

SING

SING

And Other Short Stories



Dan Szczesny

The Hobbleshush Granite State Short Story Series

Volume I

HOBBLEBUSH BOOKS
Brookline, New Hampshire

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Contents

Little Warriors	9
Gold Dust	24
By Hammer and Hand	38
Afternoon Television	42
Reptile Dreams	56
More Than Breath	74
Blue Lady	87
Imagine the Universe Beautiful	91
Sing	101
The Last Jehu	131

To the girl with the fish-shaped eyes, Meenakshi

“For people who must live from day to day, past and future have small relevance, and their grasp of it is fleeting; they live in the moment, a very precious gift that we have lost.”

—PETER MATTHIESSEN

“It never failed to amaze me how the most ordinary day could be catapulted into the extraordinary in the blink of an eye.”

—JODI PICOULT

Little Warriors

THE SLAT DOES NOT RETRACT.

Lucy Lee pulls the knob again and waits for the comforting bang that signifies her Helio's speed is dropping, but nothing.

"Come on girl, not now."

A sharp crosswind jams the plane hard, causing the engine to sputter. Not much of a blip, but to Lucy that sound might as well be a death knell. She'd expected the storm. Her plane is designed for weather just like this: low-vis, icy sleet. Just slow the plane down, make her easier to handle. Get closer to the tundra and fly in under the wind.

She curls her fore and middle fingers under the knob, counts to three, and yanks again. Nothing.

In frustration she pulls hard on the knob again and again, nearly tearing it out of the control panel.

"Hell's kitchen!"

A chunk of hail the size of a golf ball hits the plane's windshield and sprays ice over the fuselage, causing her to jump. Lucy grabs the radio and pushes the call button.

"Koyukuk, this is Helio O-3-niner. I have a non-operative slat, repeat a—"

Turbulence hits the plane so hard, the mic is knocked out of her hand. Her restraints keep her from floating out of her seat as the plane loses altitude. The red ground-speed light clicks on.

Dan Szczesny

“I’d slow you down if I could,” Lucy says to the flashing button. “But that ain’t happening right now.”

She stretches her neck to look out the side window, trying to get her bearings, but the rain and ice exploding against her plane like popcorn kernels are making it impossible to see anything. She got caught too high. Now dead reckoning is impossible unless she can find the Yukon River. And without functional slats to slow the plane, she’s literally out of control in a cloud.

“Come on now, girl, how hard can this be?”

Lucy’s been flying for Alaska Air for six years; this plane, her plane, the *Little Warrior*, since the start. She hears a thump behind her. One of the latches keeping her single piece of cargo from sliding has snapped. It bangs against the back of her seat so hard it jars her head forward.

It is a single coffin, a pine box.

She freezes for a moment. Try to fix the box or get the plane out of the cloud? Her choice is made for her when a blast of rain shatters the window to her right, and a cold shear of wind nearly pulls the controls out of her hands. Ice stings Lucy’s forehead and cheek like pin pricks. The *Little Warrior* can no longer fight the storm. The plane tips hard left, bursts out of a cloud bank into open air, and Lucy gasps when she sees the black muck of the tundra only a hundred feet below her plane.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” Lucy says, addressing her lifeless cargo, “but you ain’t going to make your funeral. I might make mine, though.”

She tightens her harness, searches frantically for flat open ground and gets ready to meet the dirt.

Two weeks before the *Little Warrior* crashes into the mud, Jimmi Oleata swings his ax high into the cool morning air, the axhead pausing for a long second, the yellow glint of the sun blinding him for a moment. Then, momentum brings the tool down, solidly, splitting the stump head cleanly, the ax burying itself

Little Warriors

deeply into the ground. The force of the impact sends a pleasant vibration up Jimmi's arm and into his shoulders.

That feeling, that tiny sense of accomplishment, is all he has now. He lifts the two halves, one under each arm, and trudges back up the berm to the waiting flatbed.

