

TEXTS

I'm Still Here

by Veronica Ross

"How long do you think you can hold out here?"

"I will stay forever," he said.

"Forever's a long time."

"So I'll stay. Till hell freezes over."

They had sent a woman this time, a young one. She knocked on the back door, and Jake stood against the kitchen wall, peeking at her through the window curtains. He'd thought of nailing up blankets over the window but then he had decided that it would be better if the house looked as normal as possible, like a house where the occupants were at home, but just not answering the door.

She looked young, hopeful, with a great tangle of red hair above a small face made rosy by the cold. She had a grey scarf wrapped around her neck, flung over the shoulder of her duffle coat, and she carried a large shoulder bag, out of which stuck her notebook. She smiled when she knocked. When there was no answer she gazed around, perturbed. Then she knocked again, smiling once more. It was a louder rap this time. The man they'd sent had knocked loudly, had muttered under his breath. The girl looked all around, then moved closer to the window as if to look in. But she didn't; she knew he was in there. There was another faint little tap on the door and then he heard her move away. He went into the front room and looked out the window there. He saw a man waiting in a small car. It was not the same man who'd come before but another man, a younger one. The man and the girl looked at the house and conferred. After a moment, the girl got in and the car moved away.

Maybe they'd thought that being a bachelor, he'd open his door to a pretty young female.

The newspapers overflowed the mailbox; he thought that he'd like to sneak out at night to pick up his mail. Particularly the newspapers. They'd probably written him up.

The Millers had moved away last month; they'd bought a place on the other side of the river. The MacMillans had gone to visit the son in Toronto.

When they came back they were going to put up one of those prefabricated jobs on a little strip of land along the highway. But he wasn't moving.

As long as he was in the house, they couldn't tear it down. It was as simple as that. He imagined the outcry. *Man Killed Defending Property*, a headline would read. There would be letters to editors. Letters to MPs. Letters to the Prime Minister. No, they wouldn't tear the house down around his ears. As long as he stayed here, there was nothing they could do.

The thought excited him. He was growing used to excitement. The boredom he'd feared when he'd gone into his house and locked the door behind him hadn't overtaken him. His thoughts were clear; he was finding that he could remember everything, that he was developing rare insights into the state of things.

He had waited until the last minute to close the house up. He hadn't given any interviews, hadn't taken part in the kind of thing where they got people to sit in rocking chairs, to say: *this place is all I've got*. Cameras panning over fields, barn, river, while his voice said: *my grandfather built that barn. All the neighbours came to help when the original one burned down. The men worked and the women cooked and that night they had a big dance*.

He'd heard the story many times. Maybe they'd have filmed the cemetery, the leaning tombstone of Emilia Garson, age 22, Resting In The Lord, with his voice saying: *she was the first wife of my great-great-grandfather. She died in childbirth the first winter here, before the house was built. Only a log cabin they had then*.

He could also have gone into a country bumpkin act. *First [. . .] sets foot on my land's gonna get his head blown off*. Or played the feisty village philosopher. *Government's into everything these days. The next thing you know, you'll have to get permission to wipe your ass*. They wouldn't edit that out today either, he thought.

But none of that. He'd tacked a small note to the front door: *I'm still here*. Let them see about expropriation and provincial parks then. Let them figure out how to steal land for bathrooms and canteens and paved parking-lots.

It was a wonder they hadn't cut his power off. He had expected it and had filled all the old oil lamps and piled two cords of hardwood in the summer kitchen in preparation. The phone was still working too. Several times reporters had called and he had hung up without a word.

He spent the evenings watching television, only the CBC now because his aerial had blown off the roof and he couldn't go out of the house to fix it. One night, as he had been expecting, *The National* covered him. It was at the end of the news, in the time slot usually devoted to things like polar bears being born in captivity.

"Plans are under way for a new provincial park in the Millbrook area of Nova Scotia," he heard. Several properties have been expropriated with – according to government officials – fair compensation being paid. One man isn't giving up so easily, however. Jake Garson left this note . . ."

