

THE MAN WHO OWNED VERMONT

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BRET LOTT

AUTHOR OF *JEWEL*

THE
MAN WHO
OWNED
VERMONT
BRET LOTT



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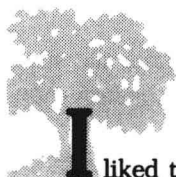
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*I was dumb and silent,
I refrained even from good;
And my sorrow grew worse.*

—Psalm 39

ONE





I liked this plumber. He had come to the front door and knocked solidly three times, then three times more before I could answer. I liked that, liked the sound six square knocks made through the apartment. I was there alone. I had things to sort out.

I opened the door, and the plumber stuck out his hand. "Lonny Thompson," he said. "Landlord sent me up. You've got a leak somewhere in your bathroom."

"Rick," I said. We shook hands. He knew how to shake hands; grasped my hand just past the knuckles, then squeezed hard and shook. I judged he was fifty, fifty-five years old.

He said, "Glad to meet you. Now where's this damned leak?"

He led me to the bathroom, as if he'd been here plenty of times, though I'd never seen him around the building before. We walked through the front room into the kitchen, then into the bathroom, the plumber turning his head, looking everything over. There wasn't much left in the apartment; my wife had taken most everything. Only the sofa bed and the black-and-white portable were left in the living room, one of those small rented refrigerators in the kitchen. Even the hamper in the bathroom was gone. "Moving in?" he asked once we were in the bathroom. He didn't look at me.

I said, "Well, not really." I didn't want to get into it.

He set the toolbox on the toilet lid. "Oh," he said, and started unbuttoning the gray down vest he wore over a red and black plaid wool shirt. He took off the vest, then the shirt, and dropped them both on the floor. Under the wool shirt he wore a gray

workshirt, the same color as his pants, *Lonny* stitched in red thread above the shirt pocket. He had on old-fashioned plastic-framed glasses, the kind of frames that started out thick across the top and thinned down to wire along the bottom edge of the lenses. He went right to business, got down on his hands and knees and opened the cabinet beneath the sink.

I said, "Cold outside?"

"Where have you been?" he said, his head under the sink. "Thirty-five degrees and dropping. Supposed to get the first snow tonight. Believe it? Snow already."

I said, "I guess I haven't been paying much attention." I squatted down next to him to see if I could tell what he was doing, if I could learn something.

"Bet you haven't been paying much attention to any leaks then, neither." He laughed. "Your landlord called me this morning. Five feet square of ceiling in the apartment below came right down on the breakfast table." He pulled his head out from under the sink and looked at me. "How'd you like that for breakfast?" We both laughed. He went back under.

I said, "I know. He called me and told me the whole thing. That's a funny story." I stood up slowly, pushing on my knees, then picked up his shirt and vest from the floor. They both smelled of cigarettes—years of cigarettes burning down to the filter, I imagined, while he drained sink traps and tightened pipes; and they smelled of burnt wood. I imagined this plumber standing beside a campfire at dawn, a rifle crooked in his arms. I folded the shirt and vest and put them on the toilet tank.

I went to the bedroom and looked out the window. There had been a good blow several days before. Most every leaf had been stripped off the trees, and I saw things I hadn't been able to see in the summer, things like the Ford dealership sign on the main street in town, the charcoal-colored hills, chimneys. The sky was an even ash gray all the way across. He was right about the snow coming.

All these things looked strange under that gray sky, but what seemed most strange was that the grass down in the yard was still green. That green next to all those bare gray trees and the gray sky and the hills looked odd.

I went back into the bathroom, and I don't think he even knew I had left. I said, "Do you know what the problem is? Do you know what's wrong?" I sat on the edge of the tub.

"Tell you the truth, I don't." He pulled out from under the sink, closed the cabinet, and sat Indian-style on the floor. "All those pipes look fine. No loose fittings, no water marks, no nothing. But you better believe there's a leak somewhere." He motioned toward me. "I want to look at the tub next."

I got up quickly and pulled back the curtain.

The plumber kneeled against the tub and ran his fingers along the edge where the walls and the tub met. "This caulking along here can go," he said, "and then every damn time you're standing in the shower, water'll seep down through these joints and collect beneath the tub. I seen that happen before." He came to a small crack on the lip of the tub, stopped and examined it a moment, then went on. "I seen it happen once where all the water collected underneath the floor beneath the tub. This was a bathroom on the first floor of a house, and they didn't have their basement heated. Know what happened?" He grinned up at me. "All this water's been collecting, and then a big freeze came along and the water froze, broke right through the bottom of the tub, put a half-inch crack three feet long right down the center. I seen that."

I said "No," and crossed my arms.

He finished checking the seal around the tub. "Your caulking's not shot, that's for sure. Not the greatest, but not shot to hell." He then started feeling the floor along the tub, pressing down every few inches with the palm of his hand. "Pull your curtain closed," he said.

