

*James Hannah*

## Field Of Vision

"Well, just 'goddamit' yourself." Beth threw the words back at him across the cracked vinyl upholstery of the car seat and avoided his eyes by concentrating on the distant black specks that were buzzards.

Michael sighed dramatically and without a hint of resignation. "We just can't afford it. That's all."

Even against the clutter of her thoughts she began earnestly to study the windblown birds. To examine the perspective, judge the technique required to draw them there, so far off. So unimpeded by things. She had always wanted to draw them but never seemed to find the time. "It's going to be awful," she said. "Absolute hell in the kitchen during the summer. And mildew this winter. Remember how it ruined my shoes?" She almost let her voice crack in front of him but held it steady. She despised how her anger often took the form of tears. His seldom caused his voice to rise, much less falter. She clenched the faded and torn armrest. "We don't seem able to afford anything, do we?"

Michael shrugged and leaned over to turn off the sputtering car engine. "Maybe when we get it sealed properly and all the insulation in. Then maybe we can talk about something cooler than fans and warmer than space heaters. Maybe next spring." He turned his head and looked out the car window toward the house.

His movement tore her away from the cool blue sky of the buzzards to look with him past their mailbox and across the wooded valley no more than two hundred yards across. Only a portion of his handbuilt A-frame house showed through the young pines and older but smaller post oaks.

There was the yellow gleam of a window already reflecting the steadily mounting light of the morning sun — the windows themselves he had salvaged from the demolition of an old schoolhouse in a nearby town. The flat deep red siding he had loaded himself at a mill halfway across the state. Anything he hadn't been able to get secondhand, he had haggled over for weeks — in person or over the phone — until the salesman had finally sold more out of exasperation and the desire never to see him again than from a sense of having reached an equitable price. He seldom bought materials from the same source more than once.

Already the morning heat stirred the flies that minutes earlier had hovered lethargically near the sun visor.

Beth turned on the worn seat and reached back to retrieve the manila envelope. "You've got everything? Lunch? Cap?"

"Of course."

She patted his hand. The hair along its back like the finest golden thread which was turning, under the roofer's scalding sun, to white. In strange contrast, she thought, to the blackish cast his tan was taking.

"Off you go then." She opened the door and came around to stand between him and the house. She tapped the envelope. "Who knows? Maybe this'll bring thousands." And then she smiled.

Michael grunted and looked up at her as she bent down and touched her lips to his forehead. Her thick tangled hair — gypsy's hair he had once called it — filled the window.

"Stay cool."

He smiled slightly, the corners of his thin tight lips puckered. "I'll try. You weed the garden." And he shook an admonitory finger at her — more in seriousness, they both knew, than in jest.

And then he was gone. The red dust of the road, like dust from pulverized bricks, swirled behind the rattling Toyota, and she stood still long enough to watch some of it settle another layer on the Spanish mulberries, the waxy leaves of poison ivy along the roadside. What remained aloft, the first warm morning breeze guided cautiously between the scaly trunks of the pines.

For a moment she forgot about him and the humidity and heat of their second summer in the unfinished house and thought only about the half-dozen pen-and-ink sketches she was sending to an art magazine. They were the best she had ever drawn. Especially the one of Molly's boy, Austen. In her drawing the child's face was hidden. All you saw were his naked back and legs — the two-year-old fat on his thighs, spilling over his knees. Beth had wanted a child for years, but Michael had never seemed ready to discuss the possibility seriously. Something new always intervened. Only six months ago he'd used the house as his excuse.

"It's not built for children, is it?" he'd said.

"Why not?"

"Well, Christ! Look around. We have a loft for a bedroom. A ladder to it. No stairs yet. Books everywhere. No yard to speak of."

"But when, then?"

"When we're settled in more. When we get a little ahead. When we can build on a nursery. That's what we both wanted, isn't it?"

With the back of her hand, Beth wiped a line of water from her forehead, then walked to the silver mailbox. She bent the envelope, careful to keep it curved as she slid it in. The red flag, as she raised it, was warm against her fingertips.

On her way back to the house, down the deeply rutted road that lacked a bar ditch and turned into a shallow stream with every rain, she stopped at the garden. She guessed she'd better follow his orders: the weeds were overshadowing the smaller plants. She walked carefully past the knee-high sweet corn — the green dramatic in contrast to the red powdery earth — and the young hills of cucumbers whose pale yellow

blooms were just beginning to show, pulled up her pants' legs and squatted by the carrots. She brushed her hair and tied it in a wiry ball behind her ears with a rubber band from her shirt pocket. Methodically, she began to weed — trying patiently to distinguish between actual weeds and the tiny first filigree of the carrot tops. Soon she had to rest her elbows on the ground, her butt in the air. She inched her way down the row, crawling forward, careful to keep her body compact, her legs and feet exactly between the rows.

