

2020 Wind & Water Writing Contest
First Prize Winner
NON-FICTION/FICTION

Mona's Roadkill

By Andrew Binks (Fiction)

Mona had a real problem with roadkill and her first husband; she said Aubrey's trophies were the bane of her existence and that he was an albatross around her neck. I called him her "first husband" even when she was still married to him because I didn't want to think he was all the good Lord had for her. Mona could be stubborn as Aubs, and stronger than he pretended to be; when one of Swackhammer's cows tried to swim to Wapos island, right where it's deepest, she was the one herded him back to dry land practically dragged him back up onto the ground. You can't figure out the thinking of a cow — he went right when he looked like he was going left — and Mona was right.

Sometimes the company of folk — even if you can't speak your mind — is good enough. I turned a blind eye to her black eyes. If it was bad I'd know because at some point she'd squeeze my hand, like she was sending all that pain right along to somewhere else. Then her long black hair would fall across her face. I'd go to Mona's on these mornings, with Aubs gone hunting. Hunting? All he ever brought home was roadkill; he couldn't hit the broadside of a deer unless he was aiming for it with his high-beams. So Aubs would get home, drunk, and be mad she was asleep, and either lay into her from behind or above, and she'd bruise her arms whacking him.

But it wasn't until we moved her fridge and found three rats clinging to it that I saw Mona wasn't happy. Her look cut straight to me. "Now don't scream like a girl," she

said. Then she scraped them off the grate with her kitchen knife. “They won’t be dinner.” (Cooking roadkill smells odd, not bad, so Mona adds lots of onions.) Rats plus the simple things did it, like Aubs not putting drywall over the insulation and things leaking and the roof half falling in on them when they watched Aubs’ shows using some kind of TV antenna channelling hornet-nest static.

I only ever hugged her once, in congratulations, because at a range she’d picked off that meanest, smallest coyote. The chickens Mona kept, well, one always spent the night up a tree and never in the coop. “Guardian Chicken Angel,” she said, “the Flock Watcher.” She’d sell them all in the fall. “Don’t have the heart to kill them, let alone eat ‘em.” Well the coyote finally got her favourite. So, early that morning, I waited for Aubs’ truck to leave and then went across. Mona stuck her sheep dogs in the house, waited until they were quiet. Late autumn, a clear chill and no wind, and one crack of her shotgun, brought those last yellow leaves sifting to the ground and laid waste to that mangy thing while it skulked for breakfast. And that’s when I hugged her. Once, and never again. Don’t touch.

“Jesus Christ Bryce, you do that again, ever again, ever, *ever* again and I swear I will punch that sissy face so hard you won’t be able to gossip for a week.”

I figured I prob’ly wouldn’t see her again for a few days or a long time — because he’d know she’d used one of his guns.

We made our chores seem like we were doing it for Aubs — taking road kill leftovers into the woods. She did the dirty work. I told her because she was closer to the earth she had more strength, never mind being Indian.

“You’re Mother Earth,” I said.

“Your talk spoils things,” she said.

“That cow?”

“You should be in a city where your kind belong.” Some people have something about them makes you want to be close – not laughs or stories and the only way to get it is to be close. Some days we’d hitch a ride into Bren’s Bakery, ignore the yokels ignoring us. She’d get me a regular coffee and a bag of day-old cinnamon knots.

But we had more reasons to be busy now and go into the woods — our new “weed” patch — between Mona’s place, and Swackhammer’s, where some weekender had bought two hundred and forty four acres — tight knit woods with a pond and a stream, and a few of Swackhammer’s lost cow’s pies — with no plans for it. Not like Mona’s and Aub’s acres with nothing but red cedar and scrub meadow choking back on itself.

The only way to find our crop was spotting the ghost tree, taller than the rest and all white and dead enough to make you want to itch yourself. Crooked as the lightning that killed it. That’s where we always left the pelts and bones. I hardly carried that stuff except today — we took turns dragging this mangy coyote carcass through the brush. We’d go side by side if the damn baby butternuts (stupid name for a nasty tree) didn’t claw at us. Poor coyote was starved, just fur and guts. Still, it would have made Aubs jealous to know she’d picked it off.

“You could make him a fur lined straight-jacket.”

“ — or you a peter heater.”

“Not enough for that.” We heaved the carcass onto our pile that the vultures and ravens fought over. “Some trophy.” Then we crouched down to our young plants, on the other side of the tree. “Do you clip ‘em?”

“No idea. I didn’t even think they’d grow.”

Aubs came back that night. She told me the next afternoon through a swollen lip.

“He called me squaw.” She could barely say it, sounded like *fkwah*.

It was her sheep dogs, not that there were sheep to guard, and she even said she made a mistake liking one of them too much, because it was that one who showed up that night all bloody looking ready to drop dead, but it wasn’t bleeding at all, it was covered with the coyote blood. That got Aubrey in a state. It was that damn sheep dog got Aubrey ranting.

Later that night, after they settled again, when a racoon fell through the ceiling pulling insulation and tarpaper down around him, was the last straw. I wasn’t there but from what I know Aubs took his rifle and blasted until he finally hit the damn thing at point blank range and there was blood and bits speckled everywhere — wall, TV, window too. That I do know because I helped clean it up.

She hardly ever called me before, but she did that morning.

Aubrey’s truck was still there.

“Aubrey around?”

“He’s gone.”

“— but his truck?”

“Might have to drive it to Wapos Island.” She didn’t look up, and I tried to keep my mouth shut, like she probably wanted. “You know, like Jesus.”

“Across the water?”

“Just like Jesus.”

I told Mona vinegar would get the blood out, and Windex would make it smell nice. “Enough blood here for ten raccoons,” I said.

“It was a fat racoon,” Mona said.

Her face was covered with slices and tiny bloody cuts.

“Did he cut you?”

“Couldn’t see the tree for the forest.”

Then, I think I got it.

After we finished, Mona sat me down out on the porch. She gave me hot coffee, then sat herself and took a big breath. Her hands were trembling, nails bloody. “We got to get rid of the weed patch.”

“Someone know about it?”

Mona gave me that look, but ten times as hard.

“Let’s just dig it up,” I said.

“Never go back.”

One thing’s for sure, you can’t sell in your own neighbourhood or there’s those selfish enough try to destroy you. All these hillbillies do all day is stand in front of Bren’s trying to sell their pot, and Mona said why don’t I get off my precious queer ass, go stand in front of Bren’s, put my big mouth to use, and let the cat out of the bag about ours. Said it was that simple.

Ten years ago, it went up in smoke, the ghost tree, our crop, cooking that pile of guts and bones, after the vultures had picked him, I mean it, clean. I could have told the

hillbillies, but they'd have hated the butternut, and if you want a job done right — well, I had nothing to lose, but Mona had her future. Today she lives in town with her ten kids. I call them ten little Indians (to myself, just like she prob'ly calls me sissy-face to herself), all there with the same mom and dad. Mona heaves the young ones around on her hip, her back, under her arms, and in strollers, like she's carrying sacks of onions. Like mother earth, strong, with a twinkle in her eye knowing her first husband will never come back.