

JANUARY THAW

K. MARVIN BRUCE

Danni Lawless couldn't know a miracle was about to happen. She stepped from her modest, run-down bungalow into the damp morning, and sighed. January in Pennsylvania's Lake Erie snow-belt could last forever. The hopefulness of white snow transformed to dingy rain. In Pithole unemployed husbands had devolved back to animal states following the refinery shutdown. The local bars weathered recessions particularly well. Men were like that. Such simple creatures.

Danni knew she was luckier than most. Patsy Munday got beaten. Frannie Kriss's kids showed up at school with bruises. Penn, although unemployed, never crossed the line with Danni or Tommy. How long could a man continue to squeeze and shove disappointment after disappointment into himself? Penn had worked at the local refinery since high school. Until the closure. Fracking rigs had shattered the very earth beneath their feet until there was nowhere left to stand. The Pennzoil refinery shut down.

Teaching third-graders, Danni offered hope. These kids were rough and crude, and already knew far too much about the world before they were even ten. She taught them the escape of Greek mythology: Athena, Zeus, and Demeter. But they understood Dionysius. Especially in winter.

A single small grocery store and three bars remained open in Pithole. Danni worked evenings at Ellie's run-down food-mart where she could make lesson plans while waiting for the occasional customer. Evenings were quiet, so she brought work to work.

Rain in January was just plain depressing. Gray from the industrial soot of the refinery that, although silent, still took up half the valley like a selfish bedfellow, Pithole stagnated. Streets were gray, houses were gray. The leafless trees sent raspy, raking black fingers into gray air, clawing vengefully at the gray heavens. At least when all the snow covered everything you could dare to hope. Rain washed away any pretense. Danni shivered and slammed the door on her ancient Cavalier.

In school during the forlorn days after Christmas, when the colors of Easter appeared like faded Crayola, the kids resembled their parents in miniature. There was a pint-sized Doug Miller. Behind him Sam Grubb,

without the mustache. Betty Rouse, before years of marriage had wrecked her. Danni knew the truth. Winter would last forever.

Driving to the ramshackle brick prison of a school, Danni's thoughts hovered between lesson plans and family. Tommy would be starting school soon. Until then, as long as he was unemployed, Penn played the role of stay-at-home dad. They all had parts to play.

Rain pummeled down in fat, angry drops with a dram of ice in them. Just like her students, Danni reflected. There was a hardness to them. Like the winter rain, they would grow up to perpetuate the cycle. Evaporation, condensation, precipitation. Falling to earth.

"No calls today," Penn sighed when she came home between jobs. "Any day now, Andy says, they'll be calling us back."

"We're managing, honey. What've you been up to, Tommy?" He was a small version of Penn, before he'd forgotten how to smile. Supper and back to work.

Ellie's was moribund when it rained. The bars were full. Tomorrow's lesson plan before her, Danni sat behind the worn wooden counter and thought about the future. The door opened, ushering in the sounds of the spiteful rain followed by an arrogant breeze. "Good evening." She glanced up.

A stranger. What was an outsider doing in Pithole? A well-dressed young man. His perfectly proportioned face bore no deep lines of worry or stress. His features were rounded, but exuded a confidence suggesting underlying strength. His laughing, violet eyes demanded attention and proclaimed joy. Abundant long, curly, chestnut hair—hallelujah—suggested maybe he was a celebrity of some sort. His suit changed shades of purple with every subtle movement he made. He wore white earbuds. His jocular eyes caught hers, followed by a smile so captivating that she flushed. With a practiced nonchalance, he pulled the buds from his ears by their cords. "Whither have I come?" he asked, his cheer unwavering.

"You've stumbled into Pithole, Mister—?"

"Person. Yonder Person. I'm on my way to Pittsburgh but I thought I might stop here for the night." He wore no tie and his gleaming white shirt shimmered as if woven from sunlight.

"Well, Mr. Person, I'm afraid there aren't any hotels in Pithole. If you can make it a few more miles you'll find Lethe's in Franklin. I'm sure this time

of year they have plenty of space.” The youthful face staring at her frightened Danni with its intensity. The stranger leaned on the counter.

“What if my car broke down?” he inquired innocently.

“Did it?”

“Why, yes it did. You’d think a Jaguar would be reliable.”

“Why don’t you call Triple A? There’s nowhere to stay in Pithole. Nobody stops here.”

“I’m not a member of AA. When you drive a Jag you don’t suppose you’ll need to be. Have you ever seen an AA decal on a Jag?” Danni wondered at his dropping of the third A. A rumble of thunder interrupted her musing.

“Thunder in January? That’s odd.”

