

FAMOUS BATTLES

Matthew Harrison

No use fibbing about the weather. The cold air hurt my brain. People claim the blizzard of '93 caused the worst winter down South, but once that record snowfall was covering the streets, a gentle warmth crept forward like the breath of some lost animal. My cold was different. Ten years had passed since the blizzard, and it was colder in Georgia than I remembered it ever being. A real mean freeze. My ears and throat burned. The mucous in my nose turned into a bitter crust. It's not that I can't deal. I've peeled away black toenails. My skin has cracked and bled. But the cold I'm talking about had purpose: it slid between my ribs, into my lungs and heart. This cold frostbit my insides.

It was December, and I was taking trails up Bull Mountain near the town of Dahlonega. I was on my way to the Paul Bunyan Club, axe slung over my shoulder. The wind stung something fierce, but the old pines had a chilled-gin scent that relaxed me. I was thinking of the bottle of Bombay waiting back at the cabin once I'd finished the male-bonding business—a few tumblers by the fire, Willie on the tape deck singing “No Great Pretender” and “Whiskey River.”

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People won't let bygones be bygones any longer. See, the day before, my wife's ex, Kurt, he showed up in town to give a lecture at the college. Beth knew he was coming. He'd called her with his plans and she'd asked him to stay at our place, on the futon in the living room. It'd been her idea to buy the futon, a pad five or six sleeping bags thick with a Japanese name that sounded like a snack food. Beth said if we got it, we could have visitors. Sure enough, Kurt was our first. She waited till he was in town to tell me.

“It's his birthday this week,” she said. “I thought I'd make a gesture.”

We were in the kitchen. I stood shirtless with the refrigerator door open, peering at the egg carton.

“Okay,” I said.

Her fingers hooked under the waistband of my pajama pants, cool against my skin. “It bothers you,” she said.

I said I guessed not.

“I could always call, say something came up.”

I twisted the lid off an expired milk jug and sniffed. Still good enough.

“Lee.” She pressed into my back. “Don't be internal.”

I shut the fridge and opened a cabinet and grabbed a bowl. I took the Cheerios from the countertop and sat down at the table near the window, away from Beth, and ate. If I said no, I didn't want Kurt over, he'd have been the better man. Suspicious hick of a husband? No big. Get a room at the Red Roof Inn downtown, meet the hick's wife for breakfast at the Cracker Barrel, meet her for beers at the Dead Rooster Pub and leave Dahlonega cocksure, the levelheaded grown-up. Guess I didn't much care for Kurt. I'd never met him, but he was always calling Beth. Plus he kept sending her these books of poems to read. They'd dated six years before she holed up with me. Now Kurt was so relaxed about us being married, he felt he might as well come stay. We'd make some kind of family. Beth had pretended to give me the decision, and maybe that was best, all told. Maybe I thought the best way to kill Kurt's spell was to invite him inside.

Beth exhaled like an actress. “The past doesn’t just vanish, you know?” She stared at the pine tree outside the kitchen window, as if the past perched there, watching us. “You can’t just let go.”

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Kurt came over the Friday night after his lecture. He brought two pints of Jim Beam and a deck of cards. A guy named Jay Tanner came with him.

Beth’s laughter woke me from a nap in the bedroom at the back of the cabin. “Here’s the old bear,” she said when I walked into the kitchen. She tugged at my unbuttoned shirt and used her palm to flatten my cowlick. I buttoned up, nodding at a big man in a pea coat and his sidekick, a midget by comparison but buff, his neck a brown stump. We all shook hands when Beth introduced us.

“How about some cards,” said the big man, Kurt. He draped his coat over a chair.

We sat down to play rummy, and after a few shots of bourbon this Jay character said, “A porcupine in heat will mate with a pinecone.” He’d been quiet up to then.

Kurt slapped the kitchen table. “That’s it. Like prefers like.”

