



Bottomland

BY DAN DOMENCH

A WOMAN'S VOICE ON the telephone told him the doctor wanted to see him concerning his test. He said, let's get this over with. The doctor came to the phone and said what he already knew. Still, her words had impact. Fear. His face flushed hot and his joints burned more than usual. Then sorrow. The mortgage will go unpaid and they will auction his 42 acres that roll alongside the muddy river. No more rows of cabbage, squash, potato, and sweet corn. No strawberries. It was too much work to make a living. He couldn't even keep summer help. He paid well, but they never lasted. The bank will sell it and someone will turn it into hay fields and then houses like what happened everywhere else. He realized he was crying quietly as if afraid someone in the house might hear, but he lived alone and had for over twenty years.

When he thought back on that moment, he wondered if thoughts could be prayers and if the prayers of the dying were especially powerful. And he wondered if the earth itself made decisions. Because when he wiped his eyes he saw through his front window a white pickup truck slide on the ice patch in front of the parking lot of his shuttered farm stand and drive straight into the middle of the field in front of the house. Snow halfway up the truck doors. There would be no get-

ting out of there without a tractor.

The driver spun his wheels, shifting from reverse to low back and forth as Mike trudged across his yard toward the garage. The pain in his hips clenched his teeth and clarified his mind and made the cold air unimportant.

The '84 International 7788 started right up, but ran rough. He drove across the field and backed up in front of the pickup. A kid peered over the steering wheel at him. Long hair. Eyeglasses. The kid tried to push the driver's side door open, but that was a joke.

Mike groaned as he grabbed the tow chain off the floor. He moved out of the cab onto the side step and said, ah, in a loud rising way as if clearing his throat. The pain made him make noises like that.

When Mike turned around he was surprised to see the kid climbing down the hood of the truck and then standing on the front bumper; an Asian kid. Mike took in what the kid was wearing: a black T-shirt and shorts and sandals with socks. The kid gestured for Mike to throw him the chain, and after he caught it he felt around in the snow under the bumper and hooked it on the frame. Then he scrambled back into the truck through the driver's side window. When Mike was back in the tractor, the kid smiled and gave Mike a thumb up out the window—white teeth blazing, a skinny arm

sticking out the window with a ridiculous thumb in the air. Maybe that was the moment the deal happened. Or maybe it was later in the garage when he parked the tractor and the kid walked in looking around impressed at the tool racks, the two tractors, the lift, the welding set-up, the ceiling-high storage racks, and the spring planting schedule listed in multi-colored marker on the whiteboard over the coffee maker.

Mike felt a peculiar warmth hearing the Filipino accent of the guy named Peter San Augustine who wasn't a kid at all but a 31-year-old mechanic with a wife and two little girls. Peter said he had driven by Mike's farm on his way to work for years and he was proud to meet the farmer of this farm. He said that Mike's sweet potatoes were oh, very good. Peter said, on the island my father worked in the fields. They talked for a time, then Peter said, if you don't mind, I will fix the International engine, the misfiring.

At the real-estate closing, the lawyer seemed annoyed and as they were leaving said that Peter probably drove into the field on purpose to get this deal. The lawyer thought the horrified expression on Peter's face was funny and he laughed. Peter said, no sir, I am inside of a dream. He turned to Mike and hugged him delicately so as not to hurt his bones. ■