The Glow of Copper

CHRISTOPHER FAHY

A slash of light made Hattie Slocum pull over. She shifted to neutral, kept the engine running, and stared across the windblown field to the house.

She spit on her palm and rubbed at a greasy smear on the pickup's window. It didn't budge, so she rolled the window down. The glass wobbled and squeaked.

She was wearing Alfred's heavy shirt, and fastened the highest button against the cold. The shirt wasn't so good anymore. The black checks were black as ever, even blacker, but the white ones were yellow as an old dog's teeth. The bottom two buttons were gone, as well as the ones on the cuffs, and the wool was full of holes from those goddamn rats. She reached through the hole above the left pocket, felt around in her gray work shirt, and located a Chesterfield. She stuck the cigarette in her toothless gums, struck a match and lit up.

Last week of September, and already cold. She only had two cords of wood, that foolish Cubby—

There—on the edge of the eave—she saw it again: that shine, the glint of sun on metal. She squinted. New shingles. They'd put on a whole new roof—and had flashed it with copper!

The summer people had promised to live there year 'round, not just in season, and they'd kept their word, but look what they'd done to the place! Every time she went by—which was once every couple of months—things had changed. The summer before, they had torn out the bamboo, cut the puckerbrush, put in a big new kitchen window and painted the trim. In the fall, storm windows and doors had gone up, and spring brought skylights, a new electric service, new clapboard on the south....

And now the roof. Hattie had seen that roof done twice before in her life. Once when she was a girl, when Daddy and Uncle Van had done it with cedar shingles, and the time she and Alfred did it with asphalt—when? Right after Korea, wasn't it? It had to be, they were back from Bath Iron Works. My god, that long ago. It was due, all right: the open chamber had leaked some bad the last few years, and the ceiling was damn near wrecked.

The cold wind rippled the field, sending waves toward the house. Good Jesus, copper, Hattie thought. She and Alfred had flashed it with galvanized metal sheets from the printer, stuff he was throwing out. They used feedbags under the shingles instead of tarpaper, too. When you didn't have money, you learned to make do. She took a warm drag on her Chesterfield, thinking of Alfred. Ought to quit these filthy things, she thought, but doubted she ever would.

Buddy, her youngest, had asked: "Don't you want to go in and see what they done to the place? It must be tore up something wicked, they took eight dump trucks out of there." "No," Hattie had answered, "I want to remember it like it was.—Like when me and Oscar and me and your daddy lived there."

Just seeing that garden spot was hard enough, and god only knew what she'd find if she went inside. She and Alfred had grown enough food for a dozen people in that plot: squash and potatoes and turnips and carrots and cabbage enough to last all winter packed away in leaves down cellar—and now there was a big two-car garage standing right where the corn had been! It was built on damn good dirt, they used to shovel out the stable there. There were lots of flowers next to the house where the bamboo used to be, but these people didn't grow food. Didn't have to grow food.

The pickup wheezed and died. Hattie crushed out her cigarette and turned the key. The engine protested, sputtered, caught. She pumped the gas.

"Hi! How are you?"

Hattie jumped. Through the window she saw the rosy, square-jawed face she sometimes saw in dreams. How the hell had she let him sneak up like that, was she losing her mind? She forced a smile. "Well, hi! Pretty cool for September, ain't it?" She felt her pulse speed up.

"Frigid," the man said, blinking. He was wearing a brown felt hat, a sort of derby, and a thick red flannel shirt like they sold at Bean's. It looked brand new.

"Got your wood in?" Hattie asked.

The square-jawed man hesitated a second, then said, "All set."

"You heat with just wood or you use coal too?"

"Mostly wood—but we put in a furnace. See the chimney?"

Hattie looked at the house again. Two flues. She hadn't noticed that, her eyes must really be going. "Oh, that's good," she said.

"The way wood's escalated in price, you probably don't save much over oil these days."

"I guess that's true," Hattie said, thinking: True if you buy your wood. She remembered that time they ran out: she was sick all fall and Alfred was working in Bath and the kids hadn't cut enough for the kind of winter they had. It was gone by the middle of March, and the cold came down real hard. She burned cardboard boxes, she burned a chair,

and then there was nothing left to burn and it dropped to zero inside. She walked up and down the road holding Buddy, the baby, in her arms, till the sun came up. Sick as she was, she walked for hours. It was the only way she could think of to keep Buddy warm.

