

~ Fiction ~

Don Mitchell

Slip Pivot

“Go ahead and ask the question,” Toni’s son Alec said.

“I guess. Well. How long?” Elliot said into the phone, stomach lurching at the words he had thought but never spoken.

How long. All summer and fall he’d been talking to Toni on the phone two or three times a week, sending her things he’d written, saying he’d come to Geneva to get her and bring her to Buffalo so she could see his new house. But she’d been saying she was too weak. Maybe when she got better. During the five years he’d known her, she always had gotten better.

Nobody had answered her phone for days. Each time he’d only gotten the machine, which meant she was back in the hospital. He’d been leaving cheerful messages: “Hi, it’s me. Just checking in. I’ll call again.” So he hadn’t been surprised when the phone was finally picked up and it was Alec, the son who lived in St Louis. If Alec was in Geneva Elliot knew the answer.

“A week, ten days, maybe less.”

Elliot couldn’t speak for a moment. Even if it wasn’t unexpected, he hadn’t known how he’d respond when the time came. “Oh, man,” he said, the banality of his response amplifying the pain. “Oh, shit. Sorry.” He stopped, unable to think of anything to say.

“She wants you. Will you come?” Alec asked.

“I can come the day after tomorrow, OK? Then I have to be in Boston. But I can stop by on the way back, too. See her twice.”

“Come both times. The boys want you too. Something about their computer.”

Elliot hung up the phone and looked at his screen, letting his eyes relax their focus, which didn’t matter because they were already blurring. He had usually been sitting at his screen when he was on the phone with Toni, because he was usually working on something and wanted to talk about it, or had been doing email with her but wanted more immediacy. And now with her death a certainty, on a timetable, here he was looking at a screen again. It felt comforting, as though nothing had changed.

He’d been doing the same thing the first time he’d talked to her. The phone had rung and a woman’s voice he didn’t recognize had said, “I’m calling about the poems you submitted. I’m sorry I didn’t get back to you sooner but I’ve been diagnosed with cancer and I’ve been setting up treatments and things.”

“What kind?” Elliot asked without thinking.

“Ovarian. The worst.” And then she’d told him she’d publish his poems if he made a few changes.

Later, he marveled at how oddly their relationship had begun. There had been no before-the-cancer that changed into something else. No period of ease that was then disrupted. He’d never known her when she hadn’t been endangered. It wasn’t that the danger had hovered over her, casting darkness, a pall; he didn’t think either of them had felt that way. There had been a

starkness, he thought, as if the danger had been strong light coming at them from a low angle, throwing everything into sharp relief, heightening contrast. Right from that first call they'd never been tentative with each other, and maybe that was context more than personality.

Elliot sat rocking in his chair, remembering how they'd finally seen each other in the flesh. It had been at a meeting where they'd both been going to read poetry to a likely indifferent and possibly hostile audience of academics.

"How will I recognize you?" he'd asked on the phone, "As for me, I'm fifty, and bald."

"So am I," she laughed.

Before he left for Geneva he made her an arrangement of the newly-tasseled variegated grasses from his yard, some red leaves and pods, and a dandelion he found still alive among the prickly pear. He chose a brightly colored Panamanian card and wrote her a note: *I love you with grasses and leaves, and with this dandelion, brave and beautiful in November.*

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Cars were lined up in the driveway. He took the arrangement and went to the door. Three dogs greeted him, barking and scuffling, nails scraping on the hardwood floor. Only one of them knew him, the one she'd gotten as a puppy a year ago. Alec greeted him, saying, "Sorry about all the dogs. I had to bring mine, is what happened. They're doing all right together but the cat's freaking."

"How is she?" Elliot asked, as he leaned over to pat the dogs, who were milling around. Even the strange ones seemed happy to be petted.

"In and out, because of the morphine. I'll get her ready for you."

The other kids were in the kitchen, a person he didn't know was in the living room, and he could hear movement upstairs. Elliot sat with the younger boys and waited.

"We can't get this new game to run," said Anthony, the ten year old.

"What is it? What happens?"

"It's called *Blood*. Actually, we can't even get it installed."

Elliot started to make a face, then caught himself. "Blood?"

"We know. It's not exactly a Quaker game, but our father sent it and we want to play it."

"I'll help you after I see your mom."

When he walked in, her eyes were open but unfocused and she seemed unaware of him. He was startled by her appearance, not because she was so thin—he expected that—but because of her hair. All the time he'd known her she'd been bald or nearly so, but here was thick, black hair. Short, but thick. It was a sign of how long it had been since he'd seen her, how long since the last chemo, the time he'd sent her a fleece jester's hat.

