

Albany Cutter

by Jamie Grove

After the egg hunt, the children went wild. They chased each other in circles and raced through the ankle-high grass shot through with dark violets and white spring beauties. They hid behind the wood pile and scrambled over the mound of topsoil getting their clothes all dirty. The children were everywhere really, till one of them found a rabbit next to the stoop and they all gathered around.

Pinned against the side of the house, the rabbit shivered. Eyes wide, the rabbit's heart beat quickly beneath its gray mottled fur. The children squealed but soon they didn't know quite what to do and the rabbit was too young to know it could just run away. They stood and watched each other silently, until one of the mothers came along and shoed them all away.

Four men came out of the house. They went up to the barn to bring down the cutter. It didn't take four men to carry that sleigh, but that's how they did it, two to a side. Coming back,

the men moved slowly down the gravel lane. When they reached the front of the house, they set the frail cutter down gingerly as if sliding the rails onto a silk pillow.

The rest of the family rushed out to see the cutter, except Grandfather Henry who stayed on the porch. He was a bit bowlegged and propped himself up with a cane. The cane looked odd at the end of his arm, which was still taut and corded from the years given over to the farm. His hip gave him pain and shifted his weight around.

The men who carried the sleigh stood next to it, looking proud.

"Not a straight piece on it," Carl said, and then he leaned against the bucket and pointed inside. "You can even see a little bit of the straw there that they used for padding."

"Couldn't have been too comfortable," Tom added.

These two men were fair-haired sons of Grandfather Henry. Carl was the older of the two, though Tom himself had just turned fifty-four. The brothers stood side by side and watched Grandfather Henry work his way down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs, Grandfather Henry paused and pushed the tip of his cane into the soft earth. He looked out to the fields that faded away to the east and south. A truck blew past on the highway.

The other two men were younger, but still old enough to have sons of their own. They inspected the cutter dutifully.

"Did you see these lead eagles?" Daniel asked.

George leaned in to get a closer look. Stuck to the end of the rein leads, the eagle heads were no bigger than the tip of a child's thumb. Their eyes bulged proudly above whipped tongues that curled back into open beaks. They made the cutter look fast.

Grandfather Henry came over to the cutter and Daniel knelt down to study the rails.

One of nine, Daniel grew up on a farm eight miles away and married Carl's daughter Sue. They were both slender and blond with blue eyes and high cheekbones. Though they had lived in the city for more than a decade, the land was still home to Daniel and Sue.

George's son came running around the side of the house. He was a blond little thing in a blue checked shirt with a wide smile that reflected the sun. Bursting with laughter, he seemed to draw strength from the earth and the sky. In this place, the boy looked so much like his mother.

At home, George had a black and white picture of Mary. The picture was taken when she was about the same age as the boy. She was playing in a sandbox, not far from where George stood

now but thirty-five years before. She too was a blond little thing. She wore a gingham dress, her face draped round with a smile of pure joy, infectious and bright.

Everyone laughed along with the boy, who paid no attention. He continued to run and laugh, and then he disappeared in the direction of the other children.

George looked inside the bucket of the cutter. He could still make out the dim pattern of paisleys in the remnant of the seat. He ran his hand over the crimson fabric. It was soft in the way that memories are when they are worn through from handling too often. He turned to Grandfather Henry and asked if they used the sleigh to get around in the winter or just for fun.

"Oh, way back then there weren't many cars out here," he said. "I suppose they couldn't get into town if it snowed."

Everyone was quiet after that. George tried to imagine the sleigh hitched up, but instead he thought about Grandfather Henry and his wife Leddie going into town on a Saturday night for square dancing. It was a story Leddie had told Mary and George many times.

"Henry loved to dance," Leddie said. "He never got tired either. Both he and his sister were like that. Those two, they never got tired. And if you got tired with all the dancing and

what? Why, they thought there must be something wrong with you, like maybe you were sick. He worked like that in the fields too. All his life, he never got tired."

A car drove past. The driver honked and honked, but no one seemed to know who it was. Eventually, when it was almost too late, Grandfather Henry raised a hand.

"Who was that?" Carl asked.

"I don't know," Grandfather Henry said, "but he seemed real happy about it. I thought it would be a shame to let him down."

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In the last town before the long drive out into the deep country, a limestone hall stands in the center of a public square. Black walnut giants surround the hall with a few tall ash trees scattered about as well. The windows of the hall, stacked up in rows, peeked out above the canopy.

Once before they were married, Mary took George into the hall. It was early June and the leaves had come in on the ash trees. Flickering shadows of late-afternoon played across white-worn planks but there was hardly a soul around.

Mary pulled George along to a marble staircase framed by heavy, oak rails. They went up to the second floor, then round to the third. Though they weren't trying to be quiet, the creaking under their feet made them a little giddy. They tried

to ease into each step, which only made the floorboards groan louder and they laughed amid their own echoes.

On the third floor, there was a door with a frail brass knob. Behind the door was a chute of a stairwell that went up to a widow's walk on the roof. From the top of the hall George and Mary took in the whole of the town. They could see the entire length of the man-made lake to the south and the magnificent, three-story lighthouse on its shore. The lighthouse had no beam but the dome glowed blue-green at night in the shadow of a steel grain elevator.