"Ataboy, Jimmi!" His uncle, drunk as always, sits against a filthy tire, smiling like an idiot. Uncle Jess is a small man, his face craggy and deeply lined. His nose is veined and cracked from the effects of Chorzi, a tribal grain alcohol made from corn pulp and roots.

Jimmi ignores him.

"You got muscles, Jimmi, look at you, and only sixteen." Jess speaks to his nephew in the broken dialect of Lower Ahtna, a dead and worthless language as far as Jimmi is concerned. "And you're not even a man yet!"

Jimmi feels his cheeks burn red. "Speak English, old man! No one cares about your tribe anymore."

Jess just howls with laughter. "Your tribe, too, Jimmi, your tribe too!"

Stumps are all Jimmi has for work now, here in the lower delta of the Kaiyah Mountains. The loggers are long gone, leaving behind plains of stumps. Since he was thirteen, Jimmi has been working these plains, loading dead tree stumps and roots into his uncle's barely functional truck and hauling them far and wide over the delta to villages that need firewood for the coming winter. There's not much left now. Jimmi has to go farther and farther from his home in Koyukuk to find the wood. Farther and farther each year, until the toil and the effort no longer are worth the few bucks village elders are able to scrape together to pay.

And his uncle, the only family he's ever really known, is useless.

"I remember a time when our people were proud, and we didn't have to dig up roots to get by," Jess is rambling, gesturing

Dan Szczesny

wildly to the air. “Now . . .” He flings his hands out to the wide, empty field and his voice trails off.

Jimmi just grunts, and turns back to his ax.

Lucy is floating high above her childhood home in Manila. Her mother, an American missionary, is singing. Or maybe she’s muttering some mantra, a prayer? “Mama, what?”

Then free-fall, like strings being cut, she’s falling into the ghetto of her neighborhood, the red tin roofs of her shanty town coming up to meet her. She can smell the floating garbage below the slats of the tin houses, the stagnant Pasig River, hear the sound of chickens.

She spreads her arms and opens herself to the water. As she hits the river, the garbage and oil and bones sting her face and arms and turn cold, like freezing rain. Suddenly her leg is on fire with a searing pain that drives her to consciousness and she yells out, grips her leg, and realizes that she’s upside down. The *Little Warrior* is upside down. Through the pain, and what she realizes is blood in her eyes, Lucy scrambles to unlatch her harness and falls onto the inside roof of the plane, now covered in thick, sticky mud. As she falls, her left leg bangs against the cracked steering column and it feels like the skin below her knee has been dipped in acid. She gasps, unable to catch her breath.

Around her, the ice and rain whip through her shattered plane, her poor beautiful girl now a twisted wreck. And through her tears and the sting of ice, she sees a jarring image. The coffin has opened, and the occupant’s pink, thick hand seems to reach out toward her, palm up.

Lucy screams and screams, praying for unconsciousness that never comes.

Jimmi leans hard into his adze, smoothing the side of his dugout canoe, getting it ready for the winter. This year’s will be his first hunt, finally the season he’s able to leave the village like a man.

Little Warriors

Traditionally, the few dozen men of the village will leave, up river, for weeks to trap and hunt and bring back game. For his first time, he'll have to stay with Jess, in Jess's cabin. But he plans to set out on his own from there, to begin the project of building his own hunting lodge, farther upstream.

Two months ago, he left the village for nearly a week to stake his own claim of hunting ground, to find a good spot near the Yukon River. Now, once his own canoe is ready, he'll begin the slow task of floating the needed materials up. The cabin itself might take three or four seasons to build.

The spruce that now forms the body of his dugout came from someplace upriver, a blowdown perhaps or a low-to-the-ground lightning strike. He found the huge log near where he wants to build his cabin, and spent two days floating it back down to the village.