I leaned over him and pulled it along the rod, stepping over

him still kneeling and feeling the floor. I said, "What do you think?"

"You do keep the bottom of the shower curtain inside the tub when you shower, don't you?" he said.

I said, "Of course," and laughed.

"You'd be surprised," he said without looking up.

He checked either end of the tub where the curtain touched the walls. "You know sometimes water sprays out of these edges. Sometimes people don't get these curtains completely closed." He flipped the ends of the curtain back and forth to see where they fell. "Do you have a glass?" he asked, very matter-of-fact, as though the question were the next logical thing to say. "And fill it with water," he added. He was still flipping the curtain back and forth.

I got the red plastic cup from the toothbrush holder and filled it. I handed it to him, expecting him to drink it.

"Sometimes along the floor, water can seep in, too," he said. "This is a good test." He then poured the cup of water on the floor along the edge of the tub. "How about another?" he said. I filled it again, and he emptied it on the floor. "If it seeps down and disappears, why then we've found our leak."

But the water did nothing, only sat in a puddle along the entire edge of the tub. We watched that water for a good three minutes, but nothing happened. "Well," the plumber finally said, "that's not your problem, either. I was afraid of this." He stood and dusted off his hands, though I was sure they weren't dirty. "We better mop this up." He waved at the floor.

I got the last clean towel from the closet and dropped it on the water, pushed it along the tub with my foot.

He said, "I'll bet it's your toilet. If it's your toilet, we've got troubles. Your landlord's got troubles."

I dropped the wet towel in the tub.

He took his tool chest from the toilet lid, set it on the floor, then lifted the lid and flushed the toilet. "Toilets I hate," he said. "That's why I always wait until last for them. Some plumbers don't mind them, some love them. Me, I hate them. Too much water swirling up around everywhere." He stood over the bowl,

looking at it as though it would say something to him. After a moment he closed the lid, and saw his folded shirt and vest on the tank. I picked them up, felt to make sure the radiator was cold, then set the shirt and vest there.

"Thanks, buddy," he said.

He set the tank lid on the toilet seat, then flushed the toilet again and played with the bulb, flicking it up and down. He reached his hand down into the rising water and opened and closed the round hatch at the bottom. The inside walls of the tank were all brown and rusted, making the outside of the tank look that much whiter. He put the lid back on, then got down on his hands and knees again. He started feeling the floor around the base of the toilet, just as he had along the tub, pressing the palm of his hand down every few inches to test it.

I assumed he was going to ask for another cup of water, so I filled the red plastic cup. I stood with the cup of water and said, "You need some water?"

He had already worked halfway around the toilet; his head was back under the tank. He stopped feeling the floor. "Christ, is that all you do?" he said over his shoulder. "Ask questions?" He forced a laugh, but I knew he meant what he said. He went back to testing the floor. "There's enough water in this damn toilet already. If there's a leak, I'll find it with the water that's already here, thank you."

I dumped the water into the sink. "Sorry," I said. I stepped over him and started out the door.

"Hey," he said. I turned around. From where I stood I could see his face under the toilet tank. He was smiling, and said, "Hey, it's these damn toilets I hate. Sorry."

"That's okay," I said. I squatted and watched while he tinkered with a knob on a pipe leading from the tank to the floor.

A few minutes later he was finished. He got up and again dusted off his hands.

He said, "I'll be damned if I can find what's your problem. I

can't find no leak anywhere, so it must be somewhere down in the floor, down below here. I've seen some strange things before, some strange plumbing problems, so nothing I find'll be a surprise." He flushed the toilet again. "You can never tell what's going on when it comes to plumbing," he said, staring at the bowl. "Maybe there's a leak in the roof and when it rains the water pours down between these walls and collected in the ceiling of that apartment below. I've seen that happen before, too. I've seen the ceiling of a first-floor apartment fall in because there was a leak in the roof three floors up." He looked at me, then at his shirt and vest on the radiator. "But I'll be damned if I can find a leak here in this bathroom."

He reached for his shirt, but I picked it up first, unfolded it and handed it to him. He sort of smiled as he put it on and buttoned it up. Then I handed him the vest.

He said, "So did you say you were moving in or moving out?"

I put my hands in my pockets. I figured I would have to say it to someone sometime, and I liked this plumber. "Neither, actually," I said. "I guess my wife was the one who moved out." I waited for some reaction. I waited for him to say something.

But he only finished buttoning up the vest, then picked up his toolbox and led me out of the bathroom, through the kitchen and back into the front room. He glanced around the room again.

"One thing's for sure, though," he said.

I said, "Oh?"

"Yeah," he said, "your landlord's going to have to spring for a new toilet sometime soon. That one in there's about shot." He stood at the door, his hand on the knob. "I'd say that one in there's at least fifteen years old, and it's not a very good one. He's going to have to get a new one, and I don't envy him having to pay for it."

