Grande Montagne

Gregory W. Rohloff

Creative Writing Workshop

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/ellipsis

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.46428/ejail.48.26
Available at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/ellipsis/vol48/iss1/26

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Language and Literature at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ellipsis: A Journal of Art, Ideas, and Literature by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.
At the base of the largest mountain in the entire range stood the village named after the mountain, Grande Montagne. Neither the mountain nor the village carried those names originally; Mount Silvercrest and Silver Point were the names derived from the silver mine that attracted the miners and the merchants who created the village and bestowed the names. The next generation thought the names reflected poorly, for the silver mine brought wealth to a select few, and it kept them there for fear of missing out on the next grand lode. Refinement was the goal, and to the villagers, a French name would turn the village into a refined and cultured place that would attract artisans and entrepreneurs, just as an earlier nearby village grew out of the arrival of Basque shepherds.

Because of the mountain range’s mild climate, only the upper reaches of Grande Montagne ever saw snow. Springs that dotted the middle of the mountain flowed down the east side forming a small lake, Lac de la Montagne. On that shore is where the village of Grande Montagne stood, its grandest houses overlooking the lake and its view of the mountain’s reflection. The visions of grandeur were a product of Grande Montagne’s westernmost side, the location of the mine, and its rich lode of silver. The miners lived just out of view of Lac de la Montagne, for their houses were at the base of the mountain on the other side of the business district and the schools, nearly two miles from the lake. This geographical spread belied the village’s importance to the outside world except for its silver.

The onset of winter that year seemed no different from previous winters when a light dusting of snow was all that fell before Christmas. But after that, the hundred-year-snows came, totaling more than thirty feet on the mountain by the first of March. When an early change in the jet stream brought warm air and rain to the mountain range, the snowmelt came so fast that by April, the lower reaches of the mountain were now quite mushy. Mud blocked the springs below ground, and the run-off filled Lake Montange
until water lapped at Shoreline Drive, the address of the biggest houses of the most important residents.

Unknown to the miners was how the rapid melt and the changes to the bubbling springs would affect the geology below the mountain. A buildup of water that could no longer escape from the springs created a series of new fissures that went far below the base of the mountain, and methane that had been sequestered for tens of thousands of years followed routes that led directly to the mine shaft. When the first crew of miners entered the shaft and struck matches to light their lanterns, they triggered an explosion so fierce it was felt on the opposite side of the mountain. Of the one hundred miners, only ten outside the entrance survived the blast. However, some were so severely burned they were barely recognizable and not long for life, leaving only two survivors.

* * *

Dr. Renaldo was leaving for his clinic when the mine explosion occurred. He stopped for a moment in his driveway next to his car, and after looking around, he started to open his car door. He stopped when he saw the mangled body of a cardinal, its head mostly missing as if it had been caught by a prowling cat in the night. He heard the song of another cardinal coming from the maple tree next to the driveway. He scanned the branches until he saw the red feathers of the bird perched near the top of the tree. He slammed his car door and the bird flew away. He went back inside his house for a paper bag to scoop up the dead cardinal, its red and gray feathers scattered at the base of the tree being the only sign of what had happened.

“Stupid damn cat,” he said as he got into his car and drove to the clinic, thinking all the while how much he had enjoyed the cardinal’s songs each morning. That moment is when the explosion rattled the town.

Dr. Renaldo’s childhood was marred by his extremely short stature. Although his arms and legs were always proportional to his height as a child, his expectations of being as tall as his father and brother quickly faded by his late teens when he was just over four-and-a-half feet tall. His height led him to study biology and physiology in high school. Often he left school early to go to the city library and pore through medical texts, hoping to find an answer to how he could make himself grow. Although he could not find such an answer, he gained enough knowledge that he was easily
accepted into college and medical school. But even there, his height made him a target for jokes. As a child, he wished that he could be like a sparrow or cardinal or any other small bird that could simply fly to a different place when threatened. In medical school, though, he answered taunts silently by pushing himself to excel.

Yet, as an academically honored graduate, he was shunned when he applied to be on staff of medical practices in Bay City. One doctor, though, suggested he answer the call of Grande Montagne officials seeking a replacement for a retired doctor. Dr. Renaldo was the only applicant. He took the slight in the same manner as his academic ranking. He had been downgraded on his internship, dropping him from first in his class to fourth. Although he had a strong rapport with the patients he saw, no one could explain the unsatisfactory report on his internship. In the five years he had been there, he had saved the lives of children stricken with pneumonia and guided adults through bouts of the Spanish flu. Still, the residents murmured that Grande Montagne would not grow into a true city like Bay City until they had a corps of tall and sturdy doctors. And while their words were shielded from Dr. Renaldo, their expressions and attitudes were not. So, he clutched to that escape of his childhood wish of being like the sparrows and cardinals and flying to freedom. Such were his thoughts the morning of the explosion after arriving at the clinic and being told that his facilities were needed for both the living and the dead.

