

THE WOMAN, THE PILOT, THE RAVEN

by Dean Whitlock

I could say it was Dicey who almost got me killed — God knows she put me on the edge often enough — but I was the fool who decided to go ahead up the mountain. And, at the end, she was the one who told me to stay off the cliff. Dead, she tried to save my life. I suppose dying changes your point of view.

I didn't want to make the trip. Dicey and I had split almost ten years ago, after two years of very intense...what? Comaraderie. Symbiosis. The sex was good, but it's hard to say we were actually in love. We had some fine times up in the mountains, and she took me on adventures I would have missed otherwise. What we shared, we really shared. But we didn't really strike a full chord. My spirit was a little too 4/4 maybe to compliment the bright chaos she lived in. Too plaid, you know what I mean? Too L. L. Bean.

So Dicey kept up the adventures in the wild and I spent more and more time in the city. One weekend in January, she went out to hike up Mt. Washington and I went into Boston. She came back and I came back and we looked at each other and split. We didn't argue, we just split. I moved into the city then, into my place on Marlboro Street. Dicey moved north, up to Bartlett, I think, right in the heart of the country she loved. I stopped hiking and dropped out of the AMC — the Appalachian Mountain Club. I got lost in my job and found things to do in Boston. After awhile, I stopped thinking about her.

Ten years later, I got a call from her mother that Dicey was dead. You know, I wasn't surprised at first. I'd seen her come so close to the edge so many times. Fell off a mountain, tried to hug a bear: that was the kind of end I expected for Dicey. But her mom said no. It was man-made. Cancer.

Then I was surprised. Her mom didn't get specific, so I guess it was probably breast cancer or her uterus or some other organ that she didn't want to talk about. It didn't matter what kind, really. It had gotten into her and eaten her away, for two years her mom said. I said I was sorry.

What else do you say after ten years?

Then her mom told me that Dicey had made out a will and that she'd put me in it. A request, not an heir. Dicey had had herself cremated, and she wanted me to dispose of her ashes. I listened to her mom explaining how the will specifically said me and that I would know where to take her and did I know where she meant?

I did. I stood with the phone dragging in my hand, looking out the window at a gray sky in the end of October, thinking about all the places Dicey had led me to, but there was only one she could have meant. And in my head, I was cursing her. It had been ten years. It was already too late in the season. I had a trip coming up to Cleveland for one of our biggest clients. I had a new woman friend. Damn it, it had been ten years!

But I also knew that ten years ago, for two years, Dicey had been my bright side, my harmony, my other spirit. She had rights to my time.

I went to see her mom and got the box of ashes. I brought it back and set it on the mantle, a blue box about ten inches square. I decided it would have to wait till spring. And I sat down with a glass of whisky and wondered how the hell I was going to live with Dicey's ashes on my mantle for the next six months. I knew I would always be thinking about them, like a song that got stuck in my head.

I went to bed with it preying on my mind and woke up in the middle of the night, dazed from some dream I couldn't remember. I got up and went into the front room, looked out over Marlboro. The city was muted, the faint sounds a discord. The sky had cleared, and up through the glow of the city's million lights, I could just see an edge of moon hanging ahead of the dawn. Someone on the third floor across the street had put a jack-o-lantern in their window, and the candle guttered in the last stages of life. It seemed out of place, even under the sickle moon, from a time when cities turned out their lights at night and people were much more in touch with the spirits of nature. The candle died out as I watched.

I turned then and saw Dicey, perched on my mantle in her tired jeans and old wool shirt, her hair pulled back in the long, dark braid she used to control it whenever we went hiking. She cocked her head and smiled. Her eyes sparkled, and for a moment, she looked like a hunting bird, and I was the mouse a thousand feet below. Then she shook her head, and it was Dicey's box again, up on my mantle, caught in a pattern of light and dark shadow on the wall.

I went back to bed, but just as I fell asleep, I heard her say, “Life’s too short, man — too, too short,” just like she’d said every other time she’d led me off the trail to the edge of a cliff that wasn’t listed in the guide.