"Shit." She finally straightened — the muscles in her forearms and along her sides aching. She held an almost invisible weed up to the pale blue of the sky and began to doubt herself. "Goddamit, it's a carrot." She looked back at her five or six feet of weeding and realized that she had taken as many carrot seedlings out as she had weeds.

It's his garden anyway, she thought angrily and stood, slowly trying the taut muscles. His methodical handiwork surrounded her: the critically measured distances between the rows; the tomato stakes all the same height; the cotton twine that laid out not only the perimeter of the field but also internally laid out the individual rows.

A gust of wind caused the symmetrical white twine to undulate gently like the strands of a spider's web, and quite expectedly Beth felt trapped in the carefully woven garden like some clumsy insect.

All through the morning she worked for him, as she thought of it. She performed her chores as if he were right there, looking over her shoulder. Before, she had been comforted by his presence. But now he made her nervous. And the steadily increasing heat seemed to pique their earlier argument. The hotter it became the slower she worked and the more aggravating each task was to perform. She became clumsy and careless. She salted the stew too heavily, and mindful of what his comments would have been, she dumped it far behind the house in a small hollow under some pines. Shamefully, she pulled some leaves over it with the toe of her shoe. And, inside again, she swept the floor, but almost as if to irritate him, she swept carelessly around the legs of the furniture.

Even the cat, which she loved because of its companionship, caused her worry. The tenth time it wailed to be let out to empty its weak bladder, she took a solid swipe at it with the broom. The dirty yellow bobtailed cat screamed at the mistreatment and scrambled hard to catch the boards on the porch's edge. But trapped by her anger, Beth stepped through the opened screen and took a harder, more purposeful swing.

"Oh God," she called after the cat. "Sarah. Sarah." She felt tears fill her eyes. But she bit her lip hard and thought of something else. She half-turned to enter the house but paused to run her hand gently down the smooth unstained wood that was taking on the texture of balsam

and the color of chocolate. She remembered having asked him to leave the siding rough because she enjoyed the prickle of it against her fingers. And she recalled his tight, controlled laugh — the force of it cut short — at her suggestion. And then she had agreed with him, had laughed at herself. For a few moments she stroked the planed and sanded wood and stood listening to the rustle of the yellow cat's retreat through the undergrowth.

What would I do with a child underfoot in this heat? she wondered as she continued sweeping. If I can't tolerate an old cat, what would a baby be like? But she had an answer for herself: That would be different. And a nice change from the impersonal attention of the old cat. Then chores wouldn't be his and mine. I could work for both of us through the child. He'd have to be kept entertained — crayons brought out and scissors supervised. I'd have to watch him carefully as he played in the bare spots under the spindly post oaks.

Imagining her life with a child helped relieve the tedium of the chores for a while, but by one she had to surrender to the heat and her increasing frustration. Any movement, no matter how short-lived, produced a torrent of perspiration. And by late afternoon it seemed as if the still damp heat had somehow generated — by its very lack of motion — a counteremotion.

She sat heavily in a rocking chair as motionless as an insect pinned on a card and watched, through the upper windowpanes of old warped glass, another flight of buzzards far off. They meandered amidst the updrafts of woods air, the glass elongating them suddenly, then as quickly causing them to disappear. They were swallowed up from both ends, disappearing into themselves.

Suddenly she wanted a better view, a closer look at those ugly birds that searched for lifeless carrion, the broken bodies of raccoons and skunks and occasionally dogs and tabby cats that reeked on the roads. And quite unexpectedly she remembered her father's surveying equipment that she had carefully packed and moved through her life since his death almost fifteen years ago. She felt that if she could get a good look at the buzzards, a closer look, then she would be able to draw them. She climbed the ladder against the far wall between the couch and the stereo, her feet and hands secure on the smooth rungs.

Upstairs in their loft the fuzzy synthetic bedspread looked scorching. The air was so stifling she panted for breath and lunged across the narrow room to push up the aluminum windows. But now there was the faintest of breezes, and the hot still air of the room was ever so slowly discharged and replaced by the slightly cooler outside air.

She lay flat and looked up under the bed, afraid of mice or other small animals that had lived with them since they had erected this place and interrupted trails and burrows and territories.