The first to arrive was the mine manager, whose office was in a shack about one hundred yards from the mine entrance. He had burns on his hands and face as he ran toward the entrance to pull those outside the mine further from the flames. Dr. Renaldo treated his burns with a silver compound, before taking the manager out to a car.

“Where are you taking him?” Dr. Renaldo asked the driver.

“Font Azure’s hospital,” he said. “The road to Bay City has been washed over with mud and would be slow going.” Font Azure, located at the base of Grande Montagne on the mountain’s north face, was settled twenty years before Grande Montagne and the silver rush. The north face opened to a lush valley suitable for grazing sheep, which attracted French Basque immigrants, and the valley’s water came from a deep-flowing spring that formed a year-round brook with the purest of water. The village soon attracted merchants, and when the silver mine was discovered, the merchants worked together to provide the materials for constructing what was then
Silver Point. And as wealth accrued there, the Font Azure merchants then set up smaller shops to sell furnishings to the miners. As Silver Point grew into Grande Montagne, the merchants maintained their monopoly in the shops. The money was funneled back to Font Azure, which gained a hospital instead of the clinic that now belonged to Dr. Renaldo. The transfer of the mine manager to the Font Azure hospital meant Dr. Renaldo would not supervise his recovery; he would be lucky to recoup the expenses of the manager’s emergency treatment.

The second survivor, the mine foreman, was similarly burned, and so Dr. Renaldo treated him with the silver compound, bandaged the wounds, and suggested he stay overnight in the clinic. The foreman agreed, and when he was resting comfortably with his family in the recovery room, Dr. Renaldo joined Mr. Baker, the town’s mortician. The two men discussed how to handle the victims burned beyond recognition, and those whose facial features partially remained so kin could identify them.

Those bodies would not be gathered for at least another week, Mr. Baker explained to Dr. Renaldo, for fear of another explosion. Once the victims who could be identified were retrieved, those so badly burned would be buried en masse. Their families would only have a granite wall with a brass plaque engraved with the names of their loved ones.

When the time came two weeks later to start the cleanup of those who were recognizable, Dr. Renaldo met with Mr. Baker once more. They had twelve bodies to prepare for their funerals; some victims had severe burns from the waist down, and others suffered partial burns on their faces.

Mr. Baker said that facial burns would be covered with makeup if possible; if the burns were too extensive, a mask would be made of plaster of paris. Dr. Renaldo watched Mr. Baker scrub the victims clean of char and loose skin. The cleaning was followed by a layer of cheesecloth over the burn area, and then Mr. Baker slowly spread molten wax over the cloth, shaping it to match the curvature of the other side of the face. Once the wax was firm, Mr. Baker spread a thin layer of plaster of paris and set the body aside to let the plaster harden.

“See how easy this is?” Mr. Baker said. “When the plaster is firm, I will match the skin tone with paint and makeup.”

“What about the missing arm?” Dr. Renaldo asked.

“Each body with an open casket funeral will have a shawl pulled across their chest covering their arms and torso so only their faces show.”
Dr. Renaldo nodded and went to the table bearing another victim’s body. The facial burn had been so severe that his left eye and most of his nose were missing. As Dr. Renaldo cleaned the victim’s face, he wondered who the man was. He stretched cheesecloth down the left side of his face and across his nose. He carefully poured the wax over the cloth, wondering if he was making the layer too thin or too thick. As the wax started to set up, it flattened across the eye socket and the nasal cavity. When he added the plaster layer, the plaster sunk into the hole where his nose should have been. Despite adding more plaster, the paris only stuck to the sides where the nostrils should be before continuing to sink. He tried to shape it, but the more he molded and pressed, the less it looked like a human nose and the more it looked like a pig snout.

Dr. Renaldo worked furiously to no avail. He did not step back from the man’s body until Mr. Baker’s chuckle broke the silence. Dr. Renaldo turned and glared at Mr. Baker.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Baker said. “I should have taken this one. I neglected to tell you how to keep the rebuilt nose from looking like a snout.”

Mr. Baker stepped up and cleared away the plaster and the wax. When he poured wax this time, he carved a wood shim into narrow strips, creating an arch to make a tip for the new nose.

After the wax firmed, he called over Dr. Renaldo.