The next day was bright and sunny. I went to work, but I spent the morning wondering about the duty Dicey had laid on me. About ten o’clock, I caught the weather, and it said clear and dry for the next few days. So I told the receptionist I was taking a couple of personal days, left a message for my friend, and rode the T over to the Star market under the Prudential Building.

I had to smile as I poked around the aisles looking for granola bars and sardines — what I called hiking food. I had always bought the food, because Dicey would have gone out with whatever was left in her pack and made do. I’d seen her catch a squirrel and stew it for dinner one night. I’d also seen her backtrack five miles to take back a mouse that had climbed into her pack the night before.

It took me just a minute to get my gear together. It was all in the back of the closet, where I’d stashed it when I moved in. I oiled my old boots and was packed and in the car by noon, heading for 1-93 in mid-day traffic and wondering what I was really up to. I decided I just wanted it over and done with, the two years and the ten years, so I could get the song out of my head and get back to my job.

I made the trip to Groveton in less than three hours, even with a stop in Plymouth for some white gas for the stove. I’d forgotten that they’d extended the interstate right up through Franconia Notch, which made the trip faster, and that’s all I cared about then, getting in and getting out. I did slow down when the road curved around Profile Lake, to look back at the Old Man of the Mountain. There’s a path that goes up above the head, and Dicey had taken me there one day. We didn’t stay on the trail, of course. She took me down to a ledge below the chin, invisible from the trail above or the road below, and we sat for an hour, feet dangling over a fatal drop, listening to the music in the wind, in a solitude amazing for the center of New Hampshire’s most famous landmark.

It’s funny — there are chains and iron staples criss-crossing the head, trying to hold off the force of wind, rain, ice, and thaw. But someday it’s all going to slide into Profile Lake anyway. When we’d clambered back up to the trail, Dicey had taken a big rock and pounded on one of the staples. Just to see what would happen, she said.

In Groveton, I bore right off Route 3 onto 110, then turned left after a couple of miles onto Emerson Road and left again onto the Nash Stream Road. After a couple more miles, I found the cairns that marked the trail head for the Percy Peaks trail. It was one of the first trips we’d made together.

Dacey had led me east off the trail, across two small peaks, and then up a steep slope to a long gentle ridge just below timber line. A tiny glacial lake sat in the saddle of the ridge, ringed by fir and willow scrub. Dacey followed a tiny stream out of the lake to where it tumbled over a long stretch of steep steps down into a high-walled ravine. She went east along the top of the wall and led me out onto a cliff face that fell in broken ledges to the stream bed. The drop was almost 800 feet.

The cliff isn't in the guide. On the AMC map, you can see the lake and the stream, but the cliff is just a dense band of contour lines, a blob of ink in the shifting pattern of the mountains. I'd showed it to Dacey, but she hadn't paid much attention. She only used maps to find the start of a trail.

I didn't expect to make it all the way that afternoon. The Percy trail was enough. The lower stretch follows logging roads, and those had changed in ten years. New roads cut across the old trail, scarring the ground. I got lost once and had to backtrack. Then the trail started climbing and became a real trail. I filled my water bottle and a quart jug at Slide Brook. The pack felt heavier than I liked, but there wasn't any other sure water before the lake.

The trail goes up to the North Peak, a graceful cone capped with bare slab ledges edged with scrub, and I was the only one on it. I wasn't surprised; it was the day before Halloween. Leaf season had been over up here for a couple of weeks, and some heavy rains had stripped the trees. The lower trail was thick with leaves, still slick from the rains. Higher up, under the spruce and fir, the air was cold, and it was chilly even in the bright sun when I came out on the lower slabs. The mountainsides had a feathered look in the places where bare, gray hardwoods covered them. The spruce and fir were dark green, almost black where they were thick. The country was ready for winter, ready for snow and the long sleep.

I went to the top of the North Peak and spent some time watching the sun drop toward the horizon. Then a contrail striped the sky to the west and reminded me of the trip to Cleveland. I got impatient again and went down off the top. I found a campsite in the shadow between the peaks, off the trail in a small clearing made smooth by years of other campers. I set up my tent, a little two-person dome that seemed huge with only me in it, and got the stove going while the shadow turned into twilight.

