Martyred Cars

Andrea Rose Gregovich

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/rtds

Repository Citation

https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/rtds/1662

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Scholarship@UNLV. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Retrospective Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.
MARTYRED CARS

by

Andrea Rose Gregovich

Bachelor of Arts
DePauw University
1997

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 2004
INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.
Thesis Approval
The Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

April 12, 2004

The Thesis prepared by

Andrea Rose Gregovich

Entitled

Martyred Cars

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

*Martyred Cars: A Novel In Stories*

by

Andrea Rose Gregovich

Douglas Unger, Examination Committee Chair
Associate Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

The seven story-like chapters of *Martyred Cars* explore the daily business and labor of a desert junk yard and its brushes with the supernatural. Each chapter takes the point of view of a different character in their own struggles with work, life, and the entities and elements that taunt them from beyond the boundaries of known science. The novel builds these layers of cosmology of archetypal universals, patterns that recur (whether it be in landscape or the pattern on a man's shirt), and a blurring of the boundary between the inanimate and animate, the spiritual and the mundane. *Martyred Cars* does not seek to solve problems or answer questions, but to view the world from obtuse and fanciful angles, from the point of view of various people, animals, cars, and things residing and consuming at the bottom of the economy, on the perpetual verge of an apocalypse.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 JUNK YARD DEVIL</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 JUNK YARD ANGELS</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 GOOD DOG, BAD DOG</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 OUT OF HEAVEN</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5 DIVISION, SUBDIVISION,</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRAGMENTATION OF MOTOR VEHICLES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6 THE FRITO BANDITO SAGA</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 7 PORTRAIT OF THE DELIVERY VAN</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

In the early nineties, my father built a junkyard from the ground up in Tucson, Arizona, and operated it for about nine years. It was something of a mid-life crisis for him, something he claims he always wanted to do. My mom was also in on the yard -- she did the bookkeeping on her time off from her own job as a social worker. I helped out sometimes, too, when I was home from college, or from my own adventures. I shuffled papers, answered phones, delivered truck engines, transmissions, and various odd formations of chrome, metal, and plastic to other junk yards, garages and body shops. I watched, listened, and started writing about this world, which grew into this novel, *Martyred Cars*.

While my father's junkyard was the primary source for this novel, my literary sources have been various. As a youngster, I was a devotee of John Steinbeck and J.D. Salinger, and I've realized lately that their work was formative in my own definition of what makes a good read. More recently, I've shamelessly read and re-read Thomas Pynchon, tattooed his symbol on my back, relished his relentlessness and unevenness. I've also felt a kinship with George Saunders, who I think shares my love of urban decay and garishly-themed spaces. And whenever I get a chance, I search for the depths of my own Slavic soul in strange Russian writers like Bulgakov, Gogol, Zoshchenko, Krzhizhanovsky, Biely, Blok, and Pelevin. The overall mood of strangeness in my novel is, I believe, more Russian than anything else. Gogol's *Dead Souls* in particular helped me through the revision of *Martyred Cars*. I've been striving for the same kind of pacing.
and lightness of which Gogol is a champion. Furthermore, certain passages in *Dead Souls* were a direct pep talk for me as a writer about the thanklessness of seeing characters like Brody and company through the kind of lens I've chosen to look through.

I must also acknowledge my pop cultural sources as well. Certain literary elements propose that we should shun the corrosive sway of television and cinema on our writing, and I've read enough undergraduate fiction to understand the wisdom of this wisdom -- it's been one of my more difficult teaching challenges to get my students to see that their narratives are fading to black or cutting to commercial for no apparent reason. I've always known, though, that for me to eschew the influence of TV, movies, and other elements of popular culture on *Martyred Cars* would be to deny it the energies that gave birth to it. The classic eighties film *Repo Man*, for example, is my novel's direct ancestor; it resurrects film noir traditions to probe the automotive and the otherworldly for their absurd and comic possibilities. And don't get me started on Joss Whedon's "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." That a television series depicting very real high school characters in a world of comic book logic can achieve a Shakespearean caliber (no fooling) of allegorical layering and punchy dialogue demonstrates to me that there is hope for us as a society. I also shouldn't get started on professional wrestling -- I've discovered brash and passionate literariness on every level of this carnival side show of a "sport." And I can't not recognize David Lynch as one of my sources. He taught me, in his films, that the best kind of satire should blur its intent, leaving the audience unsure whether they should furrow in contemplation or guffaw.

I do feel like *Martyred Cars* should associate with certain -isms and categories, such as urban mythology, comic book realism, automotive allegory, postmodern epic,
speculativism, and revisionist fantasy. I've made up some of these, borrowed others. I cringe, though, when I hear my novel called "magical realism." Maybe it is, technically. But that particular -ism always seems to imply that the magic is somehow separate from the pure realism. To me, it isn't. I believe in the possibility (not necessarily the probability) of everything I've written about in *Martyred Cars*. It's a real part of the world I've created, and it's not dismissable as some archaic cultural belief. I believe that more urban dwelling Americans believe in ghosts and goblins than are cynical, or even all that skeptical about the things that go bump in the night. Whether or not ghosts do exist, any kind of -ism I feel comfortable with must include them without any qualification. I'm speculating about what could be, what could exist beyond the rather limited boundaries of science. By doing so, I think I can have the most fun in examining the reality we do see and know. I must say, many details, events, and even conflicts in this book are straight realism. I'm not going to reveal which things in here are close to true, or even true, but in fiction workshops, these real events have usually been pegged as the most far fetched, and the most exactly transcribed dialogues pegged as unrealistic. I've come around to seeing this as a weirdly positive comment on my project.

I must thank Dameon Dollaz, Mr. Devin Andrews, Sinful, Funnybone, Brady A. Dezire, Johnny Rage, Tekniq, Solo Snuka, White Lightning, and everyone else at the Las Vegas Pro Wrestling Academy who has so enriched my weekends over the past three years. From these guys I've learned more about story, character, and passion for art than I could from any book. And thanks to Tommy, Leann, Ed, and Mark for finally befriending me so I didn’t have to sit and cheer and boo timidly by myself anymore. These four taught me everything I know about audience, period. Thanks to my parents,
Jim and Nancy, without whose entrepreneurial endeavors at Republic Auto Recycling I wouldn't know about any of the stuff in this book. Thanks to Goldie for being such a conscientious junk yard dog. And a big thanks to Declan and Phoebe for their relentless support. Thank you Jon Bauch, Han Quek, and Amanda Tomme for invaluable feedback on this book. And thanks, of course, to Doug Unger and Richard Wiley, for providing me with such a wonderfully tempestuous workspace in this writing program, in this city. It has been a very fertile place for me to create.
CHAPTER 1

JUNK YARD DEVIL

"I'll tell you, Betsy, the weather is only getting hotter! There's no relief in sight!"

Thus spoke Wild Billy, the 'A.M. Zoo' disk jockey, as Brody finished off the last of his McMuffin and pulled his pickup into the parking space beside the big red 'Martyred Cars Auto Wrecking' sign, which hung above the elaborate airbrush triptych that Josip, his parts guy, had completed a few months earlier: an '87 Olds Ninety-Eight with a halo, levitating in a starry sky above a crowd of pious onlookers, a '59 Chevy Impala shot through with arrows, and a crucified '74 Plymouth Fury with stigmata on its trunk, hood, and side view mirrors. Josip had gone hog wild with the sfumato, so that all three scenes had pea soup fog around the edges of the action.

"That's right Billy, hot hot hot! So we're giving away a free 86 ounce Really Big Gulp to the first ten callers!" Betsy, the sidekick, crooned back, in her patented 'I'm sexy, but also a hip fun chick' voice. Christ, I wish they'd get rid of those two, Brody thought. Their patter went dead as he turned off his engine. He noticed that the wind had blown the sign's C and Y into the weeds the night before, so the sign actually read 'MART RED ARS' this morning.

When Brody walked into the office, the parts hotline was already alive and chattering. Voices all over Cross Road City were in search of alternators and seat belts, brake pads
and front ends, ash trays and radiators. Josip sat at the front counter, in a daze as the
mantra of car parts rattled past him.

Brody could already feel his blood pressure on the rise. Sometimes he could just
throttle Josip. The yard was just scraping by these days, and this kid was a complete flake
about hustling for sales. A good worker, Josip, but he was a communist until he was
fourteen. Those early years are formative for one’s sense of salesmanship, Brody was
certain of it. But Brody couldn’t, couldn’t sit at the counter all day. These people who
came in for parts sent him to a breaking point on a regular basis. To call them salt of the
earth, Brody thought, would be generous. So Josip minded the hotline from time to time,
because it just wasn’t good for anyone involved if Brody kept selling enraged.

Sheila, his frizzy haired office manager, handed him inventory paperwork for the ‘85
Nissan Stanza he bought at last week’s impound auction, and Brody figured he’d work it
up before relieving Josip from the hotline. Brody was the only bidder on the Stanza, tan,
two door, at $400. The engine alone would bring in that much. The damage only hit the
rear end, which was totaled, its mangled California plate imbedded deeply in the bumper.
The windshield was also unsalvageable, with a big spider web crack. Everything else was
in good shape.

There wasn’t much booty inside the car -- a couple of empty MGD bottles, black
panties under the seat, and a bootleg tape, lovely, labeled ‘Welcome to Planet
Motherfucker’ in black marker -- until Brody heaved open the brick-heavy glove box, and
let spill its cornucopia of copper and silver coins onto the floor mat. Hey, hey! He’d
never seen anything like that before. Usually it was just a handful of pennies in the ash
tray. This guy saved his drive thru change for years!
Brody shoveled all the coins into a nearby bucket, disguised them with some dirty rags, and set it in an inconspicuous spot behind the air compressor. Unspoken code would have him share the wealth with Josip and Sheila, but lately he'd been wondering if they deserved it. He had thought, when he originally started Martyred Cars, that he would be everybody's favorite boss, the guy who has staff barbecues and gives nice Christmas bonuses. But these two were forming their own little clique lately, laughing at private jokes and listening all too avidly to the radio, fervently even, ignoring the hotline and the letting paperwork pile up in their obsession with winning worthless trinkets from Betsy and that obnoxious Billy. He'd have to weigh his options with the bucket of coins. Maybe he'd put them in the company bank account. Or maybe he'd buy flowers for his girlfriend Lucy. Yeah, he thought. That'd be a wise investment.

Brody forklifted the Stanza to the hydraulic lift and began to gut its engine and transmission. Then he took off the tires: three of the four were shredded pretty badly. Must have been one hell of a wreck! He threw the tires in their respective heaps -- scrap, and patchable. The sun glinted relentlessly off the fragmented windshield as Brody finished up the parts inventory, forklifted the Stanza to its new home, row D, space 42, and set it down on stacks of tire rims. He wiped his forehead and cranked the forklift back in the direction of the shop.

Hundreds of plastic shopping bags had blown into the Martyred Cars yard during the previous night's dust storm and now lined the perimeter of chainlink fence. They billowed peacefully in the midmorning breeze as Brody headed back into the office to relieve Josip from hotline duty.
The hotline was silent. Brody sat down and watched the cigarette shaped minute hand on the Joe Camel clock sweep from 9:47 to 48 and 49. A young punk came in looking for a Cadillac hood ornament, which they were fresh out of. Billy and Betsy yucked it up from the back office as they convinced a little boy on the request line to pour ice water on his sleeping dad’s head. Then, all of a sudden, the hotline shot off at breakneck speed, and Brody jolted forth in his seat.

“Ninety-nine Cellica a headlamp assembly, ninety-nine Cellica a headlamp assembly... Ninety-two Cutlass rear bumper, anyone with a Ninety-two Cutlass rear bumper... Eighty-five Stanza need an engine, Eighty-five Stanza need an engine...”

Brody grabbed the hotline’s handset. “Martyred Cars has that!” Ho ho! And the Stanza shall earn its keep!

Sure enough, the phone rang moments later, and it was Brody’s buddy Roadman from Beep! Beep! Foreign Parts: “Brody boy! Hook me up!”

So the deal was made, and the morning wore on. The mailman puttered into a parking space and hustled inside with a big stack of mail. Accounts payable, junk flier, payable, receivable, payable, junk flier, junk flier (Christ! He thought. How did I get on so many junk mail lists!), payable, and on the bottom of the stack, a folded, stapled piece of paper, with ‘Martyred Cars’ in a loopy, hand written address on the front. Mystery mail.

“HAVE YOU SEEN THIS WEED?” The ominously fonted question peered out of the yellow flier, which turned out to be from the city council. A photo of a cheerful yellow flowering plant below the gothic lettering topped the smaller caption: *Tansy*
Ragwort, Noxious Invader. Brody crumpled up the flier and threw it in the wastebasket with its assorted taco and burger wrappers, and tossed the rest of the mail in the ‘IN’ tray.

The hotline sat dormant again. Brody stepped outside and shaded his eyes from the glare. The sky was a complete sheet of sun-bleached blue. This heat, he thought. It’s only getting worse, and scaring all the clouds right out of the sky. The Santa Ana’s were also in high gear, whipping up dust devils all over town and fueling the forest fire that smoldered in several orange spots below the hazy blue outline of mountain in the distance. It all made Brody crave a popsicle, but, he realized, the Mr. Freezy truck had not been by in several weeks.

What could have happened to the Mr. Freezy? Brody wondered. He stepped back inside and looked, for no reason at all, at his framed photo of the Martyred Cars yard, birdseye on the wall by the soda machine. He’d had it done a month before by a Cross Road City legend, an old dude Brody knew from way back who did aerial photography and model train dioramas in people’s back yards. Sheila had said two hundred bucks was too steep for an aerial photo, but Brody couldn’t explain it, he needed to have it -- his three acre empire, encapsulated in an eight and a half by eleven inch square, all his strife represented by a tidy small gray right angle of a building and a grid of several hundred tiny rectangles that were his cars, mostly blue, red and white, with the odd green, orange, or purple block in the random mix. He was secretly determined to find a pattern, a code in there somewhere, something in the way the reds stepped forward from the other colors and said, howdy sir! Plus, he told himself, it was an investment. This guy is the Frank Lloyd Wright of aerial photos, he told Sheila. Such a thing can only appreciate in value.

*
The monitors blinked a blank cursor the next morning when Sheila tried to boot up the computer network. "I've never heard of it doing this," she shook her head, typing furiously through her bag of Control-Alt-Delete style tricks. "I'll call support, but I think it might be a while. Mercury's in retrograde, you know."

What the hell is that supposed to mean, by Christ. And without the computers, Brody thought, sales would be damn near a loss today. The hotline guys around town scooped up parts like rabid dogs, and Brody couldn't very well match up the parts by memory. He wasn't a spring chicken after all, his brain wasn't what it used to be. Brody started to jot down odd jobs he could work on until the computers were back on line. With work list in hand, Brody hollered into the shop. "Josip! Let's fix the sign!"

Josip brought out the ladder and a hammer, as Brody fished the letters out of the weeds. With Brody as spotter, Josip climbed the aluminum rungs with the Y, and was pounding away into the particle board as a powder blue Stanza crunched its tires into a parking space. A crouched, ancient woman wobbled out of the car and over to the ladder.

"Have you boys got a wiper fluid bottle for my car here?" she yelled at them.

"I think so, ma'am, just give us a minute to get this taken care of." Brody smiled politely. She didn't seem to hear, and came over to tug on Brody's shirt.

"I say, do you boys have a wiper fluid bottle for my car here!" She raised her decibel, poking Brody in the arm.

"Yeah! Yes! Hold on!" He patted her arm, and made the universal symbol for 'two minutes' with his fingers.

"Did you hear me, young man?"

Christ.
Josip saw Brody’s nostrils twitching and stepped in, climbing down the ladder.

“Boss, we can do this later. I’ll take care of her if you get her part.” He took the little woman by the arm, shouting, “Come on, ma’am, I’ll show you our waiting room!” That’s one thing Josip is good for, Brody thought, as he got on the forklift and drove out to the new Stanza. Saving me from batty old ladies. When he got there, he propped up the hood and unscrewed the holders to unwedge the bottle from its frame. As he pulled the bottle free, the metal prop holding up the hood suddenly collapsed, knocking Brody to the ground and sending the bottle flying.

Brody went to a nice, fuzzy place for a while. He woke up with throbbing temples. Josip was leaning over him. “That’s the last time I let you pull anything, boss!”

Brody’s wasn’t sure who he was for a moment, but his sales instincts were still kicking. “Did we sell the part?” he mumbled.

*

Three days later, noonish, Brody finally made it back in to ‘MARTYRED ARS,’ McMuffin in hand, as Betsy and Wild Billy were promising some guy Mike and the Mechanics tickets if he would call up his mom and tell her that he had had sex in a jacuzzi with Wilford Brimley. The doctor said he only had a mild concussion, but it felt like he’d been in a brawl! Lucy had refilled his ice pack countless times, and had gone out twice for Whataburgers when he needed a fix. I don’t deserve such a fine woman, he thought. I really don’t.

Brody found a Hickory Farms gift basket with vacuum packed sausage and smoked cheddar spread from Roadman, as well as a bouquet of white carnations next to his computer terminal, which was up and running, ready to jog parts out of its memory.
There was also a ‘Welcome Back’ card with a turtle wearing a baseball cap, signed by Josip and Sheila. These guys! Brody shook his head. He felt like an ass now for hiding the change from the Stanza. But he’d have to choose his moment to reveal the bucket of coins. That’s what being in charge is all about, he thought, choosing your moment.

Underneath the goodies, Brody found some inventory paperwork. “Sheila?” he called into the back office. “What’s this all about? No new cars, I missed the auction.”

Josip had been listening from the shop. “You were sick, boss, so I went and bid on a car. Hope you don’t mind. It was a really good looking AMC Pacer, ’83.”

“Christ, Josip. A Pacer? Who’s buying parts off old Pacers?” Brody could feel veins distinguishing themselves all over his neck. He thought of all the interesting cars he’d taken chances on at auctions -- the Opal, the Yugo, the Gremlin, the whole row of Novas, now all cluttering up the yard. Too few on the streets, too many in salvage, and Josip should have known that, if he’d ever paid attention to anything. Brody threw the paperwork on the counter. “Just what we need around here, Josip, more crap that won’t sell!”

“Boss, nobody was bidding on it! I paid only five hundred. The engine will bring at least that. Won’t it? Wait till you see. Quite a car, this one. I’ve always loved its windows that look like bubbles.” Josip didn’t have a clue. Brody shook his head and walked outside without a word.

Brody took the inventory sheets out to the Pacer, which he discovered was, indeed, cherry. Who took such good care of a Pacer? This one hadn’t been in a wreck at all -- instead, Brody surmised, stolen. The cops had cut out little several little squares of carpet, fiber samples, he guessed, which would be easily patched over with some miracle
goop he had picked up at the swap meet. The driver’s side lock was all chingered, too, and the glove box torn from its hinges. Otherwise, somebody babied this car. The papers from inside the glove box were in a neatly paperclipped bundle on the passenger seat. Brody paged through them: registration, insurance, clean emissions, receipts from Jiffy Lube, dated every third month to the day, all indicating a Sister Mary Frances of the Church of St. Christopher. There was a card with the Virgin of Guadelupe on it, and three wallet sized school pictures, unrelated, in plaid uniforms -- Kevin, 8, Marshall, 6, and Cindy, 12. Brody checked her insurance. She had comprehensive, so her provider must have bought her a vehicle to replace this one.

Brody felt, suddenly, a rush of emotion. This car was good. This car had seen bad things. He didn’t feel right gutting it just yet. Maybe it was salvageable. He left it where it was parked, and headed back into the office. Josip was sitting at the counter.

“I guess it will be alright,” Brody grumbled. He didn’t want Josip to know he’d accidentally done good.

“I tell you boss. Something felt right about that car,” Josip sounded like he’d had a moment with the car as well.

“Don’t gut it quite yet, huh?” Brody said. “Maybe it’s a fixer-upper.”

Josip went out to work on the Pacer, and Brody put in some time listening to the hotline. A young woman in a tube top broke the monotony, inquiring about a fuel cap for her Pinto. Brody gave her one for free out of a box under the counter, and smiled. He went back to monitoring the droning hotline, but he realized he wasn’t paying attention. He was fixated on the mountain forest fire. It was in a radically different configuration than when he’d last looked at it. It almost looked like it was spelling something in some
language with crazy letters, Arabic, or maybe Hebrew. It must have been the concussion thinking.

* 

"Betsy, is it ever going to rain?" Wild Billy whined over the ‘Baby Elephant Walk’ background track.

"Billy, maybe this afternoon! There’s a thirty percent chance of thunderstorms, and a flash flood warning!" said Betsy, in the same genuinely excited voice she had used when the station was giving away Bon Jovi T-shirts. Brody was driving in extra early to fix the sign, 6:30 in the morning, before the sun had fully punched in. They’d never gotten around to the C, and now the M and one of the R’s were down. What kind of a slipshod operation am I running here? Jesus Mary. Brody almost couldn’t stand himself this morning. He’d dragged his butt out of bed before Lucy even stirred, all to tend to some raggedy pieces of particle board.

Brody pushed his McMuffin wrapper into the dashboard of the truck. He realized he had quite a stash in there. God, when was the last time he’d thrown any away? As his truck took its place beneath ‘ARTY ED ARS,’ he dug out what must have been several months worth of wrappers. He wadded them up into a ball and unlocked the gate. This was the first day of the rest of his life, after all.

After he tossed the McMuffin wad in the dumpster, something caught his eye from the new Pacer. He had left the window rolled down the night before, and now, curled up inside in the driver’s seat was a furry, redheaded ball. Brody approached carefully.

The furball jolted awake at Brody’s gravel footsteps with a “Roo roo roo!” and showed itself to be a golden retriever of sorts, in full defense mode of the nun’s car.
“Hey, kid...” Brody tried to lure the dog out of the car. When he tried to open the door, the dog bared its teeth. Brody went inside, and found half of his Big Mac from yesterday’s lunch in the trash can. He came back out and offered the dog the meaty scent. The dog took a whiff, smiled, and let Brody open the door.

At 7:45, when Josip and Sheila showed up, Brody and the dog were playing fetch with an old rubber gasket. Brody’d forgotten about the sign. He felt a little awkward about Josip and Sheila catching him acting like such a softie. Indigent strays were always finding their way into the yard, and he always drove them straight to the pound. But Brody knew this one was different, a real cutie. He brought an extra stool to the counter, and the dog sat next to him as the hotline began to rattle parts. The dog barked sharply and ran under the back office desk when a crack of thunder led into a low grumble outside.

*

Just after Joe Camel struck noon, a spattering of raindrops gave way to a deafening, torrential assault on the aluminum roof. Sheila peeked in from the back office. “Woo wee! How ‘bout this rain, huh?”

The dog, who Josip had called Daisy, and it stuck, put her head in the crook of Brody’s elbow and shivered. The hotline was silent as the rain pounded the roof and bounced sharply in the parking lot. Another Stanza, this one with a psychedelic flowers and rainbows paint job, splashed into the parking lot. A gruff guy with a goatee and a boldly lettered NRA cap got out of the car and stalked into the office through the rain.
The man put his wet hands on the counter to stare Brody down: “Eighty two Nissan Stanza, left tail lamp assembly.” He slammed his fist on the counter to punctuate *left*, *tail*, and *sem*.

Brody kept his eye on the glaring man and typed animatedly into the network. The new Stanza came up as the donor again. “Josip?” he keyed into the walkie talkie. “Left tail ass on D-42, when you get a chance, my man.” The walkie talkie squawked back an affirmative giggle.

“I don’t find that kind of language amusing,” the NRA man sneered. Daisy cocked her head at him.

“Just a little joke I have with my yard man,” Brody gave the guy a cagey smile. The rain had subsided to a more suppressed patter so that Billy could be heard testing out his CD of obnoxious sound effects and grossing out Betsy. Brody winked at his customer as the back office radio produced what sounded like a mustard squirt, followed by the pair laughing heartily. The rain amplified momentarily as the shop door burst open and a soggy Josip presented the aggregate chunk of wire, chrome, and red plastic.

“Twenty five for that magnificent piece,” Brody said. The guy grumbled and pulled some crumpled bills out of his pocket. Brody gave him his receipt, and he stormed out.

“Have a wonderful day, sir.” Brody called behind him.

“Boss, that Stanza…” Josip began. He looked shaken. “Not such a funny joke. You know how I feel about that spooky stuff.”

“Josip, tail ass? How can a guy work for me if he can’t laugh at tail ass?” Brody poked him with his finger.
“Not that, man!” Josip put up his hands, unamused. “The Stanza! You know I take that business seriously.” He shook his head, went into the back office, and shut the door.

Brody could hear Sheila’s motherly timbre placating Josip’s panicked intonation. Now Brody was not amused. He headed for the forklift and cranked it toward D-42, Daisy trailing behind him.

The rain had stopped and the sun was blazing with a vengeance. The forklift lurched as it splashed through puddles on its way down the row of totaled cars. The cracked windshield of a Taurus zapped Brody’s eyes with its reflection. A small frog, come out from the rain, bounced in a puddle atop the dented roof of a mostly dismantled Lumina.

He jumped out by the Stanza, and immediately the dog started to growl. “What is it Daise?” The growl tore into a raging bark directed at the car. She backed away and raged forward, as though she wanted to attack, but also to get away from it. As Brody approached the Stanza, her barks became so furious she began to yelp and spit.

And that’s when Brody saw it. Just above the car’s bumper, someone had removed the ‘Z’ and rearranged the letters of ‘STANZA’ to form ‘SATAN.’ He smirked, and backed away. Daisy settled down a little. Brody turned the lift back toward the office.

He burst through the shop doors to the office, imagining himself to look like his favorite wrestler, Stone Cold: formidable, no-nonsense. Things are getting too silly around here, by Christ, and that’s the bottom line, because Stone Cold Brody says so!

When he pushed open the back office door, Josip and Sheila shrank back in fear.

“What the hell is the matter with you two?” he said. It was time to lay down the law.

“Are you still looking for monsters under your bed, Josip? How in the hell would I have time to think of something like that, huh? I’m too busy trying to keep this business from
going under, if you haven’t noticed! That car was that way when we got it and we didn’t notice until now, that’s the only explanation. Now back to work, Josip, the hydraulic lift isn’t going to pressure wash itself.”

“Boss! I’ve looked at that car top to bottom half a dozen times! If it wasn’t you, something not so funny is going on around here! That car fell on your head, remember? God have mercy on all of us!” Josip crossed himself.

“Really, Josip, with the state of the world, do you think Satan has time to hassle a junk yard? Come on, back to work.” Brody gave him the Stone Cold Evil Eye. Josip folded his arms and shook his head like a four year old. “Well, if you need to go to church or something, get out of here, but I won’t pay you while you’re gone. This does not fall under workman’s comp. Now go get yourself together and get over it.” Josip grabbed his lunch box and was out the door.

“Really, Brody,” said Sheila. “You could have a little compassion.”

“Sheila, I think I’m awfully patient with Josip, but for Christ sake. This isn’t medieval Europe! Satan has better things to do than play Scrabble on a freaking Nissan hatchback, and you’ve seen the books. We don’t have time for crap like this, especially in these uncertain times! We’ll go under if we don’t get our act together pretty soon.”

Sheila shook her head and went back to her paperwork. Brody went out to the front counter, and Daisy took her place at his feet. That is pretty extraordinary, though, Brody considered. The Nissan Satan and the Nun’s Pacer. Good thing they’re on opposite ends of the yard, or we could have a holy war on our hands.
Brody chuckled to himself. He looked out the window to where the nun’s car was parked. A shaft of sunlight had broken through the clouds and was glinting off its windshield.

* 

After another night of record setting winds, Brody pulled in to find the sign reading ‘A TY D ARS.’ What the hell is going on around here? First thing today, by God, the sign. His resolve sidetracked immediately, though, when he walked in to find a Virgin of Guadalupe candle burning on the counter, and to make matters worse, Josip behind the counter, trying to keep his cool with an irate customer. Daisy watched intently from Brody’s stool.

“Boss! Good morning!” Josip looked relieved. He vaguely remembered this guy from two days before. He was some kind of Middle Easterner, Pakistani or something. Brody hated to be a jerk about it, but they all looked the same to him.

“Sir!” said the man, more loudly than necessary. “I need my money back for this part. It does not work!” The guy held up a starter motor, all rusty and covered with gook. Brody took it and looked it over, while Josip made urgent faces. It was Brody’s policy that Josip always mark the Martyred Cars symbol discreetly on each part in grease pencil: an Irish cross, the kind with a circle in the middle. There was no sign of a cross anywhere on this starter motor.

“Where’d you get this part, sir?” Brody asked.

“Right here! I know you remember me! It does not work!” The guy waved the starter around, all haughty.
“Well sir, we brand all of our parts, and this isn’t one of them. You must have the wrong shop.” Brody handed him back the part.

“I’ve got my receipt, right here, are you calling me a liar?”

Brody looked at the receipt. Indeed, they had sold this guy a Nissan Stanza starter motor. But Brody would never sell a part in such piss-poor condition in the first place.

“Sir, I just ate an entire watermelon for breakfast. I don’t think you want to mess with me,” he said. It wasn’t true, but he thought it sounded pretty menacing.

“I’m never buying parts here again,” said the guy. “And I’m not leaving until I get my money back. Call the police on me!”

Brody’d had enough. “Well, well. The almighty consumer, eh? I’ll tell you what I think of that.” He grabbed the part, and ran out the front door. He shot putted the starter in an arch over the parking lot. It landed in the road with a clunk. “How ‘bout that, eh? How’s that for you’re money back! Call the police, asshole! We’ll see whose side they take!”

The guy skittered out in the street to retrieve his part, and drove off nervously in his Citation. I guess, Brody admitted to himself, that was a little much. But these people get their way and they’ll nickel and dime you out of business!

“Josip, you work the counter today,” Brody stalked off with a hammer. He was clearly only good for banging on nails today. He didn’t even have enough energy left to give Josip crap about the Virgin of Guadalupe. The guy’s Russian, for Christ sake, Brody thought, married a Mexican and now he lights Jesus candles like a native. Shouldn’t he be probing the depths of his Slavic soul? But Brody was having to learn about letting things go.
Brody worked on the sign for over an hour, and finally had ‘MARTYRED CARS’ all pieced back together when Josip came hustling out out of the office with a small, raggedy yellow flower in his hand. “Boss!” his voice wavered. “I think I’ve seen this weed!”

Brody vaguely recognized it, too, from something he’d thrown out weeks ago. He went for the overflowing waste basket in the back office. Rummaging through the trash, he found the town council flyer wedged inside a curly fries container.

“Typically thought only to infest hayfields, woodlands, and pastures in coastal regions, the noxious Tansy Ragwort has mysteriously infested our dusty town and is thriving in the dry heat.” Brody read the blurb below the flower photo aloud. “This plant can wreak havoc on an ecosystem: it spreads rapidly and its flowers are fatally poisonous to most livestock. It is critically important that you catch the plant before it flowers. Pull it up by the root, making sure to wrap any flower heads in plastic so they won’t shed seeds. Christ, Josip, don’t touch it!” Brody smacked the plant out of Josip’s hand and onto the ground. It sat there a moment, then they both realized it was worse off in the dirt. Josip grabbed a plastic bag that was stuck in the fence and slid it under the flower, while Brody scooped a section of dirt from where the plant had fallen into the baggie.

“I wonder if it’s safe to throw it away?” Josip brought up a good point. Brody made a little packet out of the plastic, and took it in to the back office.

“Sheila, keep an eye on this,” he put the bundle in the center of the desk, and stopped short. The A.M. Zoo had been replaced on Sheila’s flimsy boom box by a tranquil tape of Native American flute music. Sheila was holding a smoking bundle of
dried twigs that was quite egregiously stinking up the office. Daisy stood beside her, slurping at the air.

“Oh, God. Now what?” Brody waved the smoke out of his face.

“I’m burning sage, Brody, it will cleanse all the bad energy that’s gathering around here. Now, I know you don’t like bad smells, but just bear with me on this one.” She blew on the bundle so that smoke would drift toward him.

On the radio the evening before, Brody had heard Sean Hannity advise a caller that dealing with employees was like being a preschool teacher, you just had to play their game sometimes. Brody thought it sounded like an interesting strategy. He shook his head and decided not to argue with Sheila.

Back behind the counter, Brody found Josip staring, concerned, at the hotline, where something strange was going on: “Eighty-three Stanza, a front-end, eight-three Stanza, a front end... Eighty-one Stanza, a radiator, eighty-one Stanza, a radiator... Eighty-six Stanza, an alternator and transmission, eighty-six Stanza, an alternator and transmission...”

There seemed to be Stanzas in need all over town. “You know, we could sell all of those parts out of D-42.” Brody tried to prod Josip.

Josip frowned, and stared off at the mountains. “Boss, I’m not so sure we should be making money off of that car. I know you think it’s stupid, but I believe God may be trying to test us here. Go out and take a look at what happened to it.” Brody tried to follow Josip’s gaze out the window. The forest fire has been largely extinguished by the rain, but what was left burning seemed to spell out ‘HOD.’ Brody was just dying to make a smart ass comment. Instead, he got up without a word and headed outside.
Daisy followed him to the forklift, and jumped in his lap for the ride out to D-42. When they got there, Daisy jumped down and growled tentatively, then began to sniff the perimeter of the lot space. Something had changed with the previous day’s rain: the ground around the Stanza was now surrounded by a lush young fringe of green and yellow foliage. The Tansy Ragwort, thought Brody, this is where Josip found it. Hundreds of seeds must have been hiding all over the underbelly of the car.

“Damn this Stanza,” Brody said under his breath. Things have now gone to far, he thought. By Christ, it’s time for somebody to take charge of this nut house. This called for far more than a Stone Cold attitude. It was time to invoke The Rock. Can you smell what Brody’s cookin’, jabrodies?!

He threw the forklift in gear and gunned the engine. The effect was somewhat anticlimactic, since the lift couldn’t go much above eight miles per hour, but that didn’t shake Brody’s will.

The phone rang as Brody walked, with purpose, back into the office. He strode past the still pensive Josip to answer it.

“Scuse me, is this Martyred Cars?” asked a nasal, almost cartoonish voice on the other end of the line.

“Yes it is,” Brody answered. “What can I do you for?”

“Well, how many of you have to die before we all get to go to Heaven?” The voice asked, with a sarcastic edge. There was a split second of snickering in the background before the line went dead.

Brody looked at Josip, who seemed to sense the mystery of the call. Before Brody could say what happened, a yip came from the shop door. They turned around to find
Daisy chewing on a mouthful of the poisonous Tansy Ragwort. Brody had been in such a hurry to take charge of things that he left her by the Stanza, sniffing at the weeds.

"Josip, get rid of that infernal plant," said Brody, through his teeth. He scooped the dog up in his arms and, without a word, walked out of the office. He put her in the passenger seat of his truck and pulled carefully out of the parking lot, heading for the Little Critters Animal Hospital a few miles down the road.

* 

Daisy returned on Thursday afternoon, after having had her stomach pumped and staying overnight for observations. She was groggy, and a little urpy, but looked relieved. Brody carried her through the yard’s gate and set her down in the makeshift pen that Josip had thrown together with some extra chainlink they had stashed behind the shop. Daisy swiftly went to work on the chew rag that Sheila had brought as a ‘Welcome Home’ gift.

“It’s a good thing you brought her in right away,” the veterinary assistant, whose name tag said ‘Kathi,’ had told Brody. Her scrubs had a very busy ‘Raining Cats and Dogs’ theme on them. “That ragwort is an evil, evil plant. We had a potbellied pig in here last week puking all over the place from it, and it was too late to save him. Poor little guy. Once the Tansy gets to their liver and starts killing cells, it’s all over.”

“So Josip, how have sales been today?” Brody shouted over the Gregorian chants, which were blasting from the back office stereo. He was trying to ignore the candles flickering red and white reflections onto the counter, now a whole row: Christ with Mary, two different ‘Crown of Thorns’ motifs, Christ on the Cross, Mary by herself, and of
course, the Virgin of Guadelupe, now in triplicate. Brody wondered what those candles were supposed to do, exactly.

“Pretty slow, boss.” Josip shook his head as the monks creshendoed, “gloriam, in excelsis deo, et in terra pax hominibus...” “The hotline’s been quiet. Not enough wrecks lately.”

Brody wasn’t sure how to be sensitive about the issues at hand: the strange phone call, the Tansy Ragwort, the potentially demonic hatchback sitting amidst their inventory. The monks voices trickled to a mumble as the phone rang. Brody grabbed it.

“Hello, Martyred Cars?” squawked the voice, which Brody could tell was the same creepy one from the day before, though this time sporting a very much excessive southern drawl. “Stick a fork in me, I’m cooked!” Again, a giggle in the background, and the voice hung up. Brody felt a twinge of horror, and then squinted. An older model Dodge Dart was blinding him with its windshield as it pulled into the parking lot. A woman in a business suit with a briefcase got out.

She strode in with a swift demand. “I need to speak to the manager.” Josip, as though sensing impending conflict, caught a front bumper on the hotline and snuck off to pull it from a Festiva.

“That’s me,” said Brody, wearily. The monks suddenly boomed from out of their lull, “laude muste, benedici muste, adora muste, glorifica muste...” Brody walked over to shut the back office door. Sheila didn’t notice; she was sitting cross-legged on the floor with her eyes closed.

“I’m from the Cross Road City Council Consumer Crackdown Commission. You’ve probably heard of us.” The woman set her briefcase on the counter and pulled out
some paperwork. Brody thought this sounded like some kind of joke. “We’re like the Better Business Bureau, only with an edge. We’ve received a complaint from a Mr. Faidi, who claims that you not only refused to refund his money for a defective product, but that you took said product and threw it into the road. Would you confirm this statement of events?”

Brody sighed. “Would I confirm... sure.”

“Well sir, there are two ways we can do this,” she narrowed her eyes at him. “You can give me the refund, and I can settle things with the customer. Or, you can be a tough guy and refuse, and I can put you on the Bad Business Blacklist. And you can trust me Mr. Martyr,” she folded her arms. “You don’t want to be on our blacklist.”

On any other day, Brody would have told this woman where she could put her blacklist. Any other day, he would have made a very clever joke at the expense of her shoulder pads. But today, he was tired. Without a word, he counted $15.95 out of the cash register and handed it to the woman.

“C To The Sixth Plus R appreciates your cooperation.” She smiled stiffly and handed him the yellow copy of one form and the pink copy of another. With that, she was back in her Dart, and peeling out of the parking lot. The monks chanted softly. “Qui tolis pecata mundi, mi se re, re, nobis...”

Brody felt broken. When Josip returned to the counter, bumper in tow and ready for pickup, Brody stepped outside for some air, and to check on Daisy. The dog was sleeping deeply and kicking the air. Pieces of chew rag were strewn all over her pen. She snoozed with her front paws around a teddy bear in a Hawaiian shirt, which Josip must
have given her. Brody recognized the bear. He had found it weeks earlier, in the back seat of a sandwhiched Explorer.

The nun’s car sat beside Daisy’s pen. Brody thought it looked like it was watching over her. He opened the door and sat down in the driver’s seat. Josip had fixed the lock and the glove box, and had even discovered a chintzy, broken alarm system, which he had tinkered with and gotten to work. So the Pacer was now a perfect vision of good maintenance, as much a vision as an ‘83 could be. Brody reclined the seat back and closed his eyes. The backs of his eyelids danced with textures and patterns. In a few minutes, he sat up with a resolve he didn’t quite understand, and started the engine.

Brody drove the Pacer cautiously up the aisle beside the D row. He felt as though the orderly ranks of deteriorating vehicles were standing at attention for him as he passed today, like frazzled soldiers. The ones with headlights seemed to make grim eye contact with him as he puttered along. A torn convertible top flapped at an obtuse angle. Three hatchbacks in a row were raised, as if in salute.

When he reached space 42, Brody stayed in the car and turned off the engine. Josip had wrapped the flower heads of the Tansy Ragwort border with plastic bags from the fence, and then left them standing while he awaited further instructions. The Stanza appeared positioned behind a company of little shower-capped bodyguards. Brody figured he ought call someone about noxious weed removal — he didn’t want Josip, bless his heart, to botch things up and let seeds infest the whole yard.

