

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Tracy Daugherty

The overarching theme of these stories is the relationship between love and hate, especially the connection between kindness and violence.

In this fictional world, love often begets hate, and hate, love: a man's capacity for empathy serves as the catalyst for an act of brutality; a character's loneliness, his desire for love, causes him to chivy members of his church congregation, while the same character's unambiguous overtures of friendship produce revulsion in the narrator; the victim of a man's complicity coaxes him to take a beating that, in effect, heals him; and a sexual encounter, violent in its impersonality, its objectification of a woman, gives rise to a comment that awakens the abuser's conscience as well as his regard for his victim.

One may undermine the other: in the story involving sexual abuse, the woman treats the men lovingly, like people, and in so doing erodes their ability to treat her as something less than human; a character's habitual spite finds its way into his marriage, damaging the most important (and the only loving) relationship in his life.

And they sometimes exchange clothes: a man's attacks on his neighbor and the neighbor's quest for revenge mimic a courtship, are the beginnings of a relationship; the character who hurts his wife does it by perverting an act of love; friends and coworkers express affection by insulting one another and by pretending to fight.

What is the point of this juxtaposition and mingling of supposed opposites? To be honest, I'm not sure I know. I wrote these stories without conscious intent, and gathered them into the same collection accidentally: there were others that didn't quite work, and which had nothing much to do with amity and strife, that might have been included, too, had they been better or more finished. Still, I, like any other reader, can divine a few meanings.

With their frequent inversion and mingling of love and hate, these stories might serve as one piece of evidence that all things contain the kernel of their opposite. Given

the right circumstances--enough time, a narrative--they will demonstrate affinity. This Hegelian interdependence of opposites implies a correlary--narratives proceed by dialectic: love heads into hate, or hate into love, and the synthesis of these two spawns a hybrid possessing bits of its progenitors. "Angel of Tough Love" provides an example of this sublation: boy's complicitous response to a beating alienates him from himself--thesis; he accepts an invitation to enter a crucible of hate and love, to do the opposite of remaining a bystander--antithesis; he emerges whole and yet changed, at peace for the first time--synthesis.

Another conclusion, one that does not contradict the first: if love may lead to hate and hate to love, then the value of each impulse and action depends on context. Fine motives, however pure, might produce ghastly results if a full understanding of circumstances, a broad and informed point of view, is not present, too: perspective, point of view, is seminal.

And yet--with the possible exception of those with mystical gifts, who may rely on Dionysian rapture or its equivalent to grant them views of entire causal chains--our points of view are limited; we cannot know all the ramifications of our actions. (And, at least in one sense, it seems

that we aren't supposed to know: a story hatched whole is bound to be boring and, well, predictable.)

So we are left to examine our motives and anticipate what consequences we can. It's not much, but it will have to do. Love conquers all, sometimes. A kind word--or just an honestly felt one--may change a mind or an afternoon, now and then. We're all in the same dirt boat, heading somewhere, so we might as well use the oars provided and hope that our imaginations, incrementally, will point us in the right direction. Some of the time, we may row in concert.

Angel of Tough Love
and Other Stories

by

Jerome B. Wells

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J Jerome B. Wells, Author

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Vengeance Is Mine	1
Angel of Tough Love	33
Lutheran Summer Camp	55
Fat Rhonda	66
G-Men	71

Vengeance Is Mine

Greg was moving his bowels on Phil Wu's lawn. Phil had been standing before his study window sipping a cup of coffee and watching the sun rise over the white oaks across the street. As Greg took care of business, his owner, Steve Barnes, stood on the sidewalk reading the newspaper. When Greg was done, Barnes folded his paper and began to cross the street.

Phil scalded his lip and spilled coffee on the carpet. He set the cup on his desk and wiped his mouth, went to slide open the window. By then, Steve and Greg were across the street entering the oak grove, Steve rolling his sloping shoulders and heeling-and-toeing along in a cocky, the-world-is-mine way, Greg trotting and wagging his tail at his side.

In the five years that Phil had lived on Hazelnut Court, he and Steve Barnes had never quite met, despite living next door to one another. Phil spent a lot of time caring for his lawn, a pleasant change from writing software in his study, but he'd never talked to his neighbor. When Barnes walked by, he didn't return Phil's smiles and nods. In fact, often he would glower and refuse to make eye

contact. Phil had once caught him staring at the lawn and sneering, twisting his catfish mustache and high-bridged nose at the grass, which was, though Phil didn't like to brag, lusher and a richer shade of green than anyone else's on the block. Phil knew Barnes's name from his mailbox, and he knew Greg's because he'd heard Barnes calling the dog in his deep, grating voice. Late at night.

Phil mopped up the coffee, then went downstairs to the kitchen, where he put on water for his wife's tea, set buns in the rice steamer, and took out eggs and flour to make *danbing*, Chinese pancakes.

His wife, Susan, came in wearing a powder-blue sweat-suit, her long, fine hair banded into a ponytail. She had dark cat's eyes and hair as black as Phil's Fuzhou lacquerware, but, unlike Phil, who had been raised in Taiwan, she had grown up in the U.S.

"Morning," she said. She kissed him and went to open the refrigerator.

The oil in the electric wok sizzled. As he folded green onions into the pancakes, he said, "Let me tell you what Barnes, he just did."

She turned from the refrigerator and raised her gull-wing eyebrows.

"He stands reading his paper while Greg drops the logs on our grass. Then he struts away without cleaning."

"Unneighborly, all right. Do you think it was personal?"

"I don't know. Maybe he lets Greg do his business in different yard every morning: today our lawn, tomorrow the Olavs' azaleas." The possibility that Barnes had contempt for everyone consoled Phil.

"May be," she said. "Maybe someone should tell him our lawn doesn't need fertilizer."

"Maybe someone, he will." He dropped a pancake on a plate and gave it to Susan.

Phil got a trowel and went to clean up Greg's mess before watering the lawn. Susan came out in her dental hygienist's outfit: fresh blue tunic and matching, snap-creased pants. In the driveway, where anyone could see, she kissed him. "Irrigated with peroxide and soda?" she asked, and as she got into her Civic, he showed her his teeth. He sometimes worried that someone might bite through her latex gloves and give her AIDS. He hated the thought of her in pain, of her bright, black eyes and shiny teeth losing their luster.

Those teeth were what had first struck him about Susan. He'd been in the U.S. for three years and finally had dental insurance. The room where he'd had his checkup and would now have his teeth cleaned was full of gleaming equipment, hinged arms held together with big enameled wing-nuts, about the same as the dentists' offices in Taipei, and the office had that sour odor of burning flesh mixed with sweet mint--an evil combination. The chair was larger and plusher, though, and there was a picture window that looked out on a bed of bright purple rhododendrons. Tacked to the ceiling was a poster of a cartoon beaver with huge white buckteeth. The beaver grasped a toothbrush in his paw.

When Susan came in to clean Phil's teeth, he mumbled hello and avoided her friendly eyes; he was shy. And, ashamed of the variegated mess in his mouth, he was slow to part his lips when she took up her tools and leaned over him. Apparently thinking he hadn't understood her instructions, she opened her own mouth wide and pulled her lips back from her teeth: as small and even as kernels on a cob and as white as almond tofu. He was awed.

"You have a little bit of an accent," she said. "Where are you from?"

He knew that his accent was thick; the tongue depresser and scraper thickened it further. He told her he was from Taiwan.

Her eyebrows rose and the area beneath them became taut, shiny. "That's where my grandparents are from. They came over in 1949, when the generalissimo and company ... you know."

"Who?"

"Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalists."

"Oh yes, Jiang Zhongzheng and *Guomindang*."

"I guess. What's it like over there?" She removed her tools from his mouth.

"Crowded, dirty, beautiful. Lot of good Chinese people with bad teeth." He smiled.

She laughed, a purling sound.

"When I was small, we use toothpaste that have in it ground glass. And we don't eat much protein."

"Ground glass?" She raised her shoulders and shuddered. She asked him other questions, and he asked her some, too: why she wanted to clean teeth, for instance, and what part of Taiwan her grandparents were from.

She just shimmers, he thought. So alive. He found her round face and small, corded arms fiercely attractive and

was drawn by her easy manner. He was flattered by her interest, as well. After that, when he came to see the dentist to fix his neglected teeth, he often ran into Susan, and on one of these occasions he asked her out and she accepted. That was six years ago.

Greg's mess had begun to stick to the grass. Phil balanced it on his trowel and threw it over the stone wall, into Steve Barnes's dandelions--where it belonged.

Phil went upstairs to his study and wrote commands for the rest of the day. At five-thirty, his neighbors returned. This time, Greg stood with his tongue hanging and only ran onto Phil's grass when Barnes swatted his bottom and waved him up. While Greg arched his back, Barnes folded his arms and looked down the street, as if he were posing for a photo: Steve Barnes, thug and all-around bad neighbor.

Phil ran downstairs, yanked open the front door, and strode across the lawn. Greg stopped his crapping and bounded, tail busy, toward Phil. He bent to scratch Greg behind the ear and looked up at Barnes, who stood on the sidewalk with his arms folded, weight on one leg, looking sullenly at his dog.

"Greg, get over here," Barnes said.

"A fine-looking dog, and sweet temper," Phil said. "A German shepherd?"

"Yup, yup. Greg!" He still hadn't taken his eyes off his dog. Greg ran to Barnes and romped around him, as if waiting for him to throw a stick.

Phil extended his hand. "I don't think we ever met. My name is Phil Wu."

Barnes ignored the hand, but, briefly, looked at Phil. Barnes's eyes were glazed and bloodshot. Phil thought the man looked miserable but felt his own face growing hot with anger and embarrassment at having his goodwill snubbed. He said, "Please have your dog sit somewhere else."

Barnes snorted. "Sit? You mind Greg sitting on your precious grass?"

"I think you know what I mean--crapping on my lawn."

Barnes tilted his head back and off to one side. His eyebrows, two thick dashes with a small space between, rose half an inch. "Hey, dog feels the call of nature, what can I do?"

"Dog feel call at same place two times in one day?"

"Your grass is just too inviting, I guess." Barnes grinned. While his glassy eyes remained baleful, he stretched his lower lip so that his bottom teeth showed.

Phil said, "I see you tell him to go here. Anyway, please clean this mess now."

Barnes showed his teeth again, but this time, his eyes raised at the corners and crowsfeet appeared; he was enjoying this. "What happens if I don't?"

Phil could think of nothing to say. What could he do? He fought the urge to step back from Barnes's imposing figure. He visualized a heap of dog manure just behind his feet. If he moved, he'd step in it.

Barnes nodded, then snorted and strolled off toward the oaks. Greg stood in front of Phil, panting happily. Barnes called back over his shoulder, "Greg-man, come on," and Greg went after him.

When Phil had moved to western Oregon to be near the center of the industry using his software, he had come to a mostly white part of America. Though people were generally friendly or at least neutral toward him, he was conscious that he looked different, and talked differently, than most whom he encountered, and the several occasions when locals were neither friendly nor neutral reinforced his sense of not quite belonging.

Once, outside a supermarket, a carload of teenagers followed him across the parking lot as he pushed a cart of groceries. They shouted "nip," "gook," and several other off-target slurs. He pretended not to hear them, and although he did find it upsetting to be called such things, chocked the incident up to adolescent hormones.

But he found his next brush with bigotry harder to dismiss. He went to a feed and seed store to buy herbicide and was stopped just inside the double doors by two men wearing green John Deere gimme caps, an irrelevant detail that somehow stayed with him. One of the men extended his hand, palm out, and said, "Hey, Chuck. No dogs or Chinese allowed."

Phil tried to walk around them, but, flannel shirts shoulder to shoulder, they moved to block his way. He frowned and said, "Excuse me" and waited for them to move.

A third man appeared on their right. He wore an apron with the name of the store, Mr. Green Jeans, on it. He shocked Phil by saying, "You heard the man, fella. We don't want your business."