“The unusual brings liberty.” He straightened up, his shimmering purple suit scattering iridescent hues across the dingy store. “If you’re unwilling to help me, I shall be compelled to find someone else who will.” He made for the door. “I saw a bar across the street.”

Danni knew he’d encounter the unemployed refinery workers there. It wouldn’t end well. Were these the first giddy stages of puppy love? “Wait. Rev. Spafford—the minister—will know what to do.”

Yonder stopped and turned his strangely symmetrical face toward her. “Ah yes, the clergy. They do come in handy occasionally. How do I reach him?”

She fished her purse out from behind the counter. “I have his number in here somewhere.” Ten minutes later Rev. Spafford came in after shaking his black umbrella off on the damp wood of the porch.

“Mr. Person? I’m Rev. Spafford. The parsonage is just up the hill, I have a guest room. You might want Ram to take your car to his garage first. I wouldn’t leave such an expensive vehicle on the street here.” The minister thanked Danni and the men stepped into the night, sharing the umbrella. The aroma of Beaujolais lingered in the air. Danni thought of Penn. Of Tommy.

While monitoring gym class the next day, Gina King sidled up to Danni. The noise level of the kids edged on the intolerable—they were ready to be free of winter. “So, I understand you met Mr. Person,” Gina began with a glimmer in her eye.

“He stopped in the store when his car broke down. Ram mentioned him?”

Gina laughed lightly. “Mentioned? No. He brought him in before taking him back to the parsonage. What a guy!”

Danni blushed. “He is kinda charismatic,” she whispered, feeling a stab of guilt.

“Charismatic? I’m glad Ram didn’t leave us alone. When do you suppose someone famous last stopped in Pithole?”

“John Wilkes Booth played in the theater here, back in the days when there was a theater.”

“No, I mean someone really famous! He drives a Jag, Dannie A Jag! Even Jack Benson only drives a Buick. I’ve never heard his name before, but you can tell he must be some rock god or something.”

“Don’t make Ram jealous,” Danni warned. Gina had shown up in the second-grade classroom with her arm in a sling before.

“Oh, Ram’s not bright enough to be jealous. He brought him right into the house, after all.”

“Well, I’m sure he’ll be on his way today.” Danni said. Pithole might be god-forsaken, but you knew what to expect.

“Parts for a Jag can be hard to find around here,” Gina lilted as she called her second graders to order.

At the end of the day there was a note in Danni’s cubby. “Come join us at the scout cabin. 10 p.m.—Y. P.” On the short drive home through the rain, Danni pondered the audacity of that note. Inviting another man’s wife to a party in the woods? Of course she wouldn’t go. Things were just fine without Yonder Person.

Some years seem to consist entirely of January.

Penn was reading to Tommy at home. Reliable. Steady. Boring?

Danni dreaded work at the store again that night. It felt like work alone defined her. Still, after supper she climbed in the car and headed for Ellie’s. She was pigeon-holed as Mrs. Lawless, the third-grade teacher. Mrs. Lawless, the woman at the store. The sameness, the ordinariness was punishing for someone with imagination. When the rich felt a pinch the guys at the bottom

got laid off. And the wives picked up the pieces. She threw the Cavalier into park with more force than she'd intended.

As she swung open the door, Danni realized with a start that she was not at Ellie's. Instead, she was at the scout cabin out in the woods. And there were many cars here. Slowly she climbed out, feet in the slushy snow.

Danni had never been inside the derelict cabin with its dank logs weathered nearly black. Its sagging roof and forbiddingly small windows held dark secrets. Wasn't that Frannie's car? Maddie's? Gina's? The narrow drive was full. Music and loud, joyous talking—no, shrieking—could be heard. She had to see.

She pulled open the door. It was a shock for which Danni wasn't prepared.

Inside the dingy and crowded hut Barbara was screeching as she darted on all fours through the gathered women chasing confused mice, and catching one, holding it up, squirming by the tail. Jodi held a Jeroboam of Agiorghitiko in her hefty fist, filling Dixie cups liberally and tipping back the huge bottle for a long draught. Amid the tremendous din Amy leapt from bunk to rotted bunk bed, almost as if she could fly. Was Tammie actually naked? What was she pulling away from Rachel? As Danni stared she realized they were pulling the legs of a squealing and terrified squirrel as the poor animal thrashed about in pain, trying to bite the hands that held it tight. The animal's screams were drowned by the din of human shouting and singing.

Danni turned to go. She felt a hand close around her upper arm. His hand. "You're not leaving so soon, are you Danni?" Yonder's voice was mellifluous, inviting insanity.

"What is this?" she demanded, avoiding his beguiling face. He wore a crown of laurel leaves on his brow, encircling his flowing chestnut hair.