Other than the ragwort, though, the car looked, well, normal. Defiantly normal. A tan little box of a hatchback -- the ultimate in parking lot camouflage. Brody had an
impulsive thought -- the Stanza seemed to be issuing him a challenge of some sort. He started the Pacer again, and circled back in the direction of the office.

When Brody got back inside, Josip was trembling. “Boss,” he said. “A guy on the phone just asked me if I would lay down and die for God.”

*

The ruthless heat had fully resurged on Friday, and the forest fire had grown back into a cryptic code. When Brody pulled in below the sign (which was holding tentatively together since its bout with the wind), the A.M. Zoo Crew was on the phone, bothering a sleepy sounding guy at a place called Holy Donuts. Betsy was sharing her thoughts on the particularly blessed unction of her favorites varieties: sugar-raised and creme-filled. As he walked into the office, Brody chewed thoughtfully on the remains of his McMuffin. Josip had arranged his candles in a horseshoe around the hotline and was waiting, contemplative, in front of the computer. Brody waved him away; he needed to do some thinking. The phone rang. Brody answered.

“Mommy? Mommy?” asked an affected little girl’s voice. “Where are you, mommy? I can’t see you, mommy!” The voice degenerated into the same sniggering as the day before, and hung up.

Brody scratched his nose. He wasn’t having any of this good and evil nonsense, but he was starting to buy into the idea that something abnormal was going on, something less random than coincidence, and whatever it was, it clearly started with the arrival of the Stanza. In bed the night before, he had told Lucy about all the strange Stanza happenstance, and she told him about a car in her childhood that could not be driven smoothly for more than a month without a problem, be it fender bender, clutch failure, or
speeding ticket under outlandish circumstances. Brody was beginning to believe that the Stanza was similarly ill-fated, that it had some kind of intrinsic manufacturing flaw, something that caused problems in even the air around the auto body itself. It sounded kooky, but Brody thought it might have to do with physics, or maybe even acoustics. Brody liked to think of himself as a scholar, and thought it best to attack any situation by doing a little homework.

He dug around in the rummage bag of glove box literature in the shop and found a weathered copy of the 1985 Nissan Stanza Owner's Manual. The photos of crash test dummies caught his eye, as did the cross-section of a seated driver's bone alignment, and the sketch of a Stanza stuck in snowy conditions. Capacities, specifications, vehicle dimensions, it all put him more in touch with the Stanza, but didn't really help him understand anything unusual. Back inside, he took a look at the Stanza listings in the current blue book. He didn't know what he expected to find there, really, besides prices, but it was worth a look see.

After scalping a guy in a really nice suit for an XTerra cup holder, Brody got on the horn with Roadman from Beep! Beep!, who had been in the business since the days of paper and pencil inventory. Roadman was more or less a normal junk guy, but he spoke of vehicles with a sort of organic respect, referring to cars as she, trucks as he (yet big flatbed trucks and the odd cargo-vehicle she, which always struck Brody as counterintuitive, if you're assigning genders). He also hyperbolized automotive action verbs such as the standard runs and dies to arrive at heartfelt, emotive sentences like, “This Sidekick is feeling congested today,” and “That Intrepid thirsts for high octane gas.” Roadman's delivery guys always told Brody that he had a magic touch, too, feeling
his way to the origins of the most puzzling engine knocks and leaks. Brody thought that Roadman would be the one to ask about, well, a car that’s... cursed. He hated to resort to such melodrama, but these were extreme circumstances.

When Roadman picked up the phone, it sounded like he was crunching ice.

“Brody boy!” he garbled.

“Roadie, need your expertise,” Brody chose his words carefully. “Do you know of, I mean, have you ever heard of, a car that’s... you know, completely inauspicious?” He hoped he didn’t sound like a pansy, he might never hear the end of it.

“A car born under a bad sign, you mean?” asked Roadman, with a chomp, chomp.

“Indeed! What model you got?”

“Umm, a Nissan Stanza, ‘85,” said Brody, not sure if he should be offering any details. He hoped Roadman wasn’t setting him up to look like a real dope. “What is it, something with the engine?”

“1985, that was a problematic year for Japan,” Roadman spoke. “Their economy had grown so rapidly in the late seventies that by eighty-five, you know, the cities were totally overcrowded, not to mention polluted. And then, the yen’s strength over the dollar was causing export problems, their agriculture was going to rot, basically all of Japan was a bundle of nerves. Just think, your Stanza witnessed all that at a very young age. I’d be cranky, too.”

“But Roadie,” Brody continued. “The problem is something around the car, like electromagnetic? The car brought the Tansy Ragwort in its tires!”

“Woah! That’s a bad weed!” said Roadman.
“It’s more than that, though! The computers went down, the sign out front is falling apart, the dog ate the Tansy, I got wonked on the head, and the customers are getting increasingly weirder around here lately! All starting the very day we got the Stanza, man, you can’t tell me that’s coincidence!”

“Brody,” Roadman stopped crunching. “Sometimes life gives you lemons, man, you know that. Sometimes you have to wear a hair shirt for a while. Don’t worry, you’ll take it off at some point. You always do.”

They hung up, and Brody stared into the computer. The cursor pulsed gently in the box under YEAR/MODEL. Brody typed in ‘85STAN’ and clicked SEARCH STATE.

“Searching...” the computer flashed, “Searching...”

After a few moments, dozens of entries listed down the screen. After the last entry, the computer blinked politely, “Next search?”

Brody scrolled through the records. The computer was set to find not just the specified year, but all compatible cars, so the computer was showing Stanzas from most of the decade. But only one ‘85 was listed. He clicked on it, and sure enough, it was the Stanza at Martyred Cars.

“The only one in the state,” Brody said, to nobody in particular. He jumped as the hotline spoke up, almost in response.

“Eighty-two Pacer an engine, eighty-two Pacer an engine... looking for an eighty-two Pacer engine.”

A twinge of panic shot through Brody’s stomach. This is some sort of a test, by God. Nobody picked up the call, and whoever it was tried again:
“Anybody, anybody, eighty-two Pacer an engine, eighty-two Pacer an engine...
anybody with an engine for an eighty-two Pacer...”

Brody stared at the hotline phone. It was the nun’s Pacer. But the yard could really use the money. He laid his hand on the receiver, drew in his breath, and closed his eyes.

Before he could act, another voice came over the hotline. “All Cars has that.”

And yet another. “Back-2-Life can back-up.”

Brody exhaled deeply in relief. He felt giddy. He wanted to do something nice for everyone. He remembered the bucket of change in the shop, and called to Josip on the walkie talkie:

“Attention all Martyred Cars employees: pizza’s on me for lunch!”

Josip squawked back with a whoop.

*

Josip worked outside for most of the morning, but by lunch time had taken shelter in the air conditioned back office to hang out with Sheila and eat his pizza. The temperature had spiked up to 108 degrees in the shade, according to the thermometer on the wall in the shop. Sheila had dug up a tape called “Cool Babbling Brook,” and was piping it’s serene liquid sounds from her office. Despite everything, Brody was sweating slightly.

The phone rang. Brody picked it up.

“Hey man,” said the male, teenage-sounding voice. “I need a door handle for a ‘78 Camaro.”

Brody rolled his eyes. “Can’t help you, man, I only sell the whole door.”
“Dude, you have one though?”

“Well, it doesn’t matter now kid, does it? Because I only sell the whole door, and they’re running around a hundred a piece, far beyond your means.” Brody answered. A loon called out abruptly from the babbling brook.

“You don’t know, prick, I could be a millionaire!” The kid was offended.

Brody hung up. This kind of foolishness was what would drive him to an early grave.

The phone rang again, and it was the kid. “I’m getting my dad and we’re gonna come down there and kick your ass, man!” His sentence escalated to a scream.

“I look forward to doing business with you,” Brody sneered.

The kid paused, and then asked, “hey, can I get directions?”

Brody slammed down the phone. In a few seconds, he started to giggle. His giggle grew into a full-bodied chortle. By the time Sheila and Josip came out of the back office to see what he was laughing at, he couldn’t talk to tell them. He was beet red, choking, and close to pee ing his pants when he began to notice a consistent honking noise emerging from under the babbling brook. It was coming from outside.

Brody went outside, still grinning and breathing heavily. The honking was coming from the nun’s Pacer, something had set off the security alarm. Daisy was barking her head off inside her pen, and something smelled horrible. Brody looked around, and then he saw it. There were enormous black plumes of smoke billowing up from the far end of row D. Tiny tendrils of orange flame licking, here and there, out of some car that was the source of the smoke. He didn’t know what to do.

Brody’s staff came out to see what the honking was all about.
“Dial 9-1-1!” Josip shouted at Sheila, who froze like deer. “Do it now!” he yelled, grabbing the fire extinguisher from the side of the building. Sheila disappeared back inside.

Brody gazed, bewildered, at his employee. Josip shoved him into the Pacer, and got in the passenger seat. The honking shut up once Josip got the key off the car’s visor and into the ignition. While they peeled across the yard toward the smoke, Brody was aware of an ominous feeling in his stomach. As they came close enough to see space 42, fire was roaring inside the ’85 Nissan Stanza. The Tansy Ragwort perimeter was burning, too, their tiny heads flickering like angry candles.

Josip stopped the Pacer a safe distance from the fire. He stepped out of the car as Brody sat and watched. The already cracked windshield of the Stanza shattered loudly in the heat. Josip pulled the pin out of the extinguisher and inched forward, aiming the gust of cold white chemicals at the driver’s seat through the remaining shards of windshield. Brody stumbled out of the car. His eyes were watering. He averted them to the Geo Metro in the adjacent space. The fire was so hot that the Metro’s white paint was melting.

Brody watched Josip cover his mouth with his T-shirt and breathe, keeping the extinguisher aimed at the fire, which seemed damn near unquenchable. Sweat pooled on Brody’s forehead and ran down into his eyes. In what seemed like eternity (but which was probably closer to five minutes), sirens broke through the roar of the fire. Not long after that, Brody watched one fireman pull Josip away, while a another aimed a big hose at the fire and snuffed it out in a few seconds. The smoke lightened to a softer shade of
gray as Brody felt an oxygen mask being slipped over his face. He agreed to sit down on
the bumper of the fire engine, and closed his eyes.

*

As it turned out, Josip had inhaled a little smoke, but was otherwise okay. And
except for his pride, Brody was unscathed. The paramedics let them stay at the yard if
they promised to take it easy for the rest of the day. The fire truck hung around for a
while to investigate and keep an eye on the Stanza, which was still slightly smoldering.
Sheila hounded both of the guys into drinking green tea while they sat at the counter and
listened halfheartedly to the hotline.

Roadman had seen the smoke cloud from his yard a few streets over. He came by
to gawk at the blackened wreck and hypothesize about the strange fire.

“I’ve heard of this happening, but it’s pretty rare. The sunlight, most likely, got
concentrated in a windshield crack at just the right angle and set her upholstery ablaze.
Just like an ant in a magnifying glass! Pretty amazing, Brody.” He leaned on the counter.
“You’re lucky the fire didn’t spread to any other cars.”

Soon after Roadman went back outside to share his theories with the firemen, a
gray mini-van careened into the parking lot. A stylish blond woman and a tubby man
with bug eyes climbed out and hustled toward the office. She carried some kind of tape
recorder, and he was struggling with a giant fruit basket.

The team burst through the door. “Are you who we speak to about beatification?”
asked the woman. Her voice sounded very familiar to Brody -- sexy, but also hip and fun.

“Um. Who wants to know?” said Brody, cautious.
"I'm Betsy, and this is Wild Billy. We're from the A.M. Zoo! We came by to thank you for being such a good sport these last couple days."

Brody looked at Josip, who shrugged. "Sorry, don't get it," Brody said.

"We called here a bunch of times! Gave you guys a bunch of crap about God and dying? Mommy mommy! Remember? It was our Summer Solstice Prank Call-athon, we've been causing trouble all over town!" Billy plopped the fruit basket down on the counter. "The Bodhi Dharma Pizza Shack, R.V. Heaven, Mecca Plumbing, Holy Donuts, we've been prank calling every religously-named establishment we could find! Wacky, wacky stuff!"

Ahh, thought Brody, I remember something about Holy Donuts. And Sheila had been playing tapes over the past few days, not the radio. That's why we didn't hear them calling us.

"We wanted to thank you for being such a good sport," Betsy patted the gift basket.

Billy took a pear from the basket, dangled it in front of Josip and goggled his eyes. "Look out for forbidden fruit! Woo woo! Hee hee!" Betsy grabbed Billy's arm and dragged him toward the door.

"We'll get out of your hair now. Keep listening to the A.M. Zoo!" Betsy called from the doorway.

Sheila peeked in from the back office. "So, T.G.I.F., huh?"

"Indeed," Josip agreed.

Brody perked up his ears: the tinny chords of 'The Entertainer' tinkled distantly from somewhere down the road. The Mr. Freezy truck was back.
On Monday, Wild Billy and Betsy kicked off an ‘All Fire Morning’ in celebration of the forest fire having been snuffed mostly out by heavy rains all weekend. Betsy was in the middle of a lively karaoke medley (and in particular, ‘Hunka Hunka Burning Love’) as Brody passed the newly resurfaced Mr. Freezy on the road to Martyred Cars. He saluted Harry, the ice cream man, who waved.

Brody had laid on the couch all weekend, and was now ready to take on the world! Lucy helped him devise an attack plan that would put Martyred Cars, once and for all, back on track. Josip would get a fifty cent raise, a jazzier ad in the phone book was in order, and they’d promptly send a bunch of the esoteric cars away for scrap metal to make room for more big sellers, in particular, luxury sport sedans and unusual sport utility vehicles. And, of course, he would have what was left of the Stanza hauled away once and for all, and would call the guy about the Tansy Ragwort, which was mostly burnt to a crisp, but Brody didn’t want to take any chances.

Brody’s watch had stopped during the night, but Betsy was scat singing the time, temperature, weather forecast, and station identification to the tune of ‘Disco Inferno.’ It was 8:15 as he pulled into the parking lot and eagerly shoved the remaining half of his McMuffin in his mouth. He couldn’t park in his usual space, though, because the entire ‘MARTYRED CARS’ sign was parked there, face down in the gravel. Josip’s painting of airbrushed automotive martyrdom loomed, wordless and spectral, at ground level.

A new sign, Brody thought, suddenly weary of his bread and egg mouthful. I guess we need a new sign as well.
Josip helped the tire guy throw all the worn down, not yet bald tires into the guy's stakebed truck on a windy Monday afternoon, not long before closing. This was a semi-monthly pickup. The guy paid Brody fifty bucks a truckload, and hocked them to desperate souls at a modest swap meet mark up, so everyone came out happy. Josip set aside the four newest of the old tires to keep for himself behind Daisy's pen. He always saved a few tires for his good friends from church: Pedro and his wife, Maria, and their cousin Martin, and his brother José. When they drove down to Mexico every few weeks to visit family, they each took a tire -- the border guards hassled anyone with two or more, you had to declare them and there was paperwork. At one tire per person per trip, it took only one trip or two to fix up whoever in their family was driving on the slickest, shiniest tires.

The tire guy paid him in a bunch of greasy ones and fives, and scrawled out a receipt on the back of a Burger King napkin. Then Josip closed up the yard by himself -- Brody was at the police impound auction, and Sheila had left early to go to her daughter's school play. Sophie was playing Vaclav Havel in a skit called 'Meet Europe's Leaders.' Josip shut down the computers, counted out the register, put the cash in the safe, locked the doors, shut and locked the gate, let Daisy out of her pen, fixed her up with some nighttime kibble, and drove the yard's resident vehicles into the shop for the night: the
forklift, the delivery pickup, the nun’s Pacer, the sickly Firebird Brody was tinkering with, and the beat-up old Frito Lay delivery van that Brody and some of the other junk men stole from each other now and again. This was an endless practical joke among the yards, involving highly planned ambushes, often with disguise mustaches. Brody had swiped the van last week from Chuck’s Trucks while the Chuck’s guys were on the roof of their office watching the air show, and now Brody held the title of ‘Almighty Frito Bandito’ (at least, until someone else snuck in and sped away in the clunker). This was the kind of thing that kept Josip at arm’s length from the boss. Brody was 90% crank and the rest of him a live wire, with never any warning when an episode was coming on.

Lately, though, Brody was even more of a question mark. Something had changed in him after the strange Stanza fire, something that led him to an aggressive new approach in his overall management strategies. There was a new sign on the pole out front, yellow and plastic, with bold black ‘MARTYRED CARS’ letters that were visible from half a mile away. Brody had flushed the inventory of some old wrecks that nobody ever bought parts from anymore, which Josip, in his heart, thought was a darned shame: a cute, rusting old El Camino got the boot, as did an early model Duster and a well-parted out Camero that he’d grown quite fond of. All three and twenty other cars that weren’t making any money were crunched flat and sent away to be recycled and reborn as rebar. And Brody was selling parts like a banshee lately, picking out the most garbled voices from the hotline and wheeling and dealing prices that were just reasonable enough to keep the customer hooked in, but high enough to make a nice profit. Brody was also letting Josip in on the new wave, promising him a raise and a promotion from parts guy to full time counter sales if he a) increased his hotline sales by, what Brody called, “a
boatload," and b) helped Brody find a new Parts Guy who wasn’t “a total dweeb” (also Brody’s words). Josip intended to get his act together, he really did, but there was a lot on his mind lately, a lot that lured his attention away from the job at the worst moments.

After he wedged the cars and trucks into the shop and rolled the doors shut, Josip headed over to the stack of tires he’d set aside. He was only allowed to keep stuff like that from the yard if he promised to get it "the hell out of Brody’s sight" right away. He reached for the two top tires, hooking one with each arm, and was thrown backward, ass over teakettle, by a sudden blast of fire that shot out from the remaining tire stack.

Josip screamed. He scrambled to his feet, and ran to the fire extinguisher mounted on the shop wall. As he fumbled with the mounting latch and pulled the pin on the canister, he thought he heard a voice say, “no, don’t.”

His mind raced: the nearby cars could catch fire, as could the weeds and shrubs growing around the tires, and what Brody would say? He’d kill Josip, and on top of it all, what a bummer it was that two good tires were burning up! Daisy should have been barking up a storm, but she was nowhere in sight. Josip dashed back over to the fire, extinguisher ready, to find what appeared to be, well, a little old man standing inside the fire.

Josip paused. The man smiled, and gave a little wave. Josip raised the extinguisher.

“Josip, come on. Put that thing down. I’ll put myself out, I just need to talk to you.” What was this? The man on fire was talking. Or, rather, the man in fire, the fire didn’t seem to be affecting him -- its flames rumbled clean around him and steered clear of his outfit, which was kind of Star Trekkish, a cross between fatigues and a funky
bathrobe, something you’d see on some lonely but benevolent alien traveling through the Delta Quadrant. And he wasn’t exactly a man, he had a sort of glow about him. Not see-through, exactly, not like ghosts in the movies, but he definitely had a sheen, the kind of thing you didn’t see on normal people.

What the heck? I’ve gone loco this time, Josip thought, completely loco, something’s very wrong inside my head. He blasted a puff of white stuff from the extinguisher at the base of the fire, but the fire surged back at him, knocking him down again.

“Oh jeez,” said the fire man, leaning over him. “Are you okay?”

“You burnt my hand, dude!” Josip edged away and sucked at his palm.

“Aw, sorry. I didn’t mean to. Here, look, it’ll be okay, just let me see it.” The fire man swooped out and clasped Josip’s hand. Josip watched at the man’s face, which turned all peaceful. He felt a cold, wonderful healing going on in his hand, a feeling which extended all the way up to the elbow he’d skinned changing the oil on Sheila’s Hyundai the day before. After a few moments, the fire man let go and smiled.

“There, that should do you. Now, I have to tell you some things. I’ve been sent here... no, shhht, just listen...” He put up his hand when Josip started to speak. “I’ve been sent here by God, the Heavenly Father, under the sub-jurisdictions of both the Savior Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad, and in concordance with the edicts passed by such delegates as Zarathustra, Pallas Athena, St. Jerome, St. Bernard, Thor, Thoth, la Virgen de Guadalupe, oh, and also, ‘The Mother Goddess,’ even though she’s really more of a concept, to inform you, Josip, that you have been chosen as visionary and key pillar in this region. We were very pleased with your reaction to that Nissan Stanza. That car
wasn't possessed or anything, just fluky, we didn't actually know anything about it until we heard your prayers, but your reactions were dead on -- vigilant, instinctive, heroic even. When God saw that he said, 'by gum, Josip's the man we need on our team.'

"You see Josip, complicated events are on the horizon, too complicated for me to go into right now, but we're enlisting volunteers all over the place to keep an eye on business, so to speak, well, not just so to speak, but literally, to keep an eye on business. *It is absolutely imperative that Martyred Cars does not go belly up.* You guys in auto wrecking are... how can I put this... at the bottom of the economic food chain. Plankton, if you get my drift. Once you guys start to bail out, the big, burly whales and certain sea birds are next, and before you know it, microorganisms are all out of whack, and the coral reefs take a header, and then the fish don't have enough to eat and therefore, there aren't enough of them to go around for the carnivores of both the sea and the land, etcetera, etcetera, and, well, pretty soon we're all knee deep in scrap metal and old automotive fluids. Society needs bottom feeders, Josip. Although, I guess that makes you guys more of a crustacean in my metaphor. But my point is, you're the only one around here who can keep everything tethered. Without you, 'the center cannot hold,' I'm afraid. That Brody, he's a loose cannon. A solid guy though, don't get me wrong, he's genuine as anybody. But my point remains -- he will not be able to keep this business afloat without your diligence, *we have forseen it.*"

"Why me?" Josip asked. He couldn't take his eyes off the fire man's strange face, with its periphery of flickery flames.

"You see, that's just it!" The fire man was excited now. "It can't be anyone but you! You've seen *firsthand* what happens when entropy and corruption take their toll on
a society with idealistic underpinnings and a government full of half-witted wonks doing the bidding of an overblown, inhumane bureaucracy. Do not be so rash as to think it is a coincidence, my boy, that you, a former Young Pioneer, are here in this country, in Cross Road City, at Martyred Cars, poised to be pivotal in the crucial days on the horizon. You, with your deep dark chasm of a Slavic soul, you, who watched the Soyuz Sovietski dissolve like cheap laundry detergent! So here's what we need from you: stay focused. Get to work early, and stay late. Watch the inventory carefully. Keep track of that Brody, he's a loose cannon. Help Sheila whenever she needs it, she's a good lady and keeps meticulous records. And here's the big one, Josip: sell, sell, sell. Keep your ear to that hotline whenever you're inside, and don't be afraid to raise prices a wee tad here and there. You know, I've watched how you sell wholesale, giving gonga deals all the time. Now, normally, God would be all in favor of you helping out your brethren, don't get me wrong. But you're going to have to start kicking things up a notch, and I promise, nobody will mind. You don't know this, but customers can appreciate your position. They know what it means to have to make a living. So. That's your assignment. I have quite a few other dispatches to make this evening, so, godspeed, young Josip! And all that." He started to fade out.

"Wait!" Josip cried out. "I mean, what if I have questions or something? How do I get in touch?"

The fire man faded back in. "Right, details, logistics... Well, kid, I'm pretty much around. I'll hear you if you call. Oh jeez! That reminds me! You have to be discreet about this, Josip. Don't you go around telling people an angel appeared to you out of a burning tire, or some such thing! This whole interview is classified, do you
understand? I'm telling you, you have to watch yourself, it's a really bad scene for prophets and chosen ones in this day and age. So, be careful, and remember, sell, sell, sell!" On that note, he disappeared in a flash. The fire was sucked inward, inside the tires, and was gone.

Josip sat for a minute. A fighter jet overhead banked toward the air force base with a shrill boom. He stood up and kicked the tires. There was no sign of fire: no melting, no smoke, no burnt tire smell. The tires were fine. Daisy appeared beside him and sniffed the tires. She cocked her head. Josip couldn't tell if she'd seen anything or not.

He thought of something. His Tia Angelina from church had seen a program on Telemundo recently about exposure to chemicals. “All the chemicals in those cars,” she shook her head when she told him about the show. “They say you can get cancer, and worse, even loco. I worry, Josip. It isn’t safe, your work. Why don’t you go to art school? I always see commercials for it. You painted such a bonito mural for my Ricky's quincinero.” Josip had dismissed it, told her no, of course it was safe, we have OSHA signs up, my boss makes us be careful, and anyway, art school’s way too expensive. He told her he would just keep doing his art on his own, in his free time.

But now he wondered. He had cored out the platinum and palladium from a bunch of catalytic converters last week for the yard to sell to a precious metals scavenger. He wondered if that stuff maybe wasn't so good for you. And there was a lot of antifreeze in his life lately. And brake fluid, all the brake fluid. He'd have to take it easy for a few days.

*
While he usually slept dead like a brick through at least three snooze alarms, Josip found himself a crazy kind of awake very early on Tuesday morning, so early that the light was dim and shivery outside the window of his studio apartment. He climbed out of bed, eyes wide. He thought about calling his cousin Lena in Moscow, it would have only been late afternoon there. But then he remembered what the fire man said, and got on the road to work as fast as he could. The rows of junk pulsed past him in the salvage district like crops do when you drive by, corn, or wheat, or even orange trees, only these were rotting helicopter hulls, old airplane tails and noses, towering stacks of pallets, wrecked and ruined classic cars at Clyde's Yard, and Roadman's neatly kept rows of BMW's and Suzukis at Beep! Beep! Foreign Parts.

After he parked in the Martyred Cars lot, Josip unlocked the gate, put Daisy in her pen, stocked her up on food and water, scooped the poop, drove the vehicles out of the shop (except for the Frito Bandito van, which had an alternator problem that needed working on), opened the office, and looked at his watch. It was barely 7:30. He went back outside and looked around. There was some trash lining the fence that looked pretty tacky, so he gathered it up and chucked it in the dumpster. He unwound the pressure washer and sprayed off some gravel that had blown all over the front sidewalk overnight. Sheila arrived at eight, booted up the computers, and settled down in her office to work on the monthly withholdings. Josip had cleaned his way into the rest room, scrubbing at the stain inside the toilet bowl, when he heard a motorcycle revving fitfully down the road somewhere. He went to the window to take a peek.

The full throttle engine sounds echoed through the neighborhood, growing louder and louder until, lo and behold, Brody burst around the corner on a shiny red hog. In
seconds, he was in clear view out the front window, dipping into the parking lot and
carving donuts in the gravel, his hair whipping in the starts and stops of wind. The boss
looked like a kid on a roller coaster as he tore back into the yard and out of Josip's sight.
The engine cut off with a sputter and a bang, and in moments, Brody was in the office,
eyes gleaming. He looked different, too: instead of his standard uniform of a novelty
t-shirt and jeans, Brody wore a black T-shirt and leather pants. Leather pants! He'd look
like a bad ass, Josip thought, if he could ever wipe the stupid grin off his face.

"Whatcha got out there, boss?" Josip asked.

"It's an old Harley!" Brody said. He rifled through a box under the counter and
pulled out a black bandana with skull and cross bones pattern, something they'd found in
a car. "I bid three hundred and got it! I don’t know, something told me I should. I'm
sounding like you, huh? The hand of God pointed down at it, like, hey you! Bid on this
thing! I've been working on it all weekend, there's something wrong with the starter, it's
like you have to hot-wire it every time. I had it going this morning but it crapped out again."

Brody tied the bandana around his head and went to the bathroom to check
himself out. Josip wondered if Brody had paid out of pocket for the motorcycle, since he
was pretty sure the yard could not afford to shell out three hundred for a fun toy right
now. But Brody wouldn't like him nosing into this yard's financial affairs. So he tried to
act polite. "Do you know how to fix it?" he asked.

"Aw, not really, but I'll figure it out. It's a project, you know. I also got a great
Suburban and a Blazer for real cheap, so I thought I'd get myself a present."
With that, Brody was out the door, into the shop, without a word about chores, the
cash register, the hotline, the computers, or anything. Josip peeked through the shop
door. Brody was crouched beside the motorcycle, his nose buried in the Harley’s innards.
The hotline spoke up, and Josip strained to pick out parts from the run of garbled voices.
He typed into the computer to check on a Bonneville dome lamp assembly, then he
realized the voice was looking for a door lock assembly, and before he could get it all
figured out, someone else had jumped on the part.

Josip stared at the hotline, ready for more action. It sat dormant, like it was
snubbing its nose at him. The little black speaker phone always seemed to pipe down
whenever he had his English ears warmed up. If only the hotline guys wouldn’t mumble
so much. Josip heard Betsy, his favorite morning disc jockey, on Sheila’s radio in the
back office, offering dinner for two at the Sizzler to the caller who could make the
strangest noise with his mouth. Josip had a noise what would knock off Betsy’s socks!
He would have loved to win the dinner for his wedding anniversary, which was coming
up soon, but the fire man’s bidding for diligence still haunted him. Plus, Brody always
did tell him not to get so damned distracted by the radio.

The fire man hadn’t mentioned how God felt about them hiring a new parts guy,
but since Brody had mentioned it a few weeks earlier, Josip thought he might get to work
on that project. He pulled his milk crate from under the counter, took out his box of
colored pencils and sketch pad, and began to draw the outline for a “Help Wanted” sign
to put up in the front window of the office. He had in mind gray, gothic letters that would
sweep upward and outward, as though they were sprouting wings. Then, playing around
the bases of the letters, he envisioned a few impish creatures: marginalia. The letters
were a quick sketch, which he could fill in later, after outlining Brody’s Trans Am, but with horse-like legs, dancing in the air above the “H”, and a red Karmen Ghia with antennae and black spots, peering its headlights into the face of the “D”. He thought a nice bushy landscape background would really complete the scene. The hotline kept quiet as he penciled in some trees. He stopped drawing when a shiny white Cutlass Salon with sparkling hubcaps rumbled into a parking space, zapping his eyes with windshield glare through the office window.

Josip squinted at the vehicle as its doors flew open. Out jumped four mean looking black guys all decked out in ghetto gear: dark, slouching sweatshirts, baggy pants, visor caps askew. Josip’s heart sped. They flanked into the office with authority: one banged his way into the rest room, turning on the faucet and flushing the toilet, another headed for the mounted S-10 engine for sale in the corner, jiggling wires and flicking valves, and the third went straight for Brody’s “Test Your Blood Pressure” machine, battering the finger slot, and kicking its base when he couldn’t make it work without a quarter.

The last guy approached Josip, flashing a gold tooth out of the corner of his mouth. “Is my fucking rear end ready, bro’?”

“Uh, ‘scuse me?” Josip clenched his teeth.

“I said, is my fucking rear end ready. Whatch you, deaf, man?” The guy leaned in, as though to clarify his attitude.

“Um, I... What kind of car?” Josip had no idea what he’d done to cramp this guy’s style.

“For a Subaru, man, I called twice!”
“We don’t have any Subarus, so, um, I’m sorry?” Josip shrugged, trying to look harmless.

“Are you gonna fuck with me, man?” The guy did a thing with his arms that Josip had seen in plenty of rap videos.

All of a sudden, the shop door slammed open. Josip turned around. Brody burst in, in full cop-show stance, pointing a revolver at the guy. “Don’t anybody move,” he growled.

Josip’s stomach churned. He recognized the gun — it was a gunked up .22 they’d found in a car months ago. Brody had checked it over and tested it out on a mangled old hood. The trigger always jammed, so it was pretty worthless. He was sure Brody didn’t have any bullets left, either. But here was his boss, ready for a showdown.

The guy’s eyes grew huge, and his posse stopped in their tracks and threw up their hands. “We don’t want trouble man, just my rear end,” said the gold toothed guy.

“Are you sure you called Martyred Cars?” Brody asked. “There’s a place called Part Mart down the road. It sort of sounds the same, if you’re stupid.”

Josip’s stomach lunged again. The gun wasn’t enough, now Brody was insulting these guys? Josip scrambled to speed dial Part Mart, where a counter lady named Dotty verified that they did have a Subaru rear end waiting.

The dudes filed out the door in a hurry. Golden Tooth turned around. “Sorry, man, it was a mix up. We didn’t mean no disrespect.”

“Have a nice day,” Brody and Josip said, accidentally in unison, Brody sarcastic, and Josip in a desperate attempt at salvaging the situation with some dignified customer service.
When the Monte Carlo was screeching out of the parking lot, Josip let out his breath. “My God, boss. My God!”

“What?” Brody asked. He spun the gun’s barrel like a cowboy. The barrel was empty, indeed. Then he stuck it down the front of his pants.

“Oh jeez, boss! How did you know those guys didn’t have a gun?”

“I didn’t. I had the drop on ’em,” he giggled, did a quick draw with a little jump, then put the gun in his pocket.

“Yeah but, jeez, boss,” Josip said. “Last I checked that gun’s a dud! What if they’d tried something?”

“It’s all image, right? They had their image, and this is my new image,” he shrugged. “So long as my image trumps theirs, it’s all just fine. Right, Sheila?” Sheila had watched the entire episode from inside her office. She shook her head, shut the door without a word, and turned her radio back on. Somebody’s ‘Donald Duck’ impression blatted into the silence, then Betsy’s cackling laughter. Brody went back to the shop. A small, nondescript blue compact car pulled into the parking lot, and soon an official looking little man, balding and with glasses, got out, an official looking black folder under his arm.

He threw open the door, out of breath. “May I speak to your manager?”

Josip heard a little voice in his ear, or maybe inside his head. Take care of this one yourself.

“He’s busy,” Josip said. “Can I help you?”

“Well, young man, I’m here from the county environmental office, in concordance with the Cross Road City council on environmental readiness, to inform you, the
management of Martyred Cars, that you have been chosen at random to participate in a routine check of the rainwater runoff slopes and their subsequent drainage eventualities.”

The guy talked a mile a second. Josip nodded politely. Had he dreamed about this guy? Something was familiar. The guy was rattling off what sounded like a prepared statement from memory. Josip felt a tingly moment, that thing his babushka used to call unheimlich. “You see, there are complicated events on the horizon, too complicated for me to go into right now, but the fact is, it is absolutely imperative that we save our water supply. The rainwater that passes through zoning districts like this one has proven, time and again in studies nationwide, to contain dangerous levels of toxins, pollutants, and other garden-variety chemicals. We’ve prepared this booklet to assist you in plotting the diagnostic map of the spillage and run-off contingencies on your property. We require this before we complete a routine inspection and declare Martyred Cars a clean water zone.”

Josip took the booklet, which had the title Runoff: Our Streams, Our Kids’ Futures printed across its cover, with a picture of a very smiley boy watching his handsome dad cast a fishing rod into a pristine forest brook. The guy barreled on. Josip noticed the green paisley pattern on his shirt. It wasn’t your standard paisley, but kind of an art deco. Josip had the urge to draw it. “A sample map and instructions on how to prepare your own appear in the appendix of this booklet. Here’s my card, I’m Bernie, your county environmental inspector. Please call my office within ninety days to schedule an appointment for your our inspection of your map and site. The penalties for noncompliance are outlined on the back page. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m on a very
tight schedule!” Bernie grabbed Josip’s hand and shook it, then fumbled together his black folder and took off out the door.

“What did that guy want?” Brody had caught the end of Bernie’s speech from the shop doorway. He had a wad of wires in his hand and oil smeared across his forehead.

“It’s just an environmental inspection by the county.” Josip held up the booklet.

Brody threw down the wires. “Son of an S.O.B.! If I’d been in here, by god--”

“I don’t see anything wrong with it,” Josip said. “It’s for the greater good.” He flipped through a few pages of the booklet. It had some more pictures on some of the pages: trout in a stream, children on a picnic, a dumped in a lake.

Brody snorted. “What are you, a communist again?”

“Brody--” Sheila called from her office.

“What!” he snapped.

“Be nice!” she said. Brody grumbled something, then went back outside. Josip was alone with the hotline again.

His colored pencils had somehow scattered across the floor during the rear end incident. He gathered them up and sat down again with his ‘Help Wanted’ sign, which was really looking sharp. It would only need some finishing touches, really -- filling in the letters with gray, and some blue highlights, some crosshatching in the background foliage, and all the little extras on the cars (a bumper here, a tailpipe there, tiny door handles, keyholes, and two minutely denticulated grills). The hotline chirped, then spoke:

“Ninety-eight Blazer a transmission, ninety-eight Blazer a transmission, anybody with a ninety-eight Blazer transmission...”
Josip thought through the row of transmissions, and picked up the handset.

"Martyred Cars has that."

The voice on the other end said thanks, then hung up. Whoever it was would be calling on the regular phone any minute, so Josip thought fast. He couldn’t really scalp properly on this one, since it was another yard. There was an unspoken code of honor and wholesale prices between all yards everywhere, even the yard that once emailed from Vladivostok looking for obscure Cadillac parts. But he figured that a ninety-eight Blazer transmission would be a rare commodity, it being such a late model, and most late models getting all their work taken care of under warranty.

The phone rang. Josip rested his hand on the handset, churning some final calculations in his brain and working up his nerve. He picked it up on the third ring, and offered the transmission to Matt from Back-2-Life for seven hundred fifty dollars, plus free delivery.

"Ouch! That’s pretty steep!" Matt made teeth-gritting noises.

Josip’s hands were shaking. He really wasn’t comfortable jacking up prices like this. "I know, man, I know," he said. "It’s a scarcity, you know. What can you do?"

"I hear you, Josip. Seven fifty it is. Call me when it’s ready."

It had worked. The fire man had been right! He could do it! Josip put down the phone as Brody backed into the office, his hands up and out like the surgeons on *ER*, just after they’ve just scrubbed down and got into a moral argument about something, and the head doctor tells them all to *leave it at the door!* before they back into the operating room. Something appeared to have gone awry with the Harley -- Brody’s arms were
covered with gunk, and he'd finger-painted thick black lines beneath his eyes and down
the bridge of his nose. Josip wondered why he looked so relaxed.


"Huh!" Brody said. "Seven fifty? How'd you do that?"
Josip shrugged. "I just told him about the scarcity."

Brody nodded, then drew a black line down Josip's nose. "A gold star for you
today, Josip!" he said. He disappeared into the rest room.

Josip wondered if Brody wanted him to get the transmission, or keep listening to
the hotline, or what. From the rest room, he could hear the water running, then
scrubbing, then splashing, and all the while underneath the water sounds Brody was
humming something epic, monumental, like something that would be the soundtrack to a
very intense network mini-series. It didn't even sound like Brody in there. Josip realized
he didn't know his boss anymore. He figured he'd better go get the dumb part himself.

From just outside the shop door, Josip stopped to consider the smear of storm
clouds building across the mountains. There just wasn't sky like this in Moscow, he
thought. The sky there was a much colder shade of blue, and was always filled up with
other stuff: trees, high-rise apartments, and construction cranes these days, he heard from
his cousin Lena in a letter she sent with her official New Years card a couple years back.
People didn't write cards like that, either, in America. In this country, it was all different.
They gave cards, sure, a birthday or Easter greeting with a witty, preprinted message and
a picture of a cartoon pig on a skateboard or a bulldog dressed up in a tutu. A Russian
card was a robust thing, full of declarations and congratulations. *Fondest praises for you
your enterprise, success, and marriage joy*, Lena had written this year (she was working

50
on her English) on the back of the card with an old fashioned snowy village scene. *We wish you health, prosper, and business success with the new year.* Josip had been eight when his mother, may God rest her sweet soul, got bought as a mail order bride and they emigrated and settled in Cross Road City, so by now, he mostly didn’t think of Russia. There were days like today, though, when things struck him, shivered him. He wondered if it was true, what he’d heard on his radio headset as he lay in bed awake, late the night before: if it was possible to get out of your body and go somewhere else. If he could, he’d get right out of his body and go to Russia, straight to his babushka’s cottage in Voronezh to check out her garden plot full of paprikas and pattypans. He loved that place when he was a *malchik.* Even if not, he thought it might be a good idea to start utilizing his frontal lobe.

* 

Over the next couple weeks, Josip watched Brody’s transformation accelerate at an alarming speed. At first it was just more image overhaul -- a moussed up hairstyle one day, a denim vest with a skull on the back the next, a sticker for the cash register that said *DO I LOOK LIKE A FUCKING PEOPLE PERSON?* the day after that. Once Brody got the Harley running good, though, everything really changed. It was usually only his car buddies who dropped by the yard, mostly: Roadman from Beep! Beep! and Don, the little old mechanic from across town (who Josip thought was much more of an automotive virtuoso than simply a mechanic), with the occasional lunch-bearing from his girlfriend Lucy. Nowadays, though, there were new dudes coming around who Josip thought looked most unsavory -- a big, bearded biker with 'Hell's Angels' on his jacket, whose blunt, cigar-smoking hack echoed throughout the yard and made Josip bristle, and also,
the beady-eyed guy who did tattoos out of his van at the swap meet. Brody was awfully chummy lately, too, with the UPS guy, who was always very professional on his pickups and deliveries, but who laughed at Brody's crass pirate jokes with a sneer that deeply vexed Josip.

