

The first clue was the rain. A fine drizzle was so much a part of life in the west Cascades that people scarcely noticed its presence. They refused to carry umbrellas, letting the mist cover their hair in a light spray and their clothes in dampness. Oregonians seemed to like their air with fizz.

An occasional shower was normal, too, where a person had to run from a shop or home to a parked car, cursing the time it took to fumble for a key.

But this was something else. It had rained hard, almost without pause, for over a month. The creeks and rivers were swollen, flooding the lowest homes. The strawberry crop was ruined—berries that had not succumbed to mold and rot were devoured by slugs escaping the wet mud. The Cedar Creek Youth Soccer League had cancelled its season when the fields turned into lakes.

At the time, though, Nancy Mackay wasn't looking for clues. Squeezed under the rafters of a musty attic, she was looking for a leak. She inched along, keeping her knees on the joists to avoid breaking through the plaster ceiling. Fine particles of dust and insulation shimmered in the beam of her flashlight, and her neck and wrists were beginning to itch. She sneezed, raising a cloud of dust.

When she finally reached what she thought was the right spot, she ran the flashlight over the tongue-and-groove roof boards. Except for a few damp spots at the joints, she saw nothing. She imagined as much as felt a wet spot on her back, and she twisted her body to look directly overhead, hoping to see a steady drip or at least a rivulet running down a rafter. But the dim light of the flashlight revealed no evidence. She sneezed again, then backed out to the access hatch at the other end of the attic.

In the main room of the café, Nancy brushed the dust off her jeans and turtleneck shirt, and stared at the light bulb in the center of the ceiling. Water was seeping down the side of the fixture and gathering at the end of the bulb before falling in a steady drip. There was already a half inch of water in the bucket she had put under the leak when she discovered it. So where was it coming from?

A foot from the light, a bulge was forming in the ceiling paint. She shrugged and dragged a phone book from a pile of papers stacked under the counter.

“Roof Riders!” the man’s voice on the phone said.

“Hi. I own a restaurant, and I’ve got a leak somewhere in the roof.”

“Well, we can fix it. We can have someone out there by 3:00—”

“By 3:00? Your ad says that you can handle any problem at any time of day or night.”

“Oh, that’s true! We can handle your problem at 3:00. And we’ll be fixing roofs all day. If you look outside, you might see it’s raining. Been doing that for a while.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed.”

She gave him her name and address, and began busying herself with the tasks of opening the café.

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“It’s open, Mary!” She beckoned through the plate glass window at Mary Mowatt, her head cook, who, huddling close to the building to escape the rain, was fishing in her purse for the key.

Mary’s shoulders fell in relief, and she darted through the door into the warmth of the café. “Thanks Nancy, I didn’t know you were here, didn’t see your car. I got soaked to the bone just walking from the bus stop.”

“Well, hang up that wet coat, and I’ll get us some coffee; it should be brewed by now. I decided to walk in from home today, rain and all. Wasn’t so bad with an umbrella and gum boots...but I think I got some strange looks from a few drivers.”

As she tipped the coffee pot, Nancy paused to breathe in the strong, slightly sweet aroma. French caramel. “I think we have enough potatoes to last today, but we’ll need some more tomorrow. Our tortilla supply is getting a little low too. Can you think of anything else I should pick up?” Nancy set the two cups at a small table next to the window. A drop of rain was still on Mary’s cheek. But it wasn’t rain.

“Mary, what’s wrong?” She touched Mary’s hand. “Here I’ve been babbling away without really paying attention--I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, I’m fine.” Her voice caught, and she took a breath. “Last night John told me he wants a divorce.”

“Huh? I thought everything had been going so well for you two.”

“So did I. It just came out of the blue.”

“But what did he say? Is it an early mid-life crisis? Does he have the hots for a 25-year-old?”

“Well, he didn’t really give a reason. He just said he thought it would be best for us.”

“Best for you? In what way would that be good for you? Sounds to me like a pretty weak reason.”

“Yeah. I suppose.”

Nancy took a tentative sip of her coffee, testing to see if it was still too hot to drink. She looked into her friend’s eyes. “So what did you say?”

“Um, the funny thing is, I almost felt like I expected this. I didn’t really say anything. Maybe I don’t have the energy to fight it. But we have been happy together. It just doesn’t make any sense.”

They sat in silence. Nancy said, “You don’t have to work today if you don’t feel up to it. I can fill in for you over lunch and call Mark to fill in this afternoon. Just take some time for yourself.”

“No, thanks, I think I need to work just to keep my mind off this. I tell myself that I’ll go home this afternoon and everything will go back to normal. I tell myself that this is just a bad dream...but part of me accepts it too--that’s the scary part.”

Nancy sipped her coffee, trying to think of something to say. She rested her hand lightly on Mary’s forearm. “John will come to his senses. He would be crazy to lose you.”

They finished their coffee and continued working. To lighten the mood, Nancy put a country station on the radio--a concession to Mary’s poor taste in music--and turned up the volume. She took a sharp knife and began to cut potatoes for soup.