"It's my way of saying thank you to Pithole for its hospitality. It's all harmless fun. Have you ever seen so much joy in this town before? Just let yourself go." His smile was inebriating. Danni felt the sharp edges of rationality dulling in her head. She had her reputation to think about. She was a respected... she was a... she... he... As the last thought faded, Danni became pure energy and motion. She never felt so alive.

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The gray light of dawn found Sergeant Garrett's lone squad car parked all the way back at the trail head to the cabin. He'd put on the pounds over the relatively inactive years and he resented having to walk the half mile trail to the structure since the auto access was completely lined with cars. That access road had been intended for emergency vehicles only. He hadn't slept a wink with all the families in town calling in missing mothers, wives, and girlfriends. Cars were missing too. With that many people gone it couldn't be coincidence, but he didn't have the equipment or manpower to do a night search. After driving every street in Pithole his thoughts turned to outlying areas.

He wheezed unpleasantly, his tan shirt stretched tight across a spare-tire midriff that might've fallen off a Peterbilt. The fabric of his trousers rasped along his thighs as he puffed up the trail. There'd better be a damn good explanation for this. The path was damp with wet snow and Garrett's Smokey the Bear hat caught the congealed drops falling from the leafless trees, like someone knocking at his skull.

Sergeant Garrett hadn't seen an actual naked woman since the wife had run off to Florida with Clyde Robinson. Finding a rustic cabin full of them made him feel twenty years younger. He stood there a few minutes, his feet in the snow, appreciating the unauthorized view, pondering how to announce his presence to the sleeping sea of neighbors' wives. A strange wonder and a gift to a man his age.

He'd passed a Jaguar on the trail, and everyone in town knew what that meant. Taking a heavy breath he shouted, "This is the police! Come out in an orderly fashion."

Hurriedly finding her clothes, Danni blinked fiercely in the misty morning light. The January chill felt refreshing on her face. She couldn't remember coming here—where was the car?

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"Where were you?" Penn shouted. "What were you thinking? Tommy was scared, I didn't know what to tell him! Mommy's run off?" Tom was crying now. Seeing daddy angry was terrifying.

"I don't know what happened," Danni tried to explain. "I was driving to Ellie's, and—"

“And you accidentally pulled into an orgy? What were you thinking?” Penn had never yelled at her before.

“Language!” She scolded back. Hadn’t she proven herself trustworthy for years?

“Was *he* there?”

“Who?”

“The rich stranger in town, the playboy!”

“Mr. Person was there.” Her answer was clipped. His implication was insulting.

“Aren’t you on a first name basis now?” She spent years teaching kids not to solve disputes with violence. Her slap surprised her as much as Penn. It broke the tension. Sadness replaced fire in his eyes. “What happened?”

“Penn, I love you. I don’t understand what happened. There was some drinking, but it was like it was an effect, not the cause. We were already out of control when we arrived there. I got in the car to drive to the store, but then I was at the scout cabin. It was like somebody else was in control. You’ve got to believe me! There was no—” she glanced at Tommy. “Nothing like that happened.”

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The slushy, blackened snow-piles of January were melting rapidly. The air felt like late March. The kids were already in the classroom when Danni hurried in, apologizing. They wore adult looks in their eyes. Last night mothers hadn’t come home.

By recess the sun had broken through and the playground was hopscotched with large puddles of melt-water. The grass, still its anemic winter beige, faced the sky with an aspect of disbelief, as if nature itself could no longer be trusted. Sleepy-eyed teachers monitored the children as they inevitably used the puddles inappropriately.

“Wasn’t it wonderful?” Gina asked Danni after a luxuriant yawn.

It had been. Danni couldn’t remember the last time she’d been able to let responsibility go for an entire night. An evening when Danni was free to be Danni. “It was disruptive,” she said. “Pithole can’t survive such

irresponsibility.” Her thoughts filled with a rosy glow at memories of madness. Dangerous afterglow.

“Well, irresponsible or not, I can’t wait until the next one. I haven’t felt like that since—well, I’ve never felt like that before.” The air was unbelievably warm. “Look! Isn’t that a crocus?”

A bumblebee ambled by, bewildered by nature’s clock suddenly set ahead. “The January thaw,” Danni mused.

“Bees and flowers in the middle of winter!” Gina gushed. “This is great!”

“Gina, be careful. Don’t get carried away by Mr. Person. You know better than anyone that Ram is jealous—even if nothing happens.”

“Ram, Spam. I’ve found something I really want for a change. Look, we live in a dull town. The way I figure it, when something exciting happens it’s kind of a payback for all these dull years. The January thaw, like you said.”

