

## A STRAIGHT TEASPOON OF PEPPER

Ruthanne glassed over the pasture from her living room. Last night's rain had further matted the grass into hillocks, amber moguls poised to trip the unwary. She scanned her binoculars right and spotted two mallards paddling at the pond's western edge. The drake upended and dabbled in the muck while the female swam on. Something red flashed within the higgledy-piggledy cattails and, sucking in her breath, Ruthanne dialed the Bushnells' center focus wheel. In the morning's overcast light it was hard to tell. Could it be? She wondered. Ruby home at last?

A fox lunged. The hen duck bolted skyward, abandoning the upturned drake.

Ruthanne tossed the binoculars onto the coffee table's book stack, the lenses covering the top book's title: *The Emotional Llama: Healthy Codependency*. For the first time since she had moved to Promise, her head throbbed.

"Oh, Charlotte, what am I going to do?"

Charlotte, a male house spider, perched on the curtain dowel above the living room's picture window, responded the same as he had to Ruthanne's prior pleas. He cast a new thread.

For the past two weeks, Ruthanne had waited for Ruby to return. She'd scanned the pasture, drove Promise's roads, walked walkie routes, left brown sugar cubes on the porch, taped "Lost Llama" posters to the island's stop signs (all twenty-eight of them), and called for Ruby until her throat rasped.

She had thought she and Ruby were OK. Good even. Content in their middle years. Hay and apple snacks of the highest quality, stall temperature set at a comfortable sixty-eight degrees, artisanal water piped from the pond to an in-install on-demand trough, daily walkies. What more could anyone need but food, shelter, companionship? Yet one morning, Ruby had simply left.

Coming home last Friday morning from Road's End Café, Ruthanne spotted Ruby across the road, poking her head out from behind shrubbery and staring. Ruthanne tried to coax her home with fallen Braeburns, and when the apples failed, Ruthanne begged with carrots, beets, and candy canes. While the candy canes gave Ruby

pause, she responded to Ruthanne's offerings by retreating further into the thicket, until the following day she disappeared altogether.

So preoccupied with finding Ruby, Ruthanne had stopped going to Road's End for her daily coffee, left the apple masher on its hook in the barn's tack room, ceased painting the farm's road stand mid-brush, all the while racking her brain for what went wrong.

Picking up the binoculars, Ruthanne searched the hillside above the pond again. It was Ruby's favorite spot: clear of apple trees and warm on those rare sunny days. This morning, though, the forecast called for rain (tomorrow and the following day, as well) and the grassy area was as dingy as the rest of the pasture. And as empty.

Charlotte coaxed and prodded the new silk thread into place. The dinner-plate-sized web was in continual flux as Charlotte melded stray strands, darned holes, crafted new snares. If viewed from afar though, Charlotte's toiling altered little.

Ruthanne lowered the Bushnells and rubbed her cheek against her shoulder. The soft sweater, hand-knitted from yarn spun from Ruby's fleece, smelled of lanolin, sweet oats, and apple blossoms.

Ruthanne glanced at the fireplace mantel, at the photos wedged between trophies Ruby had won in the Master Obstacle Division at the County Fair and Llama-Rama—Ruby with blue ribbons pinned to her halter, Ruby at the beach, Ruby eating blackberries, her mouth purple from the fruit. Seeing the photos of school children hugging Ruby made Ruthanne's head throb harder. Each holiday season she and Ruby dressed up as Rudolph the Reindeer (Ruby in red nose and tied-on deer antlers) and an elf (Ruthanne with red cap, pointy black shoes, and red-checked suit) and gave the school kids a ride in Ruby's cart, festooned with bells and holly garlands. The kiddos loved Ruby. At the end of the loop around Promise Island Elementary and Middle School, each whispered their Christmas wishes in Ruby's ear, and Ruthanne later told the parents. The holidays were six weeks away. Ruthanne looked at the corner of the living room where her Charlie Brown tree would stand. If Ruby didn't come home, there would be nothing under Ruthanne's either—no alfalfa treats, carrot bunches, shiny new leather leads, framed photos of her and Ruby signed by the kiddos.

Staring at her Christmas-tree spot, Ruthanne said, "Ruby, Promise needs you. Please come home." Ruthanne rubbed her face against the shoulder of her sweater, wiping tears from her eyes.