When I was through with dinner, I sat wrapped in my sleeping bag in the silence in the doorway of the tent, sipping tea and looking up at the ragged vee of sky I could see through the trees, watching the stars turn. The sky was deep black, a depth you can never get with a city around you, or even a town. It's only in the mountains you can feel how far away the stars really are. And I began to get that distance, that sense of relief that usually comes on the third day of a long hike, when you look out over some valley and see a road below and realize that the road

doesn't matter, that everything we do and build down there has no meaning outside the day-to-day importance we give it to keep ourselves content. And I didn't like that feeling, because I *was* content with my day-to-day in the city. I felt seduced, and a little used, which is what I used to feel whenever Dicey talked me into the woods when I didn't want to go.

I threw away the rest of the tea and went to sleep, a light sleep like I always have when I'm in the woods, half awake half the time. And half the time when I woke up, I could feel a warmth beside me, and feel soft breathing in the night, a gentle presence that I almost took for granted.

"Are you awake?" I said once, coming alert to a sound beyond the fabric dome, maybe the light step of some animal nosing around the stove. She sighed and touched my cheek and said, "No, not really." And I fell back to sleep and woke up again in early dawn, alone.

I packed my gear, but left it there in the clearing, hung up on a tree. I had brought along a day pack, and put the food and water in there, stowed carefully around the blue box that held Dicey's ashes. The day was frosty, but still clear, and I planned to be back there in just a few hours to pick up my stuff and head down the mountain for home. I figured it would take me about three hours to get to the cliff and three hours to get back. I didn't plan to stay there for longer than it took to scatter the ashes and think a few good thoughts. I planned to be back in Boston that night and back to work the next day, duty done and my head clear. So I checked the map, took a compass bearing, and set out east-north-east.

The going was rougher than I remembered, and I had to stop a lot to check the compass. With Dicey, it had been easy. She moved through the woods like an animal, or a dancer, quiet and sure of her way, even though she seldom took me anywhere she'd been before. She had a talent, a natural sense of elegance in the woods. She went slowly, in harmony. She never forced her way. And the path always seemed to open up in front of her. When she led me, I followed with a kind of clumsy grace. Alone now, I stumbled along in a bad rhythm, fighting the brush and the uneven ground. I never quite trusted the compass, and I never saw the animals that Dicey always seemed to draw out of the woods.

I told her, riding there on my back, "I could sure use a little of your gift right now." And I could hear her laugh and tell me, "You've got it, nan. You just don't trust it." And she was right.

But I went the right direction and climbed up onto the ridge. I was walking in eight-foot trees, on wet, stony ground made even rougher by twisted roots and low scrub. Grass grew in some places where the trees thinned, and there was cranberry and blueberry, willow and labrador tea, depending on how wet the ground was. The last time, we'd seen deer and a fox. We'd seen kinglets and siskins and red squirrels. Now, they were hiding and silent.

The lake matched my memory perfectly, at first. It was small and almost round. The trees grew right up to the edge, crowding over the rocks and right into the water in some places. The water was shallow and clear, with a coarse, rocky bottom. It was a lake by definition only — nothing grew on the bottom. By its size, you'd call it a small pond. Dicey had gone right in when we first found it, threw off her pack and clothes and waded out to the center. The memory came back as bright as that day. The sun shone on her wet skin, and birds called from the trees while she waded and splashed in the clear, cold water, at home.

Then the lake and the memory stopped matching. The real sky was dim, hidden by high clouds that weren't supposed to be there. And I realized there were no birds, and no birdsong. The ridge was silent. I squatted down and felt the water. It was cold, much colder than I remembered. I waited, wondering if the birds would come back soon, listening.

What I heard was a sound like thunder to the North. But it played longer than thunder ever could, and suddenly two jet planes rammed by overhead and dipped into the valley behind me, flying a tight formation as close to the trees as they could get. A wind followed them, blowing the spruce and fir in a long, broken wave. Then they were gone, a distant rumble to the South, and my ears rang in the false silence. The whole mountainside seemed shocked.

