Cutting the Snow

Gregory Martin

It is just after 5, the busiest time of day for the store, and my cousin Graham and I are up at the front ringing up customers. I'm running the register, and Graham is bagging groceries. He's good help. He knows to set the heavy cans and jars at the bottom, the produce in a separate plastic bag, the bread and paper towels on top. He knows not to bag the gallon jugs of milk.

Graham is 25, two years younger than I am. He's come to visit for a few weeks from his home in Cedar City, Utah. He's almost 6 feet tall, and his 220 pounds hang loosely on an unmuscled frame that moves sluggishly, awkwardly, as if unbalanced or overburdened. His eyes are dark and brown and open, and his face is smooth, with only a few traces of hair. Graham almost always wears a heavy flannel shirt, like our grandfather, and he's wearing it now, in June. He's wearing his green apron also, like the rest of us.

Graham has had leukemia since he was 3. He's one of the longest-surviving leukemia patients in the country. But the side-effects of all the years of experimentation and blind groping for cures, of all the chemotherapy and radiation, caused seizures which killed brain cells. With each seizure, Graham's mind suffered and retreated. His cancer has been in remission for years, but he still fades in and out of health, plagued by the unpredictable seizures. During the bad times, Graham can lose a hundred pounds in a few months. It's happened more times than I can remember.

Graham and I grew up together. We spent our summers here in Mountain City, in this remote town in northeastern Nevada where our mothers were raised. The name, Mountain City, describes the place well, except for its size. Only 33 people live here. There's the

store, a gas station, a bar, a motel, and two abandoned houses for every inhabited home. Pale, rounded mountains rise up on all sides like a low wall. The Owyhee River meanders north along the western foothills, and a slowed highway splits the town's center. As children, Graham and I came here to visit our grandparents and aunt and uncle, who ran and still run the family's grocery store, the hub of the area's wheeled universe. As we grew older, we both kept coming back, for more or less the same reason. We love it here and hardly feel as whole anywhere else.

Carrying a bag of groceries under each arm, Graham follows a customer out the front door to her car. She takes the bags from Graham one at a time and sets them in the trunk. Then, placing her hand on Graham's back, she walks him up the steps to the front door. Her name is Rosella, and at 91, she's the oldest woman in Mountain City.

"Thank you dear," she says.

Graham doesn't respond. He opens the door and comes back over beside me and resumes his responsibilities, placing a six-pack of soda at the bottom of a new paper bag.

Only in a place like Mountain City could Graham do this. He is slow, inefficient. You have to watch him, help him. He could never do this in a city. In a supermarket, with the thousands of people a day rushing through the store, some customers might be patient and understand, but many would not. They would grumble or complain outright. But Tremewan's Store, with its three narrow and crowded and overflowing aisles of groceries and liquor and fishing equipment, is no supermarket. It's the only store for 80 miles in any direction. For the people of Mountain City, it's not a matter of waiting or not waiting. They ask Graham questions.

"What's new, Graham?" says Larry Monroe. Larry was born and raised in Elko County, left as a young man, and came back to it after years of commercial fishing up in Alaska. He looks the part. He has a thick, dark beard, a mid-section to be proud of, and is almost as big as Graham.

"*I* flew the *air*plane," Graham says.

"You did?"

"I *did*." Graham's voice is muffled, blurry, and his words are difficult to distinguish unless you're used to the pattern of his speech. Larry's used to it.

"You're a pilot?"

"*I* flew the *air*plane!"

Graham's father, my Uncle Paul, was once a pilot and used to take Graham with him sometimes when he flew. Graham hasn't been in the cockpit of a plane for years, but it's one of his imagination's favorite places.

"Where'd you go?" Larry asks.

"*I* flew the plane to Salt *Lake*!"

There is something poetic about Graham's speech. He has neither a child's nor an adult's inflections. The emphasis he places on particular words is, to me, surprising and wonderful. He loves the engagement of conversation. When he talks, he rubs his hands together excitedly. But he's often silent unless you first ask him a question. If you told Graham to re-shelve a can of peaches, he might look up, his brown eyes no longer a vacant field of clay, and he might take and re-shelve the can. Or he might stare out the window. But if you say, "Graham, do you know where *this* goes? Will you show me?" he will take you to the spot, to the middle of the third aisle, on the bottom shelf.