Jay scratched his nose. His face was rough, like he’d fallen asleep on hot gravel. His chest barely reached the tabletop, but his biceps damn near tore his white turtleneck sweater. I caught whiffs of his cologne, a sort of smoky vanilla. Real clean cut. Kept his black hair combed slick as a paintbrush stroke. His chin-curtain beard made him favor Abe Lincoln, and his dark eyes were like knots in wood.

“A fact,” he said. “My daddy saw it happen by Shoal Creek. Said the porcupine made a grinding noise, like a car’s blown starter.”

“I’ve heard that sound,” Beth said. We had one car between us, a brown Ford Maverick I paid five hundred bucks for, and it was fine. Got us from A to B and back again. The vinyl seats had a lasso stitch in them and made Beth laugh when we bounced over the back roads.

She sat on a high stool at the table. Her red halter top hung a little loose for my liking, showing too much skin, but there she was, gray bags beneath blue eyes, hair a mess, gorgeous. Under the antler chandelier, the fuzz on her shoulders glowed. You could say her skin was incandescent, like the atmosphere before lightning storms—white heat. Your blood warms up, your hair buzzes. It’s a strange thing, hair. Beth’s blonde spots conducted electricity. All but flickered. In our good sex days, I’d wiggle my nose over her stomach, go bump in her belly-button, then slide on down to the pelvis area where—zap—her pubes would shock me with static. Whenever I did cunnilingus, I swear the spark sometimes left my nose tip tingling.

“Well,” Kurt said. His chest rolled forward when he stretched his arms. The tiny swordfish on his polo shirt seemed to leap a moment. “I’ve always said ideas begin in the body.”

Kurt was assistant professor of something about rituals and symbols. His deal was primitive man. He couldn’t get enough of what he called our next of kin, these people who lived near volcanoes and on top of desert mesas. He’d written books.

“For instance, in the moonlight, Jay resembles a coyote,” he said.

Jay wrinkled his nose and panted.

Beth laughed. "I think he looks French."

Kurt made a big display of inspecting me. He cupped his hands and held them up to his eyes like binoculars. He whistled. "I'll have to observe you, Lee. See what animal emanates from you."

"Lee's a squirrel," Beth said, giggling. "Or no, a possum." Jay huffed along with her.

"Wait and see," Kurt said. He waved his hand in front of my face as if wiping a windshield clean. "Tell you what. Jay here is founder of a club. A group of local boys get together and drink and hack wood for a fire pit cookout in the evening once a month. Jay's been swell enough to invite me along and—well it's your call, coyote." He drank his drink.

Jay fanned his cards across the table and swept them back up. He considered me and fanned out his cards again. He clucked his tongue. "All right. He can come."

Beth filled Kurt's tumbler with more JB. I'd been watching her. She kept reaching beneath her halter top and rubbing her stomach. All month before Kurt came, she did sit-ups and leg lifts before her shift at the Visitors' Center. One time I woke up and there she was on the floor with her back bowed and one leg kicking in the air like a crab half stuck in sand. The stiff beige shirt and green skirt of her uniform sat upright in the armchair nearby, as if coaching her exercise. I asked her what it was all about. "I'm keeping firm," she answered. "For us."

When it wasn't his turn at cards, Kurt left the kitchen to poke around. In the living room he rubbed his chin at the purple futon and turquoise Navajo throw rug. From the fireplace mantle, he picked up the picture of Beth and me in front of Space Mountain at Disney World. Once he opened the fridge and stuck his head inside and said "Huh," like that.

With some liquor in me, I made no secret of scrutinizing him. I knew Kurt had grown up in Dahlonga before he moved North to be a yuppie. He had that fake tan you see on guys who drive fancy cars, but I caught glimpses of what Beth must have liked. His face was smooth as a full balloon and his cheekbones cut shadows when his head turned. His feathered brown hair stayed in place. The specks of white across his nose looked boyish, like they came from sunbathing with sand on his face. And he had these bright green eyes. I grant that's something. Green eyes do magic in certain lights.

