

THE PIPELINE

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EVERY MORNING I CREEP DOWN TO THE LANDING THAT GRANDMA uses as a bedroom at the bottom of the stairs, and into the kitchen, where I try to eat breakfast without waking the house. The problem is Grandma always hears me and, before I can even get the milk pitcher out of the refrigerator, she's in the kitchen, too, her dark green bathrobe twisted crazily because she's wearing one sleeve inside out.

Grandma has this wonderful smile and a musical Irish brogue, which make you forget she can't be left alone because she'll "get into trouble." Mom spends the days with her, then hands her off to Dad when he gets home from the plant. On school mornings I need to get up real early to fit in breakfast and chores before the bus arrives. So in the mornings it's just me.

Grandma stands at the kitchen sink and runs a dirty bowl under the faucet. She's telling her old story about the cow her family owned when she was a girl. The cow's name was Anna Livia Plurabelle, and Grandma's job was to drive it from the barn to the field in the morning, then back to the barn in the evening.

"One evening, I arrived at the field to find a wee man, one of the gentle folk, in Anna's place. He told me his people had borrowed her and would have her back by morning. My Da would understand."

Grandma shuffles to the table and sets a bowl of corn flakes in front of me. Chocolate pudding still stains the rim. A long gray hair floats in the milk. Stifling a

gag, I take my spoon in hand and wait for her to shuffle back to the chair by the window.

"I told my Da ... " And as she tells me again how the gentle folk took Anna each night of the full moon and in return promised she never would run dry, I quietly scrape the cereal into the trash and set the bowl in the sink.

Outside, I zip my jacket to my Adam's apple. The calendar says spring, but the mornings still snap like winter. Back home there would be buds swelling on the trees, crocuses and onion grass sprouting on lawns. Here, when the sun breaks over the pipeline notch in the hill across the valley, all you see are gray trees and brown stubble fields.

I balance my schoolbooks on the mailbox and cross the road to refill the chicken feed and top off the water. Behind the coop, I slop out Bert and Harry's sty. Our cow boards down the road with a real farmer. Good thing, because the chickens and these two pigs are enough work for me. I wish a leprechaun would take them all away forever.

The school bus crunches to a stop, and I crawl into the last seat where I always pretend to sleep while the bus fills up with hillbilly kids. Before I close my eyes, I look up at the house. Grandma is a silhouette at the kitchen window, still talking about her cow.

THE FIRST WARM SUNDAY we picnic in the field below the barn. Mom fixes the food and minds Grandma while Dad and I head for the pipeline. We've lived on the farm six months now, but with the bad weather and the long nights this is our first climb.

At a distance, the pipeline looks like a swath of soft grass rising gently through the wooded hills. Up close, it's spiky scrub on a slope as steep as a ski jump. Dad lopes easily upward in long strides while I huff behind him. There is no pipe in the pipeline, he tells me. The power company predicts natural gas strikes in these hills, so it pays farmers a monthly fee for a right-of-way. The hillbilly kids talk about how they'll spend their money when gas blows on their land. But Dad just hopes that when the gas is struck, wherever it's struck, his company lands the contract for the pipe.

The slope levels off midway up the hill and we stop to rest. The valley is a patchwork of green, spring coming at different times to different corners. Below us, Mom and Grandma are two white specks on a red smudge of blanket. Dad clears his throat, and I know we've come to talk about me slacking off my morning chores.

I tell him I know the owners moved the plant to the cheap labor, but I can't understand why we bought a broken-down farm seven dirt-road miles from town. Back home, I could ride my bike wherever I pleased. Here I'm at the mercy of the school bus, the stones in the road cut the thickest balloon tires to ribbons, I don't know what I'll do for spending money come summertime, and everyone at school laughs at my funny accent. And whose idea were the animals anyway?

"The livestock came with the land," says Dad. "They are your responsibility until we sell them off."

But he promises to arrange a summer job in town and, if things work out financially, he might swing a second car. We are about to shake on this when I bring up Grandma's breakfast antics. Dad's expression turns somber. He reminds me how I would tag along to visit the convent where she lived as caretaker after Grandpa died, how she always slipped me a mint wrapped in cellophane.

"But I always find hair in the corn flakes," I say.

We don't climb the rest of the pipeline.

FOURTH OF JULY Dad throws a barbecue for people from the plant. Since he's middle management, he invites everyone from the owners right down to the guy who sweeps the floor. Their families come, too, and I recognize several kids from school.

