

Tom Sheehan

The River Thief

English Wells fought the Pumquich River for forty years, moving his will, ever by degrees, at it. "By God, Miriam," he often said to his wife, "I'll go at it until I drop, most likely. What you work for, you get. You get what you work for." English, lacking funds or worldly promise, wanted to steal more land from this side of the river, to push his "small estate" out over the river's run, to claim energy's due.

"The two of us," she'd say, partners to the end, the crochet needle at a small and quick twist in her hand, or a needle making code against her fingers. At such watch, her nose would announce when the pie in the oven was ready, or a roast in its own rank of juice. English always noted her almost inert actions, the messages driven home.

By its gifts the Pumquich was magnanimous, this opulent river, a river that slipped unheralded out of the far country in various disguises. Furtive, escapee, melodious it was, in turns twisting or dancing on the face of Earth. At first a placid no-nonsense runner, gaited by life, it never ran out of breath. Then for a hectic bit it came a robust galavanter in those wild, wild places where hideaways gleamed their darkness among harshest rocks and vertical cliffs old as time itself. And now, decoded and broken into a lesser tributary by Earth's curves, sleepily at times under alder-branched archways, near breathless but ongoing in the way of rivers, it came past English Wells. For those forty years, he had gone without pause in his evening labors. There, for the nonce, in this one man, the Pumquich seemed to have met a match.

Broad, thick-browed, his deep brown eyes often at repose even at labor, his energy seemed to leap from a bottomless reservoir. From the edge of the riverbank he was always moving, or attempting to move, English would look back upon his property, at the peach and pear and apple trees marching in ranks down to the river with him, like a mathematician at a solved problem. The measurement, his own planning and its fruits of a geometric concentration, almost overpowered him. He swelled with pride and Miriam heard, time and again, his confidential aside; "Them peaches keep pushing me, Miriam. Damned if they don't."

He'd carry on, early when the sun leaped like a jumper or later when the moon, tired of repose or isolation, broke loose of the horizon like a prisoner from his cell.

"On the other side, Miriam, over there by them muddy spots, it's too low for any use. If I can stretch our piece a foot at a time, we get bigger. It's really that simple. And them at the town hall can't plot the river's line, but just obey every turn it makes."

At first English made a small dent in the Pumquich's passage to the sea six miles down, hoping always by some miracle to bend its course forever in one night. He'd build a wall of sorts against the river's flow, backfill it, and start anew, all by a measured degree... rock by rock, stone by stone, shovelful by shovelful, or by the third generation of a wheelbarrow. English, in this trade-off, never knew how much sweat his body gave back.

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“Hell, Miriam, all it takes is energy, and I got a ton of that.” The weight of the statement, fully defined and worldly, fell off his shoulders, like a slab of rock off a Pumquich cliff far up the river.

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At the same time Miriam loved the slight smile at the corners of his mouth when he made that honest pronouncement, as if he were sharing a secret she had not known. Her needle, or the crochet hook, would go its merry way, which English saw and took for punctuation of sorts.

Peach, pear and apple trees, and random but deep green clutches of grapevines, joined his slow march outward, his invasion. His thumb was as green as ever, but he wanted a wider orchard, a bigger claim. Sweat demanded it, and that force in him needing to move the Earth itself.

Pointing out a rock or boulder he was hustling, he'd yell up at Miriam at her favorite window or on the porch. "This rock might become a key-stone, or this boulder the base of a pillar." Then he'd shove his shoulder against the monster or wedge a bar beneath what only a glacier had last moved, the glacier long ago calving the rock and the land into a lake of deposits, it seemed. Never was he a serious student of Earth's history, but he felt it tremor through his arms every day with his efforts; the shiver, the shunt, the movement, Earth on the slow prow, reforming.

For those forty years, after his regular day's work as a truck driver, Miriam watched him from the window of their small bungalow, no children ever at her feet or at beck and call.

"You go about your work, English. We got no call otherwise on us."

English would handle shovel or barrow; she would cook or sew or bring a book of poems beside the window. She was content with him, life was sure, smooth, promised tomorrow on the plate. He'd wave the shovel at her, or the huge, rock-ribbed pick ax, with the shades of evening coming down on them. She'd wave back, in that gentle way she had, a book or the invisible needle in her fingers. Either was enough for English.

She'd be there after the day's last shovelful was flung or the last rock dropped into place. As rich as the Pumquich, she was. No other man could be so lucky.

From her perch in the den window, she believed the span of his shoulders could support the world, and she knew the promising shadow those shoulders threw coming into the bedroom at night, his labors done, the next drive at hand. Never had she said welcome, though she could have, but threw the covers back for him every time, the white shank of her thigh like an exclamation mark. She thought it not lascivious, but part of her total need for him. And he thought she was beautiful at cover tossing, poetry in motion.

