

MICHAEL BYERS

The Demolition Derby Team of the First Church of the Word of Elvis

These days, when Bob was not rebuilding his motorcycle, he was participating in any number of oddball activities, for example becoming official clergy in the eyes of the State of Michigan, at first just for the parking placard, but then the occasion arose to officiate Martin and Mary's recommitment ceremony, which was of course not a legally binding affair, but they needed a person of at least marginal substance who had known them forever, and that was Bob. Some years ago Bob had helped Martin build the gazebo beneath which they all now took shelter as the skies opened with karmic timing the moment Bob began his script, quickly abandoned, and it was in the intimate and jolly environment beneath that beadboarded ceiling, everyone with a beer in hand, that Martin mentioned his cousin's Cadillac, which was looking for a dignified end, a topic that was arising more and more lately about any number of matters. So a plan was conceived, and they drew straws to see who would drive, and fate declared Bob the lucky man. You were supposed to remove most of the interior for safety, but this struck both Bob and Martin, as well as Newell, the third member of their congregation, as an unnecessary precaution, so instead, duct tape was used to position old sofa cushions from the PTO Thrift Store, and to assure blessedness, Newell burned sage over the split vinyl of the rear seats, and Martin painted the hood with the Eye of the Illuminati to mystify, as he said. Bob brought his helmet. It was a mud track in Chelsea where the object was to be the last vehicle operational. You could not hit another driver's door, but other than that it was just a free-for-all, and after the initial shock of being konked much harder than expected in the right rear panel, Bob began to appreciate the old Cadillac's width and wallowing power and invincible steel frame. He eliminated a Taurus in one swift crumpling blow to the back half and used the momentum gained by the push of a Saturn to nudge a sad minivan up on two wheels and then over on its top like a beetle, and by the time he rotated himself to measure the field, he was one of only four vehicles remaining. To discover he was a genius at the sport of demolition derby at the age of sixty-six was a bit of a melancholy recognition, one quickly overwhelmed by the pure giddy joy of the moment, and so it was that Bob McDonald was reborn, none too soon. You could never say what was to be holy in this world, where its finest parts hid themselves away, but he had been patient, he had been

good, most important of all, he had remained ridiculous. The Elvis thing was ironical but hadn't Elvis been born again, or was he confusing that with Johnny Cash?

Iceboat

You needed certain specific conditions, which meant very cold for weeks but zero snow as snow obscured the ice, which, especially on Barton Pond, had a habit of developing ridgy spots which if you hit at just the wrong angle jarred your bones or sent you careening off course, worst scenario of all being to slip, skittering into the path of someone else's blades. She had been at it for years, and the number of truly perfect days could be counted on two hands, including one brilliant February morning that lived as a bright-blue circle in her mind, the round of sky above the lake and the shining ice below, a steady friendly wind from the west at forty miles an hour that swept her up and down the lake like a sharp and dangerous bird, the white sail fluffing and plumping and the freezing chill on her cheeks. How that day had stayed with her! How it returned to her, unbidden! Well, it was one good thing about Michigan. There were some. Bob had his motorcycle, and she had her iceboat, a piece of information she liked to lend out to her most loyal and interesting customers, because one did not expect her to own such a marvel, stowed in its boathouse near Chelsea, and neither did they expect her to own a third of this, frankly, ugly barber shop, which had survived thirty years thanks to its prime location, one block from campus, where they got all kinds who over the decades came and went, and neither did they expect her to be a pilot, a stunt pilot no less, who for awhile had co-owned with a guy named Paul a sweet old Cessna Germaine with a charming maroon stripe. Stunt pilot was maybe overstating it, but she could do the acrobatics, and really, if you weren't going anywhere, the point of being in the air was to use it all, all three dimensions of it, to stall and fall until the air pillowed you up again, to shift the yoke gently into an easy barrel roll, the horizon spinning in the windshield like a towel in a washing machine. She wasn't going anywhere, there had been a time for that but no longer. She knew where all the morels were, the feral cats had found her, and she had earned their trust. The tomatoes she grew were the descendants of some ancient perfect crop she'd once lucked into, and, no, there were no children, had never been, once a sorrow but not for long, all these things were what she did instead, and when her customers mentioned theirs, she allowed a little space to gather, a polite interest was expressed in the mirror, scissors or clippers suspended, it was fine, and there was something like the iceboat, up and down that excellent little lake, nearly frictionless, nearly perfect, a sun, a sky, a whistle in the wires, do not judge her, do not think you know her, you do not.

