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Under the Wheat

Rick DeMarinis

Down in D-3 I watch the sky gunning through the aperture ninety-odd feet above my head. The missiles are ten months away and I am lying on my back, listening to the sump. From the bottom of a hole, where the weather is always the same cool sixty-four degrees, I like to relax and watch the clouds slide through the circle of blue light. I have the time. The aperture is about fifteen feet wide. About the size of a silver dollar from here. A hawk just drifted by. Eagle. Crow. Small cumulus. Wrapper.

Hot today and the sky is moving from left to right, a slow thick wind that doesn't gust. When it gusts, it's usually from Canada. Fierce, with hail the size of eyeballs. I've seen wheat go down. Acres and acres of useless straw. But sometimes it comes out of the southeast, from Bismarck, bringing ten-mile high anvils with it, and you find yourself looking for funnels. This is not tornado country to speak of. The tornado path is to the south and west of here. They walk up from Bismarck and farther south and peter out on the Montana border, rarely touching ground anywhere near this latitude. Still, you keep an eye peeled. I've seen them put down gray fingers to the west, not quite touching but close enough to make you want to find a hole. They say it sounds like freight trains in your yard. I wouldn't know. We are from the coast where the weather is stable and always predictable because of the ocean. We are trying to adjust.

I make five hundred a week doing this, driving a company pickup from hole to hole checking out sump pumps. I've found only one failure in two months. Twenty feet of black water in the hole and rising. It's the company's biggest headache. The high water table. You can dig twelve feet in any field and have yourself a well. That's why the farmers have it made. Except for hail. Mostly they are Russians, the farmers.

Karen wants to go back. I have to remind her it's only for a year. Ten more

months. Five hundred a week for a year. But she misses things. The city, movies, the beach, excitement, friends. We live fairly close to a town, but it's one you will never hear of. The movie theater has shown "Bush Pilot," "Red Skies of Montana," and "Kon Tiki" so far. She has taken to long walks in the evenings to work out her moods which are getting harder for me to pretend aren't there. I'm getting time-and-half Saturdays and double-time Sundays and thirteen dollars per diem for the inconvenience of relocating all the way from Oxnard, California. That comes to a lot. You don't walk away from a gold mine like that. I try to tell Karen she has to make an effort, adjust. North Dakota isn't all that bad. As a matter of fact, I sort of enjoy the area. Maybe I'm more adaptable. We live close to a large brown lake, an earthfill dam loaded with northern pike. I bought myself a little boat and often go out to troll a bit before the carpool comes by. The freezer compartment is crammed with fish, not one under five pounds.

There's a ghost town on the other side of the lake. The houses were built for the men who worked on the dam. That was years ago. They are paintless now, weeds up to the rotten sills. No glass in the windows, but here and there a rag of drape. Sometimes I take my boat across the lake to the ghost town. I walk the overgrown streets and look into the windows. Sometimes something moves. Rats. Gophers. Wind. Loose boards. Sometimes nothing.

When the weather is out of Canada you can watch it move south, coming like a giant roll of silver dough on the horizon. It gets bigger fast and then you better find cover. If the cloud is curdled underneath you know it means hail. The wind can gust to one hundred knots. It scares Karen. I tell her there's nothing to worry about. Our trailer is on a good foundation and tied down tight. But she has this dream of being uprooted and of flying away in such a wind. I tell her the trailer will not budge. Still she gets wild-eyed and can't light a cigarette.

We're sitting at the dinette table looking out the window, watching the front arrive. You can feel the trailer bucking like a boat at its moorings. Lightning is stroking the blonde fields a mile away. To the southwest, I can see a gray finger reaching down. This is unusual. But I say nothing to Karen. It looks like the two fronts are going to butt heads straight over the trailer park. It's getting dark fast. Something splits the sky behind our backs and big hail pours out. The streets of the park are white and jumping under the black sky. Karen has her hands up to her ears. There's a stampede on our tin roof. Two TV antennas fold at the same time. A jagged Y of lightning strikes so close you can smell it. Karen is wild, screaming. I can't hear her, even if I want to. Our garbage cans are rising. They are floating past the windows into a flattened wheat field. This is something. Karen's face is closed. She doesn't enjoy any of this.

I'm tooling around in third on the usual bad road, enjoying the lurches, rolls, and twists. I would not do this to my own truck. The fields I'm driving through are wasted. Head-on with the sky and the sky never loses. I've passed a few

unhappy looking farmers standing in their fields with their hands in their pockets. Toward D-8, just over a rise and down into a narrow gully, I found a glacier. It was made out of hailstones welded together by their own impact. It hadn't begun to melt yet. Four feet thick and maybe thirty feet long. You can stand on it and shade your eyes from the white glare. What is this? The return of the Ice Age?