The jets just added to the sense of futility about the whole trip. They used the White Mountains for a training ground, and Dicey hated them. I saw her once stand out on a jutting rock hanging over Zealand Notch, yelling curses at one that kept diving down in mock fights with some imaginary tank or pillbox below. Now she couldn't curse, she could only ride in silence behind me and suffer the noise. I gave them a little half-hearted curse for her and hoped they wouldn't come back. She spoke in my ringing ears, but what she said was, "Say it louder. Believe it, man, believe it."

Instead, I waited by the lake for over an hour while the clouds got thicker and the jets went round and round the ridge. I kept hoping they would leave, so I could take Dicey's ashes over to the cliff and throw them out into silence. I grew more impatient, angry at the jets and angry at Dicey. Angry at myself for being there. My anger didn't matter. The jets kept strafing the ridge, first in formation, than separately, sometimes strafing each other in mock dogfights. Finally, I said to Hell with it, went down the stream to the top of the first ledge, and slabbed across the slope.

I came out of the trees suddenly, my feet on the edge of a twenty-foot drop that was the first long step in an 800-foot fall into the ravine below. The water played over the rocks to my right, shining and dancing down ledge after ledge till it disappeared below the lip of the cliff, I could hear its music on the rocks farther down. This was Dicey's choice, her headstone, a place she had been to only once that I knew of. A place that suited her so well I could feel her standing

beside me. I stood for a moment, thinking about that. Then I realized that it was quiet. I couldn't hear the jets. Only the water in the stream below. I slid my pack off quickly and took out the blue box. I wanted to get this done and over with, so Dicey could have her last rites in peace and I could get back to the city.

I opened the lid and looked in. Her ashes were wrapped in a plastic bag that half-filled the box. I reached in and took out a handful. I don't know what I expected, something like wood ashes, I guess. Dicey's were pale gray, fine powder, coarse grit, even small shards. And there was so little of it, so little left of the woman she'd been. I took another moment to think of that, to try to frame an image out of this dust, an image to cast out with them. I felt I owed her that much.

I waited too long. I heard the jets coming from across the ridge, the sound growing in force and shape till it drowned out the music of the stream. I still couldn't see them, but the sound kept building. I started swearing, yelling at them to get the Hell away and gone from there. Then they came into sight, twisting and veering into the valley, one chasing the other in another of their war games. They didn't fly off. They began looping and turning, circling around the lower peaks to the west and coming back to play in front of me.

I yelled again, cursing them like Dicey had done before. I shook my fist at them, her ashes clenched in my hands. I felt her behind me, taut and angry, cursing with all the power of her death. The damn jets just circled one more time, and I threw her ashes at them, crazy.

Then the two jets swerved together and I saw their wings touch. Metal flew off in twisting scrap. The sound changed to a painful scream. One jet banked off to the South, smoke streaming from its wing. The other arched up and back and out of sight across the ridge. But I could hear its engine, still shrieking and suddenly coming closer.

I realized I was standing at the edge of a long, fatal fall. I bent and grabbed Dicey's box, scrambled for the lid and ran back away from the ledge, away from the drop, while the shriek became a wail still coming closer, just over my shoulder. I ran like a panicked animal, fighting through the brush. Spruce needles stabbed at my eyes. Branches grabbed at the box in my arms. The mountainside seemed malicious, intent on trapping me there in the shadow of the screaming jet. I could hear it coming, feel the sound and the push of air as it came over ridge and dove toward me. And then the scream stopped in a hammer blow that beat out feeling, sound, and sight.

The cold woke me. I was lying on the ground, shivering. There was pain in my head, hard, steady pressure that dulled my hearing and touch. I opened my eyes and saw dirt and coarse gravel in dim light. I rolled over carefully. The pain in my head pulsed with each movement. Then I tried to sit up. Nausea rose out of my stomach into my head and left me dizzy and gasping, flat on my back again. My vision blurred and split, The shivering grew to a spasm.

