

Bill Roorbach

{IN HIS WORDS}

In Search of *The Remedy for Love*

More than a few winters ago I went grocery shopping before a snowstorm. Driving out of the parking lot, I spotted a young woman stumping ten bags of groceries along the verge of the no-sidewalk commercial strip in our rural Maine town. I recognized her slightly from her job at one of the thrift stores and stopped to offer her a ride. She was grateful and explained that she was a newlywed and that their truck had broken and they didn't have the money yet to fix it—transmission.

I found it romantic, this new young couple with their private struggles, doing their best, living on sex and Pop-Tarts and minimum wage. I dropped her at her incredibly tiny house, several miles from the store. But when I got home, snow starting to fall, I realized her groceries were still in the back of my car! I'd driven off with them! I roared back in the snow fifteen minutes to her house and crossed the cluttered yard carrying all ten bags, knocked with my forehead.

After a minute the door opened and this huge, tattooed man loomed, the husband. I recognized him from a building supply that had shut down, the grim dude always standing outside for a cigarette in his muscles and camo, built like a lintel stone but with a broken heart tattooed on his arm.

He takes in the shopping bags and he takes in my guilty grin; he takes in my Yankees cap and he takes in my not-Walmart overcoat. Clearly his new bride has failed to mention losing the groceries. Maybe she's gone back out to try and find me. He looks at me long, looks at me hard.

He says, "Who the *fuck* are you?"

ABOUT THE SAME TIME—this was when I was still teaching—I had a favorite student, older than the other freshmen by a little less than a decade,

twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. She had lived a complicated and colorful life and had been recently wed to a very sweet guy—a newly minted physician’s assistant, or PA—who believed in her. She’d helped him through years of grad school, and now he was helping her toward a BS and perhaps a nursing degree. Part of how they’d pulled it all off was his joining the Army Reserve. Basic training, then one weekend a month; very athletic guy having a blast; tuition help; insurance; job training. Creamy.

Then came 9/11, at the beginning of her junior year, just as she was starting to find her way as a student. Sometime that next spring, our man was called up, and just as she started her senior year, he deployed. Week three in-country, he was killed. Grieving, our lovely student missed a month or more of school; then, with everyone’s support, she tried to come back, only lasting about two weeks, very faraway look in her eye, no more eager hand in the air. In the new semester she tried again, but the weight was upon her, visibly upon her: sleep, hygiene, posture, all gone. And then she stopped coming to class. No one knew where she’d disappeared to. The story has a very sad ending, I’m afraid.

Collateral damage. The stories you don’t read about. In the newspaper accounts and in a public ceremony with other bereaved military families, this extremely talented young woman had been portrayed as courageous, but she’d be (and she had been, privately) the first to tell you that all of that was a fantasy: she had no courage left, no family support, no religious mythology, no belief in the war before, during, or after, and no interest in our collective fables about heroism and duty. So there was nothing to sustain her.

I HAVE AN ACQUAINTANCE—an angel, really—who has worked with homeless people for twenty-four years. “Here?” I said when he told me. “Rural Maine? Homeless?” “Here,” he said. And he had numbers: close to two hundred in our small town alone, most of whom he knew personally from his work, part of which was locating them. “But where?” I asked. “Everywhere,” he said. “Mostly in denial.” Some of the adventurous ones might be squatting pretty comfortably in a hunting camp, he told me, but most live on an aunt’s couch or sleep in a car or hole up in a barn by the road or, if they are older, stay with their kids or grandkids or with grudging neighbors. A lot of younger ones camp in the woods—great fun until winter comes along. Kids kicked out of their houses, kids with mental health issues, abused kids, runaways. Then

you have your single moms, PTSD guys, oddballs. But functioning folks, too—people in medical bankruptcy, heating-oil bankruptcy; couples who lost both jobs when this or that mill closed or when the schools were defunded; people who got into some small trouble, and then the trouble cascaded.

WE HAD A HUGE weekend-long snowstorm a couple of winters ago. What a lark it was, digging out over three days, the power out for a week, no way to charge phones, cars buried, no plow till Tuesday noon, the road a tunnel after that, snowdrifts over your head, snowshoes to check in on neighbors, everyone coming up with satisfying solutions for all kinds of everyday problems (many involving water), me for my part very cozy with my family and beloved pets and plenty of food, boxes of candles, kerosene lamps, stashed fuel and water, humming woodstove, duct tape for whatever, shop full of hand tools, heavy piles of blankets, a deep sufficiency that had only just started to fray when the lights came back on.

What if the emergency had gone on longer? What if someone had gotten injured or sick? What if we hadn't been so lucky? As a novelist I take to heart such questions as I work, as I imagine my way into a world not quite our own. It's all pretty unconscious, somewhat magical, a kind of recombinant alchemy, stray pieces coming together to form new wholes: an anecdote here, a particular smile there, an image in the paper, a sad situation, a storm, a crush on some unlikely someone, a shoe, a striped rock, a pretty ear, a scar, a tattoo seen in passing, echoes of a scientific report—increasing incidence of record-breaking snowfall, ever larger storms.

And then, one middle-of-the-night, a young lawyer appears at the far edge of my imagination and slowly comes into focus. He's hurt and lonely and flummoxed, seems to be grocery shopping as a terrible blizzard bears down. Let him decide to help the obviously troubled young woman in front of him in line. Call her Danielle. He's got nothing better to do—a messy separation, long story. Call him Eric. Give them histories, give them motivations, give them weaknesses, give them strengths. Soon enough, the two of them come to life in front of me as I work, vivid as a dream, and it's like I'm watching them even as I'm typing. Soon, Eric's in trouble, too. He and Danielle are stuck together in the rustic cabin she's claimed, the storm of the century upon them, and it's no longer clear who's rescuing whom.