Karen didn't cook tonight. Another mood. I poke around in the fridge. I don't know what to say to her. I know it's hard. I can understand that. All right. This is not Oxnard. She gets up and lights a cigarette after two tries. I don't know what to say. "I'm going for a walk, Lloyd," she says, and she does.

I'd like to know where she finds to go and what she does there. She hates the town worse than the trailer park. The trailer park has a rec hall and a social club for the wives. But she won't take advantage of that. I know for a fact that the neighbors are talking. I sit on my little porch with a cheese sandwich and a beer. Let them talk.

Three farm kids. Just standing outside the locked gate of D-4. "What do you kids want?" I know what they want. A look-see. Security measures are in effect. No cameras, no unauthorized personnel, that sort of thing. But what the hell. There is nothing here yet but a ninety-foot hole with a tarp on it and a sump pump in the bottom. They are excited. They want to know what ICBM stands for. What is a warhead? How fast is it? How do you know if it's really going to hit in the right place? What if it went straight up and came straight down? Can you bomb the moon? "Look at the sky up there, kids," I tell them. "Lie on your backs, like this, and after a while you sort of get the feeling you're looking *down*, from on top of it." The kids lie down on the concrete. Kids have a way of giving all their attention to something interesting. I swear them to secrecy, not for my protection, because who cares, but because it will make their day. I drive off to D-9, where the sump trouble was.

Caught three lunkers today. All over twenty-four inches. It's seven a.m. now and I'm on Ruby Street, the ghost town. The streets are all named after stones. Why I don't know. This is nothing like anything we have on the coast. All right. Karen doesn't like the climate or the people and the flat sky presses down on her from all sides and gives her bad dreams. All *right*.

I'm on Onyx Street, number 49, a two-bedroom bungalow with a few pieces of furniture left in it. There is a chest of drawers in the bedroom, a bed with a rotten gray mattress. There is a closet with a raggedy slip in it. The slip has brown water stains on it. In the bottom of the chest there is a magazine yellow with age. *Secret Confessions*. I can imagine the woman who lived here with her husband. Not much like Karen at all. But what did she do while her husband was off working on the dam? Did she stand at this window in her slip and wish she were back in Oxnard? Did she cry her eyes out on this bed and think crazy

thoughts? Where is she now? Does she think, “This is July 15, 1961, and I am glad I am not in North Dakota anymore”? Did she take long walks at night and not cook? I have an impulse to do something odd, and do it.

When a thunderhead passes over a cyclone fence that surrounds a site, such as the one passing over D-6 right now, you can hear the wire hiss with nervous electrons. It scares me because the fence is a perfect lightning rod, a good conductor. But I stay on my toes. Sometimes, when a big cumulus is overhead stroking the area and roaring, I'll just stay put in my truck until it's had its fun.

Because this is Sunday I'm making better than twelve dollars an hour. I'm driving through a small farming community called Spacebow. A Russian word, I think, because you're supposed to pronounce the e. No one I know does. Shade trees on every street. A Russian church. Grain elevator. No wind. Hot for nine a.m. Men dressed in Sunday black. Ladies in their best. Kids looking uncomfortable and controlled. Even the dogs are behaving. There is a woman, manless I think, because I've seen her before, always on her porch, eyes on something far away. Before today I've only waved hello. First one finger off the wheel, nod, then around the block and two fingers in a limp V, then once around again and the whole hand out the window and a smile. That was last week. After the first turn past her place today she waves back. A weak hand at first, as if she's not sure that's what I meant. But after a few more times around the block she knows that's what I meant. And so I'm stopping. I'm going to ask for a cup of cold water. I'm thirsty anyway. Maybe all this sounds corny to you if you happen to be from a big town like Oxnard. But this is not a big town like Oxnard.

Her name is Myrna Dan. That last name must be a pruned-down version of Danielovitch or something because the people here are mostly Russians. She is thirty-two, a widow, no kids. She owns a farm here but there is no one to work it. She has a small allotment from the government and a vegetable garden. If you are from the coast you would not call her beautiful. Her hands are square and the fingers stubby, made for rough wooden handles. Hips like gateposts.

No supper again. Karen left a note. “Lloyd. I'm going for a walk. There are some cold cuts in the fridge.” It isn't signed. Just like that. One of these days on one of her walks she is going to get caught by the sky which can change on you in a minute.