When it passed, I lay there, looking up through fir branches at a dim, orange dome. The light was strangely opaque, without direction. I could hear a steady rhythm like rain on cloth, but dull and lifeless, without real sound. Cold water dripped in a crazy pattern on my left hand.

I tried to make sense of the orange dome, but I couldn't control my vision. I looked around, slowly because every movement made my stomach twist. The branches above me seemed to twist and sway of their own will. I followed them to the trunk, followed the trunk down toward the ground, and came to a face staring at me with a crazy, slack-eyed smile.

I stared back, still trying to understand, trying to force some harmony into the discord I got from my eyes. It was like seeing from two places at once. But I finally took in the blue flight suit and the harness and the lines leading up from the harness to the edges of the orange dome that covered the trees above us.

It was the pilot. He'd tried to eject, but he hadn't made it, and his parachute had settled on the trees above me. His suit had been torn by the branches, and one stuck through his left arm like the broken butt of a spear. His feet dangled inches above the ground. Somewhere in his fall, he'd lost his helmet, and with it, his left ear. His left eye hung open, and his face was streaked with dried blood. His head hung loosely on a neck that looked a little too long. He was staring at me. Grinning.

Strangely enough, his right side was undamaged. His face split in my broken vision, shifting from a death mask to a pleasant smile whenever I moved my eyes. I felt colder than ever.

"Better move, man," I heard a voice say.

I stared hard at the pilot. He winked at me.

"Gotta get warm, get a fire." The voice came again, but not from the pilot.

I looked around, my head pounding so badly it drowned out all sound. I was alone, just me and the pilot and the box of Dacey's ashes in the crook of my arm. But the voice was right; the light was fading and it was going to get colder. I had to move.

I made it to my knees and had to rest. My head alternated between pain and nausea, and I knew I wasn't going to go far. I had no idea where the cliff was, where I'd dropped my pack, and there was no way I could beat around in the brush looking for it. But I had matches in a plastic case in my pocket, and there was plenty of squaw wood on the trees around me. I just had to get up and get it.

That took more will than I thought I had. The clouds had settled on the mountaintop, and everything was wet and slippery. I could only carry a little bit at a time, because I needed one hand free to hold on to the trees. I still fell a lot.

After two trips, I had a pile of dry twigs and branches, plenty to start a fire, but nothing big enough to keep it going. I couldn't break the larger branches. I was just too clumsy and weak.

I looked up at the pilot, and he grinned back, like he was waiting for me. So I went out again, and I found a dead trunk lying on the hillside just above the parachute trees. I couldn't cut it, but it was small enough to roll down the few feet and under shelter. I slumped on the ground beside it, too tired to build the fire I had been working for.

I was staring at my feet, trying to will myself to move, when I heard a noise like a door swinging open on rusty hinges. I looked up and saw a big raven sitting on a branch just under the lip of the parachute tent. The light was fading quickly, and he was no more than a silhouette, black on gray, but I could see one eye cocked to stare at me.

Ravens don't just hunt — they're carrion birds. I said, "Don't look at me. He's the dead one." I nodded my head toward the pilot.

The raven turned his eye that way and seemed to shake his head no.

I looked over at the pilot. He winked again.

I was too cold and too dizzy and my head hurt too much. I looked from the pilot to the raven and back, and gave up trying to understand. I made a small fire in the center of the triangle of trees shielded by the parachute, rolled one end of my dead tree into it, and huddled close. The raven sat on his branch to my left, the pilot hung on my right, and Dicey's box sat beside me. The light outside died completely, and my little fire made shadows on the parachute. The raven shook and preened his feathers, and hopped to a closer branch.

I tried to stay awake, feeding the dead tree bit by bit into the fire, turning different sides of myself to the warmth to dry off. Half of me stayed damp, because I couldn't bring myself to turn my back on the pilot. At some point, though, I fell asleep, and Dicey said — I knew by then it was Dicey's voice — Dicey said, "It's okay, man. I'm watching."