The boxes lay pushed against the farthest wall and she had to thrust herself half under the bed to reach them. Her tangled hair caught in



the underside of the open springs and for a second she panicked, felt the dark closeness of the dirty air and heard the scurry of mice. She yanked back vehemently and sacrificed a few strands.

She pawed the boxes out into the open and sat up, two dirty circles on her chest where her breasts had mopped up the dust.

Cautiously she emptied the contents, still frightened of spiders, of anything that might rush out suddenly.

Her mother had left little behind. Except for the now odorless sachets she'd taken from her mother's table drawers, and the small velvet boxes of ancient, mismatched earrings and out-of-fashion pendants — a yellow cameo chipped beyond recognition — there was nothing. But here, before her, there were tools a person could use, if he knew how to read the contents of these boxes and to figure their secrets. She pulled open a box of small yellow field books and opened to a page full of numbers and symbols that were foreign and indecipherable.

"Boundary Surveys," it read in black letters. And along the top border, in small script, the names of the crew members; her father's first as party chief. The weather: cool, 65 degrees, partly cloudy. Finally, the date. She looked up through the window absentmindedly and figured. He had been thirty then. No, thirty-two.

She turned quickly through the pages, watching his days of work stumble through her hands. From the lingering coolness of late spring to the brief and rare snowfall. Lot surveys. Boundary surveys. At the back of the book, behind the tables of logarithms, of charts on how to figure grades and how to calculate the cords and deltas of radii, were pages filled with penciled additions and subtractions. She closed the book, recognizing the awkward figures of his 2's and 4's.

But all of this wasn't what she was after. She brusquely tossed the fragile old books back under the bed and wiped her forehead. A longer cardboard box, crushed at both ends, yielded the tools themselves. She remembered enough to recognize the long wooden box of the level. The varnish was eaten away in places, and where the wood had been exposed, mildew had clouded the surface, softening it to a damp sponginess. What had she warned him about mildew just this morning? She ran her hand gently across the destroyed wood and, remembering her original intent, looked out the raised windows to the distant ridge far beyond their own small valley. Even though it was only a few miles away, on days like today she imagined those distances cool and windy.

Carefully she opened the level case and lifted out the heavy tube. She ran her hands along the warm screws and indentations for adjustments and fine tuning that she didn't fully understand, then crawled across the bed, gently dragging the level behind her. There was just enough space between the bed and window for her to kneel, the level's base on the windowsill.

For a while, as she tried to adjust the knobs — turning screws one way

and then the other, rotating rings around the eyepiece left and right — pine needles leapt at her only to retreat and scaly pine bark was clear one second only to dissolve into an indistinct blur of gray-green.

But finally, after stacking a half-dozen field books under the base, she had managed to tilt the telescope above and beyond the short pines and oaks of the valley and towards the hills in the distance.

She kept looking with one eye and then the other. And once she had her left eye — her best without her glasses — to the barrel, she slowly swept the flanks of the ridge. What to her naked eyes was only a green wall became separate trees. Huge pines clung to the slopes too steep for logging. And what few oaks there were were draped in the curly gray tufts of Spanish moss.

Suddenly something streaked across her narrow field of vision and when it crossed again she jerked the level around with it. But in her hands the tube bobbed violently no matter how rigidly she tried to keep her arms. She fought the same anger she had felt toward the cat and continued to sweep up from the ridge and into the deep blue of the late afternoon sky. And it was as if she had never seen it before. As if she had parted the hot hazy air with the level, had cut visually through the breath of the woods, through the wet exhalations all around her. She pressed her shoulder hard into the window frame.

Once again there were buzzards high over the ridge — they were what had blurred across her small circle. She tried to keep them in the thin cross hairs but either they bobbed and floated too quickly on the currents or else she was too unsteady. Whatever the reason, she couldn't keep them in sight. They drifted across at their own speed unaffected by her desire to hold them still, to make them flow with and match her own movements.

"Goddamn you." The hoarse sound of her voice frightened her, but she kept muttering. "Just let me see. I need to draw you." But the huge birds wouldn't cooperate and so she rested the level back on the pile of books. Her heart was pounding and her eyes, strained by the magnification, stung. She rubbed her eyes with her knuckles and took up the sweep of the distance again.

She was oblivious to the heat of the room, to the time, even to the smell of the stew drifting up through the ladder well.

Farther along the ridge to the northeast she found the dim silver wedge of the waning moon. And she breathed in sharply as she fumbled with the focus on the side of the tube. She had never seen it like this before — the shadow eating it away, a gradually darkening ring. The craters deep and in shadows. The face of it pitted and awesome. She had seen relief maps and photographs but she had never seen for herself.