I admit, from the neck up Kurt had an image. The rest of him wasn't much to speak of. He wore rings on most of his fingers, but he'd never married. His junk did bulge in his khaki slacks, but the whole package was tucked under an udder of a stomach that must have swung to and fro when he climbed over a woman.

He pulled his chair up close to the table. "It's a splendid idea for a club," he said. "Paul Bunyan expresses the values of mountain people. He's about raw labor, chopping, building with your own hands."

I heard a metal scraping sound outside, followed by a clash. That stray cat was getting into the trash again. I went into the living room, where I unlatched the antique pirate chest I'd bought at the Salvation Army. The copper Jolly Roger skull on the lid grinned at me. My handgun was inside, nestled between the red plastic tackle box and the wedding album.

"Lee," Beth said.

I walked past the table and out onto the porch, letting the screen door clang behind me.

The cold slapped my face, but I kept still. I listened. The sun had sunk behind a mountain and the trees around my front yard seemed to flicker in slow motion before fading into the dark-blue dusk. The breeze carried rich scents of dung and wood spice and the sweet rot of fruit. "John Pope," I said. That's what I called the cat. "Hey, John Pope."

I stepped down to the yard. Behind me, Beth and Kurt stood in the kitchen window, lit with firelight. Their eyes and mouths were dark holes.

The cabin light glanced off the aluminum trashcan at the side of my yard. I raised my gun and shot at nothing. The night echoed *crack, crack*, lower and lower.

John Pope leapt onto the trashcan, his yellow eyes doing a firefly dance. I pulled the trigger. The side of the can crumpled into the shape of a laughing mouth.

The cat skittered into the blue light of the yard lamp. I fired into the sky. It was mostly for show. In the end I'd let John Pope have his apple cores and Cheetos and what have you.

"We got ourselves an audience," I told him.

He whipped around and sprayed my property. His tail got all prickly and shook, and he mewed like my clock radio with dying batteries. I took aim at his asshole. Then I tucked away the gun. It's low to shoot a homeless animal.

"Did you plug the trespasser?" Kurt asked back inside the cabin.

I returned the gun to the pirate chest and went to the table.

"You didn't," Beth said to me hopefully.

I shrugged.

"He couldn't," Jay said, combing his beard with his fingers. He shook his head.

Kurt nudged me. "Say, Lee, you could settle something. You take an axe and swing it, and that sensation taps something elemental. Right? It's intimate, transformative. Very different from that gun of yours."

I turned to Beth for hints of a shared joke. "It's what you do to build a fire," I said.

Kurt beamed. "That's it. That's just what I'm getting at. Your own fire. You discover this instinctive know-how. No time to think. It's a warm rush of sudden clarity."

Point a gun at him and he'd see clear enough, I thought. I'd been in Kuwait. Back then my commander made captives pray to the Michelin Man, Papa Smurf, Donald Trump, and Lee Iacocca with his pistol. Three years later, the same commander blew himself to bits with a homemade bomb in the Georgia Aquarium. He flooded twenty-two Americans and killed a baby beluga whale in the mix. Guy's name was Dan Jacobs, and he had a wife in Memphis. Another time, an army bud of mine from Idaho got shot in a skirmish. He was comatose for two months. When he came to, he had a brand new passion for South American dance beats and what he called the Latin cause. He adopted a little Peruvian girl and named her Chiara, and he learned to play this rare accordion known in Uruguay as the *bandoneón*. You see? You never can tell. It reminds me, some old men in Dahlonega say you don't hunt for deer, deer come to guns. A deer stands still in your sights because it knows its place in the scheme of things. It gives you one shot to make good on the gift of its body. Keep shooting and you ruin the gift: then it's just any old meat. Leaves a bad taste.

Jay said, "You swing that axe, and it's a real high coming on." His head bobbed like an excited gamecock. "Your eyes focus. The tiniest movements—chiggers, eyebrow mites—you see them, and they're yours for the taking. But it's the red meat you crave."