Phil turned around and left. Being refused service ruined his weekend; he didn't shop for herbicide again--elsewhere--until several days had passed.

He hadn't encountered such blatant racism in several years and these days, commonly went about his business without fearing harassment. He was beginning to feel that the country he had adopted had adopted him, too. But now this, a troglodyte attacking him in his own front yard.

The morning following his confrontation with Barnes, Phil was ready with his video camera. He had set it up on a tripod in the middle of his desk. After shutting the door, he stood in the darkened room and waited, adjusting the camera's light meter every few minutes as the day got brighter. He had a special filter over the lens to screen out the sun's glare.

He wondered if his neighbor would choose the same spot again; it seemed unlikely that he would keep fouling the same little section of lawn. Unimaginative, too. Maybe he thought Phil would miss it if Greg went in a different place.

The camera recorded Barnes swatting Greg's bottom with a rolled-up newspaper and Greg trotting up to perform his morning bowel movement, and the turds dropping to push down the bluegrass. And it caught the two strolling toward the trees. It didn't show Phil tossing the dog's leavings over

the wall. He aimed for Barnes's Camaro and the birdbath that stood among the long grass and dandelions. After that, he went around the wall and stabbed the trowel into Barnes's turf to clean off the mess.

Getting even was good for you, Phil believed. Aside from sometimes being a hedge against further attacks--its banal, extrinsic side--an hour of revenge was more beneficial than any amount of talk therapy. One of his older brothers, Amao, had taught Phil about striking back when he was nine. This was after a bully force-fed him handfuls of rotting produce, diesel oil, and earth before filling his pants with the mixture.

Phil staggered and retched his way home, then spent half an hour leaning over the toilet, an image of the bully--a fat boy in greasy bellbottoms--wavering in front of his eyes. After, as Phil stood on the bathroom floor moodily scrubbing himself and then rinsing by dumping saucepans of water over his head, his father leaned against the door-jamb, regarding him sadly over half-glasses.

"I'm gonna kill him, with a gun!" Phil said.

His father sighed and said: "Forget the bully. You lose a little face, so what? If you strike back, he'll just retaliate, and on and on. You know?"

Phil nodded and fought the urge to vomit again. When his father left the doorway, Amao slouched in to hand Phil a rough towel. Amao fingered the cigarette lighter holstered to his gaucho belt: he was a sharp dresser, popular with girls. He looked toward the hall, shook his head, causing the coxcomb of hair on the crown of his head to dance. He said, "Let this go and you'll never get over being ashamed and scared. Tell me the fucker's name; he'll be digesting a yard of sewage before the night's over."

The next day at school, Phil passed the boy in the halls. His usually plump and smirking face looked pinched, almost thin, and was the greenish yellow of a fading bruise. When he saw Phil, he started; then he looked away as he hurried past. Phil wasn't quite sorry that the bully had been taught a lesson, but he pitied him. Too, he thought it a shame that it had had to be Amao and not him who was bold enough to administer the lesson. In any event, for weeks he experienced an almost mystical feeling of satisfaction, a

sense that life needn't be unfair after all. Amao became his favorite person.

Phil missed him: several years after Phil moved away, his brother was murdered by a jealous husband.

Over five days, the camera caught nine visits from Steve Barnes and Greg. The dating mechanism showed that the two were creatures of habit, punctually arriving at seven-thirty in the morning and five-thirty in the evening. By the fifth day, the area where Greg moved his bowels was nearly bald from Phil's trowel, and Barnes's yard, driveway, and roof were spotted with dog turds.

Phil had fixed other wagons locally. After being refused access to herbicide, for example, he had worked up on his computer a grid of labels reading, "Mr. Green Jeans: Your Lawncare and Bigotry Headquarters. No Dogs or Chinese Allowed." He printed these, drove to Mr. Green Jeans and affixed them to the bumpers of the seventeen cars in the parking lot, scurrying around on his hands and knees and glancing at the shop's swinging doors and the man reading a newspaper on the steering wheel of a Saturn. When Phil was

done, he felt vindicated, though that was soon outweighed by a tendency to flinch whenever he saw a green billed cap.

He used his double-decker VCR to make five copies of the tape and spent an afternoon baking big oatmeal cookies stuffed with Hershey Kisses. He put out a plateful for Susan and bagged up the rest and hid them in the study, with the tapes.

That evening at dinner, Susan noticed right away that he was keyed up. She watched him push translucent little morsels of jellyfish around his plate. "Where's your appetite?" she asked. "I thought you loved jellyfish."

"Taste like rubber band."

"Of course it does. I thought you liked rubber bands."

He laughed shrilly. "Tonight I got a little small business with the neighbors. Maybe a little nervous."

"And maybe your English is deteriorating fast. What business?" She reached over and finger-combed his wet hair.

"Little secret." He tittered again and coughed to cover it. "Nothing bad, I promise."

"Hm." With eyes narrowed, she searched his face. "You let me know when you're ready to talk."

He nodded and grabbed up clumps of jellyfish, chewing with gusto and attention. He was reluctant to discuss his plan because he was afraid Susan would burst the fragile balloon of his enthusiasm. He knew that she wouldn't understand how persecuted he felt: when he had told her about the feed store incident, she had initially been sympathetic, said the men were hayseeds who, in town, probably felt like outsiders themselves. But then, when he tried to articulate just how oddly humiliated he felt--as if the whole thing had been his own fault--her face took on an expression he recognized: eyes obdurate, stony, unblinking; lips compressed. She was through listening. He didn't mention the bumper stickers, though she would have known that he wasn't likely to just let it go.

At seven-thirty sharp, he set out toting a large shopping bag. He first went to see the Olavs, his immediate neighbors to the south. He barely knew Ken and Cathy, though he had often nodded to them or remarked on the weather when they were out in their yards. Ken met him at the door and smiled, crinkling the tanned skin around his pale blue eyes. He had a broad, meaty red nose.

Phil said, "I just baked cookies--not very good. But I would consider it a favor if you took them."

Ken looked puzzled, then smiled again. "Thanks, I think."

Phil said, "You have the dimples. Chinese people call them 'wine dents.'"

"Why's that?"

"I don't know. Also, something I want to talk about--with you and Cathy. This is a good time?"

"I don't see why not. Come in." He ushered Phil into a living room furnished with two couches covered in a fabric that featured mallard ducks and cattails. Both were angled for viewing a large TV with a black plastic cabinet. "I'll get Cath," he said after Phil had sat.

Cathy was blue eyed and blond, too, but there the resemblance to her husband ended. She had a short, compact body, a jutting, bellicose chin, and flaring nostrils: she looked like a tiny blond bull. When she and Ken were crushing several of the ducks on the other couch, Phil began to speak. He had rehearsed a small speech, which he now found he had forgotten. "My other next-door neighbor, Mr. Steve Barnes, he has begun making his dog, Greg, a fine German

shepherd, um, BM on my lawn." He could feel himself blushing. "My wife says that I should tell Mr. Barnes that our lawn doesn't need more fertilizer, but I try, and he is not receptive." He smiled, and the Olavs smiled back uncertainly. He gestured at the shopping bag on his knees.

"From the tape I have brought, you will see that he and Greg visit twice a day, regularly. All very silly and embarrassing, I know, but." He shrugged.

"I tell you what, I've never liked Barnes," said Ken. "You'd think a civil engineer would take better care of his own place. His dandelions seed every yard in the neighborhood."

Cathy nodded and pouted her small lips. "And he looks like the biggest churl in Turner."

Ken said, "You gonna sue him?"

"I don't want to. First I give you a tape, to show you and other neighbors this happens and I don't exaggerate." He handed Cathy a tape, which she turned over in her hands as if it were the first one she'd seen.

Before he left, the Olavs had invited him and Susan for dinner the following Saturday.

At the next house, a narrow mock Tudor with mullioned windows, an older man with a suspicious squint opened the heavy front door. He leaned on the doorknob and cleared his throat.

Phil said, "Hi, Mr. Beech-uh, is it?"

"Beech, no 'uh.'" Florets of white hair grew from his nostrils.

"I am your neighbor, Phil Wu. I live in the ranch-style two doors down. I have two small things to discuss. I want to share these cookies. Not too good, but I hope you'll take them to be polite." He smiled.

The man reached with his free hand to take the zip-lock bag. He eyed the contents. "Thanks."

Phil said, "Second thing, well. Do you have five minutes to talk about this now, or would later time be better?"

Beech looked over his shoulder toward flickering lights--a TV with the sound down low--turned back to Phil and said, "No, no, I have time--if this won't take too long."

"Not long. I have some problem with another neighbor on the block."

The man's forehead creased beneath wisps of white hair. He said, "Problem? Disagreement, fist fight, what do you mean, exactly?"

"Mr. Barnes, he urges his dog to crap on my grass every day. Two times per day."

"Huh. Have you talked to him?"

Phil explained that he had gotten nowhere by confronting Barnes. Then he said, "I have a videotape. I want you to know what happen, what *is* happening." As an afterthought, he asked, "Same thing happen to you ever?"

"Never had a problem with Barnes or any other neighbors." He looked at Phil accusingly, as if to say, What did you do to provoke him?

"I see." Phil nodded. He took a videotape from the bag. "I have the tape that shows what he has done. You can keep it, and--"

Beech waved his hand. "You keep it, fella. This whole thing is between you and him."

"Oh. Well, for your time, Mr. Beech-uh, thank you."

"Yup." Beech pushed the door shut.

Wearing a mild flush of chagrin, Phil marched up the sidewalk to the third house, which was olive green and set

well back on a gently sloping lot. Its lawn was sparse and brown. The front door was opened by a small boy with grave brown eyes and shoulder-length blond hair. He wore a clean white T-shirt and new blue jeans. Looking up at Phil, he said, "Can I help you?"

"Yes, hello."

"Hello."

"I'm Phil Wu. I live down the block. Can I speak with your parents if they are at home?"

"Yes, you can." He turned and shouted over his shoulder, "Mom, a man with a bag from down the block is here."

A woman with a red face, dark crescents under her kind brown eyes, appeared next to the boy. "Thanks, Danny. I'll take it from here." She turned to watch the boy stride away. A thick braid of chestnut hair swung across her back. She turned back to face Phil and said, "If your bag is from down the block, we must be neighbors. I'm Ann McNeil."

Phil introduced himself and offered cookies. Ann invited him in and padded on bare feet to a living room furnished with big throw pillows and littered with toys and books. Several potted plants were suspended from macrame hangers. Phil noticed that despite the clutter, the carpet

was clean and still had impressions from a vacuum.

There was a pleasant odor of herbs. Phil related his problem with Barnes, and Ann, seated cross-legged on a cushion several feet away, listened with her head tilted to one side. Then her face became redder and she said, "That's disgusting. I mean, what kind of man insults neighbors he doesn't even know? This has to stop, don't you think?"

Phil said, "I hope. Maybe next I let Mr. Barnes know that it is all recorded and everyone know what he does."

"Sure, but what will he do then?"

"Maybe curse me. But I think he will stop," Phil said nervously.

Phil liked Ann. He said, "Anyway, maybe you and Danny, and anyone else in family, will come to my house for dinner. I'll ask my wife when this can work. Do you like sea cucumber? Then how about spring rolls?"

Saturday, Phil and Susan went to the Olavs' house for dinner. Ken met them at the door. He made an expansive gesture with his left arm, like a gameshow hostess presenting attractive options, and said, "*Mi casa, su casa, amigos.* Glad you could make it. We've got a buffet table set up in

the living room--we decided to make this a get-acquainted party for all our neighbors."

Phil felt a pinprick of hurt: did Ken and Cathy think that he and Susan were incapable of holding their interest for an evening? Had they found his company dull or awkward the other night? Then he reflected that "all our neighbors" included Steve Barnes. As if reading his thoughts, Ken leaned to whisper in his ear, "Invited Steve as a courtesy; didn't want him to feel snubbed. Didn't think he'd come; never shown any interest in being chummy before. But, uh, he's here."

