

David Abrams

Vulture

Photo by John Simpkins: Early morning illumination, "Nipple Mountain" and the Steens, old Andrew's school

In the end, it is her and the vulture.

Marjean—body broken, skin wooden from the October cold, regrets logjamming her soul—leans against the boulder and tries to stare down the bird. It's not working. The vulture hunches on the pine branch unblinking, waiting its turn.

The bears, wolves, wolverines, chipmunks and beetles are just over the horizon. They are coming. But first, the vulture will have its time with her.

The wind fluffs its muddy-black feathers. The bird does not break its stare.

Before long, Marjean thinks, it will begin to taste her: small nips at first, then larger and larger bites, beak-scraping her skin until there is nothing left but a curled apostrophe of bones and a cracked skull whose only speech will now forever be the moan of wind through bone cavity.

She's just one more piece of roadkill carrion ready for the beak.

Roadkill. Killed by the road. That's a good one, Marjean.

This boulder feels good. It is her only comfort in this final resting place.

She is beyond the pain now. When she first came to, it was a tidal wave crashing hard with each breath. It was the be-all, end-all, a drowning roar filling her. Now, as time has passed, the pain, too, has faded to a low thump. She floats on a raft of numb. Marjean turns her head to find the vulture is still there. It is one with its branch. From out of the small head—so red, so raw—the vulture's eyes bore into hers. Those eyes are infinity, worlds within worlds, and they fill her with eternity.

This is how Marjean thinks now, in these last remaining minutes. Christ, she's getting all deep and spiritual. She can't wait for her whole life to flash before her eyes like a movie. That'll be a good one.

Damn that vulture. Those eyes will not blink and it's up to Marjean to break the stare-down.

She looks across the hillside at the suitcase broken open. The money—what is left of it—flutters in the wind like small green flags.

It was a \$2 bill that started it. Ten years ago, in that Laundromat in Denver and that goddamn guy behind the counter who refused to give her change for a \$2 bill ("Company policy, ma'am. We're not allowed to take 'em."), and Marjean, quarterless, making such a scene that the thin guy in the turtleneck sitting cross-legged in front of the wall of dryers waiting for his clothes to finish, came over with a fistful of change, and that led to them going out for coffee afterwards (which he paid for with her \$2 bill), and several lackluster dates in the coming months, neither of them feeling anything like love, but then one night he took her to a party, introduced her his friend, a lawyer named Gordon, and there was the spark leaping between Marjean and Gordon, and—caught up in the moment, buzzed on vodka shots—they made out in the bathroom, and the spark had to be hot and quick because Gordon was leaving the next week for Nicaragua ("Going to do some legal aid work for the Sandinistas" he said in a voice puffed with serious self-importance) and in a moment as odd as a \$2 bill, Marjean decided to pack up everything (which wasn't much) and go with him, and that's where they lived, and laughed, and loved, and fucked for six months, getting off on the rattle of gunfire in the streets every night, until Gordon felt his work was done and they returned to Denver to his promised job at a law firm and Marjean still went along with him because it seemed the inevitable thing to do (where else would she go? what else would she do?), which led to marriage, and then, after a time, pregnancy, but then the from-out-of-nowhere thunderbolt of divorce (it was Gordon, all Gordon, the dick, who'd warned her he didn't want kids and now look what she'd gone and done), so in her second trimester, Marjean found herself out on the streets again, facing single-parenthood, living at the YWCA without even so much as a \$2 bill to her name.

The wind sweeps through the canyon, the vulture sways on its branch, Marjean's blood slows to a soft tympani beat.

She hiccups another sob and goes back over her list of If Onlys:

If only she'd never moved to Butte, Montana, and completely lost custody of her son Ethan, thanks to Gordon and his slick lawyer tricks. If only it hadn't taken her so long to find work—first at the Finlen, then at Pork Chop John's, then Wal-Mart, and on and on in an ever-downward spiral of jobs until broke-starving-desperate she'd hooked up with Skeeever that one regrettable night in a squalid apartment at Silver Bow Homes, the ghetto of Butte—tiny lawns filled with a scatter of toys and needles and damp condoms. If only she hadn't liked it enough to stay for far too long. If only Skeeever, working his usual mindfuck, hadn't convinced her to take the suitcase to Helena, telling her, "Just this one time, baby." If only she hadn't said yes. If only she hadn't passed that highway patrolman near Basin and, thinking he was U-turning in pursuit of her, stepped on the gas and sped faster and faster into the canyon. If only she hadn't looked in the rearview

mirror—to see nothing was there after all—at just the wrong moment on that particular turn in the road. If only that highway bend had been less sharp and the guardrail stronger. If only the car hadn't slipped on the buttered gravel and tumbled through the guardrail and rolled down the hill, scattering Marjean, suitcase, and Skeever's dope money every which way.

If only she'd never had a \$2 bill in her pocket that day.

Marjean, life draining in a faster trickle now, looks at the vulture.

Shit. This is it. Is this really all I get in the end? This canyon, this boulder, this vulture?

A word comes into her head, as if beamed there by the vulture: Random.

This is nothing personal. It's just one of those things, isn't it? She's just one of those things now. She'll be an "unidentified woman" in tomorrow's *Montana Standard*, page 3. Two days later, they'll return her name to her, after the next of kin have been notified. Which means Gordon. And Ethan.

Marjean hiccups a laugh, hiccups a sob. It sounds like a ball ticking across a roulette wheel.

She thinks of what she'll miss the most.

Ethan. My greatest work. The one good thing to come out of all this. Those few short years with him. That time he ate ice cream and wore most of it in his hair. That butterfly he captured, but crushed between his hands as he ran to me and then he cried and cried. The smell of his head after a bath. His pudge-rubber lips on my cheek. That time he—

The words crack and fall in a tinkling heap, mid-thought. The last of her blood leaves. Her heart comes to a stop. And then the black of nothing closes over Marjean. A curtain drops.

Later, the vulture lifts first one foot then the other with a preparatory talon-flex. It puffs its chest, opens its wings with the rattling whisper of a fan and rises into the air. The vulture hovers above the car, the body, and the money-scatter. Then it descends to begin its terrible, beautiful work.

David Abrams is the author of *Fobbit*, a comedy about the Iraq War, which was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2012. It was also selected as both an Indie Next pick and for the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers program. His short stories have appeared in *Esquire*, *Narrative*, *Salon*, *Electric*, *Literature*, *Salamander*, *Connecticut Review*, *Five Chapters*, *The Greensboro Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and other literary quarterlies. He retired from active-duty after serving in the U.S. Army for 20 years, a career which took him to Alaska, Texas, Georgia, the Pentagon, and Iraq. His blog, *The Quivering Pen*, can be found at: www.davidabramsbooks.blogspot.com



