

CAROLYN CHUTE

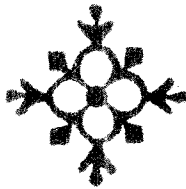
AUTHOR OF *THE BEANS OF EGYPT, MAINE*



Merry Men

Carolyn Chute

**MERRY
MEN**



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A B C D E

Dedication

Please let me honor here all the farmers who still work the land themselves, who are not agribusinessmen or agribusinesswomen, but *farmers*, who know family and community interdependence . . . America's last vestiges of freedom.

And honor to all those millions who were born to be farmers, as they have been for thousands of years, but because of modern "education," Big Business, and Mechanization they cannot be and will never know their true gift but are instead herded into welfare lines, prisons, or the slavery of Big Business . . . may they find it—the gift—in another life, another world.

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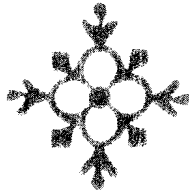
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Thank you, Toto “Wildman” Chute. Forever and ever.



Prologue

The breaking waves dash'd high
On a stern and rock-bound coast,
And the woods against a stormy sky
Their giant branches toss'd.

—*Felicia Dorothea Hemans*

"The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England"

IT WAS a poor piece of land but they made it feed them . . . potatoes and certain beans . . . and there were deer and in time, apples. But especially deer. The man was a Fitzgerald. He and his sons would string up a half dozen dressed-out deer near the shedway and head back out for more. And the wife had no daughters and she was delicately built and odd and fell often into naps although she never died of any of them . . . and she fell into weeping at times . . . and she was swept away by angers and swept off by fears . . . and she spoke of the wish for death . . . but she never died of this wish. She did the work of many women and she was kindhearted. The dogs hung around the door as much for her baby talk for them as for her tossing out bones and gristle.

The Past, Late Eighteen Hundreds, Long Ago

An Indian woman started coming along the road every day while the husband and sons were in the fields or on a hunt, an Indian woman who seemed to come from nowhere and carried nothing. She would come and stand at the door and the dogs would sniff and make low growls around and around her and she would raise her fist at them. The woman of the house knew what the Indian woman wanted.

So the woman of the house would split up some biscuit wood on the block beside the stove and feed a nice fire, and she would start some flour with lard. And all the while, the other woman's dark eyes blazed at the wife through the tiny window of the door and this wife of the house gave away the biscuits as much out of fear as generosity.

The Indian woman's eyes never softened with gratefulness. And when the hot biscuits were held out to her, she would always grab them and turn away and the dogs would follow her back to her disappearing point, vexing her, and jabbing her with their noses in the folds of her skirt. The Indian woman was a secret the wife kept, for she was so afraid of the Indian woman that she couldn't speak of her to her husband.

In time there are no secrets between wife and husband and the husband was furious to hear of all the "wasted flour and lard."

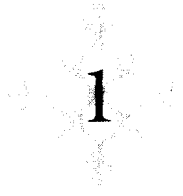
The next midmorning the Indian woman's figure appeared and the dogs hurried up the road to do their work of vexation and jabbing.

Off in the cleared field to the right was another figure . . . the husband raising his rifle to his shoulder . . . CRACK!!! . . . and the Indian woman imploded, became only what seemed like the pile of her dress in the road.

The husband hurried for a look.

The sons arrived. One son came back up to the homeplace for a shovel.

The wife then lay down on the bed in the low-pitched corner of the little house . . . afraid . . . for there is always something to fear.



The Law

A generation of men is like a generation of leaves.

—Homer
The Iliad



1 | THE CONSTABLE, Erroll Anderson, hunches a bit. He shivers. He is never dressed right for these emergencies. He beams his flashlight onto one of the truck doors which has printed on it: FOREST JOHNSON, SR., & SON. BACKHOE & DOZING. SAND & LOAM. EGYPT, MAINE. 625-8693. He makes this light dance in a frisky way, but the expression on his face remains coplike and earnest. The lettering on the door jiggles and bounces, then slides away. “So,” says he.

Forest Johnson, Jr., is leaning hard into the fender of one of the trucks, arms crossed over his jacket. “Take a guess,” says Forest, Jr.

The constable shrugs.

“Take another guess,” Forest, Jr., says.

"Hard to guess," says the constable, his frozen breath chunky, broken like small sailing ships rolling out and away.

"The possibilities are limitless," says Forest, Jr., with reverence.