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At the parsonage Ram King dispatched Rev. Spafford with a single hefty shove. Yonder Person was sleeping and easily man-hauled out to the tow-truck. “You gonna pay for last night, boy!” the surly mechanic grinned, throwing the stranger inside. The lock knob on the passenger-side door had been sawn off. The only way out was over the work-hardened driver. Yonder didn’t struggle. “Nobody touches my wife!”

The engine ground to life as Ram chuckled. He drove slowly through town, collecting a line of cars behind him like so many rust-eaten ducklings paddling after their corroded mother. “You big city hotshots think you kin take whatever ya want. Well, you just stole your last little bauble.” His phlegmy laugh was sinister. The funereal parade made a slow circuit through Pithole. Lynchings might not be legal, but they’re nothing without drama.

The macabre procession continued its slow drive as far away school children played in the sun. Winding up hillsides and slaloming along stream banks, under the cover of thick trees naked against an unbelievable sky, the procession drove. Ram had run out of ideas how to threaten, so he’d settled on the occasional snicker to indicate that something awful was alive in his head. Yonder did not speak.

Standing out between the bare trees above them in the woods were great black boulders, loosened by eons of Pennsylvania winters. “They used to make sacrifices up on them rocks,” Ram sneered, parking in a clearing that was the final segment of road. Civilization ended here.

Ram waited until the other drivers walked ominously up to his truck. Sam Grubb slapped his fist with a crowbar. Doug Miller carried a length of rusty chain. Max Duggan had a soil cultivator from his garden that resembled nothing so much as a medieval torture device.

When the crowd had surrounded the truck, leaving no possibility of escape, Ram sneered, “They call us white trash, but we’ll see what’s left to take to the curb.” Heaving himself down from the cab, he slammed the door and sauntered to the passenger side to unlock it from a great ring of jangling keys. Rough hands grabbed Yonder. A smile played across his lips.

“You think this is funny, do you?” Max asked hideously, the raw rage building. “Screwin’ other guys’ wives?” The ex-refinery worker swung the cultivator straight at Yonder’s handsome face, taking out an eye. The men crowded around as the dam burst.

“Not too much, boys!” Ram coached, “we want him conscious for the fun part.” This stranger didn’t yell, scream, or fight. No begging. No pleading. The beating was without mercy or meaning.

“That’s enough,” Ram pronounced. “Now we make him pay.” Pulling on his grease-stained work gloves, Ram latched onto Yonder’s wrists, glad to see he was still conscious. He hauled the mangled man over the damp leaves. Behind the tow truck he began to work the chain of his winch around Yonder’s hands. “Don’t worry,” he sniggered, “this will hurt like hell.” Forming crude handcuffs expertly tightened, Ram nodded to Doug. His 4-by-4 was parked immediately behind, with a cable winch on front. He shackled Yonder’s ankles together and cinched up the slack.

Doug climbed into his 4-by-4 and gunned the engine. Ram threw his head out of the window of the tow-truck. “Nice an’ slow now!” he roared.

The trucks began to move away from each other. The bonds tightened and pulled taut. Yonder Person’s arms were pulled toward the tow-truck, his legs toward the reversing 4-by-4. His battered body was stretched tight between them as their engines raged against one another. Ram watched in his multiple mirrors, and with a lurch the tow-truck lunged forward. He let out a fierce whoop, and looked up in time to see the boulder before his unfettered grill. Slamming both feet onto the brakes, he was thrown against the steering

wheel as the truck made impact. The great tumble of ancient rock above slid down in an apathetic avalanche, rolling harmlessly behind the truck, covering the remains of the stranger. Ram swore, scrambling outside the cab.

“You know,” Doug called out from behind the landslide, “this might be a good thing.”

Ram stared at him with a perfect blend of rage and curiosity. “How do you mean?”

“Well, it looks like he was killed in a avalanche.” Only his once handsome face still showed.

Penn, seized with remorse at what he’d done, tried to close the remaining dead eye. The lid flipped back open. He tried again. The corpse continued to stare. Ram stood with his hands on his hips, as if he’d personally accomplished a great task. He looked around the peaceful, winter woods. “Hey guys, look! There’s buds on them trees—in January!”

Miles away, as Danni herded the kids inside from recess, she saw a robin plucking up a worm. The January thaw had come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K. Marvin Bruce has studied in western Pennsylvania, eastern Massachusetts, and southern Scotland. He has taught mythology and folklore in Wisconsin and New Jersey. He has published twenty-eight fiction stories in a variety of venues. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, the Write Well Award (Silver Pen Writers Association), and the Best of the Web Award, and has won prizes from *Calliope*, *Danse Macabre*, and *Typehouse Literary Magazine*.