Susan led the way into the living room, where the duck-and-cattail sofas had been supplemented with a half-circle of folding chairs. On one side of the room were card tables covered with blue-and-white gingham tablecloths. Susan and Phil put their contributions--egg rolls, microbrewery beer--beside salads and hot dishes. Ann was seated at the near end of the closest sofa and Steve Barnes at the near end of the farthest one. She was listening to him, but looked over, smiled, and waved nervously when she saw Phil and Susan. Barnes stared fixedly at Ann's pink sweatshirt, then watched Danny wobble around the room in a plastic-wheel

contraption with a seat inside. Barnes had on a fuchsia golfshirt, gray slacks, and a turquoise cap. Susan said to Phil, "He looks like a Caterpillar painted in designer colors." Phil laughed without understanding.

Susan sat next to Ann, and Phil got a beer and stood several yards away from Barnes admiring a triptych of jumping salmon. He turned to find Cathy next to him, pushing her little bull face toward him and grinning. "Your wife is so pretty," she said confidentially. "I've never seen her up close before."

"Me neither," he said. "I mean, thank you. Can I introduce you?"

Susan was as comfortable as if she'd been in their own home. She said to Cathy, "Looks like you two are sportsmen. Phil and I like to fish." She told Ann and Cathy about a fishing trip she and Phil had taken several years before. She had lost her sunglasses over the side of their boat, and he dove in to retrieve them. In the process, he lost his car keys, the only set they had with them. "So, he lashed an oar to a catch-net and my compact to the net handle. The mirror reflected the sun's rays onto the bottom of the lake

so the keys and sunglasses glinted. He found both within half an hour."

"Also a bottle opener," said Phil. He sat on a folding chair between Ken and Cathy. He said to no one in particular, "This casserole with tuna and chips is delicious." He butchered casserole into "cass-a-roa" and was conscious of doing so.

Ken finished his beer and said, "Anybody else want another?" Barnes chugged the last half of his own and held it out. Ken put the empties with others on the table and came back with two more.

Cathy frowned. "You guys eat up. We're offering a prize for heartiest trencher, but no lampshade award."

Barnes tapped his lower lip with the mouth of a beer bottle and watched Phil fork up noodles and potato chips. "You guys eat a lot of dog over there in the Orient, right?"

Phil decided to treat the barb as if it had sprung from curiosity rather than malice. "Some people eat 'fragrant meat,' as we call it, because they think it warms you when the weather, it's cold. I've never eaten it. The catchers

poison the dogs and the meat can retain some poison. Dangerous, I think. Also, in Taiwan, eating dog is considered low class."

Ken said, "'fragrant meat,'" guffawed, and stopped abruptly. His laugh sounded like a circular saw starting up and then fouling in a knot of wood. "Say, Steve, speaking of dogs, your German shepherd's very telegenic." He extended his bottle toward Barnes in a toast.

"What're you talking about?" Barnes scowled.

Cathy whispered, "Shut up, honey."

Rigid, Phil said, "I don't think this is the best time for--"

"You haven't seen the feature?" Ken grinned at Barnes, ignoring Phil and Cathy. "Well, I'd say it's time you did." He set his plate behind him, and his fork flipped off the table and bounced on the floor. He went to the TV cabinet and knelt unsteadily. "For those with young ones, this is rated PG, for bathroom humor."

"None of us needs to see this again," said Ann sharply.

Susan squinted. "What's going on?"

"First public showing of local production, 'Bad Neighbor,'" Phil found himself blurting. He should have gone to

Barnes with the tape the day after he'd distributed the rest. He had planned to confront him, but had put it off, though the visits had continued.

And then it was on the screen: Greg in the foreground arching his back, Barnes out on the sidewalk with his hands on his hips.

Susan said disgustedly, "Oh, my God."

Barnes stared at the screen, his face reddening. Ken and Cathy watched raptly, as if admiring the production values.

Danny looked from the TV to Barnes. "That's you, huh?" he said. Barnes didn't respond. "Mom, why's the tape got the same thing over and over?"

Ann scooped up her son and carried him from the room.

By the time he'd seen the fourth movement, Barnes had taken on a crazed, trapped-in-a-burning-barn look, whites showing all the way around his irises. He turned to look at Ken. "Why are you doing this?"

Phil said, "He just the projectionist. Or whatever. I'm the cameraman."

"You sneaky shit." Barnes stood, his red-rimmed eyes narrowed and gleaming with hatred.

"Sure, sneaky, but I only record what is there. You shouldn't do it; *should* apologize to me and my wife."

Barnes looked over at Ken, winked at him, turned back to Phil and said, "Now, why would I do that?"

Infuriated by Barnes's smugness, Phil said, "Because turd who apologize is better than just a turd."

Barnes stepped across the conversation pit and stood over Phil, breathing heavily. "I'm gonna cave in your flat face."

Phil scooted his chair away from Barnes's foul, beery breath, then stood to spit in his face. "Tooey," he said, but his mouth was too dry--nothing came out. Barnes wrapped an arm around Phil's neck and punched him in the nose several times before Ken wrestled him off and pinned him to the floor.

Cathy dabbed at Phil's bleeding nose with a dampened paper towel. From the floor, Barnes said, "Why protect this Martian?"

Cathy said, "He's our friend, that's why. And you're a jerk."

Phil looked at Susan. Her eyes were narrowed with tension and wouldn't meet his. She said to Cathy, "Thanks so much for having us over. We'll have to do this again."

Cathy, her little features bunched in distress, made a helpless gesture with her hands. "Thanks for coming?"

Grabbing Phil's arm in a vice grip, Susan began to move him toward the door. "And it was nice to meet you, Ann, Danny," she called toward the kitchen. "Good night."

Phil yanked his arm away as soon as they were outside. Neither spoke on the short walk home, but as soon as they got inside the front door, Susan said, "Of all the stupid, childish stunts ... What were you thinking? Did Ken help you cook this up or was it all yours?" Her shoulders were hunched and her lips quivered with emotion.

He said, "No, he wasn't supposed to ...". She followed him into the living room, and he stood on one side of the coffee table, she on the other. His nose and sinuses throbbed with pain; her epithets--"stupid, childish"--seemed to increase the severity. "Hard to explain. Anyway, a racist fool, he attacks us, and I should do nothing?"

"Yes! Talk to him. File a complaint if he won't listen."

"I try to discuss it and he mocks me."

"When? Why didn't you tell me?"

Phil took his hand away from his nose and waved his paper towel at her. "Why should I? You don't care. Every time I talk about my feeling, you look like wax doll."

At this last, her jaw slid forward. "You big baby. You can't go to a foreign country and not expect to run into the odd redneck. For the love of Mike! When I met you, I thought you were brave to have moved here by yourself, but all you do is whine that Americans aren't treating you right."

"Thanks for your sympathy. What every husband needs."

"You think you're the only one who gets harassed? Ever had some creep rub against you in the line at Safeway and ask if it really opens sideways?"

"Pardon? Sideway?"

She huffed out a sigh.

Phil hurriedly said, "No. I don't understand. How come you don't tell me about this--supermarket and things."

"You'd just stew. And then you'd probably knife the guy's tires." She shook her head, and her ponytail lagged a half second behind.

He said, "No. Not my style," but avoided her eyes.

When she didn't reply, he looked at her. Her face was flushed, and several strands of hair had come loose to hang along her cheek. Thinking, She looks great, he stepped around the table, approaching her slowly, as if she were a deer he wanted to avoid spooking. "I am sorry. I have been stupid--and childish." He said this quietly as he touched her face.

She pushed his hand away. "Don't try to gentle me; I'm pissed." She turned and strode toward the kitchen.

He heard her rummage through one of the cupboards, clanging pots and pans. She'd come around; she always did.

He went upstairs, reading with the bedside lamp on until she came in. She changed into her flannel pajamas and climbed into bed. Then she leaned to kiss him on the cheek. "Let's talk more often, hm?" she said. "Even if we don't always get the responses we want, it's important to hash things out."

They held each other. After a while, Phil raised her pajama top and began to stroke her back. He reached lower,

and she said, "I don't want to make love; I'm tired, and still a little mad, frankly."

He nodded against her shoulder, but left his hands on her back. He nuzzled her neck, moved farther down with his hands. Susan murmured, "Mmm. Feels pretty good, Wu. But I still don't ...". She sighed. "Okay, but maybe just head; I really am tired."

Phil kissed his way down to her midsection and settled there. Claspng her thighs, he continued after she came. She said, "Oh, man ... All right, that'll do."

He kept on, and she squirmed. She said, "Okay, Phil. Ow! That's enough, dammit!"

When she slapped the side of his head, he stopped and looked up. "Guess I get carried away or something." He crawled up and lay beside her.

"Yeah, sure you did," she said. "I've got a great idea for getting revenge on Barnes: challenge him to a game of racquetball and then smash him with your racquet. Apologize and then accidentally do it again. You could probably hit him several times before he catches on."

"Excuse me?" His nose throbbed where she had bumped him with one of her hips.

"Every time we make up, you find a way to hurt me in bed. I can't believe I keep forgetting that." She reached to the lamp on the bedside table, switched it one setting higher and then off before turning on her side, her back to him, and pulling the covers up.

He lay awake, listening to her breathing as it slowed and became regular. Dim bluish light from a streetlamp lit and shadowed the acoustic spackling on the ceiling. I am an evil man, he thought. He wondered when it had become reflexive, unconscious.

He stood in his study, gazing out at the morning and absently pinching and twisting the flesh on the back of his hand. Soon Steve Barnes and Greg appeared. Barnes tossed something onto the lawn, and Greg ran up to wolf it down before evacuating on the grass. Smiling humorlessly, Barnes looked toward the window and gave Phil the finger. Phil continued to stare out the window and torque his skin. He watched his neighbor and the German shepherd vanish among the trees across the street.

Angel of Tough Love

It was one of those sweet summer evenings when the air is so balmy and pure that it seems to whisper against your skin. Even here, outside the Greyhound depot, where the air was usually full of carbon monoxide and odors from old sewers, the atmosphere was soft, clean. This was in part because of the breeze blowing from San Francisco Bay, and also because it was a slow night, a Sunday, so there weren't many buses rolling in to spew exhaust across the loading platform.

Don and Jimmy stood leaning against the railing of the steps that led up to the platform supervisor's office. Don wore a baggage clerk's uniform: blue mechanic's shirt, pleated pants a shade darker than the shirt. His sleeves were rolled half-cuff width, and his curly hair was a little long and wild--last year, his freshman year in college, some of his friends had dubbed him "Medusa." He was at Greyhound for the summer, to make a little money and get in shape between school years.

Jimmy, being the platform supervisor, wore a dress shirt, a tie, and slacks. His sleeves were rolled and his tie was loosened, not because of the weather, though: he

always rolled his sleeves and kept his tie loose and his top button undone. These little signs of rebellion, as Don liked to think of them, went with Jimmy's bandito mustache and long, swept-back hair. Jimmy was a Filipino-American in his late twenties.

Most of the other clerks working the swing shift were in the Package Express warehouse across Jessie Street, which was really just an alley running between Market and Mission Streets. The warehouse was a brick building that had been a hat factory back in the Twenties. On one side, there was still a sign, fading and crosshatched with mortar, advertising bowler hats. To one side of the warehouse was a parking lot half a block long and thirty yards wide. Don could see someone smoking dope--obvious from the frequent flicks of a lighter--in a car toward the back of the lot.

Sal, a husky Maltese who rode a Harley and wore a blue paisley bandanna around his curly hair, sauntered up the alley to slap Don loosely on the back. "Easy-money night," Sal said. He had a way of stretching final syllables that sounded comic, and he had brown eyes that always gleamed with obscure amusement: with Sal, it was often hard to tell what the joke was and whether he was laughing with or at you. Don was uneasy around Sal, but admired his tough, calm

manner. You could have set him down in a jungle or a lawyer's office and he would have adapted without ever breaking a sweat or changing expression.