"Ah . . . he's taken all your Craftsmans and put them in your wife's silverware drawer and put all your wife's silverware in your tool chests." The constable says this without chuckling. It is said with earnestness.

Forest Johnson, Jr., shifts his weight, but keeps his shoulder to the fender of the truck, eyes on the constable's face. He is waiting for another guess, but it remains a silent, nearly melancholy moment.

2 | Another day, another emergency.

The constable's jeep has a new ping in the engine, but there's still guts left in the old gal. She makes the long steep tarred drive without much trouble. There's the State. Double blue lights. Antennas long and feely. Parked by a rose arbor.

Another state cruiser pulling up the drive beside the constable, antennas wagging. The sun is breaking clear of the trees over along Bond Road. This is the Maxwell residence. How rich? Nobody knows. Nobody knows anything about the Maxwells. They are off-limits people. You never see them at the IGA or the PO. It's a wonder how they get from home to wherever they go to without ever being seen. Though of course they are seen, just unrecognizable, a blur of a face behind the windshield of an unrecognizable car. Perhaps a different car every time? A different route? A different time of day?

The constable veers the jeep off to the side of the drive, lets the state cop pass. The constable sees down over the embankment of the once greener-than-nature lawn to the depths of frostburned goldenrod and witchgrass, glinty, dewy . . . there a dark Mercedes. It is not smashed up or stripped. It just looks uncomfortable there.

People stand around the white arbor, some in work clothes, some in their fall-months' leises. And the cops dressed straight-creased, gray-blue and edgy. Light pops and glints from their buttons and badges. On the hot top, where the Mercedes might be parked if it weren't in the field, is an open casket, a fairly embellished hardwood beauty. Inside the casket is an individual wearing a suit of dress clothes.

A sharp-edged businessman's voice says, "I consider this a threat."

The constable, Erroll Anderson, nods to Bob, one of the state cops he knows, but otherwise he just stands there with nothing to say. He

glimpses about with his froggishly round eyes at the mashed grass and weeds leading down to the Mercedes, then back to the face in the cassette . . . more unsettling than a real dead face, a very well-done papier-mâché or clay is what it looks like, with very wide-open, very human-looking glass eyes. The shirt is a bold red-and-white stripe. Pliant under one gloved hand, a cardboard pirate's hat.

The constable, Erroll Anderson, would like to mention that the pirate's face looks just like the face of the man who is angrily gesticulating to the cop, that man with the sharp-edged voice of business, Maxwell himself, no doubt. Whoever made the pirate did quite a job, the constable marvels. He has a desire to reach out and feel the pirate's face and to see if the slightly graying hair is human or horse.

Another state cruiser arrives and then the sheriff's brown car, its radio sputtering. More metal and gleam and officialness, more fuss.

The constable is thinking how lights deter crime and considers his lecture on this that he gives a lot of complainants these days. But from every high place of this massive residence of glass and odd-angled gables are security lamps. Surely even hidden cameras and sudden buzzers, wails and bells . . . security being a kind of life-style here.

3 | The constable, Erroll Anderson, hunches a bit, freezing to the bone. His breath is shaky white tatters falling away. "So," says he. It's his fifth emergency at the Johnsons' in only a few days.

They rise grinning to the mad flicker of the constable's flashlight. Fourteen trucks. Also flickering is the half word, the deep breath, the two men moving through the predawn. Their boots crunch. Along the deathly silent line are the grilles facing out and the rigging of plows and their rams, cables, hoses, two V-plows, several wing plows.

Forest Johnson, Jr., now snaps his flashlight onto a patch of light snow and what looks like a wide-open lead-color rose.

The constable squats for a close look with his own light. He clears his throat and his bowling jacket gives a little bluish ripple. "So," says he. His froggishly round eyes are, as ever, earnest. Earnestness is in the air. For it is known among them in Egypt, Maine, who know all, that the older Forest is up there in his bed in the Johnson house dying. Dying of oldness.

Old Forest, Sr. "F.D." You just never see F.D. around anymore.

And now here we are, it has come to this, Forest, Jr., with a bit of gray at the temples.

Forest, Jr., is swishing his light over more mangled shapes. Chiseled smashed fuel caps. Once perfectly round. Once locked. All cast upon the snow. One from each truck.