I woke up in dead night. The fire had burned to embers, and my back was cold. The dim light barely lit the lower branches of the trees, but I could see the raven, head tucked beneath one wing, still on his branch. And the pilot still hung from his tree, left eye shining wide. Dicey sat beside me, legs crossed Indian style, her box cradled between them.

"I thought there would be more to give back to the earth," she said. "I didn't realize so much would go up in the fire." She paused and glanced over at me, smiling. Half teasing. "I thought about not being cremated," she said, "but I didn't think they'd let you carry my body in here to rot."

"Not likely," I said. I reached out and pushed the dead tree onto the embers, then laid some smaller branches around it. They caught and flared briefly, and Dicey faded. Then they died back a bit, and she was there, flickering gently as the fire licked the dead tree.

"Why me?" I asked her. "After ten years, why me?"

She shrugged. "You still knew the way," she said.

“Anyone with a map...,” I started to say, but she shook her head.

“It isn’t the same,” she said.

I told her, “Bullshit.”

She sighed. “Tomorrow,” she said, watching the fire, “you should be able to finish this and go back to your city.”

I couldn’t tell if she was asking or apologizing. I shrugged back.

“Was it all that bad?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I like getting blown up.”

The pilot rolled his left eye and began to laugh.

The sound was dank and leering. The raven woke and cocked his head at us all. Dicey frowned into the fire.

“I’d expect you to laugh about death,” she said.

The pilot settled back into his grin. “No sense dying if you can’t laugh about it.”

“I don’t think it’s so damn funny,” I said.

“You’re not dead, yet, little man,” he said back.

“Your kind of death is never funny,” Dicey told him.

“Not during,” he agreed. He tried to nod his head, but it only lolled to the side. “During, it’s like breaking in a virgin. It’s like climbing Mount Everest on a dirt bike.”

“During,” Dicey said back, “it’s like breathing cold blood. It’s like eating hot glass dipped in vomit.”

“Hey,” the pilot said, “it ain’t my fault you picked a shitty way to die.”

“You didn’t pick your death,” Dicey told him.

“Oh, yeah?” he said. “Look at me. How else was I going to die?” He held his arms out to the side, left one trailing the broken branch.

Dicey glanced up. Her face was stiff and sad. “If I’d known you’d like it so much, I wouldn’t have wasted my breath cursing you.”

The pilot laughed again. “Oh, my avenging angel,” he cried, “spare me, spare me.” And he laughed some more. “How about you, man?” he said to me then. “You were the one throwing the ashes. Are you sorry?”

I admit I wasn’t, but he didn’t need an answer.

“Well, don’t be,” he said. “You gave me the ride of my life, and now I’ve got eternity to try to match it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You don’t think this is it, do you?” he said, pointing at Dicey’s box. “Ashes to ashes? Come on.”

I looked at the box, and at Dicey. She was staring at him, still frowning, but almost puzzled.

“What else is there?” I asked.

“How the Hell do I know?” he said. “That’s what’s so funny.” And he lolled back his head and laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears ran out of his right eye. His left one tried to shut and couldn’t. “But I tell you,” he said finally, still chuckling, “I tell you, it’s gotta be something. I could be the next Thor. I could be Shiva. I could be Hades.”

“I’d be content to be a dryad living in that tree,” Dicey said quietly.

“Oh, you think so damn small,” the pilot said. “Look at your power. Look what you did to me. You could be Death, herself.”

Dicey laughed then, a short, bitter sound. “No,” she said, “I take things too personally. There,” she pointed at the raven. “There’s Death, waiting for his dinner.”

“That old crow?” the pilot said. “What’s he going to do, nibble off my nose?”

Dicey smiled thinly. “Watch,” she said.

She laid her right hand, palm up, on the ground in front of her and started humming a strange, high song. The raven cocked his head, watching her face. A deer mouse crept into the firelight. It stopped and looked around, nose twitching, then crept closer to Dicey’s hand. She kept singing, and the pilot and I both watched like we were hypnotized.

Suddenly, the raven gave a harsh croak and dropped from his branch onto the mouse. He grabbed it with one claw and lifted it to his beak. The mouse squealed. The raven shook his beak sharply, three times. Then he turned up his head and swallowed the mouse whole. His neck worked as he forced it down.