Brody didn’t talk to Josip about these guys, and Josip didn’t ask. The fire man had been right about Brody’s instability, even if the fire man came because Josip’s engine was gagging on bad gas, as it were. Either way, he couldn’t quite figure out what he ought to do about it. He was raising prices as high as he dared, and keeping a general eye on things, but what else was he supposed to do? Was he just supposed to call out in the air for more instructions? "Hey fire man, come here!" It felt pretty ridiculous. Just like a lot of things were feeling lately.

Josip got to work late the next Monday because his Tia Angelina from church came banging on his door at 7:45, just as he was finishing his bowl of Rice Krispies. "Two weeks in a row, Josip, and we don't hear from you," she said, her voice high-pitched and quivering, her hankie poised to dab at her mascara. "We worry, Josip, God worries! We know you're all alone in America, and we're you're only family here! If you stray away from us, it may be the devil who finds you! Oh Josip!" She put her arms around him and blubbered into his shoulder.

Josip told her his boss asked him to work two weekends in a row on the inventory update. She told him not to let his work steer him away from God. Josip wanted to tell her not to worry, that God was, in fact, calling him directly at work now, but he remembered what the fire man had said about keeping quiet. So he promised to go to
church the next Sunday, and Angelina shoved a tray of tamales in his hands. Then he
glugged down his orange juice and hurried out the door.

On the drive to work, Josip realized something inside him was changing. Going
to service on Sundays used to be the focus of his week and the center of his world. Back
when he emigrated, he promised his babushka he would keep going to church, but there
weren't any Russian Orthodox in Cross Road City, so he settled on the Blessed Virgin At
a Crossroad Cathedral, since it's frescoes were the prettiest in town. It was a Mexican
church, which would have not pleased his mother, God bless her, but she was too busy to
notice. Her priorities were bleaching her hair and painting her blue eye shadow thicker
and thicker as she plotted her divorce from Melvin, the pudgy accountant who bought her
through the mail, and planned her second marriage to Jerome, who owned a bunch of
natural food grocery stores in town. His mother's car accident came only months after she
and Josip moved in with Jerome, and Jerome said Josip could stay in the house until he
was eighteen, so long as he stayed out of trouble and kept his room clean. So Josip went
to church every Sunday, made his friends at the church socials, and got invited to their
picnics, and quincineros, and football games. They became family when he was so far
away from his own. Lately, though, things at Martyred Cars felt way more crucial than
church and family. Like right now, for example: traffic was getting heavy, and he was
still late.

He checked his rearview to switch lanes for the freeway on-ramp. There, in his
mirror, were the fire man's shimmery eyes. One of the eyes winked at him. A woman in
a Jeep honked when he almost merged right into her. Josip swerved to avoid the honker
and hit the gas.
"I know! I'm late this morning, I'm sorry," he said, as he pulled onto the freeway.

"Things take a turn today," said the fire man. "You must get there quickly, Brody needs your mindful guidance. When conflicts come, they come not single question marks, but like a torrent of bees." Josip didn't know what that meant. They drove past a billboard of severe black letters on an orange background. "TOXIC MOLD SLEUTH!" it read, with a phone number and a slouchy silhouette in a Sherlock Homes hat holding a magnifying glass.

"I've been really working hard, really hard," Josip said, checking the road, then the rearview. "My tia's mad that I've been missing church, but I'm following your instructions. I hope I'm doing okay. It's hard to know what to do sometimes."

"You will know, Josip, you will know," said the fire man, and smiled his strange little smile.

"But God wouldn't want me to miss too much church, would he? Even if Brody needs help, I should say no if it's Sunday. Shouldn't I?" A city bus sped past him with a giant advertisement on its side: 'BUY BALL BEARINGS.' When he looked back in his rearview, the fire man was already gone.

When Josip walked into the office, Brody was sporting a gnarly black eye.

"Boss!" Josip gasped.

"I know, I know," Brody scrunched his nose at Josip.

"What'd you do?"

"I took Lucy to the Bashful Bandit Bar last night on my Harley. There were some sleazeballs there, and, let me put it this way: I had to defend her honor." Brody lifted an ice pack to his face and grinned.
Josip shook his head, then gently touched Brody’s eye. Brody sucked in his breath and knocked Josip’s hand away. “Don’t touch it!” he snapped, just as a ruckus was breaking out over the hotline.

“Nobody’s ever not paid their dues! I can tell you that right now, this is a first!” Josip recognized Trixie, the lady in charge of the hotline, in rare form.

“It isn’t like I meant to not pay. I’ve fallen on hard times! These things happen, you know!” replied a scratchy voice that Josip couldn’t identify.

“It’s Art at Sir Parts-a-lot. He’s faking his voice, but everybody knows he’s damn near run his yard into the ground,” Brody said in a hush, as though the hotline could hear him. Josip knew not to sell to Art because he was about six months delinquent on his Martyred Cars charge account. Josip remembered the fire man’s prophesy, and felt a chill.

“I’ll tell you what this means,” Trixie growled. “This means nobody’s getting their Christmas snack baskets this year. That’s what this means. Because I have to make up the difference somewhere. How do you like that, everybody? No snack baskets this year because somebody welched on his dues!”

“Aw, that blows!” groaned somebody.

“That bites the big bag!” howled somebody else.

“Nobody fucks with Christmas, you turd!” snarled yet a third somebody. It was, Josip agreed, a damn shame. Trixie always went all out for Christmas: cheese crocks, big jars of jelly bellies, popcorn in all kinds of crazy flavors. Really good stuff. Art got back on the line.
“See what you did, Trixie? Now everybody knows it’s me,” Art gave up on the phony voice. “You spread my personal business all over the hotline instead of being ladylike and calling me on the phone. We’ll see what my lawyer has to say about this.”

“You dolt, nobody knows it’s you.” Trixie fired back. “I never said your name, I simply informed all the fine co-op members that they would not be receiving their Christmas goodies this year. Everyone deserves to know something like that. Nobody will know it was you who did it. Hey guys? You don’t know who it is, do you?”

“I don’t,” hissed someone.

“Not me,” someone else hooted.

Brody grabbed the hotline receiver. “Me neither,” he said. “But I’d sure like to know what rat had the nerve to spoil Christmas!”

The hotline spit static, then the voices reemerged. “Woo, wee! That’s a good one, Brody!” somebody said, against a background of raucous laughter. Brody giggled to himself, and pressed the ice pack to his eye. The phone rang. It was Roadman from Beep! Beep!, congratulating Brody on his funny one liner. Another line rang, and then another. Josip never understood why things like that were so funny. He headed in to check with Sheila on the run-off contingency map.

The day before he had finished mapping out the yard for storm water run-off tendencies, as well as spill potential areas, and wanted to confer with Sheila on finalizing the packet for submission to the county environmental office. Brody wouldn’t stop swearing about the map, so Sheila had declared that it was the responsibility of Josip and Josip alone to draw it up. Then Brody sang a song he made up called, “Up Against the
Wall, You Pinko Commie Bastards.” Josip’s feelings got a little hurt, and when he told Sheila, she gave Brody a lecture on sensitivity in the workplace.

When Josip stepped inside her office, Sheila was busy taping two clippings over her desk, above the photo of her daughter Sophie and their cat Speckles. One clipping looked like a printout from the internet: computer mumbo jumbo, a little man and a bunch of dots and lines. The other looked like the same kind of code, only in a roughly outlined, grainy reproduction. Something she cut out of the newspaper.

Josip leaned in to look, while Sheila blushed, finished up her taping and shuffled some papers on her desk. “What are these?” he asked.

“Well,” she said with some reluctance, pointing to the clearer picture, “this one’s the message they sent out in space sixteen years ago. You know, through a giant radio dish. And this is the message they just received a few days ago.”

“What do you mean?”

Sheila looked at him for a moment, then let Josip in on her conspiracy. “The scientists sent a message into space and somebody wrote back. That’s what I mean.”

“How’d they write back?”

“They put a message in a crop circle. It just turned up late last week.”

“A crop? Like corn?”

“This one was in a wheat field in England,” she said. “It turned up after an hour long rainstorm. They don’t know how such a complicated thing could have been done by people so quickly. It defies technology.”

“Why would they just send back the same message?”

57
"They didn’t! It’s almost the same, except! Look at this, this is supposed to be a model of our solar system, see, when we sent the message, we lifted Earth up a little bit,” Sheila pointed to a line of dots. “Just to say hey, we live here. And look! In the crop circle, the third and fourth dots are up! Mars and Earth!” Sheila realized her voice had risen too high. She looked toward the front office, where Brody was still wielding phone calls.

“Why put them on the wall, though?” Josip asked. “You think they’re more than just neat.”

“Someone in outer space sent us a message,” she ran her fingers over the crop circle. “I feel like I have to think about it. While I sit here and process invoices. It’s all I can do. Like somehow, nothing else is nearly as important as this. You must know about this kind of thing. You Russians have this kind of stuff out in Siberia all the time. I saw it in a book in the library. There’s always strange stuff falling from the sky out in the tundra.”

“Yeah,” Josip said. He didn’t have the heart to remind her that he’d never set foot east of Moscow. Or that he was an American citizen now. All this talk did make him wonder, though, if Sheila would understand about the fire man. “So, the spillage run-off map. I have it here,” he said. “I think it’s finished. If you want to look over it.”

“Right, okay. Just set it down. I’ll look at it in a bit,” she said, flipping on her radio and turning her back to Josip. On the radio, Billy and Betsy were arguing over mini-muffins. Josip went back out to the front office, where the phone was ringing. Brody picked up and listened for a moment.
“I didn’t know it was you...” he said with a smirk. “Well sure, but I didn’t say you. No, I said I wanted to know who the rat was. I didn’t say who the rat was, because I didn’t know... But you see, it wasn’t slander, slander is a very specific term, Art... Art, no. You can’t just call your lawyer every time you get your feelings hurt.”

Brody snickered with his hand over his mouth and hit speakerphone for Josip to hear Art’s voice near tears:

“Well, I’ll tell you Brody, the rat is me! I’m the rat! I’ll bet you like that, huh? I’ll bet that’s something you boys can laugh about on the stupid, stinking hotline!”

Josip wondered what Art would do for work now that his yard was going under. Sir Parts-a-lot had been his family’s business for sixty years. Brody snorted. “Yeah, okay Art. Just do something to pay your hotline dues, alright? Don’t be fucking up Christmas.” Brody hung up the phone. “How about that, huh? I almost feel sorry for the poor bastard. But not quite. By the way, I need the alternator off the Impala in B-27. My antics are good for sales. Arrgh, matey!” he screwed up face like a pirate and hollered as the UPS guy marched through the door with a stack of packages.

“You’ll walk the plank, aye, you will,” the UPS guy answered in a low, mean voice. They both giggled, and Josip headed outside.

Josip drove the nun’s Pacer out to the late model Impala. As he lifted the car’s hood, something buzzed on his walkie talkie. “Say again, boss?” he spoke into the mike. The walkie buzzed some more. It almost sounded like someone was singing, but through a whole lot of static. “Boss,” he tried again.

Brody finally answered. “Did you need something, Josip?”

“Uh, I thought you called me,” Josip replied.
"You're hearing things, it wasn't me. I was in the barf room."

"Ten four," Josip answered back. When he leaned in to take a look at the alternator, the buzzy singing started up again. Sometimes one of the walkie talkies at RV Heaven bled into the Martyred Cars frequency, but it was always some nasal-sounding office lady named Tracy harping on the guys outside: do this, do that. Nothing like this singing. It was buzzing away in little starts and stops now, and as Josip listened closely, he could discern a handful of voices. A glorious harmony of some sort, maybe in Latin.

He turned down the volume on his walkie. It sounded like the music was coming from Clyde's yard next door. He walked over to the side of the yard that bordered Clyde's yard. Some tires had piled up again; Josip made a stack and stood on them to peek over the fence. And there, he witnessed a scene that brought his breakfast to his throat.

In a dirt clearing amid the cars, Clyde, the most feared, gnarled junk yard guy in town was taunting a little man duct taped to a chair. Clyde's prisoner seemed familiar. Josip suddenly realized -- it was Bernie, the environmental inspector! Clyde circled the chair, pointing, spewing with the rage of a vengeful animal. "You don't know the wrath you're seeking, you people, with your clipboards and your booklets and your county mandates! We salvage for you civilians, for the greater good, for you greedy consumers who buy a new car, then another when a new model piques their fancy, then another one a few years later! Where do you think they go, huh? These old cars, that you cast away like old shells! They come to us! Us! Who you so disdain, and accuse, of spilling and irresponsibility! Ungrateful lackey! Pernicious wart!"

When Bernie whimpered for his mommy, Clyde slapped him in the face.
Josip jumped down from the tires. He thought he might puke. He held his stomach and leaned over, but only a little spit came out. The fire man stood calmly nearby, his arms crossed into the billowy sleeves of his bathrobe fatigues. "I wanted you to be aware," he said.

"I'm calling the police," Josip said over the lump in his throat.

"Ah, naw, Bernie'll be alright," the angel brushed away the idea with his hand. "Actually, he won't, but that's his path, my boy."

"So why show me that, huh? You tell me to keep a keep an eye on things, then I have to keep my mouth shut when someone's getting hurt. Nice, that's real nice. You're a real jerk!" Josip kicked the tires he had been standing on. They fell over.

The fire man shook his head. "I'm sorry you doubt me, young Josip. I do work for God. You should at least revere that," he said, and faded away.

Josip stared at the space where the fire man had been. He could still hear Clyde shouting at poor little Bernie as he sat down in the doorless, gutted interior of a side-swiped Lexus. He knew he could never call the cops on Clyde, anyway. It would violate the brotherhood. You didn't bust another junk yard on anything, ever. He slammed the back of his fist into the exposed metal floor of the car, then cringed. It hurt. He held his hand as he walked back to the building.

*

Josip slept late on Tuesday. He got caught up in a very intense dream, where Clyde danced around him in a greasy cocktail dress to the beat of an ominous beeping tribal drum, which kept escalating in its urgency. In his dream, he was stuck to the ground. His mouth was sealed shut, he couldn't run, or scream, or tell Clyde he was zloi

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
He strained against himself in his sleep, but he couldn't fight the helplessness.

He finally awoke at 8:15, his alarm clock screaming its shrill beep into the bright white of the morning. Josip stumbled out of bed, pulled on his pants from the day before, and scrounged the cleanest t-shirt out of the laundry basket. Then put toothpaste on his brush, shoved it in his mouth, and went to his car. He didn't have time for a shower, or breakfast, or anything.

His was still rubbing the crust out of his eyes and smoothing down his hair when he pulled up to Martyred Cars. One of Brody's new friends, the weird tattoo guy, was waiting out front, leaning on his ratty tattoo van. Brody's truck wasn't in the parking lot, and the gate was still closed and locked. Josip remembered that Sheila was taking the morning off for the Cross Road City Womens' Empowerment Society Bake Sale. Daisy was planted at the gate, her teeth bared at the tattoo guy. The guy followed Josip to the gate, where he leaned against the chainlink while Josip fumbled with his keys to unlock the padlock.

"You're all late sleepers this morning, heh?" the tattoo guy said. The lower half of a naked lady branded on his forearm peeked out from beneath his flannel shirt sleeve. Josip's stomach curdled. He just hated stuff like that.

"Yup," Josip kept his eyes forward as he got the gate unlocked and rolled open. He didn't want to make small talk with this guy, so he started on his outdoor chores first: the blown-in garbage, the poop, pulling each of the shop vehicles out into the yard. The guy followed him around anyway, talking on and on about his Pee-Wee Herman memorabilia collection, then his bowie knives, then "Buffy the Vampire Slayer". Josip hoped Brody would get there soon to entertain this dude.
As the guy yammered, Josip unrolled the pressure washer and began to squirt the sidewalk that ran up to the office. It wasn’t dirty, but he figured the hose would be noisy enough to drown him out. Josip soaked the entire strip of concrete, and then started working on the cracks, digging cigarette butts and stubborn weeds out with the sharp spray. The tattoo guy kept his distance, playing with Daisy and kicking the gravel.

The _shhh_ of the spray eased Josip’s headache. Josip could very well pretend he was somewhere else until Brody showed up. He let the powerful stream of water balance itself against the concrete. Instead of holding the nozzle, he was really pushing it against its own force, counteracting the pressure washer’s urge to shoot off into the air. Josip lost himself in the idea, letting the hose’s pressurized vibrations penetrate his hands and travel up toward his shoulders, which were terribly knotted up. He hadn't slept well at all. He only heard the tattoo guy hollering for a second or two before the man shoved Josip with a flying clothesline across the back in a mad dive for the nearby bushes.

“What the heck, man?” Josip spit out, shoving the foliage out of his face.

“Sorry, brother, but there’s bees! Oh God, are there bees!”

As the pressure washer spun itself into a constant aim of spray pointed at the ground by the business entrance, Josip heard a chorus of buzzing. He maneuvered around toward the din and saw it, a huge undulating cloud of dots whizzing and humming around the nun’s car.

“They blew in out of nowhere!” the guy’s voice hit a frantic falsetto. “One minute I was petting the dog, the next I was under attack! Oh sweet Jesus, the dog!”
Daisy was out in the open, yapping valiantly at the bee cloud. She seemed unsure of how to approach such a strange foe, though: lunging, then backing away, snapping at individual bees, then circling the entire swarm with a growl.

Josip made a move to go after Daisy, but the guy pulled him back into the bushes. “Brother, you can’t! They may be killers! They’ll get you as soon as look at you!”

Josip thought this guy must have seen the same public service announcements as he had about the dangerous, africanized variety of bees that had been moving up through Mexico and encroaching on the region over the past few years. Don’t taunt them, said the TV, dive in a bush or your swimming pool for cover, call an expert to come identify them. The guy was right -- they’d kill the dog if they felt like it, and they’d kill him right now if he showed his face. Josip whistled to Daisy, but she didn’t hear him.

Josip bit his thumbnail. The tattoo guy bawled out heartfelt invocations of his sweet mother Mary and his merciful Lord in Heaven. The bee cloud expanded, then contracted. Daisy postured bravely. A sudden, roaring throttle of motorcycles coming down the road agitated the bees into a skinny column that climbed into the sky for a few seconds before arching down to disappear under a Buick Le Sabre with a crunched rear end.

Brody and his big biker friend rolled in and looked around. Daisy galloped over to him. Josip and the tattoo guy crawled out of the bushes.

Brody climbed off his motorcycle. The biker smirked. “Are we interrupting something?”

“Laugh all you want there Marius, but you just missed an insect invasion!” the tattoo guy frowned as he brushed off his pants.
"An insect invasion?" Brody asked.

"Bees, boss, they were swarming like crazy just a minute ago," said Josip.

"Christ," said Brody. "The last thing we need around here is pestilence."

"They flew under the Buick in B-27," Josip explained, "but we should probably call an expert like they say on TV, ‘don’t bee a hero,’ you know that whole thing."

The big biker headed straight for the Buick. "It’s okay," he said. "I think they’re napping."

Everyone inched cautiously toward the car. The bees were humming calmly somewhere under the hood. When Josip got as close as he dared, he could see several satisfied bees running laps around the top of the hood.

"They think it’s a hive," Brody said. "Dammit, I don’t have time for this. Josip, go inside find a bee removal guy in the yellow pages. We’ll hold down the fort out here."

Josip trooped inside and flipped to the ‘Bees’ section of the phone book. Now, this was the kind of thing that made him uncomfortable with the idea of ever advancing to management. There must have been thirty bee removal companies there in the book.

How was he supposed to pick one? They each had a different catchy motto, like ‘Don’t Panic!’ or ‘Who you gonna call? Beebusters!’ One said, ‘Don’t bee stung by high prices!’ while another warned, ‘Don’t risk the disaster of a poorly done job!’ There were specialists in bee proofing, swarm removal, and pheromone traps. Josip had no idea what they needed right now. While he was chewing on a pencil, Brody peeked in from the shop.

"Bee guy coming?"

"Not yet, hang on to your horses," said Josip.
"Well, what's the hold up?" Brody had no patience for things like this.

"I'm weighing options for bees. What do we want, traps? Proofing?"

"I don't know, just call somebody," Brody said.

Josip felt very anxious. If he chose the wrong bee removal service, Brody would blame him for it. If he chose too slowly and carefully, Brody might come back in and kick his shin. He sighed, closed his eyes, frowned. This was so hard.

And then, there was another little voice in his ear. Or head: Use soap.

He scoffed aloud at the voice. "That's just confusing," he said. "I've got omens on my hands and you're telling me to wash up,"

Any soap, hand soap, dish soap, laundry soap. Flush the bees.

Josip suddenly understood. He went in the shop, filled a bucket with water and some of the detergent they used to mop the floors, then brought it outside. He joined the crowd around the Buick. Brody and the dudes stood several feet back. Josip sat down in the driver seat to pop the hood. When the hood unlatched, several bees were knocked away from their business and shot out at the dudes. They ducked like someone waved a gun. The tattoo guy said, "woah!" Josip approached the car with his bucket.

"What are you doing?" Brody asked. "When's the bee guy coming?"

"Just give me a minute," Josip said. He pushed up the car hood and peered underneath. Several bees marched sentry around the opening of the radiator, which calmly rumbled. Josip shooed them aside and carefully, carefully, poured his soapy mixture in the hole.

The bee hum gave way to a gurgle, then a hiss. Brody's dudes oohed and aahed. But Brody looked concerned. "What'd you put in there?"
"Soap," Josip said.

The tattoo guy raised an eyebrow. "Soap? Just soap?"

"Looks like your boy here just saved you quite a pest control bill, Brody!" said the big biker.

The leftover handful of bees had assembled in a small refugee camp on the Buick's windshield. Brody shut the car's door, which prompted the bees to leap into a halfhearted swarm. One of them flew at Brody and stung him on the forehead. "Damn, goddammit!" Brody slapped the sting, then pulled away his hand. "God! Fuck!"

"Yow!" yelled the tattoo guy. "Pull out the stinger!"

The dudes rushed to Brody's forehead to rubberneck at the sting. "Josip," Brody said through his scowl, "you kill every goddamn one of these bees! I don't want to see a single winged bastard on my property!"

They hustled Brody, swearing, off to the office, and the bees settled down again atop the car's battery, crowding together on a spot of sticky. Josip took off his shoe. He closed his eyes, and whacked at the bees. He jumped back and ducked as two bees that escaped his whack whipped past his head. A little man limped across the parking lot. Josip watched him for a moment, then ducked again. The bees landed back on the windshield, where he took a final swing and squished them, dead and final. He felt pretty good. He'd solved a crisis all on his own.

Josip went back inside the office. There, the little man who Josip seen coming in was babbling to Brody at the counter. Brody listened as he pressed some kind of compress to his forehead and gripped a handful of his hair. Josip suddenly recognized the pattern on the little man's shirt -- it was Bernie, the county inspector! Bernie's face was
sunburned, his eyes bloodshot, his paisley shirt spattered with grease. He prattled away, nonsensically, in a rasping voice. Josip watched him, and watched Brody watching him. The guy seemed to be telling a story of some sort, gesturing with his arms and punctuating certain phrases with 'huh!' and other verbal exclamation points. Brody's ears reddened, and his eyebrows deepened their crease. Finally, he slammed down a block of yellow sticky notes and a pencil.

"Look, write down the part you need, right here," he told Bernie.

"It's not a customer, Boss," Josip whispered under his breath. "It's the county inspector!"

Brody stood up. Bernie shrank back. "You wasted five goddamn minutes of my time breathing down my neck with your unintelligible government nonsensicalness!"

Bernie burst into some kind of garbled explanation. Brody leaned across the counter and grabbed Bernie by his shirt. "You've been sucked into the mire of a terrible madness, guy! That's what you get for bothering people!"

Bernie squealed, broke free, and waddled out the door in a hurry. When Josip looked at Brody, he flinched. Something was terribly wrong. The goodness that was Brody had fled, and had left two searing holes for eyes. The holes averted quickly, and Brody pushed past Josip into the shop.

Josip sat at the counter. The air seemed cold in the office. The UPS truck ground across the gravel and blocked the sun through the window. The UPS guy marched in the door and through the office. "Brody back there?" he asked Josip, without stopping. Josip nodded, but the guy was already through the shop door.

Josip could hear evil laughter somewhere in the shop. The hotline awoke:
"Two thousand Pathfinder needs a V-8 engine, two thousand Pathfinder, a V-8 engine..."

Josip gulped as he picked up the handset. "Martyred Cars has that."

Josip realized, in the moments between the hotline pickup and the follow-up phone call, that he had just found a buyer for the priciest engine the yard had in stock. It wasn’t even in the shop with all the other engines, but instead on display in the corner of the office, sparkling in the rays of the midmorning sun. He checked the blue book, did some quick thinking, and when Chuck at Chuck’s Trucks phoned to make the deal, Josip closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and asked for $1500.

Chuck took nicely to the price, though Josip knew it was pretty steep. He couldn’t believe it, what a sale! In his three years at Martyred Cars, he’d only sold one other engine, and that one had been for only $600, from a crappy old Honda. He printed up the invoice and did a little dance as he tore it from the printer, then ran into the shop to tell Brody about the sale. Though he shouldn’t have been surprised by what he found in the shop, for a moment, he was.

The men were gathered around Brody in the corner of the shop, where someone had hung a noose. Dangling by its neck was a CPR dummy they had found in the back of a car. It was dressed in a beat-up cowboy hat and a Girl Scouts t-shirt. It’s blank eyes goggled, and its plastic jaw hung open in horror. And Brody was beating the snot out of it.

Josip had never seen anything like this. Brody was snarling, spitting, growling, his hands splayed like claws. He ripped off one of the dummy’s arms and beat the...
dummy over the head. Marius and the tattoo guy cackled in support. The UPS guy urged Brody on. “That’s it Brody, rip him up! Kick his ass! Eat him alive!”

For Josip, it was just too much. He turned quickly and ran outside to the scrap tire pile. "Such consequence cannot rely on me," he said through his teeth to the tires. He squeezed his fists tight and bent to punch a tire, but accidentally punched through the tire, lost his balance, and fell face first into pile.

“You talking to me?”

Josip caught his breath, and peeked over his shoulder. It was Brody. He looked as embarrassed as Josip felt. Like he had lost himself. Like he had seen himself from the outside, and wanted to fix everything.

Josip didn’t know what to say. “Uh, no. I was just talking to, well, myself, I mean, nobody. Never mind,” he mumbled, untangling himself from the tires. He got up and hurried past Brody to the infested Buick.

* 

Brody didn’t say much for the next few of days, and instead focused on counter sales, the hotline, and making notes in his spiral-bound notebook labeled ‘BUSINESS IDEAS.’ When there was down time, Josip stayed outside, gathering up trash from around the fence perimeter, alphabetizing the tool shed, and throwing the rubber gasket for Daisy. Things almost felt settled. Not much had changed with business, and everything had changed with people. But the air was calm. Josip started reading his Bible again, and went to church after work a time or two, just to think. He decided he'd just wait now, for new instructions from Brody, or the angel, or whoever.
One afternoon, Brody called Josip in on the walkie talkie. When Josip walked inside, the boss was at his computer terminal, staring out the window. “Hey, I’m sorry you had to see that, what you saw,” he said. "I shouldn’t have done that. I’m not going to do that any more. It was very unprofessional. I don’t know why I thought we needed to, you know, toy with dark energy, and all that. That’s what Lucy called it, anyway. It’s all a bunch of crap, I just lost my head. It’s all these dweebs, though, I can’t keep my head on straight when they come around! I swear it, Josip! They’re my Achilles' Heel! What am I supposed to do?”

“Maybe anger management classes?” Josip had heard about these recently on a Dateline Special Report.

Brody snorted. “That’ll be the day.”

Neither of them said anything for a moment. Brody shuffled some papers at the counter and took a drink of his Big Gulp. Josip thought of something to fill in the pause, something he’d been wanting to ask Brody for a long time.

"We're very important. Aren't we? The economy depends on us."

Brody raised an eyebrow. "How do you figure?"

"I've just been thinking about it, you know, how we're like fish that eat what's left over from the other fish, the stuff that's just laying around on the bottom of the ocean, so if we're gone, there'll just be all these cars piling up everywhere. It could ruin everything."

Brody laughed, and choked a little on his drink. "Josip, Josip. You sweet kid," he said, once he got his soda swallowed. "That would never happen. If we go under, someone else'll move into our place. That's the way it works. But I'm not gonna let that
happen. I haven't put up with dweebs for the past ten years to just let Martyred Cars
tank."

A primer-colored Monte Carlo pulled into the parking lot, and a huge black guy
got out. Josip braced himself. Here we go again, Josip thought. The guy didn't look very
friendly. He wore an enormous baby blue shirt and baggy jeans. How can a man look so
scary in baby blue? Josip wondered. He really hoped there wouldn't be a problem. He
didn't have the strength for a confrontation today. The guy opened the door and walked
up to the counter.

"Yessir! What can I do you for?" Brody asked him.

He motioned toward Josip's 'Help Wanted' sign. "Somebody told me you were
hiring in here."

"Yes, parts puller. Do you have parts experience?"

"Not pulling," said the guy. "But I just quit working in the shop at RV Heaven, so
I know about some of this stuff. I'm just looking for something new."

"Can you work days?" Brody asked.

"Sure, man."

"You ever been in a gang?"

"Brody!" Sheila yelled from her office.

"What!" Brody yelled back.

"Naw, it's okay," the guy said. "I never was in a gang. A lot of my friends from
school got into it. It just wasn't my thing, though."

"Tell me something. I heard that once you're in a gang, you're always in a gang,"
Brody asked. "That's what I saw on 'Sixty Minutes'."
The guy thought for a minute. "Yeah, I guess you are, technically. After a while though, I think people just get tired of hanging around with fourteen year olds."

Brody grinned. "Part of your job description," he said, "will be that sometimes, you just need to come stand up here when there’s customers and be a little scary. Not say anything, you know, just fold your arms and sneer or something. How do you feel about that?"

The guy shrugged. "If that’s my job, man."

Brody stared at him for a minute, just long enough for the room to feel strange.

George looked at Josip, who shrugged and gave him a friendly smile. George didn’t smile back.

"Well, I think this may work. Can you start tomorrow? I’m Brody," Brody winked at Josip.

"George," said the guy. Brody shook George’s hand, and led him into Sheila’s office to get started on his paperwork.

Josip went back out into the yard. He should be getting his fifty cent raise now, he realized. And a promotion to full time counter sales. The air smelled clean, like rain was in the forecast. The sun was setting a brilliant array of pink and orange cirrus clouds across the west, and dense black thunderheads gathered together in the south. What Brody said made sense. Everything would be just fine in the world, whether Martyred Cars stayed in business or not.

"Hey," Josip said into the air. "Hey! Fire man, yoo hoo..." Nothing happened. A falcon cruised over the yard, then shrieked, and dove sharply behind the fence.

"I need to talk to you. I think you got something wrong with your prophesy."
He waited. Still nothing. He heard a tow truck rumble down the road, then the
distant voices of Roadman and Clyde in a friendly discussion somewhere.

Maybe the fire man just felt embarrassed. The guy had gotten some stuff pretty
seriously wrong. Or maybe, just maybe Josip had imagined everything. He turned to
walk back to the shop. Then something made him look at the mountain. Just above the
darkening blue line between the ridge and the sky were two lone wisps of cirrus cloud in
the shape of a 'V'. A set of wings, Josip thought.
CHAPTER 3

GOOD DOG, BAD DOG

The mangy German Shepherd was barely an adolescent when he came sniffing sheepishly around the chainlink that kept Daisy and the cars safe inside, and the rest of the world honking, yelling, and revving its engines outside, in the whirling chaos that always threatened to encroach on Daisy’s fragile dirt perimeter. Of course, Daisy wasn’t wholly anti-outside. Every now and again she liked to sneak out on a fatalistic, bad dog impulse when Brody, Josip, or George, the new man (who always said “Wazzup, dog?” and secretly slipped her Snausages when nobody was looking) opened the gate for tow trucks or delivery drivers. She did love the thrill of this occasional ritual: the adrenaline-charged escape, and the period of barreling around the parking lot like a mad tumbleweed. There was a sense of endless possibility in the fenceless space, mazes of roadway, and forests of bushes and weeds on which she could conceivably sniff, chew, and pee forever. But on most days, Daisy maintained a healthy fear of outside. For this reason, she stuck her nose boldly through a square of fence that day, to let the little guy know that as far as she was concerned, he could take shelter on her property.

It was deep evening dark when she first noticed the pup casing her fence. She barked as a precaution, and he tore off toward the road. Soon, she heard him crying softly to himself inside a hovel beneath the network of prickly pear cactus that grew along the front edge of the parking lot, which had been welled out long ago by the pack of nomadic

75

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
javelinas she eyed rumbling nearsightedly through the neighborhood every fortnight or so. A javelina den was no place for a puppy. Even though she'd been spayed a few weeks earlier, her mothering instincts were kicking in with gusto: she wanted more than anything to lick his cracked paw pads and share her water with him. The broad sky was crowded with stars, satellites, and commuter planes glowing dots in all shades of white and off-white, which told Daisy that it would be quite some time before all the people showed up. She'd have to get this pup inside on her own.

In the front corner of the yard, behind some old core engines and partially concealed by overgrown foliage, was a spot of softly packed dirt under the fence. This was the corner through which Daisy originally dug her own way inside a few seasons earlier and had staked her turf on the Martyred Cars lot. Now, so many months later, she didn't remember much about her life pre-Martyred Cars. It was all fragments in a vague blur of love and hurt. There was a happy mess of family inside a warm, cardboard box, some friendly, cooing people here and there, days of racing with her kin in a small yard overgrown with weeds, and then one day a confusing car ride, and many days thereafter of furtive outside wandering through the hot desert streets, eating out of tipped trash cans and drinking from murky puddles left by overzealous sprinklers and leaking garden hoses. And then she came upon the Martyred Cars property, where, at the first scent of the junk yard fence, Daisy understood completely a feeling of being needed and needing, all in one tingly warmth that pressed at the tip of her nose and the base of her tail. She dug her way in and curled up inside the driver's seat of a car with an open window, and on waking the next morning, began a proud career of reconnaissance and guarding, growling at anyone she could see or smell whenever her men went away for the night.
Josip, the most smiling of the men, had discovered and filled in her entry hole later that day, and Daisy had left it alone from then on. But she always kept it on file in her memory as a possible escape route for emergencies. This wayward pup outside certainly qualified as an emergent case.

Daisy kept her nose pressed through the fence, and snorted. The pup peeked out from under the prickly pear. Slowly, tail curled under, he emerged from his hideout and tiptoed onto the parking lot gravel, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch. He flinched when the motion sensing floodlight clicked on, but didn’t run away this time. Instead, he cowered, defenseless, in the fluorescent glow. Daisy yipped, and then lunged in the direction of the diggable dirt. She lunged again, and then trotted, leadingly, to the spot by the corner of the fence. The pup ran along with her. She went to work, delving her claws into the dirt and flinging pawsful aside. The pup followed her example from his side of the chainlink, proving to be a vigorous and athletic little digger. In no time, they had tunneled a passage, and the pup belly-crawled his way inside.

Daisy sniffed him over, from his nose to his rear, lashing at his various cuts and sores with her tongue. The gash in between his nostrils and the chunk missing from one of his ears told her that he had gotten into a rumble or two along the way. This pup must have been wandering for days! She herded him inside her pen, where he immediately plunged his muzzle into her water dish. Daisy curled up on her dusty blanket and watched him slurp. She laid her chin on her paws with a sense of having done right.

*  
The pup was snoozing, scratching at his ear in his sleep, and the sun was just beginning to peek over the fence when Daisy heard Brody roaring from the east toward
the yard the next morning. She'd been able to track him for miles and miles since he got his new motorcycle. As he rumbled up to the gate, she trotted over to bark and growl at him. It was always a good drill, she figured, to pretend he was an intruder before he got the gate open. Daisy hoped that acting business as usual would help convince Brody that a second dog around the yard would be a sensible idea.

"I'll be damned," Brody said, as the pup hurried out to join Daisy on fence-bark duty. Brody sat on his motorcycle for a moment and stared at the dogs. Daisy went silent; sometimes she was just awestruck by the elegance of his authority. Finally, he fished around in his vest pockets for the gate keys. The pup stuck right by Daisy's side, yapping in her ear.

Daisy panted and cranked her tail. If only she could see Brody's eyes, she would be able to read his thoughts on the matter, but his dark sunglasses blocked her from any probing. The pup jumped at the chainlink, sending a shimmer of metallic noise across the fence. Brody unchained the gate and slid it open. He rolled his motorcycle to a stop in front of the shop door, both dogs scampering at his heels. The pup whimpered with joy. He threw himself at Brody and raked his claws into Brody's new leather pants.

"Christ! Get down!" Brody barked, and shoved the puppy, who plopped in the dirt with a high-pitched, staccato yap. Daisy cringed, and nuzzled the pup. They were off to a poor start. Brody had made it clear, time and time again, that jumping on people was bad dog. Even though it still always felt to Daisy like the right thing to do, she had learned that with Brody, restraint was crucial. While Brody disappeared into the shop, Daisy tore around the driveway, her tongue hanging out the side of her mouth. There was
just so much nervous energy this morning, she had to release it somehow. The pup followed her lead, kicking up dirt and stumbling over his clumsy, oversized paws.

Brody came back out carrying two big coffee cans, which Daisy could smell were brimming with kibble. She stopped goofing around and followed him, *good dog*, to her pen, with the pup not far behind. When Brody dumped out a double serving of the brown and red morsels, the pup frantically stuck his face in the bowl and began to scarf. At that point, Brody shut and latched the pen door.

Daisy stood on her hind legs and woofed to get his attention. Brody sighed.

"We'll see, Daisy. We'll see." He walked back to the building, and Daisy was left to watched the pup choke down his meaty bits, mumbling and moaning as he swallowed. The poor thing seemed to have forgotten about everything in the world besides food. He was barely even chewing.

It suddenly struck Daisy that the pup could keep going and polish off the whole bowl. Brody would never know if she didn't get her fair share. She gently nudged her nose in beside his, and hurried to swallow what she could.

* 

By late morning, the dog pen had become the most popular spot in the whole yard. All three men had come by several times to play with the pup, and even Sheila, the tangy smelling woman who rarely came out of the building, had been by to pat heads and hand out milkbones. In the grand scheme of things, Daisy found Sheila to be an interesting case -- her inside/outside boundary was unique among the people, defined not by the fence perimeter, but by the enclosure of the main building. The building, from Daisy's perspective, was beyond inside, so ultra-inside that it almost comprised an *internal*
outside, of sorts. Daisy didn’t have much interest in exploring the internal outside -- the smells were sharp and unnatural there, and there were too many opportunities to get swatted for knocking things over -- but she was curious as to why Sheila usually stayed there, and yet the men roamed freely, in and out. It was one of the puzzles that Daisy contemplated every now and again, in those moments of reverie when something sparkly, spinning, or prismatic caught her attention, her eyes glazed over, and her tongue sagged out of her mouth.

Sheila spent some time that day testing the pup on his ability to balance a treat on top of his nose, then pop it in his mouth. Daisy was amused by the fact that he didn’t have much aptitude for a trick that had come so naturally to her -- most of his treats shot off his nose, through the chainlink, and out of sight. One treat landed by Daisy’s front paws, and she snatched it with a smug slurp. The pup got so frustrated that he barked angrily at Sheila, who finally gave him a treat for free, and a belly rub. As she was coochy cooing at the pup, Brody stopped banging on a car hood and came over to the pen.

“I don’t see how we’re going to keep another dog around here,” he said. Daisy was bothered by his tone.

“Well, you said so yourself, Daisy’s too ladylike to be useful sometimes. Stay!” Sheila stood up, blocking off the pup with body language as he made moves to jump on her skirt. Daisy scratched beneath her ear. “This boy’s more of a genetic junk yard dog, am I wrong? Maybe he can help her rediscover her savage roots.”