When Graham bags groceries at Tremewan's Store, he won't bag cigarettes. It's not simply that he prefers not to, like Melville's Bartleby. It's more than that. He sermonizes. Graham is a Mormon, two of his older sisters are nurses, and having been through so much hospitalization himself, Graham is health conscious. When someone places a pack of cigarettes on the counter, Graham says, "Cigarettes *kill* you." He sometimes says this a few times, for emphasis. And then he won't put them in a bag.

When our Uncle Mel or Aunt Lou is working the register and Graham says this, everyone usually laughs, and then Mel or Lou bags the cigarettes for the customer. When Graham bags for me, I won't bag the cigarettes either. I won't undermine his authority. Nobody needs to listen to me about their health and how to live, but everybody could stand to listen to Graham.

Graham calls his mom and dad by their first names, Paul and Di. When he's around strangers, Graham calls his parents by their full

names, Paul Graff and Diana Graff. They've taught him to do this so that if he ever gets lost, someone might be able to help him.

When Graham comes to Mountain City with Di, he goes wherever he wants and keeps his own schedule. This is the *only* place he's allowed to do this, and so I think Mountain City is Graham's place more than Gramps' or Rosella's or any one of the 33 people who live here. The stakes are higher for Graham. The privileges are greater. If Graham is taking his time crossing the highway, no one honks their horn or swerves around him. They stop and wait. They lean out the window and ask him what he's up to, where he's headed. If he's playing in Bobbie Culley's flower bed, which he likes to do, she brings out an extra spade and they put in rhododendrons. Graham wanders all over town: up the rutted dirt road to the boarded-up schoolhouse, down along the Owyhee where he talks to the cows on the opposite bank, up through sagebrush to the water tower that overlooks the town and the river and the meadows. He does the same things that he and I used to do together when we were kids. Now, sometimes, I accompany him on his travels around town. It's not that different.

Grandma, Di, Lou, and I are playing hearts. It's past 10 p.m., and we've been playing for hours, sitting around my grandparents' kitchen table. Graham is sitting at the table with us, playing his own game with his own deck of cards. His game goes like this: He takes the top card from the deck, looks at it, and then places it in one of five piles. Each suit has its own pile. The fifth pile is for aces and face cards, which all go together, regardless of their suit. Graham plays the game until all the cards are in their respective piles, and then he pushes the piles together and plays again. He doesn't need to shuffle. The game is new every time.

Within the basic framework of the game, there are many subtleties. When the number 8 appears, Graham holds out the card and says, "*That's* an 8. *That's* when Gramps goes to *bed*." Graham is right and knows it, and he laughs and smiles and rubs his hands together. And Grandma says, "That's right, Graham. That is an 8. That's when Gramps goes to bed." This makes Graham even happier. Meanwhile, Gramps, who is sleeping in the next room, sleeps on. Graham takes

another card.

"*That's* a 7. *That's* when Gianna goes to *work*." Gianna is Graham's older sister. She's a nurse in Cedar City, Utah, and works 12-hour night shifts. Sometimes Graham says, "*That's* a 7. That's when Gianna gets off *work*." It's one of the game's options.

"*That's* a 6. *That's* when SkyWest lands in *Salt* Lake."

Not all of the numbers have corresponding pronouncements. I've never heard Graham say anything about the number 2, or 4, or 9. And sometimes Graham draws the number 7 or 8 and says nothing. Sometimes Graham holds up a card and just stares at it, quietly, holding it up for some time.

"That's a 10, Graham," Lou says. "That's when the news comes on."

Sometimes this will prompt Graham, and he will repeat the phrase back to us, remembering it the way an elderly person might remember a childhood friend, suddenly, fondly. Other times, Graham looks into the card and through it, as if it has triggered something deep inside him, something he can't possibly articulate with a number or the time of day. Sometimes we'll take the card from his hand, place it in its pile, wipe the drool from his face, and hope the game will go on. Most often it does.

Graham has nothing to say about face cards or aces. They're a mystery. I don't know why Graham doesn't arrange them by suit also, making eight piles instead of five. Perhaps this is the point where Graham's mind comes up against its limitations. Or perhaps he simply doesn't want to arrange the face cards by suit. Perhaps it's because he feels that face cards and aces are all of equal importance. Perhaps it's because he doesn't think they are nearly as important as the numbered cards. It's impossible to know. But I do know this: in Graham's own way, the game is highly refined. It is a system. It is a game, and it is not a game. It is one of his ways of making sense of the world, of putting things in their place.

