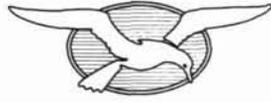


LINE UPON LINE

NO TOIL NOR LABOR



chapter 2

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

By Neal Chandler
and Margaret Young

This is the second installment of a short-short story by six authors.

JENEAL SAT OUT ON THE DECK IN THE KENNEDY rocker Larry had bought on credit in 1986, brought up to the summer cabin to stain and to varnish for her birthday, but then forgotten and never looked at again. Now the naked pine was smoke yellow except where it was gummed and charcoal beneath her hands. She liked to sit on the shabby, neglected wood and rock slowly for perspective. Sun was warm through the thin air, the sky clear, the mountain hushed with bird song, but Jeneal was working. That's what she'd told the bishop on the phone. She was conducting an audit, which she hadn't told him exactly, but if he wanted to talk, had time for rumors and for nosing into private business, then he'd have to come up to her office. She sure wasn't going down to his. She wasn't even going to get dressed.

Among other things, things like politics and sexual intercourse and family values, Jeneal was reassessing religion. She kept on rocking and squinted down over the road that climbed up through the canyon. She stroked the deer rifle in her lap and studied things out in her mind. The establishment was coming to have its say. She was calm now. She was looking forward to the conversation.

THE doe she called "Marquita" rustled the scrub oak then peeked through the buds at her. Jeneal nodded, rocking, stroking the rifle. The one time she had caught Marquita nudging her hungry head into the Designated Territory, Jeneal had shot into the air. It was pure poetry, the way a deer could leap for its life.

Marquita was eying her now, like something omniscient. Frankly, these were the visions getting her to reassess. She wasn't wondering if it might all be a lie and a damn waste of time, that establishment-religion she had married into. (God save us, three hours of hard benches and slow songs, and Larry looking like God's personal Fuller Brush Man waiting for some sparkly commission to fall from the sky!) She was wondering if it could actually be true—Heaven and Hell and eter-



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nity and that. If a deer could paw into her secrets that way, eye her that way, then maybe there was a God, and He was using deer eyes.

The bishop's rusted truck rounded the bend. She took off her sweater (Larry's sweater, actually, the grey one his mother gave him one Christmas, two sizes too big). She wrapped the rifle in it, then set it under the rocker. The bishop would, no doubt, comment on the weather, ask her wasn't she chilly without a coat, wasn't she awful lonely away from bright lights and grocery shoppers, and what kind of work was she doing anyhow that couldn't be done in an office building, and wasn't there some marshmallow—Jell-O salad the Relief Society sisters could make her? He'd look briefly toward the peak, and he'd be thinking avalanche, but not saying it. (Spring melt was upon them. Everyone expected once the sun finished its business, Larry's white, white body would come through the icy veil, hands frozen frantic, wide-eyed face, all nicely preserved. But that wouldn't exactly be happening, because that's not exactly where Larry was.)

To be continued . . . Next issue's installment by Linda Sillitoe.