

The Fall

By Jenna Shoosmith

Fennec crouches down to retie his muddy leather boots. He uses cellphone charging cables as string and a strap of duct tape to keep the soles from falling off. These boots have carried him up, down, and over the Colorado Rockies for years, and he's not ready to let them die just yet, selfish as that may be.

As a rag-tag wanderer with nothing but a banjo strapped to his back and a rusty harmonica in his back pocket, Fennec has learned to make use of the famous Old World saying: *Reuse, Reduce, and Recycle*. His socks, which were stolen from someone's clothesline last fall, keep his travelling feet warm and dry. Fennec doesn't think of himself as a thief, though. He fully intends to return them someday. Thus, the socks will continue to be reused over and over again until they are nothing but a laughable piece of string. His pants, his only pair, have rips and holes in them from years of wear and tear. Fennec is a minimalist, – he has to be – so he carries only one of each possession in an effort to reduce his travel load. Anyway, the pants do their job so long as Fennec wears them with a pair of suspenders. One year, Fennec took to wearing a hat, a black fedora-like thing made from recycled wool. Unfortunately, it blew off his head during a winter rainstorm and he never saw it again. Fennec has never been a hat-kind-of-guy anyway.

After double-knotting his make-shift boot laces, Fennec stands and jogs a few paces to catch up with the other band members. The travelling folk music group is made of five people, Fennec included, and they call themselves The Rascals.

Tiger, a Nigerian man who escaped the African droughts by voyaging the torrent seas in a dinky little rowboat at the ripe age of twelve, is the troupe's accordion player.

Condor is the violinist and, when he is in the mood, wields a tambourine.

Wild Ass, who sometimes talks to himself and is missing a toe (for a reason nobody knows), plays the washboard and spoons better than anyone north of the Sonoran Desert. He also sings back-up from time-to-time.

Buffalo is the leader of The Rascals. His demanding, powerful voice gives him instant authority, and his nimble fingers enable him to play guitar at the lightening speeds expected of any skilled folk-musician. His bushy brown beard is his most defining physical feature and usually, a leaf or twig is trapped in its masculine curls. This only adds to Buffalo's "wild-man" aesthetic.

Fennec plays the banjo and, when the moment seems right, breathes his soul into the harmonica that he traded his boot laces for.

As the group walks leisurely through the woods, Buffalo consults a compass to check their direction. Satisfied, he slips the device into his shirt pocket and announces to the group:

"Almost there, gang! We'll reach Capitol Peak by nightfall!"

Wild Ass lets out a *Whoop!* and a *Yip!*, and then silence falls upon the band members. Birds once occupied this part of the forest, but they've all since disappeared. To fill the eerie gap, Tiger starts to hum an old Nigerian folk song. His rumbling voice fills the spaces between the trees and makes the mountain seem, if only for a while, less spectral. Fennec adjusts the banjo on his back and tries to ignore the complaints that his boots are making.

As Buffalo predicted, The Rascals near the town of Capitol Peak just as the sky unveils its first few stars. Through the trees, they can see the twinkling golden lights of civilization ahead. They march onward. At the outskirts of town, The Rascals encounter a wooden sign hammered into the trunk of a yellowing aspen. They use the sun's fading light to read its inscription:

Capitol Peak
Est. 12 A.T.F (After The Fall)
Population: 2,525✓

After The Fall, everyone moved to the mountains. The Lowlands became hot and overpopulated, so people, plants, and animals all round the world migrated upward to cooler temperatures. Not everybody made it, though, as not every corner of the globe has mountains to run to. Additionally, during this time of mass migration, countless wildlife species slipped from existence. To remember the animals that were lost, people took their names and made them their own. Fennec is named after a small, desert mammal with large ears and a shy persona. With his flappy ears and tendency to blush when spoken to, Fennec fits his title perfectly.

Although people were promised a cleaner, more prosperous life up in the mountains after The Fall, civilization still clings to the wispy remains of survival even fifty years later. Capitol Peak is one of the few places in the West that has a somewhat stable government. They have a sign, after all.