The tools are his father's. His father, who died face down in a mud flat, stinking of alcohol like Jimmi's uncle. His father, who beat his mother so severely that she ended up in a rez clinic with brain damage that left her out of her mind for two years before she died. His father, who never taught Jimmi how to build or forage or use a hammer. Jimmi did that himself, slowly grinding his hands into thick, meaty pulps, slowly turning his body hard as the tree stumps he chops for a living.

Now, his time has come. Now, he'll prove to them all that he can be a better man than either his father or his uncle. Now is the time of the hunt.

Through increasingly blurring vision, Lucy sees her ankle twisted at an absurd angle. Having gulped down a handful of aspirin, she manages to crawl out of the wreckage to a nearby cluster of rocks. She hurries, before the adrenaline wears off. She packs cold muddy peat against her leg and ties it in place with the strap of her plane seat. The job of setting her own shattered ankle nearly makes her pass out again, but she keeps

her eyes on that hand. She focuses everything on that hand, through the pain and wind. That poor soul in the half-smashed coffin, bruised and purple and bloated like he'd died out in the elements, keeps her together.

Where the hell is she? When she came out of the cloud, there was no river. Clearly she had been pushed off course. That would render the flight plan she logged useless. Help could be a long time coming.

The Little Warrior's back is broken. The tail has cracked off and splintered into dozens of pieces. On impact, one of the wings must have caught the mud, causing the plane to flip. When the tail came off, everything inside scattered to the four winds. She can see debris all around the plane, spread out across the tundra. The first aid kit, the flare gun, her lunch. Gone.

But somehow that coffin stayed. One of the latches held and now it rests on its side, that hand seeming to wave defiantly at Lucy.

She calculates that she was unconscious for only a few hours. It doesn't get fully dark so close to the Arctic Circle, but the sun is low on the horizon. Maybe it's 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. The rain has let up. Now, just wispy clouds hang low over the tundra and the temperature is going up. She won't need a fire and that's a relief.

The Alaska that fascinated Lucy years ago, with its long open stretches and high sky, still manages to soothe her. Even like this, she smells the sweet fireweed and it helps get her breathing, her rhythm, back under control.

She came here only once, part of a mission. When Lucy turned eighteen, her mother sent her to Fairbanks, to a small church early in its establishment. Lucy's job then was to help a group of Filipino immigrants get the mission up and running. But she found God not in the sermons and tedious hymns, but rather in the glaciers, rivers and mountains.

One month after arriving, Lucy caught her first salmon,

Little Warriors

alone in a hidden inlet. She gutted the fish on a rock, using a kitchen steak knife, and built a fire with a Zippo lighter, using her socks for kindling. The moment she bit into that fish, she understood she would never leave this place.

Now, as the aspirin begins to wear off and she looks out across the landscape that long ago saved her soul, Lucy realizes it might kill her as well.

Jimmi is furious. A rage he never thought he was capable of feeling swells inside his chest, threatening to cut off his breathing, threatening to explode in violence. He imagines his ax, the motion of the swing, the clean, solid blow required to sink the head deep into his uncle's chest. How surprised his uncle would be. Jimmi imagines Jess's eyes, wide not with pain but with the deep and final understanding of what his nephew is capable of and what is now too late to prevent. That would be his uncle's last thought.

But the rage quickly flames out, leaving a deep, bottomless hole.

"Are you listening to us?" elder Tsose is saying. "This is very important for you to understand, Jimmi. Pay attention."

Jimmi lifts his eyes toward the council, solely out of a deeply rooted respect. He's heard all he needs to hear. With only forty-eight hours remaining before the hunt, the village council has decided that Jimmi cannot leave, that he has to take care of his uncle instead.

"We know you prepared for this," Tsose is saying. "We know how much it means to you, but postponing your leaving until next season will not bring any shame on you or your family. Just the opposite."

The full council has come to Jimmi's trailer. All six of them. Some of them so old they stay in their trucks, windows rolled down. Uncle Jess's behavior has spun wildly out of control