“What do you say?” Kurt blurted. “Some drinks, fresh wood, a good sweat!” He karate chopped the table.

I steadied my drink.

Kurt leveled his gaze at me, half serious, half winking above his tight smile. He reminded me of those hosts on TV shows about big battles.

“You’re like on the History Channel,” I said.

Beth lifted her chin like she smelled something burning.

“You could introduce old famous battles.”

Kurt swirled his drink. “That’s it,” he said. “That’s grand.”

My wife gave me the eye. That morning in the kitchen when she’d said Kurt would stay with us, I just stood there and took it. I spooned my bowl of cereal and finished my two cups of coffee, black, like always.

“I can chop wood,” I said.

“Good man,” Kurt said. He slapped my back like an old pal.

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So there I was, late afternoon the next day, trudging through pine needles and half-frozen leaves to Jay’s club. These Bunyan guys gathered on a plot of land Jay owned near the upper Toccoa River. He had an old crib barn on the property, where club members drank homemade beer and roasted venison over the wood they chopped in the afternoons. I knew the river. I’d spent my share of summer mornings wading for trout everywhere from Deep Hole down to Sandy Bottom and the Noontootla Boil rapid that paralleled the Aska Road, which I was climbing to join the Bunyans upstream. Come to think of it, I’d seen men going in and out of Jay’s barn on days I fished pools for rainbows thereabouts, just above Blue Ridge Lake.

I let my legs direct me. Crackling noises came from all sides, as if hidden campfires were melting the ice in the trees. Pins of wind did voodoo on me. I pulled my knit cap lower and tightened the red and white striped scarf I wore because it was a present from Beth, even though it looked like raw bacon to me.

I had my blue jeans tucked into waterproof hip boots in case we waded some. I waded most weekends. It took my mind off the complications of living with a woman whose body stunned me, and whose beauty made me nervous. Beth had eyes so blue they reminded me of ice in a blue ice tray. Her porcelain face invited lips to polish it. She was about my height, with fine wide hips that made me restless. Good solid apples, round September apples in your hands. Call me sentimental, but I’d wanted Beth to lick wedding cake from my fingers and kiss my face goodbye when I was in a coffin.

Thing is, her and Kurt went way back, to when he moved from New Jersey because his dad landed a job with Coke in Atlanta. She was in third grade and he was in fifth. So before they ever slept together in college, they’d shared chickenpox and plenty of skinned knees. They’d had stay-the-nights where they snuck whiskey from their parents’ liquor cabinets. For the Dahlonega Wildflower Festival each May, they painted black-eyed Susans and forget-me-nots on smooth rocks they sold for five dollars a pop. They used the money to buy things like roller skates and Madonna records, pogo sticks and a fishbowl with red and white betas that killed each other.

It was Kurt who first inspired Beth to write. She had these poems about their past. She called them *homages*. You didn't know it was Kurt in the poems. You just knew that *he* meant *him*. In one, they went camping. He waded into a river and snuck up on a fish and touched its sides with fingers gentle as the river's current. Her words. When the fish grew accustomed to his hands, he snatched it. That was that. She never mentioned skinning the fish or stripping its bones away or eating it with wine and pasta. It was just that touching moment before the catch. It bothered me. In bed, I'd stroke her stomach and think of the fish, and I wondered if she felt caught or calmed. In the poem, it seemed like being tricked kind of turned her on.

One night, Beth rolled over on her pillow and told me about the time she and Kurt swam naked in his mom's pool. When supper was ready, his mom hollered from the veranda. Kurt leapt out of the water and sauntered right into the house in the buff. His mom thought nothing of it, just gave him a plate of spaghetti. Beth loved this. She called it his salt.

