

Title: Pineapple Weed

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Elizabeth thinks that now Marty is gone – *and still no questions asked* – she might as well close up the cabin and take the Suburban clear to Halifax, where she has never been but it's far and it'll do. Then on her way out she'll go ahead and unload Marty, thawing as he is and starting to smell despite Elizabeth's heavy hand with solvent, its leaf-green liquid turning Marty the color of an unripe banana. Maybe she'll deposit him behind the sewage plant. Or maybe send him straight into the Thirty Mile, feet first.

Pinpointing Marty's final resting place was the hitch. *The flaw in the liniment*, as Marty himself would say, stupidly, and then Elizabeth would pipe up, "*Fly in the ointment, damn it.*" But look how she'd let that go: Instead of spending another winter correcting the uncorrectable, *correcting the incorrigible*, as Marty would say, Elizabeth worked out a plan that began and ended with the placing of Marty's largest trap, the legal one, in a willow-choked culvert invisible from the two-lane yet near enough to its Jake Brake-racket so as to scare off game. Her plan was this: One moonless night — dead winter freeze-up would be best, *no stench* — Marty would alight from the pickup of some equally drunken buddy and, being Marty, would relieve himself in a slow, ale-scented stream as he gazed philosophically at the heavens before deciding, *what's the big rush*. Then the buddy would gesture with his thumb to convey that Marty should for once use his head and take the deer trail straight home. But Elizabeth knew that Marty knew how their life together had long passed the quickest-distance-between-two-points

phase: He'd use his head, all right. He would take the long way, crashing through black spruce bogs, every footfall releasing the breath of winter rot.

That he'd stumble in headfirst was too much to hope for, Elizabeth understood, but with Marty you never knew. Old as he was — 67 come July and still a full head of hair — Marty had a good pair of knees on him: Drunk or sober, he could be quick-footed through a mile or more of tussocks. Except for the body-dumping oversight, Elizabeth's plan worked fine. Marty had gone the way all night-moving creatures do, one ordinary step after another until hot pain stung in all directions at once and converged in the nostrils. Too late. Even his cries had been animal, starting in shrieks, descending to howls, subsiding in laments, wider and wider apart, until all was quiet and the stars withdrew.

"It's getting to be a fine day," Lewis said, moving closer to Elizabeth as they sat, hips nearly touching, outdoors on a pine bench, the cabin door behind them left open despite the early arrival of flies. Together they watched as birch leaves began to reclaim the sky. It was March and cloudless. Much too early for warm morning sun, for moss to resume lustering the privy. Lewis could hardly believe his luck: Marty, a man who deserved none of the good fortune that seemed so steadily to roll his way, was gone not two weeks and here was Lewis, Carcross born and bred, with a strong back and a good nose for being in the right place at the right time. And that place, Lewis had thought often but breathed to no one, was here beside Elizabeth. Restrained in her mourning — in all the years he'd known her, Lewis had never seen her cry — Elizabeth was unruffled as ever. True, she said very little. But wasn't that only normal? What would a widow with a cabin free and clear and insurance money and a practically new vehicle have to gripe about, was how Lewis saw it.

In his stocking feet, he stepped across the wood-scrap porch. The view was upstream to Marys Creek, still ice locked as Lewis had pointed out over last night's stew. It had been the last of Marty's game meat — moose, possibly, but the gray-blue chunks braising in the pan had been impossible to identify. "Leave it open," Elizabeth had instructed this morning as Lewis made to latch the door. "Your supper just about stunk up the place." Lewis was hurt. None of the other women in his life had complained even once about his stew. But Marty was gone and Elizabeth had money and a cabin free and clear. And now winter was ebbing. With his foot he cracked the door wider.