There was a close-up of *I'm still here* and then the camera pulled back to show his house, his yard. It was a woman's voice speaking, the young woman who had been here perhaps.

"Millbrook is a pleasant area of lakes, streams and woods. Not surprisingly, many local residents are cheering Mr. Garson, although local businessmen say that the proposed development will bring badly needed tourist dollars to the area."

There was a quick glimpse of old MacDonald, standing in front of his store, MacDonald's Groceries and Dry Goods. He had a white shirt and tie on, Jake noticed. He had even washed his store windows.

"I thought you were going to take the money." It was his brother, Joe, calling from Montreal. "That's what you said in your last letter."

"I changed my mind."

"I couldn't believe it when I saw it. I just couldn't believe it."

"Well, I'm still here."

"I thought the deal had gone through."

"The theft, you mean. I thought you were against it too."

"I am. But if there's nothing you can do about it . . ."

"I am doing something about it," Jake said mildly.

"A dumb note nailed to your door," Joe said.

"You got rocks in your head? Take my advice and take the money and get yourself some nice little business."

"A chicken take-out maybe?" Jake asked.

"Look, Jake, they're gonna get you. You're just making a fool of yourself." When Jake didn't answer, he added, "You'll run out of food."

"Nope," Jake said. "Got enough to last me a year. Got the cellar stocked up."

"They'll get you out."

"Tell you what," Jake said, smiling. "Next [. . .] reporter that calls, I'll tell him to call you."

"You want me to sound like a fool too?"

"You can say you disagree with me. You can tell them I'm slightly touched."

"Go to hell," Joe said. "Don't you dare give the reporters my name."

Sitting behind heavy drapes, Jake thought of his family, of Joe in Montreal, of Myrna in Toronto, of Lexy in Ottawa when she was at home. They had all left home right after high school. Joe was the eldest. He hadn't wanted to go. He had wept, getting in the train in his new brown suit and brogues. At first, he had come home every year. The girls had left together. Jake supposed they had done all right.

He, Jake, had stayed. He liked to think it had been a conscious act, staying. His brother and sisters had urged him to leave, both in person and in letters. Later, when he had begun to publish his poems in obscure literary journals, the protests had dwindled. He supposed that they thought that a minor poet living on ancestral lands had something about it, gave them a way of mentioning him to their friends. He did not think that they often mentioned that they had a brother driving a school bus back home, which he also did.

Since he had closed the house up, it seemed to him that he had finally discovered his reason for staying in this place. He was meant to be the observer, the witness, not only to their lives, but to the entire state of things. And this was a thing he could do best on his own land, in his own quiet country.

The young woman was back. She came after lunch. He had set the table carefully for himself, had read a chapter of *Resurrection*, had smoked one hand-rolled cigarette – he had to ration his tobacco –

and was washing the dishes when she knocked on the door. He turned around and this time her face appeared above the curtains. She smiled when she saw him, and for a moment they stood looking at each other.

"Please talk to me," he heard her say. "I'd really like to talk to you, Mr. Garson."

He knew he could not let her in. But he moved close to the window and told her, through the glass, "I won't talk to you. I'm not moving out. I'm still here and I'm staying."

"Do you think you will be successful in holding on to your place?"

"I'm not going," he said simply. "That's all there is to it."

"I understand the land has been taken."

"How can that be if I'm still here?" He refused to say more, although he felt like talking to her. There were things he wanted to say: how simple life had been, how right, before the government started messing around in people's affairs, before they started making institutions of everything, even nature. How rich they had found the land, how inspiring, how promising, how lives revolved naturally around the seasons. How no-one went hungry. How people weren't glued to the TV then, but actually talked and sometimes even read books.

"Could I come back again?"

"Suit yourself. But I'm not saying anything more." But he did smile at her.

Myrna called.

"Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

"Fine as can be. Did you see me on TV last night?"

"I thought they didn't actually show you."

"I meant in the spirit. They showed the house."