“I want you to take it from here,” he said. “Those little strips of wood underneath the wax will hold up the plaster now. But you still need to be careful with how much plaster you pour. Aim for the cheek and build up toward the tip. Then we can stick in another little strip of wood and give him a septum so your handiwork will last until the coffin is lowered into the grave.”

Dr. Renaldo once again mixed plaster and pressed it onto the wax mask’s edge on the man’s left cheek. He smoothed it gently, creating an even curve for the edge of the nostril. Then he started on the right nostril, and as he smoothed the plaster up over the bridge of his nose, he created a bump-out on the left eye socket as if an eyeball remained under it. Mr. Baker stepped forward again and took over, smoothing it gently so that in the dim light the plaster blended in with the intact portion of his face.

Dr. Renaldo watched, and when Mr. Baker finished, Dr. Renaldo recognized this man as one who had summoned him when his daughter was stricken with pneumonia. The child was nearly gone when Dr. Renaldo arrived at the family’s home, and he immediately began to treat the child
with serum. The child rested more comfortably, and as the night wore on, the man insisted Dr. Renaldo stay through the night. By mid-afternoon the next day, the girl’s breathing was clearing, and when Dr. Renaldo pronounced her nearing recovery, he presented the man with a bill totaling fifty dollars, equal to the man’s salary at the mine. The man threw the bill down and counted out twenty-five dollars.

“Now be gone,” he said to Dr. Renaldo. “You won’t be getting rich off my daughter’s misery.”

“The charge lets me order more serum varieties if someone else’s child becomes as sick as she was. That’s why I wrote the bill for fifty dollars.”

“And I paid twenty-five—half the charge since you’re half a man.”

And the man shoved Dr. Renaldo from the little girl’s bedroom and continued pushing him down the hallway and out the side door where he fell from the stoop and splayed across the rock-covered driveway.

Now Dr. Renaldo wished he could have left the pig’s snout so that Grande Montagne could see this man for who he truly was. After Mr. Baker moved the body to another table in the workroom, he laid out two more victims, and both men worked late into the night masking the burns and damage so that the explosion could be ushered into the town’s past when the time came to resume for making this little village grow like Font Azure or Bay City.

When they had finished for the night, Mr. Baker said he would give Dr. Renaldo credit for his help so the town council would feel obligated to pay more than a mortician’s assistant would have earned. “Good to know my physician skills have some use here,” Dr. Renaldo replied and left before Mr. Baker could wish him good night. As he walked to his car, a lone cardinal landed in a tree near his car. Dr. Renaldo wished the bird would sing, but as he drew nearer, he saw that this was a male cardinal, so when Dr. Renaldo opened the car door, the bird chirped and flew away.

* * *

The funerals and burials began the day after the last identifiable body had been prepared, and the ceremonies lasted two weeks, for only one of Grande Montagne’s four churches was large enough to seat more than one hundred attendees. The enormity of the tragedy—everyone in town knew personally or was related to one of the ninety-eight victims. But by the last of the
funerals, the condolences to the grieving families grew shorter, and talk around town turned to how long the mine would be closed, and if it could be safely reopened. That discussion evolved to an opinion that the town would dry up without the mine, and that perhaps the grand homes could turn into vacation retreats if the lake were stocked with trout, bass, and walleye. The mayor, Brisbane Parker, decided he needed a decisive act, and so he declared a grand ball would celebrate the mine’s reopening, promising that the ball would be conducted in a respectful way to honor the fallen miners.

When the last funeral had been conducted, Mayor Parker met with mine manager Booker Carlton to discuss the steps needed to reopen the mine. But most importantly, Mayor Parker assured Carlton that the city would pay half the costs for equipping miners with cap lamps to replace the kerosene lanterns. Carlton smiled at that news. “That allows us to order flame safety lamps at the same time we order cap lamps and Edison battery packs. We can start clearing the mine shaft in three months, and by fall, we should start producing silver again in the upper reaches of the mine.”

“Then fall it is for the celebration ball,” the mayor said. “You will be the ball’s grand marshal; it will be a masked ball to make the two survivors comfortable.

For Dr. Renaldo, though, the news at first escaped him, for what he had been paid was minimal; less, he thought, than Mr. Baker would have received and only a few dollars more than a mortuary assistant would have been paid. Perhaps, giving up his clinic practice and moving back to Bay City or elsewhere in the country would be best. His thoughts turned again to the pig snout on the man who placed such little value on the health of his daughter that he refused to pay the full bill. Only now he could see him still with the pig snout, standing over him as he was knocked to the man’s driveway. That image made him laugh, an act so rare for Dr. Renaldo he could not remember any other occasion for laughter since arriving in Grande Montagne.