Forest Johnson, Jr., directs his viselike bitter line of a smile at the constable. Looks like Forest, Jr., thinks there's something about the constable that is insubstantial and silly. Forest, Jr.'s frozen breath bunches and bounces around his face so now there's no face. When his face reappears, it's just this dark sovereignty of eyes behind steel-rimmed glasses and a fierce close shave. It is only with words of many S's or Z's that something of his teeth shows . . . and there, the tooth that is blue-gray and skewer shaped. Odd for a man who isn't too poor to get it fixed. But, as those in town who know these things know, the Johnsons are not in the kind of business where you need a nice, big smile.

Forest says, "Everything is empty . . . even the backhoe. Even Peggy's car. If I'd had a lawn mower out here with a half a cup of gas in it, he'd have gotten that, too." He steadies himself against the iron flank of the low-bed.

The constable glances at Forest's boots, that usual quickie blushing way people look at Forest's boots. It is legendary, the once-public-spectacle of his once-imploded feet, the rods and twigs look of the broken feet. Everybody that was outside the old bank that day looked. Everyone in passing. So many people. And so much blood. The yellow bulldozer was blood. And the clapboard wall of the bank was blood. And the ambulance driver was blood. And the chunked-up sidewalk was blood. That much blood makes you a celebrity in Egypt. Blood becomes your middle name.

And what do his feet look like now? Everyone knows someone who knows someone or who himself claims he has seen the feet.

Forest smiles on and on, his thin appraising smile, says, "Like if you're going to do a thing, you want to be the best you can be. Right?"

Now the constable squints at the center of Forest's dark jacket.

Forest grimaces. "I imagine that's how *he* looks at it, too. Like for instance . . . you, Erroll, wouldn't want to be anything less than a great constable, a sort of a Nobel-Prize-winning constable. So it is with him. He wants to be the best, world's best motherfucking royal pain in the

ass . . . and god bless him . . . he is.” Then comes half chuckle, half groan. “Don’t see much for tracks here, do you?”

The constable swooshes light in all directions, stops at a tough grouping of plantain leaf. “I’ll be honest with you, Forest. If this were murder, something like that would be done. Fingerprints. Tracks. Samples of all varieties of things. Labeled plastic bags. Guys working around here as dainty as archaeologists. I mean *nobody* is capable of leaving no tracks at all. There’s something here. Impressions. State boys would investigate the living hell out of this area. In twelve hours, they’d know where everybody on Rummery Road was last night and what brand of fabric softener they use in their socks. I mean . . . you know . . . like baby-rape-death or mutilation-mother-murder. *Any* murder. Armed robbery with a dead cashier behind the counter.” He looks up to the despondent gray spot along the spiky black top of the mountain . . . dawn. “Between you and me,” he says softly. “If it ’twas the gov’nor had his wristwatch stolen or some billionaire oil baron’s ashtray taken from the back of his limo, *then* people get excited. But you and I . . . ordinary guys . . . our troubles are cheap.” He almost chuckles. Instead he sighs. “Although, you know of the Maxwells . . . have the helicopter and all those antique cars. Built that place up on Bond Road?”

Forest’s expression shows neither recognition nor puzzlement.

Constable says, “He hit them, too. Maxwell was pissed and got a lot of them scrambling over there . . . but . . . I guess the State boys weren’t able to find anything. We all just have to hang in there, you know? Best to catch him at it . . . or with the stolen property on him. We’ll watch him close for a few more hours . . . his place . . . his in-laws’ place . . . his buddies. But you know, Forest, we’re always watching him. He’s one of our favorite pastimes. He’s . . . he’s a very weird dude . . . I . . .” The constable cocks his head as if hearing creepy movie music. “Eventually we’ll get him, Forest. Eventually . . . but . . .” He sniggers. “You see . . . most of what he does is . . . pranks. Tricks. They just don’t add up to much. It’s just not worth it to the State to set up a major investigation over it . . . most police effort today is on drugs, not . . . not . . .” He leans close to Forest and jams his flashlight under his own jaw and ghoulishly rasps, “Sommmmmmmme-times our friend makes thinnnggggs *appear*.”

Forest snorts. He leans away from the low-bed and gives a brutalized fuel cap a little affectionate stroke with one of his boot heels.

The constable gets a quickie glimpse of the boot.

Forest says huskily, "So when I kill him, you can do something with my tracks, okay?"