"Just wait," Alec said, "when she goes away it's only for a minute or two. She'll be back. Sit and wait."

Elliot put his arrangement on the bedside table and tried to sense what might be in the room with them. He hadn't been in a room with her very many times. He had stopped by every time he'd been near Geneva, but that hadn't been often. Elliot thought of their connection as Victorian—intimates out of a Trollope novel, exchanging notes and letters, manuscripts—but of course it was all electronic. Most mornings there was something from her, usually written after midnight. Her email address. He wouldn't be typing it again. The phone number programmed into the auto-dialer. How long before he'd bring himself to delete it?

He didn't sense struggle or alarm in the room. On the phone, in email, she had always seemed battle-ready, even fierce: *The beast is out of the cave again*, one email had read, *time to take up the sword and fight*. He replied with some lines he'd picked up somewhere—Greek?—

The night is gone, the sword is drawn and the scabbard thrown away. The next time he visited there was a naked kung fu sword on the wall. He asked her if she'd thrown away the scabbard and she answered with a simple *Yes*.

But when he was alone with her the air around them always seemed soft, even tender, and sweet. He never sensed her shielding herself from anything. Settling into her presence reminded him of deplaning into an open-air Hawaiian terminal, of lurching, stiff and tired, from the stale, metallic aircraft atmosphere into open tropical air, mantled by the fragrance of plumeria, edged with the smell of jet fuel. Instead of masking the kerosene odor, the flowers rendered it irrelevant.

He felt the same thing when he came to her. When the two of them were together, something compressed the beast and moved it aside. It never disappeared but, like the jet fuel, became irrelevant. Elliot thought she was somehow able to draw energy from him and cloak herself with it so she could let down her guard. Elliot didn't believe in mystical energies but he knew what he felt and sensed, and kept his mouth shut about it.

Even a hospital could seem a hopeful place when he was there with her. After one surgery, he sat and read her a story, one about how he'd scattered his father's ashes; she'd known he was working on it and asked him to bring it. "It's beautiful," she said when he finished, "Now help me with my IV and we'll walk around the ward a little bit and then I'll try some tai chi."

But once that spring, the successful-surgery spring, the sweetness hardened and cracked, the way carelessly-heated sugar can pass unnoticed through caramel and coat the saucepan with brittle, bad-smelling black. Elliot was sure it had been his fault. Sitting at her kitchen table he'd said, "You know, I think you've beaten it, I do."

"Don't say that!" she spat at him, "Don't ever. You can't say that," heaving a great sob, a thing she had never done in his presence.

"Even if it's true, look what it's cost me," she said, slamming the palm of her hand on the table, spilling her tea, "Not my hair, hair grows back, but the rest of me. I'm hardly a woman anymore, am I? Important parts of me are gone and others don't work. Stuff I cared about, you know, is useless. I'm alive but I feel old and ugly. So if they cut all of it out of me that's fine, fine! but right now it seems worth it only when I know I'm still in the battle.

"If I think *I've beaten it* then I have to think about what I lost doing it. The cost. As long as I'm fighting I just go on but Jesus, I'm such a wreck. You never saw me when I was beautiful, I never say things like that, you're making me say it, but you never did. See me. And I was. And my hair. It was amazing. I miss my hair the most."

"Well, that's what I think, anyway," Elliot said, not wanting to back away from what he'd said, thinking if he did it would be the same as saying *OK, you are going to die then*, "And what's left of you still makes quite a woman. I'd take you any day."

She blew her nose, and tossed the tissue over her shoulder onto the floor, not even trying to hit the trash. Not even cleaning up the spilt tea. "See? The rules of engagement say you get to be messy." Then she smiled, and laughed, bringing back a kind of lightness, though the sweetness, spooked or shy, stayed out of the room. "And you know what? That woman of yours in Binghamton's going to dump you. I can tell. So maybe you'll get your chance at me, hey? Maybe what's left of me isn't so bad. Some of my parts are better than yours. *Your* hair's never going to grow back."

Elliot laughed and ran his hand over his head. He wanted to stroke her head, too.

She stood up and turned a figure across the table from him. "I'm dancing better than ever now, by the way. You should come to my class sometime and learn to waltz with me."

"I'm a lousy dancer," said Elliot, staying seated, "I don't know why. I can't seem to relax. Even as a teenager I was terrible."

