

The Man with Eight Pairs of Legs

2012 FIRST DRAFT

BEGINNING:

Once upon a time, a bomb exploded under a young man's jeep. The parts of the jeep, like the parts of the men, lay scattered in the lateral ditch and over the desert road. Meanwhile, armored jeeps, whose final screws were being turned, even now, by robotic arms in a warehouse outside Detroit, would arrive on cargo ships, docking at Umm Qasr, and roll down the ramp, a column of shiny replacements. He lay like a mauled animal facing the sky, his legs mangled, one foot tossed to the side, his mouth shaped like a smile until the pain set in.

Harriet thought it was a fairy tale when he first told her. The two-legged to the zero legged (amputated below the knees, he had said) to multiple pairs. She thought of the delicate dust mill of centipedes she'd toyed with as a kid in the dirt, pill bugs on their backs, the tiny wagging limbs, the invisible feet. In nursery school, she'd drawn multiple legs on villains in different colors, dangling like strings and always with a quick, short line for feet. Never princesses for Harriet, or fairy godmothers, the things that children happily remember. Even now, after a decade of devotedly teaching U.S. History to twelve-year-olds, she'd been passed over that very evening at the annual Winter Awards Dinner by the principal, who was the brother of her stepfather, who was the main barber in town and who must have fit the principal in that ludicrous black toupee, as if she didn't exist. The problem was that Harriet had been reading too much and now she was teaching the history the history teachers didn't teach.

The fairytale-telling man, who looked to be in his late twenties, sat down across from her at the small table at **Lola's**, 5,670 feet above sea level, on Main Street in Cañon City, Colorado, and offered to buy her a drink. Scotch, one rock, she said, flattered, Joplin screaming from the juke. Some oldie reminiscing, she thought, scanning the tiny corner bar for gray hair but of course there was none. Most everyone in Cañon City over thirty preferred to stay home praying, especially the women, especially on weeknights, content to be ironing or flipping through magazines close to their Maker. She wouldn't be here herself if her heart wasn't broken and she didn't need a drink. But every Thursday in preparation for TGIF, Harriet took herself out, and this Thursday, Harriet's vinyl seat felt damp, heat pumping from a row of clicking radiators. Out the tinted window in the streetlight, comforting and silent, a snow bank mashed against the hot glass.

The man hadn't told her yet. He rose up tall and burly, his flannel shirt stretched tight against his back and shoulders, cleaving to his muscular arms, his neck still red from a barber. Beyond him, the rows of liquor looked cramped and piteous in the blue half-light. The bartender, her buddy since afternoons were for graham crackers and naps, traded barbs with the burly newcomer as he poured a sloppy jigger into her fifth golden drink, giving her a look over the man's shoulder as if to say, watch your step, Missy, because any outsider in Cañon City would be hard to trust.

My name's Titanium, the burly man said with a wink, handing her the drink, one rock, a plastic mixer, middle name Silicon, surname Carbon. And then he told her about the eight pairs of legs. Braggart or confessor. Joker or freak. Arthropods, he said, are classified by the number of their limbs, a come-on she hadn't heard before, though she hadn't heard many.

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2013 DRAFT (workshopped at Tin House with Charles D'Ambrosio)

BEGINNING:

Father Dansk had presided at the funeral in his burgundy vestments. In the front pew, next to Harriet's two younger brothers, Thor and Tristan, her immaculately coiffed mother, Fay, tear--streaked and gaunt, leaned against Rick, Harriet's beefy step--father, a man legendary in town for his knowledge of rogaine and toupees. Bob Frackel, editor of the Cañon City Bee, had dubbed him The Barber of Cañonville, a name that stuck, the way things had the habit of doing in Cañon City, twenty square city blocks wedged up against the precipice of Colorado's Royal Gorge.

Harriet had stood looking down at her grandmother's tiny feet, thin straps trapping them for eternity into a pair of black stacked heels, the coffin smelling of paraffin, no hint left of lavender. The bad witch is dead, she overheard Thor joke to Tristan. She stroked Lily's wisp of purple hair. Bad for taking Harriet in when her family had all but disowned her. Bad for forgiving her for what no one else in the congregation could forgive.

Harriet had a habit of dropping by **Lola's Saloon** every Friday after a week of teaching 9th graders the history the other teachers didn't teach. She would sit at her favorite table, her back to the red-plush wall and read her students' essays, moved by their thinking, laughing at their mistakes. But now that Lily was gone, leaving her to live alone ten miles out of town in Lily's house, she'd started drinking every night.

Tonight, at Lola's, Harriet watched snowflakes randomly hit the window, then melt against the pane. Behind the bar the liquor bottles gleamed like pipes in the organ at the Church of Christ. The world felt diminished, Lola's red walls closing in, the town tightening into a knot.

