

MAC'S STORY  
by K.B Holzman

**Y**ou're six months behind in the rent." My landlord

is threatening to bulldoze my cabin. For thirty-five years he's tried to get me off his land. Last winter, he turned off the electricity, but I got by with the wood stove. I almost lost my blackberries when the refrigerator died. Instead, I put a pot on the stove and boiled up a humongous vat of jam. On Christmas Eve, I put on my Santa suit and went from house to house, knee deep in snow, giving out sticky jars as gifts. Most of my neighbors, second homeowners from Connecticut or New Jersey, generously invited me in for a glass of Christmas cheer. "Thirsty," I said and raised my empty for a refill. Some offered Christmas cookies which I declined. When the refills dried up, I continued my way around the block. My Boston Brahmin accent opens doors every time. The second homeowners figure I come from something better, that my life in a flea-infested two-room log cabin is an eccentric choice which I can abandon at will. I reassure them that the next job is just over the horizon, that by January I will be building log cabins in Haiti. Or that a rich investor in upstate New York has already put down his deposit. I point to the large vacation home on the hill that I built ten years ago, my crew of Slovakian green-carders stranded for the winter after I ran out of cash. Never mind that the owner still complains about the unfinished work. The stone chimney is a work of art. The usual problem, leveraging a new job to complete the old, catches up with me sometimes. Not that the neighbors understand, with their perpetual renovations of houses that sit empty more than they are lived in. When I asked to crash in their empty homes, just to get by for the winter, they banded together to keep an eye out for uninvited squatters. So now, most of my belongings are in a storage bin deposited on the lot of an abandoned house, hidden behind overgrown vegetation. I've received my third eviction notice. Tim, who drank with me before his wife gave him an ultimatum, promised me he would keep an eye out for their safety.

I remain optimistic. I've placed an ad in the local paper: *Log Homes, 40 years of national and international projects.* The key is the "national and international." I am better off when my reputation does not precede me. My French is impeccable, my Spanish passable. One job, preferably somewhere warm, and I'll make it through the winter. The Abenaki, even when they were at war, suspended battle for the depth of the season. In Vermont, you do what you have to do to get by. I've tied Harpo and Marx to the porch railing. I prefer to let my dogs run free, but the animal control lady has threatened to take them away.

I parked my car, which I purchased for \$500 during a somewhat blurry night of tequila shots at the Silo, in front of my ill-fated cabin. I only use it in emergencies. In the trunk there is a can with just enough gas to get into town. I prefer to walk to the bottom of the hill. From the post office, I hitch rides from neighbors checking their PO boxes. I seldom have to wait very long before someone stops and offers me their backseat in exchange for the low down on the progression of the local realtor's brain tumor, the most recent string of break-ins or to ask why my landlord removed my temporary electrical hook up, installed illegally by a buddy when the power was cut.

Sometimes, just to reassure the nervous neighbors, I allude to family, to homes on the North Shore and the Cape. I reference a brother, careful never to give details that can be traced. That is the agreement. Never embarrass relatives and, in exchange, from time to time they come to my rescue. For example, they settled the account at the Retreat last year when I needed to clean up. Mom's will specified that I should never have direct access to the limited funds left in my name. Not one of my relatives cares to deal with me directly. My brother, who takes the family's legacy seriously, made it very clear that I am better off dead, and most of my cousins agree.

I visited my mom's grave a month after the funeral. She was laid to rest in a meticulously landscaped cemetery on the Cape. But even her tombstone reminded me that I did not belong there, despite having worn a clean, not inexpensive, shirt borrowed from a man with whom I had spent the night. Mom had always reminded me that our family's life was on public display. Mostly, stashing me away at prestigious boarding schools, she treated me like a carefully guarded embarrassment.

By my freshman year at university, I had the brilliant idea that I would end it all with a glorious run down the highest trail on the back side of Mt. Snow. A cataclysmic collision with a towering maple would save my Mom, by then a grieving widow, any further cause for embarrassment. Having downed half a dozen shots of Mt. Snow's finest, I was strapping on my ski boots in the Moose-festooned lodge when I looked up and encountered Teddy's

gray-flecked eyes appraising my possibilities. The best idea I had ever had went right out that snow encrusted window. Teddy saw me, a lonely college guy with what he later called my “Fuck ‘em all, life’s a party” smirk, and he smirked right back.