"I was watching a movie. Too bad I didn't know about it. Joe called me today."

"That's not surprising."

"Are you sure you're okay? What about food?"

"Don't worry. I've got plenty."

"But you can't stay there forever. Dick says . . ."

"I'm staying. There's not a thing anyone can do about it. What does Dick say?"

"For me not to talk to reporters."

"Does he think I'm nuts too?"

There was a moment's silence. Then, "I'm

so worried about you, Jake. What if they do something?"

"Do what?"

"They could shoot you."

"Don't be silly. I'll be all right. I'll be fine."

"I'm going to watch the news from now on. In case you're on."

"I won't be. They've already tried to interview me and I refused. But I expect they'll have something about the whole thing on again."

"I'll watch anyway. Joe's really upset."

"I know he is. He called me last night."

"He's worried too."

"Sure. Listen, this is costing you a fortune."

He wasn't on the news. He turned the TV on after supper, half-listening to the programs while he read a Buckler novel. But there was nothing. He waited for that lift in Knowlton Nash's voice at the end, imagined him saying: *and for those of you who are wondering about Jake Garson on his expropriated farm in Nova Scotia, well, he's still there.* And then the next night they might move him ahead to be part of the major news. And then they'd have interviews with politicians. Maybe a politician himself would actually come knocking at his door.

But there was nothing.

And Lexy hadn't called either.

The girl was back the next day. This time she did not knock on the door; she knocked on the window and smiled at him as if he were a true friend.

"I've brought your mail," she said, holding up a bundle. "I thought you might want it."

He did want it; he'd been afraid to go out at night to get it. When he did not answer, she said, brightly, like a schoolgirl, "I'll just leave it on the doorstep then. You can wait till I'm gone to pick it up. Can I talk to you today?"

"No."

"Do you have anything at all to say? Is there anything I can get you?"

Tobacco, he thought. But he shook his head: no.

He was glad she had brought his mail. He felt sorry for her. He didn't like to mess up her assignment.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He was surprised that she only nodded and

went away. He went to the front-room window. By the time he got there, her car was already leaving.

When he was sure that the car was really gone, he opened the back door quickly. How cold the air was! He looked around furtively and then scooped up his mail. So much of it! There were the newspapers, neatly tied together with white string. Perhaps the girl had done it. An oil bill, a bank statement. A form letter to all bus drivers, setting out the Christmas holiday schedule. This must have been in his box since the day he locked the house up. A letter from a parent complaining that he did not take the bus down their lane. *I don't think it's rite Mr. Grason that the littl ones should have to walke so long a ways.* There was also a letter from Myrna suggesting that he come and stay with them once the land thing was settled. Obviously it had been written before she'd heard what he'd done. A postcard from Lexy, who was in Mexico. That was why he hadn't heard from her. Another postcard postmarked Moncton, showing a puppy and a kitten in a basket. On the back was written, "We'll burn your house down, you fool."

He tacked this one on the cupboard.

He was on the news after all. They showed the house and then, as he watched, he saw the door open, saw himself look around furtively, saw himself bend to pick up the mail. She had tricked him. [. . .]. It seemed to him that he looked dazed and frightened on the television. And also very clean-cut. He wished he had grown a beard.

Several local people were interviewed then. The town librarian mentioned his poems, but said that they had none of his work in the town library. Then came a young woman whom he did not know, but he supposed she must be an import, one of those people from the States who were buying up farms. "We're very proud of Mr. Garson," she said. Old Red Fisher, town character, said from between toothless gums, "Well, now, I guess it's his land."

He was part of the main news.

There was no phone call from Joe but Myrna called to say that she had watched him. She had all her friends watching too.

He awoke from a dream of swimming in the river, to the sound of voices. They were yelling his name. "Garson, Garson, Garson!"

He looked out the bedroom window cautiously. Kids. Maybe twenty of them. Some of them carried placards. "We're with you, Jake." "Down With Government Meddling." Boys and girls. They had come in two vans. They had their faces raised to his windows, expectantly.