Dr. Renaldo learned of the masked ball when he went to the café to share lunch with Mr. Baker, for the two developed a friendship through their emergency work together. A nearby table of women from the town chatted about the ball, wondering how soon they would need to order their gowns if they were going to Bay City to get them. Neither Grande Montagne nor Font Azure had a dress shop that offered anything other than the simplest dresses.
“Baker, what’s this that the women are talking about—a masked ball as if we were back in the seventeen hundreds in Versailles?” Dr. Renaldo leaned toward Mr. Baker. “Is the official mourning period now over?”

“You are full of sass,” Mr. Baker replied. “But, yes, the period of mourning is over. The safety equipment has been ordered and will arrive in August. So, the last Saturday in September will be a celebration. Booker Carlton and his wife will preside over the ball, so their masks need to be truly magnificent. Carlton has a wicked sense of humor.”

“Have invitations been sent, if they have, it is just one more that I have not received.” Dr. Renaldo opened the menu, but before he could decide on what to order, Baker spoke up.

“You have yet to be slighted this time around. I have not been invited formally, but Carlton’s secretary came to my office to inform me that I should be prepared to make masks for the occasion.”

“From funeral to fun, then, Baker. You are a man of all occasions here.”

“Renaldo, they want three hundred and fifty masks,” Baker said. “Most would be half-masks over the eyes and bridging the nose, but she said Mr. and Mrs. Carlton needed full facial masks, and they should not be boring.”

“So you want my help,” Dr. Renaldo said.

“If you don’t mind. We can make the partial masks over the course of a few evenings,” Mr. Baker said. “And for those wanting a full mask, Mayor Parker said he would be generous. We can split the five hundred dollars evenly, now that you know the secrets of mask-making.”

“As much as I make in a month preserving the lives of those with the misfortune of falling ill in Grande Montagne,” Dr. Renaldo said. “I will do it on the condition that I have free rein with the Carlton’s masks.”

“OK, what do you have in mind?” Mr. Baker asked. “The Carltons will pay nicely if they are eye-catching. A thousand dollars each is what Mr. Carlton said when he and Mayor Parker approached me about their masks.”

Dr. Renaldo smiled. “Eye-catching they will be, so long as I can use some surgical skills so their masks do not look at all like masks. They will be worth every penny of what the Carltons will pay. And now for lunch.”

Mr. Baker took up the menu and scanned the entrees list. “The baked chicken, I suggest.” And he laid the menu down as he looked at Dr. Renaldo. “Of course, and I’ll treat.”
The road to Bay City had been cleared by early August, so the women who wanted to create the greatest impression began their jaunts to find their gowns. The selection soon turned sparse because in Bay City, spring was the season for galas. Thus, those women who did not find a suitable gown on their first trip to Bay City turned to a seamstress there who made costumes for theatrical productions. She showed them how she could turn a simple house dress into a bejeweled gown by adding layers of lace adorned with glass beads. She explained that she could order powdered wigs with ringlets of hair that flowed to shoulder length, for only a few dollars each.

“I will be back tomorrow with an ankle-length dress,” said Bonita Carlton, wife of the mine manager. “I want seven layers of lace the full length of the dress, and I want a beaded wig.”

When the dressmaker said such a creation would be quite heavy, Mrs. Carlton cut her off. “I am the grand dame of the ball. All eyes must be on me.”

* * *

A week before the ball, Mr. Baker and Dr. Renaldo started work on the half-masks that gala-goers would hold in front of their faces whenever they addressed each other. Mayor Parker ordered one-hundred-fifty half-masks and one hundred full masks. Mr. Baker started on the full masks while Dr. Renaldo started on the half masks; they created exaggerated lips on the full masks painted a deep red, and on both, arched eyebrows in a variety of colors. After working for an hour, Dr. Renaldo set aside his twentieth half-mask and asked if he could join Mr. Baker on the full masks.

“I’d like to do something extravagant with the noses that just don’t seem right with the half masks,” Dr. Renaldo said.

“Of course,” Mr. Baker said. “Take this mold and build your mask over it. I do hope you can fashion a bird beak—like a heron. That would be magnificent.”

“A heron?” Dr. Renaldo said, tilting his head back as if this were a weighty decision of life or death. “Yes, and perhaps a tiny elephant trunk, and a porcupine face with quills. Is that possible?”

“Quills? I think so just as long as they were flexible and in no danger of stabbing anyone while they danced,” Mr. Baker said. “Ooh, you are good at this. What about a pig’s snout?”