“There is Death,” Dicey said quietly. “No malice. No glory.”

“Ah, but what flavor,” the pilot said. “What pleasure to catch and eat such a morsel as a living spirit, however small.” He winked his good eye at her.

Dicey sighed and seemed to fade. I rubbed my eyes and realized that the dark was fading. The rain had stopped, and the mist glowed gray. It wasn’t dawn, but a thinning of the darkness before the idea of dawn. The raven stretched his wings and took a few hops out of our haven.

Dicey turned and asked me, “Can you see better?”

“Not you,” I said.

“That doesn’t matter. Can you see well enough to go to the cliff?”

“I don’t know. Which way is it?”

“I’ll lead you,” she said, “before it gets too light. Then you can scatter these.” She laid her hand on the box.

“The last rites are important, nan,” the pilot said. “We’re stuck here until you let go of us.”

“Is that right?” I asked Dicey.

“Memory is the only power you have over death,” she said. “Memory and your love.”

“Oh, bullshit,” the pilot said.

Dicey got up and followed the raven.

It wasn’t so easy for me. I was stiff in every muscle. My head still hurt when I moved. But at least my sight had come back to a single image. I took the box, pulled myself up, and went after her.

The mist was swirling in a light wind, and strange lights shone here and there among the trees. I looked for Dicey, but all I could see were shadows. The land looked flattened, dull, like my hearing. Then I saw her, standing just a few feet away, looking at a twisted piece of metal that had wrapped itself around a tree at head height. I felt my skin crawl when I saw it and realized how close it had come to me. Beyond it, the mountainside was littered with more scrap. Trees had been knocked down or sheared off, brush flattened by the death of the plane. Dicey shook her head and picked a path through the wreckage. The mist swirled around her, and she was no more solid than the flickering lights.

Then I heard a noise behind me and turned. The pilot lurched from under the parachute. I could see his left eye gleaming. He stopped and pulled the branch out of his arm, then came after us, using it as a cane. His body jerked each time he put his weight onto his bent left leg. His head wobbled on its stretched neck.

He came up beside me and grinned, “Thought I’d come along for the wake,” he said.

Dicey just kept walking, and I went after her, with the pilot lurching beside me. He didn’t seem bothered by the uneven ground or undergrowth, just by his crooked left leg. I was having more trouble. It was still dark enough that deep shadows hid the path, and the spirit lights made the shadows shift and dance. I tripped over roots and stones and slid on wet brush. Dicey kept her back to the pilot and walked too fast. I lost her in the trees.

But the pilot said, “Over here,” and led me into a thick cluster of young spruce. I put my arm up to protect my face and pushed through. The pilot was right in front of me. And suddenly, I stepped out onto nothing.

I grabbed for the branches as my right foot came down on air and kept going. My left foot slid after, and I was hanging from the trees over a drop that I couldn’t see. I heard Dicey’s box scrape across stone and then land hard below me. I got my arms around a trunk and pulled myself up through the sharp spruce until I could stand. Then I looked down.

A rock face fell away into darkness below me. I could just make out a narrow ledge about 20 feet down. Beyond that, darkness. The pilot stood out on the air over the drop and laughed at me.

Then Dicey was there beside me. "Are you all right?" she asked.

I said yeah, but I pointed down at the ledge. Her box was sitting there, leaning against the face of the cliff. "I dropped it," I said.

She looked down at it. She was quiet a long time. Then she said, "It's okay. It's not that important."

"Damn it!" I said. "If it isn't important, why the Hell did you ask me to do it?" I looked around for a way down to the ledge.

"Forget it," she said. "It's not worth risking your life. Let the wind scatter them."

"They're in a plastic bag," I told her. "They'll be there forever."

I found a way, a crease in the rock that angled down to a spot a few yards from the box. I made my way along the edge, holding onto the trees, and then started working down the crease. I didn't look down. I just jammed my fingers into the crease, braced my feet on the rock and slid down a step at a time. Dicey seemed to walk down beside me. The pilot watched and grinned. I could feel his scorn, like a heavy mist I had to force my way through.