Brody shook his head. “At a certain point, the overhead on dogs gets a little ridiculous, don’t you think? I’ve got half a grand in Daisy’s vet bills already. We’ll have to get him neutered, shots, plus double the food every month...” The pup gazed at Brody
and panted, his tongue sliding over his incisors. On an impulse, Daisy bit her leg, and nibbled away at a terrible itch that had cropped up there.

"Why not just wait, and see how it goes with this one? The guys really like him, and don't forget, your girl Daisy let him in. I know you value her opinion." Daisy squeezed her eyes shut, and dug her claws into a sudden, brutal itch on her shoulder. She cowered, and tried to scratch casual when Brody caught her eye.

"Uh oh, Daisy," he said. She didn't like this tone at all. "Itchy scratchy, huh? This pup must have critters of some sort." Sheila squeezed out the kennel door, and Brody squeezed in, both careful to block any canine escape route. Daisy felt Brody all around her, digging into a spot on her shoulder, and then another at the base of her spine. She hunched up, curling her tail between her legs, trying to disappear. It didn't work, though, and she felt a leash tighten around her neck and her body being pulled out to the openness of the main driveway. She heard the pup yelping and screeching; he, too, was being dragged out of the pen and into the swirl of commotion.

As Daisy realized that her autonomy was fleeting away, she stiffened her bones and gritted her teeth. It was the only influence she could exert in the situation. Despite her efforts, she was soon lifted, stiff and kicking, into a plastic tub of warm water. She caught the rim of the tub with her paws in a last attempt to regain control, but to no avail -- somebody unhooked her grasp, and she was swiftly submerged. She cringed and bit her tongue -- she just felt so skinny and horrible when she was wet. She slowly and discreetly lifted one foot out of the tub and onto the ground, but Josip, whose face emerged clearly to her out of the activity, realized what she was doing and pushed her back into the water.
The pungent goop came next, its medicinal aroma filling her entire head as Brody dumped it on her back and massaged it into her scalp. She licked her nose, trying to find a way to avoid the smell, while Brody worked his way up and down her legs, up to her ears, and down her neck with the lather. She sneezed. The smell was everywhere. She shifted her angle in the tub in attempt to catch some fresh air in the breeze. From this new position she could see the pup being scrubbed down by George in a soapy tub of his own.

Daisy saw something different going on in the pup’s tub. He was yelping happily and stamping his feet to churn up the suds and splash George, his scrubber. As George briefly leaned away from the tub for more goop, the pup sprung in an arc out of the water and rolled in the dirt. Josip, the spotter for both tubs, lunged to grab his leash, but the pup lurched just out of reach. The pup raised his rear, dropped his chin to the ground, and woofed a challenge. Then he darted toward the shop, Josip in scrambling pursuit. Daisy was impressed; here she could barely bring herself to attempt escape from Brody’s control, while the pup had the nerve to defy, not only Josip, but George, whose giant stature alone could make Daisy shiver.

Daisy was surprised to hear Brody giggling as he sprayed her down with the hose and toweled her off with a rag. The pup’s behavior was most egregiously bad dog, but the men seemed to be enjoying it. When Brody had Daisy mostly dry and shut back up in the kennel, she watched the men corner the pup by the gate and carry him back to his tub. With a spasm of his legs, he managed to tip the tub and dump most of its water all over Josip. The pup got loose again, and the men laughed from deep in their stomachs. Daisy didn’t know what to make of all this.
The men finally gave up on scrubbing the pup: Josip held his leash while Brody hosed him with off. When they had him sufficiently watered down, Brody brought him back to the pen to towel him off.

“That’s a good doggy, yes, yes he is, ohhh, yes,” Brody gushed as he rubbed the pup’s head dry. “You’re gonna bark real mean at all the bad guys, aren’tcha boy? You’re gonna teach Daisy a little something about kicking ass and taking names, aren’tcha? Your name’s Killer White Fang, whatcha think of that, doggy? Killer, here Killer!”

The pup responded with three squealing barks, as though he understood. After Brody shut the pen door and walked back inside the building, Killer sniffed Daisy’s rear, and then playfully bit her tail. She snarled and pulled away, then went inside her kennel for some privacy.

*

In a few weeks, Daisy recognized that Killer White Fang and his bad dog antics had swiftly become an integral part of the Martyred Cars community. In some ways, it was good to have another dog around — the two of them could cover the fence perimeter in half the time it took for her to run it alone, and she felt much more confident as part of a team while putting on bark and growl fanfare for the dark, huddled figures walking too close to the property, and the occasional mysterious vehicles that pulled in and squealed back out of the parking lot at night. He was, in his heart, a sweet pup, too. No matter how much his raspy bark made her tongue taste funny, or no matter how often his restless pouncing woke her up from her all-important midday sleep, she could always see in his shiny black eyes that Killer was a kindred doggie.
There were instances, however, that tested the limits of Daisy’s patience. His peeing, for one thing, was excessive. In the days before Killer, Daisy marked her own scent here and there around the base of the fence, just to leave warnings to the javelinas and any stray bad dogs who might be passing through that the land inside the chainlink belonged to her. But Killer lifted his leg everywhere, and every minute or two -- on each corner of every car he passed, all over the walls of the building, on the tire heap, the rusting engine cores along the east fence, up and down the chainlink of the fence and all over the dog pen. His acidic scent lingered everywhere Daisy turned her nose, masking other important smells like gasoline, fast food, and rust, and merging with her own scent, the assorted odors of each of the men, and the occasional essence of cat, to alter any familiar chemistry and render aromas of all sorts indistinguishable. It was almost becoming an issue of workplace security. Daisy was finding herself faltering in smell calculations and overall troubleshooting more and more regularly.

Killer’s poop habits were equally as problematic. Daisy was always careful to poop in an approximately five foot square of driveway right in front of the shop; that way, Brody or Josip could easily see her stuff and shovel it up first thing in the morning. She thought it was important that as an employee of sorts, she work together with the men to help keep the yard tidy. Killer certainly did not share her concerns. He seemed to poop when and where the spirit moved him, inside the dog pen and out, in plain sight and in secluded spots. She happened upon his piles everywhere: in the middle of weed clumps, under cars, right next to the water bowl, and most embarrassingly, on the steps in front of the yard’s business entrance. In the midst of one otherwise very peaceful afternoon, Daisy heard Brody’s angry voice from the other side of the building.
“SUNOVABITCH!” Not long after that, Brody was in Daisy’s full view at the pressure washer, shaking his head and spraying off the bottom of his shoe. Daisy was mortified -- he had stepped in Killer’s poop! She felt certain that this would not bode well for the pup, but Brody walked away when his shoe was clean without assigning any kind of punishment, or even a bad dog decree. She did notice the next day that Josip had a new task on his agenda: he spent a good ten minutes each morning on poop scan, wandering the yard with shovel and plastic bag in hand in search of any surprises Killer had hidden the night before.

Daisy supposed, finally, that for the men, all of this was just the price of rearing a young dog. She, herself, used to get too excited around the men and pee on their shoes, but they were perfectly patient about it, and with a bit of perseverance, she was able to learn the ins and outs of bladder control. She convinced herself that Killer, too, would eventually get a handle on his toilet issues. It wasn’t until a few months into his time at the yard that the incident with the pack rat family gave Daisy ominous feelings about Killer’s conception of good dog.

Daisy became aware of a rat living underneath a forgotten camper shell behind the scrap tire heap from the day the kindly rodent set up housekeeping. Killer paid no attention to the new neighbor, so Daisy included the rat on her nightly internal reconnaissance route, and never saw any reason for concern. Daisy noticed, not long before Killer arrived, that the rat was pregnant, and preparing her den for a family. Every night, the bottom-heavy animal would scamper out through a crack in the shell’s fiberglass when Daisy pushed her nose in through the small sliding window to snoop around. Inside, she watched the lively tangle of newspaper shreds, tattered bits of
upholstery, dried leaves, weeds, electrical wires, and fast food wrappers grow into a carefully woven three room nest that struck Daisy as most cozy. She began to look forward to seeing the little matron slink in and out of the dumpster for supplies. The rat didn’t cause any damage, as far as Daisy could see, and the men didn’t seem to notice, so she decided on a laissez faire approach to this particular squatter. And when Daisy finally peeked in one evening to find the one room of the nest occupied by four tiny, scrubbed pink nurslings, she couldn’t contain her tail. Daisy sniffed the babies carefully; they squirmed anxiously. She pulled her nose out with a fresh take on the way of things. Inside, she realized, is where all things begin.

As the stars began to fade and the horizon to lighten, Daisy was sniffing a newly excavated anthill on the far end of the property when a boisterous thumping perked her ears back toward the front of the yard. She jolted, and galloped down the long, car-lined path to investigate the noises, tracking the ruckus to the camper shell, now overturned. Killer was tearing apart the rat’s nest and growling playfully. Splayed on her back across a nearby scrap tire lay the mother rat, her toothy mouth gaping, and puncture wounds on her throat leaking blood in channels down the tire’s zig-zagging tread. Daisy barked, and Killer’s head popped happily up. Squirming and rasping urgently amidst the remains of shredded nest were two of the baby rats. Killer spit out the tiny pink body he’d been chewing with an audible “pit-tooey!” and sucked another into his mouth. Daisy snarled and barked at him, forcing him away from the nest. She carefully scooped up the last rat baby with her tongue, and jogged to the far corner of the yard. There, she set him down in the soft, foamy innards of an old, torn bucket seat. His eyes were locked shut behind
his giant pink eyelids. He emitted a breathy peep, tried to stand, and crumpled on his wobbly legs.

Daisy licked him gently, her tongue wrapping completely around his body. He burrowed into the hollow of the styrofoam. Daisy felt helpless -- this was as good dog as she could do for this minute creature, and it wasn’t enough, or anything at all. The life of this rat was marked to end at its beginning. His entire family had been destroyed in minutes at the hand of Killer’s whim, and because of Daisy, he survived, so that he could die alone. Daisy whined despite herself, and covered the hole in the bucket seat with her chin.

The sun was climbing sharply in the sky when the revving of Brody’s motorcycle engine reverberated throughout the neighborhood. Daisy left the infant rat sleeping inside the seat cushion, and trotted back toward the front gate. She stopped a few cars back to watched Killer meet Brody with a wagging tail. Killer eagerly led Brody to the carnage at the camper shell. Brody picked up the dead mother rat by the tail and tossed her in the dumpster. Then he kneeled down. Killer ran to him.

“Ohhh, that’s my Killer White Fang! That’s my doggy!” Brody rumpled the hair on Killer’s head and scratched his ears. Killer was so ecstatic his entire posterior was wagging. With a squeal, he jumped on Brody. Daisy was shocked: Brody didn’t protest. “Yes doggy! You killed that nasty rat, didn’t you doggy! You got the rat who tore up the forklift wiring, didn’t you! What a good dog!”

Daisy sat. She didn’t understand the world anymore. When Brody finally went inside, Killer ran to her. He sniffed at her mouth, and yipped.
That evening, when Brody let the dogs out of their pen, Daisy hurried across the yard to check on the baby rat. She found him peeking blindly out of the hole in the cushion, shivering and gasping. When Daisy licked him, he relaxed, settled down, then stopped breathing.

*

After several more weeks, Daisy realized that Killer had officially become a dog. It seemed to happen in only a few hours — he was still a pup when she crawled into the kennel for a nap one hot afternoon, but later, when she awoke to the sun dropping back toward the mountains, Killer smelled distinctly adult. He also paid special, uncomfortable attention to her rear, far more than the customary greet and identify sniffs. Daisy was relieved when Brody finally let them out of the pen that evening. She kept to herself until the stars came out, loping away from Killer whenever he tried to horse around in this insidious new adult dog way.

When the sky grew dark and alive with its bright flecks of activity, Daisy reluctantly returned to the front gate area to watch the road with Killer. Killer didn’t pay her much attention, as he was chewing intently on an old tube sock that Josip had given him and jolting up to bow-wow intermittently, at nobody in particular. Daisy made note of the javelina pack rumbling awake in their hovel, then a careening pickup truck with a bedful of whooping passengers, and then a skinny cat slinking in the distance. She also noticed two small men walking briskly past the property, but they recoiled so sharply at her routine barks that she didn’t think them much of an issue.

Killer grew bored of his sock and began playfully biting Daisy’s neck. The small man strode past again at his same quick, consistent pace, this time with his eyes fixed on
the Martyred Cars gate. Daisy watched him carefully this time. She discerned his wild eyes and his posture -- hunched, apprehensive -- and spotted a bundle tucked under his arm. He upped his speed a notch when Killer barked and snarled ferociously at him, jumping spastically at the fence and galvanizing the noisy, cymbal-like waves of chainlink wake.

As the evening bled on and the moon showed a sliver of itself near the mountains, Daisy realized that the javelinas required close attention as well that evening. A sow had recently birthed two piglets and was scouring the area for trash. After Killer ran off to goof around somewhere in the maze of cars, Daisy watched the matronly boar drag a black garbage bag from somewhere down the road and spread its contents across the Martyred Cars driveway for her young to pick through. Daisy barked her head off at the javelinas, but they paid no attention.

Then, for a disconcerting instant, Daisy didn’t care what they did to her property. She stopped barking, and stared until her eyes watered over. She snapped quickly out of this nothingness reverie, though, when a strip of bologna slapped her on the nose.

While she’d been distracted, someone had snuck up close to the fence. It was the small, suspicious man she’d seen. Up close, she could see that he was young, far younger than Josip or George. This man was just a pup, and he was tossing cold cuts over the fence. “Here, doggy doggy!” he cooed, in a tone of voice that Daisy knew quite easily was disingenuous. She wasn’t about to fall for this scam. With a swift lick, she wiped the meat off her face and broke into a mean fit of spitting barks.

“Aw, come on, pretty doggy. You love meat, don’t you? Come on, give into temptation, pretty doggy.” He tried to coax her. He tossed over a few more strips of
bologna. The scent was heavenly, but Daisy didn’t flinch. Killer came trotting from out of the cars with his nose in the air, a look of primal thirst in his eyes. Killer ignored the man and ran straight to the meat.

“You’re friend likes it, you little bitch. What’s your problem?” The young man’s voice took on an edge. He kept throwing meat strips, which Killer scooped up, one by one. The man tentatively put his foot in a chainlink square, as though aiming to climb the fence. What did he think he was going to pull? Daisy lunged at him from her side of the fence with urgent snarls, and he backed away. Killer looked up, licking the last taste of bologna from his whiskers. “Fuck it,” the man muttered.

Daisy stood her ground, teeth bared, making sure this man intended to fully vacate the parking lot. Finished with his snack, Killer joined her at the fence to inhale the remaining cold cut vapors in the air. Killer was pretty worthless when push came to shove, Daisy concluded, but at least the cars were still safe. The man crunched backward across the gravel and then turned toward the road. Though Daisy saw it coming, the man looked utterly surprised to find the entire javelina pack suddenly crowding around him, lured by the scent of the bologna package still in his hands.

The man cried out in panic. He dropped the package and ran back toward the fence. The piglets and several males descended on the bologna, but the two alpha sows charged after the man, nipping at his pants. He took several steps up the gate’s chainlink and wedged one shoe on top of the gate latch, hefting his weight well above the javelinas. Daisy watched from a few paces back as the javelinas stretched and hopped, trying to reach the man, their portly bodies balanced awkwardly on their skinny, hoofed legs. They weren’t agile enough to lift their snouts to his height.
Daisy felt relieved. While she hated this man out of duty, she didn’t want to see him gnawed to bits by such crude creatures. She sat on her side while the javelinas stood on theirs, grunting mildly, at a loss for what to do next. The man made eye contact with her; she growled softly and slurped.

He looked down at the javelinas. “Shoo. Shoo!” He shouted at them. They flinched back a step, then repositioned themselves. Then suddenly, they scattered. The man watched them scurry back toward the road. He stepped tentatively down. It was at that point that Killer White Fang burst out of the bushes, eyes feral, incisors glinting, and clamped his jaws brutally into the man’s leg.

Daisy burst into a howling, yelping fit of barks. The man screamed in pain. Killer tore a strip of cloth from his pants and bit into his shoe when he tried to pull away. The man moaned when Killer whipped his head back and forth, as though trying to break the foot’s neck. Daisy dashed to the soft dirt spot beneath the fence, where a sloppy hole was freshly dug, and scrambled through.

When she emerged from the bushes, Killer was on an absolute rampage, snapping his teeth in rapid fire across the man’s arm. Daisy leapt at Killer’s head and sunk her own teeth deep into his neck. He yelped and let go of the man, who limped quickly away. Killer leaned in the direction of the man, but Daisy bit down harder. When the man was out of sight and Killer began to whimper, she let go.

Daisy surveyed the parking lot. Scraps of cloth had scattered across several yards of the driveway. She sniffed at some gravel where blood had dripped from the man’s wounds. His shoe rested tread-side up against the gate. Killer tried playfully to mount Daisy, but she shook him off with an unforgiving snarl. She stormed into the bushes and
wiggled back under the fence. Killer remained outside, sniffing at the shoe, the cloth, and the blood. Daisy trotted into the grid of cars, beginning her perimeter watch with new, determined conviction.

Killer stayed outside in the parking lot that evening, sniffing out the external borders of the property and gamboling foolishly into the road, chasing and yapping after the occasional car or cat that traveled through. In the morning, when Brody plowed through the javelinas’ garbage spread across the parking lot, Daisy waited silently by the shop door to see how he’d react to the scene of carnage in front of the gate.

“Killer!” Brody parked his cycle and picked up the shoe. Killer galloped in from the road. “Did you catch a burglar last night boy? That’s my boy!” Killer got a good tousle on the head for his deeds, and that was that. Daisy wasn’t surprised. Her disenchantment with Brody was now complete.

Daisy refused to get in the pen with Killer that day. She sprinted out into the cars, slithering out of both Brody and George’s grasps, challenging them, yipping herself silly, stirring inside herself the impulsive, thrilling bad dog she had worked so diligently for months to repress. Brody hollered, “Dammit, Daisy!” and grabbed at her with unfriendly hands. When they finally cornered her by the Freon tanks, she stiffened and growled, forcing them to drag her back toward the pen. Killer watched timidly as she threw an explosive, barbaric tantrum at the pen gate. There was no way she would spend another day in the pen with that monster.

Eventually, she got her way: the men clipped the leash to her collar and knotted it to an engine core, then brought her water in a coffee can and a spare bowl of kibble. She
lay down, and squinted as the sun rose. Across the yard, she could see Killer basking in the shaded heat of the kennel. Daisy shut her eyes, and tried to sleep on the hard dirt.

When the dogs were set free that evening, Killer kept a healthy distance from Daisy. He didn’t look upon her with fear, though, but instead with a sort of princely disdain. He sauntered about the yard with his nose and tail cocked, lifting his leg to pee long streams across the building, the gate, and one car after another. The appearance of a half moon seemed only to amplify his brazen mood, inducing fiery bursts of howling and moaning, and sending him in lurching sprints from one end of the yard to the other. In a particularly furious spasm of energy, Killer galloped across the dirt toward a nearby car. There, he sprung in a series of leaps up the bumper, across the trunk, and onto the roof, where he wailed with passion at the sky.

Daisy surmised that this new revelation had taken Killer by surprise -- once he climbed to the top of one car, he seemed compelled to summit all of them. For the rest of the night, she watched him scrape his way up compact car after mini-van after luxury sports sedan, each one stoking his fervor. When Brody pulled up in the morning, Killer was perched atop the roof of a small truck near the front of the cars. Killer bounced cheerfully when he saw Brody, but Brody jumped off his motorcycle and banged his fist on the gate.

“Killer, no! Get down, dammit! Bad dog!” Brody roared. Killer slid down the windshield and stumbled to the ground as Brody unlocked the gate and stormed inside.

Daisy perked up, and cocked her head. She wandered out of the pen to watch the drama unfold. This was certainly a new development. How on earth, she wondered, after
everything else, was this suddenly so bad dog? Brody grabbed Killer by the collar. Josip pulled into the parking lot to see Brody dragging the dog toward the pen.

“Boss, what’d he do?” Josip climbed out of his car and rushed over.

“Go look at that Toyota. He put big scrapes and dents on the hood. I’m willing to bet he’s been on quite a few of them. That’s money down the drain, Josip, damaged goods. We’ve gotta get rid of him, today. I just hope Daisy hasn’t picked up any of this behavior.” Brody kept a firm grip as Killer squirmed under his collar. Josip examined several more cars and discovered Killer’s handiwork. In a few minutes, Daisy found herself alone in the pen, while Killer paced in a circle at the end of the leash knotted around the engine core.

Later that morning, Killer was led away to Clyde’s junkyard a couple plots down the road. Daisy frisked happily into the pen that night, and felt a new, blissful freedom within the chainlink square. Her very own internal outside, she mused. That evening, when the oblong moon rolled over the mountain, Daisy heard Killer’s long, primitive howls echoing throughout the neighborhood.

*Killer White Fang came sniffing around the Martyred Cars fence every now and then after he moved over to Clyde’s. Clyde didn’t care that his dogs came and went as they pleased, and didn’t mind if they jumped on cars. He kept only older models in his yard, which had bodies of hard steel, most of which had long since been scratched, dinged, and sun-bleached of their sheen and color. Clyde was so blasé about his parts that he stacked cars two, three, and four high. When Killer came to visit Daisy, he pranced with an unsettling arrogance.  

94
On a breezy evening, Daisy watched storm clouds curl over the mountain, glowing spectral in the light of the mostly full moon. She watched them unroll their tendrils until time slowed down. Her tongue began to drip. After a while, she forgot she was a dog, or a soul, or anything. A crack of lightning and a splitting peal of thunder brought her back with a jump and a yelp. She hurried inside her kennel and trembled, her nose between her paws. One raindrop pinged on the roof of the kennel, and then another, and then they lost their oneness in a violent racket. Daisy closed her eyes. If she stayed like this long enough, she knew, the noise would go away.

The initial onslaught dulled quickly to a light spittle of rain, and underneath it, Daisy could hear a barking. It was Killer, barking his fool head off, a feral, shrieking bark, with an undertone of bestial glee. Daisy peeked out of her kennel, where she could hear it more clearly. His bark resonated with passion, and was stripped of any lingering good dog or civility. Daisy realized that, since leaving Martyred Cars, Killer had shed the shackles of inside, and was spinning now, uncontrollably, into the dark chaos of the endless outer realm.

She trotted out of her pen and over to the scrap tire heap, the rain spitting on her coat and clotting up the hair around her eyes. By climbing carefully up the tiers of slick rubber, she made her way toward the best place in the yard to get a clear view down the road toward Clyde’s. She couldn’t help it; she was compelled. She needed to hear exactly what Killer was raging on about.

She had just found a solid footing in a wedged tangle of rubber tread when she saw him. Killer had his four legs planted firmly on the roof of a four car tower, which rose high above the others, lit magnificently by Clyde’s floodlight. Daisy yapped twice.
He jolted toward her, his eyes gleaming, drunk on the height, the spotlight, and the storm.

I am everything, Daisy! Killer howled. I am the ultimate essence of everything that is absolute and boundless and infinite! I’m infinite, can’t you see? Infinite! I’m more alive than the world! I’m everything! I am now! I am alive!

Daisy stared, dumbfounded. She felt something invisible surge across the ground and through the tires, toward Killer, as though the air itself was drawn to him. And then, a blinding, screaming crunch of lightning zapped down on Killer’s tower.

Daisy scrambled. Her front legs and a back leg slipped into the cracks of the tire pile. She yelped, and kicked at the tires with her free leg. After several moments of squirming unwedged her, she carefully restored her footing. When she looked back at the car tower, Killer was gone. A small fire had been ignited, and was burning steadily inside the cab of the highest car. Smoke spiraled into the glow of the floodlight, disappearing out into the dark sky. A black, smoky emanation swelled across the land from Clyde’s. Daisy licked her nose, and hacked at the rudely familiar fume.

*

Daisy hid in her kennel all night, trying to process what had happened. Killer was no more, that much was clear. She would never know exactly why things happened the way they did, but she settled on some abstract conclusions. Killer had betrayed the natural balance of things. He had ignored the importance of the boundary between inside and outside, and had removed himself from the polarity of good dog, bad dog. After everything, she couldn’t muster much empathy for the pup. He did this to himself. Bad dog behavior, she understood, didn’t just hang in the air. That bolt of lightning was a
clear response, a sharp bite in the centrifugal circle of cause and effect. That was life, Daisy though. The life Killer was so eager to live, and be.

The fire had burned itself out by morning, but Clyde’s car tower was still smoking when the first car pulled into the Martyred Cars parking lot. Daisy climbed out of her kennel when she heard Josip’s crunching footsteps and the jingle of his keys unlocking the gate. She trotted to him, nervously.

“Daisy, chica! ¿Qué pasó, perra mía?” Josip scratched her ears, and smelled the air. “What the heck, dog? It smells like a barbecue around here!”

Daisy licked his hand, then followed him inside the building.
George's job at Martyred Cars was pulling parts, mostly. Sometimes deliveries. Sometimes getting lunch at McDonalds for Brody. He could always find stuff to do outside, and he didn’t have to deal with too many people. It was good to finally have a job again -- while he’d been unemployed, his girlfriend Kayla’d pretty much ordered him to sit in their room all day playing his two boring video games so he wouldn’t spend any money. It was all around a bad idea, getting a Sony Playstation -- he was thinking he’d enter the citywide video game competition ‘cause he was really good at that stuff, so he got it using an ‘Everyone Gets Approved’ credit card with really high interest that was advertised during Montel. But then it turned out he couldn’t afford to even rent any of the new games that kept coming out, so he hardly ever played the thing, except for when he was stuck at home, without work. During that time, Kayla had to give him gas money to go look for jobs even, and she got all pissed off and said “what the fuck?” when he’d used up half a tank just driving around one day. He wished she’d just been cool and hadn’t cursed. She knew he hated it when women cursed. She made him hate her sometimes, but only during times like this, when he really couldn’t say anything about it.

When he’d met her at the movies so many months ago, he’d never thought it would come to this. It had been opening night for the new samurai fighter movie, and the
only empty seat in the theater was next to her and her girlfriend, the jittery one with the skull tattooed on her arm.

Kayla’d given him a funny look as he squeezed toward her, past all the people’s knees. It was a look he’d seen plenty of times before, one he was used to thinking meant *Warning! Warning! Black man approaching!* “Don’t worry, I don’t bite,” he said. That’s what he usually said to white girls when they gave him such a look.

“Oh yeah, me neither,” she’d laughed, like it was nothing. Then she pointed to her friend. “She does, but I’ll hold her off.” That was what had got him about her, right from the start. She seemed like the most *real* chick he’d ever been out with, smart and totally on top of things. He wondered, all the time, why she was bothering with such a loser of a black guy like himself.

Kayla agreed to move in together and split the rent, five hundred dollars, at *Charming Apartments for Older Persons*, only if George would get his shit together on all that sort of stuff. George loved her, and he thought the whole thing would end up cheaper in the long run, but after six months it sure didn’t feel like it. *Charming Apartments* was really just an old, twelve room motel by the freeway that anybody could stay at for as long as they wanted, daily weekly monthly. George didn’t know why they had the ‘Older Persons’ bit. It was a little embarrassing when anybody found out he lived there, but he did like the ice machine, and Babs, the manager, let him do laundry for free in the maid’s closet. Plus, it was cheap as hell.

Even so, there was really only money for gas and groceries in their budget. Even then, Kayla usually brought home free dinner from Wendy’s, where she was daytime shift manager, so they could keep food at a minimum, milk, cereal, bread, balogna, since they
couldn’t afford it, and since they only had a tiny little motel fridge in their room. There
was the other little shit that always came up -- haircuts, socks, oil for the car -- that there
was really no money for but he squeezed it out somehow, borrowed it if he had to. That
was one of Kayla’s rules for if they moved in together, pay back everyone you borrowed
from and never borrow money again. She didn’t get it, though, she had her folks to ask
for help if she had to. George had nobody to ask these days except Kayla, and it just wore
him down, always asking her for five bucks so he could go buy underwear or something.
She didn’t say it, but he could tell she hated giving him money, always sighing and acting
all overwhelmed. She was stingy as hell. She even kept pennies and put ‘em in a jar.
Pennies! He made jokes sometimes and she got all pissed, but pennies. Come on.

George didn’t know how things had gotten so dire. It had been okay for a while,
they were just squeaking by, until he quit his bullshit job at RV Heaven. It wasn’t the
smartest move, he admitted that. But George left that place in what his mama would have
called a "snit fit." He made a big show of it, too -- slamming doors, cursing like a house
afire, and overturning a huge tool case, sending a silver slew of ratchets, wrenches,
sockets and screwdrivers in all shapes and sizes clattering across the shiny concrete shop
floor. When he busted into the front office, George felt like his brain took a Polaroid of
Tracy, the secretary, shrinking back in terror as he firmly announced his resignation. He
couldn’t get her fearful blue eyes out of his head. It was months ago, and he was still
having dreams in which that girl screamed in his face and yelled rape. He’d been the only
one in that whole damned place who could taste the evil, could see it dripping from the
walls and smoldering away in the frantic eyes of the cartoon angel at the pearly gates on
the neon ‘RV Heaven -- New & Used’ sign out front. Once he finally stood up and did
the right thing, he fell smack into Angry Black Man mode, at least as far as all those commission-grubbing puppets were concerned.

It had been the retiree couple from Nebraska who had, unknowingly, shown him the way and the light out of that nut house. George watched from the Mini Winnie he was wiping down as Mickey, the punk ass salesman, really laid on the sleaze, demonstrating just a little too aggressively storage compartment after storage compartment on the model of one of the luxury motor coaches that had been sluggish sellers all season. This was not your old folks’ motor home, mind you, this was a monster touring bus, really only suitable for a heavy metal band, far too much machine for the happy little lady in the pink floppy hat and her husband, the classic old white guy, complete with his wire-rim bifocals, brave comb-over, pants cinched high over his belly, the whole nine yards.

George thought they were downright cute, harmless as kittens who just wanted to revel in the greatness of this fine country in their sunset years, as the old guy had put it. But they just weren’t sure if God would approve of them putting such a big chunk of their nest egg into a recreational vehicle, they said to Mickey, who was drooling all over the guy’s fancy Rolex. We’ve got our grandkids to think about, you see, said the little lady. Charles is a senior in high school, and hopes to be a civil engineer. And little Marie is only a sixth grader! College isn’t cheap these days, and we’ve promised to help out as much as we can, God willing. That’s when Mickey got on his walkie talkie, and called in ‘The Closer’.

That’s what Martin Ruiz, the owner of RV Heaven, liked to call himself. He had one of those name plaques on his desk that said just that, The Closer, with a mean looking
lightning bolt slicing between the words. Mr. Ruiz's motto, he told George at least twice a week, was, “whatever it takes.”

*What I do is, I scope them out,* was the kind of thing he liked to explain to George whenever the lot was slow. Ruiz would meander through George’s work area, picking up tools and putting them back in the wrong places, and musing about his philosophy. *You have to look for what’s bugging them, what’s keeping them from pulling out their checkbooks. That’s where I focus. That’s where I work on it. Because they all want to buy, George. They wouldn’t be on the lot if they didn’t. It’s my job to make them feel good, feel safe, feel a-okay about taking the plunge.*

If George said “uh huh” enough times, Mr. Ruiz would get bored and leave him alone, but not before patting him on the back and saying, “That’s business, Georgie!” *Georgie.* George hadn’t been called that since fourth grade, when he beat the hell out of Wyatt Anderson for a “Georgie Porgie, Puddin’ Pie” comment on the monkey bars. But George always swallowed his anger around RV Heaven. That’s probably what made him go off in the end, finally.

When Mickey called The Closer on his walkie talkie that day, George stayed in the shadows of the Mini Winnie and watched the scene unfold the way you watch the really hard scene in the movie you’ve seen before, the one where the guy on the lam gets shot in slow motion while his girl cries out in horror and the cop lowers his gun somberly, wishing there could have been another way. You watch knowing full well what’s about to go down, but still hoping, somewhere in the back of your silly brain, that maybe, just maybe, this time it might be different. Mr. Ruiz lumbered out to the little old customers under the guise of answering “a few complex finance questions,” and Mickey piped

102
down, stepped back, and snuck away to troll for a new set of unsuspecting retirees. Ruiz listened carefully as the folks explained their dilemma, a thinking man’s frown upon his slimy face. After he’d heard his fill, he took their hands, bent his head, and said a prayer. The bastard said a prayer! Some crap about the lord blessing them with travels from the mountains to the prairies throughout the highways and the byways. The little lady bowed her head, too, and the old man nodded wistfully. George didn’t wait around to see if they’d buy, but deep down he knew they would, just like the guy in the goddamned movie gets it in the end every time. He was out the door and on the road in record time, despite the unfortunate awkward moment with Tracy. He breathed a hundred times easier once he was unemployed, sucking in the freedom of two o’clock on a weekday out in the streets, with nobody but the stop signs to tell him what to do. He’d miss talking to the breathless -- Mrs. Longbottom out by the back fence, and Old Man Cooper behind the oil shed, but god knows, nothing else at that damned place. He drove around in bliss for a good hour before his car overheated, and he thought he’d better think about another job pretty quick.

Kayla was mostly cool about him quitting RV Heaven. George could read her mind, though. It was written all over her face, and in the little edge of attitude in her voice, even though she said it was no problem. But he knew what she was thinking: This is what I get for getting involved with a black man, a deadbeat, a total loser, quitting your job while I work my ass off every day, all day over vats of greasy french fries. She didn’t say that stuff, but it was in the way she shook her head about it. She did say she could get him a job at Wendy’s, but she didn’t press the issue when he said no thanks. She wanted George to talk it out, though, as usual. “Let me get this straight,” she asked
him that evening. "You quit because your boss said a prayer? It doesn’t sound that bad, George, I mean, everyone’s boss is an asshole. That’s just life."

“It’s wrong, Kayl! Last month he put on one of those little Jewish caps when a rabbi came in. I heard him talk about ‘the Mother Goddess’ once with some stinky hippies. There’s only so much I can watch before I get too mad.” George wished she’d just let it be. But women are like this, he knew. His mama was like this. They have to talk about everything, make it all make sense in words. This was something, though, that George would have rather kept inside his head. But Kayla did pay George’s half of the rent that month with the little she had in a savings account, so he couldn’t let himself get too annoyed about anything.

It took a month to find the job at Martyred Cars, where George felt much more at home. It was just long enough to really botch up the bills, but at least he could start digging himself out of the hole. Brody was the kind of boss you could shoot the shit with, so long as you did your work and didn’t give him any lip. And Brody’s friend Don was a wizard with cars -- he messed around under George’s car hood with a wrench during some down time the first day. George didn’t know what that guy did under there, but the Monte didn’t knock or wheeze, or spit out any oil for a good week. These were decent folks at Martyred Cars. George figured he could stay there for a good while.

It did take a few weeks for the local breathless to show themselves which, from George’s experience, was a longer time than most breathless could stand to be so shy. That’s what his mama had called them, "the breathless." She could see them, too, up until she had her aneurysm and died when George was fifteen. They really took their time at first, peeking at him in rearview mirrors and out of puddles from the hose.
The little Mexican boy was the first to finally break the ice, after George had been working there a few weeks. He didn’t look at George, but made a big ruckus of himself as George worked at unsticking the driver’s side window of an old Honda. The boy wore a T-shirt with a big “8” on his back and kicked a little ball in the dust.

“Hey, ‘bro,” George called out. The boy stopped kicking and disappeared. George kept at the window.

A couple days later, George caught the teenage girl watching him from the hood of, he assumed, the truck she died in. She gave him a shy smile and twirled her hair. The elderly couple started showing themselves soon after, just drifting around and admiring all the wrecks. George was relieved to finally meet a talkative vato breathless named Augustino. There was always one in a place like this, a guy who had loved to shoot the shit when he was alive, and who was willing to clue George in on the breathless politics of the place.

“You the new guy,” Augustino appeared, leaning on a fence near George, who was eating his lunch of Tupperwared leftover macaroni in the shade behind the storage shed one noon hour.

“That’s right.” George was careful not to make any sudden movements, but Augustino wasn’t at all skittish. The breathless adjusted his backwards baseball cap and folded his arms.

“Yeah, we been watching you,” he said. “We been discussing it, ‘cause you’re the kind of dude we can talk to, right, but there’s a bunch of ‘em who don’t think it’s a good thing. They’re all thinking it’s better to let you do your thing and we do our thing, and I was all, no man, I’ll show you, he’s alright, I can tell.”
"Why so shy, all those other breathless? Never a whole place been shy like that before. Usually they all come talking to me, every place I go."

Augustino sat down in the dirt next to George. "Bro', we don't even trust the dog 'round here. Well, I take that back -- the old man has a thing about showing up on that Josip, pretending to be an angel alien and shit, telling him he can save America or some shit. He's got some magic tricks, too, -- he can do all kinds of poof smoke, pyro and whatnot, maybe he'll show you sometime. But no, man, we all died hard, no shit. Me in that Impala over there, my crazy chinga girlfriend was all pissed off and speeding, then we hit a dump truck, no shit, man, my whole body went crash, right through the windshield and stuck there, glass all cutting into my stomach and shit. Blood everywhere, man, and I just stayed there like that 'till it was over. Shelly Marie, that little jail bait? She don't even know she's dead. She thinks she ran away from home, or some shit. She got her head sliced right off, that's what we figured out. Sitting on the middle seat in her daddy's truck, truck hits a car, she ain't wearing no seat belt and flies right into the CB mounted on the dash. The old lady and the old man, they take care of her. You know, make sure she's alright and shit. But it's a tough crowd on this lot."

"That's rough, man, that's rough," George said.

"Naw, it's alright. This is a good place if we gotta be somewhere, management's cool and whatnot. They keep the air pure, if you know what I'm saying. We all just stay in our cars most of the time, smell the people we used to be and all that. Everybody keeps a few things stashed for memories. I keep my old green card under the seat, you know, just so I remember what was what. José, that's the kid always kicking something around, he's got a whole stash of McDonalds toys in his trunk the management don't
know about. Them old people, they don’t say their names so I don’t know, their car got crushed down for scrap a few months ago so they just cruise around now. They’re friendly, though, she’ll wanna make you dinner. She can’t do it, but it’s the thought that counts.”

“How many breathless you got around here?” George asked.

“They come and go. Right now we got about ten. Most of them too scared to show up on you. Lot of ‘em move on, too, you know, ‘go into the white light’ and that shit.”

“Why don’t you all go into the light?” George thought this was what you were supposed to suggest when the whole ‘white light’ issue came up. That’s what they always said in the movies, that the breathless needed help when they got confused.

“Would if I seen it man, but I never seen it. I don’t know,” Augustino began to sound distant. George hoped he hadn’t fucked things up too badly, talking about the white light.

“I’ll see you later man, my lunch is over,” George said, but Augustino was already gone. George finished up with his macaroni, then trudged back to the building. When he stopped to tie his shoe, a McDonalds ‘Fry Guy’ racer rolled across his path.

When he got inside, Josip was staring at the hotline, and Brody in with Sheila, pissing and moaning about some form or other they had to fill out. Keeping the wonks downtown happy, Big G, Brody had told him on more than one occasion. That’s half the business I do around here.

“How the hell am I supposed to fill this one out honestly? You tell me that!” Brody’s voice was coming unhinged.

107
“If you would just take it easy,” Sheila’s voice firm, like a mom. “Let’s just go through this list of questions they have here, and then we’ll see if we even need to bother with it.”

“I see that first question on there. ‘Do you ever find buried artifacts on your property?’ Well yes, in fact, Sheila, we do. I found an ancient Coors can with one of the old pull tab thingies out by the fence, and Josip found a really old hubcap last time it rained.” George could hear Brody forcing himself to simmer down. “Now, look at that second question -- what era would you estimate these artifacts to have come from? I don’t know about the Coors can, but the hubcap is pretty freaking old. There’ve been junk yards on this land on and off since cars were invented. I know, I had to look all that stuff up when I bought the land. So, we admit to finding a hubcap on a ‘44 Rambler or some such, and they get it in their heads that this yard should be some kind of archaeological site, we’re all out of jobs. I’ve seen it on TV, they can just come in here and kick us off our own land. All in the name of history. Well to hell with that, I say. To hell with that!”