I expect engineering types yapping about natural gas and scrabbling over the pipeline to check out exactly how to lay the pipe. But no one mentions gas, no one even glances at the pipeline. Instead, everyone talks about a new contract with NASA for quarter-inch metal hoses the length of a finger. The hoses are bound for the space shuttle, which will take off like a rocket and land like an airplane. The engineering types gnaw on burgers, push their glasses back up their noses, elbow each other about VIP passes to lift-offs at Kennedy.

I steal around back of the house, where the Camaro Dad bought from the high

school bio teacher sits on the dirt driveway. Five years old, it already shows the wear of country roads. Rust eats at the wheel wells. Tar stains the chrome of the grille. White stuffing erupts from a slit in the driver's seat. But I don't see the car with my eyes. I see it with my heart.

I mix a bucketful of soap. Tomorrow is my first day as counterman at the Rainbow Sweet Shoppe, and I want the Camaro to shine. I'm rubbing hard when I feel eyes burning into my back. I assume it's Grandma, because last I saw she was slouched in the old metal glider on the front porch, looking antsy with all the strangers milling around. But the eyes belong to a girl from school named Dovie, and for a moment I wonder why she's here until I remember her father works at the plant.

"That's Mr. Swartwood's car," she says. Mr. Swartwood is young and has a reputation for being cool.

"Used to be." I dunk my sponge and slop a huge mass of suds onto the roof. "It's mine now."

Dovie tiptoes across rivulets of water streaking the dirt driveway. She cups her hand and peers through the tightly closed windows. I first noticed her in English class, wearing a cheerleader's uniform for the junior varsity basketball game. She was cute, with dark hair pulled into a thick ponytail. Today she wears her hair loose and wiry, like the Jewish girls back home.

She circles the car, one hand on her chin. I wonder if she's fishing for talk or interested in the car. We never spoke in school, except to read parts from *High Tor*. Everyone snickered at my city accent that day, and even she bit her lip between lines. But I decide she digs the Camaro, so I let the car talk for me. I slop on more suds, squint one eye, rub hard through clusters of bubbles. All the time I bask in Mr. Swartwood's reflected coolness. When I look up, Dovie's gone back to the party.

I LIE IN BED, my finger nudging the dial of a transistor radio pressed against my ear. On cloudy nights, distant radio waves bounce low across the hills, and I can pull in Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, even stations from back home. The static recedes, and the voice of a familiar deejay swirls into my ear. After one song, the signal wavers and then breaks up.

I've obsessed about Dovie for a solid week, stretching that two minute encounter like a piece of taffy to examine every strand, wondering whether my silence blew a chance or saved me from foolishness. She passes the Sweet Shoppe each day and must see the Camaro parked nearby. But no teenagers dare hang out in the Shoppe till after dark, when I'm long back in the hills, grounded by a junior license. I can analyze this thing to death, I realize, so I decide to buzz to her house after work tomorrow and ask her on a date for Saturday afternoon. And the next day, when my shift ends, I haven't lost my nerve.

Dovie lives where the backyards tail off and turn into cornfields. A breeze sucks white curtains against a window screen. A radio tinkles deep inside. I knock on the door and step aside so she's certain to see the Camaro parked in front. She materializes in cut-off jeans and a tie-dyed tee shirt and greets me with a giggle. I barge right into my invitation. Buttermilk Falls. Saturday. She giggles again, and I pile on the details. Eleven a.m. Pack a lunch. Take my Camaro.

"Yes," she says, probably to save me embarrassment.

I'm so stunned that when she asks me in for lemonade I beat a hasty retreat.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT, a thud shakes the house. I creep to the heat grating in my bedroom floor and peer into the living room below. Light from the kitchen lays a bright trapezoid across the living room carpet.

I pad down to the bottom of the stairs and see Grandma isn't in her bed, which means she thinks it's breakfast time and I'll be eating corn flakes at ten past midnight. But the kitchen is empty, and the bathroom door is ajar. Inside, Grandma lies crumpled on the floor, a pool of blood spreading from her head.

I holler like a banshee.

The nearest hospital is thirty miles away, across a stretch of hills the locals call the Hogbacks. I always wondered about the name, but with Dad gunning the car into the dips and up the slopes and Grandma groaning in the back seat, I don't wonder anymore. It's past four when a doctor finally talks to us. Grandma's brain is addled, he explains. She believed she was getting into bed, let herself drop, and cracked her head against the toilet seat.

"Have you considered a nursing home?" he says.

"No, we haven't," says Dad.