Copperhead

They were warned about the snakes right away but did not expect the snakes' number or the regularity with which they insinuated themselves into the old house, to be discovered working along the shingled porch wall or, say, curled like a cat in the cool corner of the moldering library, or once, in spectacular fashion, arching out from beneath the mantlepiece, presenting a bobbing yard of muscle into the air of the little corner bedroom where they were housed for the year. This particular snake had, it was thought, made its way up the chimney and worked its way beneath the antebellum siding and, seeking light or scenting the air of their room, followed its nose. They were by this time ready, one was to take the five-gallon plastic hardware bucket and with the handy wire-hooked stick, loop the beast and drop it in. The snake could gain no purchase on the plastic sides, and so the next task was to bring the thing down the driveway, beneath the magnificent spreading live oak, across the tufted lawn, across the gravel road, down the path past the rowboat to the lake, and tip it out. One watched it slip away across the sand into the brush. He thought of marking them somehow, to see whether their visitors were returning. But like so many things in his life, at that point his impulses were passing and provisional, his aims evaporating the moment they arose, the only exception being his persistent and deepening wish to have some other girlfriend than the one he did, while at the same time being far too cowardly and essentially inept to address this issue, it also being the case that their situation here struck him as pretty marvelous, this ancient house and its two hundred acres, its adjacent lake and fields, the looming mirror in the corridor with its flaking gold frame in which one did not advisedly gaze too long as always something seemed to shimmer in its corners, ghosts or just the melting intrusion of history and its unpassing presence here. Furthermore, sometimes they had good times together. They laughed, they thought about the future, and at night a station in Baton Rouge broadcast an hour of ethereal electronic music, wordless and drifting, that billowed like blue curtains, she said, in her widening mind, and he admired that, he remembered that, it was a good description, it took note of the height of things in this house, their low position in it and in their lives, which had only barely started. And so. And yet. The weekend she went away he invited someone else to come, another girl, to visit, and she did, wary but unsurprised, probably, by his unseasoned passes, which got him nowhere. She was stiff and unyielding, though she accepted his kisses, a

few of them, before she mentioned the lake, and they went off across the grass and down the bank and here was the steel rowboat overturned on the shore. There would be snakes under it, he was sure, there always were, and in the churning heat they would be seeking shade, and so he warned her, and he flipped the boat with a single heave, and the promised snakes uncoiled in alarm and darted into the water, and as this all happened he watched her expression carefully, seeking whatever it was he was seeking there, in whatever that look of hers was, shock and alarm and a kind of greedy loathing, as though relieved to find the thing that was truly vile right here before her, because in those days, although he didn't know it, he was always looking for clues to who he really was, the things he could not tell about himself, not yet, not for a while.

Picchvai

For once it was going to be her turn to choose, and Richard could just pretend to go along and like it. Bhutan was her choice, and because the money was no object at this point, she booked the most elaborate and kingliest package tour, which in fact included a session with the king who was, according to the literature, thirty-eight years old, girlish in his enormous golden outfit that in photographs made him resemble, though she would never say so in the royal presence, or so she hoped, a goldfish. Nineteen days. The first few days were intended to acclimate one to the altitude, and in fact Richard did look a little gassy there on the cobbled roads of the village below the vast jagged mountain whose heights they would eventually mount. Red-faced and wheezing, but not giving up. A far cry from his young self, but who was not! Well, she still looked all right, in fact, despite everything, a sweeping energy to her long step and with her hair still shoulder-length, a graying blonde achieved only by the most masterful techniques, thanks to Jacques. One needed to acquire a gift to bring back for Jacques, indeed for everyone, and these first days were spent investigating the possibilities, but the choices all seemed cheap and fake, even the obviously ancient relics seemed to be just exactly the thing one would find in Bhutan, and therefore not the thing at all. She remained empty-handed and uncertain, while Richard by the third day had become bold enough to explore on his own, and when they reconvened at the leaning pink hotel that evening, some new light had come into his eyes. The next morning, their guide collected them, only them, they were paying enough for that, at the restaurant next door, very good tea steaming dark in its tiny cups and a tangy, musty yak butter that spread itself in clotted clumps, like muscle, but which complemented the dense bread perfectly, every bite a work of a minute or so as the grains permitted themselves to be fragmented and then dissolved. Pushing on, up the high road to the next stop, a caravansary on a sheer cliff where Joshi's Range Rover shone royal blue beneath the faded flags that beat against the wind. A night here, another six thousand feet attained, before the final push to the royal palace at its monumental heights, visible in the afternoon light as a jewel box fastened to the mountain. Centuries of intrigue and murder and princely misdeeds invisible in the clarity of the air, one only saw what was in front of one. History so dense and present it vanished altogether. In fact they were not only guests of the king but honorary ambassadors, they were informed, a bit of news that brightened Richard's gaze again, always about

him a little creak of baronial ambition, the gentlemanly games, the lifelong manly and polite indifference toward her suffering. In the presence of the king they would be asked to bow, to not offer one's hand to shake, Evelyn was to curtsy and Joshi, with a lovely little step, demonstrated the proper depth, not overly deferential but entirely correct. A night alone in a humble chamber that looked out on the golden arm of the palace, the air so still and spare it seemed she could hear the stars fizzing in their sockets. And then the morning audience. A throne room, the king in a yellow tunic, a red plaid sort of shirt beneath, and the niceties completed, Evelyn found a lovely perfect blankness where her soul had once been housed, and so she thought to compliment the country, the palace, the people, news his majesty accepted in silence as his mighty due. So high she had climbed, there was only downward, downward to go, the rest of her days, however few remained, would be spent at a lower altitude. In the end, the gifts she brought home were textiles, easy to fold and transport, imitations of the ones she had seen in the palace, decorative and bright and busy with life, animals and lords and mountains and everything, all of them known as *picchvai*, a tender strange pungent word, which only later she would learn meant "backdrop," a bit of the world patched and sewn from silk meant to hang behind a shrine, to give position to the holiest of holies, to the unspeakable crucial true thing, to that one thing, fast approaching now, that could be properly considered only once it was set in contrast with everything else there was in the universe.