Hard Working Man

By Michael Guccione

Finally sitting down on the couch after a long day of physical work was always a relaxing way to reset my bearings. To add to my discomfort, my muscles ached something fierce. In the following moment of rest, my sore muscles and bruised bones reminded me that they would keep food in my stomach a few more nights, or keep the lights on, or rent paid. Being that exhausted was always welcomed because of what being that tired means for us. It meant that we were still in the rat race for a little longer. Whenever I went home that dog tired, I looked forward to nothing as simple as sitting down and sinking into our worn-out, old couch with a cold drink in my hand. The recent copy of Auto Trader was a further distraction to take my mind off all my little aches and pains.

“I’m sooo hungry.”

Most of the time, I loved coming home to Lucy. She would jump into my arms, giving me a bear hug and smothering my face with kisses. We’d been together for seven years, yet no matter how tired I was, I never tired of seeing her. We had our fights like any couple but she was my rock, always there for me. Since we had no kids together(Lucy had a son, Jamon, who she had when she was 16 before we met), we clung to each other. We were each other’s world.

“I’m sooo hungry.”

“I think I heard you the first 30 times,” I told Lucy.

I tried to tune her out by focusing harder on the Auto Trader. The coming weekend my buddy was coming over to our apartment to help me replace the break pads on my F-150. Another expense.

“I’d love nothing better than to cook us dinner, Jordy. But we don’t have anything. The fridge is totally empty. Well, I think there’s some margarine and mayo and a few beers. What am I supposed to make with that?”

It was always something. I hadn’t been paid recently. We were clearly out of groceries and I had no money. Food, we could do without for the time being. The more immediate problem was where I was gonna come up with the $300 for the break pads this weekend. I couldn’t put them off any longer. Mine were shot. If my truck were to go out of commission, we would both be screwed.

“I don’t know what you’d do with it. You’re creative. You’ll figure something out.”

“I figured out you’re a cheap bum a long time ago. Sometimes, I don’t know why I stay with you.”

“Then go! No one’s stopping you. You always want something. You want some food. You want new clothes and new shoes. You want to stay? You want to go? Want, want, want… What I want is for you to make up your goddamn mind and stop driving me crazy.”

“Gimme some fuckin money. I need to go to the store.”

Holding my tongue, I squirmed against the couch cushions. She was intentionally pushing my buttons. I didn’t want to blow up on her. I was in a chilled mood so I figured it best to just be quiet, instead of covering her pretty little face with spittle. I was as pissed at her as the time when she asked me about having another baby. I had been wrong to chew her out then and I didn’t want to make the same mistake twice.

“Did I tell you I got to talk to Jamon?”

Encouraged by her change of subject, I followed along as she talked about her son, who was 13. I’d, personally, always liked the kid. He was a good boy, doing his best for his grandma, considering the cards he’d been dealt. Since Lucy had been a 16 year old minor at the time of his birth, her mother reluctantly became his court appointed legal guardian. She raised him while Lucy ran wild through the rest of her youth. Jamon, it seemed, had turned out well-adjusted, considering the parents he came from.

“Glad to hear the lil tyke’s doing good. He’s really a good kid. Maybe one of these weekends your mom will let us have him for the day. What do you say?”

“Jordy, I’m hungry and starving.”

Ok, that wasn’t going away, so I crumpled up the Auto Trader and whipped out my scarred leather wallet, the one I had scored up the face of long ago. Another laborer had a wallet that was eerily similar so I had taken my drywall knife to it so that there could be no accidental mix-ups. Dude still tried. We ended up fighting. He beat my ass pretty good but I won the fight. Afterwords, I snatched up his look-a-like wallet and flung it over a house as far as I could. The money was still in it, too.

I spread open my wallet, exposing the emptiness for Lucy to see.

“You see that?” I asked. “Ones. Maybe ten bucks. That’s all the money we have to our names right now. And I shouldn’t have to remind you that rent’s coming up. We need cigarettes, gas for the truck, too. All I need is the cash. I think Gabe and I can install them. And, if all that wasn’t shitty enough, we’re almost out of toilet paper. It’s always something, dammitt.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah… I know all that. Don’t you think I know all that shit? But the fact of the matter is fuck all that. You know why? Because I’m hungry and that money is just as much mine as it is yours. There’s definitely enough for some burgers or some tacos.”

I conceded, knowing full well that Lucy never let common sense come between her and her stomach. “Ok then. It’s probably worth it, the more I think about it. More eating, less complaining… sounds like we both win.” I smiled at her and she smiled a squinty, mock-smile back at me. Her eyes followed the cash that I plucked from my wallet. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“What’s that?” Her expression turned suspicious.

“I’ll give you our cash.”

Lucy swiped the rumpled ones right out of my hand. She stashed the bills in her jean’s hip pocket, while batting her fake, butterfly eyelashes of black, goopy eyeliner. Sometimes I thought she wore too much makeup. I extended my rough hand to brush against the smoothness of her face. Her creamy skin slid effortlessly by my big, calloused paw.

“But I want you to lend a hand tonight at work. You got that? Two hands.”

She looked annoyed at my request. “That’s a very big ‘but’ for about ten bucks.”

“I’ve seen bigger. That doesn’t matter anyway. I need your help. The place I’m going to is a big house. I don’t want to spend all night there. Two of us there makes the whole job go that much smoother. As smooth as your cheek.”