Focusing the binoculars on the hillside above the pond, Ruthanne glassed over the training jumps (no Ruby) and panned the hill leading to the pond (nothing). Drizzle dimpled the water's pewter

surface. The drake, bobbing right-side up now, was alone.

"Poor thing. Doesn't know what happened." She searched the shore for the female. "Charlotte, you don't think the fox nabbed her, do you?" If so, she thought, the male would be one lonely duck, because mallards mated for life.

Ruthanne pivoted the binoculars right, ignoring the house's front porch in the foreground with its two missing banisters and floorboards in want of winterizing sealant. Then she panned across the landscape, taking in the rutted driveway leading to Bush Point Road, two mailboxes (Mr. Wilson's numbers firmly affixed to his box, hers missing the last two digits), the goats hunkered in their pen, and saw nothing new since she had scanned ten minutes prior. She settled her gaze on the barn, hovering on the R2 Farm sign hung over the double Dutch doors. In the drizzle, the barn's newly painted siding appeared inky black and the metal roof dull.

Ruby had run off before. Bored with snacking on their Braeburns, Ruby had jumped the fence and crossed the road to Mr. Wilson's orchard, with its sweeter Pink Ladies and Winesaps. Promise was a small island. Ruthanne wasn't worried Ruby would be hit by a car, stolen, or shot by a weekender who couldn't tell the difference between a russet llama and the island's native black-tailed deer. Things like that didn't happen on Promise.

After a day or two of absence, Ruthanne would find Ruby sticking her head out of her barn stall, puckering her thick lips and whistling. Whistling until Ruthanne answered with the first stanza of Kenny Rogers's "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town" ("You've painted up your lips, and rolled and curled your tinted hair... Oh Ru-uuby..."). Ruthanne would unlatch Ruby's door and the llama would unpucker her lips and flutter her thick eyelashes against Ruthanne's cheek.

Her ex-husband, Howie, had been like that, too. After spending a week (or three) at some conference in a far-flung place or basketball tournament in Vegas, he would wander home and say, "Hon, let's have a quiet weekend with our [meaning his] favorites." She would reserve all the Star Wars episodes Blockbuster carried, play George Michael over and over (especially "Wake Me Up Before You Go Go"), and slide a juicy pot roast in the oven.

Ruby, though, hadn't come around and it was going on two weeks now.

Scritch-scratch. Scritch-scratch.

Limbs of the Braeburn growing between the porch and barn scraped against the house. The tree, spotted on a weekend trip to the

island, at first glance too tall and full to be an apple tree, was why she had moved to Promise all those years ago. Driving by that Saturday, she took one look and knew she had to live under its branches. The Braeburn came with a spring-fed pond, twenty-five acres planted with spindly apple trees, tideland rights, a three-bedroom homestead in need of TLC, and a For Sale sign. By the end of the day, she had yanked the sign free of its posts.

She never trimmed the tree, its loosey-goosey canopy so un-Howie. Howie, who pruned maples into lollipops, insisted she follow his mother's pot roast recipe down to a level teaspoon of pepper (never heaping). Howie, who insisted she wind her hair into a tight chignon.

She had not meant to leave Howie.

But the tree, with its leathery leaves and gnarly bark, wooed her. Falling asleep that first night on a blow-up mattress she had bought at Earl's Hardware, she knew from then on she would never go hungry, want for shade, or be ignored again.

"Charlotte, what a time to be thinking of Howie."

Ruthanne hadn't thought about him for awhile. Hadn't until Ruby ran off, and then Ruthanne wondered about Howie a lot.

After yet another deviation from his mother's pot roast recipe (adding playful paprika), Howie had insisted Ruthanne enroll in the Culinary Academy to learn traditional cooking arts. She roasted, pressed, and molded her way through Essential Meat, Cider Essence, and Cheese Basics. While she received the highest mark ever from the Cheese Faculty Director (for a refreshingly delicate camembert made from a creamy mixture of llama and goat milk), pressing apples captivated her. Crafting ambrosia from bushels of different varieties was like conducting musicians. Each offered its own flavor range. Braeburns set the tempo, Foxwhelps added phrasing, Russets integrated a beat. She realized sticking to a constricting formulaic recipe was like playing scales, while experimenting resulted in Mozart's Don Giovanni. Howie didn't want tastier. He wanted everything to stay exactly the same and never change.

