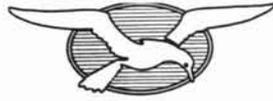


NO TOIL NOR LABOR



Chapter 4

STALIN'S CRIMES

By Neal Chandler, Margaret Young, Linda Sillitoe
and Levi S. Peterson

This is the fourth 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 eternity and that. If a deer could paw into her secrets that way, eye her that way, then maybe there was a God,



"Quit talking to those deer," the old woman said. "That's a very old religion! I'd have thought you'd have better sense."

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.)

WHY are you even doing this, the deer asked as the bishop parked in the roadside rut, since you've already had the conversation? I mean, what's in it for you?

Nothing, Jeneal answered, more surprised by that truth than the implication of talking with a deer. I just didn't know how to say no other than making it inconvenient, she added.

Marquita nodded. You could lose a lot, she said, her eyes even wiser.

Jeneal sighed, and a small cloud of knowing passed between them. Really, she'd always been able to converse this way except the other person pretended not to hear unless every word was uttered.

Marquita tipped her graceful head as the truck door slammed. Besides, she said, you're already free.

Jeneal smiled deeply at the sky. Free was precisely the word that had eluded her. But how do I get rid of him? she asked. I mean not—

Marquita lifted a hoof toward the sweater under the chair. Bishops leap almost as high as deer, she said; he'll run. Then she vanished into the scrub.

IT wasn't the bishop who came around the corner of the cabin and up the steps onto the deck. It was an elderly woman who wore rubber-bottomed boots, a soiled mackinaw coat over a flowery dress, and a scarf tied over mouse-grey hair. She had no upper teeth, and her eyes, magnified by thick glasses, looked like peering moons.

"I've got a deal on the Shermoor and Thrale encyclopedia set," the old woman said. "Nothing down, thirty-five dollars a month. Can't beat that."

"Lord, no," Jeneal said. "I've already got too much information at my fingertips."

The old woman opened her briefcase and took out a book. "For example, anything you want to know about Stalin is here. You look in the S volume. Everything is alphabetized. You can't believe what that fellow did! Eight million Soviet citizens died in the labor camps.

Eight million!"

"I've got a visitor coming," Jeneal said. "You better leave before he comes up the road. There isn't any place to turn around if you meet each other."

"You should read this book," the old woman insisted. "I know what you've got wrapped up there in that sweater. It's one of those short-barreled carbines. I hope you're not into that militia stuff like the folks across the valley."

"It's none of your business whatever I'm into," Jeneal said. "Sometimes I take a shot at a fence post. Just for practice."

"What you ought to do is quit talking to those deer," the old woman said. "That's an old religion—a very old religion! I'd have thought you'd have better sense."

"I don't have to take this," Jeneal said. "Clear out of here. Get off my property!"

Then the old woman was gone. It was just like people said: it happens in the twinkling of an eye. Jeneal ran to the edge of the deck. The rusty pickup was gone, too. There were no tire tracks in the muddy road.

Jeneal took the rifle and went into the cabin and put water on for a hot drink. "I'll be damned," she said. "Who would have thought it? The Three Nephites are women." ☐

To be continued . . . Next issue's installment by Pauline Mortensen.



SAFFRON

Weight. Counterweight. What we are
or have become: the thinnest fraction
of an inch, the sum of substance
pulsing on, the leaping
out, the curves and webs of all
we build. Each satisfaction sorely
needs the drawing down, the giving
over to renew that better place
to hang our hats. I speak
new worlds; I make this tongue
become my flame for I am fleeting—
see how fast I arc this blue.

—DIANE BEATY