Jaime Saldivar made his entrance fifteen minutes before opening. Nancy glanced up to see what he was wearing. Tight black jeans, alligator skin cowboy boots, and a deep blue shirt with pointed collars the length of 747 wings. Pretty conservative.

“It’s time to party, ladies,” he said. “I’ll mix the margaritas if you’ll get the chips and salsa.” He rummaged in the kitchen cabinets, pretending to look for tequila.

Mary laughed. “What’s the occasion, Jaime? You get lucky last night?”

“Not like you think, pervert. In fact, the lovely Sylvia Wilson consented--no, enthusiastically agreed!--to accompany me on a date tonight. It will be an evening of romance that she will never forget...Hey, what’s with that?”

He walked to the bucket and stared at the dripping light bulb above it.

“A leak,” Nancy said.

Jaime grinned and pulled a piece of paper from under the counter. He scribbled something on it and taped it to the bucket. Nancy put down her knife and walked over to look. “Soup of the day,” the sign read.

“Ha ha,” Nancy said. Drop by drop, the bucket was filling with gray water.

At 10:00 Nancy plugged in the purple neon “Open” sign, and the mid-morning coffee drinkers started to drift in. They didn’t order food, but Nancy didn’t begrudge them taking up space. The markup on the coffee was high, especially if they ordered exotic lattes or mochas. In the back of her mind, she knew it was her only hope for eventually running the place in the black.

Jaime cheerfully kept the mugs filled, stopping at the tables to joke with the customers. Nancy helped Mary in the kitchen, occasionally poking her head out the door and greeting people she knew.

The lunch crowd finally arrived, a sodden group of townspeople who filled the place with noise and laughter. Nancy helped Jaime, balancing plates on her arm and drinks on trays. It was her favorite time of the day, the reason she bought the restaurant in the first place.

In mid afternoon she unfolded her umbrella and hunched into the downpour. She crossed Alder Street, stepping wide to avoid the dirty water rushing in the gutter. She took her time, checking out the window displays of boutiques and junk shops. The town was, to put it charitably, a loose collection of organized clutter. It had its own charm, ugly in an endearing way, like a basset hound. A few years ago, the town fathers and mothers had attempted to impose an artificial theme on the buildings, arguing that business would increase only if the property owners would slap on the facade of a cowboy western town. Two enthusiastic

boosters complied, to hilarious effect: the locals snickered at the fake building fronts and called the owners “Doc” and “Miss Kitty.” The city council and chamber of commerce reluctantly conceded that there was something to be said, after all, for fierce independence, and chaos once again reigned in building design.

Nancy crossed High Street and climbed into a residential area. Fat raindrops smashed into limp flower petals on the rhododendrons in the front yards she passed. The rain beat a drum roll on her umbrella and sizzled on the street pavement.

She crossed her yard on a winding footpath, turning a blind eye to the weeds growing under her azaleas. Unlocking the door, she savored the stillness of the house, a silence that she knew would be shattered in moments. She picked up the phone and called Sarah, her babysitter, letting her know she was home early.

As she started preparing dinner (macaroni and cheese, good dinners having gone by the wayside since she started cooking for a living), the door burst open and the house filled with noise. Her children, along with a handful of friends, streamed in, dropping a wet collection of backpacks and coats on the kitchen floor and table.

“Hi Mom!”

“Hey Maddie, how was school?”

“Fine. I got a A on my science project...” Her voice trailed off with the stampede of Nikes as the horde moved downstairs to the bonus room. Nancy shook her head and went back to grating a block of Velveeta. Outside, a dark cloud moved over the western sky, blocking what remained of the daylight.

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Later, after the hour-long ritual of getting the four kids to bed, she and Bruce floated in the hot tub. The rain had eased off some, making a soft rattle against the corrugated plastic roof over the tub. The bitter smell of bromide mixed with the cool and moldy scent of the air blowing in from the back yard.

“So how was your day?” he asked. She paused before answering, wondering how their lives had become so hectic. He had been home for four hours, and this was the first opportunity they had had to talk. Unless you counted the happy babble that had flowed over the dinner table.

“It went fine,” she said, then told him about Mary Mowatt, and her husband who thought he wanted a divorce. She still found it hard to accept.

“Things really are getting weird,” Bruce said.

“I guess.”

“At the bank, too”

“How so?”

“Well, a bunch of our customers apparently emptied their savings accounts over the past week, and today they brought their money back in--in cash.”

“Well, at least they brought it back.” She listened to the rain for a moment. “Why did they pull out their money in the first place?”

“No idea. One of the tellers asked, and all the customer said was something like they were worried about a financial crisis. That’s obviously something that we don’t like to talk about, so we didn’t pursue it. Kind of like joking about bombs at an airport security gate.”

Nancy propped her legs on his knees and leaned back, letting her blond hair float on the water. A gust of wind shook the roof, sending a cascade of rain over the edge. Somewhere under the bushes, a frog added his song to the rhythm of the night.