George listened as the two of them bickered. Josip rolled his eyes and whistled something, some song George was sure he’d heard on the radio, something with a lot of baby baby and oh yeah. He was sweating inside the building more than he had been out in the yard. He leaned against the wall, closed his eyes, breathed in the A/C. He remembered the A/C in his car had quit that morning. Shit, he thought. Everything’s going to shit.

*
“You believe in UFO’s, Big G?” Augustino peeked in the busted out back window of a little Geo Metro with most of its parts still on it a few days later. George was jammed into the back seat, unscrewing the bucket seats and their tracks, which some punk kid had used as a spot to stockpile his old bubble gum. It was a good sign, he thought, that Augustino had let it go about the white light.

“Naw, man,” George replied. He didn’t know why he didn’t. He never had. It just didn’t make any sense. He could see breathless, you’d think he could see UFO’s, if there was such a thing.

“Well you better start, man, because it’s all true!” Augustino was so excited, the door on the Metro slammed shut.

“You know that on your end? You breathless got insider information on that one?” George sat up as best he could and opened the door again.

“Naw, dude, I seen it! Me and my hermanos was driving up the mountain once when I was alive, gonna drink us some brews and bee-bee-cue up some balogna for sandwiches man, you ever try that shit? That’s good shit, I’m telling you. So we came around a bend to a big open valley and there the fucker was! Big motherfucker! With lights and flashing shit, just like E.T. Phone Home, same thing. And we all turned and looked at each other, you know how you do, and in a second, when we looked back, that fucker was gone!”

“I can’t drive a long way like that, ‘bro. Just around town is all I drive, or else I spend too much on gas. That’s probably why I never see ‘em, plus it hurts my back to drive out far enough,” George said.
Augustino looked surprised. “Huh, really?” he said. “I’d’ve thought you’d have some kind of lower lumbar support in that granny car of yours.”

A surge shot through George, in through his feet and straight to his neck. “It ain’t no granny car.” He breathed deep, tried to sound calm.

“Hey, no disrespect, G. I just meant ‘cause my granny had one. That was a long time ago, though. Probably means something different now.”

George inhaled big, exhaled big. Augustino didn’t mean anything by it. But now he’d have to think about it. His Monte Carlo, a granny. Wasn’t nice enough to be a granny, but on the other hand, it had a built-in kleenex holder. He usually just stuffed ketchup packets and napkins in there, but it definitely had the oval opening, perfect for a granny’s damn tissues. Dammit, he thought.

It was getting near time to go home. When Brody squawked on the walkie talkie that he could go a little early, George wasn’t even happy. He didn’t really want to go home, there’d been a fight with Kayla that morning over him needing to spend so much on cokes from the machine.

“You don’t need soda, is all I’m saying,” she’d had on her tone of voice that reminded George of his bitch sixth grade teacher.

“Oh, I don’t, huh? You wanna know how hot it is out there when I’m pulling parts? And you, all the free coke you want over at Wendy’s, telling me to cut back.”

“But you could just bring a big jug of water with you, George, it’d be healthier, and you could fill it up in the fountain. There’s a fountain there, right?” Kayla sounded so logical. George hated it when she was logical. It wasn’t fair, she was just better at it than him, but it didn’t mean she was right.
“You’d have me on strict bread and water if you had your way,” he’d said on his way out the door.

George went over to Daisy’s pen to kill some time before he left. Sheila gave him a handful of dog treats every morning, and he’d hung onto them all day today. He offered her one through a chainlink square. She hooked it through carefully with her tongue. He offered her another as Shelly Marie, the little breathless, showed up behind Daisy.

“What’s up, kid,” he said. She offered him a droopy little bouquet of some ratty white flowers he’d seen on the weeds around the yard. He pulled it through the chainlink square. “What’s this for?”

“For your girlfriend,” said Shelly, and winked and giggled.

“Why?”

“It’s obvious you don’t wanna go home for some reason. Just bring her the flowers, it’ll make her happy, and if she’s happy, you can be happy. That’s how it works.” Shelly said, and disappeared.

“Thanks,” George said to nobody. He had to smile a little bit. He put the flowers in his front pocket and went inside to clock out. When he started his car to leave, it popped and gagged quite a bit before it turned over. The thing was a piece of shit when he’d inherited it, after his sister got shot in the church parking lot by her psycho fiancé, and that was years ago. He never even went back to church after that. It was a shame Tisha’d never been a breathless, he would have liked to talk to her. They never really talked that much before she died, just argued about shit. Stupid shit, he thought now.

And what the hell was wrong with a granny car, anyway? Granny’s gotta drive something, he thought. At least grannies keep their cars all clean and vacuumed, none of
these wrappers and straws all under the seat. George rolled down the window and held out Shelly's bouquet to scatter off in the wind.

*

"You know what else is weird?" Augustino had been talking George's ear off all day, while he pulled parts, while he ate lunch, while he hung with the dog, and now that Brody had him polishing the row of yard cars. He had the nun's car looking all pretty, and now he was working on the delivery truck. Sometimes the boss man got a burr up his butt to get everything looking all tidy, especially when business was slow. George didn't mind. It was something to do. Something to keep his mind off his own damn car. The whole engine on that thing was about shot, and George didn't know what he was going to do. If his car crapped out, that was it. The end. He'd have to ask Kayla for a ride everywhere, in that nice old Chevy her dad gave her when she was a teenager. She'd damn near be running his life if that happened. George had to stop thinking about it. It was about the worst thought he'd ever had.

"What's that, man?" George asked while he rubbed away the dried polish, trying to ignore the headache pulsing away in his temples.

"I could go to a restaurant," Augustino mused on, "and get all full on whatever, burgers, tacos, then I could eat sunflower seeds all the rest of the day. Even though I was full. You ever have that, G? Sunflower seeds. Like they ain't even food."

Sometimes Augustino just went on like this, talking about shit that didn't mean anything. George didn't say anything. Usually he said "uh huh," but he wasn't in the mood this time. It just kind of bugged him sometimes -- just because he would listen and
let people talk, they thought that’s what he was there for, just for listening to them, like he might not have his own troubles stewing.

“G, what’s wrong with you, man?”

“Well, now that you ask,” George put down his rag. “My car ain’t gonna last another day. Ain’t worth to fix, either, but I gotta drive something. And I’m barely making the rent as it is, and there’s no way around it, it’s all fucked up.”

“What about your girl?”

“My girl has saved my ass so many times that I ain’t much a man at this point. One more time and I turn into a cockroach.”

“It’ll all work out. Don’t sweat that stuff man, it always works out,” Augustino smiled and sounded all shiny.

“That’s easy for you to say, dead man. You ain’t got bills to pay.” This was what these kind of people always said, too. *Don’t worry! Just think about sunshine and rainbows!* Shit. Then they cry about their own girlfriends and their mammas. “It just kind of makes me *tired* to hear that shit, man.”

Augustino looked like he had something big about to come out. “G, there’s a thing that goes, ‘for everyone who he hast thou, he shalt be without...’ Wait a minute, I fucked that up. Well, it basically goes, ‘whoever has stuff will get more stuff, and always have plenty of stuff.’ You know, money and clothes and shit. Then the rest of it goes, and this is the part about you, G, ‘whoever doesn’t have stuff won’t get no more, and even the stuff he has, which ain’t much, The Man’ll come take it all away from him.’ And that’s in the Bible, bro’, that’s just the way it goes.”

“Oh, that’s nice. So you’re saying I’m just fucking?” George got all sarcastic.
“Naw, that’s the thing, you just gotta see how that whole principle works. It’s like a trap you’re stuck in, but if you understand it, you can find a way out.” Augustino made important gestures with his hands, the kind of gestures that tried to be words, concepts, planets, but always fell short.

George was getting pissed off. “You can’t tell me that, man, you’re dead. You got free from the money. I’m still stuck! I’ve got nothing, do you hear me? Nothing! I’m nothing. What do you suggest I do, kill myself? Is that a good idea?”

“You gotta be proactive, homes, look at the game and figure out how you, Big G George, can start winning.” Augustino got right in his face with a big, blurry finger. “That’s what you have, in that thing I told you about. Money, stuff, it ain’t you. I don’t know who ever told you it was. You got a big old brain, but right now you’re getting played hard. You gotta change something.”

“What though?”

“That’s what I don’t know, man. I ain’t you. But it ain’t gonna fall in your lap like manna from the skies, I do know that much.”

“What the hell you talking about, ‘manna from the skies’? You’ve lost your shit, dead boy!” George said. Augustino took the hint and disappeared. George went back to rubbing at the truck hood. The way the wax came off in powdery flakes felt good, relaxing. He rubbed and rubbed with big round strokes. Sometimes he could forget about things, if he just got into a pattern.

George’s headache was starting to go away when he felt a cold hand on his arm. None of the breathless ever touched him besides Nanny. That’s what George had taken to calling the old folk breathless, Nanny and Pappy, and they didn’t seem to mind. He
turned around to find them both standing beside the nun's car, looking all worried, like he broke curfew or something.

"Augustino's right," said Nanny, her voice so soft and old-lady like. "You can't worry too much about your car. The Lord will take care of you. He always does."

"Thanks, Nanny, but I really don't want to talk about it anymore. I just want to keep my mind on my work for a while." George turned back to the wax. Nanny put her hand on him again.

"Don't let it bottle up, son," said Pappy, all concerned and frowning. "Troubles are like a house of cards -- if one falls out, the rest come tumbling down."

George had no idea what that was supposed to mean, but he played along -- smiled, nodded, agreed not to worry. Then went back to his polish. His head was starting to throb again.

Around 4:30, Brody crackled on George's walkie talkie.

George hadn't felt like starting a new polish job so late in the day, so he was in the shed, rearranging the shelf with all the oil and antifreeze and whatnot on it. Josip always just shoved stuff on that shelf, but George liked to have each thing with its label facing out and with its family -- wiper fluid with the other wiper fluids, gas additive with the other gas additives, that sort of thing. The breathless had been good about leaving him alone for rest of the day. He'd tried not to think about Kayla or his car, but he couldn't help it. His brain was going over and over the thing, trying to figure out a plan to get some money or something, anything. But there was no way, at least without getting his ass arrested. His stomach had started to hurt, and he was trying to concentrate on the
shelving, wiping off all the dust and grime from all the bottles, when Brody called. He
trudged outside and found Brody waiting for him by the nun’s car.

“I want to sell you this thing,” Brody said, patting the Pacer’s hood.

“Thanks, boss, but I got zero cash. Less than that.” George shook his head.

“Well here’s how I figure we can to it. You sell me the Monte Carlo for blue
book. Which won’t be much. Then, what do you figure, hundred bucks a month? Can
you swing that? I take it out of your paycheck until you pay it off. Not like a loan or
anything, and you only pay what it’s worth. We just have to leave it in my name until
we’re square. That’s my only requirement. We’ll put the extra dealer plates on it, and
Sheila can write you up an official looking letter that says you work here. You know. In
case you get stopped.”

“Yeah, but, you know. What if...” George wasn’t sure how he could say this the
right way. “What if I, you know...”

“If you quit,” said Brody. “Don’t worry, I get it. Here’s what we do. I put your
hundred a week in an account plus whatever we figure for your wreck. Then we let it
draw interest, and the interest goes toward your total. If you quit, I shut down the account
and give you whatever’s in there. We’ll have Sheila type this all up.”

George didn’t say anything. The hundred bucks a month was on his mind. He
could cancel car insurance if he had the dealer plates for a while, but the payment to
Brody would be twenty bucks more a month. That would throw off his budget, and Kayla
would be pissed about that, but George didn’t think he ought to tell Brody he couldn’t pay
it. And why was Brody doing this anyway? He never felt very good about letting guys
do him a favor. His mama always used to say not to trust the big man, even if the big
man played nice, and George was pretty sure this was the kind of thing she meant. But Brody wouldn’t let up.

“I just want to help you along here, George. If my employees are worried about their cars and their girlfriends and how they’re going to pay for dinner -- don’t get mad but Sheila told me how you’re struggling -- if employees are all stressed out, everything starts to go to shit around here. This is an investment in the company I’m making. You don’t have to feel like I’m doing you a favor or anything. And plus,” Brody went on, all excited, like he’d been thinking this through for days. “That car’s just rotting away if nobody’s driving it. You’d be doing me the favor, keeping that thing rolling.”

George looked over the Pacer, like he was sizing it up, except he was really trying to buy himself some thinking time. It really was in good shape, for such an old thing. He’d been under the hood a couple times, so he knew how clean it was running. I’d be a real ass, he thought, if I didn’t take this thing.

“Okay!” He tried to smile, but had a feeling it came out looking way too toothy.

“It’s a deal. Can I drive it home tonight, though? That piece out front ain’t gonna start, I don’t think.”

Brody was fired up, bouncing around like a crazy puppy. He showed George all the bells and whistles on the Pacer -- the custom upholstery, the kooky alarm system, the CD player Josip had jury-rigged, and the hatchback lock that you had to jiggle just so. Brody made Josip check the air on the Pacer’s tires while he helped George push the Monte Carlo inside the gate for the night. Once George gathered up all his junk out of the Monte -- an old sweatshirt, some jumper cables, a flashlight with its bulb burned out -- he squeezed himself into the driver’s seat as Brody and Josip watched, smiling proudly, their
arms folded. George pushed the seat all the way back and tried to look happy. Damn, this thing’s little, he thought. He turned the key and pulled away slowly with a little wave for Brody, who rolled the gate shut behind him.

George’s knees kept getting hit with the steering wheel as he puttered down the road. He could just barely move his leg between the accelerator and the brake. A new car, he thought, and I don’t even fit the thing. God had handed him a big old miracle, but he was too much of a jerk to feel good about it. He turned left at the light once he got out of the junk neighborhood, figuring he’d head over towards Wendy’s to show Kayla the car. Maybe she could talk him into pulling his head out of his ass. She had a way with things like that.

He pulled around back at Wendy’s to find Kayla smoking out by the dumpster. Her hair was arranged carefully in a big red ponytail that tumbled in little ringlets all around her Wendy’s visor. It was the same style her hair had been in when he met her at the movies, so many months before.

George unwedged himself from the front seat of the Pacer as she flicked away her cigarette and laughed.

“Where the hell did that thing come from?” she asked.

“The Boss gave it to me. I mean, he’s selling it to me real easy. Hundred bucks a month.”

“Well Christ, George, why aren’t you happy?”

“It’s gonna throw the budget off by twenty bucks. Payment minus car insurance.”

There was plenty of tension between them on this issue, anyway. He never paid car insurance before he moved in with Kayla, or even registered his car. Instead he just stole
temporary permits from RV Heaven every couple of weeks while he still worked there. He didn’t like the stealing, but it was either steal or get stole from in that case. Car insurance was eighty stupid bucks every month that he’d never see or hear from again, but she made him pay it because, she said, it’s the right thing to do. When George had yelled back at her, his finger right in her face, he barely even heard what he was saying: So I’m a bad guy, then, that’s what you’re saying, right? I’m just a big, fat, stupid nigger you should’ve never got involved in, right? Just say it, say it, say it! She walked right out and stayed at her parent’s house out that night, and he didn’t see her for a couple days. He had to grovel, and be punished for weeks, and she swore, if it ever happened again, that was it, the end, no questions asked. So George could barely stand to talk about it, but Kayla didn’t even seem to remember all that stuff.

“We’ll figure it out. This is a good thing, right?” She squeezed his arm.

It almost pissed him off that she was being so easy about it. He shook his head. “I don’t know. It just don’t feel right. The breathless were acting all funny today, really nagging at me, and now I got a tiny little car. Something ain’t right.”

“George. The breathless. They won’t get you anything but thrown in the nuthouse, your special friends. Brody’s a good man, I think. And you got a new car. How ‘bout we consider this a step up? A way out of a rut? Life isn’t required to suck. Sometimes it can even get better.”

George felt a little better. Kayla had him convinced, in her way. She had a way of saying things that made perfect sense for a few minutes. They never lasted long, though, these temporary fixes.
George went home, turned on the TV, ate the Monterrey Ranch Chicken Sandwich Kayla had put together for him, and tried to relax. The phone rang a couple times, but he ignored it. If it was the credit card people, he couldn’t talk to them, they got him too mad. Kayla was always good at telling them off, she even said funny stuff, like answering the phone, “Crack Whores Unlimited, how may I help you?” He always let her answer the phone.

Montel had on teenage girls who beat on their mothers. There was a skinny ho with purple hair wearing a bikini top and white hot pants who kept screeching at the audience, “You don’t know me!” The other one, a more chunky girl with bad teeth and her belly hanging out of her pink tube top was all, “Sit your ass down, bitch!” over and over to some woman in the front row. George felt his heart speeding up. He wanted to climb inside the TV and spank those girls, behaving like that while their poor mamas dabbed their mascara with little hankies. What the hell is wrong with people.

* 

Business was slow a few days later, dead even, when the boss had a bee in his bonnet for George and Josip to get the yard all cleaned up. They gathered trash for part of the day, weed whacked later, then spray painted the hydraulic lift, which left both of them feeling woozy. George was a little stressed out: one of the nun’s car’s tail lights got smashed overnight in the Charming Apartments parking lot, along with windows on a couple other cars. It was some punk kid with a baseball bat, and by the time everybody stumbled out of their apartments, all sleepy in their underwear, the kid was off and running. There wasn’t another Pacer at the yard, so George knew somebody’d have to buy a new tail lamp assembly, and it wasn’t going to be him, at least this month. He was
thinking it over, whether he should tell Brody. The boss had been so nice about the
whole thing, George didn’t want to bring this up so soon, like a damned jerk. As it was,
he parked carefully, strategically, in the very last parking space by the bushes, so that the
damage was pointing its sorry self towards where nobody’d be looking.

George and Josip were trying to recover from the spray painting behind the shop,
sort of hiding, when Brody chirped onto the walkie-talkies to tell them the phones were
suddenly ringing off the hook.

“Boys! Come in here,” he said. Josip popped up without much effort. George
groaned and held the lift to pull himself up. His back was bothering him, too, on account
of driving the tiny nun’s car. He probably needed a chiropractor, or at least one of those
special leg pillows they advertised on TV. Inside the office, they found Brody with a
phone to his ear, a yellow legal pad in one hand, a pen in his mouth, and typing at the
computer at the other. Two phone lines were ringing. George leaned in the doorway as
Josip picked up the call.

“Things got suddenly freaking busy,” Brody said to George, as he put down the
phone and scribbled something on his legal pad. "I need you to get a driver’s side tail
lamp assembly off one of the Cadillacs and take it to RV Heaven."

George’s stomach lurched. “God, boss,” he said. “can’t Josip do it?”

Josip wrote something on a sticky note and put down the phone just as the hotline
shot off something about a power window motor. He picked up the hotline and typed
something on the computer. “No can do, I need him here,” Brody shook his head. “I
don’t know what happened, things just suddenly got nuts, and that Mr. Ruiz said he’d pay
ten extra bucks if he could get the thing in under an hour. It's some kind of freaking Cadillac emergency. Guy even said 'chop, chop.' I can see why you quit.”

George stared at Brody. This was the worst thing that could possibly happen. If it were anywhere else, he might even think about quitting, but that would be about the end of his life at this point.

“Oh, and, the delivery truck is getting detailed, so take the nun’s car, if you don’t mind. I’ll give you gas money.” Brody slapped him on the shoulder. “George, c’mon, quit giving me puppy dog eyes. It can’t be that bad. Just march over there, give everybody dirty looks and drop off the part. It’ll be fun.”

Yeah, George thought. Fun. He plodded out to the Cadillac. He couldn’t imagine going back to RV Heaven. He had to, but it didn’t seem possible. As he took off the tail lamp and carried it out to the nun’s car, he began to wonder if Ruiz somehow knew about the nun’s car’s tail light. If, just maybe, Ruiz was ordering this damn thing to be a fucker. There was some rock singer on the radio as he was driving over going on about walking up and down that lonely road of faith. George turned it off. He clenched his teeth as he pulled into the RV Heaven lot. The angel on the sign, that damn neon sign, stared in the late afternoon shade. He sat for a minute, then forced himself out of the car.

His heart was speeding up steadily as he stepped in the door. He felt a little like he was swimming. The room felt thick, and everything looked a little too dark in color. The older office lady, Mary, was smiling at him like some kind of judgmental grandma, and there was Tracy behind her desk, looking at him, kind of scared, but with a little
smirk in her eyebrows. Ruiz came out of the back in his bad brown suit from the mall, with a real sleazy, pretend-friend smile.

“George, how nice to see you,” he pressed his hands together, squinted his eyes. It was supposed to look all generous. “Thank you for bringing over the tail light.”

Tracy stood up from her desk. “I really hope you’ve found what you’re looking for, George."

“We all do. We’re all pulling for you.” That was Mary. Like they were all feeling sorry for him or some shit. Oh, that poor, troubled black boy, they’re thinking. He lost his mind, quit his job here, went broke, and here he is, driving a tiny little car, selling old junker parts. They think they’re so special, and all the while ripping off old folks. George slapped down the invoice form on Mary’s desk, making no eye contact. Mary signed it. George tore off the pink copy and handed Ruiz the stupid tail light. Ruiz took the part with a fat, condescending smile, then patted George on the shoulder.

George noticed a lapel pin, which must have been new: a big red C, hanging by a chain on a golden lightning strike. C, for Closer, George thought. Just like his damn desk sign. George took the invoice and stormed out the door, exactly like he did when he quit. It didn't feel very good this time, though. It felt like the one other time in his life he'd stormed out of a workplace.

That one he hated himself for, and hated hating himself for. Before he worked at RV Heaven, George spent a year as a telemarketer. He surprised everybody by having a real knack for it. *Fifty grand* he made that year. Got used to credit cards, a nice apartment, a brand new Jeep Cherokee for no money down and $400 a month, a nice home entertainment center, eating at Red Lobster a bunch of nights a week, a strip club
now and then. The more money he made, though, the worst debt he got in. He was still paying off the $5000 ring he bought for the girl he was going out with, who skipped town a month later and took the ring with her. But he stormed out on that job, too, when he got transferred to the ‘Elder Squad.’ That was the call floor team that specialized in talking old folks into buying expensive herbal supplements. The scripts actually said George was supposed to tell them how that shit would keep them alive a few years longer. *God’s antibiotics,* he was supposed to say. He threw around a lot of papers when he quit that time, and hollered about “fucking phone scams” and that sort of thing, so loud that everybody in the whole room had to hang up real quick on whoever they were talking to. The only breathless at that place was some 21 year old dude who’d walked in there a couple years back and shot himself in the face. That kid was no fun, all jittery and going off for no reason.

After that he was out of work for four months, got kicked out of his apartment, got his Jeep Cherokee repo’ed, and let the bills pile up. That’s when George’s life more or less turned to shit. The worst of it was when he took out a loan at a check cashing place, thinking for damn sure he got the job in shipping and receiving at a gas nozzle factory. It didn’t work out, though, and he got a ticket for check fraud that he couldn’t pay off for a month, which was too late. The cops came and hauled him in, right around the time he was first dating Kayla. She bailed him out of jail, and agreed to move in with him so he could get his finances straight. That was a year ago, and he was still just barely getting by. George wondered if he’d ever be good enough for her. He didn’t know how things had gotten so damned crazy in his life. There’d been a time when everything was normal -- he had no money, and never thought he’d get money. It wasn’t so bad, he knew how to
be happy. Now that he’d been run through the wringer and come out with his credit wrecked and debt collectors calling all day and night, he wondered if he could ever get straight again.

He jammed himself inside the Pacer and turned the key, too hard, until the engine choked. He sped out of the RV Heaven parking lot just like he had the first time, only this time not feeling free and good. This time he felt like his whole stint away from the place had been tarnished, fucked up. George coasted through a stop sign as he turned left at the end of the long stretch of dirt road that would take him back toward Martyred Cars.

“Mister G, you’re driving too fast.” Little breathless José was suddenly sitting in George’s passenger seat, unbending the arms of a Transformer robot.

“José, what are you doing off the lot?”

“I can get out in cars like this one, it was a nun’s, you know, and she had it blessed by all sorts of guys. Nanny and Pappy told me to come along, said you’d not get so mad if I was here.”

“It ain’t about you, it’s about those people back there, kid, all this while I thought I done the right thing, showed those people that they couldn’t get away with using the Lord’s name to screw people, and all they saw was the Angry Black Man. That’s all I am to anybody, Angry Black Man. Now, what’s this fucker doing?” He drove up behind a paint-peeling beater truck puttering along and had to slow way down. George got right up behind him, tailgating in a bad way.

“That’s not good, driving like that, Mister G. There’s people at the yard died that way.” José sounded like Nanny a little bit, with her “don’t do that” tone of voice. Only he was still a kid. George laughed a little bit.
“I’m being an ass aren’t I?” George said.

“Yup, you are,” José nodded, then disappeared.

George backed off the truck. The truck turned left onto a dirt lane, and George took it a little easy. It was only when he turned down the winding Oracle Road, the road that led back to Martyred Cars, that strobing red and yellow lit up his rearview mirror with a big “whoop, whoop!”

George groaned. He pulled over to the side of the road and put his head in his arms on the steering wheel. In a minute or two, there was a tap on his window. He rolled it down.

“License, registration, proof of insurance.” The cop had brown tinted glasses and a furry mustache. George fumbled around in the glove box to find the little pouch Brody had for all the car’s documents. He handed the wad of paperwork to the cop, then tried to shift around and pull his wallet out of his back pocket, but he couldn’t. The nun’s car was too small for him to maneuver. He opened the car door for some room.

“Sir. Close this door, stay in the car. Get your license, too.” The cop blocked the door with his leg.

George felt like he couldn’t breathe. “I can’t get my wallet. Car’s too small.”

“Now just stop. Hold still, sir. Don’t move, you hear me? Let me see your registration.” The cop was getting all uptight.

George remembered a Montel he’d seen once where they talked about black guys getting pulled over and beat up, and how it was a national problem and all that shit. Some dude was on there who used to be a gangbanger but was a motivational speaker now, looking all swank in his fancy red suit, campaigning to educate all the brothers out
there, as he put it, about what to do when you get pulled over. Dude had a little rap that
sometimes got stuck in George’s head if he thought about it: *Keep your cool, like you’re
in school. If he’s a hater, you can sue him later.* It was pretty damn stupid, but it had a
good point. Dude never said what to do, though, if you were a big guy in a little car.
George knew he had to keep calm, do what the cop said, but he was about to explode.

“May I please get out of the car, man? It’s too small.”

“I’ll decide when you can get out of the car, sir. What’s your name?”

“George.”

“And George, what’s a brother like you doing with dealer plates?” The cop
thought he was funny.

George forced himself to absorb it. “I work at Martyred Cars. My boss owns this
car. I’m on a delivery.”

“And what’s your boss doing sending you out with a busted tail light? That’s
what I’m struggling to understand here.”

George could see where this was going. He could barely breathe. He needed out
of the car before he could say any more to this guy. He went to push the door open.

“Sir, freeze!” The cop had his gun out, pointed right at George. “Step slowly out
of the car.” For Christ sake, George thought.

“Aw, hell,” George mumbled. He unwedged one leg from the car, then the other,
his hands in the air. The cop turned out to be a little guy. He handcuffed George and
pushed him around the front of the car. George shook his head at this nonsense as the
cop pushed his face into the Pacer’s hot hood and proceeded to pat down his legs. “I ain’t
got nothing, man,” he said.
The cop was in his back pocket, yanking out his wallet with a knee pressed to his knee. George figured the guy was checking out his ID. "I'm still trying to figure out why your boss would send you out on a delivery with a vehicle in this condition. It doesn't make sense to me at all. So you're just going to calm down and explain it to me."

George's lower back was starting to hurt, and his left shoulder, too, the way the cop had him pushed against the car. "You're killing me, man," he said, and tried to squirm. He got a shove in the head for his trouble. He couldn't stand it any more and shoved back, knocking the guy down. The gun went off into the tire of the Pacer, with a big pop and a whoosh. Things were starting to get out of hand. George stumbled around. "Shit, fool! You need to take it easy!"

The guy scrambled, grabbed his gun, aimed it at George from the ground. "You just hold it there, buddy." He scrambled over to his motorcycle, never taking his eye off George. George could hear him mumbling something about back-up into his radio. The guy got up and put on his tough guy face again. "Now, homes, we'll see how you feel about a ticket for assaulting an officer."

*

Everything after that was pretty damn embarrassing. George got hauled down to the station in cuffs by the back-up cops, who clonked his head on the doorway of their car when they pushed him in. The motorcycle cop told a big story about how George called him "cocksucker." Said George needed anger management classes. George tried to stay calm as he explained his side of things at the station, but he ended up with a wavery, high pitched voice like he was about to cry, his hands shaking and all. The little spaz cop argued, but it turned out they'd been having problems with this guy. Racial profiling, and
that shit. George had to sit and wait in a little glassed in area with a bum who kept picking his nose while they decided what to do with him.

The cops agreed to let George go without incident, so long as Brody came to pick him up, so they could verify vehicle ownership, they said. George was about to puke from shame when Brody showed up. He could see Brody talking to the guy at the desk. Then Brody ran toward George’s little room with a wild-eyed face to put on a show in the glass doorway. *George,* Brody mouthed, pretending to dab tears from his eyes, *George, I was so worried! George, don’t scare me and the kids like this! George!* The bum giggled. “That your girlfriend?”

Brody opened the door. George came out and tried not to make eye contact. They walked out to Brody’s truck quietly, though George could feel Brody grinning and peeking at him.

“So, what happened?” Brody asked as they were driving back toward Martyred Cars.

“Some punk kid went wild with a bat at my apartments last night, trashed the tail light, and I didn’t want to tell you. Then I got pulled over. It was poor judgment.”

“And you called the cop a cocksucker, I heard?” Brody giggled.

“You know I didn’t. That guy lost his cool. He was covering his ass.”

“Hmm. Cops suck,” Brody concluded.

“Yeah. The fingerprint guy was alright though.”

They drove in silence for a minute. Then George sighed. “So, the nun’s car’s down and out. That cop’s gun went off into the tire, I think.”
“Yeah, we got it towed back already. Josip put a new tire on it, and Roadman has a Pacer on his lot so he gave us a tail light, free of charge. ‘As gratitude for Martyred Cars’ support of the Frito cause,’ he said. Guy’s a nut.”

George sat quiet for a minute. This was not at all what he expected. “So I’m okay? I’m not out anything? I don’t owe anybody money or have any tickets or anything?”

“You’re in the clear, George. You stepped in shit and came out shoes clean,” Brody turned the corner and the big, black and yellow Martyred Cars sign came into sight.

“Hm,” George said.

As they pulled up to the yard, the breathless were all standing in a crowd waiting for George behind the fence. Shelly Marie was holding José’s hand while he kicked dirt. Augustino had a crazy little smile, like a cat that ate a damn bird. Nanny and Pappy were all dressed up for some reason, he in an Indian’s feather headdress and she like some kind of airplane stewardess, a little hat on her head and the whole works. George gave them a nod as he followed Brody into the building.

That evening, when he told Kayla everything that happened, she fell off the chair, laughing loud and hearty, like she’d lost her shit. At first he wanted to smack her for laughing, but when he got to the part about the bum in the police station, he started to smile a little, too. They had sex for the first time in a long time that night. She was never into it when they were arguing about money, said she didn’t like to get sex all mixed up in other things, so it was kind of a rare day. George started talking as she pushed herself down on him, over and over. \textit{Do you like having me inside of you? Do you, baby? Tell}
me, do you? She opened her eyes suddenly, like she didn’t understand the question.

Then she nodded.
CHAPTER 5

DIVISION, SUBDIVISION, FRAGMENTATION OF MOTOR VEHICLES

Sheila'd heard people joking about radiation storms on days as hot as this one. The cicadas vibrated outside. The A/C hummed inside. The second hand on the bikini babe clock over her desk ticked silently from one notch to the next, taunting her with its proximity to Friday. It threatened, with every tick, to slow down, stop, refuse to proceed, keep her trapped at work, stuck inside the confines of the week. She stared at it, its rhythm taking up a beat with the radio, then falling out of synch every time the baseline got involved. It was all out of whack, the baseline. It made her think about randomness, which led her right back to what she couldn’t stop thinking about lately: why everyone was so willing to swallow Clyde’s story about the disappearance of Killer White Fang.

It had been weeks since she’d heard Killer’s hoarse bark reverberating around the neighborhood. Brody dismissed her with a roll of the eyes when she asked if he knew what happened to the old boy. Josip and George shook their heads sadly when she asked if they had seen Killer lately. Neither guy wanted to set foot on Clyde’s property to find out. For that matter, neither did Sheila. There were possible live wires and rusty sharp things waiting to get you all over that place. Clyde’s compliance with codes of all sorts was sketchy on a good day. Brody said that the guy refused to insure his property, because, in Clyde’s words, “fuck ‘em!” So Sheila had to wait until Clyde came to
Martyred Cars before she could inquire about the doggie who had brightened all of their lives for the few months before Brody got mad and sent him away.

Clyde finally came over one day with a youngish Rottweiler, but not Killer, to demand some pens. “I need a whole damn bunch, too,” he said. “As many as you can spare!” Clyde did this sort of thing often. Scamming office supplies, running them clean out of cardboard boxes. Borrowing Daisy’s dog tags when Animal Control was in the neighborhood so he could pull some kind of switcheroo to cover for his unlicensed dogs. Sheila sometimes felt put out by this sort of chicanery, but it didn’t matter this time. Pens were easy come, easy go. She kept a big coffee tin full of all the pens and pencils Brody and the boys found in cars. They never had to buy any, really. Pens were officially off the office supply budget since they started saving them like this.

She brought up the dog situation while she had Clyde captive, waiting for his pens.

“So, the dog, Killer,” Sheila asked. “How’s he doing?”

Clyde grunted. “Let me put it this way,” he leaned in. “That dog got struck by lightning.”

Sheila felt a tinge of horror at the thought of it. “Seriously?”

He snorted.

“Well, live by the sword, die by the sword, I guess?” she said.

She really wanted to hear a little more about it, but Clyde just snorted again. She handed him a wad of pens, and he bowed. “Thank you, m’lady.” With that, he was off.

Now that’s odd, Sheila thought. Let me put it this way, he had said. Was that to imply that the lightning was a metaphor of some sort? For Clyde’s twelve gauge, heaven
forbid? Or was ‘Lightning’ the name of the Rottweiler, maybe? And don’t you usually hear about it when stuff gets struck by lighting? Isn’t that neighborhood-newsworthy?

When she’d asked, Brody refused to talk about it. George pulled the classic: “I don’t know, I just work here.” Josip was elusive, too. But he was at least willing to discuss it.

“There was that stinky fire at his yard a while back,” he said when she told him about Clyde’s mysterious comment. “Something that happened overnight. He never said what it was, and, you know, who wants to ask?”

Who wants to ask, indeed. The Martyred Cars staff regularly observed signs of some very funny business at Clyde’s. Unnatural smells (usually metallic, but sometimes what Brody noted were more like “essence of pool chemical”), random bangs, other outbursts that sounded like guitar riffs, plus the comings and goings of some very unsavory characters in beat-up, windowless ‘Chester Molester’ vans, as Sheila’s daughter Sophie liked to call them. Clyde was a piece of work. But Sheila thought everyone should be a bit more interested in what became of poor Killer, or concerned, at least, that there may have been a lightning strike so close to the property and nobody had been told. Doesn’t anyone care about pets anymore? If anything horrible ever happened to her cat Speckles, Sheila would have needed a few days off work to cope with it. She thought that was just normal. But it seemed that she was the only one who cared about a dog like Killer White Fang.

The shop door was wide open as George and Josip maneuvered a rolling display stand holding a pristine truck engine from a Chevy Silverado into the corner of the front office. Sheila snapped out of it, out of her ‘reverie,’ as Sophie had been saying lately, and
shut her door to hold the A/C in her office. She sat in front of the file magic-markered "98 OLDS ACHIEVA' in Brody’s ferocious handwriting, an array of DMV forms unbound and spread in a fan across the surface of her fake wood desk. Brody had asked her, earlier that morning, to make sense of the paperwork on a car that had been sitting in the shop for a month. It had been a rental car Brody’d bought at the county auction in pretty good shape. He figured he could fix it up and sell it. When Sheila turned in the paperwork which would change the car’s legal status to ‘salvage,’ a barrier flew up in the computer, and she was sent away with a notice that the DMV would inform the police that Martyred Cars was in possession of a stolen vehicle. She handed the mess over to Brody, since it all looked awfully touchy and official. He’d handed it back to her a week later in this file, his face red and exasperated.

"Things just go from bad to worse with this red tape, I’m telling you. I went to the DMV, then the police station, and there was no freaking way out of it. Every time you think you’ve got the right form filled out the right way, there’s some kind of goddamn dead end. A box you checked or didn’t check that lights up all kinds of alarms at the DMV or the police station and gets them all fired up to throw cuffs on you. And yet they won’t just come get the damn thing off my property. What the hell am I supposed to do with it? It’s been taking up space for weeks and I’m sick of it, but everybody you talk to is too dense to understand what the problem is. See if you can figure it."

She stared at the official forms, pink and yellow carbon copies, invoices, receipts, and business cards Brody had collected in the file. There was a polaroid of the car, too. It was really an unassuming little thing, for causing such a stir. Just a plain blue sedan,
with all the telltale damage signs of a grand theft auto. She rearranged the papers from
the fan into a patchwork of squares. She stared some more, let her eyes go out of focus.
The dull color blocks of paperwork became a blurry map, the record of this conundrum in
an abstract bigger picture. Then she had an idea. She’d make a DMV run on Monday.

The clock had only moved two minutes since the last time she’d checked. It just
had to be later. The night before, she had almost finished a big Time Life book from the
paranormal section at the library about black holes, worm holes, and other space
anomalies that they theorized could warp time, loop it, mix it up, shred it. She’d been
noticing how often time toyed with her since she started this book. Its editors described
these phenomena as indescribable. Humbling, legitimate proof that humanity was vastly
insignificant. Sheila felt a twinge of sadness whenever she thought about this. She’d had
to put the book down when Speckles started yowling at the fridge. She fixed him a bowl
of lettuce, which he hunkered to munch. His can of Savory Grill sat untouched in his
regular dish.

“I don’t know about this salad thing for Speckles. Cats are supposed to eat meat,”
Sheila said to Sophie.

“He wants to be a vegetarian,” her daughter had said. Sophie did always seem to
have a direct line of communication with the cat. Sometimes Sheila would find them
sitting together on the couch, the cat with his paw on Sophie’s hand. Sheila imagined
they were all wrapped up in each other’s hopes and dreams when they sat like this.
Sophie would whisper little secrets to Speckles. Speckles breathed deep and smiled, his
eyes in slits of contentment, like the good fortune cat who sits by the cash register at
every Chinese restaurant. Sheila sensed, and knew, in these moments, that she was
missing a piece of meaning, and not something remote and inaccessible, like black holes. This thing between her daughter and the cat was just under Sheila’s nose, something she lived with every day, but simply hadn’t the tools to recognize.

This time, though, when Speckles asked for his lettuce, Sophie’s eyes’d remained glued to the last page of her own book. She was just finishing Gravity’s Rainbow.

Sheila stood up from her desk. She unlocked the door that led out of her office and into the yard. When she walked up to Daisy’s kennel, Daisy sat and wagged, motioning with her paw in anticipation of a treat. Sheila passed a Pup-peroni to Daisy through the chainlink; Daisy took it and hurried to sit down with it in her doghouse. It seemed that even Daisy could care less about Killer. Sheila walked back to her office.

* 

Sophie always complained that her ‘gifted and talented’ class, in which they studied things like conversational Arabic and Soviet foreign policy, was too easy. Sheila had Sophie taking some extra lessons on weekends when they could afford it. Sophie really wanted to take a class on genetic engineering at Cross Road State University, but the registrar was being difficult, insisting on a twelve year old age minimum to enroll as a student of ‘continuing education’ status. So Sheila’d tracked down a local Russian guy for the next best kind of lessons. He was a line cook named Dimitri, and he had a PhD in astrophysics from Rostov State University.