“I would like to do that for Mr. Carlton, and something that would go with it for Mrs. Carlton, something totally outrageous.”
With that change, they continued working through the evening, creating a hawk’s beak on one mask and matching it with a duckbill, and another pair with a heron’s beak matched with a heavily furred dog’s muzzle complete with an array of black and white whiskers. Each creation bordered on humor and terror. By the end of the evening, forty full masks had been completed, and Mr. Baker motioned for Dr. Renaldo to arrange the masks so that they could firm up and dry.

“Tomorrow, I can finish the full masks and you can resume making the half masks,” Mr. Baker said.

“Of course,” Dr. Renaldo said. “When I go home tonight, I will sketch out the masks for the Carltons, and I will make them after the half-masks are completed. I have been studying some books explaining how such a mask could be created that could be attached with surgical stitches to their faces so they could be heavier than other masks, thus, more noticeable and more outrageous.”

“Stitched?” Mr. Baker said, drawing his hands toward his chest.

“The idea comes from masks created after the Great War for soldiers so badly wounded they needed a full face covering from just inside the hairline to the tip of their chin and along the jawline. They were quite successful, and with just four stitches above the hairline, and three into the chin, the masks were never in danger of slipping.”

“That’s interesting,” Mr. Baker said.

“And even more interesting is that they can be removed the next morning with no fuss for the Carltons,” Dr. Renaldo said. “The only matter is the expense, at least a thousand dollars each.”

“For this,” Mr. Baker said, “Mayor Parker and Mr. Carlton would certainly be all in without a question. And if we finish the masks as quickly as we are going, I can plan my own costume and mask. Are you going?”

“I think not,” Dr. Renaldo said. “Who would I dance with? Besides, by the time we are finished with the masks, I will be ready for an early night in. Particularly since I will have to install the Carltons’ masks at the clinic the night before the gala so they can be more comfortable and will be used to wearing their masks by the start of the ball. They can be quite heavy compared to these full masks.”

Mr. Baker nodded as if he understood and agreed, but the look in his eyes as Dr. Renaldo glanced across at him when he finished speaking was as if the doctor was speaking in Latin.
Dr. Renaldo sketched out the designs of the masks with little detail. For Mr. Carlton, he arched the eyebrows halfway up the forehead and colored in a wisp of a goatee on the chin. And when he showed it to Mr. Carlton, he explained that the design of the two was not to be the shocking grotesquery that Mr. Carlton had wanted, but they were aimed at focusing attention on the nose piece, which he waited to draw until he was seated at Mr. Carlton’s desk, and then he raced through the strokes as he spoke. “It will look something like this, a bulbous snout turned up so that the nostrils point out instead of down.”

Mr. Carlton chuckled as Dr. Renaldo continued. “And it will be powdered with a pinkish-hued powder as its finishing touch so that in the bright lights of the Hotel Montagne’s ballroom, it will glow.”

Then he showed a sketch of Mrs. Carlton’s mask, the lips fashioned as if they had been rotated a quarter turn, and her eyebrows below her eyes. As Mr. Carlton gasped, Dr. Renaldo placed the sketches in his bag, and as he stepped toward the door, he turned back toward Mr. Carlton.

“One thing, sir, you need to come to the clinic tomorrow night. Do not eat before you come. Because of the weight of the masks, I need to stitch the masks in place—a very fine stitch in no more than four, maybe five places, so that when you are dancing the mask will not bounce around. The stitches come out the next morning with barely a hint that they’d been there. To get the stitches in, you’ll need anesthesia, hence no eating beforehand.”

Mr. Carlton leaned back. “I had no idea this would be such an ordeal.”

“You’re not thinking of switching are you?” Dr. Renaldo asked.

“No, no, my good man,” he said. “We need to make a splash to show that Grande Montagne is back in business.”

On the morning before the grand ball, the song of a green warbler perched in a tree near the bedroom window woke Dr. Renaldo. He did not arise immediately because the song was continuing, causing him to smile. This is the day I break free with flight for how I’ve been treated by this place. And after he had eaten breakfast and had gone out to the car, the fluttering of a hummingbird caught Dr. Renaldo’s attention, and he stopped to look
for it. Not far above him, he spotted the bird, with a green throat, purple forehead, and dark tail. He recognized the bird as one that would soon take flight from these mountains and return to the highlands of Mexico. “Go, my friend, I will join you later,” he whispered.

