

## Ramon in Winter

Ramon talks to inanimate objects. Not a lot, just sometimes, when things happen. When he backed his pickup into the stove, he got out and squeezed between the kitchen table and the truck to look at the stove. Not too bad. A shallow dent. Or a deep scratch, depending on how he thought about it. He said, "Excuse me, stove, an accident. No offense intended. Don't tell the landlord, okay?"

If he thought about it, he thought it beat talking to himself. He avoided talking to himself, because maybe people who talk to themselves are losing it, a little nuts, maybe. Or, he didn't really know about people, but maybe if he started talking to himself, he would be a little nuts. The squeeze between the truck and the table was too tight, so going back away from the stove, he climbed onto and over the table.

Probably he shouldn't have moved the truck. He had avoided the temptation for three months. Ever since he put the wall back on the front of the house after he moved the pickup inside, he hadn't moved it forward or backward. Sometimes he got in, sat behind the wheel, and started the engine, sat there with it running for a while.

He hooked a hose to the exhaust pipe and put the hose out the window so he wouldn't fume up the house, and always he avoided the temptation to move the pickup. There wasn't much room. Sometimes he put it in gear, but he always held the clutch in, until this time, and now look, a damaged stove. Not too bad though. Maybe he could fix it.

The trouble is, you could go crazy from boredom. It would be crazy, to live through war, to see such a crazy, malevolent world, to try to kill people you didn't want to kill before they killed you or your buddies, many of whom were killed anyway, and to come out of it sane, and to try so hard to build a home and a future that seemed sane, until the day Mary took the children and left, with her brothers there because she thought Ramon might kill her when she told him, and he wouldn't have,

never would, would have forgiven her anything she had done or could imagine doing, would have changed any way she asked if she had just stayed.

He had been crazy for a while then, until he dried out of anger and hate and tears, came alive, and started moving again, looked to see if anything around him made sense.

Where he had lived was grey and alien. The people he and Mary had known together seemed like strangers to Ramon. They didn't want to see him. They acted like they were embarrassed, and they didn't know anything they could say to him. If he talked to them about his life, the way it was now, they acted like they didn't know him.

His brother said, come up here if you want to. I know where you can get a job, so Ramon moved north. He ran a chain saw and bumped knots from logs on the landing in a logging operation until snow shut it down for the winter.

He walked outside into the quiet, cold night. He climbed over the built-up snow that had slipped from the porch roof through half a dozen storms. He walked through snow three feet deep along the driveway. He stood silent in the night.

Thirty degrees below zero. The aurora borealis glowed in the northern sky. Twice before, he had seen the northern lights, but always very dim, this far south. Tonight, they shone brighter, clear in the clear sky. Pale colors shifted across the sky; pastel, curved sheets of green and blue light shone from infinity down to the mountains north of him and filled the sky.

Nobody believed him when he said he saw the aurora borealis.

"You don't see it this far south," they said.

He always thought, "You mean YOU don't see it, because you're asleep in your bed with your electric blanket turned up high," but he never said it.

He'd read they had more colors farther north, violets and reds, and they made sounds. Someday he'd travel north and find out. Here, they glowed pale in the dark sky, shades of blue and green, silent as the sky above him.

Pale, ghostly light filled the sky and emptied him, first of emotion, and then of thought.

Over in the timber, across the meadow from him, a coyote yapped. Then another. Then they howled. They sang, three or

four of them together, hard to tell how many. How did they get through nights like this, thirty below, or the night when all the liquid in his thermometer huddled down in the bulb at the bottom, fifty below or colder?

He felt very cold, dressed for indoors near the stove, but he'd been outdoors, who knows how long, probably more than an hour, and the cold penetrated clear to his bones. He thought, he could stay out, make no effort to go back into the house. He'd heard freezing to death was a peaceful, gentle way to die. You go peacefully to sleep and never wake up.

The lights faded from the northern sky. Ramon, he thought, maybe the craziest of all is to keep surviving. Maybe that's really nuts. But he lifted his foot that he couldn't feel and turned and walked, stiff with cold, back into the house.

The sun rose into the pale winter sky. Ramon dressed for the cold and started for town. Twenty below zero when he left the house. He walked almost halfway to town. Not much traffic. Winter, and the way the economy is. He didn't really care. It felt good to be outdoors, to walk.

Everywhere around him, clean, white snow on the meadows, quiet, clean snow on all the mountains, no habitation within miles, just the wild mountain with forests and meadows and the highway lying intrusively across the mountain. He walked on the cleared pavement, across the flat valley and up the mountain. For a while, he wondered if he had dressed warmly enough, but he walked hard until the sun started warming the day, and then he slowed down and looked at winter around him.

He watched three ravens eating something out on the snow, out on the meadow. He ate his lunch sitting on the berm of snow thrown up by the plow and walked again, clear to the summit, 5,856 feet high.

In the early afternoon, he got a ride, and the rest of the road into town seemed short. The man who gave him a ride said he was going straight through town, so Ramon got out of the pickup downtown and hiked up the hill to his brother's place. He knocked on the door, and when his brother opened the door, Ramon said, "Come out and paint me a picture."