And in that way *beaten* it was dropped, but Elliot picked it up again and put it on a photo. He had taken a picture of her on that visit: back-lit so you could see her stubble, she was standing in a tulip bed, holding daffodils she'd just cut, looking straight at the camera, an enigmatic expression on her face. To Elliot she seemed calm and purposeful, even secure. On the back of the framed print he taped a note: *To a strong, wise woman who'll look at this picture when she's old, and remember.*

What I see in your picture, she wrote back, is a ravaged middle aged woman who's been granted a reprieve.

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She moved her head a little and smiled at him. "You've come." Her hand was resting on the covers. He took it in one of his. Her skin was smooth and full, not slack and dry, which surprised him.

He picked up the card he'd brought, and showed it to her. "Read it to me," she said, so he did, but it was hard and he had to stop twice. She didn't seem to notice.

Perhaps, he thought, perhaps his speech had fallen into the same cadence as her attention and so had been seamless to her.

"I like the dandelion," she said, "turn it towards me. People bring hothouse flowers. Wild things are better now."

She closed her eyes and went away. Elliot sat, holding her hand and looking at her. In a moment Alec came in and raised his eyebrows.

"Just a couple of minutes more," Elliot said, "please."

He kept holding her hand, watching her dream, thinking *the friend of my heart*, which is what he called her to distinguish her from the other women in his life. He couldn't just let go of her hand and leave. He wanted to kiss her, and when he rose to do it she woke.

Leaning towards her he said without thinking, "I have loved you," the tense surprising him with its acceptance, its finality.

"I know you have," she said.

She lifted a thin arm and put her hand on the back of his neck. He steadied himself with one hand on her pillow. He meant to kiss her forehead, to brush it with a kiss and leave her. But she tilted her head back and moved towards him, pressing her lips to his, her mouth open slightly. He could feel the little gusts of her breath. He put his hand on the thick black hair he had never felt, and stroked it. Her lips were full and moist. *How can this be?* he thought. When he pulled back slightly she pulled him down, kissing him strongly, even ferociously, rising a little more, kissing him hard, harder, then released him abruptly, fell back onto the pillow and closed her eyes.

There was a sudden commotion downstairs: dogs barking, storm door slamming, the high piping voices of children excited in spite of themselves. Elliot stood up, seized by the moment, wanting to stay in it. Concentrating on Toni took all his strength. If he gave in to the noise, it would collapse around him, ushering in disorder and its partner, death. If he could possess this moment she had given him, then afterwards he would always be able to distinguish it from others, superficially similar: bending over a woman lying in a bed, her nightgown falling open a bit, as Toni's had when she rose to kiss him, a breast curving beneath cotton. The times a woman had kissed him, leaving early for work, or going home.

He wanted to keep this memory from mixing with the others. Maybe if he gathered it in, inhaling the scene as if it were air; once in him he could force phase changes: gas, liquid, solid; it would harden, perhaps crystallize into something to be held and examined when he chose. He looked around the room trying to fix everything in his memory.

She opened her eyes and when she located him she said, “I was dreaming. I was dreaming about you, that you were holding the dandelion in front of you and I was looking at it, and you were walking away from me, walking backwards down a hallway or a path, then I couldn’t see you anymore but I could still see the dandelion.”

Elliot started to say, *Wild is what’s left*, but before he could, she closed her eyes again. And with *wild* in his throat he saw how wrong he’d been, how false his idea to freeze the scene, lock it down, had been. Everything mattered—noise, commotion, disorder, change, yes, death too was part of what he needed to take with him. All of it. Toni *was* change and movement, had been, would be. She—*they*—never had been static. How had he not seen that? *She’s going someplace*, he said to himself, *only to earth, but that’s the right path*. His hunger for stasis, his avoidance—false desires, empty. She’d made the potent choice, drawing herself to him, kissing, declaring, *It’s me. This is it*.

Elliot hesitated, even bent forward towards her a little, then backed to the door, turned and walked out past Alec and the nurse and went downstairs to the boys and their game. He had trouble focusing on their screen, but set them up for blood and mayhem anyway. Hoarse screaming and virtual death, magic bullets. If you had enough points you didn’t have to stay dead.

In the car he realized he had said no more after *I have loved you*. The thought stayed with him all the way to Boston, *that was my goodbye*, all the way to Boston at high speed in the rain. It was a comfort to him to have left her with that, exactly that, and its acceptance.