A thought crossed his mind: *is this because of the poems?*

Nevertheless he opened his curtains and waved. They cheered. Should he ask them in? He couldn't. If he asked them in he would have to feed them and food was rationed.

He did not quite know what to do about them and so he closed his curtains. He decided for a start not to shave. He took his time with breakfast, frying his one egg, squeezing an orange. (He had bags of Tang for when the oranges were gone.) He could hear them outside, calling for him.

What if they intended to stay? They would pitch tents; they would have bonfires at night and sing. It would be like a party. At the same time, their noise, he thought, would disturb the clarity of his thinking.

He went to the front of the house and opened a window.

"I'm still here," he called.

"We're with you!" they yelled back.

"Thank you."

"We'll picket Government House! Down with government controls!" A cheer, in unison.

He gave a dignified but friendly wave of his arm and closed the window. This seemed to satisfy them. He watched from behind closed curtains. They were setting up a tent. One boy was passing beer out from the back of a van. A girl reached into the van and produced a guitar.

The girl was back after lunch. He had been watching the kids, and he saw her drive up. This time she came in a van. TV cameras to film his supporters, he assumed.

He went to stand by the kitchen window.

She smiled her bright smile, indicating the pile of mail.

"You tricked me," he said.

"People are interested in you, Mr. Garson. There's been quite a reaction to your situation. What do you think of the support you're getting?"

He shrugged. Was this an interview?

"How long do you think you can hold out here?"

"I will stay forever," he said.

"Forever's a long time."

"So I'll stay. Till hell freezes over."

Good. This was what she wanted to hear.

What if he asked her in? He would make tea.

She would be sympathetic.

"If you would only talk . . ."

But he shook his head.

"Why do you want to hold on to this land?"

He ignored her and went into the front room.

Presently he saw that she was holding a mike up to some of the kids.

He couldn't think. He wandered aimlessly around the house, peering out now and then at the kids. Some of the locals were there too, but they kept apart from the kids. Ernie, the bootlegger, arrived with a case of wine; money exchanged hands. The RCMP came, looked around, left. Several kids were reading what looked like comic books. Their signs were leaning against the vans. Later when he looked, they were cooking on a Coleman stove: hot dogs and beans. From a side window he saw a couple embracing in the hollow by the barn.

A man knocked at the door, the front door this time. He looked to Jake like a reporter. Jake ignored him. It occurred to him that the girl must have been a country girl, to have come to the back door the way she did. A country girl with dreams of making it big on TV, a girl with proud parents who watched the news nightly on TV.

She seemed like a nice girl.

But he would not talk to her. Because . . . because . . . he knew that everything depended on maintaining a certain mystery. If he talked, everything would change.

There they were, the kids, on *The National*. Several of them were interviewed. They all said the same thing: that Jacob Garson was a hero, a man brave enough to stand up for his freedom. And that they were behind him.

Jacob, not Jake.

And there was Joe. In his office.

"What kind of man is your brother?" he was asked.

"A complicated person. The family intellectual, you might say. He always was a loner, even as a kid. We're all very proud of him."

"Would you do the same thing?"

Joe hesitated. "In the same situation, I suppose I might," he said finally. And then, his voice gaining strength, "It's just not right, the way the government meddles in people's lives."

"Do you think he'll be successful?"

"Knowing my brother, I'd say he stands a pretty good chance."

"What does that land mean to you?"

"I was born on that land," Joe said. "And before me, my father and my grandfather. It's been in the family 180 years. My roots are there. Losing it would be like losing a part of myself."

This time, Jake called Joe.

"Saw you on TV tonight."

"I'm just trying to help," Joe said. "How did I sound?"

Jake had been prepared to say, "Like a Dale Carnegie man." But he didn't. "All right, I guess."

"I'm getting to be pretty popular," Joe said. "I had ten calls today, people wanting to know if we were related. I'm telling you, people think you're really something."