"It'll be fine weather soon for pineapple weed," Lewis said. He rubbed his hands together like a man about to dig in. To be funnier yet he smacked his lips. "Hon? You looking forward to picking pineapple weed with me? I like mine fresh and raw." In case his message wasn't clear, he smacked his lips again, gave her a grin. She blinked and pushed the door all the way open. Silenced, Lewis squinted at the sun. He scratched at his chin in imitation of men with stubble; Lewis had begun to wonder if Elizabeth might be comparing him with Marty, full bearded where Lewis was without. He viewed her in profile — thin lips, graying eyebrows, long chin. Now Lewis was up, pausing on the top step to survey ice on the creek. Elizabeth saw how quickly he'd learned to avoid the middle tread, loaded with carpenter ants that Marty ignored. Lewis would see to that; he'd take the Suburban into town this week and pick up a board and replace the step, gone spongy and black, without Elizabeth ever having to ask.

"Come to think of it," Lewis began again, "what we sorely need, hon, is an overhang on this little porch of Marty's." Come June after they'd had their fill of fresh pineapple weed, *tastiest finger food on God's green earth*, Lewis would scour the sandy shoulders of the two-lane for older, slightly bitter pineapple weed, their scent well past prime, and dry the flowers

in bunches under the overhang that he would make for Elizabeth with his own two hands. All winter they'd sip pineapple weed tea by the woodstove, their socks and mittens drying side by side on the grate. Around them would be the aroma of blended bodies: Yukon Pure for him and, as Lewis liked to quip, Eau de Piney-Sol for her.

“Hon? What do you say to pineapple weed?” Lewis raised his left hand to fend off the fly that Elizabeth had been watching as it took a chunk off Lewis's manifestly hairless cheek. Blood seeped before he could attempt a swat. There might be two bites, for all Elizabeth knew. She was picturing a certain fast current between Whitehorse and Dawson; it might do if the ice held up and regular applications of Piney-Sol continued to do the trick. Marty out there in the trap, not as mangled as you might think, *identifiable*, is what the NWMP would conclude. And here was Lewis itching to forage far and wide for pineapple weed. A winter-weary nose like his, eager for that first tang from a pineapple weed cone crushed between thumb and index finger ... a nose like Lewis's would detect solvent in the lightest breeze, carry him straight to Elizabeth's cache and Marty's banana-green remains.

Lewis returned to her side. There was still too much snow to step from the stairs to the ground and so he sat again with Elizabeth, nuzzling up close and reaching his hand down to wipe the fly-bite blood on his sock. She sat very still, eyes closed, recalling the shale bluffs above the bends of the Thirty Mile. Instead of chancing a walk on softening ice while lugging Marty bloated like an overfilled pillow tank, one good heave off a bluff would do, wouldn't it? Not that Elizabeth, arthritic even in fair weather, could scale a bluff or much of anything anymore. And blame the Marty decades for that too. For leaching away her youth, her looks, her sap. “*You have the scent of maple syrup about you, my dear,*” Marty liked to say. And, yes, she'd believed.

With his hands now spaced at what he imagines are four-foot increments, Lewis is measuring the new overhang — *our overhang*, he says. He smiles. At some point he has slipped into his work boots. They're unlaced and the two reddish tongues flap-flap with each step. Elizabeth laughs at the sound, points at Lewis's feet, at the way the tongues remind her of two dogs under foot at the first sizzle of meat in the pan. She's about to confide this, to ask in her own way if he too is intimate with life's foolishness. But hold on: *Life is no joking matter*. "Forget it," Elizabeth finds herself saying aloud and Lewis hears nothing. He's checking the Suburban's gas gauge, reaching into a back pocket for his beat-up wallet in case there's money for lumber and beer.

The unshaded sun is hot. Elizabeth wonders how soon until the river ice goes out, how long until her last gallon of Piney-Sol runs dry. She dislikes pineapple weed, whether fresh and crushed or dried and steeped. To Lewis she will point out, *It's only chamomile and awfully weak chamomile at that*, and when he answers, *Absotively, posilutely untrue!* as Marty himself would have done, Elizabeth will reply, *now that's the flaw in the liniment* and she will long for the Thirty Mile and its piney bluffs and its many many bends.

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