She kept looking from the instrument to see it with both eyes. But to her eyes shaded from the weak late-afternoon light by the eaves, the sliver appeared smooth and bland and usual.

She had the desire to turn and drop down the ladder to her sketch pad, then to rush back up to their bed and draw all she had seen for the first time: the ridge at once a wall of shades of green and yet individual trees; the indistinct blur of black curiously at ease against the cobalt sky; the rough and terrible face of the losing moon. But instead she scanned it all again, having already ritualized her sweep: from darkening ridge to the few remaining buzzards that hadn't yet dropped down to roost for the night to the rising piece of moon.

It seemed only a matter of minutes before the rusted yellow Toyota drifted noiselessly into the faint cross hairs. When it reached their driveway, she realized that Michael must have switched off the engine. She glanced away from the eyepiece to her watch — he was early.

The car slowed and came to rest on the small stone bridge, and Michael emerged in his dirty workclothes — the shirt dark with perspiration, the pants splotted with tar and oil from the shingles.

She warmed to this game. Certainly she had observed him from across the room at parties — had watched him lean belligerently against a far wall, or, more rarely, had seen his tailored smile and heard him laugh, his voice slightly false to her ears. But this was new and exciting. Here he was alone. She gladly followed him from the car, back up the hill, to where a path cut through the trees to the garden.

But the quickly failing light made it more difficult for her to find him between the intervening trees. Anxiously she bounded across the chenille bedspread and opened the square box. The heavier transit — shorter and thicker of body — was higher in magnification. She remembered this from her father at a distance of more than two dozen years.

At the window she tried to focus quickly, almost terrified at having lost sight of him for so long — of having missed any second of this rare opportunity. Frantically she fumbled with the knobs. Her hands were sweaty and her fingers slid off the warm metal. She heard herself breathe in too deeply and felt her lungs catch for a fraction of a second as she brought his face to within an arm's reach.

Just as quickly as she had begun, she now wanted to end this spying. To lower the aluminum windows and crawl back across their rumpled bed, seal up the boxes and leave these instruments alone for the mice and mildew. She felt shameful like some child caught in a dirty act by the sudden opening of a door.

But she ignored this part of herself because, under the stronger magnification, the pale face drew her on. And for the first time in almost fifteen years of marriage, she thought she saw the truth in his face across the distance of a few hundred yards — the cruelty in his blond eyebrows, the ugliness congealed in the tight set of his fleshless lips.

She turned away for a moment to rub savagely at her watering eyes and when she turned back to the transit he was gone. She scanned the patches of garden she could see — the bright green stalks of corn, the wire pens for the cucumbers. But he had drifted silently from her field of vision.

With an artificial calm she swept the valley before her as she had learned to scan the hills earlier. But still she had no luck and in the twilight the trees seemed to be absorbing the last stray particles of light.

She muttered to herself. Out of desperation she began at the car, and as she traversed slowly to the left, she saw him emerge from the path and walk toward the creek.

She watched him jump down into the dry ditch by the side of the car. She tried to sharpen her focus but in the darkness she could only intimate some things.

She knew that he removed a stone from the tight-fitting headwall he had built to keep the rains from eating at the road where the creek crossed it. And she saw him reach into the opening — the white luminescent hand was swallowed up — to remove a pouch like the sandwich bags she packed his lunch in. And his hand moved again, from his shirt pocket to the bag. Then the bag and rock back in place.

And for the second time she saw his face clearly. This time he almost jerked his head up toward the house and seemed to look directly into her eyes. His thin blond hair was ruffled by some breeze down there that failed to touch her higher up the hill. The heat around her was still as thick and palpable as a shawl.

It seemed as if they watched one another for a long time. And in that time she tried to interpret his face a hundred different ways.

Even after she heard the whine of the starter and the crunch of the gravel on the drive, she still held her eye to her father's transit and continued to watch the blurred dark circle of road that ran across the dry creek bed.

Only slowly did she recover and then meticulously smooth the crumpled bed covers and carefully repack the tools and push them back into the dusty dark under the bed.

Once downstairs she bent over the simmering stew and stabbed at it with a wooden spoon. It had been money, she told herself. That had to be what he had folded and placed behind the stone.

"Hello," Michael said. He had stopped on the porch to remove his filthy work shoes.

Beth turned, the spoon still in her hand, dripping brown splotches on the stovetop and her blouse. "I'm pregnant," she enunciated, her voice unfaltering.

"What?" He had bent over at the waist to untie his shoes and now he turned his white face upward to see her.

"I'm *pregnant*." This time she spewed the words at him, and she knew that if she really wasn't, then very soon she would be.