Next to her, a metal arm dropped down. Joplin wailed from the juke. Harriet had made the selection. *Work Me, Lord*, the raw, bluesy voice pleading, don't leave me alone with my pain.

She heard a voice she didn't recognize and turned to see the back of a man's red neck. The man was standing at the counter hobnobbing with the bartender, whose name was Matt though local folks called him The King. Every month he wore a different toupee fashioned by Harriet's stepfather. Tonight, in a slick black toupee, he was a dead-ringer for Elvis, if Elvis had lived to be fifty.

Once upon a time, the red-necked stranger was saying, a methane fireball roared through the upper branch of Buckhorn Mine in Gunnison and exploded next to a young miner shearing coal from the wall's black face. He lay there in the dripping cave, legs mangled, one foot tossed to the side. His mouth, shaped in a smile, hardened as the pain set in.

That's horrible, said Matt.

But here's the thing, said the stranger. A thousand miles away in a Pennsylvania warehouse, mechanical arms had just turned the final screws on the next generation of diamond-hammered drills.

a technology that would have allowed rescuers to reach the shattered man in time to keep his body whole.

It was fate, Matt said. Bad timing.

The stranger slapped down some cash and scooped up his drink.

Fate, he said, is not irreversible.

In fairy tales perhaps, Harriet thought. She rummaged through her backpack for her cigarettes. Magic wands. The kisses of princes. Then he walked over and sat down at her table.

Name's Callahan, he said, holding out his hand.

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2015 DRAFT (workshopped at Breadloaf with Randal Keenan)

BEGINNING:

Harriet endured the faculty Christmas party in the high school gym as if she were doing penance. Trapped between the math and English 12th grade teachers, she crossed and uncrossed her long, shapeless legs; fidgeted with her hands. She felt that itch in her crotch. Her skin burned, a consecration of the nerves. On occasions like these, her body was like a noose around her neck. But she didn't leave. She wanted the award too much. The room, festooned with red and green balloons, stank of fruit punch and P.E. sneakers. Her over-dressed colleagues looked like baubles in the artificial light.

Every year, before winter break, Harriet's old-fashioned principal, his head as bald and shiny as a spoon, honored three teachers with merit awards. Harriet had outdone herself this semester, working late into the night. But her name was not mentioned – it had never been mentioned and it would never be mentioned among the whoops and applause though no one could argue that anyone was more devoted to her students than Harriet Rodgers. It was a conspiracy against which she now silently vowed to commit secret acts of sedition. The vow was to God, despite His propensity to disappoint. Her first act would be to down a few shots **at Lola's.**

She drove the few blocks in whiteout conditions. Away from Cañon City High, she felt her skin cooling. Once inside, she shed her coat and gloves, punched in Janis Joplin's *Work Me, Lord* on the jukebox, and sat down at her favorite table. Lola's Saloon, dimly lit by sagging strings of Christmas lights, was no bigger than the living room at Grandma Lily's house, where Harriet had lived alone since Lily died. Half a dozen regulars were at the bar recounting the local news. A sheepdog went and chased down the Litton's Appaloosa. Little Maxwell Perkins pinched a goddamn cigar from his mother's purse. Get a load of this. Old Dumbarton's cow got her fat head stuck in a fence reaching for the greener pasture on the other side. This last bit had the men in stitches when suddenly an unfamiliar voice shot through the room, gravelly and loose, too loud for the place.

"Fireball came out of nowhere," the stranger said, mimicking the thrust of the thing

with his arm. Harriet, who had just yanked a stack of final exams from her backpack, spun around to see a strapping young man standing at the end of the bar, his freshly barbered neck still red from the razor.

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2019 (workshopped at Juniper Summer Writing Institute with Joy Williams)

BEGINNING:

Harriet knew she was drunk. The towering pylons on the Royal Gorge Bridge wavered in her headlights, their multi-strand cables edged with snow. Behind her, Callahan looked eerie, his motorcycle tinted red in her taillights. At thirty-eight, she had already been branded a spinster by the town. Unadorned and half a foot taller than the swashbuckling stranger – he looked like Keanu Reeves in the Matrix – she felt certain he would change his mind, that he would pull off on a side road, and head back to Cañon City. But instead, he followed her the thirty miles out to Grandma Lily’s place, the small farmhouse she’d escaped to at fifteen and where she now lived alone.

No man had kissed Harriet since a colleague at Coolidge High cornered her in the locker room a decade before. But that night Callahan did. They kissed in the narrow hallway in front of Lily’s Episcopal crucifixes, Callahan shedding his leather jacket and tight denim shirt in front of portraits of Harriet’s great grandmother and her grandmother’s dead sisters, all buttoned up and bodiced like Gold Rush pioneers.

