

2023 Wind & Water Writing Contest
First Prize Winner
FICTION/NON-FICTION
Category - Fiction

The Farmers' Almanac

By Dawn Miller

Maggie sat at the scarred kitchen table with a cup of black coffee and a copy of the *Farmers' Almanac*. A half dozen black-eyed Susans poked from a mason jar on the table, their heads bowed, yellow petals curled along the edges. If, as the almanac predicted, they were in for better weather, she'd go down to the pond today. Pluck some scarlet bee balm or purple coneflower to replenish the jar.

From the tattered couch in the back room, Ray snorted.

Sometimes she imagined him dead. Not just because of the foul names he called her. Or the way he groped at her as she hurried up the stairs to lock her bedroom door at night. Truth was, she was plain exhausted after thirty years together—tired of his moaning, his newsprint-smudged fingers that left black marks on the door frames, his scent of hops and barley and days-old morning breath. Tired of how he sucked out all the energy in a room. Sucked all the energy out of her.

Storm clouds gathered, grey and heavy, like the bedsheets she'd forgotten on the line last night, now slumped in a laundry basket by the door. She got up, put them in the dryer, and watched the sheets' tiny bluebell design spin. The almanac called for sunshine, but today looked no better. Wasn't that always the way?

Although thunderstorms usually happen in the spring and summer, they can occur year-round and at all hours.

Metal springs moaned, and Ray's feet slapped the wooden floorboards. He shuffled to the bathroom. Maggie went to the kitchen and poured his coffee, then added double-sugar, double-cream.

He dropped into a chair at the table, and she slid the mug in front of him.

"Cows won't milk themselves," she said.

"Give me a goddamn minute." He took a sip, wiped his white-crusting mouth with the back of his hand, and eyed her. "Anyhow, those old Bessies are near dried up. Just like you."

She saw the way he looked at her, how his gaze slid across the flowered housedress she used to wear only on cleaning days. Had she brushed her hair yet? She patted the back of her salt-and-pepper bob; the rat's nest gave her the answer. No matter. Did he expect her to get dolled up so she could sit and look at his grey stubble and bulging paunch? She raked her fingers through her hair. Maybe she wouldn't brush it after all. *She didn't have to look at the back of her head.*

Ray rose and grabbed a day-old bagel from the bread box. He smeared a thick layer of butter on it. "You going to help me haul that log from the pond?" he said between bites, crumbs rolling down his shirt.

The ash tree had split in two last week; Emerald Ash Borer eating it from the inside out until it gave up and plunged headfirst into the pond surrounded by wildflowers.

"Not if it rains again."

He leaned against the counter and stared at her. "You're not made of sugar."

"No," she said and fingered a button on her housedress, "I am not."

In the developing stage of a thunderstorm, cumulus clouds are pushed upward by a rising column of air.

She changed into a pair of frayed jeans and a blue shirt she left untucked beneath her mud-speckled barn coat. By the front door, she slipped on her red rubber boots, freshly hosed down.

Ray shoved his feet into his boots and clomped out the door. A clump of manure loosened from between the treads. He looked back at the zigzag—like a dark lightning bolt—as it skittered across the linoleum. "You can wipe up that later."

She glared at his sloped shoulders. He never used to be like this. Not when they first married. When did things shift to where their days were spent circling each other, each word testing the air between them? She trailed him to their pickup. The wind whipped her hair and strands stuck to the corners of her mouth. In silence, they drove to the pond, less than a kilometer away.

Before a storm, thunder develops in the background, although you might not be aware of it at first.

Maggie got out of the truck. Ray reversed the vehicle, edging perilously close to the pond.

“Not so close,” she yelled and stretched out her arms as if to shelter the blue bellflower, scarlet bee balm, and orange hawkweed—the one colourful place amongst the pale switchgrass, mud, and slick brown leaves on the acreage.

“I know what I’m doing,” he barked, and stepped down from the truck. Bee balm flattened under his heel. He motioned for Maggie to take control of the winch. “You start it, and I’ll snag the tree.”

The wind subsided, and she smoothed hair from her face. Across the treetops, cicadas hummed, an electric buzz. The throaty croak of hidden frogs echoed.

Overhead, the grey clouds shifted to a bruised purple. “Maybe we should wait,” she said.

“I’m not coming out here twice, goddammit. We do it now.”

Maggie pushed the handle forward to engage the motor, and the frayed steel cable unspooled. That’s how their lives were, she thought, as the drum turned: round and round.

Ray secured the cable to one end of the splintered ash and tugged to tighten the hold. “Start ‘er up.”

She pulled the handle. The drum reversed, and the cable unwound. The line grew taut, and the tree shifted in the water. Mud sucked and squelched as the wet soil released its hold.

Raindrops peppered her jacket.

Be careful when heading out into a storm; many people don’t know that the first stroke of lightning can be just as deadly as the last.

Droplets, like tiny orbs on a spider’s web, balanced on the wire, worn from so many years of dragging logs and hauling vehicles from muddy holes and snowy ditches.

The sky rumbled with thunder. The cable strained. Steel threads snapped. *Ping. Ping. Ping.* Hadn’t she told him to replace that old, twisted cable a hundred times? Hadn’t she said that very thing?

White-knuckled, she gripped the handle.

She should cut the engine.

She should.

A sudden *thwack*, like a cracked whip. The cable snapped, shooting out like a sidewinder, and sliced Ray's neck. His eyes grew wide as a snared rabbit's, one hand clutched to his throat. Blood gushed through his fingers and down his chest. He crumpled to the ground. The air sizzled with a flash of lightning.

Maggie stood frozen, hands over her mouth. The cable thrashed near Ray, still as a stone, his dark blood spilling onto the soil.

All her life, she'd remember that moment: how the rain fell so suddenly, so heavily, the air ripe with petrichor. The look of Ray's wide, startled eyes.

Droplets ran down her cheeks and into her mouth.

She stumbled back to the house, the deluge filling her footprints. A clap of thunder ricocheted through the sky, and she slipped. Fingers splayed in the wet earth, she pushed herself up and staggered to the house. She hosed off her red boots and placed them, slick and shiny, on the boot tray inside the house. She took the sheets out of the dryer and added her sodden coat and jeans. Ghostly footprints marred the wooden floors as she slowly walked upstairs, naked, and changed into her flowered housedress.

Her coffee sat cold on the kitchen table. Hands trembling, she picked up the phone and called 911.

"Ray went out in the storm. I told him not to go. He should be back by now. I'm worried," she said.

She arranged the freshly picked cluster of scarlet bee balm and blue bellflower in the mason jar and made a fresh cup of coffee. Between the pages of the *Farmers' Almanac*, the spot where it promised better weather, she slid a dog-eared bookmark.

For once, the almanac would be correct. It would be a very good year.

The End