Jimmy said, "Sal, you on break? Then what're you doing coming from Seventh Street? The work's that way."

Sal replied with a series of gestures: He brought a fist up under a forearm. With a palm toward him, he scraped his fingernails against the bottom of his chin. Then he caught the back of his front teeth with a thumbnail and pointed the thumb at Jimmy.

Don said, "Want me to translate, Jim? Let's see, 'I'd leap gorges to finger-bang your aunt.'" He turned to Sal. "Have I got it right?"

"Sure, that's what it means in Pago Pago. But around here, guy, it means 'Quit hanging with fudge-packers.'" Sal looked from Don to Jimmy with the good-natured contempt of a tree shrew eying lungfish.

Don wondered if he'd just been called gay. He thought so. He wasn't, but guessed he didn't care if Sal thought he was. Still, he didn't like being baited, especially by someone he admired.

A clerk known as "ST" pushed a cart along the inclined platform that ran adjacent to Jessie Street. He bumped

Don's shoulder with the cart and then set the brake. Although it didn't hurt, Don rubbed his shoulder. Sal said, "Now you've bruised the man. Say you're sorry."

ST good-footed away from the cart, said, "Sorry," faked a left jab at Don, then made as if to drive a right into his stomach. ST danced back out of range of Don's tardy left hook. "Slow, boy, you slow," ST said. His light-green eyes held no malice.

Don said, "Least I'm not stupid."

"How you figure?" ST tapped his own kinky red temple with a forefinger. "You had brains, you wouldn't be no baggage clerk; you'd be a tie rack, like Mr. Jimmy."

Jimmy began to say something but was cut off by Mike Turner, an angular blond kid whom everyone called "Pipe Cleaner" or just "Pipe." Though they were looking at him already, Pipe waved his thin arms to get their attention. His eyes were bloodshot, and he reeked of pot. He said, "You guys, somebody's in ST's car."

Don reached the lot first; he'd been a runner in high school. He hurdled the slat-and-chainlink fence and continued down the aisle between the cars. Several rows over was an open door, a jean-clad butt protruding.

He tried to be quiet, but through the rushing in his ears, he could hear his feet scraping gravel against the asphalt. The thief backed from the car and stood, looked at Don. Tall and broad shouldered, the man turned and ran around the back of the car, a paper bag in one hand. He banged the other hand on the trunk to act as a pivot.

Don ran to the end of his row and then over. He considered slowing down and letting the man go--what would he do if he caught him? But if his coworkers thought that he'd hung back, they would never let him forget it. They were still riding Pipe for backing down from a fight with a driver the month before. Don hoped the thief could run like a pro back.

The man was too big to zigzag through the cars quickly. Don was soon right behind him. He launched himself, threw his shoulder into the thief's back, and wrapped his arms around his thick middle. The man stopped but didn't go down. Don hung on and tried to wrestle him toward the rear end of a station wagon. He barely moved but said, "Okay, you got me," in a cracking voice. Then Don heard pounding feet, and the others were tearing the man from his grasp. The bag fell, compact disks sliding from its mouth.

Don backed away and leaned against a car. He found he was winded. "Oh man, am I glad to see you guys!" he said to Jimmy, who was standing off to the side with his arms folded. Don heard a wet popping sound and turned to see the thief bent over and ST bringing his knee up into the man's face. Hands over his nose and mouth, the man staggered. Pipe stepped to throw a fist into his ribs, then backed up, shaking his hand and wincing.

Sal arrived. He brushed past Jimmy and Don and said in his comic-accent voice, "Fellas, fellas, let's be civilized about this. Just hold the man; the police will be along any minute."

ST took one of the car burgler's arms, twisted and bent it until the man rose on the balls of his feet. Pipe took the other arm gingerly. Sniffing back some of the blood that ran over his lips and down his chin, the thief looked at Sal and then hung his head. Sal dug into the right front pocket of his uniform pants. He tossed a roll of quarters up and down a couple of times as if judging its heft, then leered at Jimmy and Don and waggled his eyebrows, which disappeared under his bandanna before coming down.

Don cleared his throat but didn't speak. He wanted to stop Sal. Sal leaned so that his arm hung along the back of

his leg, his fist in the crook of his knee. As he began to straighten and twist around, he said, "Head up, you fuck."

There was so much whipping momentum in that punch that Don knew that was it: the thief's jaw would shatter like glass, or he would fly one-armed from ST's hold and land with a dead thud on a car ten feet away. But Sal miscalculated. His knuckles grazed the man's chin with a whispering sound, and he nearly fell. No one laughed.

After catching himself, Sal took a short step and stomped on the outside of the man's right knee. Sal's boot made a zipping sound as it continued down the shank to catch the ankle. The thief yelled. Sal popped him almost gently on the point of his chin. His eyes rolled up, and his body sagged. ST and Pipe let him drop, and he compassed into a kow-towing pose--on his knees with his forehead knocking the deck--and toppled onto his side. Jimmy said, "Okay, guys, I think that's enough."

Don looked at Jimmy in disbelief. "That's enough?"

The air stank of cologne and nervous sweat. Smirking, drawing taut the skin on his square, stubbled jaw, Sal returned the roll of quarters to his pocket.

Jimmy ran a hand over his blow-dry. "Pipe, get security down here."

Pipe walked off grumbling, his fine hair bobbing as he bounced along. "How come I always have to do everything?"

The thief moaned. He rolled over slowly and began to stand.

"Stay down," said Jimmy.

The man didn't seem to have heard: he rose to his hands and knees. ST swung his sneaker into the thief's side, and Sal dug a toe between his legs. The thief yelped but didn't move. Jimmy stepped over and tentatively kicked his Florsheim at the man's ribs. "I told you to stay down."

Don said, "Jesus, guys, what's he gonna do, run away? Look how slowly he's moving. C'mon."

ST's pupils nearly eclipsed his green irises. "Hey Don, man, fuck you! Nobody break in your car." He looked down at the thief. "Motherfucker steal my shit, motherfucker." He leaped into the air, pulling his knees nearly to his chest, and came down on the thief's back. He jumped up and down several times.

The man splayed arms and legs out. In a thick voice, as if his tongue were in the way, he said, "Ow, quit, damn it."

Sal, affecting a falsetto, said, "Mommy! Help!" He slammed the toe of his boot behind the man's ear. The thief

yelped and rolled onto his side, put his hands up to protect his head.

"Don't kick him in the head," Don shouted.

Sal drew his foot back lazily and kicked the man in the hand, then struck a spot his hands weren't covering. "You gonna stop us, Donny boy?" Sal put his hands on his hips.

Don stared at Sal, then watched ST put the CDs back in the bag.

Jimmy let out a lungful of air. "Security. Where's security, damn it? Where's Pipe?"

In a tenor voice, Sal crooned, "Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes, are calling." He looked at ST, who was putting the sack on the trunk of a car. "What now? You got a hacksaw in your car?"

ST looked at him sullenly. "You talk a lot, Sal."

Don went over, knelt, took a tissue from his pocket and dabbed at the crusted blood around the man's nose and upper lip. "You okay?"

"Fuck you care?" the man croaked.

Don said, "Help's on the way." He thought that he should have gone instead of the spaced-out Pipe; he hadn't done any good here.

Security, two off-duty policemen in golf shirts and jeans, sauntered up at last. "What we got here?" one said.

Jimmy said, "This guy picked the wrong place to burgle cars."

The policemen laughed. One went over and knelt. He said to Don, "Your work is finished, Tonto. We'll take it from here." The policeman talked with the thief for a moment, then took out a cell phone.

Jimmy said, "Hey, you guys, back to work. Chop, chop."

Feeling shaky but heavy, numb, Don walked toward the warehouse. He was disgusted with everyone, but particularly himself. He had been raised by parents who believed that selfless action was the basis of a worthwhile life. Both had served in the Peace Corps when they were Don's age, and they continued to volunteer at homeless shelters and soup kitchens. Don himself drove carloads of Southeast Asian refugees around San Francisco and Oakland on weekends, helping them locate and buy housewares, food, and clothing.

As he disengaged the brake on a cart piled high with luggage, he thought, So you only help when there's no risk, huh? What a guy!

* * *

Later that night, he was walking down the platform after loading a bus. Beneath bare fluorescent tubes, the platform looked especially dingy. Its rafters and posts had probably once been a cheery sherbet green; now they were spotted with soot and made him think of bile rather than dessert. Heels clicking on the smooth concrete, Sal ambled toward him. He noticed the tire of fat that bulged Sal's uniform shirt and half covered his braided leather belt. Slob, asshole, Don thought. He hated Sal for his casual viciousness.

Sal said, "The innocent bystander." He scratched his groin and smiled with his mouth closed.

"Let me in on the joke." Don felt dizzy with fear and anger.

Sal stopped four feet away and put his hands on his hips. "You're the joke, faggot." He said this quietly, turned his head to look up and down the empty platform, then gazed placidly at Don.

Don could smell Sal's Brut cologne. From the row of snack and drink machines at the head of the platform, he heard a fan begin to whir. "Step outside?" he said. He knew he would regret this, but it seemed right, somehow.

"Now, that's not necessary." Sal looked to his right quickly, and Don turned to look, too. Then Sal was punching

his nose and his solar plexus, following these with an elbow to the side of his head. Don stumbled into a pay-TV chair and sat, dazed and gasping for breath. Sal continued up the platform, whistling now.

Don wiped blood from his nose and upper lip with the back of his hand, then, idiotically, fished for quarters in his pocket. He had only dimes. No TV. Oddly, he was no longer angry at Sal--the guy was like a shark, it was his nature to attack and mangle--but he had not lost the heavy, grinding guilt. He saw the man's head hang as Sal prepared to strike. Then, face puffy, bruised, and bloody, the man looked at Don with accusation: "Fuck you care?"

When he finally got to sleep that night, Don dreamed that he was being beat up, slowly, by Sal and ST, while Jimmy supervised and offered pointers. This occurred in the main aisle at Woolworth's. Among racks of brightly colored clothes and wall posters of haggard fashion models, Sal and ST played soccer with Don's head while he watched from several feet away. The kicks didn't hurt, exactly: it seemed that each removed a patch of his dignity, as if it were the peel coming off an orange. Halfway through the workout, while they took turns logrolling his body, Don left, walking

toward the sleepwear and telling Jimmy over his shoulder, "I've got a bus to load."

Don met his girlfriend, Judy, for lunch the next day, at a Vietnamese restaurant in the Tenderloin. The restaurant was located on the ground floor of a towering Edwardian apartment building that shone chalk white in the early afternoon sun. Judy, like Don, was a student at San Francisco State. She had walked up from the office on New Montgomery where she was working for the summer. When she saw his swollen nose and black eyes, two sharp creases appeared between her abbreviated eyebrows. "What happened to you?"

He made a face. "Long story. I'll tell you later. How's the job going?"

"Long story. I'll tell you later," she said looking at him out of the corner of her eye. He laughed. They went inside, wading through the aromas of rice vinegar and fish sauce, and sat at a table near a window that looked out on Larkin Street. All but the bottom two feet of the window was covered by a roll-down blind. They watched pairs of legs scissor by on the sidewalk, then looked at their menus. As she scanned hers, Judy said, "Thomas Markham, Esquire, yelled at me this morning for filing the Anderson folder in

the litigation cabinet. Of course, it should have gone in with the arbitration 'A's." Holding her pixie-cut, coarse blond hair back from her forehead, she said, "He called me a 'careless and inattentive little piece of summer help.'" She delivered the quoted words in a deep, plummy voice, enunciating carefully.

"He's a pompous piece of starch. How are you supposed to know everything right off the bat?"