Then I was at the ledge and had to let go of the crease to reach the box. I hesitated, getting my breath and trying to think only about the box, not about the drop into darkness below me.

"Go back up," Dicey said* "You're not responsible for my death."

"Sure," the pilot said. "Let her hang around here with her trees. She's not afraid for you, anyway. She's afraid of dying."

"She's already dead, asshole!" I yelled, and the words echoed across the ravine, along with his laughter.

So I let go and took nine careful steps along the ledge. I kept my left hand on the face of the cliff beside me and leaned in the few inches I could. My right hand hung out over space. Dicey came behind me, faint now, a ghost of the spirit of the woman.

I reached the box. I crouched and hooked it with my right hand and worked it up the side of my body, still leaning on my left hand to keep some contact with the solid cliff. Finally, I could turn and lean my back against the rock, both feet braced against the lip of the ledge. I took a breath and pried off the top. I spread the mouth of the plastic bag.

But I wasn't able to touch the ashes. My heart was pounding, and each beat was a pain behind my eyes. My ears hummed. I couldn't think of anything but pain and the pilot's grin and the long drop beyond my feet.

“Dicey?” I said. “Dicey, what if I don’t do this? Would you stay here? Would you last as some kind of mountain spirit?” I was asking as much about me as about her, but I remembered how she moved in the forest. “Wouldn’t you like that?” I asked her.

“There’s nothing I can touch,” she said, “except imagining.”

“I’d come,” I said. “Others would come. We could visit.”

“One night a year?” she asked. “Like an old ritual?” She laughed softly, almost wishfully. “You’d forget me, the real me. Like you forgot the mountains. The mountains are rock at least. They take longer to wear away. I’m not, and I wouldn’t.”

I took a handful of ashes then and remembered her as best I could, trying to think of the live Dicey and not the spirit beside me. But when I held up my hand and opened my eyes to throw the ashes out into the dawn, I saw the pilot, hanging in front of me. Grinning.

“Move,” I said.

“Hey,” he replied, goading me, “I’m not really here, right? Just throw. Get her out of your hair.”

“Move, God damn you,” I said.

He just laughed and said, “If she’s right, I already am.”

I realized I was crying. For Dicey. My indifference, my anger — they had faded somewhere climbing down the cliff. I was mourning, and my body shook with crying. I held up a handful of her ashes, but I couldn’t throw them.

I swung my fist at him, but he floated out of my reach. I kicked out at him, and balanced on one foot at the edge of the drop. I felt the foot slipping. Dicey cried out, and I felt her hand like a breath on my arm. I went right through it, falling.

But my foot slipped straight out and I simply sat down hard on the ledge with an undignified thump. The pilot laughed at me, but I still had the box and the handful of ashes, I was still alive. I started laughing, too, at myself, for fighting with a dead man. For fighting with myself. For fighting with the mountain. I laughed until the pilot stopped, and I laughed some more as he realized the night was ending. His face twisted and he tried to say something, but he was fading faster. I ignored him, waiting quietly for full dawn.

I turned once to Dicey, but she was fading, too, and we had nothing more to say. I held out my handful of ashes and let them fall. Then the next handful, and the next. The mist blew off, and the light grew. Dicey was gone, her ashes were gone where she wanted. I had done the ritual that friendship demanded. And I suddenly realized I could hear the sound of the stream, playing on the rocks far below. I could hear birdsong, and, back toward the wreckage of the plane, the croak and clogging of ravens.

I climbed back up the crease. It was hard, but I made it. And I found my pack where I'd dropped it the day before. I ate and drank, suddenly aware of the needs of my living body. While I was finishing a handful of raisins, I heard voices on the mountainside above me, and the sound of a helicopter coming closer beyond the ridge.

I put on my pack and went the other way, along the edge to the end of the cliff, and down into the ravine to follow the stream to the road. The pilot was half right: You can at least choose how you will live your life.

Dacey was half right, too. I went through the woods in a new harmony, and the path opened before me.

-###-