

## HENRY HUGHES

### FIXTURES

Kyle and Nina were driving east when it came up again.

"It's not too much to ask? Is it?" Nina said.

Kyle tipped a plastic cup and looked over at her. "No. And it's the way I've been. You know that."

"I know *you*."

"Pour another couple, baby, will you?" Nina looked out the rear window then reached under the seat for the vodka. She poured an inch into each cup and splashed them with fruit punch. "We're outta ice."

"There's a Circle K up here. I gotta get some swivels, anyway. We'll pick up some wine coolers, if you want. Hey, listen, I can't help it if girls want to talk. They come into the store and I help 'em out. There's nothing wrong with that."

"But it's the way you talk to them. I don't know if you're serious."

"I'm not serious with them. I'm serious with *you*."

When they came down the hill toward the Circle K, Kyle said, "Drink up, honey. There's the fort." He felt good, finishing his drink, slowing down as they rolled into the sunny town. There were three video shops, a couple diners, a salon, and a furniture store. They passed a state trooper parked in a blind drive and Kyle bowed, "Afternoon, officer." Nina shook her head and smiled.

In the Circle K, Nina looked at magazines and Kyle picked up a bag of ice and a four-pack of wine coolers. Nina opened the door for him, and when they got to the car he remembered the swivels.

Back inside, he studied the tackle rack. A few feet away, a busty woman came out of the storeroom carrying a box printed with red rabbits. Kyle stared right at her breasts, then quickly refocused on her face and smiled. She was good looking--deep brown hair, amber eyes. She looked at him a little longer than he expected, put the box down and said, "You're Kyle from Stayton Fixtures, aren't you?"

Nina put the heavy cooler in the trunk and wondered what was taking him so long. He gets that way around fishing gear, she thought, finishing her drink and studying the plastic cup for a moment. It was a promotional from the fixture shop where Kyle worked, and it sported a bunch of phrases spoken by light fixtures: "Of Course We Can," beamed a track light; "Not A Problem," assured a ceiling fan; "It's Done," glowed a sconce. That's a bunch of bullshit, she thought

Kyle came out of the store smiling.

"Get your stuff?" she asked.

"Got'em. Hey babe, let's fish right over at Dodge Bend. The kid said they're catching some rainbows there. It's close."

"I thought you wanted to take a nice drive,"

"I do, but if there's fish right here. Let's check it out. If it's not cool, we'll move."

Kyle had never been to Dodge Bend Park but he had a good sense for turnoffs and trails. They drove down Main Street and the wheels were singing a bit.

"You need new brake pads," Nina said.

"You know a lot about cars for a girl," he teased.

They found the park. There were a couple rebel-flagged pickups parked above a gravelly bend in the river where men were fishing. "Rednecks," Nina said. "That sucks."

"Hey, no problem. There's always more water." Kyle drove the circle, stopped to look at the fishermen, then headed toward a faded sign, "No Motorized Vehicles." He drove right on past and Nina laughed, sinking down into her seat. They followed the grassy ruts north under a luxurious canopy of trees for a quarter mile. A small deer ran across the trail and into a meadow stoked with fireweed. The deer stopped, looked at them, then walked off into the green shadows.

"It's beautiful," Nina said.

"Yeah, it is. Let's find a place to pull over. River's got to be right there." The road turned east and a wide opening in the trees unveiled a great blue band of water.

"Would you look at this?"

"Are you sure this isn't private property?" Nina said.

"I don't think so. And I don't care."

Standing in the clearing before the river, they toasted and kissed. Nina tasted wonderfully fruity. He touched her fine blond hair and looked into her eyes. "River eyes," he said. She smiled. They kissed again. When he tried to pull off her shirt she looked wildly at him, but lifted her arms anyway. She had small breasts and he touched them lightly at first, then closed his eyes and kissed her. He squeezed her breasts and ass, then bladed a hand along the flat of her stomach into her shorts. He was with Nina now, but he returned to the other woman from moment to moment.

Kyle walked into the water and howled from the cold.

"Won't you scare the fish away?" Nina asked, lying nude in the sun on the old coat he had thrown down for them.

"Fuck the fish," he said. But she was right. He'd better not make too much commotion. Fish were on his mind again. He soaked his hot body in the cold water, scrubbed his crotch and walked out into the sun.

"You should try it," he said.

"I'm fine."

Kyle put on a pair of thin sweats and his waders. Nina lay in the sun until he was nearly ready, then pulled on her shorts and shirt. She folded his jeans and set them beside her, then plucked one of his sneakers from a bush, neatly placing it next to the other one beside his jeans.

"I'm just gonna work my way up river. You okay here?"

"Yeah, I'm great. You want to carry a couple coolers with you?"

"I better take it easy. I don't know what the river's like up there. But here, give me a sip."