The waiter, a tall Asian man in a guayabera shirt, took their orders for crab roasted with garlic, steamed rice, and spring rolls.

Judy continued: "He's right about my being careless, actually. But I'm not a little piece of anything." She and Don watched two hairy legs capped with lace-up leather shoes go by. "I hope he doesn't fire me."

"If he does, you can come load buses with me." He told her about the events of the night before.

"I'm glad you didn't try to stop them. They would've stomped your college-boy ass."

"Sal stomped my ass anyway. But that guy ... He wasn't trying to escape, and they really hurt him. I hope he doesn't have brain damage."

"And if you had intervened, maybe both of you would."

The waiter brought their food, and they began using a nutcracker and pick to remove the crabmeat from the shells. Judy ate a mouthful and said, "God, this is good. And the garlic, whew! Markham'll keep his distance this afternoon." She ate another mouthful and gazed at Don. "You know, this reminds me of a situation we discussed in a class last year. If you were an aid worker in a refugee camp and you saw a Hutu using a machete on a Tutsi, what would you do?"

"Until last night, I would have said that I'd try to take the machete away."

"Even if you might get hacked to death yourself?"

"I would've said so. Why are we here if not to help, in whatever way necessary?"

"Well, I wouldn't have the balls, figuratively speaking, to do anything but yell, 'Stop!'"

"Neither would I, I guess. Jesus, this is depressing."

"Yup, but there it is," she said.

Eight-fifteen, Saturday morning, Don was driving a sport-utility vehicle through the peeling Victorians of the Western Addition. The car's nose swept to the top of its windshield in an unbroken angle, so Don had christened it the *Speed Boat*. This early on a Saturday, there weren't

many other cars to compete with: fortunate, since Don, bleary eyed and punchy, didn't feel up to dealing with traffic or much of anything else; he hadn't slept well the past six nights.

Mrs. Nguyen, an octogenarian toting enough string bags to carry home every retail item in the Bay Area, rode in the front passenger seat, an inflatable pillow cushioning her lower back. She was arguing with Don about the best place to buy canned beltfish. She said, "Happy Valley Market only place. Not just best."

"I'm sure I've seen it at the mom-and-pop on Hyde and Turk. It's eel, right?"

"Isn't ee-oh," she said witheringly, her eyebrows crimping her forehead up into her Brillo pad of hair. "I think you drive, I buy food."

Although today he found her smug, irritating, normally Don liked Mrs. Nguyen, even if she did call him Donna and seem to find him simple. He also had respect for her: she had lost two-thirds of her family in the Vietnam War and had moved to San Francisco, via a floating refugee camp in Hong Kong, when she was over sixty. It must have been like being plopped down on another planet, yet she seemed more vital and tuned in than either of his, American-born grandmothers.

"So how's Otis?" he asked. Otis was Mrs. Nguyen's three-year-old grandson.

She smiled. "Don't go there. This week, he pick all my crocus and feed the parrot."

"Huh." He saw a group of men jostling each other outside a Circle K. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"You never mind." She sighed--theatrically, he thought.

They approached a housing project. On the sidewalk in front of the pink cement building, Lur, a three-hundred-pound Burmese man, was waiting with his slim wife, Huizen. The SUV was a block away when Huizen swung her handbag at Lur's substantial head. She hit him twice before he swatted the bag out of her hand and began slapping her face. Mrs. Nguyen said, "Drunk."

Dry mouthed, Don watched Lur backhand his wife. She stumbled and then stepped to kick him in the groin. Don parked, and Mrs. Nguyen opened her door. He said, "I'll take care of it."

She ignored him and stepped onto the broad sidewalk. He got out, looked up and down the street: other than a stocking-capped wino rooting through a trash can, no one for blocks. Huizen and Lur were shouting in one foreign lan-

gauge, and Mrs. Nguyen was yelling in what sounded like another. She tottered toward them. Lur ignored her, slammed the outside of his foot into Huizen's stomach. He threw another side kick, and Huizen, bent over, caught and twisted his foot as it grazed her black stirrup pants. He bellowed, pulled away from her, backpedaled several steps. Waving her arms, Huizen shouted something at Mrs. Nguyen, and Mrs. Nguyen said, "Wha'?" She offered Huizen a Kleenex for the blood dripping from her nose to her floral-print blouse before turning to walk up the sidewalk.

Lur's face was a brownish orange; even the scalp visible through his brushcut was terra-cotta. Shivering at the thought of trying to stop him, Don began to follow Mrs. Nguyen. She was going to get help, he assumed, and her English wasn't that good: she might need someone to explain clearly what had to be done.

He saw the wino, now apparently asleep, seated on the opposite sidewalk, propped against a house with his head lolling on his shoulder. In Don's imagination, the car burglar appeared with the clarity of a vision. The man was unhurt, his dark skin unblemished except for a few shaving nicks, heavy-lidded eyes calm and spoked with red. He came forward and reached to embrace Don. The man's arms were

warm and firm. He leaned against Don gently, moving him, urging him backward. Don had the sense that he could choose at any moment to break the thief's grasp and walk away. But he treasured that warmth, that conferred security. He allowed himself to be moved.

Several yards from the couple, still enfolded in the thief's arms, Don saw Huizen spit on Lur's stretched yellow T-shirt. Lur caught her jaw with his fist, and Don was between them as Lur followed her retreat. Don faced Lur, looking up into his small, glassy eyes as he kept coming. His breath was rank, sour, like rotten fruit.

The thief, or Don's visual and tactile image of him, was gone. Don felt sad and empty--and then terrified. Lur shoved him and clapped giant hands over his ears. He howled with pain; his ears felt as if cherry bombs had exploded inside. Lur punched him in the solar plexus, and as he began to fold over, unable to breathe, he struck out with his forearm, catching Lur in the windpipe. Lur made a delicate sound, like a woman clearing her throat; his smooth features remained set.

Don felt pounding on his back. Over his shoulder, he glimpsed Huizen's narrow brown face between the curtains of her hair. Her fists, or the heels of them, were sharp and

hard; he moved into Lur to get away from the hammering. Huizen began yanking Don's hair. Lur reached around Don to grab at her, and for a moment, still struggling to breathe, he was crushed against the man's massive stomach. He could feel Huizen's arms wrapping around him to flail at Lur. With all his strength, Don shoved against Lur and stumbled backward with Huizen hanging from his shoulders, her nails digging into his skin. He slapped at her hands. "Let go, please. Ow, hey!"

As Lur hunched and set his bulk in preparation for another charge, a police car angled into the curb, and two officers with nightsticks got out to cross the sidewalk at a trot.

Arms folded resolutely, Huizen sat on the *Speed Boat's* back seat glaring out the window. Mrs. Nguyen, still riding shotgun, said, "She never forget me calling cops. Probably everybody mad. I don't care."

Don said, "I'm grateful you did; they were all over me." He stopped the car, got out to slide open the left side door so that the Trans could load themselves and their fold-up shopping carts into the back. Mrs. Tran, looking too warm in denim jacket and Levis, wanted to know what had

happened to Don's face--in the past few days, his black eyes had spread to create a green Zorro mask--and why he was so late, too, by the way. "Terrible traffic," he said.

"Thanks for asking."

After he had gotten them situated, he climbed back into the driver's seat. Huizen gave a little burp and said, "I'm not feel good."

Don said, "You want a plastic bag, a place to lie down, maybe?" He wondered why he was being so solicitous. His scalp still ached. If he'd had his way, the police would have taken her as well as Lur.

Mrs. Nguyen twisted around, groaned slightly. "Oh, too bad! You don't feel very nice. Maybe Donna, he don't feel very nice, either. Maybe nobody care how Miss Rockhead feel, huh?" She turned and plucked at the pillow behind her back. Then, sounding tired, her voice low, she said, "Tell Donna where is Happy Valley. I forget."

Don reflected that, actually, he *did* feel very nice, aside from the waves of shattering, neuralgic pain traveling from ears to jaw. He was at peace.

He looked in the rearview mirror. Huizen appeared stunned, her head back and tilted forward slightly, as if she had just been warned to sit up straight or else. Beside

her, the Trans were showing a keen interest in the car dealerships along Van Ness. Don said, "Let me know what you want to do, Huizen. We can stop or take you home, whichever."

Mrs. Tran said, "We already way late. Huizen, you put your hair on my legs, hon."

Mrs. Nguyen moved the pillow again, bolstered her back against it. Don touched her hand and said, "Can I adjust the seat for you, Mrs. N?" He wondered if someone who had been through so much and come out so strong had an angel of tough love. Then again, maybe an imagination would be enough.

Lutheran Summer Camp

We all grieve in our own way, I guess. My dentist, Tim Seward, had lived with his mother all of his sixty years, so when she died last fall he seemed to take it pretty hard. In fact, for a while I was afraid he'd gone right over the edge.

The first time I noticed anything strange about Tim was when I ran into him in the supermarket parking lot, just a week or so after Mrs. Seward had passed away. He was dressed in his usual casual, neat way, with a short-sleeved dress shirt--top button undone to reveal a white T-shirt--pressed gray slacks, and loafers. His hair had been cut recently and was carefully combed to the side, plastered down to minimize its acorn-cap appearance: his head was broad at the top and nearly came to a point at his chin. His ears, though they were flush with his temples, seemed canted out.

I started to express my condolences, but Tim was distracted. He said, "Walt, how many gals are on my tail? I don't want to look; it might encourage them. I gotta start wearing looser pants or something."

No gals in sight, at least none taking notice of graying pear-shaped Tim. I laughed tentatively, and, eyebrows low

and bunching, Tim scowled. Then he moved like sixty toward his Rambler American. I thought of phoning to apologize, but what would I have said, Sorry, I didn't think you were serious about having to beat women away with a stick?

Maybe a week later, I read in the *Turner Tribune* that Tim had been arrested for assault. He had gone to Mrs. Hufnagel's house, tackled her when she came to the door, and pulled out her dentures. The paper said that Tim told her that her plates would be in his safe and that when she was ready to pay her bill, she could pick them up.

So when I went to have my regular six-month checkup and cleaning that same week, I was a little nervous. I'd paid my bills, but who knew what Tim might do? I'd just settled into the cushy astronaut's chair in his office when he came in rubbing his hands. He pointed at the dripping azaleas outside the room's picture window. "Do you think the rain'll ruin the rhubarb?" he said. His small, deepset eyes looked a little tired, had a little more shadow around them than usual, but didn't look crazy. "Laughing gas for you, or is it too early in the day?"

I declined; he hadn't even glanced at my teeth yet. I told him I was sorry to hear about his mother passing on, and he nodded gravely as he placed the mask over his face

and fiddled with the tank's knobs. Then he inhaled deeply and began to laugh as if the guffaws were being wrung from him.

Jumping Jehoshaphat. Tim and I had belonged to the same church congregation for over twenty years, and a bright bow tie would have been a wild departure for him. He'd always been an affable, nervous, and thoroughly reliable man. At parties, he never drank more than half a martini or a glass of beer, and usually it was just decaf.

I watched for sudden movement and said, "Just have Margie give me a cleaning this morning, Tim. Things to do." Then I couldn't help it. I asked if he was feeling all right. I told him I'd read about the denture repossession, and well, it was a little unusual to do that sort of thing.

He told me that I should refer to him as Brian from now on; he'd changed his name. Then he said, completely deadpan, if a little woozy from the gas, "She was due. You know how much I was carrying her for?"

I couldn't think of a sane response to that. He maundered out of the room, and soon after, Margie appeared, looking frazzled with her scrubs wrinkled and her eyes blinking to beat the band. She was so nervous that she cut

my lip with a scraper. I gave her a look of commiseration and told her not to worry about it; I understood.

The next time I ran into Tim/Brian was at a fellowship-builder potluck at the church. Pastor Hunt and his wife hosted the event, which included a sing-along and a bonding exercise in which you had to introduce yourself to someone you didn't know well. This really was to drum up new blood for the church's committees. Whenever there weren't enough Quilters for World Relief or Faith Development developers, the Hunts held a social of some kind. For the life of me, I couldn't tell you why I was there; it wasn't as if I didn't know what was going on.