“Just call me Mac,” I told him. He had money. A founding partner in one of the early computer companies, he had cashed out at just the right time.

I told Teddy that my parents, well-meaning socialists with a religious bent, had died in a car crash leaving me a small inheritance. I confessed to dreams of skiing in the Olympics squashed by chronic injuries, a trick knee, a suspicion of an auto-immune disorder. I bragged of an internship with the “cement king” of the North Shore. Teddy laughed it all off. He truly couldn’t care less who I was, as long as we were high and the sex was good. He was one hell of a skier and we couldn’t get enough. By the time April arrived and even the most expensive snow-making equipment couldn’t lay down enough white stuff to coat the runs, we were an item. That summer Teddy taught me how to build. He had this thing for honest trade. Together we built a house from scratch, starting with pines we felled ourselves and completing our project by choosing perfect stones from the brook for the facing on the chimney.

“Listen up, ladies,” the drunks at the local bar proclaimed, “If a man doesn’t know how to hunt or fish, he might as well be your girlfriend.” The locals did not hesitate to speak their minds. If the liquor was flowing, we never bothered to take them on. They were hunters. They had guns.

Teddy died of a heart attack in our bed on a Memorial Day weekend. I called Jessie, the local constable. Jessie was a former rock-and-roll guitarist who once played with Springsteen before flaming out on drugs and booze. He moved to Vermont to escape the craziness. Now he is righteously sober with poorly fitting dentures he pops in and out of his mouth, a wife, five kids, an enormous belly and a smoker’s cough. “What do you want me to do?” He asked. “He’s dead.” The emergency services were overwhelmed by the usual calamities of a holiday weekend. The ambulance didn’t arrive to take away Teddy’s body for three days. I had plenty of time to ditch our ample supply of coke but not half enough time to figure out what to do next.

To my surprise, the house and all of Teddy’s money were left to an ex-wife and three children that he had never told me about. I had to get out of there, and fast, before my own shit came to the attention of the lawyers sniffing around as soon as the death certificate was filed. I packed up what I could. A flyer at the post office advertised a rustic cabin for rent. The simplicity of two rooms, the anonymity of the ski resort community appealed to me. *What the hell*, I figured. *I’ll stick around for the summer, at least until I get my shit*

*together.* Which took longer than anticipated.

During the ski season, I waited tables at the resort in exchange for discount passes. Over the summer, I signed on with a local contractor to build cabins, using skills that Teddy had taught me with such tenderness. The crew, mostly illegal imports from Europe, looked up to me. I spoke to them in their native languages. They bought me beer. On summer evenings, I sat on my front porch listening to Brahms. A woman I met at the general store asked me to watch her puppies while she visited her old man in rehab and never came back for them.

Word of mouth came in handy. Jessie, in addition to his job as constable, plowed driveways in the winter and worked as a maintenance man at Stratton in the summer. In between, he took gigs as a self-employed carpenter. Eyeing his customers' driveways, he'd say "I'd be worried about that crack in the wall if I were you." Once he got the job, he'd brag, "I don't let 'em Jew me down, just cut corners wherever I can. Hell, what they don't know can't hurt them." He always insisted that he underbid his jobs, and usually shorted the local help he recruited to do most of the work. Nevertheless, the jobs he passed on to me paid enough that I was set for a year. Go figure. I put a lot of love into that pine wainscoting. A load of firewood, a supply of vodka, and a young man just out of prison who needed a place to crash. Over the years, I learned to get by. Until the bulldozer arrived. My plan is to go out with a bang.

Just across the border from Brattleboro, there is a desolate stretch of New Hampshire highway dotted with large department stores. Their entire inventory consists of fireworks. Family owned factory outlets open year round. Display windows plastered with posters advertising Black Cat, Boomer, Magnus, World Class Cowboys. A museum showcase with samples of consumer fireworks manufactured over the past century. The stores advertise video stations for viewing merchandise before selecting the most bang for your buck.

