Walter McKenzie

That afternoon it had been raining since early morning, a fine, stubborn rain that showed no sign of letting up on anything, not the weather and not anything else.

Hugh was in the kitchen when someone knocked on the door.

Not once.

Three times.

The woman took her time getting from the gate to the eaves, as if the mud owed her something and she was collecting on it with that same slowness.

—Are you Hugh Cameron?

—Yes.

—I was told you were a journalist.

—Years ago.

—I need you to write my husband's obituary.

—When did he die?

—Not yet.

The kettle started to whistle.

Hugh turned it off, and in that small gesture—his hand on the handle, the steam dying away—there was something that later, much later, he would recognize as the real beginning of it all, more than the question, more than the woman standing under the eaves with water running down the collar of her coat.

—He has cancer —she said—. The doctors think he won't make it to winter.

Hugh stayed standing by the door.

—Then wait.

—I want him to be able to read it.

There was a brief silence, the kind that in the movies stretches out with a close-up and music that never seems to end, and in real life lasts barely two or three seconds—long enough for a man to reconsider the rest of his life.

—I don't write anymore.

—I know.

—Then you know I can't help you.

—I can pay you.

—It's not about the money.

—I can also give you a piece of land.

Hugh looked up.

—In Ophir.

She said the name of the town as if it were a magic word, capable of solving equations that hadn't even been posed yet.

—Think about it. I'll come back tomorrow.

Before all this, when Hugh Cameron retired from journalism—if what he'd been doing the last few years, interviews for Sunday supplements nobody read, obituaries of minor politicians, book reviews he forgot as soon as he handed them in, could still be called journalism—he sold his house in Dunedin, gave away almost all his books to a library that would probably send them straight to the recycling bin, and rented a small house in Ōmakau, a town in Central Otago so small that on the road map its name was printed in the same tiny type as a cemetery or an

abandoned gas station. He didn't ask any of his children for their opinion. He'd gone thirty years without asking their opinion on anything that actually mattered to him.

The house stood at the end of a gravel road and cost him only $330 a week. At first it struck him as almost a joke; after a few months, it stopped seeming that way. It had two bedrooms, only one of which he ever used, a stove that smoked when the wind came from the south, furniture that didn't match, and in the shed, rusted tools and a bicycle with no wheels. From the kitchen he could see a row of poplars. Hugh arrived while the cold still hadn't let up, hands shoved in the pockets of a coat that no longer fit him right, and he had no way of knowing yet whether the poplars really turned yellow in autumn.

Unpacking took him less than an hour: clothes, a few photographs he could no longer quite place, and a folder of drawings his children had made—suns with too many rays, dogs with too many legs. The rest stayed in Dunedin.

The days began to resemble each other with an almost religious regularity. The poplars turned yellow, then went bare, then turned yellow again: nearly a full year spent watching that same handful of trees transform while he himself stayed much the same. The only real variation came when he had to go to the Medical Centre in Alexandra, a half-hour drive Hugh made without any hurry, looking at the dry hills the way you look at something you already know by heart. Afterward he'd go back to the house, make coffee, and read the paper halfway through. He never finished it.

He went to the pub two or three times a week, almost always when there was rugby on, and always sat in the same spot, a stretch of worn bench he'd come to think of as his by right.

John would pour him a beer.

—So? Still not regretting the move?

Hugh would raise his glass.

John would wait.

He got no answer.

The following week he'd ask again, with the same near-liturgical formula.

That was the life the woman in the rain had just interrupted. That night Hugh thought more about Ophir than about the man who was dying. He knew exactly where it was: a few minutes by car, a handful of stone houses, a swing bridge that showed up on every postcard of the region. What he didn't know was what land was worth out there, and that was the question he ended up typing into his phone—first almost against his own will, then with the insistence of someone checking the same result three times over. He found comparable sales. Did a rough calculation. Sat looking at the number on the screen for longer than made sense for land that wasn't even his yet. He turned the phone off. He didn't like how quickly that calculation had come to him.

He said yes the next day.

Not because he wanted to write again.

He said yes because he'd spent a month convinced he'd left ambition behind, and discovered he could still sell off a decision of his own for a piece of land he'd probably never visit. That, and not Walter's cancer, was the first thing that made him feel old.