After she told me that, we fooled around some, and when Beth fell asleep I went to the window and pressed my cock to the cold glass as I drank a can of Tecate. I looked at Beth and thought about our bed talks, how we listened to each other and didn't judge. I couldn't get tired, so I roamed around the house touching things—the kitchen faucet, the doorknobs, the porcelain figurines of puppies and turtles that Beth collected. I wondered how much you have with a woman is just a garage sale waiting to happen, or something that only happens before you fill your space up with things. I still don't know. I always tried hard not to jinx our relationship with doubts.

But later that night, when Beth kicked the sheet away and exposed her magic ass, I got worried. I petted the footboard. I fingered the brown glass ashtray with bubbles frozen in it like some sculpture of smoker's lung. I laid my palm in the curve of Beth's waist. At that moment, I hoped to hell I'd never be just words to her, nothing but nameless hands and wet skin in some poem.

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I followed a path of pressed weeds through the woods, heading uphill until the trees gave way to a narrow dirt road overlooking the town. From that height, Dahlonega looked like a model village, with cotton snow on the rooftops, plastic pickups on an electric track, a bank that doubled as a cookie jar, and street lamps the size of toothbrushes. I stopped to take it all in. My backpack and suspenders felt weird, like I was hovering in a parachute above the buildings. I could just make out the huge green dragonfly painted on the side of my old high school. The Lumpkin County Dragonflies. Those were the days, back when bra straps and cheap beer kept us buzzing.

I walked around a bend and found the old observatory. It was a rain-stained igloo made of concrete and covered with bright graffiti. On its side, some prankster had spray painted a neon pink spaceship with a Confederate flag on top and a green alien with eye stalks in the cockpit. The building split the main road. I took the left fork back toward the woods and came across a white pickup. Kurt and Jay stood by the truck and smoked.

"Here's the man," Kurt said. He wore a brown and yellow plaid shirt tucked into Levis hitched high on his waist by a pair of wide suspenders. On his head was a knit beanie, bright red with the Bulldog logo.

In the cargo bed of the pickup stood a huge piñata, bright blue and stiff legged and plump, secured with bungee cables. Its chin touched the roof of the cab. The thing seemed to me part horse, part cow. Two tinfoil horns were glued to its head. Its round plastic eyes looked startled.

Jay climbed into the truck's bed and patted the piñata's rump. "Lee, meet Babe, tonight's sacrifice."

"The Blue Ox," Kurt explained, propped against the tailgate. "Paul Bunyan's loyal companion." He said loyal like the word was used up.

I remembered the stories from when I was a kid. Babe's tail plowing a gigantic gorge into the earth, creating the Grand Canyon behind her. The tired lumberjack laying his head on Babe's stomach and searching the night sky for the constellation of Taurus and Orion. "Looks good," I said.

"Well, she'll soon be crammed full of goodies," Jay said. "Your typical M&Ms and Tootsie Rolls, sure, but also a year's worth of poker winnings, from pennies to the big bills. Probably a solid thousand bucks in Babe's belly. Everyone's pitched in. I'll stuff her with other prizes, too: packs of cigarettes and a few nice Zippos, beef jerky, some lottery scratch cards. Mardi Gras beads for entrails." He ran his fingers through the tufts of blue paper on the piñata's back. "Let me tell you. When we crack her open, it'll be quite a spill."

Kurt motioned for my axe. "See you brought your own rig. Do you mind?"

I gave it to him.

"Solid make," he said, doing some practice swings. "A smooth grip, too." He handed it back.

Jay sat in the cab. He cranked the ignition and the truck shuddered. "I'm back to the barn," he shouted over the engine. "Got to prepare the main course."

"Right," said Kurt. "We'll get some wood ready."

We crunched through the underbrush and entered a clearing where fifteen, maybe twenty guys lounged around several tree stumps. Everyone wore plaid flannel shirts and suspenders and caps in combinations of red and blue and yellow.

The cold wind died away in this open space. An axe stuck up from a stump here and there, its polished wood handle like the lever of some primitive trapdoor. I imagined one of the Bunyanites pulling one of these axe handles and the ground snapping away and me falling onto sharp antlers and ox horns, gorged to death.