Jessie, an avid golfer, plays any chance he gets at a course in New Hampshire. Regardless of how many carpentry jobs he has, he golfs any day the sun comes out. Since he doesn't work when it rains, his customers often complain about the slow pace of their projects. He agrees to give me a ride to New Hampshire in his battered black truck.

All the way to Brattleboro, Jessie complains. His clients are demanding. His legs are killing him. This country is going to the dogs, what with Obamacare and fags getting married. Jessie quit smoking the previous summer, and despite the unlit cigar perpetually hanging from his mouth, he's put on fifty pounds and is totally miserable.

I commiserate, telling Jessie I am expecting a job to

come through any day now. A whole new market is opening up in Cuba, and just yesterday I received a call inquiring about log cabins for an eco-resort. All the while, I mull over possibilities, aerial shells containing burst charges and internal time fuses, barrages of rapidly firing explosives, batteries of mortar and bundles of roman candles.

Gunpowder in all its glory, chemically altered to burst into color as it explodes in the night sky.

Jessie drops me off on the highway just outside of Brattleboro, still grumbling as his truck drives off in a cloud of exhaust. I walk into the biggest and brightest of the outlets where I watch a video showing the World Class Rover, the best-selling 500 Gram Aerial, modeled after the actual rovers that landed on the Moon and Mars. Watching explosion after explosion, I think about the bulldozer on its way to my cabin. I have visions of destroying the machine in a fiery display. Of my humble home lit from within, flames licking the weathered logs. My fellow shoppers buy explosives by the case as the video loop shoots dazzling firefueled flowers at the Moon, audio booms ricocheting against ceiling tiles that barely contain the noise. After so many years in the mountains, I have almost forgotten the anticipation of the inevitable explosion, danger laced with promise. In the end, I choose the World Class One Bad Mother. Alternating gold willow, multi-blooming crackling flowers with a final four shot.

When Jessie fails to show for my return ride, I gather up my merchandise. A trucker takes me as far as Brattleboro; we share a six pack of beer. A yoga teacher drives me over Hogback Mountain and asks my advice on how to handle her young son who hates life in the country. In Wilmington, I step into the Pub for another beer, placing my bag of fireworks at my feet as I take my usual barstool. When I complain about being abandoned in New Hampshire, Corey the bartender looks up. Haven't I heard? The place buzzes with the latest gossip. Jessie has been evacuated by helicopter to Dartmouth-Hitchcock Hospital after collapsing on the golf course. The Constable had a heart attack or DVTs; at best, he was going to lose his leg. His wife and children were rushing to his side as we spoke. The doctors didn't know if he was going to make it. In all the excitement, no one notices the bag at my feet. I never did have the chance to grieve for Teddy. Our isolation gave us a kind of invisibility. But for Jessie, I put on one hell of a show. Twenty drunks leave that bar to stand on the side of the Deerfield River and watch the display. The night is crystal clear and the World Class One Bad Mother is phenomenal. "For Jessie," we toast, tighter than any family, drunk on our mortality and the random lunacy of who survives and who succumbs to the ever-present threat of extinction.

Jessie never credits Obamacare with his survival. He

claims that God was looking out for him. By the time he comes home, eighty-five pounds lighter and short one leg, I am out of rehab. Ninety days sober and feeling good. Harpo and Marx, after a winter with Tim, are overjoyed to see me. My cabin is gone. In its place, a flatbed truck deposited a prefab vacation home. The pines have been cleared for a mountain view which ups the sale price considerably. I tell my new landlord that I have just completed a project and wear my Haitian Pride tank top as proof. I just need a room until the Cuban eco-resort obtains the proper clearances. In the meantime, I'm finishing up Jessie's jobs. He is singing again, this time gospel songs instead of rock'n'roll. He never did pay me what he owed me but whenever his grandchildren plan a birthday party, he always asks me to bring the fireworks. †