Walter was mending a fence when they arrived. He was tall, thin, a man of few words, the kind of person who seems to have been shaped by the weather before anything else. He shook Hugh's hand.

—So you're the journalist.

—I was.

—Better.

They went inside. Margaret made tea. Walter talked about the last frost, the price of wool, and a water pump that had been losing pressure for two weeks, and Hugh listened to all of it with the strange feeling of sitting in on a class about a language he'd forgotten without noticing.

Hugh opened his notebook.

—Where were you born?

—Around here.

—Have you always lived here?

—Mostly.

—What did you do with your life?

Walter thought it over for a few seconds, as if the question needed to be weighed physically, with his hands.

—Worked.

Nothing else.

The following weeks were much the same. Hugh would turn up two or three times. Sometimes they'd end up fixing a gate. Other times they'd move firewood. One day they replaced a broken window, and Hugh thought that the new pane, so plain, so without a history of its own, said more about Walter than any sentence he could pry out of him. The interviews never lasted long. Walter answered without hiding anything, but he didn't seem interested in remembering either, and that lack of interest, Hugh was starting to suspect, wasn't poverty but a kind of wealth he himself had lost somewhere along the way in his working life—at some conference, in some newsroom lit by fluorescent tubes.

He never said, "when I was young..."

He never spoke of pride.

He never exaggerated.

One afternoon Hugh worked up the nerve to ask something different.

—What was the best day of your life?

Walter kept hammering a nail.

—Don't know.

—There must be one.

—Maybe.

He didn't add anything else, and that silence, that "maybe" hanging in the air like smoke from the stove when the south wind blew, began to gnaw at Hugh in a way he hadn't felt in years—not in front of a blank page, not even in front of the editors who used to hand back his copy marked up in red pencil like a failed exam.

One afternoon, with Walter out of earshot, he asked Margaret whether Walter had ever had any serious trouble in his life. An accident. A falling-out. A debt. Something.

Margaret set the teapot down on the table harder than necessary.

—What do you need that for?

—So people will want to read it.

—People who know him already know what he's like. People who don't, don't need to hear about his troubles to believe in him.

Hugh said nothing. He closed the notebook faster than he meant to, and the shame of it—of being caught digging for someone else's misfortune to make the piece work—stayed with him for days, longer than anything an editor had ever said to him in thirty years in the trade.

He couldn't find a story.

He found days.

Small jobs.

Meals.

Rain.

A trip to Timaru.

A dog that went missing for a week.

A cow that kept breaking through the same stretch of wire, with a stubbornness that amounted to something almost like a philosophy, though nobody had ever bothered to write it down.

None of it seemed important.

And yet, every time he went home he wrote three or four pages.

He didn't understand why.

One morning he decided to ask him outright.

—Walter...

—Yes?

—I can't find the obituary.

Walter set down the hammer.

—Then don't write an obituary.

—What should I write?

Walter took a while to answer, looking at the half-finished fence as if the answer were written somewhere in the wood.

—Write how the days were.

That sentence kept turning over in his mind for weeks.

The following Tuesday Hugh went back to Alexandra. The test results were in. The doctor didn't say much.

Tumor.

Pancreas.

Treatment.

Months.

When he came out, he bought a coffee at a service station. He set it on the roof of the car while he looked for his keys. Then he drove off.

He never drank that coffee.

He didn't call his children.

He didn't call anyone.

He went straight back to Ōmakau.

Walter was by the fence again.

—Thought you were done with that.

Hugh dropped his jacket on the grass. Walter handed him a shovel. They worked for close to an hour without talking.

When they finished, Walter rested his hands on the new post.

—That'll hold.

Hugh looked at the fence. It took him a moment to answer.

—Yeah.

That night he read back over everything he'd written. The first pages were about a death. The last ones were about a man who mended fences, baked bread on Sundays, and never locked the shed.

He tore out the first page.

Where it read:

Obituary of Walter McKenzie

he wrote simply:

Walter McKenzie

The next day he brought the pages over. Margaret read every one of them. She said nothing. Walter barely skimmed them.

—There's one thing wrong.

Hugh waited.

—What's that?

Walter held up a page.

—Sounds like I already died.

Hugh took the manuscript. He closed it.

—It's not finished yet.

Walter handed the pages back.

—Then come back next week.

There's still time.