Before Sophie’s Saturday afternoon astrophysics lesson, they liked to split a pizza -- half cheese for Sheila, half minced garlic for Sophie -- at Silly Al’s Pizza -N- More, in the shopping center a few streets over from Dimitri’s house. Sheila also loved their Greek salads, which had a vinaigrette dressing that brought her to tears with its tangy
goodness. Sophie gobbled up her pieces so she'd have time to play the Ms. Pac-Man machine. Sheila chewed on an olive while Sophie flipped the joystick with determination. Even though she was working out calculus problems in her spare time, Sophie could still get into directing the little munching ball through its maze, eating dots and skating away from the blobby ghosts. Could there be nutritional value in a dot? Sheila pondered. It was a philosophical question, really, one she thought she might ask Brody, next time he was in the right mood.

Sophie was calmly absorbed in her game when a little fellow walked through the door beside the machine. He was short, just barely taller than Sophie, though he must have been in his thirties. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and suit pants, with a short sleeved shirt in a faded pastel green pattern of strange, futuristic looking paisley, his hair greased back in clumps combed with an awkward hand. He looked like you might imagine an accountant might look in a comic book, except that he carried a garbage bag with enough of a load in it to make him lean and limp a little.

Sheila's chest tightened up when she realized he was talking to Sophie, then not to Sophie, then to Sophie again. Sheila’s thoughts fell away, and for a moment she was purely primal, a mother wolf watching as some big, clumsy bird of prey circled her unsuspecting little cub. The guy stuck out his hand to shake hers and said something. Sophie looked at him quickly, then away, trying to ignore him. He kept talking. Sheila shot out of her chair and hurried over to hover behind Sophie as the little man shuffled around her to check out the neighboring Elvira pinball machine.

“Mom, you’re bugging me,” Sophie said, racing Ms. Pac-Man around corners, in circles, doubling back, bobbing and weaving through the maze, chomping the dots with
an audible wocka-wocka-wocka, which Sheila supposed, in that moment, was the sound of electronic lips smacking.

“That’s right, not a single hound’s got a face like my ugly mug!” the accountant declared, with a sort of glee, as some kind of a response to Sophie’s complaint. He rapped on the pinball glass, which evoked a sexy ‘oh, yeah!’ from Elvira. Then he got down on his hands and knees and crawled under the machine, poking around like a curious dog. Sheila exchanged eyes of concern with Al, the proprietor, who came out from behind the counter. The little man backed out from under the pinball machine. When he rose to his feet again, his booming voice delivering a sage warning to Sheila:

“But it’s only right, madam, to say that there’s a killer among us.”

Sheila froze. The little accountant turned and went to introduce himself to an elderly couple splitting a calzone several tables over. Al intercepted him and steered him toward the exit.

“Alright, Rainman,” Al said. “Time for you to leave.” Al was big, Viking-sized, and had one of those thick, dark mustaches you didn’t question.

“Stock market crash, stock market crash!” the accountant hollered, as though to offer an explanation.

“Go home and take your meds, man,” was Al’s conclusion as he pushed the man out the door.

“I’m sorry about that,” he offered Sheila. “He comes through here every now and again. There’s a group home a few streets over, and that one slips away by himself sometimes.”
“It’s okay,” Sheila said, though the more she thought about it, it wasn’t. The little guy had said something about a hound, and a killer. Sheila remembered what she’d heard on late night talk radio a few months back, a guy with a Brooklyn accent, who had called himself an ‘urban shaman,’ told the talk show host that certain insane people had a special connection with the otherworldly. “God speaks to them directly, you see. He passes on the line of glorious truth that exists in the universe beyond, but that is veiled from us in our lives on this earth. That’s why they’re nutzo, you see what I mean?” Those had been his exact words, and they’d made a certain kind of pure sense to Sheila. The kind of thing that she not only understood, and agreed with, but knew, when she heard it, to be true without question. She had a shimmer of this feeling again about the rantings of this little man. The feeling was something like what Josip called ‘unheimlich’ once, when he was trying to explain a deja vu he had about Bernie, their old county environmental inspector. “You mean, as in ‘The Maneuver’?” Brody had asked. Josip’d gotten embarrassed and clammed up. Sheila made a note to ask Sophie about ‘unheimlich’ later. Now she thought she’d better calm down and make sure her daughter wasn’t too freaked out.

Throughout the entire affair, Sophie hadn’t budged from the video game. Ms. Pac-Man chomped the final dot on the screen, and the intermission began, a little anecdotal scene, on which a stork brings Mr. and Mrs. Pac-Man a baby to the tune of a sweet electronic jig. Sophie looked up, finally, with a small smile of triumph, one that showed no concern for what had just happened.

“I’ve got the high score, Mom,” she said.

*
First thing Monday morning, Sheila gathered all the title paperwork and headed out for the DMV run, the folder for the Olds Achieva tucked inside the larger folder full of standard DMV business. She’d think Brody would want to do the DMV runs himself, it being so personal, his name and livelihood on all of the titles. But Brody could only under extreme circumstances stomach the DMV. She had insisted, once, that he take in all the regular paperwork to get the new yard cars titled ‘salvage’ or ‘dismantle,’ just so he’d understand what exactly went into running his own business. “What if I quit one day?” she asked him. “You’d be a babe in the woods.” Brody reluctantly drove over to the DMV branch with a stack of neatly-filled out forms, all ready to hand to the girl at the dealer window. He was back in forty-five minutes with a red face and his hair all askew. The paperwork was undone. “They make you wait with all the people, I just couldn’t,” he mumbled. He went straight outside to pet Daisy. She never pushed the issue of the DMV runs again.

Sheila was sitting in the north corner of the crowded waiting room between an older gentleman with tall socks and a young mother in a shiny purple tank top. She’d been favoring the east corner of the DMV until it turned out that she’d botched her early feng shui calculations. Her birthday divided by the building’s magnetic orientation actually came out in the west quadrant of the DMV. Sophie had worked this out on her graphing calculator. But recently, Sophie found an article online about how the author of Real Feng Shui, the book they’d been working with, was being sued for fraud by the Feng Shui Council of America. Sheila wasn’t sure where it was best to sit now, so she picked the north corner, where there was a more comfortable bank of chairs. The ‘Now Serving’ sign bonged as it changed numbers. “Now serving B, ninety four,” said the female
computer voice. Sheila’s little ticket said F-12. There was no telling where she stood in line.

The young woman’s two year old boy threw a plastic Pepsi bottle up in the air and rejoiced when it clattered across the ground. That mother was not controlling her child. Sheila cleared her throat when the bottle hit her shoe.

“Careful there,” she said to the boy. He cowered.

His mom looked panicked. “Tyler! Get your butt over here!” she screeched at him. He stopped what he was doing and opened his mouth into a long wail.

Now look what I’ve done, Sheila thought. The sock man sighed. “Now serving H, two,” said the smug computer.

Sheila thought about Sophie’s upcoming science fair entry, a refractor that automatically gathered light samples from various stars, samples that would in the end, Sophie alleged, eventually be cross-referenced in a way that would prove the age of the universe. Sheila thought about picking up some groceries, maybe artichokes for dinner, and she needed some apricot facial scrub. She thought about the contents of the junk drawer she’d been meaning to clean out: scissors, stapler, extension cord, brittle plastic knickknacks and a million rubber bands. Then her thoughts cycled back to Killer. He was on her mind a lot lately. Something struck her. A few days before he disappeared, he had been prancing down the road with a more feral swagger than usual. She had some Pup-peroni in her drawer. This had been his favorite treat when he lived at Martyred Cars. She lured him into the parking lot with the promise of a Pup-peroni stick. He surprised her, though. Instead of jumping on her skirt and causing a scene, as was his way, he sat, lay down, rolled onto his back for a brief instant, and gave her a certain
meaningful look from the ground, a look it seemed as though she was supposed to receive, and in turn act upon. The only problem was that she didn’t know what Killer was trying to say that day. Before she could rub his belly or anything, he leapt to his feet, snatched the Pup-peroni and took off down the road. It was just strange. And not long after, he was struck by lightning. Or whatever had really happened. F, twelve.

“F, twelve,” said the computer again. Sheila jolted up. Almost an hour and a half had passed on her watch since the last time she had checked. Could that really be? Tyler and his mother looked at her. She caught her expression in a nearby window: startled, a little frazzled. She followed the directions of the Now Serving board to window three. There sat Michelle, her favorite dealer specialist, a woman about her age, with hair like hers, who Sheila could see shopped where she did sometimes, in the ‘Active Wear’ section at Sears. Today Michelle was wearing a salmon-colored jogging outfit in a cuddly soft synthetic fabric, not unlike the one Sheila’d bought in a baby blue a few weeks back. This woman, though, took much better care of her perm than Sheila had time to. She also had ‘Footprints in the Sand’ in a little frame by her computer, with a little guardian angel pin, which Sheila had seen recently at the Hallmark Store, still clasped to its cardboard square, stuck into the frame’s backing.

Michelle smiled at Sheila. “Didja wait long?” This was their friendly ritual.

Sheila heaved a pretend sigh and ran the back of her hand across her forehead, making the universal sign for ‘phew!’ “Thought the computer was holding me hostage out there!”
“You know, sometimes,” Michelle was serious now, conspiratorial, “it does! Once in a while, someone sits out there all day, waiting and waiting, watching the other customers come and go.”

“Really?” Sheila asked.

Michelle nodded. “It’s quite tragic when that happens. There’s nothing we can do, though. And I’ll tell you, those people usually have it coming for one reason or another. If they would just pray to Jehovah, like I do, they wouldn’t be at the mercy of so many machines.”

This was out of nowhere. Sheila didn’t really know what to say. Usually Michelle and Sheila talked about their cats, their daughters, the floral patterns on their bedspreads, that sort of thing. Sheila had no idea she’d been making friendly all these months with a woman who might well be living on a different planet. She hoped she’d never made Brody’s joke about a bumper sticker — ‘My Darwin Fish Beat up your Honor Student’s Jesus Fish.’ Which, now that she thought about it, wasn’t all that funny.

After a moment, she smiled, awkward, and began to unbind all the forms from their folder and its subsequent sub-folders, clips, clamps, and bundles. “These are all standard, three ‘salvage’ and eight ‘dismantle,’ she said as she arranged two neat stacks. Michelle got to work on the stacks, clicking her sculpted, dark purple nails across the computer keyboard, entering data at an effortless clip. As Michelle was nearing the end of the final title change, Sheila began to explain the third bundle of papers she had assembled, that of the stolen Oldsmobile, in what she hoped was a clear monologue of bullet points:
“This one’s apparently stolen. We bought it at the state auction, and soon after got a call from the auction yard, but since we’d already paid, they wouldn’t take it back. The police have been notified, the report filed, but since the insurance company already compensated the rental car company that owned it, we seem to be stuck with the car now. Nobody wants to impound it. We can’t keep it, though, our space is at a premium, so I wanted to try to declare it as abandoned. By the police. I called the police to report that they themselves had abandoned a vehicle, and they just acted annoyed. Then I scoured your website, and it seems that I can do this through the DMV somehow, the abandoned thing. And I need your help,” Sheila leaned in, tried to get back in on the conspiracy.

Michelle stopped typing, leaned toward Sheila, and spoke in a low voice.

“It’s possible to do this,” she said. “But it’s important that you don’t say much about it to anyone. Family, friends, even your boss needs to hear as little about the details of this as possible. Here’s a packet,” she slid a stapled set of photocopies out from under her counter. “Take it back to your office. Read it, fill out the attached forms carefully.”

“Okay, thanks,” Sheila said.

“It’s going to be difficult, this thing you want to do. But I’ve seen how you find your way through these things,” Michelle whispered. “Good luck.”

Sheila thanked her again, gathered up her papers, smiled politely, and turned to leave. As she walked across the waiting area and toward the exit, she heard Michelle’s voice again.

“Sheila!”
Sheila turned around. The woman mouthed and motioned silently, desperately, but with such animation that Sheila was sure everyone in the waiting area couldn’t help but watch: *I’ll pray for you.*

*

The florescent overheads in her office hummed a few mornings later as the new county environmental inspector sipped the green tea Sheila gave him in a styrofoam cup. He sat in the extra chair and flipped quietly through the pages of the three ring binder Sheila and Josip had prepared, per county guidelines, using a special manual called *Runoff: Our Streams, Our Kids’ Futures.* He was an attractive young man, one she could see wanted to wear something else besides a shirt and tie. He spent a lot of time styling his hair, which was short enough, Sheila thought, to just wake up and go. He kept peeking at her. He wanted her as his ally here. Sheila turned the radio on to fill the awkward space between them.

She pulled the accounts payable ledger out of her desk drawer. Brody didn’t trust the computer to keep the numbers straight. He insisted she keep a penciled record of the yard’s finances. It was the last priority in her job description at Martyred Cars, but a duty she found therapeutic. There was something relaxing about so much addition and subtraction. She saved it for moments like these, when she needed to escape. The radio segued from a pop song with a comforting hook to a Billy and Betsy call-in segment entitled ‘Sex and Slurpees.’ Sheila turned it off, quick.

Brody was peeking around the corner. He looked like he had to pee his pants. He’d exploded about the county run-off requirements the other day, for no reason at all. “What a bunch of crap,” he’d said. “I mean, what a bunch of crap!”
"I guess they worry about oil and gas spilling, then getting washed into the water supply and such," Sheila told him, paging through the manual. "It's actually kind of interesting. I'd never thought of this sort of stuff."

"We don't spill, Sheila! We drain all the fluids in the shop, then the car sits outside dry! And if we do spill, it lands on the floor, not the dirt! And George gets the mop! I don't need the government to tell me how to mop my floors!" Brody was derailing into his own kind of logic. Sheila tried to steer him back.

"They're just saying --"

"It doesn't even rain, for godsake! Like twice a month it rains!" Brody cut her off.

"Why are you yelling at me? It's not my fault." Sheila closed the manual and folded her arms.

"I know, but dammit..." He trailed off into the other room. Sheila and Josip had been preparing the paperwork covertly so to avoid such scenes. Sheila scheduled this appointment with the country inspector during Brody's monthly chiropractor appointment, but it got rescheduled at the last minute. So here they all were.

"It looks good, it looks real good," said the inspector, taking a methodical sip of his tea. "I just have some concerns about a couple of your slopes."

"We're not a ski resort." Brody had been listening from just outside the office doorway. He popped his head around the corner.

Sheila gave him a look. She had this thing under control. Now Brody had to stir it all up. These inspectors got on power trips, put their egos in their jobs. You didn't
want to fire them up, rub them the wrong way. This guy took Brody’s comment in stride, though. He laughed politely.

“Of course, of course. Slopes... that’s what we call the areas in which run-off is a particular concern. Yours aren’t too bad, but I need to run some numbers back at the office.” The guy smiled at Brody. A big, toothy, condescending smile. Sheila cringed. She knew that sort of thing would only push Brody’s last button.

“Run some numbers? Please,” Brody said, his tone rising. “Just tell me what the problem is right now!”

“There’s not a problem, no worries!” said the inspector. “Your folks here seem to have everything in tiptop shape! It’s just our policy to run certain variables through a matrix, which alerts us to various possible contingencies and any probable complications. It’s standard operating procedure.”

Brody came inside the office and sat on the filing cabinet. The office felt even smaller with Brody’s anxious energy in it. He couldn’t let the issue go. “So, why exactly is it that you’re always in here bothering us? You can see we do everything exactly how you say we’re supposed to. And yet you’re in here, taking up my staff’s time, drinking out of my styrofoam.”

“Brody...” Sheila reprimanded him.

“No, it’s okay,” the inspector nodded, put his cup down. “We appreciate your cooperation, Brody, we really do. I’m only in here for routine monitoring, nothing more.”

“Yeah, but,” Brody went on. “Hardly anybody follows your rules. If you look out that window, I’ll tell you, there are two yards, within view even, in flagrant violation of all sorts of codes.”
The guy looked out the window, his eyes eager and wide, not unlike Sophie ogling the pies in the revolving case at Denny's. There, within view, was Clyde's car tower, the Beep! Beep! front entrance, and the row of cars in the back hinterlands of the AA Pull Your Part yard. "Well, I sure appreciate your bringing this matter to my attention. I'll be looking into these violations, you can be sure. We believe in honesty and consistency at the county code office."

"Great! That's great!" Brody feigned camaraderie with the guy. He turned around, then turned back with a flourish. "By the way, if you do go snooping around with these guys, be sure to bring a gun. I'd advise maybe something like a twelve gage. It's most important that you look mean, going in. That's how you'll keep them from really eating you alive."

The guy cowered for a moment, then pulled together his composure. He shuffled all his loose papers into his briefcase and headed out the door with a quick, polite good-bye for Sheila. Sheila wished Brody could just let this stuff be. Let her handle it. If they just laid low, did what they were supposed to, there would really be very little trouble. And now she had to worry about this sweet little government inspector, Brian, was the name on his business card. He couldn't be more than twenty-three years old, and now he was heading out into the cruel neighborhood to confront guys like Clyde and their toxic and otherwise unsavory code violations. She felt so sad, suddenly. Poor Brian. She hoped he would be okay.

She started listening to a new book-on-tape on her drive home from work that night. It was called Mystic Path to Cosmic Power, by a man named Vernon Howard. Sheila came out of a thought fog as the reader spoke through a very powerful passage:
Learning to walk confidently is largely an unlearning process. We must cease to accept the false as true. We cannot learn to accept what is right if we secretly insist that we already know it. If a man truly sees that he does not know rightness, his very emptiness leaves room for it, which changes the man into a freer state. Do not be afraid of your emptiness.

A guy in a clown suit and a charity collection bucket was suddenly in her window at a stoplight, his hands on his hips, a finger shaking in her face. She motioned, ‘huh?’ Then he changed his posture. His fingers went to his mouth, miming, ‘hey lady, you oughta smile more.’ She smiled politely, but it felt so false. As the light turned green, she wondered if Vernon Howard had people telling him to smile all the time.

* 

When Sheila and Sophie were walking to their car after Sophie’s astrophysics lesson on Saturday morning, the crazy accountant-looking guy from the pizza shop the week prior came barreling around the corner, several houses down, and darted toward them on the sidewalk, limping with his garbage bag in a direct path that would intersect with Sheila and Sophie.

“Sophie, get in the car!” Panic lurched and burned in Sheila’s chest. Sophie complied, her small eyes scared and young. Sheila stumbled off the curb and dropped her keys, then as she leaned to pick them up, some charts slid out of Sophie’s astrophysics folder, which she’d forgotten was tucked under her arm. She crouched in the street and tried to look busy, hoping he’d limp on past. Instead, though, his uneven footsteps stopped clumping on the sidewalk right beside her.

“Excuse me, madam.”
She looked up, and accidentally caught him right in the eye. His face was like Killer’s from time to time, a face of desperate longing, not for anything in particular, but just for a little something. It was a sad face. Now she felt a little sorry for this guy.

“Can I help you?” She tried to sound firm, but also unassuming. She ended up just cocking her head and sounding confused.

“Madam, do you know this house.”

He asked the question as a statement. She wasn’t sure how to answer, or if she shouldn’t, or if, maybe, she really, really should. “Um, well, I know the man who lives here, yes,” came out.

“I wonder if you could tell me, does this house have a swimming pool.”

“Um, yes, I believe it does,” Sheila stood up and brushed off her skirt.

“Is it round or is it square.” The guy asked questions with the decisiveness of somebody in the lightning round of a game show. Sheila knew Dimitri’s pool was kidney shaped, but she thought she might not want to get into it.

“I don’t really know, you know,” she answered. “I’ve never been back there.”

“Do you think you could find out for me, or find out if I can go back there and see. I like to find out about all the houses, whether they have pools, and if they’re round or they’re square.”

It sounded like he really needed to know, in the depths of his being. But Sheila really didn’t want to get involved. “We’re in a big hurry. I’m very sorry.”

“Well, also, do you know, does it have one light or two. I like to find out if the pool is round or square, if it has one light or two.”

“I think it has two,” she offered. It made her so sad for some reason.
“Okay, because I really like to know about all the pools, if they’re round or if they’re square, if they have one light or two.”

Sheila got in the car. The accountant fellow limped away with his garbage bag. Sophie had cracked her window and listened. “That guy used to be something else, mom,” Sophie said.

“What, sweetie?” Sheila said, absentminded as she started the car.

“I mean, he wasn’t born loony. He used to work hard, take pride in his job.”

Sophie had her colored pencils and sketch pad out and was starting to draw. She’d trained Sheila to keep quiet while she was working on something, but on the drive home, Sheila sneaked peeks at the sketch as it developed. It struck her as a sort of futuristic paisley, a patterned map of green and black squares, tadpoles, and quatrefoils. As she drove, she realized where it had come from: the pattern on the accountant-guy’s shirt. But in Sophie’s rendition, it meant something else. What had struck Sheila as paisley, Sophie recognized as an overhead view of a stylized landscape. Grassy yards. Overgrown lots. And homes, with swimming pools.

When they got home, Speckles cried, so Sheila put down a bowl of iceberg lettuce. But he kept crying.

“He’s gotta have the nutritional stuff,” Sophie shook her head as she fixed up his bowl: carrot and cucumber slices, croutons, radishes, cherry tomatoes, halved, and some creamy Italian dressing. The cat rubbed his face on Sophie’s leg. When she set the salad on the floor, he mowed into it with an erotic purr.

*
Sheila slept late on Monday morning. The roo-coo-coo-coo of her neighbor’s pet rooster had settled firmly in her dream as the voice of Killer White Fang, all done up in a cartoon rooster costume, prancing like a goofball and pecking his pretend rooster head as he led her through a labyrinth of chainlink lined with tumbleweeds, conflicting neon arrows, and statues of St. Francis of Assisi, as Billy and Betsy’s voices on her clock radio bled in and out with commentary on gusting winds, local fundraisers, and men who leave the toilet seat up. She jolted awake as a garbage truck unloaded a dumpster somewhere nearby with a violent crash. The clock radio read 7:55. Crap, she thought. Crap! There was nothing she hated more than being late. It wasn’t that Brody cared about her meticulous punctuality. But she’d been working very hard over the past few months to model a positive work ethic to George and Josip. And now here she was, rolling out of bed at the last minute like a deadbeat.

Sheila rushed around the house with toothbrush in mouth, knocking her hairspray off the bathroom sink and bumping loudly into the kitchen table as she tried to get ready. Speckles glared at her from the kitchen counter and yowled for more salad, turning his back in disdain on his bowl of Friskies. Sheila had a moment of fret about her cat’s choice of vegetarianism, then remembered how late she was. Sophie was always pulling back her covers and bouncing on her bed to get her up on mornings like these, but it was a teacher’s planning day at the school today, which meant Sophie had the day off and was spending the night and day at her friend Parthenie’s house. Sheila got in the car. In the rearview mirror, she realized she’d forgotten all but her base make-up. Her face looked puffed, dried. She hoped she still had some lipstick and mascara in her drawer at work.
As she pulled down the freeway off-ramp and toward the junk yard neighborhood, Sheila noticed a new billboard outside Wendy’s. “You will fall behind a gravel truck in traffic. It will rain disaster on your windshield,” read the twenty foot scroll pulled artistically from an enormous fortune cookie. It was for a new shop: ‘Confucian Windshield Repair.’ She made a mental note to tell Brody about this place. When she walked in the office, Brody didn’t seem to notice that she was about twenty minutes late. He was busy telling George about his gun dealer.

“This guy, you know. He has to get to know you pretty well before he likes doing business with you. His fingers are all f*cked up, I don’t know what he did to them. He’s just got a little counter in there, you know, it’s mostly just a store front -- you walk in, get your ammo and whatnot, then you leave. Not one of these bigger places, and I prefer it that way. Those places get on your nerves. They’re all full of tirekickers and bullshitters, going on about guns. Not who you really want to associate with.”

George listened, complacent, and nodded, then took an invoice from Brody so he could go find a part. George acts like listening is a part of his job, Sheila thought. Now that’s a good man! She opened up the accounts payable record book, which was sitting on the counter. She figured she’d organize it this morning. Accounts payable was always a mess, stashed full of receipts, bank statements, Daisy’s vet paperwork, shopping lists for Costco and Office Depot, Brody’s scribbled I.O.U. type notes, and other assorted papery miscellany that Brody and the boys didn’t know what to do with. When she turned over a greasy, weathered invoice from the toxic waste disposal guy, she unearthed a polaroid of Killer sitting proudly, a hunk of styrofoam hanging from his mouth. Sheila didn’t recognize this photo. Who would have taken it? The boys knew not to play with
the Polaroid: the film was expensive, and Brody lectured regularly that the camera was not a toy, that it was only to be used for the documenting of salvage vehicles for their files. But here was Killer, grinning like a fool on celluloid. She showed the picture to Brody.

“Did you take this?” she asked him.

“Forgot my damn glasses,” he said, squinting, and held the picture tentatively at arms length to calibrate for his far-sightedness. “Hmm,” he said. “Dunno.”

“Well I didn’t, and neither George nor Joséph would dare,” she said. “What was it doing in accounts receivable?”

“Couldn’t tell you,” he avoided his way into the supply closet. There were some overly obvious rummaging noises and throat clearing. Why on earth was he acting so shifty? It was just a question.

“It's just weird, is all I’m saying.” she had to let it go as the 'FRANK'S KEYS' van rumbled onto the parking lot gravel.

“Gotta talk to Frank,” Brody whisked past her to greet the key guy. Something was strange about the whole scene. When Frank stepped out of his dusty blue van, Sheila realized the normally dumpy, sweaty, balding Frank was a woman today.

Brody ushered him (or her? Sheila wasn’t sure which was more appropriate) into the office in his a full drag get up -- heels, stockings, mid-length skirt, blouse, and long, flowing blond wig. “So my doctor told me to wear ladies nylons, you know, for my leg ulcers,” Frank was telling Brody. “But they didn’t wear well with pants, everything bunched all up. So I started wearing a skirt, and it just didn’t look right, I had to go for the whole outfit. And then, well, I saw the wig at an estate sale.”
“It really suits you!” Brody said.

The key guy frowned and pursed his lips, which Sheila thought had a little bit of clear gloss on them. She remembered how much she wanted to put on some make-up. The key guy was serious, all business. “Where’s that car you want me to key into?”

“Josip’s working on it around the side of the building.” Frank pranced into the shop, though it looked like he was trying not to prance. You can’t quite help it in heels, though, Sheila knew.

Once Frank was out of earshot, Brody looked at Sheila. “So there he was, in drag, explaining and explaining how he wasn’t really in drag. It’s a perfect metaphor, isn’t it? For life? You are what you wear?”

“An astute truism,” Sheila said.

“You know,” Brody told George. “Sometimes things just come out of my mouth like that. I don’t know where they come from. It’s like I’m tapping into the collective, like I’m Borg! Like it’s out there on the radio waves. I don’t even think it through, then it turns out I say something freaking brilliant. Did I tell you,” he barreled on, “about when we sold Lucy’s great aunt’s eight tracks at the swap meet? Because, you know, Lucy inherited everything from that lady, who kept all kinds of crap. So Frank came ‘round and bought ALL the eight tracks. Like a hundred of them for twenty five cents each. He actually said he’d be robbing us blind when Lucy said he could have them all for five bucks. And he was highly offended that we’d sold one out of the ‘Best of the Hoosier Hotshots’ box set. He said ‘you just don’t break up sets like that,’ like it was immoral, or some damn thing. There was even one with its tape all tangled that we were just gonna to chuck, but he scooped it up like it was a baby bird, popped open the case...
with a special little eight track tool he had in his pocket and unwound and rewound the
damn thing. Lucy said she imagined him living in a studio apartment with the walls
lined, top to bottom, in eight tracks. Like he’s saving them all for posterity. From a life
of oblivion, in this, the digital age. It’s a little poignant, don’t you think?” Brody said.

“Um hm,” George said.

Sheila loaded the accounts payable book in the crook of her arm and headed for
her office. Her want to put on make-up had become a dire need. When she opened her
door, there, sitting in the dark, was Brian, the government inspector.

Sheila caught her breath. Brian greeted her with the same look of desperate need
she’d been seeing so often lately.

“My goodness, Brian, you scared me,” she said.

“I’m sorry!” he gasped.

“I forgot,” Brody called from the other room. “You’ve got a visitor.”

Sheila turned on the overhead light. Brian flinched. She realized, in the
florescence, that the kid was all disheveled. His shirt untucked. His hair tousled. Several
days of beard had grown on his ashen face.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “But I had to talk to someone. You’re the only one
I’ve found out here who... who has... Well, it’s like they don’t have souls!”

“Oh, Brian,” she patted his head and sat down in her chair to open her drawer.

“They have souls. Sweetie, they just don’t like the law. It’s like the Wild West in this
neighborhood. They all have guns and big dogs and feel strongly about private property,
that’s all. They’re all good folks. Well, probably not Clyde, but he just wants to be left
alone.”

157
"I've seen things," he mumbled. "I don't know what to do. How can I go back to the office? I have to report things, bad things, violations you'd never expect to see outside a death camp..." He looked in horror at his hands as though they held the memory of what he'd seen.

"Brian..."

"Or no, even worse! Nothing you'd see this side of hell!" His eyes grew wide, his fingers tensed, curled, shuddered.

"Brian, you're being a little melodramatic. I've seen all the things you've seen. They've been here all your life, and no good will come of you reporting them. It's mostly just OSHA stuff, but the guys who work in those yards are probably OSHA hazards themselves. Nobody's being harmed, really..." She stopped for a moment, doubted herself, thought of Killer.

He sighed. "I can't go back to the life I led before," he said with finality.

"Sweetie, go home. Take a shower. Maybe you should think about a career change. You're too pure to work where you work." She wanted to give him a hug, but he smelled a little toxic. She patted his shoulder instead, then fished a lipstick and compact out of her drawer.

*

Sheila spent all day preparing the paperwork for her two-thirty appointment at the DMV. The packet Michelle had given her in order to declare the Olds Achieva abandoned by the police asked all sorts of background questions on the applicant, which Sheila bit her tongue and answered. Martyred Cars' business ID numbers, corporate and association memberships, social security and driver's license numbers of the
establishment's president or owner. Brody would have throttled her if he knew she was disclosing even his inseam, but she told herself it was her job to make these decisions, to decide who should know what, and when. She knew Brody would sleep easier with the Achieva's status settled, so she did what she had to do.

Brody put his dealer plates on the Achieva, and Sheila drove it to the DMV, with its jacked steering column and red and black wires hanging at her feet. She followed the packet's instructions and drove down a twisting, shrub-lined driveway, around to the back of the DMV building, where she discovered a clean white garage with a gabled roof and tidy aluminum siding. It was unusual architecture for Cross Road City, which was mostly filled with stark desert architecture -- modern cinder block elementary schools, flat stucco strip malls, public libraries with intimidating metal sculptures integrated into their blueprints. The DMV itself was a single-storied square monolith, with tall, darkly tinted windows. This little garage didn't match at all. When she pulled up to it, Sheila noticed something sitting up on the roof. It looked like a little monkey. Could that be a gargoyle? How could that be?

A state employee stood in the middle of the garage, silent and serene. He motioned with his hands for her to pull in, keep coming, keep coming, little more, little more, now stop. She got out and handed him the paperwork.

"Waiting room, around the side, we'll let you know," he said. She followed his instructions to a very small white room with five chairs. The wall was blank, save a white telephone and a poster demanding, in a brusque, fat-lettered font that she always wear her seat belt. On one of the chairs, someone had left a copy of *The Watchtower*. On
its cover was a picture of a nice young man who looked just like Brian, sitting in his work cubicle, looking pensive and in a crisis underneath the headline: “A Time To Speak.”

Sheila sat. The air conditioner groaned. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes. She hadn’t brought a book or anything. She figured she might meditate. She’d been cutting corners on her meditation lately. Eugene, the Transcendental Meditation representative for the greater Cross Road City area had been calling and sending little postcards saying, *time for your yearly check in, Ms. Sheila!* He’d give her quite a lecture if he knew she’d crunched the twenty minutes, twice daily meditation schedule down to three or four times a week at five, maybe ten minutes, whenever she had a few free. This little DMV room was a good place to really get in a good session.

She introduced her special mantra to her thoughts. It found itself in a rather turbulent little whirlpool of notions and conundrums. George’s debt to Brody pushed it’s way in. George had about two more years of payments left on the nun’s car. When Sophie’d gotten dropped off at the yard last week by Parthenie’s dad, she’d said something about George’s gift. The conversation had gone elsewhere, but what had that meant? Sheila let her mantra back in for a while as she sunk deeper into her mind’s depths. Then the algae growing in Sophie’s fish tank took over. My goodness, that stuff grew fast in there. Sophie claimed an algae-eating Plecostomus would come out of the tank in her dreams and suck out her brains, and that snails were simply "lowbrow," but it seemed to be up to Sheila to get in there with a sponge and scrape the darned stuff off. She brought the mantra back, sunk even deeper. She’d have to talk to Sophie about this uppity, entitled attitude. Where was she getting words like "lowbrow"? Why couldn’t she clean her own fish tank? The girl had revamped the schematics of Sheila’s stereo

160
system for more extensive radio reception, but she couldn’t pick up a sponge for five
minutes? Or, Sheila thought, she could just let it go. She was letting a lot go now. She
was losing herself, losing her place, losing everything in her mind’s remotest depths.

The phone rang, a shrill, jangling alarm of a ring, and she jumped. She looked at
her watch. It was quarter to five. Moments had turned into hours. She thought for a
minute, then picked up the phone.

“Olds Achieva’s ready,” said a voice. She hung up and took a few deep breaths.
Then she went back out to the garage.

“I’m sorry it took so long,” said the inspector. Two other men in uniform sat
together on a tool counter, watching her carefully. “There were some issues...” He looked
at the other men. They nodded. “This vehicle was involved in a homicide.”

“That’s okay,” Sheila said. The men drew back in shock. “I mean, yeah, we
knew something was holding up the processing.”

“Ma’am, are you sure you want to be so rash about this?” said one of the men.
“We said a prayer for you. But this car has seen things, horrible things. If you wait, we
could look around for a crucifix for you. Or if you prefer, a St. Christopher for the dash?
We highly advise you don’t leave without something.”

“Really, thanks, but it’s okay,” Sheila felt awkward. “Junkyard cars have all seen
bad things. We’re used to it. I don’t have too far to drive.” She hurried to climb inside
the Achieva and start the engine.

As she pulled away from the DMV, the sun was heading downward. The
stoplight had her facing directly into the sun, the bug splats on her windshield lighting up
all at once, like a skyful of blinding phenomena. Sheila flinched, squinted, fumbled for

161

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
her sunglasses, pulled the sun visor down from the car’s ceiling and angled it this way, and that, but the sun was too strong, the bug splats relentless, the light was flooding the car, hitting her from every angle. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, then opened them, submitting to the brightness, letting the ultraviolet rays sear the molecules of the skin on her face, the psychic tsunami of the sun’s storms pummeling her from all sides. And that’s when she saw him, the black silhouette crossing over on the freeway, a dog, like a wolf, or maybe it was some kind of specter, a shadow caster, galloping with the slow, mechanical movements of a marionette. The sun rays shot around him, followed him as he ran, highlighting the charicature of his muzzle with a fixed expression of wild, dangerous hilarity. And then someone honked -- it was the green light -- and when she glanced back up, he was gone.
CHAPTER 6

THE FRITO BANDITO SAGA

It was Roadman from Beep! Beep! who originally purchased the old Frito Lay truck. The truck was parked on a patch of dirt near the freeway off-ramp with ‘FOR SALE’ scrawled on a big, greasy strip of cardboard inside its windshield. He paid $400 to a girl in a ratty brown dress and dreadlocks, who shook his hand firmly and lugged her belongings away in two black trash bags. Roadman hooked the van to his pickup’s tow bar and pulled it back to Beep! Beep!, where he parked it out front and watched it lovingly from his office window all day.

Roadman, as lore tells it, felt sorry for the boxy old Frito Lay truck. He said it needed him, that he could just sense its systems crying out for lubrication, fluid refills, and warm hands. When Sheila analyzes the tale, Roadman is described as having had a bad case of Charlie Brown Christmas Tree Syndrome, shop vaccing and meticulously scrubbing its grubby floors, rubbing its worn exterior with a soft new shammy, and driving it home after work sometimes, so it could spend the night in his carport. Sheila's cartoon archetype would prove authentic when all the guys on the hotline began to razz Roadman about the clunky delivery van.

While most of the hotline would later insist that they limited their heat to calling Roadman smart ass names like ‘Chippy’ and ‘Vending Boy’, it is well documented that the guys at Back-2-Life went whole hog. At first they amused themselves with more
traditional hijinks: a box of cheese doodles above the Beep! Beep! business entrance rigged to fall on Roadman’s head when he opened the door one morning, strategically planted snipers with peashooters pelting him with Skittles outside both Beep! Beep! office exits, sign after sign on his back that read things like, “Chip me, baby!” Then they got more creative. One of the guys paid his buddy with a pilot’s license to fly a banner off the back of a Cessna that read, ‘SNACK FOOD TURNS ROADMAN ON,’ all throughout the light industrial neighborhood, with several strategic steep turns around the crossroads that met at the Beep! Beep! property. They even pooled their money to send poor Roadman a stripper, who sprung out of a cardboard vending machine in a bikini crafted entirely out of Twinkies. Brody maintained a *laissez-faire*, ‘boys will be boys’ policy on the matter until they picked the lock on the Beep! Beep! shop one night, stole the Frito Lay truck, and left a snotty ransom note, which included the oh-so-eloquent penultimate line, “Can you dig it, sucka!” When Roadman turned up at Martyred Cars with a long, hopeless face the next morning, Brody took matters into his own hands. Sheila witnessed the following scene from her office that day:

“They can’t do that. They just can’t do that. It screws with the brotherhood, you know? Because they know you won’t call the cops on them. They know you can’t be a snitch. And they abused that, they abused your good faith!” Brody squeezed his hands into tight, red fists.

“I don’t know. I mean, I guess it doesn’t matter enough to make a big hoop-de-la about it. It was just a hobby, that truck. A toy, and a cheap one at that. I might as well rise above it and forget it,” Roadman smiled sadly and shrugged.
“No, Roadie. This affects all of us. They’ve crossed a line. I won’t stand for it.”

Brody turned his cap visor backward, rolled up his sleeves, and stormed out the front door.

Legend has the rest of the scene transpiring with cinematic accuracy. Brody marched down the road to Back-2-Life, past the ‘NO TRESPASSING’ and ‘WARNING! ATTACK DOGS’ signs. He swung open the Back-2-Life front gate, strutted past the Back-2-Life parts guys (who were stunned speechless by his audacity), gave them the finger, and snarled, *fair is fair*. Brody spotted the Frito Lay truck parked behind their shop, climbed in without missing a beat (which was especially easy since truck had no front doors), turned the key (which was, as he had predicted it would be, ready to go in the ignition) and sped out of the yard and down the road as Bunky, the Back-2-Life counter man (and head conspirator in the heist, so claimed Roadman) ran out of the office shaking his fist, his thin, wispy gray hair swirling in Brody’s dust.

Various billiard-side anecdotes recall Brody honking the horn as he drove the van victoriously back to Beep! Beep! to offer Roadman safe haven for his baby at Martyred Cars, where the fences were more secure and the shop locks foolproof. Roadman was happy to work on the Frito Lay truck in his down time under Brody’s careful watch, and for about a month, nobody said much to either of them about delivery vans, or snack foods, or vending machines. Then one afternoon, while Brody was off site making a delivery, three of the boys from Part Mart (who had always been awfully chummy with Back-2-Life, so noted Sheila after the fact) showed up in dark glasses and faux government inspector uniforms and pulled a fast one on Josip and Sheila. One kept them talking while the other two spread out around the office, then the shop, examining vents
and sockets, tapping walls with their pens, then meandering outside and very swiftly sliding into the seats of the Frito Lay truck, which they pulled nonchalantly off the Martyred Cars lot.