When Graham and I come to Mountain City, we're the only men in town in our 20s. Mountain City's widows, Margaret and Rosella and Bobbie and Dorothy, refer to us as "the bachelors." "Well, if it isn't the bachelors, back again," Rosella says, coming into the

store one summer day. "Hold on to your belt buckles."

"Afternoon, Rosella," I say.

"Get *out* of the way! You're *blocking* the *door*!" says Graham, and then he starts laughing so hard he almost falls off the counter he's been sitting on.

"Don't you *John Wayne* me, Graham Graff," says Rosella. "I've handled more than a few cowboys in my day, and I can handle one more."

Graham laughs even harder and rubs his hands together. Graham's hero is John Wayne, and this line of his comes from "Hondo," a movie Graham has seen more times than most people would think possible. Graham does his John Wayne impression whenever anyone stands in the doorway with the door open for more than a moment, which is pretty often.

When Graham doesn't get his way, his refusals are creative. It's the middle of July, and he and Di are going home to Cedar City tomorrow. But Graham doesn't want to leave Mountain City, so he's crossed out tomorrow and the next day and the next on the calender at Tremewan's Store. He's got all the days marked off halfway into August. His work starts again in the middle of August, and Graham likes work, so he's willing to go home for that. Each weekday from 9 to 5, Graham works at a supervised shop with other adults like him. He builds wooden pallets used in the freight industry. After work my uncle Paul picks Graham up, and they drive to the airport and watch SkyWest's 5:15 flight to Salt Lake taxi down the runway and take off.

Twenty-five miles east of Mountain City, there's a ghost town named after our great-great-great-uncle. The town's name is, or was, Rowland, after Gramps's great-uncle, Rowland Tremewan, a miner from Cornwall who settled the area in the late 19th century. There's nothing there now but a few caved-in mine shafts, some crumbling foundations, and the remains of a chimney.

Graham doesn't know his family history. He doesn't know any history. He doesn't know that Gramps's full name is Oliver Rowland Tremewan. He knows his brother's name is Rowland Graff, but he can't associate a name with a reason or a history or a place. He can't

understand that being a Tremewan descendant in northern Elko County, Nevada, is a bit like being a Mayflower descendant in Boston. He *can* tell you that he's "pioneer stock," and he will, if you ask him. But he doesn't know what that means. Graham can't tell you that this country is in his blood. He can't tell you that he belongs here, but he does, and he knows he does. He just can't tell you.

Graham is gently shaken awake by Di's hand at his shoulder. His eyes open slowly, and it is some time before he sits up and orients himself in his world. He wakes always like this, emerging each morning from sleep like a bear from winter. He can't rise from sleep with expectation. He can't wake excited or anxious or hesitant. Whatever anticipation he may have harbored at bedtime has been lost in dream or the spaces between dream, and he wakes blank, like an amnesiac who must be told his name.

Graham takes a shower and dresses himself in the clothes Di has set out for him. Once dressed, Graham puts on his coat, hat, and gloves and goes out the side door into the cold morning. It's winter, and Graham and Di have come to Mountain City for a few weeks over Christmas. It has snowed 2 inches during the night, and Graham starts the snowblower and begins clearing the driveway. No one has asked him to do this. He's fully awake now, and the chain of events that make his life has been set in motion. He's happy. It shows on his face through the fog of his breath. He pushes the machine in front of him, and powder flies out its side onto a low berm of old crusted snow at the driveway's edge. Graham calls this "cutting the snow." In the summer, when Graham comes to Mountain City, he cuts our grandparents' grass every single morning. In the summer, they have the best-kept yard in town.

Graham has cleared most of the driveway when the small engine of the blower falters and stops, and the white morning goes quiet. Graham stoops down, rests one knee on the now cleared pavement, and unscrews the cap to the engine's tank. He peers down and sees that it's empty.

Graham goes to the dark garage, to the back right corner, and finds the can of gas, lifts it, and carries it and a funnel out to the blower. When Graham lifts the can of gas, he doesn't lift it to gauge its

weight, to see how full it is, to see whether there's enough gas to fill the tank. There's always enough gas. Gramps keeps it full; not to do so would be to extend the chain of decision and action beyond Graham's capacity. For 25 years, our family has gauged this capacity.

Graham fills the tank, screws the lid back in place, and returns the gas can and funnel to their places in the garage. He starts the blower again, finishes the driveway and clears the sidewalk. Inside the house, he finds Gramps waiting for him, with a breakfast of eggs and bacon on the table. After breakfast, the two men walk the quarter-mile down the highway to the store.