In her cold bedroom, Callahan laid her down on her comforter and opened her like a package – first her winter coat, then her beige wrinkle-free suit jacket and white blouse, carefully lifting out her arms, then stroking her slim shoulders, her pronounced collarbones, along the borders of her no-nonsense bra, before unbuttoning her slacks. His chapped hands, warm on her skin, held the ravages of winter.

She’d met him earlier that evening **at Lola’s Saloon** on Main where she’d taken refuge from another humiliating Christmas faculty awards dinner – she had never once, in her fifteen years of teaching, received the annual merit award – fitting her lanky body into a dark, back booth. She was correcting a stack of midterms, savoring the burn of Ballantine’s in her throat, when she’d heard an unfamiliar voice, high-pitched for a man, too loud for the place. He had the regulars enthralled – prison guards, farmers, and merchants – his dark hair greased and rolled back from his brow like a scroll.

“Fireball came out of nowhere,” he was saying. “Shot straight through Buckhorn Mine over in Gunnison. Pure methane. Sucked out the oxygen so fast it suffocated a dozen grown men before it exploded at the boy’s feet. Poor kid was hell bent on shearing his share of coal. Didn’t even see it coming.” Harriet had leaned in. Fatalities soothed her the way frightening fairy tales soothe children because it’s not happening to them. She’d lit a cigarette, deeply inhaling the pleasure, then exhaled uneasily when the stranger headed to her table. He wasn’t a big man, but he walked like one.

“Name’s Callahan,” he’d said, reaching down to push her stringy blonde hair out of her eyes. Then he’d bought her a drink, punched John Denver into the jukebox and extended his hand. It was the nineties, not the seventies, but he’d put on *Rocky Mountain High* – ‘on the road and hanging by a song.’

Now, half naked, he smelled like tree-bark after rain.

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2020 FINAL VERSION:

THE MAN WITH EIGHT PAIRS OF LEGS

BEGINNING:

Cañon City was not a city. It was a small, gossiping, high-security town in Colorado’s high desert, bordered on the west by the Sawatch Range. A home rule municipality boasting thirteen prisons and fifty churches, its 10,000 people - one fifth of them locked up – governed themselves as they saw fit and thrived on the stories, true or false, they told themselves.

Everyone in Cañon knew that thirty-four-year-old Harriet Rogers, the reclusive, six-foot tall history teacher at Coolidge High, was not a drinker. Nor did she hang out in bars. But on this clear wintry night, heading down Main Street toward the interstate, her Buick, like a stubborn horse, bucked and halted in front of Lola’s Saloon of its own accord. Or at least that’s how the town later came to explain it.

Harriet worked her lanky frame into a dark back booth and shrugged off her winter coat. The ceaseless swill of pandering speeches at the Christmas faculty dinner had driven her to near madness, her nerve endings lighting up randomly like rollovers, spinners and kickers in pin ball machines, just below the skin. She had fled the cavernous gym, inadvertently releasing two green helium balloons into the night. She could still taste the sugary punch.

“Anything that burns,” she called out to the bartender as she pulled a stack of midterms from her satchel. But the bartender, a middle-aged man coiffed in a slick pink toupee, couldn’t hear her over the half dozen regulars jostling at his trough – prison guards, farmers, and merchants – each one attempting to one-up the other with accounts of Cañon’s breaking news. A rabid sheepdog up and chased down Litton’s prize Appaloosa! You heard Old Dumbarton’s cow got its head stuck in the homestead fence? Bet she was gunning for greener pastures...

“Get a load of this one,” someone said. Harriet looked up to see an unfamiliar man in a motorcycle jacket position himself at the bar. “Giant fireball came out of nowhere,” he said, taking off his jacket and mimicking the thrust of the thing with his arm. “Pure methane.”

The locals fell silent. The bartender set down the Collin's glass he'd been wiping with a towel.

"Happened over at Buckhorn Mine in Gunnison a few years back," the young man said. "I saw the whole thing. Sucked out the oxygen so fast, sixteen men died in an instant before it exploded at a boy's feet."

Harriet leaned in. Fatalities soothed her the way frightening fairy tales soothe children because it's not happening to them. She lit a cigarette, deeply inhaling the pleasure, then exhaled uneasily when the young man noticed her from across the bar and headed to her table. He wasn't a big man, but he walked like one.

"Callahan," he said, by way of introduction. His dark hair was greased, rolled back from his brow like a scroll. Harriet felt the heat on her legs from the clicking wall radiator beneath her table. Like a fool, she relit her lit cigarette. He slid the stack of exams to the side and bought her two shots of exactly what she'd ached for. She must have winced.