Brian wrote "D.B. Cooper" on his nametag and slapped it on his seersucker shirt. He said to Pastor Hunt, "If you're a proper shepherd for this flock, I'm the Second Coming." Pastor Hunt's clear blue eyes glazed and his round cheeks flushed. He asked Brian if they could have a little chat in his office. Brian said loudly that he was onto Pastor Hunt's little racket and he didn't swing that way. "I know a closet cruiser when I see one, Padre."

Mrs. Hunt, Alva, suggested that it was time to sing a hymn or two. We sang "Our Lord's World, It Is a Patchwork" and then a round of "Rock of Faith." On this second hymn,

Brian sang, with braying gusto, the part the folks on the other side of the aisle were supposed to sing. When it was over, he got a plate of tuna-and-potato-chip casserole and three-bean salad and perched on a folding chair near me; other than the two on either side of me, all the seats were taken. Joanie Doran passed by on the way to the buffet table and I smiled and said hello. Joanie smiled at Brian and said, "That chorus, Tim. You're one card and a half."

"Thanks very much, lady." Then, loud enough to be heard all the way in the sanctuary, he said, "This is the worst hot dish I've ever eaten. Really chews ass, don't you think?"

I had a little confab with him then. I told him that he was shooting himself in the foot with these shenanigans. If he could control himself, it was probably time he started, before he found himself shunned by everyone in the community. The man was behaving like a class-A boor if not a lunatic. As his friend, it was my job to pull him up short. I told him all this, but it didn't do a lick of good: he flat ignored me. Didn't even tell me to mind my own business. I applied myself to the tuna casserole, which really wasn't that bad, and waited for the next activity-- the introductions.

I had met three relative newcomers to our congregation, and complimented all three on their manner of dress, when things reached a head. Scanning the room over Jane Deasey's shoulder, I saw Brian speaking with Shirley Thorpe, a sweet woman with flaking fair skin and bole-thick ankles. I saw him point at her matronly chest and ask, "Those gals real or have they been surgically enhanced?"

Pastor Hunt came over. Livid and shaking, he told Brian that he had to leave right then or be ejected. "This is the first time I've ever had to ask such a thing, Tim. I think it's time you got help."

Brian jerked his arm as if he were shaking off the pastor's grip, though the man hadn't touched him. He said, "Should've known you can't speak your mind in this conformity factory. I think I'll go find some Christians."

After he left, things relaxed quite a bit. He was the main topic of conversation, and there was much speculation on what we should all do about him, if anything. Alva Hunt wondered if there were some way, in the absence of next of kin, for people who were close to Brian to have him committed--just for observation, of course. Tom Barquist told us all that it was rumored that "that son of a gun" had been seen stealing dead people's garbage in the middle of the

night. I wasn't prepared to believe this, but Ruby Olav claimed to have seen Brian lifting Hefty bags from Phil Johnson's trash cans, stowing them in his American, the day after Phil passed away.

There was more of this sort of talk, and the drift seemed to be that as Brian's friends, we all had a responsibility to report him to the police or other appropriate authorities before he seriously hurt himself or someone else. This was just talk, of course, but I left feeling that if Brian wanted to escape the mob, he had to get normal, and fast.

I drove by his house on the way home. I'd thought of stopping off at the Big "O" for a cup of coffee and a little conversation, but really, I had a responsibility to pay Brian a visit.

The first thing he asked me when he opened the door was whether I was interested in buying his house. He led me down the hall into his living room, and I stopped right there. The place was filled with garden trolls, picture frames, food processors, exercise bikes, Coleman stoves, espresso makers, you name it, most of it leaning against or piled on his mother's Morris chairs and Naugehyde-

upholstered sofa. He pushed some travel brochures and a BB gun off a chair and told me to make myself at home. Then he went to the sideboard and poured us each a stiff tumbler of whisky.

He stood against a StairMaster and toasted me. When we'd both had a belt, he saw me looking at all the clutter and said, "You'd be amazed at what people throw out when a loved one dies. Why let the dump get all the goodies, I say."

He hadn't removed his nametag. "D.B.," I said, trying for a light tone, "are you on medication?"

He winked at me, or that was his intent, I suppose: he clenched both eyes shut. "Let me show you something." He led me out of the living room and down a hall to a bedroom. Standing with hands on his waist, thumbs to the front, he swept the room with his eyes. It was orderly, clean: chenille bedspread with yarn cowboys and pistols (hospital corners), small desk with a spotless blotter and a few hardbacks between praying-hands bookends, slightly frayed braided rug, two models of biplanes suspended from the ceiling with fishing line. A boy's orderly, clean room. As far as I could see, the only recent additions were a TV set with a thirty-six-inch screen and a hardwood magazine rack

filled with issues of *Reader's Digest*, *Highlights for Children*, and *People*.

"Clean room. And neat," I said conversationally.

"Thanks. I'll bet yours is just as tidy."

I shrugged, not wishing to argue: I live in an orderly, clean studio apartment, not a boy's bedroom. I looked at my watch and thought about heading home.

Brian nudged me. "I don't sleep in here anymore. I've moved into Mom's room." He jogged down the hall to the master bedroom. Careening on a throw rug was a collapsible canoe, and leaning against the wall, a fiberglass bow and a quiver of arrows. Brian said, "Look at this," jumped and landed sitting on a low-framed bed covered with a down sleeping bag singed at one corner. The mattress sloshed while Brian struggled not to capsize.

"A waterbed. Honest to John," I said. I hadn't known they still sold them.

He rolled back, slacks riding up to expose chalky shins, and punched a button on a portable stereo. Over a droning keyed fiddle and Nordic chants, he shouted, "This is the life, eh?" He grinned broadly, ecstatically. He had healthy gums and a good number of fillings.

His mother was dead, so at last he was free to become a boorish lunatic who lived in Lutheran summer camp. Huh. I couldn't see that it added up. But if Mrs. Seward had been keeping him in check all those years, she'd been doing the world a favor: plain as saltines, he wasn't just unbalanced; he'd gone ahead and stepped off the beam.

I slapped my thighs and bobbed my head in time with the Swedish folk music for a few minutes, then said I had to be going. Brian shot me a look of disappointment, his little eyes suddenly droop-lidded and dull. The last thing he said was, "You'll let me know about the house?"

From what I understand, he's now under observation in the psychiatric wing of Good Samaritan. I haven't been there yet--I gather they allow visitors--but will try to get around to it. I've been busy lately and, frankly, am in no rush to go. I know it may seem cold, but there comes a point when you see that rubbing elbows with the deranged is unhealthy--the next thing you know, you're viewing the bizarre as ordinary--and you just have no choice but to harden your heart a little.

I have been as busy as all get out lately, all stemming from a silly disagreement with the mail carrier. This time,

he put my circulars and *Newsweek* in 207's slot--I live in 201. What began as a difference of opinion has turned into a brouhaha: I've had to appear in court twice, the only blessing there being that I managed both times to get one of the parking slots in front of the law enforcement complex and so didn't have to make that long hike from First Street. Also, though it seems hardly fair, I'm expected to replace the lobby window. The glazier wants a small fortune, so I'm engaged in negotiations with him--more time and energy.

In any event, I haven't really had a moment to call on Tim. I feel a little guilty about this, and yet, honest to Pete, what purpose would my visit serve? I seem to recall hearing that once a patient reaches a certain stage, there isn't much that anyone, let alone simple friends and acquaintances, can do to be of comfort--he hardly knows who's who or what's what anymore. I will get up to the hospital when I can, but like anyone trying to lead a normal, productive life, I have things to do that can't be put off. You understand.

Fat Rhonda

I don't know, things are pretty good. I check the phone lines from nine to five, come home and have a few tokes and watch the tube. I go to bed when I feel like it. And on weekends, I get a quarter of white drugs, do it up alone or with Mike down the hall.

Sometimes I lay up on the roof, too. I've got a good tan. The roof has Astroturf, a couple of chaise longues, and you can see the length of Hyde Street, or most of it. The Blackhawk Bar, the Chinese grocery, Bank of America. One time, a couple of guys from my floor were up there and beaned an old man crossing the street with beer bottles and nearly killed him. They're gone now, and it's just as well. They were a little over-the-top.

I keep my place clean in case anyone drops by. Easy enough. It's just a studio, and with the exception of the kitchen table and chairs and the TV-CD home-entertainment island, I don't have much to dust. The bed's the only thing I have to move when I vacuum.

Last Friday night, Mike came by around six with a half-rack of Schlitz malt liquor and an entire gram of sixty-forty, coke and crank. Me, I don't drink, but Mike likes it when he's coming down, says it's like having an airbag in your car.

We shot a couple of spoons and were feeling like men, horny and ready for about anything. That's when Mike said, "Let's get Fat Rhonda up here."

Fat Rhonda's been poked by everyone I know. You've never run into such a hose queen. But she's friendly enough--I mean in a way that's got nothing to do with trying to be sexy.

Mike grabbed the phone, but Rhonda's got call-waiting. She came on and said something on the order of Can you hang on a minute, please? I know this because Mike put the receiver between his ear and shoulder and, his voice vibrating like he was on a bed with Magic Fingers, asked me to turn up the TV. We were watching the powerboat races.

I said "Fuck that," took the receiver and clapped it back on the hook. I didn't feel like waiting. Rhonda only lives two floors down, after all. I told Mike to put the rigs away--Rhonda's scared of needles--then shot downstairs and banged on her door.

Rhonda opened up and said, "C'mon in, Rich." She swept her hand back as if she were ushering me into the dining room at the St. Francis or the Hilton, maybe.

On the bed, beside the pillows, lay a supermarket romance, one of those glossy paperbacks with raised letters. I suppose there are worse ways to spend your time.

Rhonda said, "I was just talking to Mike. He hung up when I asked him to wait." She looked hurt.

I told her Mike was upstairs with me, and why wait when you could let your legs do the walking?

Her laugh was noisy, like furniture being moved. She's easily amused. Then she apologized because her sink was full of dishes. Like I cared. Fat Rhonda's a little off.

I said, "Come up and do a couple of lines, watch the boat races?"

She put a hand on my chest, stepped back and looked at the ceiling a minute. "Well," with this grin, as if she had to think whether she could find time. She looked me in the eye and said, "All right. Just give me a few minutes."

I thought she looked good enough already. She had on leotards and a big shirt that hung straight from those queen-sized tits. I was wired and she looked fine. I told her that--that she looked fine.

She waved away my compliment and took out cheese and Sociables crackers, arranged them on a plate and poured me a glass of Calistoga water so I'd have something to do while she was in the can.

I drank the water.

When she came out, she wore a dress and nylons, and her hair was up. I almost said, We're only going upstairs, but was feeling tolerant, and like I said, she's a bit dippy. So I thought, If she wants to think of this as an occasion, let her. What the hell.

We took the elevator. Not my choice. If she'd get used to climbing stairs, she might lose some of that extra poundage. But that's Fat Rhonda, lazy. If she climbed stairs or dieted, she wouldn't be herself.

We did a couple of lines and then got out of our clothes, and Mike and I double-teamed her. She made plenty of noise, too, although mainly was just nice. I have to admit that-- Rhonda's easy. Whatever you want to do is okay. She's nice.

When we had finished and were halfway back into our clothes, Rhonda asked, "Did you like me?"

I felt awkward, and a little pissed off. I could see Mike was embarrassed, too, because he looked at the TV and said, "Shit yeah, Rhonda, we always like you." Then he went for a beer.

I don't know. I really don't know why I'm telling this, but sometimes, because you're high or tired, things stick with you and take on a significance they don't deserve.

I wonder what Fat Rhonda thinks of after she puts down her book, before she goes to sleep at night. Me, lately, it's bottles flying from a roof and hitting somebody who just had his lunch, scrubbed his toilet, whatever.