Since sorrow and loss still reign in this New World, the people need a distraction, and this is what The Rascals are for. They sing songs of love, adventure, and hope. They also have a few melodies about loss and deprivation in their set, but they usually sprinkle those in amongst their happier tunes.

Tonight, The Rascals will play for Capitol Peak to commemorate the autumn equinox. Seasons are a precious commodity in this world of near-eternal summers, so the coming of slightly cooler temperatures is cause for wild celebration. President Bear, the head of Capitol Peak, asks The Rascals to perform on the equinox every year. The group may cross great distances and wander deep into the heart of the Rockies, but they always, *always*, return to Capitol Peak for the start of fall. Fennec looks forward to the equinox all year long, more so than the other band members. For them, visiting Capitol Peak an indicator of passing time – proof that another year has slipped by. For Fennec, it holds immense promise and possibility – it is his annual opportunity to fall in love again.

For the celebration, the people of Capitol Peak congregate in Town Hall, a repurposed ski lodge with a pointed wooden-beamed ceiling and a fireplace that's five times Fennec's size. The

lobby of the ski lodge is cleared to create space for dancing, and the hearth is lit to create warm light in which to dance. Each year around midnight, President Bear opens a barrel of dark ale and makes a toast to his people and to his daughter, Heron. He speaks to good health and good weather in the coming months. His toast is always met by applause and *Whoops!* and *Yips!* from the crowd. Then, The Rascals pick up their instruments and, until dawn breaks, they play swing and folk tunes as dancers move freely across the floor.

Every year is the same, and long-practiced traditions are always met. Wild Ass always drinks too much, Buffalo always tells a story about the band's adventures in the mountains to curious townspeople, Tiger always shares a cigar with President Bear after the ale is opened, and Condor always sneaks off with a woman for an hour or so for some suspicious reason.

Fennec has his own tradition. All night, as he plucks away at his banjo and stomps his feet in time with the music, his eyes follow only one person within the dancing mass. Her name is Heron, and she is the most stunning woman Fennec has ever met.

Each of her movements and wayward glances in his direction made his heart palpitate wildly. He can't breathe in those moments, can't focus either. His banjo playing suffers as a result, but Fennec would do *anything*, give *anything*, to experience more of those brief, lightning-bolt milliseconds of bliss. Heck, he would sell his make-shift shoelaces and muddy boots and just walk around barefoot if she smiled at him. She stuns him to the point of breathlessness, and he can never bring himself to speak to her. This happens every year, every time the Rascals play at Capitol Peak. Fennec has loved Heron since the moment they first met, the first autumn that The Rascals played at Capitol Peak. Poor Fennec is trapped in a blinding, speechless type of love – a smoke raised from the fume of sighs. And, of course, Heron hasn't the slightest idea of the power she holds over the banjo player with cellphone charging cables as shoe laces.

This year, Fennec bravely breaks his tradition. He decides that he's tired of waiting, of doing nothing, of singing songs about love but never experiencing it himself. When Buffalo tells the band to take a break, Fennec takes his chance. He slips across the dancefloor and gently pulls Heron aside. His heart is humming. The sound fills Fennec's bones just as Tiger's Nigerian folk song filled the empty forest earlier that day. He feels lightheaded and, as he blushes profusely, he asks if Heron will join him, just for a minute and only if she's not busy, outside Town Hall. She smiles, nods, and then follows the floppy-eared banjo player into the fresh air. As they walk, Fennec thinks of what he could say, how he should say it, or if he should say anything at all.

That night, as the stars laugh from the heavens, Fennec asks Heron to consider running away with him. It's a wild request, and Fennec startles himself by asking it; however, he has never felt so sure about anything in his life.

Heron doesn't respond immediately – such an unprecedented request would make *any* sane and reasonable person hesitate for at least a moment or two. As she considers Fennec's proposition, she purses her lips and she studies the rugged banjo player standing before her. Her eyes run across his face. They take in every whisker, every freckle, every scar. In his panic, Fennec feels compelled to withdraw the proposal, to ask her to forget he ever said anything, and to run for the woods and hide beneath a rock for the rest of his life. The silence kills him slowly; he can feel each cell in his body shriveling up from sheer embarrassment.