The man—what the hell was his name?—said, "You have time to stop in?"

Hattie nudged the accelerator, shaking her head. "No, I gotta get home," she said. "Got tons to do around the place."

"Just for a minute?—Just to see how we've fixed things up."

The engine died again and Hattie thought damn. This truck had cost her half of the money these people had paid for her house, and now it was stalling out. In the silence she felt herself starting to sweat.

"Cackie hasn't seen you in ages," the man said. "She'd love you to visit."

Cackie. Catherine, her real name was, it was on the deed. Cackie was a foolish, rich woman's nickname. "I better get back," Hattie said, "my truck's actin' up. I better get Buddy to check it out."

"How is Buddy?" the man said brightly. "I saw him at Grossman's once, oh, maybe six months ago."

"He's fine," Hattie said, and wondered: Had they seen Buddy's name in the paper last week? Operating under the influence, driving to endanger ...

"Why here's Cackie now," the man said.

Good god, she was already halfway across the field. Tall, golden, sleek, and looking like she owned the whole damn world.

The hay was up to her waist. If Hattie still owned the house that hay would have been cut twice by now, but these people didn't have horses, didn't have animals at all, that's what Luke had said. The barn where her Sally and Toby had lived was used for storage now.

Shielding her eyes with her hand and smiling, Cackie came up to the truck. "Why Hattie, it's so good to see you," she said. "But I feel so guilty. We've been meaning to have you to dinner for over a year. Impossible to believe so much time has gone by. Can you join us for lunch?"

Hattie's work pants were splattered with dirt and grease. Straw stuck out of her sleeve. "No, I have to get home," she said.

"Steamed mussels," Cackie said. "Am I tempting you?"

Steamed mussels. Depression food, that's what they used to eat in the days of no money. "Sounds good," she said, "but I gotta go bank that trailer of mine. Won't be long before snow, by the feel of it."

"Well stop in for just a minute, then. You just have to see what we've done." She smiled again. "Come on."

Hattie protested again that she had to get back. But the next thing she knew she had opened the pickup's groaning door and was hunching out of the cab and limping along beside Cackie, who said, "We'll

walk up the drive, it's easier than going through the field."

The drive had been scraped and leveled and topped with crushed stone. There hadn't been any sinking up to your hubcaps in mud *this* March. "We *love* this field," Cackie said. "In the spring it's just gorgeous, and even now, as dry and brown as it is, Fred and I both think it's *terribly* attractive."

Fred, that was his name, thank god the woman had mentioned it. "This field fed a lot of animals," Hattie said.

"I imagine it did," Fred said.

The sparkling white chips of stone crunched under Hattie's boots. Must've cost a goddamn arm and a leg to have this laid down, she thought. When she looked at the house again, she thought: it seems bigger, but why? The way the eaves were painted blue, that kind of blue they used in Camden and Wiscasset, maybe that was doing it.

"Do you like our new roof?" Cackie asked.

"Oh yes, it's *elegant."*

Fred laughed. "I don't know if I'd go *that* far."

"I think the copper flashing really *is* elegant," Cackie said; and looking at Hattie, she added, "We love the glow of copper."

"So don't I," Hattie said, thinking: and the glow of gold ain't hard to take either.

Cackie frowned, but kept smiling. "We wondered why the old roof was done in three colors," she said. "We'd never seen anything quite like that before."

Hattie cackled. "Oh, that was my idea. I said to Alfred, 'We put on a roof that's red, white and green, nobody's ever gonna miss *our* place.'"

"Ah-ha," Fred said. "So that was it."

No, Hattie thought as she limped along, that *wasn't* it. They had bought Ralph Watkinson's leftover shingles cheap, *that* was it. They'd never had enough money to buy all one color.

The wind rolled through the hay again, and Hattie thought of Toby. Nicest horse in the world, that Toby, but he got the heaves. No money for the vet when he first took sick, and after he got the heaves he was finished. He was buried right next to the barn ... The barn! She laughed sharply and said, "Will you look at the barn!"

It was covered with cedar shingles. Hard to see from this far away, but they looked like selects—or first clears at the least. First clears or selects on a barn!

Fred said, "What a project. The whole south wall was rotted out, I had to have it totally rebuilt."

