.

Hank bounded, racing in and out of the creek below the cottonwoods as Roy took the flask from the pocket of his black down vest. He took a mouthful of bourbon and then tucked the flask back into the pocket. He trudged forward, dragging the shovel, and tossed his cane toward the metal chairs, then removed his vest, and placed the gun on it. There, where the dirt was softer, where he'd made love to Alma many, many springtimes as the cotton from the trees

had swayed like dancing snowflakes around them, he began to dig.

As he dug, he saw her smooth tan skin, her coffee-colored hair not yet streaked with grey, the blue of her eyes matching the sky behind her as she straddled him, laughing. He stopped to rest, stopped to swig from the flask. How many seasons had they been together under these cottonwood trees? With each memory, the digging became easier, the dirt he scooped became lighter, until finally, faint from the recollections and the labor, he was done. At last, the task finished, he released the shovel from the grip of his stiff fingers. Sweating, panting, he shuffled to the metal chairs. He'd teased Alma about how she had insisted on picking the cotton out of her hair, about how pointless it was since before she'd finish more catkins would have landed. But he wasn't smiling when he picked up his cane and gun, and plodded out from the weak shade the leafless cottonwood branches afforded.

Roy whistled to call Hank and struggled to pick up a stick. His back ached from the digging. Hank whined and pranced, hoping for a game of fetch. With immeasurable effort, Roy flung the stick into the fallow field. Hank tore after it, delighted in the game. Roy grasped the revolver and pulled it from his belt. He walked on, leaning on the cane, the gun a heavy comfort. Hank returned with the stick in his mouth, holding it up for Roy, pawing at the ground. Roy patted the dog gently on its head, grabbed the stick, and flung it again out into the field.

Bringing the gun up to level, Roy struggled to balance with the cane propped up against his leg. With both hands strangely steady on the grip, he raised the weapon, cocked, and aimed, only to realize he was too slow. Hank was already returning, holding the stick lopsided in his smiling jaw and dragging it on the ground. Roy grabbed the stick again, throwing it as far as he could to give himself the advantage, wincing at the pain in his shoulder.

The gun, already cocked and ready to fire, felt lighter in his hands as he brought it level

and aimed. He searched for Hank through the sight, and then saw the dog's dim shadow playfully bounding into a crouch and barking. Then, as if the dog's instincts suddenly took hold, Hank stood on point at something Roy could not see. Roy blinked, then fired. The roar of the gun filled his ears and he momentarily lost balance. Stabbing at the ground with his cane which had been propped up against his hip, he righted himself, breathing heavily. Wiping his mouth with the hand that held the gun, Roy squinted at the field, scanning it for Hank. The dog lay on its side, motionless.

Roy awoke in the night, his hips in searing pain from being motionless for so long. He inhaled deeply, pulled his hand from Alma's and rolled, pushing himself to a sitting position with his legs hanging over the side of the bed. The room was cold, the air still and heavy. Reaching for the bedside light, he pulled the chain to turn it on, then gripped his cane, and slowly rose to fill the woodstove. The pain in his hips seeped downward as he shuffled. He stood by the fire after feeding the coals that patiently glowed, leaving the door of the stove ajar to allow the oxygen to nourish the flames. Convinced that the fire would take, Roy closed and latched the door, then hobbled back into the bedroom, impatient to return to the warmth under the down comforter.

From the dim light beside the bed, he knew. Alma was bluish, her jaw slack. He'd seen others dead, and animals too, of course. He'd always snorted with derision when someone said the dead looked like they were sleeping. It wasn't true, of course. There was no mistaking sleep for death.

The hardest part, he thought, would be how to get her there, under the cottonwood trees. He brought the wheelchair alongside the bed, and leaned over his wife's body. Tenderly, he

brushed her grey hair back behind her ear with his crooked, shaky fingers. Leaning in and wrapping his arms around her torso, he held her tight and struggled to straighten himself. He lugged her toward the chair, lurching inch by inch, embracing her. Finally, he had her over the chair, her legs still reaching the bed. He had wanted to lay her down with grace, but collapsed and let her go. She landed on the seat, a little on her side, head wobbling, but she was there.

Roy crumpled onto the bed, the tremor in his hands amplified by his exhaustion and agitation, by the fact that he hadn't eaten. He slept, briefly, fitfully.

When he awoke, he avoided looking at Alma. As quickly as he could, he left the suffocating air of the bedroom. He hobbled outside. The day's first sunlight was just breaking across the oak-studded hills, alighting the frost-coated grasses like a silhouette of flame. A bank of clouds hung in the west, brewing with gloom. A cold front was on its way, and the trees and grasses shivered in anticipation. Roy stood, leaning on the porch rail and watched the clouds move in. The energy of the storm was still distant but he felt it and was grateful.

Roy covered Alma with the comforter and tucked it into the sides of the wheelchair. It was easy enough to move the wheelchair through the house. Out on the porch, Roy turned the chair so that Alma faced the door. He set the brakes thinking – hoping – he'd have more control, and then carefully eased himself to the lower of the two steps. He tried to shut out the images of the wheelchair crushing him as it fell, out of control, his bones breaking, and him lying pinned and helpless beneath it.

“Damn it.” Who was he kidding? He could barely move Alma when she was alive and able to help. How would he get her down these two steps? He sat down to think, startled that he hadn't thought it through like he'd intended.

An hour later he had a plan. With all the strength he could manage, he dragged her from

the chair until she was right at the edge of the top step. Then he worked his way down to the bottom step, released the chair brake, and pulled it down the steps, moving back. It bounced and flipped on its side, coming to a stop right in front of Roy. He managed to right it, and reset the brake. Then he mounted the steps again, and dragged Alma, wrapped in the comforter, down the steps, a slow one-two shuffle with Alma's feet thudding as they dropped from each step. With great care, he set her back in the chair, and rested again.

Later, the cold wind picked up and Roy fought to push the chair into the wind. They were nearly to the cottonwood trees. With each step, the metal chairs beckoned, and Roy quickened his pace, impatient to sit and share a bourbon again. Steam rose from him, evaporating into the chill. He wheeled Alma near the chairs that waited. Collapsing in a cold chair, Roy pulled his flask from his belt and breathed. He sipped, the heat of the whisky invigorating and calming. When he recovered, he wheeled the chair near the hole he'd dug. He unwrapped Alma, and with a tenderness that belied his age, lay her down. He adjusted her limbs until he was satisfied she looked comfortable, and then gently combed through her hair with his fingers. Her eyes were closed. He covered her with the comforter, then climbed out and rested again.

The flask empty and the clouds low and nearly white, Roy pushed the wheelchair out into the field to retrieve Hank. He stumbled over the furrows, relying on the chair to keep him upright. Squinting into the field, he searched for the dog. And then he noticed a raven. He approached, yelling at the raven atop the dog. His voice, raspy and hoarse, had no effect on the bird. He staggered, struggling to maintain his balance and still push the chair. When Roy was within fifteen feet, the raven flew, accusing Roy with its caw, caw, caw. He removed his vest and threw it over the dog, not wanting to see his face. He knelt to lift this load.

Finally, the sky a velvet purple above the mountains to the west, Roy lay back in the hole he'd dug under the cottonwood trees, Hank at his feet, Alma at his side. He covered the three of them with the comforter that had warmed them so many nights before. The memories of their lives together were spinning, twirling into an eddy around him. In the fading light snowflakes began to fall and swirl, dancing like the cotton catkins many springs before. Falling and rising, the memories carried him, relieved of all burden.