Thus began the game. The Frito Lay delivery truck became known, simply, as 'The Frito,' and its presiding nabber 'The Almighty Frito Bandito.' The rules were born and evolved rapidly. Breaking and entering, as well as blatant trespassing in general, became taboo very quickly, since everyone pretty much agreed with Brody that it created unnecessary bad blood on the hotline. If, however, there was a hole in your fence, or you were dumb enough to forget to lock your gate, aspiring banditos were welcome, in fact, encouraged to come get the Frito, so long as they had the courtesy to lock up when they were done, or fill in the fence hole with broken glass and tumbleweeds, so that any legitimate crooks would get what was coming to them. The Frito was not easily hot-wired, and successful Banditos heeded the lessons of the early combatants, keeping the keys out of the Frito's ignition. It was thus a much trickier feat for new banditos to break into the game, since all key copies made in the early days were guarded with ferocious zeal. In practical terms, though, whether a guy had a key or not, there were only two ways to appropriate the Frito: well-planned deception, or vigilant observation and exploitation of the Bandito yard's security weaknesses (in essence, catching them when they weren't looking). And if the Frito 'fell ill,' as Roadman would say, it was the responsibility of the reigning Bandito to nurse it back to health.

The early snatches were easy -- if a guy was brazen enough to conspire against a colleague, to walk onto a colleague's property, past colleague, colleague's employees, and sometimes even customers, shameless enough to drive away in a vehicle which said
colleague claimed as his own under a bastardized form of finders keepers, losers weepers, well, it was just hard to do anything to stop such a guy. What do you say to someone with that kind of balls? This was the question they all asked themselves in the early days, every time someone emerged from obscurity, off the dusty road, to step forth and claim the Bandito title, with all of its rights and privileges. After a while, though, various Banditos and hopefuls began to develop defensive strategies aimed at keeping the Frito in their yard as long as possible. The Frito was rarely left outside after closing, and a few yards went as far as planting a parts guy in the Frito’s driver’s seat whenever there was down time as a safeguard against any funny business. For a while, quite a few Banditos took to clamping The Club on the Frito’s steering wheel whenever they had to leave it unattended, which was extremely effective until Brody bought a ‘Lock Picking For Dummies’ kit on Ebay, which claimed that an eight year old could pick The Club with it in under a minute. He offered publicly, in a 'hear ye, hear ye' announcement on the hotline to lend the kit to any aspiring Bandito who could present him with a cogent plan intended for use in recapturing the Frito from a reigning yard utilizing The Club. The guys at Back-2-Life put up a stink about Brody’s kit, as they had been the original Club users on the Frito, but Brody responded smugly with what became his personal Bandito motto, a motto that stopped those snotty Back-2-Lifers in their tracks and made the guys on the hotline cheer in support: fair is fair. Defending the delivery van was a delicate tightrope in this way: any scheme a guy devised to keep the Frito in his court could be schemed against and undone by the ingenuity of another guy striving for local fame and glory. The more creative or complex your defense of the Frito, the more likely it was for an up-and-coming Bandito to spin your plans around so that they’d bite you in the ass.

167

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Chuck at Chuck’s Trucks, for example, once chained the Frito’s axle inconspicuously to the bed of his rock solid, cherried-up ‘82 Chevy pickup, and parked them both in the Chuck’s parking lot. He regretted it later when Freddie from Part Mart happened by on his Vespa, spotted the Frito looking vulnerable, and tried to peel it away, yanking the hell out of the Frito’s underbelly and putting a nasty scrape in the Chevy’s tailgate. Freddie felt bad and fixed the tailgate himself, but the Frito repairs were on Chuck, since he was Bandito at the time. The most victorious of the Banditos knew that there were no shortcuts in an auspicious defense of the Frito, and that success depended on tireless grassroots security, an ever-changing routine, and above all, constant vigilance.

* 

Though she’d only laid eyes on the Frito on a handful of occasions, Lucy knew the saga of the Frito Banditos in meticulous detail. She could have written a book on the subject, complete with historical timelines, detailed maps of the area, and profiles of all the Banditos, past and present, with their nicknames, special talents, and favorite costumes. Every time the Frito changed hands, Brody came home with a red face and eyes all aglow, brimming with things he needed to talk about. Lucy could tell it had been a day with Frito significance even before he got in the house. On a normal day, there was always a leisurely spell of goofing around before he came inside — tinkering with the motorcycle and crushing aluminum cans for a while in the garage — but on a day when the Banditos were active, Brody stomped right in to find her with only a short detour through the kitchen to grab a beer from the fridge and a beef jerky. Lucy was usually in the TV room at this point in the day, watching the late afternoon network drivel (she kind of got into Maury Povich) and cranking up the speed on her one-woman edible gift basket.
assembly line: patting multicolored paper shred into the wicker containers, artistically arranging fancy apples and tangerines, tucking in little packets of wafers and yogurt covered pretzels, tying metallic ribbons in big bows and saran-wrapping the whole works. All work had to stop, though, when Brody burst onto the scene on any given evening to unload all of the day’s Frito events from his harried brain. Brody’s narrative was exhilarated and jubilant if there had been a just swipe. He was ready to rumble, though, if the new Bandito had played mean or dirty, or if somebody had gotten on the hotline after the heist to snicker too proudly, or to make an unnecessarily smart-assed comment, or to call anybody “sucka.” Lucy wasn’t the sort of significant other who got tired of hearing about all the Frito Bandito stuff. She also didn’t mind dates at honky-tonk and biker bars, or weekend trips to the swap meet, or even Brody’s unquenchable fascinations with both professional wrestlers and televangelists. She liked to think of herself as a surveyor of archetypes, a keeper of legends, a subculture enthusiast, even. Someday she’d write it all down, maybe start a website to document all of the things she’d heard people say, the get-ups she’d witnessed people wearing, and the dramas she’d seen concocted, just for the sake of concocting.

Lucy had been following the hands-changing of the Frito for a good four years, longer than Josip had worked for Brody and nearly as long as Lucy and Brody had lived together. Things had gotten strange in the most recent era, though, when Bunky from Back-2-Life took control of the Frito under the most improbable of circumstances. Brody had been in the midst of pulling off a scheme to snatch the Frito from A+ Pull Your Part, a rookie yard on the Bandito circuit, when Bunky happened to stop by to check out the vintage Towmotor forklift that A+ had acquired at an antique auction. Bunky alerted the
A+ guys to Brody’s shenanigans -- Brody was incognito in his buddy Dale’s spare UPS uniform and big brown delivery truck (with Dale hiding in the back as getaway driver), having pulled around the back of the shop, near the Frito, under the guise of dropping off an enormous shipment of some sort. Brody sat calmly un-Clubbing the Frito’s steering wheel with his kit as Steve from A+ hustled out of the shop in a panic, waving his arms and hollering, _oh no no no you don’t!_ Brody climbed out of the Frito and began to lay on the old-timer charm so that Steve would settle down and remember it was all just a game, sort of. Brody put his arm around Steve and invited to buy him a root beer from the A+ pop machine, and as the two of them buried the hatchet, Bunky slipped out the A+ side door, into the Frito’s driver seat, and drove off in what should have been Brody victory. Dale watched the whole thing helplessly from inside the UPS truck, unsure of what was going on and not wanting to further screw up a heist that had gone so horribly wrong.

From that day forth, Bunky at Back-2-Life turned himself into the an unbreakable Bandito, and one with some pretty serious sportsmanship problems. Attempts on the Frito were made, at least once a week, but Bunky thwarted them all. He built a fortress of wooden pallets around the sad little van, locked a Club tight on the steering wheel, and even clamped a big yellow parking violation boot over the rear driver’s side tire. Lucy agreed with Brody that Bunky’s cocky attitude on the hotline was entirely inappropriate, what with all that pathetic crap blocking in the Frito. As though he really did _own_ the Frito, and as though his very livelihood somehow depended on the thing. Lucy could gauge the level of tension rising on the hotline over the Frito Bandito affair reflected in Brody’s dwindling patience with the silliest things: slow traffic, less than efficient waitresses, commercials that broke into his TV shows at moments of dramatic climax.
Dale wasn't the same, either. He blamed himself for the Frito heist gone wrong. Whenever he came over after work to watch wrestling with Brody, he laughed much less, made far fewer pirate jokes. This situation couldn’t last forever, but it would take a plan with Special Ops elegance for anyone to get into Back-2-Life and get the Frito. As his reign grew lengthier and lengthier, Bunky even started posting a sentry (in a black, bulletproof-looking outfit, of all things) in the driver’s seat, who didn’t budge an inch during business hours (which was really an extreme use of funds for what was, after all, supposed to be a lighthearted competition). After Bunky passed the six month mark as the Almighty Frito Bandito, Lucy knew an insurrection like nobody’d ever seen had to be brewing in the shadows. She just never thought she’d get drawn into the middle of it all.

Her role changed suddenly, from discreet anthropologist to active participant, on an afternoon when she was holed up in her office, working with her gift basket software on the plans for an intergalactic themed proposal that would be presented to the attendees of the big Star Trek convention at the Hilton down by the airport. Her idea would situate the goodies in a silver and black basket designed to resemble a Borg cube, and would include ‘warp plasma’ candy (which was really vacuum-packed pomegranate seeds from the health food store), miniature cans of 7-Up (a subtle Seven-of-Nine reference that the trekkies were sure to pick up on), and some crazy, alien looking fruit (which she found in abundant supply at the Indian grocery situated humbly in the corner of the corner strip mall). She thought the green spike-covered fruit, which seemed to be some kind of melon, were her ace in the hole, and would be sure to knock the other bidders out of the much coveted Trek contract. She heard Brody’s truck rumble up the driveway just before six, the garage door hum, the back door bang, the refrigerator open and close, and then,
after he failed to track her down in the TV room, Brody’s voice, cheerful and excited for the first time in weeks, reverberating across the house:

“Lucy... Luuuuuuuuucy... Where’s that Lucy-kins?”

He popped his head into her office and hollered, before he realized she was in there. “LUCY! Oh, there you are. Get this -- we’re taking back the Frito. It’s a definite. And you’re helping.”

"Ha!" Lucy said, and went back to tweaking her basket design.

“No, we’ve got it all planned! It’s foolproof, and you’re crucial, in terms of the plan. We can’t do it without you. You’re little, and you’re cute, we need a little cute lady to get in there. Oh, and, you’ll have to do your party trick, if that’s okay.”

Lucy shot him a look. He gritted his teeth and jumped back a step. “Woah there, don’t get mad! I know that’s off limits. I would never bring it up if it wasn’t an emergency. It’s just that you’re the linchpin, the keystone, you’ve never been one of those, have you? Come on, it’ll be a new experience.”

“How much is this thing going to cost?” She folded her arms. This was where they always got hung up. Brody was frugal when it was convenient, or when the books out at the yard were looking their most dire. But when he got a burr up his tail like this, the sky was usually the limit. Gift baskets brought in a good living, sure, but they couldn’t cover the mortgage if Martyred Cars bit the dirt. Lucy hated that she had to be the battle ax at times like this, that Brody made her play this game. The guy was prone to fantasy, though, expensive fantasy, and somebody had to reign him in. And besides that, he wanted to get her party trick involved. He knew how sensitive she was about that, what a secret it was. If he wanted her to do that, in public no less, the thing that damn
near gotten her expelled her sophomore year in high school, well, he could expect some pursed lips and uncomfortable silences.

Lucy knew the look on Brody’s face. He was working it over in his brain, really thinking through his motives. She knew that hanging by little chains from one tray of the old-fashioned scale inside his brain was his ego, his love of retribution, of cleaning house and laying the smack down. She had to admit that when he spoke, she was a little surprised to hear what was weighing so heavily in the other tray.

“Mostly man hours, it’ll cost. We probably won’t get many hotline sales for a few days, we’ll be too busy to listen. I know what you’re thinking, Luce, but this isn’t just a fun little game anymore. This is about the morale of not only my boys, but the boys all over town. That Bunky, he’s taken something from us that we look forward to. Something that didn’t belong to him! If morale stays down, and the guys stop giving a damn and start taking short cuts and then, well, that’s when used automotive parts start getting cracked and all boogered up. It’s capital down the toilet, my love. You’ve not seen George lately – sluggish as a big... as a big slug, that guy, and breaking parts left and right. When George is all out of whack, I know something’s wrong.”

Brody got down on his knees to put on a big begging act. She knew she had to resist vigorously, lengthily, at least over night (really, she thought, how can you just sign on to something like this?). He had a point, strange as it was. From the moment he brought it up, though, Lucy knew she’d be along for the ride. Brody was like that, very persuasive. Thank God he always had his heart in the right place.

When she finally agreed over coffee the next morning to help retrieve the Frito, she quite plainly laid our her terms. Her involvement would run three days, tops. She
wanted a comprehensive briefing with all involved parties in attendance. Finally, she wanted to ride along on some basic recon, survey the scene, really see beforehand what she was getting into. Brody rolled his eyes a little at the scope of her demands, but ultimately agreed that meticulous planning would secure their success. When Brody left for work that day, Lucy felt antsy, despite herself. This was going to be... well... an adventure! She couldn’t remember the last time she had been on an official one of those.

* 

After the fact, Lucy retained a sort of Super-8 image of what Brody termed ‘the calm before the storm’ part of the operation in her mind. It was as though she had watched it from a distance. And yet she was right at the center of the scene, on the back of Marius’s Harley, and in the center of a pack of Brody’s Hell’s Angels buddies as they thundered toward the Back-2-Life yard. It was very intense. Brody had insisted that she dress the part for the reconnaissance mission: her red go-go boots, which hadn’t been out of her closet in years, a black vinyl miniskirt that had been on sale at the mall, and a Hell’s Angels jacket borrowed from Samantha, Marius’s wife. None of the guys at Back-2-Life had ever seen her, as far as she and Brody could remember, but she was glad to feel so well-disguised under Brody’s extra motorcycle helmet. She’d forgotten how much she didn’t like lying, trickery, stirring things up and putting on acts. She really wasn’t cut out for it. She did everything she could to stay out of situations like these, but Brody was right. The heist couldn’t come off without her.

Back-2-Life was not far from Martyred Cars, right in the same light industrial and metal salvage zoning tract, but the boys picked her up at a 7-Eleven a few miles away and took a circuitous route through the winding streets of warehouses and junkyards. They
accelerated casually past Martyred Cars, as though they knew not a soul at the establishment. Lucy could see Brody and Sheila watching them nonchalantly from behind the counter in the office. Out in the yard, Josip looked up from inside Daisy’s pen, and George glanced over from the hydraulic lift as they passed. She readjusted her hold on Marius’s belly and didn’t breathe as they turned the corner onto the dirt road that dead-ended where Back-2-Life was situated.

As the pack motored into the Back-2-Life parking lot, Lucy’s stomach was in knots. The yard looked like a fortress: blocky, impersonal letters spelling ‘BACK-2-LIFE’ across a tall, stark, silver building surrounded by higher than necessary fences with diagonal white security slats and rolls of barb-wire protecting their tops. A guy named Stu parked his bike and went inside to make a bogus inquiry about some part or another. Lucy climbed slowly off the bike, under the guise of stretching her legs. She took off her helmet and ambled over to the fence, where the view was severely limited on account of those damned bendy slats woven in and out of the chainlink. Folding her arms, she glanced up at the sky, stepped toward the narrow space between fence and gate, and stole a limited view into the back yard. Marius got her attention with a mouth-clicking noise, then beckoned with his head in the direction of the yard’s main building. Lucy angled her view in that direction and strained to make out objects in her half-inch wide view slit. She felt dizzy and slightly panicked when nothing made visual sense to her from her strange perspective -- it was all a mess of multicolored car metal and other assorted industrial hues, shapes, and textures. Then suddenly, like an optical illusion, the faded red and white logo on the Frito’s rear doors emerged to her from the mess of stuff. Almost as though it knew she was there.
All of the shapes back there suddenly began to make sense to her. She was able to
discern three of the pallet stacks about a foot apart, at what she figured was about
headlight-height to the Frito. She could see how the van was completely surrounded. A
parts guy in what looked like a SWAT team get-up walked around the back on his own
reconnaissance and kicked the pallets, which barely budged. A stack of those things was
heavy as a fucker, according to Brody. Each stack, if it were to be moved, would
probably have to be moved by a forklift. She backed away casually to lean on the
motorcycle and took in the larger security picture. Big combination locks on both the
business entrance and the delivery gate. Front fence was pretty well impenetrable, and
the other three sides of the yard were fifteen foot brick walls, by god, if you want to talk
about excess. Somewhere inside the yard, very serious dogs were barking, snarling, she
could practically hear their saliva.

Before she could note anything else, Stu strode out of the office in a casual hurry.
“The thorns are restless,” he mumbled, shoveled his helmet on his head and climbed on his
bike. Lucy couldn’t quite remember all the codes Brody had rattled off at the secret
Operation Take Back meeting the night before, but she was pretty sure Stu meant one of
the Back-2-Life guys had looked at him funny. Stu, perhaps, wasn’t the best guy to be in
there buying time; he was kind of jumpy and high strung, always spilling his beer or
diving under the table whenever some drunk guy raised his voice. Lucy climbed back on
the bike with Marius and the team pulled out of the parking lot, trailing a cloud of dust.
They drove Lucy back to the 7-Eleven, where she picked up some drinks and got in her
old VW Bug to drive over to Martyred Cars. Brody was waiting anxiously, she’d even go
as far as ‘chomping at the bit,’ at his computer. She plunked the Slurpee he’d requested
from 7-Eleven down on the counter and put her hands on her hips. Brody jittered and tapped his pen.

“You saw it, right? You see what I mean? If we time it just right, we can get you in there,” he said.

Lucy raised an eyebrow. She was feeling very powerful in her biker get-up. “I’m not all that convinced. The place is a citadel! I have your word, now, that none of this will get me arrested.”

“Scout’s honor,” he said, and raised two fingers. “Bunky knows we’ll shun him if he calls the police on anybody. And even if he does, we’ll be heroes! And that’s good for business.”

Josip walked in with some hunk of metal and Brody quickly hid his hand in his pocket. He put on a stern face as he took the part. The hotline started to chatter, and Brody picked it up to offer someone a torque converter. Lucy didn't know what a torque converter was, but it sounded cool. Then the phone rang. Brody looked suddenly stressed out. Lucy waved without a word as she headed out the door.

* 

The next day was the day. B-Day, Brody’d been calling it. When the alarm went off extra early that morning at 5:15, Lucy found Brody already up and about, pacing the house in his robe with a cup of coffee and releasing his anxiety in assorted household chores: watering plants, alphabetizing the video tapes, running the dishwasher with two plates in it in order to “clean out the mechanisms.” Lucy took a quick shower, let Brody finish sweeping the recently swept porch, and then made him sit on the couch so she could rub his shoulders and calm him down.

177
At six, the Bandito team began to phone in one by one, as planned, and Brody kept a sort of roll call on a strategic planning form that Lucy found in the templates on her computer. Josip and George were sleepy, but a go. Sheila, Clyde, and Dale were all, as Dale put it, “totally amped.” Don was the only one with cold feet. Don was the elderly independent mechanic (or as Brody always corrected her, “the world’s foremost automotive artiste”) to whom Brody contracted out his more complicated projects. But Brody gave him a good pep talk, and refused to hang up before Don talked out all of his anxieties. Brody reminded Don how Bunky needed to learn a lesson, and rude and impatient Bunky had been when Don had ran into some unexpected problems fixing his mom’s Cadillac. By the time Brody hung up, he had brought Don back around, and got him all worked up about the exciting adventure of winning back the Frito. At 7:15, Lucy and Brody got in his truck and drove out to Martyred Cars to wait for everyone involved in ‘Wave One’ of Operation Take Back to assemble.

By 8:01, Sheila, Dale, and Clyde had arrived discreetly at Martyred Cars. Clyde walked over from his yard next door, escorted by his latest pit bull Letty. Sheila pulled her Hyundai into her usual parking space, business as usual. Dale pulled his big UPS truck quickly through the front gate and around back of the building, as not to appear fishy. At 8:15, the call came in from Roadie that Don and Josip, Lucy’s associates on ‘Wave Two’ were ready to go at Beep! Beep!. Brody gave Lucy the keys to the nun’s Pacer and she headed across the neighborhood to join her team. As she hurried down the road, she passed George in his Monte Carlo. He gave her a somber thumbs up. Lucy hoped Big G was okay with being the lone player on ‘Wave Three.’ Josip had been quite accurate when he described wave Three as “the wave of the unknown.”
entailed was anyone's guess -- a complete variable. George might have to run
interference, he might have to pick up the pieces if someone else's wave missed their
mark, or he might have to play the diplomat or risk management guy -- smooth down
Bunky's feathers if anything got seriously broken or help clean up the messes that were
sure to be left behind in the melee. She had thought it strange that George had
volunteered to play this crucial role, and even more strange that Brody had eagerly
agreed, but, she conceded to herself, Brody knew the guy better than she did.

At Beep! Beep!, the mood was one of quiet, intense nervousness. Lucy waited
beside Don on the plastic chairs in Roadman's waiting area as Roadman sat at his desk
and stared intently at his hotline, which murmured intermittently. Josip leaned against the
wall, tapping his foot absentmindedly to the big band tune coming out of Roadman's
transistor radio. Lucy tried to concentrate on the pattern of the wood grain on the old
Beep! Beep! counter. Lucy's watch read 8:35; she realized 'Wave One' would be well
underway. She would learn later that evening, as everyone told their stories, that the
diversion wave ran as smoothly as it possibly could.

Clyde was the first to arrive on the scene at Back-2-Life. His goal was simply to
bug Bunky -- to stick by his side, distract him, annoy him, and throw him off his game
however he could. "Oh yessir! I can do that one Brody! I'll blab blab blabber 'till I can't
blab blabber no more!" Clyde had said at the team meeting, when Brody explained that
his job was essentially to improvise. Clyde was a loud dude, a dude who sometimes
didn't make sense when he talked to you, and most of all, a dude you didn't mess with.
His yard was a seething nest of code violations, his dogs were trained to kill and seemed
to really like the idea of it, and he kept a mean looking shotgun slung over his shoulder,
just about always, to ward off anyone who might want him to change his ways
(thankfully, he’d agreed to leave the gun at his yard on B-Day to ensure everyone’s bodily
safety during the heist). Somehow, though, Brody and Clyde had maintained a cordial,
neighborly relationship over the ten years Brody’d been in business, and Clyde was
always up for taking part in any of Brody’s projects. Clyde first pointed Letty in the
direction of the Back-2-Life dogs. Clyde had assured everyone at the planning meeting
that Letty would keep Bunky’s rottweilers, Sinful and Funnybone, busy and barking the
whole time, so that they couldn’t tip off Bunky or anybody that people were snooping
around or fiddling with the Frito. From his experience, Clyde explained, nobody at
Back-2-Life would ask him to get his dog out of their yard, and if they did, he’d act all
indignant. After that, said Clyde (who, in practical terms, was really not that reliable of a
source, but who Lucy knew embellished only to make his role in the legend more
poignant and literary), he went inside and hit Bunky with a constant stream of questions
(“like my cousin’s wife’s sister’s kid, gots some syndrome, Ass-burger Syndrome,
something like Ass-burger, he just asks and asks, he’s a marathon asker,” Clyde
explained proudly), questions with no bearing on anything, and in no apparent logical
order. Clyde asked about Bunky’s preferred hair care products, the rpm on his new
forklift, what he had for breakfast that morning, whether he thought rock and roll would
make a comeback. Clyde kept at Bunky until Sheila showed up, then settled down a
little, snooped in some drawers, and stayed in Bunky’s peripheral vision as a constant,
malignant distraction.

Sheila went in with a more calculated approach. You could always count on
Sheila to be ever so resourceful, and indeed: she brought a whole duffel bag full of
goodies into Back-2-Life with the goal of distracting Marlys, the Back-2-Life office lady, and Manny, the most crafty of Bunky’s two parts pullers. Sheila sat down with the two of them in Marlys’s office and laid a spread on the table of stuff they might like: crocheted kitchen magnets, specially engineered nesting Tupperware, and some new multi-level marketed miracle health care products she was in on. She said Marlys and Manny were completely distracted by all the goodies and well primed for the final strike in Wave One. Sheila said Manny was a real sucker for the Tupperware, and that she almost had Marlys sold on the ‘Special Healing Cream For Toes’ when Dale’s big brown UPS truck pulled into the parking lot.

Dale arrived right as Clyde and Sheila were in the middle of working their magic, his only purpose being that of a red herring. It was Brody’s hypothesis that, since Dale was involved in the fateful heist-gone-wrong so many months ago, his presence would signal a very conspicuous attempt on the Frito. “Counterintuitive, yes,” Brody had nodded at the meeting when everyone expressed doubt over this part of the plan. “But it’s the only way we’re going to get in there. Bunky will see Dale there at such an unusual hour of the day, and then he’ll realize Sheila is there, too, and he’ll panic! And if all goes the way it should, he’ll be all wrapped up with you troublemakers, and that will leave the yard wide open for Wave Two.”

As they told it, Brody’s theory had been right on. As soon as Dale walked through the door, Bunky smelled a rat.

“Hold up,” Bunky shook his finger at Dale. “Hold up!”

Dale shrugged. Sheila and her pawns peeked out unassumingly. “And you!”

Bunky swung around at Sheila. Sheila cocked her head. “Something’s up, kids. I’m
onto both of you. And you two,” he indicated Manny and Marlys, “are getting real lazy, here. You almost fell for whatever’s going on here! I’m calling that damn Brody. Sheila, Dale, you two stay put, and you doofs keep an eye on them! Dammit!” He sounded exasperated with his staff. “And where the hell did Clyde go?” Bunky bellowed as he stormed into his private office.

“I do have a delivery for you,” Dale called after him, for effect.

The planning of Wave Two, Lucy would be willing to argue, truly showed the scope of Brody’s experience as a Bandito. Nobody at Back-2-Life knew Lucy, and Don claimed that as far as he knew, Bunky thought him “a neutral party in the Bandito war.” So Brody had positioned the two of them as the next besiegers: Don driving, and Lucy in the passenger’s seat of Don’s little Caprice. They pulled out of the Beep! Beep! parking lot right behind Dale, and gave themselves only about thirty seconds of trail time behind him. It was crucial that Wave Two struck just after Dale’s arrival, while Bunky was at his most paranoid, and Marlys and Manny had their focus on Dale and Sheila. That left only Tino, the other Back-2-Life yard man, who was the one usually outside guarding the Frito, and who was, well, kind of lumpy and unkempt and, Lucy could attest for it -- not the sharpest tool in the yard. Don drove straight up to the gate, hoping they were out of view of anyone in the office. Lucy patted him on the shoulder, and he gave her a brave thumbs up. Apparently his nerves were under control.

Don got out of the car and knocked on the gate. “Yoo-hoo, Tino, yoo-hoo!”

Tino came running obediently. Lucy was impressed; Don, whose little baseball cap barely reached her shoulder, commanded a great deal of authority with all of these
junk guys, even the adversaries. He was something of a village elder around here. When Tino swung open the gate, Don carefully explained their “situation”:

“My niece Lucy here, Tino— that’s right, shake her hand-- my niece’s VW Beetle, it’s a ’72, can you believe it? Beautiful thing, her little car, but the alternator’s down and out, and I don’t know if you know this but ’72 was a tricky year for VW alternators. But I know you boys have one back there, I think it’s way in the very back if I remember correctly, and I’d like to take a look at it if you don’t mind. Why don’t you let us pull in here and you and I can head out to look at it. And let’s walk, it’s been a long time since you and I had a chance to talk.”

Tino nodded. Poor boy, Lucy thought. He didn’t have a clue. Don told her afterwards that the “tricky year for VW’s” bit was “a bunch of bunk.” He also told her that he’d crafted the tale around her ’72 Bug in order to authenticate her character and make Lucy feel more comfortable. “I know sometimes, Lucy, when somebody’s fibbing, it’s easier for everyone if there’s the truth in there somewhere. I wanted to make sure you didn’t get yourself all turned around about which way was up.” Lucy thanked him for this, then told Brody, who got a good giggle out of it.

After they pulled inside the gate and got out of the car, Lucy caught a glimpse of Letty taunting the pacing, snarling Dobermans (who looked humiliated by the constraints of their dog run) with her deep, throaty arf. Don gave Lucy a shove toward her next objective. “Why don’t you go inside and have a soda pop, Lucy? This is mens’ business.” Don ad libbed that last part, and Lucy cringed a little, but she supposed it was a good way to cinch her motive for staying behind.
“Okay, Uncle Don,” she smiled big, tried to look dumb. Don and Tino started on their walk. She turned and headed around the building toward the business entrance, then ducked against the building. After about 45 seconds on her watch, she headed back to Don’s car with her duplicate key. With what she felt was Bond girl precision, she slid the key into the trunk lock and popped the hood for Josip, who was curled up in there, a big grin on his face.

Hiding in the trunk had been Josip’s idea. Sheila had raised a motherly objection at the meeting, citing heat exhaustion and oxygen deprivation as big no-no’s. “Nobody needs to be getting hurt, here, Josip,” she fretted.

Brody seemed equally as concerned. “You know, we could find you a good costume, Josip. You could dress up like a paratrooper, what about that? Or we could rent you a radiation suit and you could tell Bunky he’s got some kind of biohazard, eh?”

Nobody could shake Josip’s resolve. He said it was important to him, then told a story about how, when he was eight years old, he was stuck in a dark elevator by himself in an apartment building outside Moscow for twelve hours. He’d been “nursing a phobia for small dark compartments,” as he put it, for all these years, and it was “busting his style.” There were all these shows on TV lately, he said, where people have to eat weird worms and jump off buildings and stuff like that. He wanted to do his own personal test of courage, a descent into darkness, get locked in a trunk and have to wait for someone to let him out. His conviction won Brody over, and here he was, happy as a banana in the trunk of Don’s car. But there was no time to congratulate him. He and Lucy both had work to do.
Josip sprung out of the trunk with a backpack full of tools, and Lucy followed him to the Frito. After they slid their way between two stacks of pallets, Josip went to work on the parking violation boot, and Lucy slid into the Frito driver’s seat to pick The Club. Lucy pulled Brody’s lock picking kit out of her jacket pocket and focused on the task for which Brody had been training her several hours a night all week. She got the tension rod into the lock and was working on raking the pins when the Frito clanked and trembled: José was going to town on the boot. Her lock picking was thrown off, and she had to start over. Tension, in, and now carefully, the pins -- one, two... three... four, five, six... and a good clean rake. With a tiny clink, the Club was toast. She laid it on the Frito’s passenger seat and hopped out to see how Josip was doing.

Josip’s hair was all amuss, his teeth gritted. He had a screwdriver jammed inside the locking mechanism of the parking boot and was prying at the boot’s wheel cap with a tire iron.

"Jeez, Josip, I thought you weren’t going to damage that thing! Bunky’s going to be so mad," Lucy whispered.

Josip looked up at her with crazed eyes. “Bunky can eat my ass,” he hissed.

Lucy stepped back. She’d never heard a potty mouth like that on Josip before; usually he was the one looking all pious and offended when Brody so much as let loose a ‘goddamn.’ She moved away from the Frito and went to stand watch by Don’s Caprice. Letty was rolling around in the dirt as Sinful and Funnybone moaned and howled. There was some noisy activity coming from near the front entrance of the yard; it sounded like Bunky was kicking out Sheila and Dale.
“It disappoints me that you think I’d be involved in that sort of chicanery,” Lucy could hear Sheila sounding disdainful in the parking lot.

“Oh, save your yap and get out of here!” Bunky roared. Lucy heard a car start, then the deep ignition and idle of the UPS truck. A splintering noise, then a big clank came from the Frito. Lucy looked. Josip was peeking around the pallets to signal her that he was ready. In an unfortunate turn of play, Bunky stepped out of the shop’s side door just in time to catch Josip in the peeking act.

“I knew it! I just knew something was going down out here,” Bunky lurched at Josip and grabbed him in a headlock. “Well, listen here, Jo-jo, your game’s over! You got that? GAME, OVER!” He stopped to glare at Lucy. “And who are you!?”

“Um, I’m here with my Uncle Don? He’s out in the yard, with that guy?” That was her best like me! voice. She was actually pretty good at like me!. Bunky frowned.

“Poshli na khyui, motherfucker!” Josip spit through his teeth (again with the language! she thought), as he winked at Lucy. With a grunt, Bunky dragged Josip, still locked under his arm, inside the shop.

Now, this was a real problem. The plan had been as such: Josip would take care of the parking boot, Lucy would pull her party trick, then unroll the gate for Josip to zip away in the Frito. What with Josip getting busted, she was all on her own. She had a duplicate key for the Frito, just in case, but she didn’t really think she could pull off the whole scheme by herself. Don was out amongst the cars somewhere, and at any rate had to keep Tino occupied. George wasn’t due to show up for a good five minutes, during which time Bunky could discover the Frito bootless and un-Clubbed. Clyde... Clyde
might still be somewhere, she realized. But who could possibly predict, with that guy.

Yes, this was a real big problem.

Lucy sat on the hood of the Caprice. It occurred to her that this entire thing could
be all for naught at this point. Dammit, she thought. We should have brought the
walkie-talkies. The walkies had been an issue of contention at the Operation Take Back
meeting -- one school of thought said they were invaluable for unanticipated instances
such as these, while the other won out with the argument that all the buzzing and
squawking would give the whole operation away. Dammit, dammit! She shook her head.

A commotion caught her attention -- one of the Dobermans (Funnybone, Lucy figured, if
the dog's name matched his personality) was trying, without much success, to climb the
side of his run. Letty's screeching and yelping sounded to Lucy like she was laughing at
the poor guy.

Lucy saw Don about a hundred yards out, walking back with his arm around Tino,
who looked to be telling Don a complicated, emotional story. The moment was slipping
away, and she was the last one who could pull out this attempt. She hopped off the
Caprice, slid in between the pallet stacks, and got back in the driver's seat of the Frito.

She shoved her key in the ignition and sat, breathing deeply. She knew what she
had to do, but, it had been an awfully long time! Suddenly, Manny was in the passenger
seat beside her.

"Busted!" he screamed. "And who the hell are you anyway?!"

Her stomach sank. "Um," was all she could think to say. She didn’t have to say
anything else, though, because Clyde appeared from the Frito's cargo area swiftly threw a
big tarp over Manny's head.
Manny struggled. Lucy watched as Clyde held on, and wrapped his arms around Manny’s chest.

“Do your thing, chickie! Do your thing!” Clyde urged her on.

Lucy faced forward. She concentrated her energy in a big ball in her stomach, breathing, steady, then pulled the zap up into her brain, and shot it out of her forehead, through the windshield, and directly at the pallet stack, which burst into flames.

She exhaled. She was suddenly overcome by the extremely gratifying, climactic feeling she hadn’t felt in nearly two decades, since Misty Moore had called her “skeezy cunt” in the VO/AG hallway in high school, after Misty’s boyfriend had said Lucy was woo-see, lookin’ fine! The cunt comment had caught Lucy off guard and stung her heart (or maybe her lungs) like a puncture wound. She had indulged herself, that day, in something she’d only tested out under controlled circumstances in elementary school under the guidance and backyard fort protection of the kid next door who had a 175 IQ and went to special classes at the university. Lucy zapped Misty’s jacket and it was such a relief to her poor, bruised ego (and possibly internal organs), but the episode had resulted in nothing but problems — a screaming stop-drop-and-roll scene, the school was evacuated, and Misty was sent to the hospital for singed nostril hairs. Lucy and her parents got called in for meetings with the principal, and child psychologists, and even a parapsychologist who had traveled in from god-knows-where. This little bearded man put little suction cup sensors on her temples and made her guess what was on the other side of about a thousand cards -- stars, wavy lines, circles, it was all so corny. Everyone at school had called her a witch, which was actually fine, because they were too scared to say it to her face and therefore mostly left her alone, but Christ, had that been a lot of
trouble. She'd sworn off using her party trick after that, and had taken comfort in control -- of her finances, of her nutritional intake, of the direction the toilet paper hung down from its roll. She'd built her life on this control, developed it into independence, and found a man who considered it lovable, thought it was cool that his woman had this latent power all bottled up. But boy oh boy, the release on those pallets felt good! She pushed more zap at the fire, which made it burn harder, faster, until the smoldering wood inside began to weaken and crumble.

Her focus was broken when Clyde moved up to sit on the bundled Manny and slapped her arm.

"Let's go, girlie!" he said urgently. She started the Frito's engine, stretched to reach the clutch, and cranked it into first gear.

She would later learn that good old Clyde had been camped out in the back of the Frito for quite some time. "I sneaked out through the shop, after all my askin', askin', askin'," he recounted. "They were all in a tizzle over Dale and Sheila. Once that Tino was out of the picture, I climbed in the old truck and hid under a tarp. I heard the ruckus when Josip got caught, and shee! That boy's got a mouth if he wants to! But I had to think while I was in there. I didn't really know what I should do, you know, so I just hid, 'till Manny almost gotcha, and then, well, I nearly shit my pants!"

Lucy gave the Frito a pedal-ful of gas, and crashed the big van through the fire. Clyde busted out with a resounding, "yee-haw!" The Frito emerged from the pallet fortress before a mystified crowd standing a safe distance off: Tino staring in a sort of dumb terror, Marlys fretting, Bunky stomping his feet, and Don grinning cautiously to himself. Sinful and Funnybone cowered behind their doghouse at the sight of the fire,
while Letty bounced up and down like a cheering fan. When she pulled the Frito toward the front gate, the gate swung open *on its own*, she thought for a second, until she realized that it was Big George, pulling it open from the outside. Without a word, George stepped up through the passenger door and pulled the tarp-bound Manny out from under Clyde. George gave Lucy a subdued, jubilant fist in the air as she pulled away, then put his arm around the dazed Manny. Lucy watched George and Manny in the Frito’s side view mirror as they walked back into Back-2-Life, George with a fire extinguisher strapped around his back to clean up after the operation.

If someone had told Lucy a month before that she’d be taking a victory drive through the scrap metal and light industrial district in an ancient, slightly scorched snack food delivery truck with Clyde of all people, cheering, laughing, congratulating each other and high-fiving like charismatic protagonists in a buddy film, she’d have said something about flying pigs and an ice age in Hell. But here she was, making extremely localized history. To make the morning even more extraordinary, when she turned on the Frito’s AM-only radio, it was a particularly *apropos* song by Pat Benetar that sang dully from the Frito’s one working speaker:

```
We can’t afford to be innocent
Stand up and face the enemy
It’s a do or die situation
We will be invincible.
```
CHAPTER 7

PORTRAIT OF THE DELIVERY VAN

When she finally finds out how it all ends, Frito wishes she could have told Roadman about some of the things she has seen. He would have enjoyed her stories. She’s felt so many different hands and polish rags, tasted so many grades of fuel, antifreeze, and engine oil. But in the end, she belongs to Roadman. It’s in the way he speaks to her, the stories he tells her about hatchbacks, forklifts, and flatbeds he’s known.

It’s strange, really, how old age has become a time of glory for her. She’s never heard of this happening; usually, an older vehicle is a burden for drivers, an investment drying up. She’s certainly an older model, lacks the more recent innovations in hydraulic ramps and product racking and stacking, not to mention having old-fashioned looking gauges: her speedometer, gas, and engine dials read with thin-numbers and needles that wobbled and shook to the rumbling of her oft achy engine. She’d always thought she’d be scrapped long before now, but here she is, a relic, and a trophy among many men.

She does miss the days of purpose, though. Those were the days she wishes she could share with Roadman: the days in which she knew duty. She didn’t always have a name. Names came in the more recent years. In the beginning, she was happy just to have a number: good old Truck Forty Three. She had a bunch of drivers back then, an ever changing crew of clean shaven, white-uniformed men whose names Frito could never keep straight. There was one name she always did know -- Pedro. This was her
kindly little mechanic, who always kept her fluids healthy, her connections secure, and
her filters replaced on a strict schedule.

In those days, Frito relished work. She started promptly every morning, no matter
the hour or temperature, took corners carefully despite a heavy load or lack thereof, and
never gagged on bad gas. She was forgiving to the new drivers when they were getting
accustomed to her sensitive clutch. She knew her routes well, and her parking spaces,
knew where to avoid curbs and pot holes, and she even kept track of each of her vending
machines, which snacks sold well in each, in which the candy bars got stuck. Oh, and her
fleet. How she loved her fleet. All scrapped now, as far as she knew, except for Truck
Twenty. Some family was living out of Twenty somewhere off in the desert. That’s what
the UPS truck told her not long ago. UPS said just last week that Twenty sent his love.
Frito shudders when she thinks of it.