"They found some Civil War skeletons out here," I said for no real reason. It was a fact. Two soldiers were discovered in 1989. One had a canteen fused to his pelvic bone. The other gripped brass binoculars. Scientists decided they were between seventeen and twenty years old.

"Is that right," Kurt said.

I leaned on my axe. "It was two boys, one with a rotted blue uniform and one with a gray one. They were perched up in the trees. Neither had evidence of a fatal wound. What do you make of that? Likely they were hiding, or could be they deserted. My guess is death by starvation."

"Interesting." He contemplated the trees.

"The History Channel wouldn't cover it."

"Come again?"

"Seems a couple of young dead skeletons down South isn't much special."

"You never know," Kurt said. "Those programs always need new material."

We looked at each other. He fidgeted with his suspenders. A plane rumbled overhead.

Kurt pointed to somewhere beyond the trees. "Beth's in the barn. It breaks the rules to bring her, but I thought my visit called for an exception." He rubbed his clean-shaven face. "It's been years. Besides, her barbecue sauce smells mouthwatering. You've tried it?"

"So this is what you do," I said. My blood was fire.

His green eyes narrowed. "What's that?"

"You go places," I said, staring at his pinched lips. "You go into towns. Fix the rules to suit yourself."

"Now hold on," he said.

"It's my wife."

"Sure." He reached for my shoulder, but I flinched away. "Look," he said. "She wanted to come. And Jay didn't mind. He's an old friend of mine. We met here, before I left." He scanned the woods around us. "We're all friends here."

"Sure," I said, inhaling.

A sharp crack came from behind me. I turned and saw a plaid-shirted man pumping the handle of an axe that was wedged in a log half split on a stump. He braced his foot on the stump's edge for leverage, grunting. "All right now," he said. "Come on." Finally he jerked the axe out and heaved again, splitting the log in two. "We'll need more of these for the fire," he said to us, wiping his forehead on his sleeve.

"Not a problem," Kurt said. He motioned me over to a different stump.

More guys came into the clearing carrying wood. They dropped it onto the ground. I raised my axe like an executioner. Kurt laid a log on the stump and I chopped, breaking pieces in two, blinded by images of him splitting Beth's legs and wedging into her. I couldn't help it. Each blow of the axe and her skin unfolded pink with Kurt before me, and I cursed him, less for his past pleasure with my wife than for what he left inside her. His big name maybe now burned proud somewhere deep in Beth, in a place I'd never reach.

The corners of my eyes stung. My elbows throbbed from the force of my axe pounding wood.

"Good!" Kurt shouted. He put his hand up to get me to stop. His face was flushed with satisfaction.

"We're stacked full," he said, brushing dirt from his hands. His breath filled the space between us. "This ought to keep us well fed and warm."

We piled the timber into a wheelbarrow that Kurt pushed ahead of me. Soon the Toccoa River shimmered at the far end of a field, like a strip of corrugated tin with stars dashed across it. Jay's barn stood in the left corner of the field. There was a light in the large doorway, and I could hear men murmuring. As we got closer, the air thickened with a sweet honey smoke. I smelled barbecue on the wind.

Kurt went into the barn first. "Party's starting," he said.

Inside, lanterns hung from ropes lashed to rafters, and sawdust covered the open floor. Horse musk pervaded the place, though all the stalls had been removed. The plank walls had gaps. In the middle of the roof, there was a hole so big you'd think a meteor had hit the barn. The fire pit in the center of the floor coughed orange embers that spun up through the hole. On a spit above the fire, a skinned doe turned, its muscles blistering brown. I approached the animal. It still had eyes. They looked at me, glazed over with patience. I watched the

face revolve, the eyes reappearing, unblinking, and all of a sudden I felt used up, abandoned. I had myself a wife, but I sensed I'd finish this life alone.