All through the day, he counted the hours when the Carltons would come in. Before noon, he called the mine office and asked the receptionist to remind Mr. Carlton to eat lightly and to call Mrs. Carlton to remind her, too. And in mid-afternoon, he checked his anesthesia supplies, starting with nitrous oxide administered with an occasional stream of oxygen. And when the mask had been attached to the chin, ready for the cuts that would show Grande Montagne what monsters they were, he would apply ether to knock them out for the completion of his plot. When he felt comfortable that the remaining three patients’ minor ailments could wait for treatment, he ushered them out and went to the bank to take out a thousand dollars from his personal account.

Shortly before five o’clock, the couple arrived, and Dr. Renaldo gave them gowns and directed them to neighboring exam rooms where he would start their anesthesia, and then transfer them individually to the procedure room where he would apply ether.

“And just to be safe,” Dr. Renaldo said, “you haven’t eaten this evening, have you?”

The Carltons assured him they had followed his directions completely and Mr. Carlton waved an envelope. “Two thousand dollars in cash, as you requested.”

Dr. Renaldo smiled and tucked the money in his lab coat pocket. He then arranged the nitrous oxide canister in Mr. Carlton’s room. Soon he was in a drowsy state, and Dr. Renaldo pushed the gurney into the procedure room where he fitted a wire mask over Mr. Carlton’s face and measured out ether into gauze. He watched for a moment and then took the nitrous oxide into Mrs. Carlton’s room and started her preparations.

“I will be back in a few minutes after I fit your husband’s mask to him,” Dr. Renaldo said, but the woman was already drowsy and did not reply or react.

Dr. Renaldo took a scalpel and immediately cut around the tip of Mr. Carlton’s nose, clamping sponges on the sides of his face to control the bleeding, before stitching shut the wounds on the sides of the nostrils. Then he dropped the tip of the nose into a cup he buried in the bottom of the trash can. Within minutes, Mr. Carlton wore a mask that featured black stripes
that ran from the edge of the mask to the focal point—a plump, bright pink snout that would have looked perfectly natural on a hog.

After returning Mr. Carlton to his room, he wheeled Mrs. Carlton into the procedure room, where he repeated the ether process. Now he worked more delicately because a sense of madness welled up in Dr. Renaldo. Mrs. Carlton was a beauty, but he braced himself to carry out this act of revenge on the town’s power structure. He made slits from the base of her nose through her upper lip, and then from the lower lip for an inch toward her chin. The lines were jagged for he had to clamp sponges on the sides of his openings.

He stitched her lips together so that her mouth opened side-to-side, matching the vertical mouth opening of her mask. Next, he cut in a circular fashion around each eyebrow, and carefully set them aside on a tray. After stitching these wounds shut, he attached these brows to again match openings in the mask below her blue eyes, and then her mask, and her beauty was blotted out.

Dr. Renaldo waited for the anesthesia to wear off—now it was quite late in the evening—and as the couple started to move around on their gurneys, he measured out a shot of morphine for each.

“This will help with the discomfort,” he said as Mr. Carlton sat up. “When you feel steady, get dressed and I will drive you home in your car.”

Mr. Carlton started to object, but Dr. Renaldo cut him off. “When the morphine kicks in, you will feel too woozy to drive. The distance is one that I can walk back to the clinic.”

Soon they were dressed and wobbled to their Packard. While Mr. Carlton insisted he could drive, Dr. Renaldo guided him to the passenger seat and took the wheel, driving carefully to avoid any jolts or attention from anyone passing on the street. Then, Dr. Renaldo walked briskly back downtown, whistling softly and thinking of his escape from Grande Montagne. When he passed the Post Office, he pulled out an envelope bearing a letter of resignation addressed to Mayor Parker. His whistled song grew louder and brighter as he drew near the clinic. Dropping the letter late on a Friday night meant the letter would not be processed until the next morning, and if the postmaster was headed for the ball, perhaps it would not arrive until Monday afternoon, by which time, Dr. Renaldo would be in Bay City and calling on medical practices to see who would need an additional physician, confident his classmates would steer him wisely, whether in Bay City or in a neighboring state.
Saturday morning, he took his medical kit and called on the Carltons. Neither had slept well, but with the ball just hours away, they were too excited to complain about discomfort.

“I will be back around four o’clock to administer a slight dosage of the morphine to each of you—no more than one glass of champagne each tonight—but the morphine will keep you in strong spirits,” Dr. Renaldo said. “Any questions?”

“This whole business has taken away my appetite for breakfast,” Mr. Carlton said. “Any suggestions?”

“Yes, a broth soup—chicken would be perfect if you like that—and a slice of soft bread—something bland that won’t upset your stomachs,” Dr. Renaldo replied. “Avoid exertion until after you’ve eaten.” He turned to Mrs. Carlton as he continued.