"I don't paint pictures on order. I just paint what I want to paint."

"Then want to paint a picture for me. I really need it. It's

something I'd do myself, but I never learned. I can't draw a good circle even. How long since I've asked you for a favor? Hard times, we have to help each other out."

So his brother packed his brushes and paints, and the next morning, they drove out to Ramon's house. His brother said, "What season?"

"Spring. Spring's good to think about in a long winter. Springtime's a good time to take a drive. A highway there in the middle, up the door and going on above it, could you? I know you got to paint what you feel, but could you feel a highway about here in the middle? I'd do it myself if I could. Maybe I could take lessons sometime. It's never too late for anything, is it?"

So his brother painted a scene on the inside of the house, right in front of the pickup. A highway, just leaving the edge of the Oregon desert, climbing up into timber. Juniper trees at the edge of the sage brush. Then pine trees and western larch, red fir. Big trees, the way it used to be, before they logged everything. Birds.

Ramon wanted to ask for a deer, back in the timber, but he thought maybe he'd asked enough already, so he kept quiet and boiled water for tea. He put a piece of galvanized roofing metal between the wood-fired kitchen stove and his pickup, so the paint on the pickup wouldn't scorch.

His brother painted three deer. A doe and a fawn, and then, way back in the timber, where you almost couldn't see him, a big buck, five points on a side. His brother said, "Bucks don't have antlers in the spring. Don't tell me; I already know. Sometimes an artist changes reality. Otherwise, you got photographs. Otherwise, a camera could do the job just as well. Even better."

"Sure. I know. I like it just fine. I sure do like the deer. I wanted to ask for a deer; now there's three. I'll drive slow through here, just take my time and see the country. I've seen pickups that hit a deer at sixty miles an hour. Just totally totals the pickup."

"Not to mention the deer."

"Yeah. Not to mention the deer. It ruins the meat. If you wanted to eat the meat, you couldn't do it. It's all so bloodshot, it isn't salvageable."

Patches of snow still, back in the timber, in shaded areas.  
Flowers.

“Are those real flowers?”

“No. I just now made them up. I think I was influenced by orchids, but they’re not orchids when you look at them. I’m going to put some blackberries right at the edge here, right by the window here. There aren’t any blackberries in this part of Oregon, and they wouldn’t be ripe if there were, but I remember lots of blackberry patches when we were kids, so I’m going to paint some in, okay?”

“Okay. Sure, you bet. I love blackberries. To look at, to eat. This is great. This is really great. This is terrific. Here. I made some tea. Take a break. Let’s just sit here and drink this tea and look at it. We can sit on the hood here. Better yet, let’s get in. I just washed the windshield this morning, inside and out.”

They got in and sat there and drank tea. Ramon said, “It’s spring, and we’re headed up the highway. Gas tank’s full. No place we have to be real soon.”

“Better drive slow. Lots of deer around here.”

“You bet. Slow and easy. No hurry.”

Ramon’s brother painted until dusk. Then he said, “Well, that’s it. That’s the big picture.” He signed it over by the window, in the blackberry patch. A leaf hung down, almost obscuring his signature. Five large, ripe blackberries hung right over his last name, ready to be picked and eaten. He cleaned his brushes and packed everything and drove away just after dark, his headlights shining up the mountain and then absorbed by the forest and the darkness of the night.

Ramon sat in the dark kitchen, quiet as thought. After about an hour, he got up, opened the pickup door, and got behind the wheel. He started the motor and turned the lights on. That didn’t work. The headlights shone too brightly and the picture washed away in bright reflection. He shut off the lights and the motor.

After a while, he stepped down out of the pickup and put on his coat and gloves and scarf. He blew out all the lanterns and walked out onto the front porch. He lit a match and read the thermometer. 22 below zero. He dropped the match into the snow, and the flame tried to live in the cold and then died.

The northern sky glowed, like the northern lights had been there and were fading, or like they were just coming up. He

thought he'd read one time they could be predicted; there was some way to tell when they'd show up. He couldn't remember. He could look it up and see, but he knew he wouldn't get to it, because, if they were predictable, he didn't want to know about it.

The sky didn't change all the time he was out, stars shining through the faint blue glow, like a reminder, or a suggestion, until he was too cold. Then he went back in, but he didn't light any lamps. He felt his way around. Then he opened the pickup door, and the interior light gave him enough light to get ready for bed.

He shut the pickup door and got into bed. He watched the stars bright in the sky through the big, south-facing window in the bedroom, like he did every clear night for a while before he went to sleep.

Tears ran down over his temples onto his pillow. He couldn't stop them. He said, "What is this? I'm pretty much happy and at peace, and tears, and I don't even understand where they're coming from."

Then he realized he was talking out loud to himself. He said, "So what? So what if I'm a little crazy? or completely crazy, even? It's a long winter, and no work until the snow melts, and in the morning, when the sun starts shining through that kitchen window, I'm going to take a long, slow cruise."