

Tim Gautreaux

DANCING WITH THE ONE-ARMED GAL

(from *Zoetrope*)

On Saturday, Iry Boudreaux's girlfriend fired him. The young man had just come on shift at the icehouse and was seated in a wooden chair under the big wall-mounted ammonia gauge, reading a cowboy novel. The room was full of whirring, hot machinery, antique compressors run by long flat belts, black-enameled electric motors that turned for months at a time without stopping. His book was a good one, and he was lost in a series of fast-moving chapters involving long-distance rifle duels, cattle massacres, and an elaborate saloon fight that lasted thirty pages. At the edge of his attention Iry heard something like a bird squawk, but he continued to read. He turned a page, trying to ignore an intermittent iron-on-iron binding noise rising above the usual lubricated whir of the engine room. Suddenly the old number two ammonia compressor began to shriek and bang. Before Iry could get to the power box to shut off the motor, a piston rod broke, and the compressor knocked its brains out. In a few seconds Babette, Iry's girlfriend, ran into the engine room from the direction of the office. White smoke was leaking from a compressor's crankshaft compartment, and Iry bent down to open the little cast-iron inspection door.

Babette pointed a red fingernail to the sight glass of the brass lubricator. "You let it run out of oil," she said, putting the heel of her other hand on her forehead. "I can't believe it."

Iry's face flushed as he looked in to see the chewed crankshaft glowing dully in the dark base of the engine. "Son of a bitch," he said, shaking his head.

She bent over his shoulder, and he could smell the mango perfume that he had given her for Christmas. Her dark hair touched his left earlobe for an instant, and then she straightened up. He knew that she was doing the math already, and numbers were her strength: cubic feet of crushed ice, tons of block ice. "Iry, the damned piston rod seized on the crankshaft," she said, her voice rising. "The foundry'll have to cast new parts, and we're looking at six or seven thousand dollars, plus the downtime." Now she was yelling.

He had let both Babette and the machine down. He looked up to say something and saw that she was staring at the cowboy novel he'd left open facedown on his folding chair.

"I don't know, Iry. The owner's gonna have a hard time with this." She folded her arms. "He's gonna want to know what you were doing, and I'm gonna tell him." She gestured toward the book.

"Look, I checked the damned oil level when I came on shift. It wasn't my fault."

She looked at him hard. "Iry, the machine didn't commit suicide." She licked a finger and touched it to the hot iron. "Mr. Lanier has been after me to cut staff, and now this." She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and shook her head. "You need to get away from this place."

He pulled a shop rag from the back pocket of his jeans and wiped his hands, feeling something important coming. "What's that mean?"

She looked at him the way a boss looks at an employee. "I'm going to lay you off."

"You're firing me?"

"Last time we had a compressor rebuilt we were down for a long time. Come back, maybe next month, and we'll see."

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