BETWEEN SITTING AT THE HOSPITAL and running around buying medical equipment, I miss two full days of work. But finally Grandma is back in the house, along with bed rails and a shower seat. With her swollen chin and bandaged forehead, she looks like Popeye.

Saturday morning Mom and Dad spring a meeting with a social worker on me. Can't be changed. Will take up most of the afternoon. Someone needs to mind Grandma. I never told them about the date with Dovie, and I storm off to the phone, slamming doors in my wake. Dovie says she understands, but her parting giggle makes me think she never expected me to follow through.

Mom and Dad set Grandma up on the front porch with lunch, a pitcher of iced tea, and pillows for the glider. I'm to keep an eye on her and, when the sun swings around the house, drag the glider into the shade.

First time I call to Grandma through a window, her iced tea is gone, and flies spiral around the crusts of her sandwich. She doesn't answer, only stares across the valley and chews her tongue. After that, I just peek. She doesn't move, doesn't seem in any need. Finally, I head out the back door. The Camaro sits in the driveway, the sun baking a layer of dust into its metal hide. I yank out the hose, dump soap powder into a bucket, but I never turn the faucet. The car looks too dirty, like no amount of washing will ever rub it clean.

I dive behind the wheel. The hot vinyl singes my skin, but I let it burn. My infatuation with Dovie has pulled me through the last two weeks, and now nothing shields my hatred for this farm, these hills, the entire countryside. I should be at Buttermilk Falls with Dovie. Instead, I'm babysitting someone who doesn't even know I'm here.

I lie there in my funk long enough for the sun to move across the windshield. When I check on Grandma, I find the glider empty and hot as a frying pan. I scour the house and return to the porch, thinking maybe she melted into the pillows. Then something catches my eye from clear across the valley: a white dot slowly climbing the

pipeline.

I race through the lower field, which is chest high and buzzing with insects. I slip under the barbed wire fence marking the end of our land. Grandma still climbs, but I gain fast. Finally she stops midway up to sit on a rock. Huffing, I crash beside her. She doesn't notice, just stares back at the house and silently works her jaws. Red welts glisten on her ankles and burrs stick to her duster. I start to speak, but she cuts me off.

"Your father won't let me climb this hill, and now I know why."

"Because you'll kill yourself is why." I try lifting Grandma off the rock, but she doesn't budge.

"I needed to see for myself. I didn't think the pitch would be so steep."

"I could have told you that," I say.

A growl vibrates in my chest, then builds and separates into the engine of a car droning across the quiet of the valley. When conditions are right, you can hear a car miles off. Sometimes the car never reaches you, just fades back into the buzz of the insects. But down below a dust plume rises over the trees, and a car breaks out into a clear stretch between two fields.

"We'd better get back," I say. I try lifting her again, but it's like uprooting a tree.

The car swings up the driveway and parks next to the Camaro. Mom and Dad climb out and slam their doors, the sound reaching us three seconds later. I stand behind Grandma and work both hands under her arms, but she stays solid on the rock. A screen door bangs sharply, another of the sounds that carries across the valley. Dad ransacks the porch, then starts hollering for us.

"I'm sorry I ruined your day," says Grandma.

"You didn't," I say, which is a lie, of course, because all I want is to get her down the hill.

"I bet you had a date and then you needed to stay home with me."

I wonder whether Grandma really knows about Dovie, or if one of her notions accidentally hit the mark.

"He was the same way whenever a young girl got under his skin," she says.

"The world stopped."

"That's not my big worry now," I say.

She cocks her head at me, as if waiting for me to dig into a bowl of corn flakes.

"I'm supposed to be minding you," I tell her.

Dad wades toward the lower field, waving his arms and shouting like he's spotted us. A smile blooms on Grandma's face as she listens to him yell.

"I'll handle him if you keep our secret."

"What secret?"

"About the farm. This isn't the farm in Ireland, but I don't want him thinking he failed me."

I lift again, and she rises easily upright. Dad still shouts. He sounded worried before, but now he sounds angry. Maybe because we're ignoring him, maybe because he snagged himself on some barbed wire.

"It's a beautiful farm just the same," Grandma says, leaning against me as we stagger down the steep, clumpy grass. "You know, we had a moo cow at the old farm. Anna Livia Plurabelle."

We aren't on the pipeline anymore. We're back in a world where leprechauns borrow cows on the night of the full moon. She tells the story again, and it sounds fresh, if only because she tells it without missing any of the details I know like an old song.