The barn got hot and the men rolled up their flannel shirtsleeves and pocketed their knit caps. Everyone drank mugs of beer and told stories about drinking beer.

Jay came over to the pit beside me. He pointed at Beth, who sat with Kurt near the keg.

"A real catch," he said and handed me a drink. I finished it in three gulps. Jay walked away and pulled a tin milk pail from the shadows of the barn and carried the pail to the keg. He laughed with Kurt and Beth while pumping the keg and filling the pail with beer. Beth sat Indian style and dipped a spoon into a bowl in her lap. She brought the spoon up covered with brown sauce then licked it off.

Jay dragged the pail over to me. He plunged my empty mug into the beer and handed it back.

"Old friends, those two," he said.

"And some."

"Never can tell what you're getting into, can you?"

I said I had a fair idea, most times.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe so." He held out his beer for cheers. We clinked mugs. I watched Beth.

"Look here," he said. "Know about moon craters?" He gulped his beer, his eyes fixed on mine.

"What?"

"Craters. Those holes on the moon's face. What can you say about them?"

I figured I knew as much as the next man.

"Do you now. Let me tell you a story. I can see you're wondering what this is all about." He swept his hand from Beth to Kurt to the fire. He brushed his stucco-looking cheeks as if trying to shoo the firelight.

"Paul Bunyan," he said, "had a bad case of insomnia. He'd be half-asleep while stumbling across state lines, stepping on barns and splashing up huge waves from lakes and generally making a big mess he'd have to apologize for later. He hung out in country places with small populations, but still, it's amazing no one ever got hurt during one of his nighttime rambles. Well, once Paul rested in these very mountains while on his way to Florida. He aimed to bathe in the Atlantic Ocean."

He paused and poked at a wood chip floating in his beer.

"Okay," I said.

Jay looked pleased with himself. "Hold on a minute. See, Paul Bunyan's stomach grumbled in his sleep so much it caused earthquake tremors in Tennessee and Georgia. All the shaking kept him awake, and pretty soon he had a mighty hunger. He stumbled around some more, until he came across a flock of spotted deer grazing in a nearby field. He scooped the whole bunch into his mouth. He pinched a few blue jays and robins from the trees. Smacked some rabbits flat and ate them like mini pancakes. But he was still famished, and his mouth was like a hundred hot paper bags. So he leaned over the Toccoa River and slurped it dry. All the fish were left flopping in the mud, and Paul Bunyan swallowed those up, too."

Beth had her foot wrapped around Kurt's calf. She leaned forward to hear something he was whispering into her ear. His hand swam in front of her. Beth seemed moved, but determined not to cry. She looked like a new bride. When Kurt finished, she leaned back and her eyes met mine. She raised her hand with the spoon and held it out to me, as if inviting comments. I gave Jay my full attention.

"Well," he said. "Paul Bunyan's stomach grumbled so loud, folks in Chattanooga checked the sky for an approaching storm. He commenced to walking again, poaching a cow here, a pig there from farms he passed. At long last, he settled down in an orchard. Big Paul just couldn't swing that massive axe of his unless he got the food he needed. And he was starting to get dizzy, to tell the truth. Soon enough, he noticed a huge plump fruit far above him. It hung from what must have been the tallest, most expansive tree he'd ever encountered, since he couldn't see a trunk nowhere, or no branches for that matter. He licked his lips and reached up for that fruit, touched it, scratched at it, and finally grasped it just long enough to take some quick nibbles. 'Yuck,' he said. The fruit was bitter as chalk and concrete hard. Paul was disgusted. He threw that bitter fruit as hard as he could above him, and it got stuck between some stars and started glowing again, only this time not looking so tempting, what with all the scrapes and bites Paul gave it. That's when he realized he'd been half asleep and munching on the moon. 'I'll be damned,' he said. Thing is, he was no longer hungry. Moon killed his appetite. With his bladder all swollen with the Toccoa River, Big Paul tugged his trunk from the world's largest Levis, and he created the Okefenokee Swamp with his hot stream. You never heard such relief. All down the coast of Georgia, folks mistook Paul Bunyan's moans for a hurricane on the rise and rushed to board up their vacation homes."

