

The Last Thing to Burn

Also by Will R. Dean
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Dark Pines
Red Snow
Black River

WILL R. DEAN

The Last Thing to Burn



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Dedication to follow

I should have chosen the moment before the arrival of my children, for since then I've lost the option of dying. The sharp smell of their sun-baked hair, the smell of sweat on their backs when they wake from a nightmare, the dusty smell of their hands when they leave a classroom, meant that I had to live, to be dazzled by the shadow of their eyelashes, moved by a snowflake, bowled over by a tear on their cheek.

Kim Thúy, *Ru*

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I'm not going back.

Not now, not ever. My right ankle is the size of a fist and I can feel bone shards scraping together, six-year-old shards, as I limp away from the farm cottage towards the distant road.

The destination is there, I can see it, but it's not getting any closer. I walk and hobble and it's still a whole world of pain away from where I am right now. My eyes scan the road, left, then right, for him. Very little traffic. Lorries transporting cabbages and sugar beet; cars ferrying fruit pickers. One bus a day.

I have my five-pound note, his five-pound note: my ticket out of this flatland hell. The creased green paper's rolled and tucked into my hair, still black after these nine British years, though only God knows how.

Every step is a mile. Etched aches and new pains melt into red-hot misery beneath my right knee: boiling fat and razor-sharp icicles all at once.

The track is pale October brown, the mud churned and dried and churned by the tractor. His tractor.

I move as fast as I can, my teeth biting down onto my tongue. I'm balancing different pains. Managing as best I can.

He's not coming. I can spot his Land Rover from a mile away.

I stop to breathe. The clouds are moving over me, urging me out of this forgotten place, helping me at my back,

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pushing me along towards that road, towards that one bus per day with my five-pound note hidden in my hair.

Is that?

No.

Please, no. It can't be.

I stand completely still, my ankle bones throbbing stronger than my own heart, and he is there on the horizon. Is that his truck? Maybe it's just the same model. Some plough salesman or school teacher. I look right, towards the town past the bridge, and left, towards the village. Places I've never been. My eyes lock onto the Land Rover. *His* Land Rover. Keep driving, for the love of God be someone else and keep on driving.

But he slows and then my shoulders fall.

He turns onto this track, his track, the track to his farm, to his land.

I look right at the nothingness, the endless fields he's sculpted, and the spires in the distance, and then left to the wind turbines and the nothingness there, and then back. That's when I weep. Tearless, noiseless weeping. I fall. I fold forwards with a crack, a sharp stone beneath my right knee, a blessed distraction from my ankle.

He drives to me and I just kneel.

With a clean, clear-thinking head maybe I'd have managed to escape? Not with this leg. Not with him always coming back. Always checking on me. Always watching.

It's Kim-Ly in my head now and I will not let him in. My sister, my little sister, it is you that gives me the strength to breathe right now on this long straight churned mud track in this unseen flatland. I'm here for you. Existing so that you can carry on. I know what's to come. The fresh horrors. And I will endure them for you and you alone.

He stands over me.

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Once again I exist only in his shadow.

Consumed by it.

I won't look at him, not today. I think of you, Kim-Ly, with Mother's eyes and Father's lips and your own nose. I will not look up at him.

I've made it past the locked halfway gate, maybe two miles, maybe more.

But no further.

It's still his land all around. Smothering me.

He bends and reaches out and gently picks me up off the dirt and he lifts me higher to his shoulder and carries me on towards the cottage.

I am as limp as death.

My eyes are drips, falling to the mud, to the footprints I created an hour ago, the men's size eleven sandal prints; one straight, the other at right-angles – that one a pathetic scrape more than a print, each step a victory and an escape and a complete failure.

He walks without speaking, his strong shoulder bulging into my waist, hard and plateaued. He holds me with no force. His power is absolute. He needs no violence at this moment because he controls everything the eye can see. I can feel his forearm at the back of my knees and he's holding it there as gently as a concert violinist might hold a bow.

My ankle is burnt. The nerves and bones and tendons and muscles are as one damaged sludge; sharp flints and old meat. Fire. I feel nothing else. The pain is something I live with every day of my life, but not like this. This is wretched. My mouth is open. A silent cry. A hopeless and unending scream.

He stops and opens the door that I scrub for him each morning and we go inside his cottage. I have failed and what will he do to me this time?

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He turns and walks past the mirror and past the key box bolted high on the wall and heads into the one proper downstairs room. In Vietnam my family had six downstairs rooms. He takes me past the locked TV door and past the camera and he places me down on the plastic-wrapped sofa like I'm a sleeping toddler extracted from some long car journey.

He looks down at me.

'You'll want pain pill I expect.'

I close my eyes tight and nod.

'It'll come.'

He takes the Land Rover keys from his pocket and walks to the lock box in the entrance hall. He takes the key from the chain around his neck and opens the box and locks away the key and then locks the box.

He comes back in. A man twice the size of my father but half the worth of a rat.

'Empty 'em.'

'What?' I say.

'Empty your pockets, then.'

I unzip his fleece, the zip buckled as I sit hunched on his sofa, and reach down into my pinny, his mother's pinny, and pull out my remaining four objects, the four things I have left in the world that are actually mine.

'Four left.'

I nod.

'Well, your fault, ain't nobody to blame but yourself, Jane.'

My name isn't Jane.

'Pick one.'