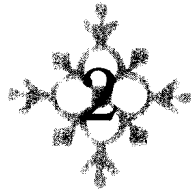
Erroll squares his shoulders, blue satin waves of his bowling jacket moving in and out of place. "Don't joke like that in front of me, okay?" He beams his flashlight into Forest's face, then lowers the light. There's a breeze now, small of force, but big with cold. Erroll starts up a little teeth chattering and dances from foot to foot. "It's been proven, Forest, that light deters crime. I'm surprised your insurance company isn't all over you about getting yourself lights. A couple of mercury lamps . . . one here . . . one over there . . . well worth the money . . . get your money back in six months for what he won't steal from you."

Forest's dark eyes get small, more tightly focused behind his wire glasses, scrutinizing the constable so hard there's almost a cross-eyedness. His voice softens. "So he can see better what he's stealing, right?" He looks up into the black sky, eyes blinking wildly. "Forget it, Erroll. I like the no-lights method . . . because *he* won't see me when I lay low for him with my thirty-ott-six."

The constable's little dance picks up momentum. He looks yearningly in the direction of his jeep parked near Johnson's house across the lot. He wonders, "You going to wait around here every night for the next two or three weeks, maybe two or three *months* . . . all night, every night? I doubt it." He steals another glimpse of his jeep.

Forest Johnson smiles. "Sure I'm going to." His voice is the kind of voice some men have that goes softly hoarse on certain words, so that his voice, like frozen breath, gets tattered and shredded, then again whole. "You don't get it, do you? I'm really into it now . . . the beauty of it. It's a damn beautiful thing. Romantic in a way."

4 | When the constable is finally alone in his jeep, he runs the motor for heat while he marks his report sheet. From out of nowhere a candy cellophane hops onto his bowling jacket in a friendly way. He brushes it hard but now it hops to the opposite cuff. He considers how he has always been an honest man, a nice man. But how gray and vague and flexing the wide world is. Inside the jeep, the heat builds and the ride home is solemn, but toasty.



Super Tree Man

They have perhaps a year or two
Left of this
Before history begins to edit them into
Something without smoke or flies, something
Beyond all recognition.

—Larry Levis
"The Clearing of the Land: An Epitaph"

1 | LLOYD HAS NEVER seen this little girl before. Never. Till now. This thick-legged girl sitting on top of the kitchen table, bare but for terry underpants. Lloyd tries to find familiarness in her face. Unk Roger has said she's Lloyd's "own cousin." "Own cousins," Lloyd knows, are the kind you're supposed to visit more often than this . . . or at least see them walking around at a wedding . . . or the IGA. He flashes his eyes on each face here, then flashes his eyes away, crazed with wonder and fear.

A red-haired woman rinses a washrag in a pan of bloody water . . . squeezes . . . then slops the rag once again on the scratches shaped in V's and willy-nillies on the little girl's legs, the washrag looking like a good-

feeling thing, crawling into place around each ankle, adrift up and down the legs. The woman's fingers are like shafts of light, so thin, maybe weightless. The little girl stares at the woman's hands. The child is blue-white and long. Long bodied, eyes rounded in the poor light.

Through the open doorway looking out, you can see their deep-water yard. Rain coming up to the door. And off across the openness, power lines with their high wires . . . peat and ledge and juniper and blackberry and sumac, all the awful stuff. Nothing to make you shady. And close to the door, a logging truck like the wall of another building. And all over all of this is the kiss-kiss of rain. And Unk Roger is in the doorway looking out, wearing his black lace-up boots. He stands like a guard. When his face shows, he is wearing his high-and-mighty look. And the woman's face has gotten high-and-mighty, this probably being because you have a certain thing, a certain "look" that runs in the family. Lloyd has figured this must be so . . . like in a family you have big bones or little bones. But besides this there's something going on . . . a twinkle in the woman's green eyes . . . a little joke going on here. Jokes are always going on when you are age eight and three-quarters . . . jokes above your head . . . jokes not on you but *without* you. In the place where the red-haired woman's teeth once were, between the hard ridges of her gums, there's a cigarette, which is not lit yet. It jiggles, blue-white as the little girl and perfect in its unsmoked condition.

There's no place to sit here. Just one upholstered chair with an old man in it. There's barely room to stand. Lloyd sees that his father, Edmund's, crotch is against the table. His father, Edmund, . . . a man too dark to show much of a flush. And yet Edmund's face is aflame. Bothered. Edmund's dark eyes seem to find something about the woman's house-dress.

Now Lloyd's father, Edmund, pulls a blue bandanna from his overalls pocket, draws it across the back of his neck. Lloyd hopes his father might do something next that will let Lloyd in on the secret joke of all this.