"How much do they cost?" I said. I wanted to listen to this plumber talk about things he knew.

"Really depends," he said. He seemed to enjoy talking about it, and took his hand off the knob. "You can buy a good one for, oh, about a hundred fifty, hundred seventy-five. Last you a good

twenty years. But then on the other hand you could buy a cheap one, seventy-five to a hundred, have it last fifteen years, and have to flush it three times just to make sure everything goes down." He pushed an imaginary lever on an imaginary toilet several times to show me what he meant.

He turned and opened the door, and I could smell the cigarettes and burnt wood. I didn't want this plumber to leave. I wanted him to stay and tell me more about plumbing, more stories. I said, "I guess you know a lot. About plumbing, I mean."

"Thirty years," he said, and pointed to his head. He smiled. "Thirty years." He walked out into the hall, turned and said, "I'll be seeing you whenever that landlord of yours decides to spring for that toilet. So long."

I said, "See you." I started to close the door, then stepped out into the hall.

"Lonny," I said. "Hey, Lonny."

He was already a few steps down the stairs, but stopped and turned around. He looked surprised. He stared at me a few seconds, then put his hand on the back of his neck.

"Jesus, buddy. Jesus, Rick," he said. He seemed to look past me. "Don't ask me," he said. "Don't ask me a goddamn thing about anything other than plumbing. I'm just the plumber."

I stood there a moment. He looked away. I said, "You hunt, right?"

"Yeah, I hunt," he said. He was quiet a moment, then said, "I'll call you sometime when we go hunting. When we go deer hunting. You can go with us. I know where you live." He waved and disappeared down the stairs.

"All right," I called down. "I'll be here."

Back in the apartment I could still smell his shirt and vest. I looked out the window at the odd green against the gray, and smelled the cigarettes and burnt wood. I knew he would call me.



I stood at the window a few minutes, looking down at the lawn, and then Lonny came from inside onto the steps, walked across the grass. He was carrying his toolbox. He crossed the street, the collar of his shirt turned up and covering his ears. His pickup was parked at the curb across the street, a dull red Dodge with LONNY'S PLUMBING AND HEATING painted across the rear panel of the bed. He climbed in, started the engine. A blue cloud of smoke and steam poured out the tailpipe. He drove off.

That was Saturday morning. I looked at my watch, saw it was only eleven forty. I had the rest of the day to do whatever it was I had to do. Sort things out.

I flipped on the set, sat on the sofa and watched a pregame show. I watched the game that followed, and the one after that. It wasn't until the third quarter of that second game that I looked out the window and saw the snow coming down. Snow had already collected a half-inch on the bottom edge of the window pane. It was a fine powder, not heavy, but constant, and I knew we'd have a long snow.

I turned back to the set. One of the teams had just scored a touchdown, a black player standing in the end zone, his arms above his head, his knees buckling beneath him in a slow dance.

It snowed the rest of the afternoon and into the night; by the time the apartment was dark except for the bright black-and-white images from the set the snowflakes had become larger, heavier, more like pieces of cinder falling in the dark. Near nine I unfolded the sofa bed, made and ate a sandwich, and then went to bed.

The set played all night, and I remember waking up now and then to some old movie, and to the black snow falling outside the window. That is how I dealt with the situation that first weekend. That is how I began to sort things out.

Paige had left the Wednesday before. It wasn't as if I hadn't known a thing about it, either. I had known. I had known there would be one day, one moment, one instant when I would see she was actually going to do it. That instant came Tuesday night, when I came home from work, set the keys on the television set, and heard her crying. I went back to the bedroom where I found her sitting on the floor, her back against the wall, her legs up against her chest. She hugged her legs, and cried without looking at me. This was the moment I knew she was gone.

The next morning a man I'd never seen before, a young guy with a droopy mustache, pulled up outside in a U-Haul truck. He got out. He held a piece of paper in his hand, looked at it, then up toward our window. I was watching all this from the front room. He entered the building.

"Don't worry," Paige said from somewhere behind me. I didn't turn around. "He's no one. No one you should worry about." She was quiet, then said, "He's just a kid from U-Haul. I hired him to give me a hand. He's no one."

I turned around, my arms crossed. Paige stood in the doorway between the kitchen and front room. She was wearing an old green and red plaid flannel shirt and gray sweat pants, her hair just brushed through. She wore no makeup, her eyes no less red and puffy than they had been last night. She would think herself ugly like this, I knew, but she wasn't.

I looked down at the floor. "So who should I?" I said. "Who should I worry about?" Before I even let out the words I knew there was no need for me to say them. There was no one. She was leaving because of what was inside this apartment, not because of something she was headed for out there.

She laughed, put her hands on her hips. She looked down