

## Nancy Lord

### The Walker

After they moved to a cabin on the mountainside, the young couple often saw the bushy, unkempt man walking on the road. He wore an ancient Army knapsack, shiny with grease, and bent under the weight of it. The first time they came upon him, they stopped and offered a ride. But he had a rabbit-look to his eyes that went right through them and kept going, and he shook them off, kept walking, didn't say *thanks anyway*, didn't say anything, walked right by and up the hill without a pause.

His trail, they learned from other neighbors, branched partway down their trail, but they never turned that way. They understood that, in Alaska's big spaces, there were people who wanted only privacy.

Winter came. They saw him walking in snowstorms, face rimed with ice. They slowed their chained-up truck and gave him a chance to wave them down. He never looked at them.

They bought an old snowmachine to move loads between their truck and cabin. One day, hauling laundry and jugs of water, they met him on the trail. He shouted at them, wild words that flew like spit with the wind, a rant against motors, noise, spinning things, the devil. He beat at the snowmachine with a tree limb and then stumbled off, cursing. It took both of them to move the limb from the trail.

On a night deep in winter, they leaned over bowls of soup while snowmachines buzzed the hills around their cabin. The fresh snow and open country had drawn riders from town, their machine lights jogging through the dark. The noise, a humming like gas lanterns, was near and then away, and then, as suddenly as a spoon drops, the front window of the cabin collapsed in a shatter of glass.

They were on their feet when the delayed rifle crack reached them, and then they were on the floor, elbowing to the back of the cabin, where they lifted the bed mattress like a shield. Bullets dinged the stove, splintered wood in the walls, whomped like hammers into the mattress.

In a lull, they heard the walker shouting, something about internal infernal combustions and *come get me, fascist pigs*. In another lull, lights out, they dashed in sock feet into the snow. They ran like frightened moose, legs punching through crust, away.

At the trial, a psychiatrist called the walker a paranoid schizophrenic. She also said that he understood that shooting at his neighbors was wrong—even if he thought they were sending machines with secret agents and space technology after him.

He went to prison.

They were glad, in a way, because he was so clearly dangerous. But they were sad for him, too. When they thought of him, they pictured him trying to walk in a six-foot cell and banging into both ends with his forehead.

They didn't imagine the prison van, the icy road, the underskilled driver transporting, like sacks of coal, men from one prison to another more secure prison. They didn't imagine the big truck, full of modern electronics, bound for the mega-store.

When they heard, they wondered aloud: In those last seconds, as the big truck slid and then crushed the prison van, was there time to feel, in the mind that was his, vindicated?