I look down at the plastic dust sheet covering the sofa, at the ID card, which contains the last words I possess in my own language, the last photo of myself, of what I used to look like before all this happened. It's the last thing with my real name,

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Thanh Dao, with my date of birth, 3 November, with my place of birth, Biên Hòa, Vietnam. It proves I am really me.

Next to it lays mum and dad. My mother with her smiling eyes and her cow's lick fringe and that half-grin I see in my sister sometimes. And my father, his hand in hers, with love and trust and friendship and warmth shining onto my mother from his every pore, his every aspect.

And then Kim-Ly's letters. Oh, sweet sister. My life is your life now; my future belongs to you, use every second of it, every gram of pleasure. I stare down at the wrinkled papers and think of her Manchester days, her job, her hard-won independence, soon to be real, complete, irrevocable.

I inherited the fourth item from his mother. I didn't want it, but I needed it. I need it still. I found it in the store cupboard up in the small back bedroom, the one he makes me sleep in one week out of every four. *Of Mice and Men* is his mother's book, but I've read from it or thought of it or wished from it every day for years so now by rights I'd say it belongs to me.

I look at him, at his lifeless blue-grey eyes.

'I need them Lenn, please.' I mesh my fingers together. 'Please, Lenn.'

He paces over to the Rayburn stove and opens the fire door and pushes in a handful of coppiced willow and closes the door again and turns to me.

'You went leaving here so now you choose one of 'em. If you don't, I will.'

He goes over to the sink and I see the jar on top of the cabinet.

'Can I have a pill first, please.'

'Pick one and then you can take pill.'

My ID card. My photo of my parents. My sister's precious letters. My book. My, my, my, mine. Not his. Mine.

I already know which one it'll be. I've rehearsed this in my mind. In the middle of the night. Planning. Scheming. Hoping for the best for preparing for the worst. For this.

'You didn't even make it one third out,' he says. 'Don't know what you were thinkin', woman.'

I focus on Mum's face. I memorise it through my ankle pain, through the hurt and the dry tears. I register the details. The asymmetry of her eyebrows. The warmth in her gaze. I look at Dad and scan his face and take in every mole and line, every beautiful wrinkle, every hair on his gentle head.

I push the photo towards Lenn and gather the letters and the book and the ID card back into my arms and onto my lap and bury them deep inside his mother's pinny.

This was a selfish act. But I think my parents would understand, they'd know I needed the book to stay sane and the ID card to stay me and the letters to get up each morning and go to sleep each night. They'd forgive me.

He picks up the photo and holds it by the corners so as not to touch the image. He puts it inside his oil-stained overalls and then he stretches up and takes the jar off the kitchen cabinet. It looks like something you'd find in a sweet shop, tall and made from glass with a screw-on metal lid. It contains tablets the size of pencil erasers. He won't tell me exactly what they are, but I know. He's a farmer. He can order them without anyone asking any questions. He takes out a pill, the white dust marking the cracks of his calloused fingertips like some rock climber or weightlifter, and then he snaps it in two. He places half back inside the jar and screws on the lid so tight I can't budge it, and then places the jar back on top of the cabinet. I've drugged him before, of course. Well, I tried to, did you think I wouldn't? Fragments dissolved into hot gravy. Almost two pills. But he's very particular about his food. He tasted something off. By then he'd eaten most of his dinner. I

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watched him, praying, pleading, begging. He got sleepy, and then, dozy like a furious wasp at the end of summer, he came at me. That's how I lost my own clothes and the silver ring my grandmother gave me when I left home. He tasted the horse drugs in his chicken pie gravy. He's more careful these days.

'Have this.'

He pours me a glass of water from the tap and hands it to me along with the snapped half-pill and I take it and swallow it.

'Can I have the other half, please, Leonard.'

'You'll get poorly, you know you will.'

The pill's taking effect slowly. I urge its haziness down my body towards my ankle, faster, willing it down there through the blood vessels and nerve pathways to dull the pain away.

'We'll see about rest of pill. Maybe after you've had your tea.'

That is hope right there. The chance that I might black out, be swept away by the tide into a deep and dreamless sleep. He'll be watching me, monitoring me, he always is, gazing, staring, owning, but I will be at the bottom of the sea by then, a break from this fenland life, a sabbatical from hell.

'Better get sausages on while I watch tapes. I want it like me mother did 'em, proper brown and no pale bits.'

I try to stand from the sofa but my ankle's too raw, even with the horse pill kicking in. I drag myself over to the fridge while he sits at the old PC, careful to unlock it with his password, his broad back shielding it from me. The screen lights up. Everything in his fridge is his food. Oh, I'll eat some of it, but I didn't buy or grow or pick or choose anything. I drop the sausages, Lincolnshire, into a cast-iron pan on the Rayburn. He's scanning through the tapes, the tapes from the seven cameras installed by him in this house, his house, to monitor me every single day. The sausages spit in the pan. I watch the

fat liquefy and boil inside the sausage skins, bubbles moving, and then one bursts open from its side and fizzes.

‘You’ve had quite a day, ain’t you?’ he says, pointing to the screen, to me a few hours ago collecting my belongings, my four objects that are now three, and leaving this place through the front door.

‘Quite the little holiday, you’ve had, ain’t you?’ he looks over at the potatoes in the sink. ‘Make sure there’s no lumps in it this time, Jane.’ He turns back to the desktop screen. ‘Me mother’s never had lumps. I don’t like eatin’ no lumps.’