Bill Finkel made a remark on the way in to the dispatch center today. It embarrassed me and coming from anyone else I would have called him on it. But he is the lead engineer. A few of the other guys grinned behind their hands. How do I know where she goes or why? If it settles her nerves, why should I push it? I've thought of sending her to Ventura to live with her mother for a while, but her mother is getting a bit soft in the head and has taken to writing mean letters. I tell Karen the old lady is around the bend, don't take those letters too

seriously. But what's the use when the letters come in like clockwork, once a week, page after page of nasty accusations in a big, inch-high scrawl, like a kid's, naming things that never happened. Karen takes it hard, no matter what I say.

Spacebow looks deserted. It isn't. The men are off in the fields, the women are inside working toward evening. Too hot outside even for the dogs who are sleeping under the porches. Ninety-nine. I stopped for water at Myrna's. Do you want to see a missile silo? Sure, she said, just like that. I have an extra hard hat in the truck but she doesn't have to wear it if she doesn't want to. Regulations at this stage of the game are a little silly. Just a hole with a sump pump in it. Of course you can fall into it and get yourself killed. That's about the only danger. But there are no regulations that can save you from your own stupidity. Last winter when these holes were being dug, a kid walked out on a tarp. The tarp was covered with a light snow and he couldn't tell where the ground ended and the hole began. He dropped the whole ninety feet and his hard hat didn't save the day. Myrna is impressed with this story. She is very anxious to see one. D-7 is closest to Spacebow. It isn't on my schedule today, but so what. I hand her the orange hard hat. She has trouble with the chin strap. I help her cinch it. Myrna has big jaws. Strong. But not in an ugly way.

I tell her the story about Jack Stern, the Jewish quality control man from St. Louis who took flying lessons because he wanted to be able to get to a decent size city in a hurry whenever he felt the need. This flat empty farm land made his ulcer flare. He didn't know how to drive a car, and yet there he was, jerking around the sky in a Bonanza or something. One day he flew into a giant hammer-head—thinking, I guess, that a cloud is just a lot of water vapor, no matter what shape it has or how big—and was never heard from again. At the airport in Minot they picked up two words on the emergency frequency, *oh no*, then static.

I tell her the story about the motor pool secretary who killed her husband and three children with a target pistol while they slept. Both of them pulling down good money too. I tell her the one about the one that got away. A northern big as a shark. Pulled me and my little boat a mile before my twelve-pound-test monofilament snapped. She gives me a sidelong glance and makes a low buzzing sound in the bottom of her throat. We are on the bottom of D-10, watching the circle of sky.

The trailer stinks something fierce. I could smell it out in the street as soon as I got out of Bill Finkel's car. Fish heads. *Heads*. I guess they've been sitting there like that most of the afternoon. Just the big alligator jaws of my big beautiful pikes but not the bodies. A platter of them, uncooked, drying out, and getting high. Knife fork napkin glass. I'd like to know what goes on inside her head. The note: "Lloyd. Eat your fill." Not signed. Is this supposed to be humor? I have to carry the mess to the garbage cans without breathing. A wind has come up. From the southeast. A big white fire is blazing in the sky over my shoulder. You can

hear the far-off rumble, like a whale grunting. I squint west, checking for funnels.

Trouble in D-7. Fifty feet of water and rising. My report on the failed pump: "Possible bearing seizure." But it's only an educated guess. What am I supposed to do, dive down to the bottom of the hole with a flashlight? They'll find out what went wrong when they pump it dry. But the contract requires investigations and reports on the spot. Waste. Possible bearing freeze-up, possible short, possible fuse, possible condom in the impeller. How the hell do I know?

Myrna wants to see the D-flight control center. I ask her if she has claustrophobia. She laughs, but it's no joke. That far below the surface inside that capsule behind a twelve-ton door can be upsetting if you're susceptible to confinement. The elevator is slow and massive, designed to carry heavy equipment below. The door opens on a dimly lit hall, a spooky cavern. There is crated equipment scattered here and there. At the end of the hall the door, several feet thick to withstand shock waves from the bomb. I wheel it open and we go inside. The lights and blower are on. I wheel the door shut. It can't latch yet, of course, but Myrna is impressed. I explain to her what goes on in here. We sit down at the console. I show her where the launch switches will be and why it will take two people together to launch an attack, the chairs twelve feet apart and both switches depressed for a full three-second count before the firing sequence can start, in case one guy goes berserk and decides to end the world because his old lady has been holding out on him, or just for the hell of it. I show her the escape hole. It's loaded with ordinary sand. You pull this chain and the sand dumps into the capsule. Then you climb up the tube into someone's wheat field. I show her the toilet and the little kitchen. I can see there is something on her mind. Isolated places make you think of odd things. It's happened to me more than once. Not here, but in the ghost town on the other side of the lake.