“Do you have some help with your ball gown; I’ve heard the talk about it being so bejeweled and heavy, I don’t want you to strain getting into it.”

“Of course,” she said. “Eva is here and she will help me dress; she has done this before, so I am in good hands, Dr. Renaldo.”

“Very well,” he said. “I will see you tomorrow.” And with that, Dr. Renaldo returned to his apartment to pack books, clothing, and personal effects so he could load them into his Model T and be gone first thing Sunday morning, joyous at the thought that this tomb of an apartment would be empty.

When Dr. Renaldo returned in the afternoon, the Carltons were already dressed for the ball—Mr. Carlton in a black Tuxedo coat trimmed with silk lapels, and Mrs. Carlton, barely able to stand in the seven-layer gown with jewels scattered randomly across the flowing top layer that ran from her shoulders to the floor.

“I have smaller doses of the morphine so that the weight of the masks will not be a burden as the evening wears on,” Dr. Renaldo said.

“It is a shame you will not be there to see the reaction to our masks,” Mr. Carlton said. “I love how you painted vertical lips on Henrietta’s mask. It is such a shock.”

Dr. Renaldo nodded. “I’m not much for parties and balls,” he said. “I’m sure you will be the hit of the night.”

“If you don’t mind, sir, the shots we had last night were quite overwhelming,” Mr. Carlton said. “We don’t want to miss a moment tonight.”

“Very good, sir,” Dr. Renaldo said as he snapped shut his medical bag. “When would you like me to come Sunday to remove the masks?”
“I’ll send for you Sunday morning,” Mr. Carlton said. “Will you be at the clinic or at home?”

“Home. But I do have some errands so your messenger can leave the message at the small table near the stairs that lead to my door. I won’t be gone long, so I will come immediately when I get back from the errands if that suits your desires.”

With that, Dr. Renaldo tipped his hat and left for home. Now the time for leaving would be changed. He would load the car as soon as the street outside his apartment was dark, and he would then disappear into the night before the ball was over. He stopped at the clinic and boxed his medical books. And when he arrived home, he realized how each box of clothing, kitchen items, and bedding, brought a greater sense of joy. This was his escape.

Shortly after nine o’clock, a smattering of rain started to fall and Dr. Renaldo looked back at the mountains, now shrouded in clouds. Little of value was left in the apartment. Leave it; when I mail the key to Mrs. Sims, I can instruct her to dispose of what’s left. And with that, he carried his bags to the car and set them in the passenger seat. The going would be slow as the rain now fell steadily. The hour drive to the bridge across Crystal River now would take three hours or more, time he wanted to reach Bay City so that he could freshen up before seeking out his classmates.

The runoff that had been contained in the ditches alongside the gravel road now lapped into the roadbed, washing away gravel, and causing the Model T to slide across the larger muddy patches. As Dr. Renaldo neared the bridge that crossed high above the Crystal River, he saw small black birds stalking around the side of the bridge. He slowed down first, and when he saw what the Chihuanhuan ravens were dancing around, he pulled the car over to the left side of the road and got out. Immediately the rant of ravens took flight down the mountainside, leaving Dr. Renaldo alone to ponder where the rain had washed out the right-side bridge support that connected the road to the bridge.

He threw a stone from the roadway into the abyss, and silently thanked the ravens, for he was uncertain if the Model T could stay to the left side on the bridge and make it the one hundred yards across the chasm. He would need daylight, and even then, he realized that a doctor was not a bridge engineer. So, he returned to his car to sleep until daylight, and if he could not sleep he would comb through memories of past patient calls down the side roads to homesteads and cabins that would give him an alternative
to returning to Grande Montagne. Perhaps a road led to Font Azure so he could take a highway there along the valley that also led to the coastal plains and Bay City.

He was certain that in daylight he would recognize such a road and he would be in Bay City by nightfall. He went to sleep and dreamt of a green-throated hummingbird, which circled him momentarily in the dream and then he joined it in flight leaving the mountains behind.

At daybreak, the song of another hummingbird awoke Dr. Renaldo, who twisted around in his seat until he saw a Blue-throated Mountain Gem. “Ah, my dream bird sent you to be my guide from this accursed mountain,” Dr. Renaldo said as he left his car and looked once more at the other side of the bridge. The damage was much worse than he could see in the dark; the bridge tilted slightly toward the failed support. The hummingbird flew directly over the gap and disappeared among the pines. Dr. Renaldo dug through the boxes hoping to find a map that could show him the routes other than the one he had known from his arrival to Grande Montagne.

