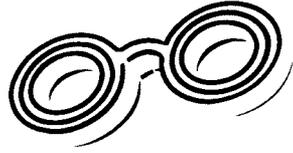




Bliss
and Other Short Stories

TED GILLEY

Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction



Prairie Schooner
Book Prize in Fiction
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Set in Arno Pro by Kim Essman.

Designed by A. Shahan.

For my mother,
and to the memory
of my father

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Bliss and Other Short Stories

All Hallows' Eve

Horses are the new children. Pasture and field in high-autumn shades of bruised red and yellow, aroma of horse-apples and hay, sweetness of harvest and rot. White fencing, a kitchen dooryard and the white farmhouse with cellar workshop, passive solar, a royal flush of hardwood floors, a black, white, and chrome kitchen, offices, cedar chests piled deep with quilts against the cold New England winter nights, just commencing. Plantings, views, privacy deck. A pair of pristine barns shaken free of chattels. And two men.

"I'm just saying," Jamie says.

"I *hear* what you're saying," Sirut puts a hand on Jamie's Saab, lifts it off.

"Yeah, thanks, I don't want that to get scratched"—his eye on Sirut's ring.

"I'm hip to that." Sirut's lingo amusing and dated, here and there a phrase of American he might have learned from a soldier. He glances at his own car, a Chevy. It announces his lack of affluence—*I am a very used and very tired car*—and he wishes he could have parked it elsewhere. But where? No practical arrangement for parking is laid out. So, he brought it down into the yard and parked it beside this nice expensive one.

Jamie says, "She'll be back in, I don't know. Fifteen minutes?"

Jamie, he means. *Jamie and Janie*. In Sirut's country, the similarity in names would be a love sign, a small domestic marvel, celebrated. Here it is a smirk.

"I mean, I plan to get as much as I paid. Even more—you can get that. Saabs don't decline in value."

There is a swish of gravel from under the trees they both believe is caused by Janie's car. Hers is the last house on the road, the nearest neighbor is half a mile away. *Locals*, Jamie called them. Sirut gazes into the red and yellow foliage roasting in the declining sun. In Cambodia, there were only, finally, *locals*. Millions of *locals*.

Janie's car rolls into the kitchen yard.

"So, you'll stay to dinner?"

Sirut is silent. He would prefer to speak with Janie, and alone—had meant to find her here *alone*. After all, Janie is divorced, she told him so only the day before: Did he understand? *Yes, we have divorce in Cambodia*, he had replied, grinning. (*I'm hip to that.*) He did not say, *The divorce of all from all*. No point.

But to find the former husband here, walking out from the house, a cup of coffee in hand, a big smile on his big face. *You must be Sirut.*

Must I!

"I do not understand." Sirut hears Janie's car door snap shut; he is aware of her diminishing distance from them, even though all is quiet here, muffled cleanly—in winter, too, drifts, floods of snow! Nights so cold your bones could crack. And in these woods, what? Isolation. A far-off buzzing of cars or a single-engine plane with its sad, brassy note blurted across the tops of the trees. The cough and catch of a chain saw.

We escaped the city, she said. She and her husband—this Jamie—had wanted a positive lifestyle, horses, a house, careers that could be plugged in, unplugged, transported, updated. And they wanted to see the world. *Before it's too late*, she said, serious all of a sudden.

They'd been drinking gin-and-tonics at the party his American sponsors had given in honor of his birthday. Everyone was a little drunk. He had met Janie half an hour earlier, and he was in love. *In my country*, he said, handing her a fresh, icy drink—and stopped. He had been telling stories about his country all day! What he wanted now was to kiss this woman, to obliterate *country* in a rush toward her: to stake a claim.

"What can I tell you?" Jamie says. He polishes the car with a chamois, then lifts his arms away to view and to display the clouds

crowding the black, gleaming surface. "It's an arrangement that works for us. I still live here because, for now, it's convenient. For now. Hey, Janie."

"Hey. Hi, Sirut! What's convenient?" She is wearing an elegant and unfussy, secondhand-store-quality dress. But new. Expensive.

"Snowing down south," Jamie sings.

Janie tugs at the dress's hem. "Sirut, it's so nice to see you."

"Okay, you two." Jamie points at them with six-shooter fingers. "That's my cue. Be good. I'm off to the village."

"Pick up some mums."

"Will do."

"And pumpkins. *Three*, Jamie. Three pumpkins."

The Saab's engine turns over. Janie turns to Sirut. "What was convenient?"

"I do not understand." Sirut keeps his eyes on Jamie's car as it climbs the graded slope of yard and mounts the gravel road beside the house. "I do not understand." The car disappears into the shade beneath the darkening foliage. When night comes, these hills close in like jungle, and in the dark, there's no difference at all.