My grandparents have an old home movie from back when Graham and I were kids. I haven't seen it in years, but I remember it vividly. Our family is gathered in our grandparents' living room, and Graham and I and our brothers and sisters and cousins are giving a sort of talent show, performing skits and singing songs. Graham and I are both dressed in our cowboy outfits: boots, spurs, Stetsons, western shirts, belt buckles, the works. I'm singing "The Gambler," by Kenny Rogers, and I'm fumbling, forgetting the words. In the background my family's singing the words to me, helping me along. You can hear Graham's voice, too, so distinct even back then, "Know when to walk away, know when to run." Then Graham's singing his song, "Rhinestone Cowboy." And he's singing loudly and clearly and pointing his finger to different people in the crowd as he sings, at Grandma, Lou, my mom, Uncle Mel. He's hamming it up. He knows every word.

Gramps, Mel, and I sit up front on the counters. It's morning, and the store is empty. The day before, Graham had a seizure and collapsed in the center aisle, striking his head on the hardwood floor. He lay there without moving for what seemed a long time, before Mel rushed over, knelt down, and put a hand on his shoulder. Graham muttered something then but didn't cry or wail the way a child might. He just looked up at Mel, unsurprised, uncomprehending. He hadn't suffered a seizure in weeks.

"His eyes were as empty as I've ever seen them," Mel says. "Like the fall knocked him clear back to zero. For a minute there, before I saw those eyes, I thought to myself, 'Oh, God, we've lost him.'"

No one says anything for some time. Gramps is going blind, and so his eyes, too, are empty, a milked blue, and they stare ahead fiercely, at nothing. His hands grip the counter firmly. "My brother Syd's boy was the same as Graham. Worse. Every day there was the worry he'd die. The boy lived to be near 30. Every day there was that fear. Syd should've let that boy die when he was born."

Then Gramps hesitates, as if about to say the next thing, to complete the analogy. But he doesn't. He doesn't believe that. He lowers his head and looks at the floor. For Gramps, silence is the fence he builds to hold in the things he knows. When Graham comes to visit, he spends most of his time with Gramps, sitting beside him on the counter, the two of them quiet together or Graham telling Gramps about the plane to Salt Lake. I wonder if Gramps's feelings for Graham now are a reflection of his own fear, as if Graham were a mirror in which Gramps sees himself in the time to come: blind, dependent, an invalid. After a long while, Gramps goes to the back, gets his flannel, and walks home.

Graham comes in the front door of the store wearing light-blue scrubs that read Plainview Medical Center. He's carrying a clipboard, and when Mel sees him, Mel says loudly, for everyone to hear, "The doctor is *in*!"

Graham shouts back, "*I'm* Dr. Graff!" and then he goes over to Mel and starts scribbling furiously on the Tremewan's Store credit slip he has attached to his clipboard.

"Doc, am I gonna make it?" Mel asks.

"*I* think so," Graham says, and then he hands Mel the slip, which is entirely illegible and looks a lot like a doctor's prescription. "*Three* times a *day*," Graham says.

We haven't seen Graham in a while. He's been spending a lot of time in the hospital lately, making his rounds.

When Dr. Graff bags groceries at Tremewan's Store, he doesn't wear a green apron. "*Doctors* don't wear green aprons," he says.

The Associated Food truck has come and gone, and the boxes are stacked in rows by the warehouse door. All morning I've been emptying them onto storage shelves: pickles, cornflakes, pork and beans, catsup, peanut butter—a long list of things. Most all of this will go out front and eventually feed this small section of Elko County. Those few items that remain won't leave this back room, won't pay for themselves, leading a shelf-life all their own.

The empty boxes get tossed in a haphazard pile over by the deep freeze. We'll use these for packing when paper or plastic won't do, for hauling groceries in the beds of pickups. Graham comes back to the warehouse to help me, and we throw the empty boxes on the pile.

"Graham, do *you* think so?" I ask him, in reference to nothing particular.

"*I* think so!" he answers, smiling. I don't know why, but he loves this question, so I ask it often.

I didn't tell Graham that these boxes don't need to be stacked, to be placed carefully, like the eggs he handles gently when he's up front bagging, like the way he's been handled his whole life. He could see for himself the lack of order, of care. He just started chucking them on the pile, box after box, with different spins, arcs, and motions, pausing after each toss to rub his hands together excitedly, his sign for happiness, for joy.

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