Old man in the chair. Has a white pearly lumpiness to his forehead and one temple. But Lloyd has seen worse than that. Just another chain saw story. They all start with, "I was workin' over to blah blah blah . . ." You hear Clayton and Rick tell theirs. You hear Hazen's. And that other guy at the store . . . guy with one hand. Another and another. Foye is the name of these people here. Lloyd's dead mother's people. She

has so many people, which also includes Gramp Fogg and the unks. All her people. Every road you take, there's somebody to wave to and blow the horn. Or else you got to stop the truck and talk a million years to someone standing by their mailbox. Usually boring. But these . . . the Foyes . . . they are making a fire on his father's face.

The woman says, "You boys come to see the transmission?" and her cigarette frisks up and down on each and every word.

"Yup," says Unk Roger by the door a little testily. He doesn't even turn around.

What they have on the drainboard is four nice pies, painfully swollen, exuding winy-black from the fluted edges and from the fork marks of their high meridians. The sweet right heat of them mixes with the bad odor of tomcatness although there's no tomcat in sight . . . and some odor coming out of the father, Edmund, . . . not just his usual woods, cattle, and work . . . but something like alarm . . . but not alarm . . . something other.

The woman says, "Too late. A feller was here last night . . . paid cash."

"Zat so," says Edmund, his eyes on the middle of the woman.

Lloyd sees his father's shoulders thickening, flexing, the throat working its undulating big timbre around a thought. Lloyd leans his weight onto his palms on the table to lift himself up for a handstand sort of thing he is known for doing on everybody's furniture and at school at times when he himself least expects it, which sometimes causes furniture to flip. He swings his legs to and fro. The bloody water in the pan sloshes out some.

"Stop," says Edmund deeply, but very, very soft.

Old man in the chair turns his coffee mug around and around. Coffee mug on his knee. No place else to put it. *Very small house.*

"You need a boat?" the woman asks Edmund. "We got a boat that might be for sale. You want to look at it?" Her eyes make tight little bee circlings around Edmund's face, then stop outright. Eyes into eyes. The stare is held.

"No thanks!" snorts Unk Roger from the door, still facing out, staring into the warm rain.

Lloyd crosses his arms to hide his fat-boy breasts.

"Know these boys, Emery?" the woman asks the old man.

"Yep," says the old man, looking up from his coffee mug, nods into Edmund's eyes and then toward the back of Unk Roger's head . . . but not to Lloyd . . . Lloyd not part of the tangled, weary old past.

The little girl has purple hands.

Unk Roger says, "Ready, Ed?"

Edmund says, "In a minute."

Unk Roger now has disappeared from the doorway. There's just the sucking sounds of his boots in the black mud, somewhere between the towers of darkened forklift pallets, some long low cars, big water with boards crossing to the clothesline, little water in puddles shaped like feet. And the logging truck, huge, huge. House, eensie-weensie.

The father, Edmund's, eyes drift to the little girl's purple fingers curled around the black-painted rim of the washbasin. "Blackberry-picking champ of the world, eh?" says he. His voice strange, thick, like caught in the middle of a swallow.

The woman says, "She learned her lesson this time." Then she cocks her head, squints out into the dooryard. "Sure you don't need a boat?"

"Not me," says Edmund, a smile flickering across his face.

The woman's mouth stiffens around the cigarette, like drawing smoke, though there's no smoke. She lets the washrag slide into the dark water and says, "Okay. Done." She hauls the little girl over the table edge to the floor. The table thumps and sways as the little girl goes under. Lloyd wants to see where she went, but he would have to stoop and put his face down there in the darkness.

The woman strikes a kitchen match, keeping her back to Edmund and Lloyd as she lights up. They don't see her face for a whole minute. She just smokes and smokes the long while. "You wouldn't like a nice cat, would you?" she says at last, turning.

"Not me," chuckles Edmund Barrington, his eyes blacker, wider now. And hers . . . full of sport. Tosses her red hair, shoots out her smoke craftily over one shoulder. "Double paws," she says deeply.

"Good for him," says Edmund with a grin.

2 | On the way home the pie has a special place in the toolbox on the flatbed. It's a pie the red-haired woman gave Edmund. There she wanted to sell him stuff so bad, doesn't sell anything, just winds up one less pie. When Lloyd says, "I'm going to eat the *whole* thing!" for about the fifth time, Unk Roger says, "Talk about *something else*."