Pumpkins for their porch—he's seen this already: spooks and witches, ghosts and goblins. Haunted houses. A haunted country, but haunted by what? *I'm hip to that*, the Khmer soldier had said in bad American, putting the barrel of the pistol into Sirut's father's ear and pulling the trigger. Laughing soldiers returning his mother to him, used, mute, her mind and soul scoured clean.

They escaped the city, then the camps, finally the country.

The horses drift over, ears erect: Is something up?

Do unto me, their eyes say.

"I simply do not understand," Sirut says.

The horses stir, then drift back to their grazing. Long necks arc, the big heads' extravagant lips fuss and ruffle the grass.

"Sirut," she says. "Tell me what was convenient before."

Bliss

All my life, I seem to have been mistaken for someone else. The other day, a woman stopped me in the produce aisle at the market and said, “Michael?” When I pick up heart pills for my dad, the pharmacist always says, “Hi, Tim.” When I correct him, he smiles and says, “Good to see you.” When I walk down Idle Road from my apartment to my job, or along the highway, people I don’t know wave at me from cars. I wave back, it can’t hurt. One day a girl leaned out of a car as it shot by and yelled, “I love you, Jamie!” I am introduced to people over and over again. “Have we met?” they say. “It’s Walter, or Phil, or Daniel, isn’t it?” I have wondered if wearing a name tag would be a bad idea. *Hello, I’m Cleave*. Who could forget such a name? When I look in the mirror I realize that I am, to some extent, a fabrication. The face looks like mine, all right, but also looks, vaguely, like anyone’s: a racial cameo of smooth skin, fine hair. Mouth, nose, and eyes all where they should be, but somehow indistinct—the anonymous, undeclared face of a baby. A face you could put a face onto, including your own, or that of someone close to you whom you’ve not seen in you can’t remember how long. “Michael?” When the lady in the store said that, I just smiled and shook my head—and she looked confused, hurt, angry. Who had she lost? Yes, I wanted to say, but didn’t. *Yes, it’s me*.

I stepped from the mud and rain of my midday duties into the outer sanctum of the Pritchard Publishing Company. It isn’t what people think. No one ever says to me, *Oh*—you work for a *publisher*, because everyone around here knows that there is only one such out-

fit in this part of the state and that it is owner-operated by the crazy Pritchards, purveyors of four-color brochures to the attractions of the Green Mountains. It's a reprint operation. Mr. Pritchard is our only "author." *Oh*, folks are more likely to say. You work for *them*.

And there is nothing glamorous about what I do: I am the "general help."

When I came in, Mrs. Goodell, our executive secretary, blinked her smartly made-up martyr's eyes at me in a code I could not interpret. She held up her heavily ringed hands; silver bangles rattled into the sleeves of her red blazer. Mr. Pritchard was burning up the telephone in the inner sanctum. "I can't stand this," Mrs. G. said. But I knew that she could. "And Cleave," she added in a register of confidence and woe, "I have to tell you, there are no checks today."

"Excuse me?" I said.

One of my jobs is to take paychecks to Billy and Jill, who make runs to the printer and distribute our materials. They usually hang out at the warehouse on Idle Road, minutes from here but far from here, if you know what I mean. Naturally, it registered that Mrs. G. meant *my* check, too, and I went into meditation mode, or tried to—not easy, what with Jack Pritchard ordering his daughter, LeeAnne, in a voice normally reserved for summoning Satan, to bring him the *receivables*, and she screaming that she could not find them and had he forgotten that receivables were not her *bailiwick*?

Their offices are two doors apart.

Nevertheless, I willed an interior stillness, visualized the cosmos within, and ascended: I looked down on the building, then rose higher, floating over the local greenery, then the county, the state—and on and on in a series of diminishing images until the earth disappeared in the litter of space and I approached the peace and quiet of infinite distance with its cool, clean open-ended light-years.

Someone spoke my name.

I opened my eyes. Mrs. Goodell was looking at me with concern. "Cleave, are you all right?"

"Mrs. G.," I said, "I'm fine. But I do need to be paid."

“You will be paid.” Her face darkened with anger. “We will *all* be paid.”

I first encountered the Goodells years ago, when I was waiting on tables in a restaurant in the next village. As I made the rounds of my station, I saw that *Mr.* Goodell was in something like a drunken coma. I’d never seen anyone that paralyzed. On a return trip from the kitchen, I glanced at *Mrs.* Goodell, and her face wore the look of concerned and painful anger I was seeing now.