The search was futile, and so Dr. Renaldo sat in the car trying to recall his visit to the cabin of a trapper who had broken his foot when he stepped on one of his own traps. The road was nearly twenty miles outside of Grande Montagne, but it was not as steep as this road. Even though it was narrow, the road switched back and forth down the mountain until it came to a creek that fed into the Crystal River, and that is where the trapper’s cabin sat among the pines. Now, he tried to recall if that road looped toward the creek and then back to the main road, or did it cross another road that continued through the valley, past the river bend and led to Bay City? He sat for two hours, panicking at the thought that he would get on that little road only to find that it too was a victim of a mudslide, or that the trapper’s cabin had long been abandoned and now was no longer a landmark he could trust. And so he sat, admiring the beauty of the mountain range and the towering pines and the sound of the rushing river below, wishing that another possible escape route could come to mind.

Instead, by mid-morning, the noise he heard was the sound of an automobile engine, an engine more powerful than his Model T, for it was the sound he had heard when he drove the Carltons home. He turned to look at the car—the Packard, indeed—and he saw Mr. Carlton striding mightily toward him. He sat still until Mr. Carlton was next to the Model T. His mask was slightly askew for the stitches on the right side of the mask had been
cut. In his hand was an ax, and Mr. Carlton pulled the ax over his head and swung down on the hood of the Model T. The ax handle split and the head of the ax bounded away from Mr. Carlton.

“I ought to beat you to death with this,” he said, waving the splintered handle over his head. “My assistant went to your apartment only to find the door open and the landlady sweeping the floor. She told him you had left Grande Montagne and would not be back.”

Then Mr. Carlton jabbed his finger at the mask near his nose. “This is what you did to me. Me! Me! I put up the money to equip the clinic so you could have a job. And this is how you repay me.”

He flung the ax handle into the gap where the rain had washed away the bridge support. And he grabbed Dr. Renaldo and pulled him from the Model T. Then he turned to a strong box on the floor. “Is my money in this?”

Dr. Renaldo, now prone on the ground, muttered a soft yes, and Mr. Carlton grabbed the strong box and carried it to his Packard.

“May God have mercy on you, Renaldo, for no one in Grande Montagne will have mercy if you show up there; I’ve already seen to that.”

“Did you call the police?”

“No. If you can find your way clear, then go.” And with that, Mr. Carlton tossed the strong box onto the floor of the Packard and started the car. “I will take care of Bonita first, the monstrous act that you committed on her beauty. I will take her to Font Azure, and when I am assured that whatever can be done for her mouth is done, then I might call authorities.” And he drove away, and all Dr. Renaldo could hear was the rush of the river far below him and the squawking call of a Chihuahuan raven gliding overhead, cutting lazy circles far above the treetops and the river gorge.

Two hours later, still stretched out across the ground, a voice called out to Dr. Renaldo. “Hey sir, you all right?”

“I could not be better, for I did not collapse the bridge in the middle of the night, and the man who robbed me did not kill me.” Dr. Renaldo stood up. “Are you with the police?”

“Nope. the county roads department office in Font Azure. The Bay City office called me to check the bridge. So that’s what I’m here for.”

The man lumbered past Dr. Renaldo and, after inspecting the chasm where solid ground had been the day before, he returned to Dr. Renaldo. “I can call the police when I get back to Font Azure and send for a truck to pull your Model T. Never saw one with a gash in the hood like that.”
“I don’t think I need either one.”
“What about the man who robbed you? Where’d he go?”
“Font Azure I presume.”
“Well, there you go; I can turn him into the police when I get there. What did he look like?”

For a moment as the whole scenario ran through Dr. Renaldo’s head, from the mortician work to the grand ball and the miserly ways of Grande Montagne, Dr. Renaldo held his tongue for several moments before answering. “He has a nose like a pig’s snout, and his wife’s mouth goes from up and down and opens from side to side.”

“Well hell, Buddy. You’re drunk. I can’t let you get on the road in that condition. Now you hop up there into my truck and I’ll send for a tow to get your car. You can spend the rest of the day in the drunk tank. In the morning, you can see the judge, pay a little fine, and be on your way.”

Dr. Renaldo shook his head. “I told you I was robbed, but I suppose one could say the man took what had been his. The Font Azure drunk tank will be good, and I will agree to whatever the judge orders tomorrow, other than a fine.”

And Dr. Renaldo climbed up into the truck under the gaze of the county roadman.

“Pretty spry for a little guy,” he said as Dr. Renaldo closed the door. He looked out the window as they took off down the road. He did not look at the road as the truck jostled along the washed-out gravel. Instead, he looked up at the ravens gliding from their perches amid the pines to a spot on the ground, and then taking off again, circling overhead.