"Don't surprise me none," Hattie said. "It was gettin' some bad when I was here. That place was made out of secondhand lumber to start with, you know. Me and Alfred tore apart an old chicken coop up to Montville, hauled it down in a trailer and put up that barn. We lost

our good one to lightnin', same way I lost my daddy. You two oughtta get lightnin' rods. They say it never strikes the same place twice, but I don't believe it, do you?"

Cackie's smile was broad this time. "No, I don't," she said.

They had reached the house. It wasn't a long walk, really, but Hattie's bum hip—the one she broke at Star Rope nine years ago—was throbbing bad. She was sixty-eight, and thought as she caught her breath: it's better to live on the road at my age, not up a dirt drive. Especially in spring, if you can't afford gravel and have to park down at the end and hike in because of the mud. But she missed the place. She really did. When she looked around at all that these people had done, her heart ached.

They had torn out the bridal wreath by the door—the one that Suzie had planted when she was a kid—and the lilac that Daddy had planted. It looked funny without them, wrong. They had put in all different things—azaleas, it looked like, laurel, too, and that other plant with dark green leaves that the doctor had around his house, roto-something. All the bamboo was gone. Well, good riddance to that. But of course it wasn't really good riddance, you never wiped out bamboo, no matter how smart or how rich you were. She could see a few of its dark red spears at the base of some laurel. Let it go for a couple of months, and they'd have a jungle again.

The catwalk up to the front door was gone, replaced by brick. Not chimney brick—new brick. "I always wanted to do that," Hattie said, "get rid of them boards, but what looked like a little rock under there was a boulder! How'd you move it?"

Fred said, "Weldon Farris bulldozed it out. He's been such a help."

Hattie stared at the bricks and said, "Well, that's nice to hear."

She had lived next to Weldon Farris all her life. When times were rough after Oscar died—back when pulpwood sold so cheap that even if she sawed all day she couldn't make enough to pay her taxes and feed everybody too—Weldon hadn't offered to help. He hadn't offered to help because he wanted the town to take her house so he could buy it cheap. He didn't want the house, he wanted the land—the field and the well. He'd have torn the house down if he'd got it. But he didn't get it: she married Alfred, then the war came along and there was work. Thank god for World War II. Then three years ago when the house got so rundown she had to move into the trailer, Weldon made her an offer on it. She refused, although she couldn't pay her taxes, and the summer people had come along and she'd sold it to them for less. Weldon had always sucked up to summer people, so it seemed only right that he had them for neighbors now. Anyway, he was an atheist, and he deserved it.

"Shall we go inside?" Cackie said.

Hattie's stomach sank. She limped onto the granite step—they

hadn't changed that, at least—and crossed the threshold.

She laughed, though she felt so turned around she was dizzy. The stairs were still in the same spot, right in front of her, but now they were covered with carpet. The bannister was gone, replaced by a wall and a modern railing. Her kitchen was now a dining room with a round oak table and six oak chairs; sun from the picture window fell in a brilliant bar at the foot of the table, right at the edge of the oriental rug. And the new kitchen—was in Daddy's room! They had torn down the wall and put the kitchen in there!

Feeling slightly sick, she said, "Don't that window look great. It's so light in here."

"Opening up that wall has made such a difference," Cackie said. "It lets in so much warmth in the winter months."

'Well I guess prob'ly!" Hattie said. "I always wanted to put in a window like that myself, bought a used one down to Eggle's in Owls Head, stuck it out behind the barn and before I could fix it a storm cracked a branch off the popple tree and smashed it to bits."

'What a shame," Fred said. "But we've found it doesn't pay to use old windows, you can't get them really tight."

"I guess that's true," Hattie said. She took a deep breath and said, "These the same old floors?" They used to be gouged and splintery, all the paint worn off. Now they were smooth and dark and glossy, with a prominent grain.

Cackie nodded. "We had Mr. Ransome sand and finish them. They came out quite well, don't you think?"

"Oh, beautiful," Hattie said.

She looked back at the kitchen, and her stomach contracted again. When the lightning killed Daddy she'd closed the door on his room and never let anyone use it for thirty years and now—the sink was right where Daddy's bed had been! She looked away—and noticed the beams overhead. "Well by god would you look at that!" she said. "I seen one of them once when I put up the celotex back in the fifties, but who ever thought they could turn out so nice?"

"Freddy's terribly clever," Cackie said. "Once we tore out that cardboard stuff—"

"The celotex?"

"Oh, is that what it's called? When we tore that out and exposed the beams, Fred instantly saw their potential. He hired some high school students to sand them down, then finished them with oil and turpentine."

