

Off Lost Road Rd.

Nance Van Winckel

I turn onto River Road, park my car in the empty gravel lot at River of Life Baptist, then walk east along the horse trail by the Spokane River. Mid-March, a dry warm day. The water's full throttle coming out of Idaho. I am surprised to see actual horses—three of them, with teenage girls aboard—on the horse trail. The girls are laughing too hard to return my hello when we pass. A mile up the path I leave the river behind and veer onto Lost Road. It's a paved one that'll take me uphill to the water tower. I'm in my cruising speed now, facing into a cool wind. I like this road. It ranks up there on my list of close-to-home, best-walking roads. It cuts through wide pastures and a small, tidy orchard. The Selkirk Mountains loom up on my right as I head north, and although the occasional big barking dog comes racing toward me, it'll just run into its owner's sturdy fence. Hi, doggy, I'll say, and buzz past. The houses are set far back from the road and I like to think no one sees me, or hears me, out here, singing along to Little Richard or reggae from years back.

Passing a tilled field, I notice an old woman walking across it. She's using two canes—a white one in her left hand and a silver metal one in her right. A small, tan dog runs ahead of her, sniffs, wags, and runs back. Ahead and back. Gleeful. The woman, her back to me, goes on slowly. She wears the sort of head scarf my great aunts wore—a solid navy color, tied under her chin. She can barely maneuver over the uneven field, a mishmash of dirt clods. She keeps a slated wooden fence to her left, walking exactly perpendicular to my direction, heading, it would seem, straight into the mountains, although of course to reach them, she'd have to cross a quarry first, then a couple of streams, and a half-dozen ranches. But she'd be in Idaho if she walked only one more mile, although I doubted she could. The white cane and the silver cane kick up a little dust ahead of her, as does the dog. I think, Why doesn't she walk on the road? The road is good.

The road is good. Straight. No potholes. One need glance down only every minute or two. I like to look into the distant peripheries. Farther along, I see, in another newly tilled field, two enormous rabbits bound

up out the dirt. They are the color of the dirt, and as they jump, they lunge at each other. They must be bucks, I think, and I wonder if they're at play or war. I slow down and watch them a moment. I've never seen rabbits cavort in this manner. Like human boxers, they leap toward each other and hover until gravity yanks them down. Then I pick up my pace again, wondering how far into my own future I'll be walking these roads. No doubt seeing the old woman has put this thought in my mind. I tell myself I'll walk out here as long as I'm able. And suddenly the number of "able"-bodied years seems impossibly small. Will I have five more? Ten? Possibly twenty? Surely a knee will give out soon, or maybe a hip. I gnaw on these troubles like a dog with a bone. Or might the roads become too dangerous, as they do in my dreams? Full of vagabonds?

When I reach the water tower, I turn and go back. If the Baptists haven't stolen my car, I'll get home before dusk and I'll have put in a good six-miler today. I don't see the rabbits again, but perhaps there's a victor out in that field, or a corpse. Then here comes the old woman again. She has also turned around and is heading back, heading toward me. I see her shout as the dog rushes at me. He stops at the edge of the blacktop, panting, watching me intently. I wave at the woman. It's meant as a "thanks." And that's when I see: she is not an old woman. She is a girl, maybe twelve or thirteen. I try not to stare. When I'm walking, I'm in what my husband calls Nanceroonie-zone. But I'm a little in the world too. I'm moving through it, singing to it. I have a smile for its residents and only mild disdain for its doggies. Still far out in the field, the girl is taking her time. I notice her legs are thin, quite thin. She puts each one down firmly before swinging forward the other. Her navy scarf has slipped loose and she tips her face into the sun. She is whistling, and I slip off my own headphones to hear what her tune is. But of course it's nothing I know. It's a song for a young girl.