English could have said so, but he didn't. They had always passed on the pillow smalltalk, their energies matched and compensated. Morning was often the next thing they knew.

Shadows, though, as in all of life, were like hands reaching to grasp one another, or take them in; though these mates knew the distance between shadows was covered with good ground.

The one shadow in all of it that came at Miriam, out of context or kilter, was who would, in the end of it all, come into ownership of all his labor. Even with no children of their own, it would not be fair for the town to end up with forty years or more of English's work.

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Miriam could not count the hours English had spent “down there” at the back of the house, with pick and shovel and barrow, nor counted his trips with donated fill dumped practically at their door; he had his own designs on what should go where. It was not that he was an engineer, she had convinced herself as well as he had, but certain things would last longer than others in the continual wash the river exerted and the drainage plying storm after storm across the land. Over the years he had developed his own laboratory for tests, calculated the results, planned the future moves.

Neighbors dropped their excess fill at the rear end of his driveway. Rocks, old stone walls, parts of foundations. Rock gardens, suddenly flattened out to choicer lawns, came trundled onto his property. English would accept only that which was natural; no junk, no plastic, nothing that would take a thousand years to get back to its original properties. He could have accepted Hank Patterson’s old Ford, because Hank had proposed its use.

English could have loaded it with brick and stone that it would keep in place for years, a miniature chunk of breakwater, until it rusted out. He did not take it.

“Hank, I know you’re trying to do what you can, but this move of mine is for keeps, and I won’t really try to screw up the river or the land, other than just letting it mosey a bit. I know iron was here ever before I started, but I’ll not add it, or any plastic either. None of that new stuff that never let’s go.”

“English,” Miriam argued, “You could start a new wall with that car sunk in place. You could roll it over and drop it right where you need it most. It’s a sure way to make a bottle cap.” She felt she was trying to shorten his task; to see his dream done sooner; his place in the physical world marked off forever.

The other shadow, though, lingered for her. She often thought it like a forgotten meal that reinvents itself on the palate at the strangest hour, a gourmet roast, a soft and irresponsibly memorable red wine. The taste was there, even if phantom.

The 4th of July bomb came into their lives, bursting from the shadow. Miriam’s sister Georgette and her husband Paul Linkard were obliterated in a head-on crash with a gas tanker truck in a night rain storm as they came from the wake of a neighbor woman that Georgette had ironically serviced through some tough health issues. The sole child of that union was 5-year-old Paul Linkard, Jr. Shortly he was the responsibility of his Auntie Miriam, or as his mother used to say, *Auntie Em*.

Now Miriam had her own task; at her age to get this child to some kind of maturity so that he could function in the world. English had his river; she had this child. And, as with all things emanating from shadows, the changes came. Exhaustion came early at her in her new days, the day full of running, doing, getting done, chasing down the child. And taking care of her man.

The first night the covers were not thrown back on the bed, and Miriam deep into a demanding sleep, English Wells knew life had changed.

Paulie drew at him as well, the towheaded smiler locking up a new place in his heart. Nights Miriam’s hand flopped innocently against him, and

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fell away. He thought of the river again, as a kind of lover, making demands, giving parts away, taking them back. He tried to think of some line of poetry she had read during one of the *other* days, days

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before Paulie. As always, he could not bring it back, knowing each verse was but momentary in him. Sleep, in its stead, came in reward.

And it was Paulie who came screaming out of the deeper yard one evening when English was pinned in the water by a boulder. Miriam screamed at neighbors. Two men leaped down the yard in bounds to find English caught between the boulder and the wall he had built and the river washing over him. One of them, Patterson himself, wedged the long crowbar in place and freed English from certain death. Waskovitch pressed on English's stomach to push the river free of its claimant. English gagged and gasped and gave mouthfuls of water back.

Neighbors thought English would give up his quest, and Miriam for a few nights was back to her cover-tossing, but the river continued, and so did English Wells until the night, beside her man in a sudden stillness, him cool as the river, Miriam Wells knew one journey was over.

Evenings occasionally, Paulie leaping upwards and off to another school, Miriam Wells waves an invisible needle or a twig-like crochet needle out the window or from the depths of the porch. One night, nearly inaudible, she read a line of poetry into a small patch of darkness at the edge of the river. *Once, near thirteen, we shared/a cigarette under cover of the mist/and the alewives passed us, upstreaming. /That's the night we forgot to listen. That's the night we began.*

It was a secret she had kept from English, her own poem, and she let go of it forever.