

Butternut

by T. Marie Bertineau

She heard the chainsaw growl before she opened her eyes. She'd been dreaming of him again, wishing him back. Clinging. It pained her to wake, to rouse her brittle frame cradled there by her ladder-back rocker, the one he bought at a roadside sale in '34. The one she'd sat in each morning as he'd readied for the mine, kissed her head and cooed, *And there, right in front of me, shines my Butternut. G'day, Butternut, he'd say. G'day.*

Beyond the house, the saw whined. Men shouted. Weary, she peeled herself from the concave seat, worn to her cloverleaf imprint. She toddled to the east window, its weathered sash blanched and sagging, a kindred spirit. In the tall grass she saw them, the tree service mentioned in the township notices she'd received—and promptly burned. She rapped at the pane with bony knuckles. "Get the heck outta here!" she croaked. The saw blade caught a glint of sun, flashed its teeth, gnawed at the highest limb. Graying bark shredded and sprayed. Her chest tightened.

Wincing, she scuttled as fast as her limp would allow, straight to the cellar door. On the landing perched the empty .22—once his muskrat gun, when his breath still mingled with hers, when it warmed the walls and sweetened the air. She grasped the cold barrel and scraped to the back door. Outside, rifle in one hand, porch railing in the other, she maneuvered the tilted steps and shuffled to within ten feet of the big white truck. Raising her bluff, she pressed the stock against her sunken clavicle and took aim. "I said get the hell away from my tree!" Her voice was stronger now, called to action.

The foreman saw her then, out the corner of his eye, a frailty, an unexpected complication. "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" he bellowed up to the lift. The chainsaw eased, burped, and quieted. All eyes were on her now, the rifle aimed at the foreman's knees. "We're just doing our job, ma'am," he said, arms wide, palms down. He wore hunter's orange; glowed bright as citrus. "Can you put that thing down?"

"No one's taking Verdin's tree," she said. "Sick or not, it ain't comin' down." That tree was all she had left of him now. A reminder of the life he'd lived—the life they'd shared. He'd planted it in her honor. "Butternut" was what he called her. Butternut was what he planted. It was a seedling then, nothing more than a twig in the garden, but like their love it had thrived. They were rooted together, there in that ground. Entwined.

Suddenly, overhead, the canopy shrieked. An ailing limb tore from the fated host, bounced against the cankerous trunk and plummeted, thrashing and gnashing, until it

shook the earth and heaved its last breath, its weight crushing the unchecked rye beneath.

Silence prevailed. She lowered the gun.

She knew. Verdin had spoken. "Let me go, Butternut," he had said. "Let me go."