There were lots of letters this time. Someone had added to the pile left by the TV girl. "Glad to see you're standing up for your rights," he read. "We had the same thing happen to us, but we didn't have your courage. Good luck." "Your land could be enjoyed by all, you selfish { . . . }." "Regards from the Browns." A letter from a national magazine asking for an exclusive interview. A long, tearful letter from Myrna about how good life was back home. She wanted to go on TV herself but Dick wouldn't let her. Someone sent him a \$2 bill. Someone wrote that they'd saved his poems and could they please have his autograph.

A kid asked for water. He told him to use the well.

Each night they had a sing-song.

Nothing from the government.

He counted the cans of soup and stew and spaghetti in the cellar.

There was nothing about him on *The National*.

He decided to take the old grandfather clock apart and fix it.

His beard was growing.

He wondered if it would be different if he had a wife and children. They'd probably send in food

and milk, like they did in hostage cases.

He saw the trucks going down the road. Construction was starting, even though it would surely snow soon.

Anyway, he was still here.

The kids were gone. One afternoon they just packed up and left. The water tasted funny. He wondered if they had accidentally thrown something into the well. He found that he missed them, despite their noise. He wished that the TV girl would come back. One night he saw her on *The National*, interviewing strikers. Her hair was blowing in the wind and she looked cold but she was smiling.

The mail was collecting in the mailbox again.

Why hadn't Myrna called? Because the phone was dead, that was why. Probably the notice was in the mailbox too.

And then the power was shut off and he had to use the oil lamps and fill the old wood stove with wood. He missed the television.

If the TV girl came back, he thought, he would ask her in. She would hang her coat and scarf on the back of a chair, and he would make tea and she would sit with her cold, red hands pressed against her cheeks, her elbows on the table. They would talk. He would tell her his ideas about land, about government, about family. She wouldn't have a tape recorder going either. He imagined her just driving up some Sunday afternoon, on her own time, to see how he was doing. Maybe she'd tell him a little bit about herself, like how she was going with this guy who wanted to marry her but she wanted a career too and he wanted children, and anyway she did not know if she really loved him although she thought so. She'd say that she admired him, Jake. Maybe she'd even been attracted to a man like him, a man who was a bit different, with a bit of mystery about him.

He found himself missing the land. All the leaves were gone now. The trees were fragile grey wisps against a snow-promising sky. In the woods the air would be cold and the leaves underfoot would crunch as he walked. At this time of year you could hear the ocean from the woods, even though it was more than half a mile away.

He could hear the construction crews down the road.

One Friday, it snowed. The trucks did not come back on Monday morning. Maybe they were calling a halt to everything until spring.

But where was everyone else?

Had they all forgotten about him?

He decided to go for a walk.

The world was bright and beautiful and dazzling. He took deep breaths of air and became dizzy. The world expanded around him, grew in front of his eyes. His head cleared and he saw a rabbit scamper away. He saw deer tracks, and what he thought were moose prints. His woods. His land. And his the only human tracks marking the snow.

This would be an appropriate day for them to come. Surely they were watching. They would seize the house while he was out of it. When he turned to go back to the house, he half expected that he would find the sheriff there, and the police, and men in dark overcoats who would be carrying official documents. He would sneak back in by the old side door to the summer kitchen and he would lock the door again. What could they do then?

But there was no-one there. There was grey smoke from the chimney curling into the white sky. There were no new footprints.

Taking a chance, he walked across the road to the mailbox, which appeared to be empty. But when he checked, there was a card in it. It was a note to call at the post office for a parcel. Had they bundled his mail up?

As he crossed the road back to his house, he saw that the note on his door was gone. He would have to make another. He did this, not taking off his wet boots to go into the kitchen. He wrote: *I'm still here*. On impulse, he added: *Can you see me?* He wrote it on cardboard and nailed it to the front door.

As he did this, he wondered how long it would be before anyone came by to see it. He wondered if some decision had been made of which he was not aware.

He took a look around at the skies and the bare branches of late autumn and then he went back into his house and closed the door. And then he locked it behind him.