Ruthanne yanked her leather bomber jacket from the coat rack next to the front door and hustled her arms into the sleeves. She tucked a loose strand of carrot-red hair into the coiled twist at the nape of her neck, the hair snugging perfectly inside the pins, her hands knowing from years of experience how to make it so. She hung the Bushnells around her neck by their leather strap and slammed her feet into muck boots, the jagged toenail of her right big toe further ripping gray woolen socks. The picture window rattled as she shut the door behind her, sending a stabbing pain across her temples.

Careful not to slip on the rotting vegetables she had strewn around the heritage Braeburn as compost, Ruthanne glanced up at the gnarly larger limbs. "I bet you don't miss Ruby." Ruthanne patted the tree. The one upside of Ruby's absence was the energy saved from chasing Ruby away from the Braeburn.

Caressing the tree's rough bark, Ruthanne said, "I don't know why she has it in for you. When she returns, I'll talk to her again. Insist she pee somewhere else. Use the barn as a scratching post. And the spitting, that has to stop."

If it wasn't for the tree, she never would have found Ruby in the first place. Its fruit, sweeter and juicier than typical Braeburns, had won blue ribbons in the Fair's Raw, Baked Pie, Preserves, and Cider categories until the year a flat-bed rumbled up the road (contributing to the growth of pot holes), delivering grafted varieties to Mr. Wilson. He planted his trees in straight-as-a-Roman-road rows, and just like that, the Best-of-Show blue ribbon was out of reach. Researching how she could regain some advantage, she read an article about the sweetening effect of composting and herbivore poop, llama excrement in particular.

For twelve years, it had been a great system: watermelon rinds, carrot tops, and potato peels from Road's End kitchen divided equally between tree and llama, Ruby stealing mouthfuls from the tree's share. Between rotting greens and Ruby's leave-behinds, Ruthanne held on to Best Cider year after year.

She picked up the Bushnells and scanned the pasture one more time. Across the hillside above the pond (nothing) and over the water's surface. "There's that drake." She quickly scanned the rest of the pond's surface and reconnoitered the shoreline. "Negatory on the she-duck."

Ruthanne relocated the male mallard and dialed the focus wheel until she spotted distinct feather curls on the duck's tail and its orange webbed feet. The duck paddled slowly. "Not a care in the world." Ruthanne watched the mallard paddle a yard or so, all the while looking straight ahead. "Must sense his mate's coming back."

She panned further right. Mr. Wilson's white Chevrolet pickup crept along Bush Point, swerving between potholes, barely missing their mailboxes and her cider and cheese stand. Mr. Wilson's dog, Reggie, hung his thick head from the rolled-down passenger seat window, and with each crater dodged, the Chesapeake retriever's head bobbed.

Approaching the intersection with Main, Mr. Wilson slowed. Instead of turning right and heading to the café as she expected him to, and as he had every weekday morning since he moved in across the

way, Mr. Wilson nudged the truck onto the brambly shoulder.

"What's that old codger up to?" Ruthanne looked through the Bushnells.

The truck's door opened.

Reggie bounded across the ditch and scrambled underneath the split-rail fence marking Wilson's property boundary, and ran hell bent for leather through his orchard.

Leaning against the tree trunk for stability, Ruthanne followed the dog's progress through Mr. Wilson's orchard rows. "Has to be something. That retriever's on the scent."

Reggie zipped between Winesap and Pink Lady rows, the trees and grass manicured Howie-esque. Ruthanne focused tight on Reggie. The dog slammed on his brakes at a Winesap and lunged straight into the air. One. Two. Three jumps. Reggie snapping his jaw each time.

Ruthanne scanned the crotch of the tree, where the trunk split into three uniform branches. "Something's there, alright." She focused on the crotch. "Awfully high, that crook. Pushing six feet. Ruby could easily reach it. But Reggie..."

Landing, Reggie's knees buckled and he smacked his chest against the ground.

"Ouch." Ruthanne clucked her tongue. She jammed her left muck boot against the apple tree's trunk so as to not blur the action.

"Crisscross applesauce. Will you look at that?"

On the fifth go, Reggie's teeth hit the mark and the dog grabbed hold of whatever it was. Returning to the road, Reggie pranced like a Tennessee Walker and held his tail straight as a flag pole.

"Awfully proud of himself, that dog. Hope Mr. Wilson gives him atta-boys for going the distance."

Ruthanne panned Reggie's destination. Mr. Wilson stood, back against truck tailgate, arms folded, watching the dog's progress. Reggie dropped the object at Mr. Wilson's feet and sat, tail thumping weeds.