G-Men

Duane said, "Slow down. It's on this side of the street. 1637." He scanned RFD mailboxes.

Clete showed his brown-tipped teeth. "This is 'Donations in his name can be left to oncology research unit, Good Samaritan Hospital,' right?" His white Arrow shirt still had the store folds at the elbows and midsection, which disgusted Duane--this was the third time he'd worn it--and his neck and cheeks were the color of withered straw. "Should be a bingo."

"Yup. Dilaudid footballs, Numorphan, something good." Duane put the map, newspaper, and phonebook on the floor between his legs. "1637. Park." He turned the rearview mirror toward himself, inspected his cropped blond hair, adjusted the blue tie that matched his too-tight blazer as the rented sedan's tires brushed the curb. He frowned, slanting his hazel eyes the way he thought police did: annoyed and condescending. "Hope those aren't retreads, mister."

Clete leaned to take the sample case from the rear seat. He handed it to Duane, who opened it and checked to see that all the gear was there: gray metal box, receipts,

orange window cards. Clete reached in, turned the lockbox around, and dialed the combination.

Duane looked up at the clapboard house set back from the street. Above a bed of blue peter were two windows with curtains drawn to one side: like two eyes staring askance at him. In the yard one house down, a young woman in a turquoise one-piece hosed down a red El Camino. Duane turned to Clete and said, "I told you not to dip into the stash when we're working, man. It's unprofessional."

"One fucking football. Chill." Clete popped a horsetab and swallowed it dry.

Clete and Duane had been disposing of narcotics the last three Sundays and already had made seven thousand dollars. They had met in a bar near the Willamette River, a place with old dark-wood walls, black leather barstools with foam rubber erupting around the edges, and three pooltables lit with lamps shaped like liquor bottles. From hidden speakers came blues harmonica with a vicious, distorted guitar grinding behind it.

After twelve hours in a refrigerated warehouse lit by fluorescent tubes, Duane found the bar both comforting, insulating in its smallness, and suffocating--hot, smoky,

loud. At least there weren't many people around. A few men and women shot pool, laughing or whistling at every shot, their blanched faces, long dirty hair, tanktops, and jeans almost interchangeable.

A man in baseball cap, checked Pendleton shirt, and Levi's out at the knee clomped in and crossed the planks to the bar. He sat two stools from Duane, though only one other stool, and that near the door, was taken. This irritated Duane. He was planning, maybe idly, but he still liked to concentrate. He finished his beer, raised a finger to signal the bartender, and thought of moving to a booth.

The man spoke to the bartender. She wore blue eyeshadow and had on a muscle shirt that said "Live Through This" in slashing black letters. Pulling on the beard hiding his neck and the lower half of his face, the man said, "What is it I'm supposed to live through this time, Lorrie?"

"A cue stick probin' your prostate," she said. She reached beneath the bar and pulled up a bottle of Jim Beam.

His eyes, which reflected the low orange lamps above the bar mirror, closed in a mock wince, and he squirmed on his stool. "Not while I'm a free man, uh-uh.... Hey, what's that smell? Jesus, stinks like catfood in here.

What *is* that?" His beard caught on his collar as he turned to look at Duane. "That you, guy?"

Duane looked at the man's skewed nose and raised eyebrows. His beard was sprinkled with sawdust. "It's your dad or your brother--they're both so butt-ugly, I can't tell 'em apart--pulling trains in the storeroom. You're up next, I think."

The man's eyebrows went higher, and a boot hit the floor. If necessary, Duane would drygulch him--hit him in the windpipe with his forearm--as he left his stool. Then he would grab the ponytail sticking out the back of the man's cap and pull him down to get a whiff of the whiting entrails on his knee. Not that Duane was particularly angry: people often complained about the reek; it went with the job.

The man left his foot where it was and drank his whiskey. When he laughed, a shower of motes fell from his beard. He turned to the bartender. "Everywhere I go, somebody dumps on me. Now even refugees from the slime line are flicking me shit."

Lorrie said, "He's really an inventor, aren't you, fish guts?"

Duane shrugged, fixed Lorrie with a baleful stare; he didn't like her tone, not much. A little crowd, one deep, had formed a horseshoe around them. Lorrie brought up a bat. She had ink tattoos between her thumbs and fore-fingers.

The man stepped from his stool, removed his cap and waved it at the spectators. "Get back to the tables, you ghouls! No fight tonight. Shoo!" He waved his hat again, grinned, and made as if to kick one of the men. He reseated his cap and said to Duane, "So, what you sitting there so pensive about?"

The man introduced himself--his name was Clete--and Duane found that he wanted to talk: his plan was far enough along that he wished to share it.

Clete motioned at the bottles behind the bar. "Buy you something to clean the scales from your teeth?"

They moved to a booth, and after a few more drinks, he told Clete about the obituaries. "The beauty of this is that anyone who did it'd be helping people, protecting them."

Clete moved his head over, as if to examine him from a different angle. "Um, how so?"

Duane laughed for the first time that night. "Well, if I thought of it, you know plenty of junkies did, too. Am I right?"

Not being a user himself, Duane had no idea who might buy in bulk. Clete had a friend who would pay twenty bucks apiece for the heavy painkillers cancer patients took. And he would give thirty for a morphine suppository, forty-five for a Fentanyl patch. Clete also knew which medications were prized by addicts and which were worthless.

As he walked back to his residence-hotel room that night, Duane had the feeling his life was about to improve. He had to be heading and gutting at six a.m., but he lay awake much of the night, watching the neon cocktail glass outside his window alternate between upright and sipping positions as he made a mental list of what they would need: a lockbox and a stencil through which to spraypaint "Property of United States Drug Enforcement Administration"; receipt forms rubberstamped "USDEA" with a Portland address and phone number; Day-Glo orange cards printed with "This House Contains No Narcotic Painkillers," "USDEA Disposal Unit" in smaller letters beneath.

Narco disposal proved exciting: Duane never knew if the bereaved would buy his story, though so far all had been

convinced. He came to think of himself as a benevolent outlaw, risking prison in his effort to help people. As often as he had wished that life held something in store for him besides the dis-assembly line and occasional tinkering with machinery, it wasn't until he had read the obit for a cancer victim that his hopes had taken specific shape. He had a direction at last. While he dumped fish heads and entrails down the chute, he imagined becoming well off and famous. Someday he might be a rich folk hero. He knew this wasn't likely--he might never receive great recompense or recognition for his service--but anyone could dream.

And if anyone needed a dream, it was Duane. At thirty-five, he had been working in light-industrial jobs for seventeen years. He was tired of the monotony, the long, grueling hours, and the low wages. But what else could he do? He'd barely finished high school, never been to college. He was bad at tests and written assignments, no getting around it. His mind would not settle down. He had been the student who always took the option of building a motif-depicting mobile instead of writing a book report. And yet, he was smart enough, in his own way: he had devised a shaker for sorting shrimp, which, though unpatented, had been used in canneries for years.

He had been promoted to supervisor at several plants, but always briefly: he found watching people do back-breaking, mind-numbing work harder than doing the job himself; headaches and stomach pains would always force him back to line work, a victim of his own empathic nature. The other thing holding him back, one plant manager had told him, was that he was one lousy judge of character. He assigned the aimless and lazy to loosely supervised duties and reserved the most tedious and closely monitored jobs for creative self-starters. He had an uncanny knack for this.

But all that was behind him, or soon would be. Duane and Clete were talking about going full time, expanding their jurisdiction to include the whole I-5 corridor from Eugene to Portland.

Duane snapped the lock back on the metal box, replaced it in the case, and shut the lid. "Don't zone out on me, now. Stay awake in case I need a hand or we have to leave quick, all right?"

Clete waved his hand. "Got you covered."

Duane shut the Buick's door and walked stiff legged, heel first, with authority, up the pitched drive. He went to the door, was about to press the bell when he heard

whimpering or mewling. His stomach began to roil. With one hand clasping the wrist of the one holding the case, he stepped back. The mewling stopped and was followed by the faint sound of a woman talking: "I won't" or "I don't." Then there was a low, quick, guttural voice that reminded him of samurai in a movie he had once seen.

In the open garage were two cars, a blue Nova and a powder-gray Oldsmobile. Duane glanced at his partner, who was staring straight ahead. Walking around the side of the house, Duane stepped to the edge of a window framed with thin steel. It was dark inside, and he could see nothing from this angle. He squatted to duckwalk below the window frame, his slacks binding at the knee and seat. This time when he looked, he saw the silhouette of a kneeling woman. The woman's chest rose and fell quickly. Behind her stood a dark figure wearing a billed cap and holding a pistol to the back of her head.

Duane set his case down and, reversing direction, walked on hands and knees until he was out of sight of the window. Then he ran on the balls of his feet, his leather soles making a crisp sound on the old barkdust, as if

someone were chewing toast. Clete still directed a catatonic stare through the windshield. Duane groaned: he could walk the twenty yards and get Clete to help, but he would undoubtedly want to avoid trouble and leave, or tell the woman next door to call 911. By then, it might be too late.

A bank of clouds, heavy and immanent with rain, seemed to hem the roof, leaving no air between the house and sky. Duane felt uncomfortably warm. Before crawling beneath the window again, he took off his jacket and laid it on the ground. The samurai voice continued. He crept to the back door and pulled the screendoor open as slowly as his shaking hands would allow. Miraculously, it didn't creak. He turned the back door's knob, and, with a little "huff," the door swung in.

He didn't hear any voices. From his right came a heavy knock of wood on wood and then a clattering on the floor. The noises were repeated. Nearer, closer to his ear, was a sound of stoppers being pulled one after another from bottles. His neck creaked as he turned to squint: the kitchen faucet was dripping. He exhaled and moved farther into the room. The screen door banged shut. He jumped, smelling something acrid, as if he had been punched in the nose.

The rifling sounds stopped. "Grandma? What you doin' out there?" the intruder called in his hoarse voice.

Duane moved quickly to a doorway through which he could now hear breathing above the rushing in his ears. His eyes were growing used to the light: her hands were bound behind her, and she was leaning over her lap, away from him, toward the front door. She breathed heavily, but made no other sound. Her white hair was tied in a bun, except for a few strands that had come loose to hang over her knees.

Duane knelt beside her and whispered in her ear, "Don't say anything." He put his hand on her arm to reassure her. With the side of her head, she butted him. He rubbed his forehead, fighting the urge to vomit, and said, "Federal officer, ma'am. Just sit tight, and I'll get you out of this." She moved her head again, but he had backed out of range.

"Grandma, you still there?" The voice came from the hall, near a sunburst clock.

Duane tiptoed to a bookcase beside the doorjamb, his loafers squeaking so that he was sure the man would hear them. He stood to one side. A nickle-plated revolver extended in two hands was followed through the door by a billed red cap. Their owner stepped two feet into the room

and pointed pistol and bill at the kneeling woman before sweeping them toward Duane. Duane jumped toward the man and brought both forearms down on his wrists, bending from the waist just before he struck and following though toward the floor. The gun bounced.

The woman stood and turned to watch them. Her eyes were wide with what looked more like interest than fear, and, as if on a hanger, her white dress hung straight from her shoulders and collarbone.

Instead of going for Duane, the man reached for the pistol. Duane stepped and brought his knee into the man's face as he leaned over, then grabbed him by the ears and raised knee to face again. His head described 180 degrees before he landed on his back. "Bastard," the man said. He began to turn over and crawl toward the shining gun, but the old woman kicked it into the hall. She stepped back. Duane knelt on the man's back, punched him once in the hairy nape of his neck, then took a wrist and, pivoting from one knee to the other, twisted the arm up toward the cap, which he thought it surprising that the man hadn't lost by now.

Duane tried to catch his breath. The woman, standing six feet away, tossed her head to clear her face of errant

strands of hair and regarded him. He said, "Thank you for your assistance, ma'am. If you'll come over here and scrunch down, I'll untie you."

