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Bliss and Other Short Stories

Ted Gilley

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Bliss

and Other Short Stories

TED GILLEY

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For my mother,
and to the memory
of my father

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All Hallows' Eve

Horses are the new children. Pasture and field in high-autumn shades of bruised red and yellow, aroma of horse-apples and hay, sweetness of harvest and rot. White fencing, a kitchen dooryard and the white farmhouse with cellar workshop, passive solar, a royal flush of hardwood floors, a black, white, and chrome kitchen, offices, cedar chests piled deep with quilts against the cold New England winter nights, just commencing. Plantings, views, privacy deck. A pair of pristine barns shaken free of chattels. And two men.

"I'm just saying," Jamie says.

"I *hear* what you're saying." Sirut puts a hand on Jamie's Saab, lifts it off.

"Yeah, thanks, I don't want that to get scratched"—his eye on Sirut's ring.

"I'm hip to that." Sirut's lingo amusing and dated, here and there a phrase of American he might have learned from a soldier. He glances at his own car, a Chevy. It announces his lack of affluence—*I am a very used and very tired car*—and he wishes he could have parked it elsewhere. But where? No practical arrangement for parking is laid out. So, he brought it down into the yard and parked it beside this nice expensive one.

Jamie says, "She'll be back in, I don't know. Fifteen minutes?"

Janie, he means. *Jamie and Janie*. In Sirut's country, the similarity in names would be a love sign, a small domestic marvel, celebrated. Here it is a smirk.

"I mean, I plan to get as much as I paid. Even more—you can get that. Saabs don't decline in value."

There is a swish of gravel from under the trees they both believe is caused by Janie's car. Hers is the last house on the road, the nearest neighbor is half a mile away. *Locals*, Jamie called them. Sirut gazes into the red and yellow foliage roasting in the declining sun. In Cambodia, there were only, finally, *locals*. Millions of *locals*.

Janie's car rolls into the kitchen yard.

"So, you'll stay to dinner?"

Sirut is silent. He would prefer to speak with Janie, and alone—had meant to find her here *alone*. After all, Janie is divorced, she told him so only the day before: Did he understand? *Yes, we have divorce in Cambodia*, he had replied, grinning. (*I'm hip to that.*) He did not say, *The divorce of all from all*. No point.

But to find the former husband here, walking out from the house, a cup of coffee in hand, a big smile on his big face. *You must be Sirut. Must I!*

"I do not understand." Sirut hears Janie's car door snap shut; he is aware of her diminishing distance from them, even though all is quiet here, muffled cleanly—in winter, too, drifts, floods of snow! Nights so cold your bones could crack. And in these woods, what? Isolation. A far-off buzzing of cars or a single-engine plane with its sad, brassy note blurred across the tops of the trees. The cough and catch of a chain saw.

We escaped the city, she said. She and her husband—this Jamie—had wanted a positive lifestyle, horses, a house, careers that could be plugged in, unplugged, transported, updated. And they wanted to see the world. *Before it's too late*, she said, serious all of a sudden.

They'd been drinking gin-and-tonics at the party his American sponsors had given in honor of his birthday. Everyone was a little drunk. He had met Janie half an hour earlier, and he was in love. *In my country*, he said, handing her a fresh, icy drink—and stopped. He had been telling stories about his country all day! What he wanted now was to kiss this woman, to obliterate *country* in a rush toward her: to stake a claim.

"What can I tell you?" Jamie says. He polishes the car with a chamois, then lifts his arms away to view and to display the clouds

crowding the black, gleaming surface. "It's an arrangement that works for us. I still live here because, for now, it's convenient. For now. Hey, Janie."

"Hey. Hi, Sirut! What's convenient?" She is wearing an elegant and unfussy, secondhand-store-quality dress. But new. Expensive.

"Snowing down south," Jamie sings.

Janie tugs at the dress's hem. "Sirut, it's so nice to see you."

"Okay, you two." Jamie points at them with six-shooter fingers. "That's my cue. Be good. I'm off to the village."

"Pick up some mums."

"Will do."

"And pumpkins. *Three*, Jamie. Three pumpkins."

The Saab's engine turns over. Janie turns to Sirut. "What was convenient?"

"I do not understand." Sirut keeps his eyes on Jamie's car as it climbs the graded slope of yard and mounts the gravel road beside the house. "I do not understand." The car disappears into the shade beneath the darkening foliage. When night comes, these hills close in like jungle, and in the dark, there's no difference at all.

Pumpkins for their porch—he's seen this already: spooks and witches, ghosts and goblins. Haunted houses. A haunted country, but haunted by what? *I'm hip to that*, the Khmer soldier had said in bad American, putting the barrel of the pistol into Sirut's father's ear and pulling the trigger. Laughing soldiers returning his mother to him, used, mute, her mind and soul scoured clean.

They escaped the city, then the camps, finally the country.

The horses drift over, ears erect: Is something up?

Do unto me, their eyes say.

"I simply do not understand," Sirut says.

The horses stir, then drift back to their grazing. Long necks arc, the big heads' extravagant lips fuss and ruffle the grass.

"Sirut," she says. "Tell me what was convenient before."