"They look fine," Hattie said. "Real good." A huge refrigerator, new electric range, dishwasher ... "Well," she said, "I gotta go."

"Oh you have to see the rest of the place," Cackie said. "It'll only take a minute."

"This way," Fred said, turning back toward the stairs, and Hattie followed.

More polished floors, another oriental rug, more beams, huge sliding glass doors to a deck. The paintings on the wall had frames with little lights on top, like the paintings in that Farnsworth Museum that Clara had dragged her into.

"What did you use this area for?" Fred asked with a quizzical smile.

"This was the old kitchen," Hattie said. "—Before we drilled the well. When we got the well we tried to pipe the water in, but it froze 'cause there ain't no cellar under here. So we moved the kitchen to the other side, where it was when you bought the place, and turned this into the woodshed."

Cackie and Fred exchanged glances. "We insulated the crawlspace," Cackie said. "—With urethane."

Hattie nodded. What was this woman trying to tell her—that she was a fool? She had banked with hay—and the pipe had split—but hay was free.

"We blew cellulose into the walls, even though we tore them down and put up plasterboard," Cackie said. "Fiberglass batts are too labor-intensive."

Hattie figured that meant they were too much work. Summer people were sort of allergic to work.

Her head was swimming. She could hardly remember the way things used to be. Oscar had died here, right where the summer people's piano was standing now. She had wrapped his bad tooth in adhesive tape so the pliers wouldn't crack it up, but the damn thing shattered anyway, and what with him yelling and squirming around, she couldn't get all of it out. The pus went down into his lungs and my god he got hot, but Dr. Welsh said if they didn't pay up for Suzie's whooping cough he wouldn't come. The bedroom was freezing cold, so they'd moved Oscar into the kitchen, right next to the stove, but he'd died all the same.

"With the wall opened up, the view is superb," Cackie said. "So peaceful."

"Yeah," Hattie said, and her voice sounded distant and thin. She looked through the sliding glass doors at the spot that used to be her riding ring and a shock went through her. "My apple trees," she said.

Cackie tilted her head. "It was dreadful to have to cut them down," she said, "but they were right in the line of our view. Unfortunate."

"I guess," Hattie said.

Those trees had been Gravensteins, wonderful keepers, apples you couldn't buy in any store. For years they had been the only fruit they ate all winter, and now they were gone. She and Alfred planted them back when Buddy was just a baby, and Cubby fell out of one once and broke his wrist. They must have been thirty years old. Good trees like that, cut down for a view.

Fred led the way through the door that used to go out back. Now it led to a hall, a bedroom with a gigantic closet and a downstairs bath. The shower was fiberglass, and the sink--dark blue—was set in a tan formica vanity. "Blue," Hattie said. It just slipped out, she hadn't meant it to.

"Isn't that color delightful?". Cackie said.

Hattie hesitated. 'Well," she said, "I always liked a white bathroom myself."

At the head of the stairs was another, larger, bath with another fiberglass tub and shower and a *yellow* sink. How dirty *were* these people, anyway? Hattie thought. She always sponged down once a week and took a real bath once a month in the kitchen tub. Who needed more than that?

A washer and dryer sat against one wall, and the dryer was going—on a windy, sunny day like this! There was something wrong about that. She nodded at the washing machine. "Them automatics ain't all they're cracked up to be," she said. "I'll stick with my wringer. I like to be able to wash my clothes for as long as I want."

Cackie smiled her maddening smile and said, "But you can do that with an automatic, too, you simply reset the timer."

Hattie felt herself blush. "Oh really?" she said. "I didn't know that."

The south bedroom had been transformed. She and all of her kids had been born in that room—all except Chuckie, that is, who had given her so much trouble. Hattie had always found if she stared at the dark brown stain where the chimney leaked, the pain didn't hurt so bad. Now the stain—the whole ceiling—was gone, and Hattie felt mad as hell, though she couldn't say why. After all, it was their house now. In the north bedroom she said, "You sure got a lot of closets. I only had that tiny one downstairs."

"I guess we're pretty thingy people," Fred said.

When she was carrying Chuckie she had that growth on her neck, and the bigger she got, the bigger the damn growth got. If she had it off her baby would be retarded, Dr. Lord told her, but letting it go would kill her for sure. So she had it off, of course—and Chuckie *was* retarded, just like Dr. Lord had said, even though she had him in the hospital.