Her voice was grave and deep, a voice for describing crime and politics--a newscaster's poised tone to it. "If you're a policeman, why don't you have a firearm?"

"I'm with the disposal unit of the Drug Enforcement Administration. Ordinarily, we don't have any use for weapons."

"Why are you in my house?"

"I came by on a routine call to check for narcotics and overheard your conversation with our friend here."

She wrinkled her forehead.

He said, "Perhaps I should explain the purpose of my visit. We're dispatched when someone passes away from a painful disease, to prevent addicts such as this man--"

"My husband died in an accident, not of any disease. That's what I was trying to tell the man you're sitting on. Now, how is it that you have the same screwy notion he did?" She edged toward the hall.

The pistol rested against the coping beneath the sunburst clock. Duane said, "This has happened before, actually, though we're working on it and would prefer that

it didn't get out. Gangs have somehow gotten access to our computer files. This is, however, to my knowledge, the first time we've been mistaken about the cause of death."

The man on the floor laughed abruptly. "What a load of crap. You read the newspaper, just like I did."

Duane raised the man's arm toward his shoulder blade, and the man swore. Duane said, "Ma'am, if you'll just look at my credentials," and reached toward where his coat's inner pocket would have been. "They're in my jacket--outside, near my case."

In her long shift, the woman floated across the floor to look. "I see it."

"I'll untie your hands, and you can go out and find my ID. You're welcome to look in the case, too. There are several items in there--a safe box, receipts, warnings to intruders, and so forth--that no one else would be likely to have."

"I just about believe you. But I have a better idea: why don't you take this man to your car. You do have a car?"

"Yes, ma'am, of course."

"Take this man to your car and leave. I don't much feel like getting near either of you. Leave the door open,

and I'll have a neighbor untie me. How does that sound?"

"Fine, except that I'd like to secure him. Do you have some rope or twine?"

"Just what I'm wearing." She gave a humorless laugh and nodded. "A policeman who doesn't carry a weapon wouldn't have handcuffs, either."

"I'm really closer to a desk jockey than a field officer. I just work for--"

"I don't care. I'm tired. Leave now, please." She stood near the window, the light slanting across her set, sad face.

"C'mon, hoss." He lifted the man's arm and its owner followed it. He walked him to the hall, reached down and picked up the gun, held it against the back of the man's hickory shirt and marched him toward the front door.

"You can let go my arm now, I think."

Duane dropped the arm and immediately felt a wave of relief; his own shoulder had been hurting in sympathy. The man rolled his shoulder and waved his hand around experimentally. Duane stepped back and said, "Open the door, and if you try anything, no more kidneys."

The man opened the door, but said over his shoulder, "How you know it's loaded?"

"I don't, dumbass, but if it isn't, I can always break your arm."

The woman in the bathing suit was gone, and Clete was asleep. Duane banged on the front passenger window with his free hand. "Open the trunk, Clete! Unlock the fucking trunk, man. Wake up."

Clete opened his door and stepped out. He rubbed his eyes. "What's going on?"

"You guys aren't cops," the junkie said over his shoulder. "Let me go."

Duane said, "Shut up or I'll kill you. Clete, would you please open the goddamned trunk, please?"

"Why? What do we want with this guy? I don't want some guy in the trunk." But after Duane gave him a furious look, he went over and unlocked it.

"In," Duane said. "Now, or I'll slam the lid on your head. In, in, in." The man got in carefully, and Duane slammed the lid. He said to Clete, "Be right back," and ran up to retrieve his case and coat.

He wiped his fingerprints from the pistol and was about to throw it over the woman's back fence when the thought struck him that she was right, an agent should carry a

firearm. This one would do until he found one more suitable: nickel plated was a little flashy. He shoved the pistol in the back of his waistband, against his spine. It felt cold and uncomfortable but at least was hidden.

He picked up his case and coat. Around front, the door was still open. He stood in the entryway and called, "Excuse me," but there was no answer. Kneeling, he set his case on the floor, popped it open, removed one of the Day-Glo signs. He turned left at the end of the hall and found a bedroom whose window--one of the suspicious eyes--could be seen from the street. He propped the card against the windowpane.

"Why are we taking this guy with us?" asked Clete. "This is really dumb."

"Because he might go back and hurt that old lady--he's slime. He tied her hands and--"

Clete waved his hand to silence Duane. "Are we supposed to make calls with this guy in the trunk? What if we get stopped?"

"Right. Let's take him out of town and let him go."

"I'm easy." Clete's eyes were half shut, lizardlike,

and his face was flushed. His large-pored nose looked like a garlic press. As he glanced in the rearview mirror and spun the steering wheel to the left, he said, "Where'd you get the piece?"

"Belongs to that lump of dirt."

"Better toss it; you don't know where it's been."

Duane supposed Clete was right. "Know where I can get a Glock?"

"Nope." Clete clamped his pasty jaw shut. He looked over and said piously, "I got nothing to do with guns: don't need 'em, don't want 'em near me."

Duane shrugged, sat back and shut his eyes. He saw the old woman sitting at her neighbor's kitchen table in her white dress. The woman in the one-piece was making coffee. Over the compressor-like sounds of the coffee maker, the old woman said in her anchorwoman's voice, "No, I'm not going to call the police. That young man in the suit saved my life. Why he happened along just when he did is beyond me. The fact that he probably wasn't really a policeman--had no official obligation to help--makes it all the more remarkable. Risking life and limb to rescue someone he doesn't even know. Now *that's* valor."

The sound of feet beating a tattoo on the trunk lid roused Duane from his reverie. He imagined being locked in the trunk himself and felt a wave of claustrophobia. "Step on it, Clete."

Clete frowned, looked over and said, "Keep your shirt on. Why not let him go here? This is far enough away." On one side of the car was a windbreak of small spruce trees, with grass a foot tall beneath; on the other, a long row of tract houses.

Duane watched two young boys take turns heaving a brick onto a shake roof. They'd already split several shingles. "Suppose he phones in an anonymous tip?"

They decided to take the man to the old reservoir, from which it would take an hour or more to walk to the main road. Since one of their calls was only a block up and two over, they would stop there on the way. First though, at Duane's suggestion, Clete gave the junkie two Fentanyl patches to reduce his restlessness. He seemed pleased: "Dude! The room sucks but the food's excellent."

Clete parked before a blue doublewide trailer with redwood stairs leading to the front door. Duane was on the top step, bending to pet a Siamese cat, when a thin old man

opened the door. "Yes?" He wore denim overalls, a flannel shirt buttoned to his neck.

Duane smiled and tried to catch the man's watery blue eyes, but after glancing at him briefly, the man stared over his shoulder with a bewildered, far-away look. Duane showed him his ID card, flipping open its case, and said, "Agent Jim Knight, United States Drug Enforcement Administration, sir. I'm sorry to bother you during your time of bereavement, but for your safety, I have to ask you to surrender any narcotic medications left over from your wife's illness."

The man looked vaguely familiar, and Duane tried to remember what the name in the obituary had been. Turning without comment, the man led him into a living room with one paneled wall. The man switched on a table lamp. He looked more alert now. He strung some of his stiff, neck-length gray hair behind an ear and gestured at a couch. Duane sat near the edge of the cushions, his forearms resting on his thighs. "Would you care for something to drink?" the man asked.

"No, thank you. If you could just gather up the medications and bring them to me, I'll lock them away and give you a receipt."

The man sat across from Duane in a ladder-backed rocker. Peering at him, the man said, "You look familiar. You look an awful lot like one of my students."

Mr. Terhune, that was it, his seventh-grade homeroom and social studies teacher. Bastard had pitied him. Duane smiled and shook his head. "Not from around here, I'm afraid."

Mr. Terhune stood, murmuring, and shuffled out of the room, his slippers making a papery rasping sound on the linoleum floor.

The room's most prominent feature was a gallery of composite photos of Mr. Terhune's classes, all with him in the center, lining two credenzas. Duane found himself and his older sister, Diane, who had been three years ahead of him; both of them had bangs to their eyes, and on the sides, their blond hair curled to clutch at the lobes of their ears. Diane had done well in school and in other areas of life: she was now a medical records clerk, married and raising a son on whom she doted.

He heard the papery noise again and quickly returned to the sofa. Mr. Terhune came in bearing a shoe box. He lowered himself into his rocker and said, "How's Diane these days? That girl was a go-getter."

Duane blanched. With fumbling care, he pulled his case across the cushion beside him, kept his hand on it. Then, abruptly, he stood. "I'm sorry. I just remembered ... I have to go." He moved to the trailer's door, reached to twist the knob. Squinting and with his mouth open, Mr. Terhune looked at the shoebox on his knee, then watched Duane pull the door shut.

At first, he thought Clete wasn't in the car, but as Duane drew closer, he saw that his partner had slid down in the seat and was reading the newspaper.

"That was quick ... wasn't it?" Clete tossed the newspaper aside and yawned. "Good haul?"

Duane shook his head and tsked. "Another bum lead. Suicide. I can't believe how much misinformation these obits have. Thirty-eighth and Montana next?"

Regarding him curiously, his dull eyes unblinking, Clete said, "Hey man, your hands are shaking."

"I probably need something to eat." Duane stared out his window at a curb gutter choked with iron-red mud.

Thirty-eighth and Montana was across town. Clete took the beltline, which passed the track to the reservoir. As

he rode, Duane buffed his shoes with a handkerchief, straining toward the floor.

They reached the turnoff, and Duane sat back and watched misshapen firs and barbed tangles of blackberry vines heave past: the road needed grading; its washboards made the Buick bounce and sway like a jeep climbing a hillside.

Over the rocking and creaking, Clete shouted, "Shit! We break an axle, *I ain't paying.*"

They came to the reservoir, a big concrete pill surrounded by unmown grass. Clete swung the car around through the high weeds and back onto the road, the Buick's nose pointing the way they'd come. He climbed out and said, "Help me get him out. Might be too loaded to move."

Duane scanned the clearing as he walked to the trunk. A prefab metal shed with a dark window stood fifty yards away, on the other side of the reservoir. No cars. The reservoir itself, towering fifteen feet above him, had cracks traced by moss snaking down its sides. The only sound was an occasional muffled belch, as if, inside, bubbles were rising to burst at the water's surface.

Clete unlocked the trunk, pocketed the keys, and swung the lid up. The junkie lay on his side with his legs drawn high. Clete said, "Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

Smiling, his crinkling light-green eyes nearly without pupils, the junkie rolled over the trunk's lip and found the gravel with his feet. When the man stumbled, Duane caught him by the arm, waiting until he regained his balance before stepping away. The junkie adjusted his cap, said, "Thanks, bro."

Duane jumped as if he'd been shocked. He took the gun from his waistband and fired repeatedly at the man's chest, through a swirling haze seeing him take several steps back and then fall to lay on the gravel. Flowers of blood opened on the front of his hickory shirt.

Clete stared at the pistol in disbelieving fear, the bottoms of his eyes all whites. The deep creases in his forehead thinned and broadened; they seemed to writhe like worms. When Duane knelt to see if the junkie was alive, Clete ran to jump into the Buick. He started the car and drove off with doors and trunk lid flapping.

Duane thought of chasing the car--the road was too bad for Clete to drive fast--but felt exhausted; just walking

would've been like swimming through oil. His ears still ringing from the shots, he tossed the gun aside and felt for a pulse. He closed the staring eyes.

No body, no conviction, he thought. He forced the door on the shed, found only hoses and nozzles. He searched the area around the reservoir, too, but there was nothing with which to bury a man. A few feet off the road, he used a stick to dig a shallow hole for the pistol. Then he slung the corpse over his shoulder and carried it into the woods, noticing as he walked that his shoes had become skuffed. He covered the body with dead branches and humus. After that, he removed his jacket and began trudging toward the belt-line.