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When Elliot turned into the strange driveway he was surprised. Alec had called him in Boston the day after his goodbye visit to say Toni had died. He’d only given him the address and the rules she’d laid down: There would be a party at which everyone would bring flowers and a favorite dish, at which there would be waltzing. Then everyone would take someone else’s flowers home. He’d thought the party would be at an ordinary house, but this was a mansion with a long driveway curving back into trees. It was packed with cars and as he drove past the entrance he could see a crowd inside. He had been thinking there would be twenty or thirty people at this party, that it would be something casual and loving, friends reminiscing, the family.

The family was in the entrance hall but after he had put down his food and flowers and hugged them and gone on into the mansion he realized there must be two hundred people. He knew no one, no one at all. Where had they all come from? Sure, it was a tight small-college community, but, but.... Could they all have been friends? It was startling to think so. Beautifully dressed smooth people—were they administrators? Students, some dressed for a party, others more casually, a sprinkling of plainly dressed natural people, and lots of kids—he spotted her two little ones—running around with balloons, spraying confetti from aerosol cans. They could have been at a New Year’s Eve party.

Elliot put the flowers he’d bought in Boston on a shelf, and his food, barely warm after the long drive, on the table. He stood back against a wall and looked around. Where to start mingling? The smooth people, who if nothing else were his age? No, not them. She’d disliked administrators, but here they were anyway, claiming space, claiming her, being seen to claim her in a way he could not.

Instead, he ate. He loaded his plate with food, indiscriminately piling spoonfuls one on top of another, and took a seat at an empty table, a place facing away from the crowd, looking out a window onto Seneca Lake. Snow coming, he’d heard on the car radio, it should start soon. *Who do they think I am?* he wondered, and decided no one would be thinking anything about a middle-aged guy in wrinkled clothes, eating alone. Just another acquaintance.

Elliot couldn't help turning and looking over his shoulder, as if for a person who had been supposed to have joined him, someone who might not recognize him from the rear. He was lonely and realized he was on the verge of anger, no, not on the verge. He was angry. No one knew who he was. He resented these people—in his place—he who had sat at the deathbed! When resentment welled up in him he was ashamed.

Sitting alone, eating servings of food jammed together on a paper plate, mixed textures and flavors, the dry swimming in the wet, all a mess he thought, *but that's how it always is anyway*. Who goes to the buffet table and comes away with one or two helpings, the way food is served at a real dinner? Instead, you load your plate with everything because you don't want to have to get back in line, don't want to cut in, don't know what you're going to want until you move down the line and see it in front of you.

The thick texture of noise and warring tastes penetrated his resentment. *I'm getting it wrong again*, he thought. Sitting back, he lowered his guard, opened the gates, and let all the sensations crash in at once: the food, talk, laughter, music from the combo in the next room. Now it felt exactly like a party, one at which he belonged. Well, it *was* a party, ordered by his friend, served up after her death. And so far he had been a poor guest. He owed the friend of his heart better than this.

A young man walked through the crowd. "Waltzing at 8:30, instruction at a quarter after."

Two lines began forming near where Elliot was sitting—men in one, women in the other—so he stood up, but behind the men, not quite ready to take his place in line.

Elliot had noticed the woman earlier because of her hair. She had a wavy pulled-back mass of hair, dark and streaked with gray, a combination which had always pleased him. She was a large woman, tall and with ample breasts, which appeared to be swinging freely beneath her shirt. She seemed a comforting woman to Elliot, relaxed, so dancing with her should be easy.

The lines moved forward and met, leaving Elliot behind. Leaving the woman on the other side behind, too. He caught her eye. She raised her eyebrows at him and he nodded *Yes*, and worked his way through the couples already being instructed—*one-two-three, one-two-three*—to stand in front of her.

"Will you waltz with me?" he said.

"Yes. My name is Alexis."

"Mine is Elliot."

She put out her arms, and so did he, taking her right hand in his left, putting his right on her back, the standard ballroom dancing position. He hadn't forgotten that. Alexis seemed stiff, stiffer than he expected. She wasn't bending towards him. She wasn't coming into his arms. He wasn't going to envelop her in his arms and slow dance the way he'd done as a teen-ager, bodies touching, slow dancing in the gym, slow dancing because he danced so poorly, and certainly he wasn't going to dance gracefully and beautifully the way some others already were, though there was no music yet, just the dancing master's *one-two-three, one-two-three*, but he wanted to hold her in a way that would let them dance. And here he was with a stiff partner, a rigid one. For all that she was smiling and friendly, respectful of him, respectful of what they were doing, which of course was not slow-dancing at a high school dance but dancing a waltz for their friend who had died.