There was a movie theater across the street from the hall where three films played on two little screens. Friday nights, kids huddled together in chatty packs under the chasing lights of the marquee. Sometimes they went to the movies but more often they hitched a ride out to a dance or tried to get into the biker bars.

Up the street, the sign for Schweiterman's Pharmacy ran alongside a grand Victorian turret that jutted out into the intersection of State Line and Main. For sixty some odd years, Schweiterman's opened on weekdays and Saturday mornings. On Sundays, the Catholics filled the pink granite Cathedral and the Coach House Restaurant served silver-dollar pancakes next to the tracks where no train had ever stopped.

It was years before George went up to the window's walk again, but when he did he took his son. They walked hand in hand in the June shadows. Their footsteps were much louder than George remembered.

Standing together on the roof, George pointed out the farms in the distance. He showed the child where the land drifted away into the pastoral spaces of a hundred years ago. Fields of corn and beans closed in around fading red barns and white clapboard houses. The oldest farms were half a mile from the road and shaded by clusters of oak and shag-bark hickory. A few ranch houses carved out five acre plots right up next to the highway and the electric. Then, just outside town, quarries raked up the ground and upstart suburban houses expanded in predictable tracts around the deep ponds left behind.

Time does not heal, George thought. It simply makes the past unrecognizable, except perhaps as myth.

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When everyone had enough of the cutter, the four men carried it back up to the barn. Grandfather Henry went back to the steps and made his way slowly up to the porch. He sat down on a bench that stood against the wall of the low ranch house and held his cane against his chest. This is how George found Grandfather Henry when he returned and he sat down next to him.

Carl and Tom stopped on the walk in front of the house. They spoke to each other quietly. There were long pauses between what was said.

"Lay down any mulch this weekend?" Carl asked.

"I did," Tom said. "Only took me about an hour and forty-five minutes. But what I don't understand is why he made the beds so wide. They're three or four feet in places and built up too. Damn near to the sill of the porch in one place."

"Maybe he did it to keep water away from the house?" Carl asked.

"That doesn't make sense either," Tom said. "I thought of that, but it doesn't make sense because the house sits up so high. I never had beds that wide at the farm."

"That's true."

There were bright red tulips in Carl's flower beds. They swayed in the constant breeze. It was a warm spring, better than a lot of years when they would all be trapped inside with the kids.

"I like your tulips, Carl," George said.

"Those tulips, all of them, are volunteers," Carl said. "Tiny bulbs, not yet as big around as your little finger. I guess I didn't find them all when I dug this up last year."

"Don't you like tulips?"

"Oh, they're alright I guess."

George went out back to look in on his son. The boy was kneeling down near the back of the lot where the open yard fell under the arms of hickory and oak trees. When George came up to him, he saw that the boy was picking the spring beauties out of the thick grass. He had a mash of them in his little hand.

"I pick flowers for mama," the boy said.

"Let's pick them together."

It felt good to move their searching fingers through the cool grass. They gathered up the vinous and delicate flowers until they could hardly hold the mass in their hands, then they got up and walked over to the barn. The boy saw the cutter sitting in the open doorway and ran to it.

"Can I ride?" he asked.

George put the boy into the bucket. How he knew to snap the reins, George couldn't guess, but he laughed and played along while the boy went like hell across the countryside on a frosty winter's evening.

But where did they really go in that cutter? George wondered if they raced it across the powdery snow of early morning or under the stars all night. A person couldn't take a fancy sleigh like that to church. It was only big enough for

one person anyway, like something that might have belonged to a doctor.

For years the albaney cutter sat out in the woods. In the rain and the heat and the cold, the veneer was the first thing to go, the luster stripped raw in a single season by the stiff wind. The rot left behind by layers of storm-driven leaves did the rest.

When Mary was a child, she used to look out her bedroom window on nights when the swirling blackness came charging in from across the Indiana border. The wind raged and whispered at the same time. It seemed to her that the wind must have carried away the words of men before they had a chance to speak. All those muffled voices came tumbling down from the sky at once when the clouds could no longer hold them back.

She told Grandfather Henry this and he smiled at her.

"I never thought about the wind like that," he said, "but that might explain why the corn has always been pretty quiet in this part of the county."

George took the boy out of the cutter and they walked back to the house. It was getting late and there was the long drive back home to think of. The child fought him all the way, of course, desperate to go back to the barn and ride in the sleigh.

They lost half the spring beauties in the struggle, and what they saved was a ragged looking mess.

After they said good-bye to everyone, George strapped the boy into his car seat and started up the engine. He pulled out of the gravel lane and onto the road. He stuck his arm out the window and waved to Carl and Tom, who were still standing on the walk in front of the ranch house. George beeped the horn and Grandfather Henry raised his hand under the porch. The boy was asleep before they passed the first crossroads.

The sun slid lower in the rear-view mirror until it was almost gone. The orange light of dusk filled in all the places where the shadows faltered and held its own for a few moments. When the light disappeared altogether, George drove on until he reached the town with the limestone hall. He saw the blue-green dome of the lighthouse blazing like a torch. The streets were empty and the stoplights sagged on their cables.

At the public square, George stopped the car. He left the sleeping boy behind and walked over to the hall. On the top step, George spread out the spring beauties carefully and then went back to the car. He drove with an easy foot on the gas till he reached the main highway where he could set the cruise control and relax.

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About 2,500 words

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