Jay dropped his mug into the pail. We'd finished most the beer during his story, so he unzipped the chest pocket of his overalls and passed me a metal flask. I drank some backyard liquor that tasted like rubbing alcohol mixed with licorice and grass.

"All that was long ago," Jay said. "Before Columbus."

My face screwed up. It felt like two lit matches were stuck in my nostrils. The barn shrank and fizzled and Jay waved back and forth, his mouth moving. His words flew who knows where. I felt good. I swigged more of his stuff.

Before long my ears were humming. Voices leapt out at me in clear bits and pieces, as if someone was fiddling with a radio tuner. The static gave way to announcers saying things like "best sloppy joe in Dahlonga," "a big conspiracy," "Are you some kind of Democrat?" and "I'd like to tap her keg, if you follow me."

Jay was shouting over the commotion. "Bunyan! Not a fact. Not like this barn or the river out there. But true enough. There are things like that. Man on the moon. We have these cravings, you know? UFOs. Ghosts. It's what it's all about."

"Bigfoot," I said.

"No doubt."

Beth and Kurt joined a circle that had formed around us. That's when I noticed the giant piñata rising from the sawdust floor. Two men pulled a chain and the piñata floated up and dangled under the hole in the barn's roof.

Jay passed me an axe. "You're new. You take first swing." He leaned close. The lines in his face were like scribbles made in wet cement by some deranged kid—hardening, crazy.

"Show us what you had in the woods," Kurt yelled from the other side of the piñata.

I hesitated, trying to focus through my liquor haze.

FAMOUS
BATTLES
**Matthew
Harrison**

“Have at it,” Kurt said. His arm went around Beth.

Jay pulled a bandana over my face. I shut my eyes anyway and watched the fireworks behind my lids. I bobbed in the babbling darkness like a cork tossed in rapids.

“Save some for me,” I heard Kurt say. “I get next hit.”

Beth laughed. Jay’s liquor rushed through me. I wanted to bust that piñata so good the Tootsie Rolls and plastic necklaces and coins scattered among a bunch of boots and grasping hands and the game was over. Mostly, I wanted to swing once and go home to bed. It was my bed. I’d had it long before Beth and I’d slept there by myself and with other women, too. I saw myself clinging to the quiet mound of pillows until the undertow of liquor ended. How many nights had I drifted off alone like that? Kurt and Beth could have a fling, for all I cared. Right then, I hoped they did. At least I’d wake up knowing what was mine: an acre of land, a cabin, three rooms, a bed, two eyes and two hands and all the freedom a man needs to shut out the world.

Jay clutched my arms and guided me backward a few feet. The Bunyanites were banging plates and mugs with silverware and chanting “Swing! Swing!” I lost my sense of direction in the clamor. I just knew the piñata was in the air somewhere, too big to miss. I raised the axe and swayed and baby-stepped in a small circle. Someone said “Careful now” as I tried to find my way. Hands turned me to the right and held me steady.

Then I recognized Kurt’s voice ahead of me. “Give us what you have!” he shouted.

So I did. I sprang forward and swung so hard my insides about burst out. The impact was a dull splitting thud, like striking a big cabbage. The axe slipped before sticking firm. There were slow heavy gropes around my stomach and legs. I waited for the scuffle, the grunts of laughter. The piñata’s contents had spilled across the floor, but the men were silent and still. My eyes throbbed behind the blindfold. I turned my head back and forth in the dark, straining to listen, but I only heard my own breathing.

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Born and raised in Georgia, Matthew Harrison lived in Seattle and the Los Angeles area before moving to Massachusetts, where he’s currently working toward an MFA in fiction at UMass Amherst.