"Be careful."

"I will. You enjoy yourself. Have a party."

"Maybe we can check out that furniture store on the way home. They may have that couch we're looking for."

"Sure."

"Hey," she said. "I love you."

He lifted his pole off a stump, made a few casts from the bank, but gave up quickly, figuring the spot was ruined. He stepped into the water and began casting his spinner upriver and retrieving smoothly in a downward swing. Kyle liked to fish, and he began to concentrate, taking a step or two against the current after each cast. He turned to check on Nina. She picked up a magazine and began to read. Twenty minutes working up the westbank, he looked back again and couldn't see her. He took another step and a small grey rabbit shot from the bushes. He smiled. There was good water ahead. The river bent east and he crossed over to stand on a gravel bar and fish a deep cut on the westside.

Three cranks into his retrieve he felt a solid hit and set the hook into a fish that took off downstream. He worked it back carefully and saw that it was a good trout. "Nice," he said aloud, netting the rainbow--a fine, fourteen-incher. He wished Nina were there to see it. "Ah, what the hell," he said, and let fish slip from his hands into the river. The woman from Circle K returned. What's so wrong with that? he thought. He was putting together an explanation in his head, though he didn't know who he might offer it to.

Last spring a woman had come into the fixture shop. She had silvery hair and some kind of accent. As she and Kyle talked, he learned that she was from Australia, and was now divorced, living alone, trying to fix up her house in Salem. He wasn't sure how old she was. Fifty, maybe. The tan muscles in her neck and shoulders made him think of swimming. She ordered a complicated fixture, Kyle offered to come over and install it. A lot of women had trouble with installations.

"I really want to do it myself," she said. "I'm tired of having men do things for me."

Kyle smiled. "Sure," he said. "I understand." But when her order arrived from the warehouse, Kyle made some adjustments, unscrewing sections for which there were no assembly directions, pulling a wire from its connector. He sealed up the box and called her. "It's a tricky fixture," he said. "You sure you don't want me to install it? Well, if you have any problems--any problems at all--just call. Okay? Ask for me. It's not a big deal. Even electricians call sometimes."

The next day she phoned and he knew exactly what to do. When the light went on she opened a bottle of wine; an hour later they were in bed. She brought Kyle to things he had never done before. Things he had never even asked Nina to try. They got together four or five times before he told her one afternoon, shortly after he arrived in the Stayton Fixture van, that he really couldn't do this anymore, that he was in love with another woman. Nina's name was never mentioned. "I'm sorry," he said.

"It's okay. But you might've told me."

"Sorry," he said again.

Kyle fished upriver for another two hours without a bite. Loops and twists bedeviled his line and he wondered if the swivel he tied on was turning properly. Cheap Circle K junk, he thought. He looked at his watch, considered getting back to Nina--she wanted to check out that furniture store--but decided to press on a little farther, finally coming up on a big hole where the river spilled in from two directions. There was a blue stone shaped liked the head of a fox. This looks good, he thought, tying on a jig. He cast into the heart of the pool, and retrieved slowly, twitching the rod, waiting, hoping. If I get a good one, I'll keep it. We'll cook it tonight. Nina will like that. He made three or four more casts then felt the pickup. Just like that. The fish was taking line, the drag sang. Now this is a fish, he said to himself. And just as suddenly it was gone. He reeled in the limp line, examined the end, and saw the tiny curls of a failed knot. "Fuck. Goddamnit" he said aloud. Slumped in disgust, he let his rod tip fall into the water. "Godamnit," he said again. He tied on another jig and worked the pool for nearly an hour but there was nothing. Long shadows stretched over the river. His head felt dry and achy. It would be an easier walk downstream, he thought, and started back.

Kyle kept looking for the clearing, wondering if this was the right place, or did he have farther to go? He didn't see Nina. He didn't see his car, either. But that was the clearing; he recognized the stump where he leaned his rod. Stepping out of the water, he wondered. She must've gone into town for something to eat. Am I that late? It was August and starting to get dark earlier than he remembered. Where is she? He walked up the bank and stood at the place where they made love. There was a soft depression in the grass, and what he thought might've been a tissue was a piece of stock memo with the name *Jessica* written in flowing script over a

number. "Shit," he said, stuffing it into his vest. The jeans that pocketed the note were gone. His cell phone was gone. Everything was gone. I'll be walking into town, he thought, shaking his head. He had a few dollars and there was a bar up the road where someone would have a phone. Kyle felt surprisingly good, like something exciting was about to happen. That was hours before the police and the tears, before she smashed their car through the window of Stayton Fixtures, pulled a few lights off the shelf, drove home and installed them above their old couch. He didn't think a woman could do that. He didn't think anything he did could make a woman do that.