"Gloves! Reggie retrieved Mr. Wilson's grimy pruning gloves."

Mr. Wilson stuffed the gloves into his back pocket, pivoted, and heel-to-toed to the truck's door.

Reggie's tail drooped.

"Not even a pat." Ruthanne removed the Bushnells from her eyes and stomped her left boot into the ground, smashing rotting potato peels into the muck. "You'd think Mr. Wilson cared more about his silly gloves than Reggie." She kicked at a pile of soggy vegetables and a half-decayed pumpkin rolled into a mound of llama poop, sending pellets into the air.

Ruthanne pressed the palms of her hands into her eyes as her headache raged. She glanced above her, through the large Braeburn limbs to the overcast sky. Nearly bare, the last storm had peeled away leaves and apples outside her reach. She could clearly see her bedroom window pane, usually obscured by leaves. The tree had grown so much. All the compost and Ruby's pellets, especially Ruby's pellets, had made a difference.

Small things, over time, made a difference. Then again, sometimes big things did too. Big gestures. Grand gestures that could erase all the little hurts, the complaining about her cooking, his long absences, the insistence on her hair tied up just so—those things could have been forgiven if Howie had just made that one big effort of paying attention to her: a rafting trip down the Grand Canyon's Colorado, front-row center-stage seats at a Bruce Springsteen concert, dead-heading their rhodies after a glorious spring-time bloom, all two dozen shrubs, some as tall as their Seattle craftsman home.

Ruby didn't need a new paint of coat on the wall or fresher alfalfa, she needed a grand gesture that let her know she was the only one. Ruthanne hustled through the barn's entrance. Inside the tack room the air smelled of saddle soap and fermentation. On one wall, looped over pegs, polished leather leads hung. Next to the door, an apple masher dangled from a hook, with remnants of dried Braeburn pulp clinging to its mesh. Shelves lined the remaining three walls. On the lower section of one, Ruby's panniers, their white canvas pouches shaken free of apple leaves and bits, sat ready for next season's harvest. Empty glass jugs, each with a hand-stenciled label: R2 Farm, Promise, WA, lined the other shelves. The refrigerator in the next-door storage room hummed, churning into a cooling cycle, keeping rounds of camembert and cider jugs bound for Seattle bistros at proper temperature.

"This should do the trick." Ruthanne studied the chain saw leaning against the wall. Her left hand patted her chignon and her fingers pushed at the bobby-pins. She grabbed hold of the saw's handle and lifted it. "Damn!" It was light and worthless, the gas tank empty. After the last storm, she had siphoned fuel from it for the barn's generator so Ruby's stall light shone, and had forgotten to refill it.

A large trash can stood in the middle of the tack room. Like knitting needles stuck into a yarn skein, rake, shovel, and hoe handles poked from the tin barrel. Ruthanne rubbed her left temple. It was hard to ignore what was clearly a migraine, but she had to make things right with Ruby. She shut out the pain and reached inside the bin. From the bottom, she grabbed hold of a pruning saw.

Ruthanne cut the air with the blade. "Never do." Perfect for

lopping small dead branches, she needed something with more heft. She tossed the curved tool back into the barrel.

Sifting through wooden handles, she shuffled hoes, rakes, and shovels.

"Aha!" Ruthanne lifted forth an axe. Wetting her fingers, she tested the blade. "Not bad. Not bad at all." She wrapped her fingers round the head and walked out the tack room's door.

Standing next to the apple tree, she raised the axe. Her purple patchwork skirt swirled against her knees.

Thwap. The axe hit the apple's trunk, bigger around than Ruthanne could stretch her arms in a bear hug. Ruthanne jostled the axe's handle, rocking the head back and forth, until the blade popped free. A divot of wood clunked to the ground, falling atop gooey celery stalks.

Ruthanne stepped sideways and raised the axe again. Water from the saturated soil oozed into her footprints. Drizzle dampened her hair and wet the shoulders of her jacket.

Thawk. Another divot flew into the air.

Sawdust sprinkled her muck boots, jacket, skirt, and head. With a solution so close at hand, her full-on-boil headache ratcheted to a simmer.

"Ruby, you're number one," she shouted. The goats bleated, adding urgency to her cry. Hopefully, Ruby would hear her pleas. Ruthanne raised the axe again. And again. Her back and shoulder muscles bulged with each swing and the divot pile grew.