So Frito learned about duty early on in her days in the snack food industry. She’d
known this would be the way in her incarnation as a delivery vehicle. This form was very
much a late stage in any auto’s progression. Every auto she knew looked forward to
living the life of a sports car, or a swanky import of some sort, but not Frito. Frito knew
this was a life of certain heartbreak and full of problems -- theft, obsessive compulsion,
idolatry even. The drivers of those cars embodied the worst kinds of vanity, always
fixing their make-up in the rearview mirrors and yapping on their cell phones. Frito can
tell you, after careful observation, that the more a person talks in their car, the less they
actually have to say. You wreck quick as a sports car, and often have to manage the most
quick, unpleasant and violent of deaths, deaths that seat belts could so easily prevent.
Frito wrecked just a month off the assembly line when she was a Camaro. No, a delivery
van was a fulfilled life, a life of learning and betterment. She had no idea, though, that her real education would begin after she became obsolete, was replaced in the fleet, and was sold into the private sector.

She was bought, and sold, and bought again, and spent several years parked by a fence, with little to see but the quail that pattered through with their coveys, and the occasional coyote. Eventually, she was bought by a teenage boy named Jack, who always wore a white t-shirt speckled with tiny holes she could see had been burned in by an explosion of battery acid, and who knew how to tinker her ailing transmission back into health. Frito insists that Jack was good, even when he and his friends hid inside her to drink whiskey out of the bottle. She harbored him more than once, when he needed a place to grope a girl under a blanket, or when he huddled on the floor of her cab, between the two seats, shivering and shaking out tears for an entire night while she watched bruises emerge from the red swells about his face. And Jack took care of her. Of course, he let the bug splats pile up on her windshield, and the gritty mud built up on her undersides, but her fluids were always at their levels, that was for sure. He would even sometimes remove and disassemble her transmission and parts of her engine to wash them carefully in a bucket of sudsy water. Yes, Jack was good.

Then one winter morning, she cringed inwardly as all four of her tires got kicked. The boy moved his tools out of her cargo area within an hour and everything changed.

* 

In retrospect, Frito cannot fathom how she rationalized the tirekicker's behavior to herself over the next few months. She's deeply ashamed, even now, years later, to think of the malicious mischief in which she conspired. But in fact, she supported him in all of
She was as good a vehicle as she had ever been. Better, even: as his escapades grew more and more nefarious, she could only overcompensate with more devotion. But now she’s gotten ahead of herself. Minutes after Jack left her, the tirekicker hefted his large behind into her driver’s seat, turned her key, shifted, and laid into her clutch. She lurched and shook. He drove her clumsily to a crowded, gritty neighborhood, where gutted couches sat on shoulders of the road and naked children stood in the doorways of tin-roofed shanties. Frito had only passed through this area a time or two on her vending route years before. Snack machines never lasted long around this part of town. When they were stationed here, they usually had to be rescued, covered in cryptic graffiti with foreign objects all jammed up in their coin slots. The tirekicker steered her through the gate of a ragged wooden fence and up to a cockeyed, two-story stucco house with a slouching porch. He left her, went inside, and she sat for two days, empty.

Cars and trucks came and went from this house at all hours. Clean, shiny vehicles with tinted windows and dirty, dinged and scraped wrecks alike. None of them had much to say. Then one evening, the tirekicker opened her back doors and began to load her cargo area. A TV, a bicycle, a boxful of a disassembled computer. Frito thought, at that moment, that she’d be helping the tirekicker move his belongings, maybe to another house. But then there was another TV, and another. And a bike tire, and some more bike tires, and a stack of brand new car tires, a stack of hubcaps, a motor scooter, and another! Frito began to feel the wrong of it. The items huddled, dejected, inside of her. One of the motor scooters asked Frito frantic questions she couldn’t answer, lots of wheres and whys. She could see that these things had been yanked from their spaces, jarred out of
their necessities. Little streams of chaos followed each one of them, small travesties in which Frito was helplessly complicit.

The tirekicker drove the load to a strip of storefronts, all dark, barred, and shuttered but for a store lit inside and out by relentless, clinical florescent tubes. A sullen man as greasy as the tirekicker appeared in the doorway to wave them around back, where all Frito's cargo was unloaded, roughly and rapidly with a crotchety dolly. The new tires extended a desperate plea to her with their incongruously fresh and rugged scent in this gritty back alley. But she could only watch and wait until she was empty once more, and the tirekicker hefted himself back into her driver's seat to start her engine.

This loading and unloading became a semi-regular routine for Frito. Eventually, she learned to shut her soul away from all the things, automotive, electronic, and even more personal things -- sporting goods, artwork, antique hutches, dinner tables. Once he rolled an entire rack stuffed with fancy hanging garments up her loading ramp as though it made perfect sense. Frito reassured herself, when her self worth was at its lowest, that the work with the tirekicker was not unlike what she did in the snack food industry, though it lacked the uniformity and consistency, the standard operating procedure she held so dear. Some nights, she and the tirekicker worked alone, driving slowly, pausing behind shrubbery and in dark patches. Other nights the tirekicker sped timidly with his dark-clad posse of young toughs, his eyes flitting down every side street. They could load and unload for hours and hours, three days in a row, then Frito would sit alone for a week in front of the cockeyed house, whose dark, slouching windows shared nothing with her. Frito felt all of this upheaval and denial weighing heavier and heavier on her own

195

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
personal load bearing. She always drove tired in these times. Her doors creaked, and her tires sagged.

The chaos of all the displaced things would first spill over into the tirekicker’s, and thus Frito’s lives in the form of a massive truck hauling tons upon tons of gravel along the freeway. They were cruising at forty-five down the freeway at seven on a hot morning, hauling a load of antique furniture they’d picked up at someone’s storage locker. Frito would have preferred taking the surface streets -- even when her cargo area was completely bare, she had to strain to accelerate over sixty -- but the storage locker was just beyond the outskirts of Cross Road City, on a road so old that its asphalt was bleached to a light gray. Frito didn’t even know if this road linked up with the city any other way than the freeway -- it appeared, from her vantage, to branch off into only unmaintained private dirt roads and cow paths. So Frito and the tirekicker were returning from their pickup with a full, fragile, precarious load at fifty in the center lane of the freeway, as the enormous eighteen-wheeled trucks and fiery-engined sports cars blew impatiently past them on both sides. Frito didn’t belong among these vehicles at her age. She shuddered at every overtaking -- the immense weight and speed of freeway traffic struck horror in her very frame. The tirekicker drove nervously, too, his grip tight and constricting on her steering wheel. She knew he was less concerned about the traffic than he was about the safety of his precious cargo. She could feel his nerves at every contact point she made with him: his sweaty palms on the wheel and stick, his feet on the pedals, his slump in her driver’s seat. It made her handle skittishly, irresponsibly. She hit every pothole and veered more than once into the rumble strips.

Then, suddenly, they were caught in a maelstrom.
It took Frito a moment to understand what was happening. What kind of weather was this? Her hood, her grille, and her windshield were being pelted in a stinging shower that pinged and dinged and cracked until the tirekicker finally changed lanes and slowed even further, which drove the storm down to a lull, then a standstill. *Holy Be-jesus*, gasped the tirekicker, and sped up again until they reached their exit. By the time they pulled up to the old, slouching house, Frito had several deep, raw nicks in the glass of her windshield, two of which were already beginning to radiate profound cracks.

Frito had dealt with windshield injuries twice before, in her snack delivery career: once, during a hailstorm, when she was taken to a friendly glass shop where a kindly glass guy patched the crack with some soothing plastic gel, and another time, when a golf ball fell from the sky and bonked her glass, at which time the guys in the Frito Lay garage replaced the whole thing. The tirekicker didn’t share such a concern for her comfort, though. Over the next several weeks, he let the nicks go until they spider-webbed fully across her sore windshield. Frito knew quite well that compromised visibility was a most unsafe way to drive. Indeed: the tirekicker’s reactions in traffic became erratic, confused. He hit her brakes abruptly, for no reason sometimes, and other times barely soon enough. He veered her way too close to other cars, onto the shoulders of the road, up and over curbs, through canopies of trees that scratched the heck out of her sides. Her Frito Lay logo was faded by now, but began to peel and scrape with this kind of driving. This could have been the most tragic element of her time spent in the realm of dispossession. She could withstand the pain and embarrassment of dinged paint and a dented body, of driving that ruined her alignment, but being robbed of her logo, of her very history, was a thought that made her jerk and stall.
Just shy of a month after the gravel storm, the tirekicker attempted to take some things from the Cross Road City Convention Center. *They've got all sorts of audiovisual crap laying around in a place like that, so grab what you can,* Frito overheard him telling his thugs. He drove around to the back parking lot of the main amphitheater and backed up to a huge shutter door, the kind that opens up onto a dock for shipping and receiving, the unloading of lights and stages for grandiose rock and roll bands and the like. Frito felt so obvious. This seemed like an all around bad idea.

The tirekicker and his thugs disappeared into the building as Frito waited by the loading dock. She felt silly, small. She noticed her gas tank was quite low. The sunset blazed pinks and oranges through the clouds as it sunk rapidly behind the horizon. Frito still waited and worried. Did the tirekicker really plan to make a getaway on this little gas? Frito had run out of gas once on a delivery. It had been a sudden stall, like a temporary death, in which a drought ran through her fuel lines and her pistons were paralyzed. It was a feeling she never wanted to have again.

Moments after the sun’s fire dipped completely out of sight, the tirekicker punched out of the emergency exit next to the oversized shutter door and flew at Frito like a big, angry poodle had once done: scrambly, goggle-eyed, as though he was going to bite her headlights. He flew into her driver’s seat, slammed her clutch, and ground her into second gear. With a series of awkward jerks, Frito flew into motion. The tirekicker was sweating, his eyes frantic and dashing about. Frito noticed the thugs fly out of the emergency exit and scatter across the parking lot, but the tirekicker didn’t slow down for them. He did slow against his will, though, when he drove out the 'Entrance Only' gate.
instead of the ‘Exit Only’ gate, because that’s when Frito’s tires popped loudly as they were punctured on the ‘Extreme Tire Damage’ spikes.

The tirekicker didn’t stop, as a sensible driver would have, but instead laid his boot into her accelerator. She careened, wobbled down the road far slower than her engine willed, her blown tires thumping and grinding along the asphalt. The searing from her injured tires shot through her rims and axle into her very frame. Her rearview was blurry from the pain and rattling, but Frito could make out the reflection of the thugs in a scuffle with some uniformed men. She fought against herself: her engine roared while her wheels did everything they could to stop. The tirekicker steered her through a maze of old town side streets, past tortilla factories, weathered stucco facades and catholic shrines. It seemed that nobody was aware of them -- only the odd faces peeking from windows at her noisy passing.

They turned under the freeway, over the river bed, and down a long dirt road lined with aged, billowy eucalyptus trees. She handled even more bumpy on her now shredded tires, but the pain of driving on dirt was much more dull. She could see little homesteads along this route, set back from the road and hidden in large part by strategic shrubbery. And then, when a prominent ‘DEAD END’ sign in bold, block letters stood in her headlights against a wall of brush, the tirekicker hung a right down the final drive, toward a hodgepodge of a building, a trailer, it seemed, which had sprouted an adjoining cluster of shacks, an awning, and a makeshift front yard where several sad cars sat debilitated, their hoods open, weeds growing around their tires. He pulled Frito around behind it and parked her next to a chicken coop and a dead tree around which a grim-faced pit bull wrapped and unwrapped his chain in the dark. The tirekicker went inside the trailer,
where there was a rasping woman's voice, some laughing and some crying, some sounds of anger, and then, after some time, the clinking noises of dinner. The needle on Frito's gas gauge was well lodged in the orange 'E' sector. She could feel, in her tank, less gas than a man could hold in the palm of his hand. The pit bull lengthened his chain far enough to come within reach of her destroyed front tires; he sniffed them sympathetically and laid down, leaning against one of her exposed, aching rims. The chickens babbled softly.

Frito stayed put for several days. She rested in the company of the pit bull, whose depression raged into the night, but subsided somewhat every morning. It was during this time that she realized something small but horrible had happened to her alternator during the trauma, something that would plague her for the rest of her days. The tirekicker scrounged up a crummy set of old, bald tires for her, which he changed himself. He stuck a hose in her radiator, but didn't bring any of the coolant she so craved. Frito was completely unbalanced in these bad tires on her scraped rims as he filled her gas tank with a jerry can of very low octane and pulled her out of this hazy little world and back onto the road.

The tirekicker seemed to forget about the entire incident. But a few days later, when Frito thought they were just picking up a new load of goods, some of their cargo was suddenly human. Three youngish girls, to be exact. Frito couldn't say quite how old they were; they certainly weren't children, but they were far from adults. All three wore the same garish blue eye shadow, and lipstick the bright pink of a cheap lollipop. Hair frozen in carefully built snarls, pants and tank tops both cut to expose several inches of belly. They lingered in that blurry state of trying so hard to look older that they looked

200
much younger. People can be so convoluted, Frito realized. The tirekicker picked these girls up hitchhiking on their way through Cross Road City. The tallest one sat in Frito’s passenger seat and talked politely to the tirekicker, while the other two huddled in the back atop a large pile of thick fabric, which was actually the body of a hot air balloon, the strangest heist Frito had seen the tirekicker try to pull off yet.

Frito hadn’t seen the tirekicker steal anything so esoteric before. She’d also never seen him pick up hitchhikers before. The events of that day remain crisp in Frito’s memory, but fragmented: a short series of tableaux, lit in a chiaroscuro of black and white. Frame number one captures the front seat area: the tirekicker, a perverse grin revealing his snaggled teeth, with one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the girl’s knee as she leans expressively away from him. In frame number two, a dog is in the road and Frito is barely up on two wheels in a sudden swerve. Frame three is a close up of the tirekicker in fleeing from Frito's open door, which is propped obtusely in her upended position. His arms are aflail, his mouth goggles in panic. Finally, frame four is later, time lapsed -- a noble-eyed paramedic strapping one of the young ladies to a backboard while two policemen take notes from the other two, their make-up smeared with tears. One wears her arm in a sling, the other holds an ice-pack to her bandaged head.

Frito never saw the tirekicker again. She was a hopeless wreck now, and slowly dying. She could see the hash marks on the line of time, and that hers was coming, the time for her body to be scrapped and stripped, salvaged and recycled, time for her to abandon her metal for a better life. She laid tipped, her windshield shattered, on the side of the road for days. Eventually, a police car came by to wish her luck. The police men righted her, put an orange sticker on her window, and drove away. Someone else came
by in a fun-colored off road vehicle to take the hot air balloon away. Her reluctant passenger departed her gladly, pleased to be loaded back inside the vehicle it knew well and with whom it worked on tours, apparently. Finally, she was towed, a slow, sad funereal procession down the highway to the light industrial neighborhood with all the junk yards. She even passed right by Beep! Beep! and Martyred Cars. But something changed her path. For a flashing moment, time aligned, and she saw the entirety of her past, present, and future with an intense wash of emotion. It was at this point that her path changed. She was not yet dead, she still had more to learn. She was pulled quickly back to her present and passed the two yards with only a twinkle of unheimlich.

She sat at the impound yard for only a day, because somehow, somebody who knew somebody knew somebody else who really wanted to aggravate his homeowner’s association. And thus, she was towed, in her bashed state, to an immaculate gated neighborhood, where, for two weeks, a community raged in conflict over her ramshackle presence in this guy’s driveway next to a particularly humorless Lincoln Town Car. There were shouting matches in the street between this guy and overly made-up, puffy faced women in their bathrobes, and angry notes pinned every morning to her window. She didn’t really understand much of this. Soon, a couple of scruffy, automotively savvy boys offered to buy her for fifty dollars. They moved into her, popped for new tires and windshield glass, straightened out her alignment and balance, banged out her dents, and suddenly she was alive again, more than a vehicle, a cargo area, a temporary haven — she was a home.

*
And so she entered a period of her life in which she became thoroughly flecked with hair, dust, crumbs, gravel, bits of plastic, and little rolled up balls of silver gum paper, and underneath it all was the dull black sheen of gummy soot that had been building on her steering wheel, dashboard, vinyl seats, the runneled floor of her cargo area ever since she entered the private sector. That was the period where she had many mattresses and sleeping bags on her floor, and boxes full of books, 8-tracks, and LP’s that were in the constant cycle of buy-sell-trade at the swap meet. The period when there was always a patchwork dog to sit in her driver’s seat and bare his teeth at passersby.

Frito must admit, she loved the hippies. Among all the people she drove with through the years, these taught her the most about vitality. They carried essence with gusto, which delivery drivers did not: the essence of grit, of incense smoke, of candle wax, of enchiladas. There were so many drivers now, so many coming and going that Frito lost track of who owned her during that stage of her life. She learned from them what it was to relax policies, to ignore health codes, to park crooked in a parking space. This was as close as Frito came, as a motor vehicle, to knowing what she knew now as the happy cacophony of chaos, of a million things converging. She had many names with the hippies -- Scout, Janis, Kerouac, to name just three -- and felt much love, dumb, idealistic love, inside her, around her, for her.

It wasn’t about what happened with the hippies, or what got done. Instead, it was about what was. Frito never knew where they were going, or what they were doing. In that sense, she lost track of her purpose with them, at least in the sense that she’d formerly known purpose; it really didn’t seem that they were doing much of anything. But that was what was so beautiful about these people. They talked to her, worried about
her feelings, asked her input on their travels, even though it didn’t much matter where they went. They checked her oil and water at every gas stop, and if she needed some coolant or 10W30, they all emptied the loose change from their pockets to pay for her necessities. She was more than just a vehicle for them, and more, even than a home: she was a valued companion.

Months turned into years with the hippies. Different members of the clan came and went, and came again. She belonged to everyone and to no one for most of this period, until finally she realized she had come to belong to just one of them, a strong, skinny girl named Star. She had been riding alone with Star for weeks (not counting the occasional hitchhiker) before she realized the community had dissipated. Star was an optimist, and a smiler, but she rode for herself.

One morning early, soon after Frito realized she had an owner again, Star took her on the road. That’s what Star told Frito – *we’re on the road, girl!* It took Frito a few hours to understand that this meant something different than she thought it did. Star meant that they’d said good bye to Cross Road City (the only locality Frito had ever known, ever considered, even) and relocated to the road itself for a while. The road became more than a route between places: for Star and Frito, it *was* the place. As much as Frito didn’t care for driving on the freeway with the tirekicker, it was different with Star, who was quite cautious and courteous. Frito felt balanced and secure in the right lane, even when monstrous eighteen-wheelers and reckless sports cars blew past her on the left. Star and Frito drove all day, out of the dusty desert, into vistas filled with washed out yellow meadows, surrounded by dark blue, lush mountains, and back into desert again.
And then they were suddenly in and out of dense blocks of forest for a day. When night came, they pulled off the road into the closest parking lot, and Star curled up on an old mattress in Frito’s cargo area. In the morning, when the sun rose over the parking lot, Frito realized she was parked on a small economic island, a grouping of industry that sat so near the road that it wasn't much more than an extension of it, not attached to any city, but alive with glossy plastic hospitality that greeted and guided its customers. Star ate a breakfast burrito from a drive thru, gassed up Frito, squeegeed the dead bugs from her windshield, and spoke on a pay phone before they set off again for another day of road.

Over the next few days, Frito realized that every economic island they passed through was a variation on a very traditional theme: gas, food, lodging. Every stop boasting its efficiency, its affordability, its key relevance to the lives of the people on the road. Frito sat with bug splattered mini-vans and jolly RV's outside gas stations, truckstops, McDonald’s, Arby’s, and Wendy’s restaurants, as well as numerous 'Country Kitchen' themed diners, 'to go' coffee stands, and gift shops, and watched the people of the road and their purchases. Star brought out mostly sandwiches and sodas in big paper cups. Frito saw many an old lady carrying newly purchased baseball caps, and scores of teenage boys with their arms around twelve-packs of lite beer. One middle-aged couple bought crullers and wiper fluid, another bought bags of candy with 10W30. She counted several books on tape in the hands of wizened, salt-and-peppered truck drivers. Cups of coffee left the buildings in droves. Products were shipped in by both gargantuan eighteen-wheelers and more smallish vans like Frito, rolled in on dollies and assorted other cooperative pushcarts, packed neatly in well-labeled boxes and crates, containers that Frito found to be strangely giggly and carefree.
The road people came, and went, and rode along beside her, and mostly looked
the same. Men and women, young and old, were all clad in jeans and t-shirts, sweats and
tennies, flip-flops and baseball caps. They all wore their bodies stiffly, with fatigue and
often chiropractic misalignment, and always with an essence of dishevelment and gritty
glaze about their hair and skin. It was an essence Frito usually saw coming off of
vehicles that needed a good hose-down. It didn’t suit the human body, the drying,
greasing, bleaching effect of exhaust fumes and asphalt vapor, the poorly circulated air of
enclosed vehicles, and excessive exposure to sun and wind. Frito was impressed that Star
managed to avoid this road fatigue with bright eyes and skin, despite the dirt that built up
under her nails and in the snarls of her dreadlocks.

One day, as Frito noticed her gas tank nearing its reserves, Star pulled her off the
freeway, past a road island and down a dusty country road to a destination the signs
called “Road Forks,” though it was unclear if this was a place name or a description of
what happened somewhere in town. Star drove past a liquor store and a video store, past
a feed store and a post office in a trailer, past a row of small square houses, which seemed
built of material not much stronger than the cardboard cases her snacks always used to be
packed in, and finally, with a bump-bump, and another bump-bump, over a railroad track,
and down yet another dusty country road. The road wound its way down a colonnade
lined with overgrown, unruly shrubs, which led to a farm house where Star parked Frito
among a number of pickup trucks and rusty hatchbacks for a spell of semi-permanence.

For the next few weeks, Frito couldn’t see much of what went on at this farm
house, but Star still slept on the mattress in her cargo area. Star left Frito early, just as
light was lingering below the horizon, then returned to her far past the deep darkening of the sky. When Star returned, her limbs creaked with wear, her eyelids hung low, and her skin was coated in a thin layer of rich, brown earth. But when Star crawled onto the mattress this way, Frito noticed something about her driver that had been missing before.

At the end of a work day, Star glowed with the contentedness of purpose, a kind of purpose Frito hadn’t felt fully since her days in delivery. Frito wasn’t sure of Star’s role at this place -- occasionally, she’d spy Star from an obtuse angle somewhere on the property, carrying a bucket, or a shovel, or pushing a cartful of something from one place to another -- but it seemed that Star had found some sort of duty. Something Frito rarely saw in these post-delivery drivers.

One evening, Star brought a boy back to the mattress inside Frito.

She thinks it would be indiscreet if she told you what they did there.

She will tell you that this boy’s greasy blond locks did not quite approach the disarray of the hippies’ hair. This boy latched on to Star and came back every night for exactly one week. After exactly one week of sleeping with Star in Frito, the boy loaded his duffel bag into Frito’s cargo area early one morning, just before the sun. That morning, Star started Frito’s ignition for the first time since she’d parked on this property. Frito coughed and groaned as her starter awoke for the first time in weeks. She was surprised her alternator was functioning at all. The boy sat in Frito’s driver’s seat while Star steered them out of Road Forks, back onto the freeway and north, sharply north, a direction in which they would aim for the next week.

Now, Frito’s understanding of the logic of roads, gas mileage, and expediency in general, she’ll admit, was always limited, local, focalized from the perspective of inside
the maze, feeling her way around. She was built in Detroit in the late seventies, shipped via rail to Cross Road City metropolitan area, and there she lived for, lo, two plus decades until Star took her on the road. So at the time, she wasn’t in any position to question the cross-country route that Star and the boy chose, though she’ll tell you now, from her current vantage point, it didn’t make much sense. Star and the boy talked on and on about it: heading north, the wonder and mystery of the north, the poetry and freedom and spiritual renewal of ‘north,’ as a concept, in general. But instead of linking up with the nearest interstate, which happened to be I-90, and driving fast and free of stoplights, intersections and road conditions, they stuck strictly to the roads that plotted the most severely upward, be they state highways, country lanes, or unmaintained back roads of dirt, with deep ruts of pot holes and fallen tree branches. Frito didn’t want to complain, but she didn’t care for this kind of travel at all. Her shocks weren’t what they used to be, and she really wasn’t designed for much more than a gradual incline on a smoothly paved asphalt route. But she persevered for Star and the boy, prayed for her alternator, and tried to get on board with their enthusiasm. She rumbled along through the mud puddles, past the horses in their pastures, and alongside rural distribution centers, pulp mills, and tractor factories that stunk up the air with their emissions. They passed through towns that seemed to have missed months, years, and perhaps decades that had passed in the towns she’d seen along the interstates. Towns where old men sat on old chairs outside their wizened houses and followed her with their eyes as she passed in and out of their periphery. Towns without much in the way of traffic control or road intersection. When there was a stoplight in one of these towns, the cars around Frito slowed down for the
yellow, and paused for a beat before they accelerated sedately down the road, as though
their drivers needed to inhale, then exhale prior to resuming their short, simple journeys.

Finally, the landscape progressed from mostly flat and grassy to an amalgam of
rolling meadow and patches of dark, dark treescape, where trees blended into their own
carpet of ground cover. The single trees blended into vast oneness, Frito mused once,
along a quiet stretch while Star slept on the mattress and the boy drove with a cigarette in
his mouth, listening to a late afternoon talk radio about dietary supplements. It was soon
after the forest encroached upon everything that, apparently, they pulled toward a city that
signified their arrival at the north, or more specifically, Northgate, North Dakota, as noted
on sign after proud sign upon entering the city (WELCOME TO NORTHGATE! YOUR
GATE TO THE NORTH!), on liquor store marquis (CONGRATS N-GATE HIGH ON
YOUR WIN OVER N-RIVER), and grain elevators (HOMETOWN PROUD,
NORTHGATE). The boy was exuberant, ready to celebrate. He poked Star from a deep,
tingly sleep to show her the north. She snarled at him, something groggy and poorly
worded -- goddamn think about what I want, why don'tcha sometimes -- then burrowed
back inside her sleeping bag.

This was the first outburst in a rift between Star and the boy that Frito had noticed
developing for days now. The boy, Frito thought, was a problem person. He reminded
Frito of a big, awkward retriever puppy named Jerry who had lived in her for a while
during her time with the hippies. Jerry was always getting too excited and jumping on the
driver, or knocking over people’s fast food dinners with his tail. Star laughed at the boy’s
slobbery kisses at first, but soon began to brush him away in disgust. One day, in his zeal
for her, he flew at her as she drove and chipped a small corner off one of her teeth, a mistake for which she punished him with cold silence for miles and miles.

North was marked officially by a small, serious building and three friendly-looking uniformed men, then another small, serious building with an equally uniformed set of stern, exacting men, who rifled through Frito's cargo bay, turned over Star's mattress, and asked the boy a bunch of questions about his identification and recent whereabouts. After Star, the boy, and Frito herself stopped shaking from the strange humiliation of this experience, they took a sharp turn from north to west, which only seemed to amplify the distance between Star and the boy. They drove for hours in silence, Star in a scowl, the boy in a sad, anxious knot. Finally, in the dark hours of a breezy morning, they emerged out of a pastiche of cities with smokestacks into a green and rocky wonderland, where the rough blue of the sea crept in at the road from behind the trees, then backed away again at sharp, retreating angles. Frito had never seen this much water at once, water that didn't end. The boy was excited, too, but Star was in a funk again, and pretended to sleep. The sun rose after several hours of these winding, dark roads, and the boy pulled Frito down a rattling dirt road, which ended in a large, warm building made of logs. Star and the boy called it a lodge. There she was parked, in a dirty lot a stretch away from the lodge, among several pickups, a tired old Beetle, and three friendly Winnebagos.

The boy and Star left Frito and headed inside. Frito wouldn't see them again until evening, when they returned to sleep, their eyes and limbs half asleep already, reeking and coated with salt, fish, and oil. This would be their routine for a month. Frito never got to know what went on in the lodge, but she noticed things becoming quite clear between
Star and the boy. They began to come back to Frito separately, usually Star first, then the boy, much later, who would stumble around and laugh too loud for the hour, sometimes peeing on a nearby tree. They stopped sleeping in each other’s arms, and instead every night moved further and further apart on the mattress, until the boy got sad and moved to the passenger seat, his feet resting on the dashboard and head on his balled up jacket propped against Frito’s window. Finally, one afternoon, Star stormed back to Frito and dumped the boy’s things abruptly into the parking lot. She started the engine as the boy ran after her, waving his arms, wait, wait! Star said, it’s too late for that, and threw Frito into gear so hard that Frito jolted and kicked up rocks. From now on, girl, said Star, we ride alone. She stroked Frito’s dashboard as they pulled out of the bumpy dirt and onto the main road. Star breathed deeply, tempering her shaking anger.

Star dabbled in other jobs once she split from the boy: diner waitress in Whitehorse, drive-thru girl at McDonalds in Thunder Bay, day laborer on a construction site in Truth or Consequences, dishwasher in three different towns called Sunnyside. Frito began to understand that Star was as dutiful as any of the delivery drivers she’d worked with in the past. Instead of devotion to an industry, though, Star was devoted to herself, to her life, to making herself useful as she unearthed fascinating place names and the potentials within them. She kept her word to Frito and drove alone, despite the friends she made and the hitchhikers she looked at with sympathy. Star was determined to maintain herself, to keep herself pure of overwhelming influences like the boy.

After something like a year of circling the quiet roads, occasional snow patches began to line the sides of the road, and the night came more and more quickly and deeply. Star added some heavy duty antifreeze to Frito’s radiator, and took her back on the
interstate, on a direct, deliberate route, which Frito soon realized was a line leading back to Cross Road City. The land lost its trees and grass, and filled again with expanses of soft-colored earth, dotted with the scattered, scruffy plant life Frito had forgotten she loved. They rolled into their hometown, past several freeway exits that Frito had forgotten -- the tirekicker’s Oracle Road, the old Frito Lay distribution center on Industrial Drive, and Polaris Street, where she’d lived with Jack so long ago. Oh, how she hoped he was safe and well. Finally, Star turned off the freeway at the Tangerine Road exit, one that Frito didn’t remember ever taking. They drove through a rather upscale housing development, one of regulation pastel stucco, and pulled into a driveway where a clean woman with neatly brushed hair came out of the front door to meet them. The woman, Star much older, came to Frito’s door and put her arms around Star. Apparently, they were home.

Frito sat parked in this driveway for several weeks, with the occasional trip for groceries. They were home, and they stayed at home. Now, Frito really thought that with Star, she had found the driver she’d grow old with. She never anticipated the day, a couple of months after they arrived home, when Star packed up her things in two garbage bags and parked Frito on the side of the road with the fateful ‘FOR SALE’ sign propped on her dashboard. That’s when she met Roadman, who fell for her, cleaned her out, fixed her up, got her status officially changed from ‘salvage’ to ‘restored salvage’ at the DMV, and figuratively speaking. In Roadman’s hands, and when she was snatched from them, she became the centerpiece of a celebrated ritual, the guest of honor in a local mythology. She was a prized pawn, an honored trophy, a role she never thought she’d play in her vending incarnation.
She understood that she belonged with Roadman, at Beep! Beep!, but that she lived at many yards, changing caretakers with the game. She lived at Martyred Cars for some time, though, and almost wondered if the game was over. If, perhaps, somehow, Brody owned her now, even though she still belonged to Roadman. She was parked in the center of the sweet, smashed cars, which she watched slowly lose their hoods and fenders, their ornaments and grilles, their bucket seats and steering columns, part by part, week by week, transmuting their ranks from parked cars to emptier and emptier shells of former careers in transportation, their faces sporting busted eyes and missing teeth. She, among them, stood clean, whole, more or less intact.

Then, early, early one morning, while it was still very dark, the aperture of time constricted from its extreme, lapsed speed to a crawl: the moments ticked by at the pace of the drip dripping from a nearby leaky wiper fluid bottle on a newly arrived Geo Metro, which George forgot to drain. The drip plopped like a metronome in the dirt, as a nearby lizard, waking up, rustled a counterpoint. The dog, who had taken to sitting in Frito’s driver’s seat, sighed deeply. An airliner flew over on the base leg of its traffic pattern at the local airport and saluted all the salvage vehicles. Frito wondered why everything was suddenly so microscopic.

At the next yard, Frito was aware that Clyde was awake, burning his garbage. Heaps upon heaps of plastic wrappers, tumbling stacks of cardboard boxes, oily rags, and an old Mustang bucket seat all smoldered, sizzled, released their toxins and fumes. The slight rumble and crackle of the fire kept Frito’s alerts up. She felt like warning someone, lighting up a dashboard sensor of some sort. Then Clyde dragged a weighty wooden crate, as tall as he was, to the edge of the fire, and pushed it up on one corner, then over,
so it would tip into the flames. The fire splashed, burst with tiny airborne embers. All the cars at Martyred Cars flinched at this fire, then resettled into their resting. But Frito watched the embers fly out into the sky, twinkling their tiny specks of fire. As the wiper fluid dripped, the embers danced, one by one, about the air, explored their trajectories, several wandering dangerously close to the Martyred Cars yard, others strayed down the road and out toward a nearby vacant lot. They burnt away to dusty bits of ash, one by one.

Except for one.

Frito watched the lone surviving ember spiral in the sky over the far territory of the Martyred Cars lot. It seemed to see no urgency in finding a place to land, surfing one gust of breeze until it died, then finding new air just in time to cruise on a new course. This glowing speck seemed to grow. Its animated flight grabbed the attention of the dog, who perked her head and jumped out of Frito to chase it and bark. Frito watched, the wiper fluid dripped. The dog ran below the ember, following its flight. Or, Frito wondered, could the ember have been following the dog? Frito watched the ember teeter on the brink between object and subject. It seemed, for a moment, to flutter tiny wings.

Then it shot abruptly to the ground. The ember landed smack in a dry, brittle scrub of weeds. The dog raced to it, stuck her nose in the weed patch, then leaped back when the weeds screamed and changed from dry drained life to a small, flickering pyre. The blaze found a wad of garbage ambling nearby. This garbage was soon fiery, and carried the spark to the underbelly of a nearby Honda Civic, where it found its way into the engine.
Time was accelerating again. The open hood of the Civic was soon belching flames. Before Frito knew what happened, three more cars had caught fire, two under their hoods and one in its upholstered interior. The temperature increased steadily in the territory of Martyred Cars. In moments, or minutes, or maybe longer, the fire had swallowed an entire corner of the yard and laughed at Frito from several cars away.

Her little plastic parts began to loosen and melt. Her thin old paint blistered and spit. She watched the fire curl and bite in angry whips out of the mini-van and ignite the driver’s seat of the next car over, a kindly SUV with its windshield missing. Where were the people? Somewhere, the dog was barking, a panicked, urgent, screechy cry of warning to whoever might hear her. A car alarm spoke from one end of the yard, berating the fire with a *whoop-whoop-whoop*, then a *whee-ooh! whee-ooh! whee-ooh!*, then a *whoop-whoop-whoop* again. Then another, then another, the cars fretted, cried, sent out their distress signals. Frito wondered for a second why nobody had ever installed an alarm in her. And still, there were no people.

Frito’s tires were warm, too warm. Her back left tire suddenly popped, and she collapsed in that corner as its air hissed away. Even if someone did come, it was looking bad, she’d really have to limp out of this one.

It’s a funny thing when you catch on fire, Frito mused later. One moment you’re just hot, and then, with a bright puff, you’re suddenly ablaze. The fire kindled on some loose wiring hanging from her underbelly then quickly found her oil pan, where it took root and blossomed, in through the oil pump and filter, then burst out of her engine, licking through her grill and around the cracks of her hood. One headlight exploded, filling the air with tiny glass shards.
It was at that point that Frito left her metal. She climbed up, up, and watched her flaming hulk from an airspace that had always been the domain of the neighborhood’s big night owls. The cars were gathering up there, one by one leaving their metal and fiberglass as it burned. A helicopter swept through her airspace and circled the yard, its oval of spotlight feeling over the fire, the cars, and the building. Daisy made her own frantic passes in and out of the spot as she ran about in her own desperate frenzy to save, to find a savior, or to find a way to reach someone who might be able to do what she couldn’t. Soon came the emergency vehicles, fire and sheriff, the ones that tore around town with red and blue lights, always in a hurry, always sounding their whooping, screaming alarms to make the other cars make way, part like a tide of overpopulated pigeons. The men from these vehicles cut open the front fence with some big tool she didn’t recognize and began passing through the opening like a stream of ants.

An owl flew at Frito with round, frowning eyes. He screeched at the intrusion of all the cars at his altitude. There were other energies crowding up to that stratum, too. Several of the yard’s ghosts had climbed up to watch the fire. A family of pack rats burnt alive in the first aid kit compartment of an Xterra bobbled past Frito. All the weeds that had sizzled where they sprouted -- around the rims that propped up the cars -- floated like wispy clouds around and through the souls of all the vehicles. And then there were the less obvious, the disquieted residues, all the little things caught in the blaze -- snarled balls of lint and hair, discarded snack food wrappers and wayward plastic grocery bags, a floppy teddy bear the dog had played with until it was caked with mud and slobber, the essence of a dirty, baby-sized Sea World t-shirt that had been wedged for years under the passenger seat of a Ford Festiva. Frito took the owl’s hint and ascended out of the
crowded space to a vantage further up, just in time to see Brody’s truck pull into the parking lot. Brody left his truck door open as he rushed with wild hair through the hole in the gate.

Brody was a good man. Frito wanted to tell him. She wanted to tell him that it was okay, it really was. This would hurt the establishment of Martyred Cars, but not Brody, who he was, the space he filled. At her altitude, the yard was but a grid of blips that he had built, multicolored squares, with the grey building sitting like a big brain at the front end of the property. The layout of cars was a code she could read clearly now as it slowly smoldered away in the fire. Frito could also see that the yards fit together in a burgeoning, dynamic patchwork among the other junk yards, the airplane cemeteries, the recycling plants and squatter’s nests. The Martyred Cars acreage held its contents in a strictly regulated grid of right angles, even underneath the fire that ate steadily away at its substance. Down the road at Beep! Beep!, Roadman parked his cars in a mostly dull-colored, angling pattern of noble chevrons, a more slow moving grain than Brody’s smooth texture. Clyde’s yard next door blackened the land with a thickly layered composition of randomness -- Clyde’s cars seemed to enter his property as leaking, panicked disasters that remained in motion until their momentum burned out in natural atrophy. A pallet distribution center to Clyde’s kitty-corner was a tight mosaic of squares, all sharply varying shades of the same kind of wood. A resting place for the hulking shells of old military helicopters beyond the pallets was organized, miraculously, in a single, enormous star burst.

The air was chattering sleepily with early morning cell phone calls, military and aeronautic transmissions, and the opening patter of the local FM stations. “I’ll tell you,
Betsy, the weather is only getting hotter! There’s no relief in sight!” squawked one deeply practiced voice that Frito didn’t recognize. “That’s right Billy, hot hot hot!” chirped back another. The voices drew lines in random patterns above a gridwork of grids: neighborhoods, parking lots, strip malls, all laid over by a more majestic trellis of roads, streets, avenues, lanes, boulevards, highways, cul-du-sacs. A network in infinite shades of black and gray, each veined with its own code of white and yellow lines and dashes, orange cones and barrels, and all intersecting in a poorly, sweetly timed system of perpetual electric signals in red, yellow, and green. All of it set in a desolate desert valley, twinkling at the foot of a very wizened mountain range, which watched the city grow up, and would watch it fall again one day.

Frito watched as meanings encrypted and deciphered themselves in Cross Road City. It was finally time, she realized, for her to look into finding a new meaning for herself.
VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Andrea Rose Gregovich

Home Address:
501 E. Lake Mead Parkway #1111
Henderson, NV 89015

Degrees:
Bachelor of Arts, English (Writing Emphasis) and Russian Studies, 1997
DePauw University

Special Honors and Awards:
DePauw Honor Scholarship, 1993-97
O. Ralph Raymond Award For Excellence In Russian Studies, Spring 1997
Institute For Human Studies Film and Fiction Scholarship, Fall 2002
UNLV International Programs Scholarship, Summer 2002
Institute For Modern Letters Scholarship, Summer 2002
UNLV GREAT Assistantship, Summer 2003

Publications:
"I Was a Peace Corps Dropout" (essay) in Liberty, April, 2000.

Dissertation Title: Martyred Cars

Dissertation Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Douglas Unger, M.F.A.
Committee Member, Richard Wiley, M.F.A.
Committee Member, Dr. Megan Becker-Leckrone, Ph. D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Mary Riddel, Ph. D.