Topside the weather has changed. The sky is the color of fishbelly, wind rising from the southeast. To the west I can see stubby funnels pushing down from the overcast but only so far. We have to run back to the truck to beat the rain. A heavy bolt strikes less than a mile away. A blue fireball sizzles where it hits. Smell the ozone.

This is the second day she's been gone. I don't know where or how. All her clothes are here. She has no money. I don't know what to do. There is no police station. Do I call her mother, do I call the FBI, the highway patrol, Bill Finkel?

Everyone in the carpool knows but won't say a word. Bill Finkel has other things on his mind. He is worried about rumored economy measures in the Assembly-and-Check-Out program next year. It has nothing to do with me. My job ends before that phase begins. I guess she went back to Oxnard. But how?

We are in the D-flight control center. Myrna, with her hard hat cocked to

one side, wants to fool around with the incomplete equipment. We are seated at the control console and she is pretending to work the switch. She has me pretend to work my switch. She wants to launch the entire flight of missiles, D-1 through D-10, at the Panama Canal. Her big jaw is set and gleaming in the fluorescents. Why the Panama Canal? I ask. What about Russia and China? Cuba? Why not the Panama Canal? she says. The hell with Russia and China and Cuba. Just think of the look on their faces, Lloyd. All those people sunning themselves on the decks of luxury liners, the men working the locks, the admirals, the peasants in the coffee orchards. They'll all look up trying to shade their eyes but they won't be able to. What the hell is this all about? they'll say.

I feel a little of it myself. What if I couldn't get that twelve-ton door wheeled open, Myrna? I see her quiver. What if? What if? She puts her arms around me and our hard hats click. She is one strong woman. Lloyd. Lloyd. Lloyd. But a little later she is calm and up to mischief. I recognize the look. Okay, okay, I tell her. What is it now? She says she feels like doing something screwy and I am not surprised.

I'm sitting on the steel floor listening to the hum of the blower and waiting for Myrna to finish. I'm trying to picture what the weather is doing on the surface. It's hard to do. It could be clear and calm or it could be wild. There could be a high thin overcast or there could be nothing. You just can't know when you're this far under the wheat. I can hear her trying to work the little chrome lever. She's going to have to leave it in there. The plumbing isn't hooked up yet and won't be for six months. She comes out grinning, pretending to be sheepish, but I can see that the idea tickles her. Me too.

Something takes my hook and strips off ten yards of line, then stops dead. Snag. I reel in. The pole is bent double and the line is singing. Then something lets go but it isn't the line because I'm still snagged. It breaks the surface. A lady's shoe. It is brown and white and has a short heel. I toss it in the bottom of the boat. The water is shallow where I am and clear. There is something dark and wide under the boat like a shadow on the water. An old farm house, submerged when the dam filled. There is a deep current around the structure. I can see fence, tires, an old truck, feed pens. The current takes my boat in easy circles. A swimmer would be in trouble. I crank up the engine and head back. No fish today. The shoe is new and it was made in Spain.

I'm standing on the buckled porch of 49 Onyx Street. Myrna is inside reading "What He Must Never Know." The sky is bad. The lake is bad. It will be a while before we can cross back. I knock on the door, as we planned. Myrna is on the bed in the raggedy slip, giggling. "Listen to this," she says. "Listen to this." But I'm not in the mood for stories. "I've brought you something, Myrna." She looks at the shoe. *That? That?* But she agrees to try it on anyway.

A thick tube hairy with rain is snaking out of the sky less than a mile away. Is it going to touch? "They never do, Lloyd. This is not Kansas." This is not California. "Listen to this," she says. Myrna is reading about a pregnant high school girl locked in a bathroom stall with a knitting needle. I'm not listening. I have to keep watch on the sky because there's a first time for everything. The wind is stripping shingles from every roof I can see. A long board is spinning like a slow propeller. The funnel is behind a bluff, holding back. But I can hear it, the freight trains. Myrna is standing behind me, running a knuckle up and down the middle of my back. "Do you want to know what I did today while you were out working on the dam?" she says. The dark tube has begun to move out from behind the bluff, but I'm not sure which way. "Tell me," I say. "Tell me."