## GREAT BLUE HERON

Snake-daggered and slate narrow,  
the great blue aims his hungry arrow.  
Stab, flip and tip—a salamander slides to the gullet.  
When startled, the heron *gawks*, wings yarded, feet dangling,  
and he's up over the trees—pterodactylic—cloaked face coiled  
comfortably on his past.  
Forty miles for food is no problem. Marsh or dry field. Fish, frog,  
grasshopper and snake. The armored crayfish rattles down his tilted lance.  
He sees nothing in autumn's blaze or his smoky reflection.  
He steps past the surface,  
looks, stabs, eats.

## RING-NECKED PHEASANT

Celestial gaud of China, they astound  
our fields with flash-cackle color. Exploding  
from high grass, wild-winged and long tailed—dogs bristle,  
men swing to fire—splash-tumbling October brandy,  
simmering breasts, and salmon hackle. But here, for a moment,  
on a June green  
with the coyote asleep and the hawk stuffed,  
the pheasants open themselves to the sun,  
preen their mottles, scratch and peck across the seedy hill.  
Tan-cheeked hens and scarlet-wattled cock.  
His raiment shimmers copper and gold,  
his white ring *rings*  
like the orbiting grasp of beauty and death.

## TOUCHSTONE

The only voice is Indiana highway  
and a stone you might have touched  
last time we met—I-65, Thanksgiving Break.  
I gave you truck stop earrings,  
and you tucked one under a rock—to *hold on to*, you said—  
lovemaking in the weigh station woods  
as Macks rumbled deer bones  
back to dust.

Grad school was reading, writing and the bars—  
three a.m. and where else to go  
but windowless Heavilon Hall. Our cracked  
wooden desks heaped with ungraded compositions,  
that old green chair smelling of pizza.  
*Piercing?* you asked, holding a stapler to my ear. What I heard  
might've been security  
or the heat. Laughing back into our clothes,  
I pulled stories from your paperweight.  
Page after page you let me in,  
but never your family or hometown Detroit  
where your new husband's fighter returns to base,  
a swallow full of moths.

Letting one stone fall to pick another, there is—*nothing*—  
I think, across our lost bed. Deer tracks, leaves, litter,  
the slick of spiraled snails  
over that somewhere *stone*,  
that listens and holds  
because it doesn't know.

PRINTED IN SPAIN

Bangwalk the sky, baby,  
play blue fountains four nights straight  
and you'll understand what González said:  
*México es una juerga grande*. Hungover Mondays?—  
call coffee, fire some staff, a little coke will lift your ass.  
Take the day, but don't stay home.  
Playroom skills are fine  
for fathers, but you're a smooth suit,  
a diplomat, lover of cigars and cousins cute.  
What happens in that cush cabaña, amigo?  
Who do we call  
when another drowns below  
your salty silks? We missed you again, señor G.,  
walking sidewise toward the sea,  
holding off gulls  
with a claw-bound passport  
printed in Spain.

## VICKI'S GRANDFATHER

The Sonderkommandos  
gulped and guzzled their hearts,  
leading prisoners off the trains  
and into the showers, saying everything's okay.  
Wheelbarrows, smoke. It was do this or die  
sooner.

On Friday afternoon I ride the C train  
to Brooklyn, enjoying the steel sway, the pneumatic doors  
opening at every stop, until I get off and walk  
the leafy streets  
up to Vicki's brownstone.

Sitting around, reading the papers,  
I just ask, *Vickie, does it bother you that I'm not Jewish?*  
*Not anymore, she says. Let's eat.*

Into the flames  
her grandfather slid all his daughters, save one  
who walked on ashes back to Long Island,  
holy sand spit of peaches and roast duck. *It's my mother, she says.*  
*It's hard for her. But she likes you.*

We eat clams  
at a bar between Oceanbeach and Rockaway,  
watching old, graffitied subway cars barged  
and dumped for a reef. Startled fish circle their new barracks.

Vicki's grandfather is buried in Poland.  
No one visits his grave.

IN A RABBIT WAY

Before driving to work,  
Chloë lifts her silver-grey rabbit from his hutch, his little heart  
fast in her arms, his ears perked to every garden rustle,

wide-eyed to wing-shadow and shrub, sniff-twitching  
breeze, breath, bloom and blouse, the long furry feet

itching for purchase and push. But Chloë cradles  
him to his back, the warm cosset of her plush chest,

ears stroked into smooth canoes turned over in the sand  
after a river of listening: car doors, barking, a raccoon

or the neighbor's tom drawn to your tender hops?  
*Oh, sweet bunny*, she says softly, easing his pulse,

feet trackless in air, his eyes slowly, slowly closing  
until there's not a sound, scent, or shape

of what we call fear, as she saves him day after day  
in her own way, in a rabbit way, hugged close in the warm  
burrow of a moment.