A soft autumn wind brushes past them, filling the air with the scent of decomposing leaves and earth. Heron tucks a stray strand of her marsala-colored hair behind her ear, and then she takes Fennec by the hand.

“When do we leave?” she asks, a smile playing on her lips.

Buffalo doesn't ask questions, he's not the type. The other band members follow his lead and remain silent. By the light of the rising sun, The Rascals and Heron leave town. They know that they will not be returning to Capitol Peak next fall.

With his compass and the blooming morning sun as his guide, Buffalo points the travelling troupe Northeast toward Mt. Lincoln. They ramble through the woods all morning and afternoon, occasionally stopping to rest and play music to the listening trees. Fennec walks by Heron's side, and the two talk until their mouths are dry and their jaws ache. When they can speak no more, they use sideways glances and raised eyebrows to communicate.

As the sun starts to fall, the troupe finds a sheltered spot in which to rest for the night. Wild Ass catches a few rabbits for dinner, and Tiger, who keeps a booklet of matches so he can smoke cigars, starts a campfire. The six spent wanderers gather around the flames, eat their meal, and then share stories until stars clutter the sky above.

For several months, every evening is the same. Wild Ass always catches dinner, Buffalo always tells a story around the campfire, Tiger always smokes a cigar after the troupe has eaten, and, whenever they stumble into a town or come across other mountain travelers, Condor always sneaks off with a woman for an hour or so for some suspicious reason.

Fennec and Heron have their own traditions. They wake up and fall asleep next to each other every day. They hold hands when the terrain becomes rocky (or, frankly, whenever they feel like it). They tell jokes and stories to each other to pass the time. Around the campfire, Fennec teaches Heron how to play the harmonica, and Heron teaches Fennec how to wiggle his ears. They have countless other traditions that develop as the seasons flicker past. In this way, Fennec exists in a state of perpetual lightning bolt bliss, and he didn't even have to sell his boot laces for it.

Winter fades into a gentle spring and, as the troupe reaches the northern border of what was once Colorado, spring blooms into summer. Although more than half a century has passed since

The Fall, traces of the Old World's influence still linger. The air in summer is warm, steamy even, and plants battle with heat stroke and drought. As the wanderers traverse the mountainous landscape, they encounter sepia-colored valleys that once held a rainbow of wildlife species. As they trek through open fields, their boots crunch through crispy grass and pick up wisps of dried earth. As their lips dry and their skin burns from walking in the sun, the troupe learns to never stray too far from water sources or the shade. They also beg the Earth to spin faster so autumn can rescue them from their summer hell.

However, Fennec would look back on that summer in later years and remember it as the happiest time in his life. For, as autumn approached, he noticed slight and somber changes in Heron's movements. Just as leaves die in the fall, Heron too began to fade. At night as they slept, Fennec could hear her curt and struggled breaths. When they held hands, he was often startled by the cool clamminess of her palms. When they embraced, he feared that she would crumble in his arms.

And then, on the day of the autumn equinox, after a gentle sprinkling of rainfall, Heron collapsed.

A sickness, which had been waiting, brewing for over a year, finally overtook her. It crumpled her lungs like paper and left her utterly breathless.

Fennec had never loved anyone so much as her before, and he knew that he would never fall in love the same way again. He marveled at the cruel kindness of the universe – how, only a year earlier he had asked Heron to join him in the rugged wilderness, and if he had waited a year, he would have been too late. Fennec was thankful for the year they had together, for all the mornings and nights lying next to each other, for all the hand-holding, and for jokes and stories that helped to pass the time. However, he couldn't help but feel a sense of loss, an intense wanting of what could-have-been. If only he had asked her to run away sooner, then they would have had more time.

The Rascals hold a funeral for Heron under a blushing cottonwood tree. Buffalo leads the band in song, and they each say their goodbyes as the sun sets in the West.

As the group turns to leave, Fennec notices that his boot laces have come untied. He crouches down to straighten the cell phone charging cables and, as he rises, a bird no larger than a harmonica lands in Heron's cottonwood tree. Fennec has never seen a bird before.

The banjo player smiles, and then he jogs a few paces to catch up with the other band members.