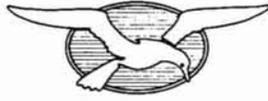


NO TOIL NOR LABOR



Chapter 6

AN ENCOUNTER

By Neal Chandler, Margaret Young, Linda Sillitoe, Levi S. Peterson, Pauline Mortensen  
and Brian Evenson

*This is the final 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, 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



STEVE KLAMM

*"Listen a minute, Jeneal. All I'm getting around to is that we found Larry's body. Suppose you tell me what he died of."*

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."

SHE turned up the gas.

Well, of course. It didn't take a college professor to figure that one out. She would add this latest item to the conversation. Squirt it over smoking coals like lighter fluid, bring it all back to the flame. All the evidence would add up to something. At least she had faith in that much. Sure, the bishop would quote some scripture, remind her about not speaking of the mysteries, but for nothing else she would bring up the old woman in memory of her Larry. Larry, who even in his final moments could not abide her own growing necessity for talk. She would say it for him. Because she could say anything now, knowing that it would never make print.

Tomorrow's news would read, "Crazed woman, something something, disappearance of her husband earlier that year, something something, big picture of the gun, yadda yadda." They will come looking for facts, but they will miss everything.

Beads were already forming on the side of the pan. And who said a watched pot never boils? And that was it exactly. They would miss the way she stood there bringing the water to a boil, the great barrels of water behind the piddling amount now in the pan. They would miss the barrels and see the piddle. Never see the way the mother stands there at the stove, the child playing underneath the skirts, the father's feet coming in reeking from the barn, his voice booming overhead,

"We are going because I have the say. I have the final say. We are selling everything we own and moving out. We are going." They would miss all that. And the child, both arms around the mother's post of a leg, wondering what would come next, after going.

Now that was religion. The mother's leg.

The boiling water hissed off the hot metal. Someone else was coming up the drive. She flipped off the gas and picked up the gun. Whoever it was, this one would be for Larry and her mother's leg.

**I**T was the sheriff this time, out of uniform and not in his Sunday bishop's suit either. He stood in the dirt track, resting one hand on the hood of her car as she approached with the gun held before her.

*I should have waited on the porch, she thought.*

*I should have made him come all the way to me.*

"Jeneal," he said, lifting his hand convulsively.

She nodded. "Bishop," she said.

He deliberately looked all around him. "Lovely country," he said.

"Lonely."

She nodded again.

"Suppose you invite me in?" he asked.

"I'm fine here."

"I got something I want to say," he suggested.

"Out with it," she said.

"It's a tad delicate," he said.

"You've never been one to mince words."

"No," he said. "That's true. I don't come as bishop," he said.

"I'm here as sheriff." He pushed away from the car.

"Larry confided in me."

"As bishop or sheriff?"

"As both."

"You never spoke to him."

"Now, Jeneal, listen a minute. All I'm getting around to is that we found Larry's body." He propped his hat a little higher with a thumb, fiddled with the brim. "Suppose you tell me what he died of."

"I don't have anything to say."

"Now, Jen, the Holy Spirit is telling me different."

"I thought you came here as sheriff," she said.

He swallowed. "Truth told, I don't know what I came up here as. I came up in good faith and friendship," he said. "How can I help you if you won't cooperate?"

"Maybe I'm beyond help."

"No," he said. "Don't say that." And then, "Please, give me the gun."

"What gun?"

"The rifle in your hand."

"What rifle?" she asked. "I'm not holding anything. Your word against mine, bishop."

"Look," he said. "Just to run a test or two. I'll tell them you handed it over willingly. Hell, we'll come soon and get it in any case."

He took a step forward toward her, a little puff of dust rising where his boot came down. She raised the gun, flicked the safety off.

"You wouldn't shoot me," he said, "whether you did Larry in or no. Jen," he said, "You wouldn't do it."

"What do you know about what I would or wouldn't do?" she said.

"All's I want's the story of what happened," he said. "I swear I'll cast it in the best light I've got."

When he took a further step, she spun the rifle around, took the snout of the barrel inside her mouth, against the mouth's roof. It was awkward. She could just reach the trigger.

"Jen," he said. "Don't do this to me."

*To him?* she wondered. "Go on home," she said, her tongue and lips awkward against the metal.

He turned and climbed back into the truck. He started it, pulled slowly away. She watched him a moment, then pulled the gun from her mouth. Turning, she walked back to the cabin, taking her place in the rocking chair, rocking back and forth, tasting the metal in her mouth, waiting for whoever would come next. ☐



## MATERFAMILIAS

Dorothy Lyon Mitchell 1925–1997

She glows thin, small  
in the large chair—  
light as a bird with hollow bones.

A transparent tube  
traces the hallway like  
Ariadne's thread, binding her breath  
to this world.

She holds the newspaper tight,  
proud enough to offer  
this disease to God.

An exaltation of grandchildren  
followed close by  
an argument of offspring  
spill into the room.

She folds the paper, crisp,  
and gathers them  
in her iron tenderness,  
touching, without moving,  
each and every one.

—MARK J. MITCHELL