Mr. Pritchard called to me from the inner sanctum. As I entered, he turned his attention from the window and pointed at a package lying on his desk. “Take that to the post office, then go over to the warehouse and tell Billy to close up.” The telephone rang, but *Mr.* Pritchard just ignored it. He ignored me as well: his chair pivoted silently back to the window, to which watery view he appeared to surrender himself. From her office, *LeeAnne* yelled, “Dad, pick up!” But *Mr.* Pritchard did not pick up. For a few moments, he and I watched the rain paint the windowpanes.

I made myself ask him about the checks. A glimmering light washed pale shadows down the length of his face. “Cleave,” he said, as the phone continued to ring, “please just go.”



This is how I met Jill:

Once upon a long time ago, the eighth grade boys and girls were herded indoors for one of their foul-weather-Friday dances. A record player was set up, loafers and sneakers sprinkled onto the hardwood floor, and the musk of dead basketball games warmed and rose. When the needle dropped on the slow and baritonic Righteous Brothers, the boys rushed the girls, who had gathered into ranks of self-defense and availability. I grabbed Jill’s hand, led her out among the other dancers, and pressed her to me, and she was not reluctant. I had never held a girl—I had never even held hands with a girl—and here I was all but fused to one. We two-stepped in a small circle without speaking until the Brothers announced one last time that that lovin’ feeling was gone. “Thank you, Cleave”—

she breathed these words into my ear. You know how that feels? We peeled apart and cool air rushed between us.

But for some reason, we never clicked, and I didn't do anything to make it happen, and that togetherness—that little knot—untied. There was nothing left on the line but a murmur.

Now, Jill popped out of the warehouse and waved as I drove in, and my heart just laughed like it always does when I see her. "Cleave!" she called. The payday party had begun—she had a bottle of beer in her hand—so I quickly broke the news about the checks. They didn't seem too surprised that we'd been stiffed.

"This bites, man," Billy said. "Cleave: cigarette me." I complied, and he glared at me with rage and affection.

A large, oblong man, top-heavy and uncomfortably hinged, Billy had spent eighteen years in the navy, wandered home to Ohio, where he had a series of adventures involving law enforcement personnel, and now, as manager of the Pritchard Publishing warehouse—a glorified garage—shoved a beer into my hand.

Jill leaned against a stack of shrink-wrapped tourist guides and sipped. Her expression suggested that she was surveying the map of a week without money. In my own mind, phantom digits blinked in and out of existence. Billy wandered in a deliberate slouch, his shoulders braced for battle and for surrender. Then he boiled up, shoving his lizard-skin boot against a stack of pallets, spilling them. "Bastards!" Whipping his empty bottle against the far wall, he reached into the front-loader for a fresh one. Jill scooted past me, grinning madly, hooking my arm into hers, and we escaped.

Now, despite the fact that we'd never gotten to know one another early on, we did get into the habit, years after our school days, of taking walks together. At that time, Jill was seeing someone—in fact, she was informally engaged. But she and Bud (not his real name) were having a serious problem. I got wind of this, and one day I happened to stop in front of her house. She came out—she'd love to take a walk!—and so it became a now-and-again routine: I happened by, and if she happened to be around, we took a walk.

We reviewed the school lives we'd barely shared. She offered me bits and pieces of the Bud problem, and I ate her words like candy. I listened, I nodded gravely, I suggested different routes we could take—riverbank? graveyard? fairgrounds?—and occasionally threw in my two cents' worth. I imagined she might take a different path with Bud, and that my capacity as tour guide might somehow evolve into, simply, guide, and then to something better. But it didn't.

And for a while, all was well. And then it wasn't.

I hung around out front on that fateful December afternoon for what seemed a longer than usual time, and finally she hurried out, head-down, quick in her big boots. I noticed the light jacket and the speculative look she shot my way, and I thought, Well, this is the last time. A guide knows.

"God, it's cold," she informed me. I remarked that it must be polar air riding on the jet stream, and she nodded without looking up and hugged herself more tightly. She said, "Maybe we could just go around the block today."

"Excellent idea," I said. "A walk around the old block."

"Because it's just so *cold* today."

"Do you want to go back? Not that we've gone anywhere."

"What's wrong?"

"How's Bud?" I said.

She stopped right there. "What are you talking about?"

I said, turning to her, "Bud is back in time for the holidays, right? *Bud* has had a change of heart. Right? There will be an announcement on, oh, let me think now, Christmas Eve. Right?" I hated myself for talking this way, and even though it turned out to be true—right down to the impending Christmas Eve joy fest—I felt like a bastard, steamed up and shaking semi-righteously inside my coat. Jill's green eyes glazed. Fingers of wind smoothed strands of hair across her face. Her hair—how can I describe this? There's a ripple effect the wind can't make or unmake. But I went on talking as if I'd spent my whole life making women cry.

"So why are we even—*shit*. What is even the point? You don't have