Well, not *retarded* exactly, he just couldn't read real good, but boy could he drive a car! She figured the growth was punishment for fooling around with Harlow, but then again Suzie wasn't really Oscar's and she'd turned out fine, got half way through eleventh grade. God must've been looking the other way that time. Or maybe He only let you make one mistake.

Fred opened the door at the end of the hall. Hattie's heart felt thick. The room looked twice as large as she remembered it, with a blue

flowered print on the walls, two skylights, and wall-to-wall carpet, all white. "My god," she said.

"My study," Fred said.

'Why, who would've guessed...." Her voice trailed off.

"Isn't it handsome?" Cackie said. "Fred loves the quiet here, and the light. What was it you used to call this room? You told us once."

"The open chamber," Hattie said.

Cackie nodded. "The open chamber. And what did you use it for?"

"Just storage," Hattie said—which was another lie. They'd kept a commode in here for when it got too cold and snowy to use the backhouse, and they'd hung the winter wash in here.

Through the window, the field shone and shook in the sun. In the bathroom, the dryer hummed.

As they went downstairs again, Cackie said, "It's certainly not a spacious house, but it's fine for just the two of US. Fixing the open chamber and building the new addition have helped a lot."

"I raised ten kids here," Hattie said.

"With your father's room closed off? And the open chamber used for storage? Amazing."

"We managed," Hattie said. At the foot of the steps she squinted at Cackie. "You people are gonna have kids, right? Didn't you tell me that?"

Cackie glanced at her husband, then smiled again. "We're not sure yet. Fred has his business, I have my photography...."

"Yeah," Hattie said. When they'd come to her about buying the place, she had asked the same question and they'd told her, Yes, they were sure they would want to have children one of these days.

"And of course we have our cats," Cackie said.

"Of course," Hattie said, and thought: You call two animals having *cats?* She herself had sixteen cats, with more on the way.

They took her out back to show her the deck. The sheds where she'd kept her goats and pigs and tools had been torn down. And the blueberry field—had been plowed under! It was nothing but lawn! "The blueberries here, my god, we got quarts and quarts...."

Cackie said, "From those tiny little plants?

"Best berries on the peninsula," Hattie said. A sudden knot hardened and burned in her ribs.

Around front Fred said, "*So* good to see you again. You'll have to come back when the landscaping's finished."

"Oh, yeah, I'll do that," Hattie said. "Thanks for showin' me through."

As she limped down the drive, the knot in her side made her catch her breath. She stopped, lit a Chesterfield, sucked it, exhaled. Smoke streamed away on the wind as she walked again.

Cubby was right, she thought, she should never have sold the place

to these people. They had wrecked everything she and Oscar and Alfred had done. They had promised they wouldn't tear the place down, and they hadn't, but they hadn't kept anything either: not the roof, the walls, the cement steps Oscar had poured, the sheds ... And they'd lied about having kids. She coughed deeply, bringing up phlegm, which she spat at the field.

The pickup's door creaked loudly as she hauled herself inside. She sat there, smoking, staring at the house.

The pain had moved higher, was close to her heart, and she thought: Oh these people were clever, all right, with their college degrees — utting down apple trees it took thirty years to grow, plowing under the best blueberries in Maine, building a garage on the richest soil you'd ever want to find. Yeah, that was real clever.

What a fool she had been. Cubby warned her, but she hadn't listened. She had sold the house for damn near nothing because these people had said they would care for the land, have kids ... Well, that was summer people for you, you couldn't trust them.

The copper flashing sparkled like a river full of coins. A blast of wind sent a shiver down Hattie's back.

The wind had been like this in fifty-three, that time when Luke was playing with matches. They hadn't cut the field a second time that year because the tractor broke, and my god did it burn! They'd only had three brooms and it was beating them, but luck—for once—had been on their side: the wind had changed, and the blaze took the chicken coop, sparing the house.

Hattie turned the ignition key and the pickup started. She revved the engine, thinking, Don't stall on me now. Don't you dare stall on me now. She looked at the house that was no longer hers, put the truck in gear, took a final drag on her cigarette, then flicked the butt into the field.

There was smoke for a minute, a sudden small flash, then the wind fanned a circle of copper into the hay.

Oh you're clever, all right, Hattie thought as she pulled away. And you're probably lucky, too. Well, let's just see.