Sweat dampened her brow and inside her bomber jacket, the sweater made from Ruby's fur clung to Ruthanne's wet back. Her arm muscles ached and she stopped swinging. Axe blade in the rotting vegetables, she leaned on its handle to catch her breath. She could hear her heart pound.

The six-inch gash glistened white and she touched the wound with a calloused finger. It was wet, damp from sap and rain. Her hand began to tremble. More sap welled from the slash.

"You're bleeding." She placed her palm against the Braeburn's trunk. "I'm so sorry." Her entire body shook and tears trickled down her cheek. "So sorry." Using the axe would take the rest of the day and the tree would suffer so. Best to go to Earl's and buy gas for the chain saw tank.

Under the carport, Ruthanne steadied herself against the sun-faded hood of her Ford pick-up. "Come on, Rocky, you can do it. Give me one more go." Grabbing hold of the door handle, she lifted up until she heard the latch engage, and opened the sagging door.

She climbed into the cab. With muddy boots on both clutch and brake pedals, she tried to turn the key she kept in the ignition, but her hand shook so. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She turned the key again. "Please, oh please don't fall apart on me now, Rocky."

The transmission churned but failed to catch.

She pressed her forehead to the steering wheel. "We're just running to Earl's. You like Earl's. There's gas there. Truck treats." With fingers crossed on her left hand, Ruthanne turned the key a second time. The engine gurgled, groaned, finally roared.

"Atta-boy." She patted the truck's console, her trembling less. "There's an extra can of oil in your future if you keep this up."

The truck swayed as she picked her way along the pot-holed gravel driveway. The real estate lady who sold her the house had told Ruthanne smoothing the bumps and filling the craters would be easy, and Ruthanne had planned to do so until she realized the pockmarks had kept Howie at bay.

Shortly after he discovered her missing (it took a week), he parked outside her gate so as not to risk bottoming his Caddie and begged her return, calling at the top of his voice. He offered a bouquet of red roses and promised to change. He left the bouquet against the gate before speeding back to the ferry to catch the last mainland-bound run.

For the first week, she thought about taking the ferry home nearly every morning. But come Sunday, the red roses, the most cliché flower, wilted against the gate, their petals blew away and stems dropped to the ground, blending in with the wildness around her. Howie had made his grand gesture, but it had been too little, and too late.

Ruthanne bounced on her old Ford's seat. Straight ahead, across Bush Point, Mr. Wilson's trees, like umbrellas at the seaside, poked from a grassy beach. Each trunk was wrapped in paper to prevent deer girdling and blankets of chipped bark encircled each base. Without commercial mulching and armoring, they wouldn't survive a Promise winter, Ruthanne knew. She turned and looked out Rocky's back window. Not like her Braeburn. Her heirloom's genetic makeup could withstand anything, even a herd of starving deer, and produce heaven-sent fruit. Who knew, a scientist might one day come knocking and ask for seeds, the others (she looked forward at Mr. Wilson's row markers: Winesap 635; Fuji A3221b; Lady Apple 983) dead from worm invasion or other over-breeding calamity. Her Braeburn could save apples from extinction.

A duck skimmed low, between two rows of Winesap 635,

swishing to the left then right, as if it were surfing an air wave, flying very unduck-like.

It was the female mallard.

Ruthanne slowed. The mallard glided across the fence, its belly skimming over the top rail. As she flapped across the road, the hen's and Ruthanne's eyes met. The duck swung into R2 and banked left. Stretching her wings and sticking her webbed feet out in front, the hen landed on the pond and slid aside the drake.

Sometimes, what you loved returned.

Her hands shook again. The truck's left front wheel dipped into a rut and Ruthanne bounced hard in the seat. She inhaled deeply. She would not cut down the tree. She would take one day at a time, and see where that got her. Ruthanne checked her rear-view mirror to make sure she hadn't left a piece of Rocky in the crater. "I should really fix this road."

She caught sight of herself in the mirror: hair pulled taut from her forehead and bound in a chignon. Leaving one hand on the wheel, she yanked the pins from the back of her bun and shook her head. Wisps of carrot hair and apple sawdust flew. The bobby-pins landed on the truck's floor, lost among the dirt and leaves.

# Qwerty

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### LAYOUT AND DESIGN

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P.O. Box 4400, University of New Brunswick  
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E-mail: [qwertymagazine@gmail.ca](mailto:qwertymagazine@gmail.ca)

Website: [www.qwertyunb.com](http://www.qwertyunb.com)

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