"You're not from the College," she said.

"No, I'm from Buffalo. A friend," Elliot answered, no longer wanting to reveal himself, and she let it go at that.

All Elliot's dancing had been with women who were more skilled than he, women who had carried him along—had frankly *led* him. Alexis couldn't get the box step right, which meant that Elliot couldn't, either. The whole of their dancing was less than the sum of its parts.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I’m a pretty good athlete, actually, and I should be able to dance, but I can’t.”

Elliot remembered an email Toni had sent after one of the bad times, one of the times she’d admitted fear and depression. *I’m ballroom dancing again, though, she wrote, so maybe I can waltz it all away. Let me give you some waltz words: telemark (no skis), slip pivot and banjo, swirls. Open impeti. It’s doing me good.*

Alexis wouldn’t move closer to him and he didn’t want to pull her in. But this far apart it wasn’t working. It was uncomfortable, but he wasn’t sure he wanted her closer, actually, because that might seem like cheating on Toni. *Goddam*, Elliot thought as he woodenly box stepped with Alexis, one-two-three, one-two-three in the dance master’s cadence, *why the hell didn’t I dance with Toni?*

They could have danced together in her kitchen the brittle night she wept for her ravaged body. He could have gotten up from the table and danced with her and something would have flowed and brought back the sweetness. They would have been partners, and it wouldn’t have mattered how badly he danced. She could have shown him what a telemark was, they could have slip pivoted into an open impetus, and the pup would have barked and the kids would have heard the commotion, come downstairs, and laughed at the two baldies waltzing on the old linoleum, an elbow hitting the refrigerator, a hip the washer. It might have softened and lightened the burnt sugar back into caramel.

Because Alexis wouldn’t move in closer Elliot’s elbow couldn’t bend and couldn’t crook out to make room, so his forearm was pressing the side of her breast. She didn’t seem annoyed, but Elliot didn’t think she could be enjoying it. He wasn’t. Any other time he’d have wanted his partner closer, but he didn’t want to hold Alexis in his arms, to use dancing as an excuse to hold her in his arms, this woman who would never have come into his arms under any other circumstances. Another time he’d have felt excitement and anticipation at having his arm where it was, anticipation that this woman would be in his arms in another way entirely. Any other time, but not now.

It was hard, very hard, and got no better when the music started. Alexis leaned towards him, saying they should get in the center of the floor where they wouldn’t be so visible. But it was no better there for him, surrounded by couples, box-stepping woodenly near the band. And the band! It was some kind of western trio, or maybe folkies with an expanded repertoire: a bass and two guitars, playing too fast in three-fourths time.

Elliot, at arm’s length, looked directly at Alexis. Their eyes met easily enough. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I’m so sorry I’m not a better waltzer. But I never learned.”

“Don’t apologize. Neither did I.”

When the dance ended Elliot made a little bow and thanked Alexis. “We did it,” he said. “Thank you.”

She smiled and inclined her head at him. “Thank you.”

Elliot turned away and left the floor. *Don’t look back*, he said to himself. He stood for a moment in the doorway, feeling the crowd move around him. Dancers were leaving the floor and others were entering to take their places. Motion, all motion around him, motion and noise. He edged to the side and stood against a wall, staying there a minute, watching the crowd, then—deciding abruptly, as if to hang up or log off—picked up a foil-wrapped pot of living chrysanthemums, hugged the family, got his coat and left, leaving the music inside.

It was snowing heavily, but there was no wind. The flakes, large and quiet, muffled the noise from inside. He felt them melting on his head. He heard himself breathing in, counting one-two-three, out one-two-three. His own three-fourths this time, just the cadence. No melody. Clear of the mansion, in the new snow, Elliot stepped out, turned, saw no one watching, went up on his

toes and spun, stepped wide again, covering ground, flowerpot in his elbow, pressed to his chest, unexpectedly sharp, turned to see footprints, two together, one apart. Raking light from the mansion cast shadows in the ruts his dragging toes had made. Black asphalt exposed in dancer tracks, already ragged-edged in blowing snow. The bright mansion rotated by, its porte-cochere empty. He whispered towards it, *Come out, come, come out.*

Moving backwards, sideways, Elliot danced the driveway, lit by wan street lamps, their yellow globes his balloons, snow-covered trunk lids and bumpers his chairs, friend of his heart in his arms. Lazy white confetti. Elliot waltzed a shade, a shade drawn from light, took her close enough to dance, really dance, lifting his arm to spin her, grace at last with them.