She crossed her arms in full-on little girl pouting mode. “I thought you didn’t want me to help you at work anymore. Isn’t that what you said? And I didn’t appreciate that crack about my ass. Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at the way she had chosen to phrase herself. “Alright, I’ll let that go. And I don’t care what I maybe said before. This is now and I want your help. You want to get fed, don’t you?”

Lucy sighed, loud and clear, still batting her dark eyes furiously. Her sigh was a rush of hot air. As was her style when matters of control were at stake, she aimed an icy stare down before she would make any type of announcement.

“So, what’re we waiting for, Jordy? Let’s get this over with.” Then, she started to rummage around for her coat.

“Sounds good to me,” I agreed. I stood up, leaving the Auto Trader in my place. I retrieved my Carhart jacket from the back of the couch where I laid it a half hour ago. With Lucy, I thought I’d had the last word but she could never stand to see me grinning when I’d been right about whatever.

“And I hope you know that I’m not fucking you tonight.” She said with a restrained smile that let me know that this too was negotiable. She brushed past me to the front door. Instinctively, all I could do was follow her ass, thinking of ways to attack those negotiations later on.

In truth, times were bleak. We had really struggled hard these last couple years. Any moneys I maybe had set aside had long ago been used up in emergency situations. The work just didn’t seem to be there anymore, where once there was always enough gigs for the whole community of union and us, non-union workers. Even when I would beat the streets for a stretch and maybe pick up a bathroom remodel or a leaky roof patch, they didn’t come often enough, and I felt super lucky when they did come my way. There were still a ton of craftsmen out there, despite the supply of jobs being all dried up.

I was out there, hustling along, from job to job. The gaps between jobs meant I could never make up any distance. I was no more secure than when I had started out ten years ago with a green nose and belt full of tools with good old Jim Baker as my mentor. My work history, both with Jim and flying solo, listed everything from diesel mechanic, painter, roofer, some electrical work, some plumbing, drywall, asphalt and flooring. Jack of many trades I was. Skilled at many, total expert at none. These days I took whatever I could lay my hands on. Work was slow, but my stomach didn’t know the difference.

The house I had spied last week on my way home from the neighborhood BP. Dilapidated and in need of some TLC, the one floor house was a rather common ranch style, two bedroom, probably built in the late ‘40’s. Even in a state of decay, the house served a valuable purpose for low income home renters. The landlord or association had left it vacant for months, the victim of a halted remodel. That’s what caught my attention last week. This house, in a specific way, was similar to my own one-bedroom apartment in that it was comprised of half-finished and false-started projects. Different wood and unmatched paint, that sort of thing.

Every time I see one of those beautiful old houses in a paralyzed state of disrepair it reminded me of my own laziness. From my kitchen cabinets, that I needed to resurface and restain, to the hole that needed patching in the plaster wall of my bedroom, there were so many projects either half-started or outright neglected. I saw those problems everyday but I still found excuses to avoid repairing them. I made myself feel guilty. The damage was right in front of me. But, typical of me, I was helpless to change those minor details. I made myself feel guilty.

When once we arrived outside the rental house, it was nighttime. Lucy and me made ghosts of our cold breath that we blew away in gusts that swirled away like a whirling dervish. The ghosts surrounded us in the biting night air, while I hurriedly rummaged through my metallic tool boxes, strapped to the open bed. My fingers stung beyond cold each time they touched the cold metal. Lucy stood behind me, swaddling herself with her arms crossed, stepping back and forth. Time was late and I’d already put in eight hours of work in earlier. In my line, you had to go when the work was there.

“Hurry the fuck up, Jordy, would ya?” She bitched. “It’s cold as hell out here.”

“Would you keep your fucking voice down?” I grunted back, keeping an eye on the neighboring houses, their porch lights already lit up. “Here. Take these. You’re gonna need ‘em.” I handed her a 16 gauge hammer and tin snips. She wasn’t happy but, cold and confused, she took the tools. “Bitch, don’t be stupid. I ain’t got time for explanations. Follow me and only squeak if spoken to.”

I pushed her and with my right hand palmed the shit out of her left ass cheek so that when combined with her tight blue jeans and the below freezing cold made a loud whack that unintentionally echoed down the darkened street. She followed with a pitiful sigh, then the sound of leaves crunched as I pushed her by her ass through the yard and then up the unlit and warped porch.

Once inside, I flipped the immediate light switch several times to confirm the power was cut off. I walked in a square around the living room, raising all the window blinds to allow moonlight and streetlight to somewhat illuminate the place. There wasn’t a stick of furniture left. As I felt my way through each room, they were each barren. Only the living room had a cloth tarp stretched out over a section of the wood floor with some cans of paint, some roller trays, rollers and some brushes. Our vision gradually adjusted to the near darkness. I saw Lucy standing twelve feet across the living room. She was holding the tools, one in each hand, at her sides as if they weighed a ton. Thinking of her, I scratched at my ill-lighted, facial scruff, forgetting that I was clutching the pipe cutter, which gave me a sharp wake up call, the chilling effect of ice cold metal on bare skin.

“Listen up. I’m gonna be working in the bathroom, then the kitchen, then the basement. You’re workin’ in here. All you do is find the wire and strip it outta the walls. Destroy the walls. Do whatever you have to do to get it out. Wind it up and then come get me… and I want you to be keeping an eye out the windows. If you see anybody, nosy neighbors, people in suits or cops, shout it out, ya got me?”

“Yeah, yeah, I got ya.”

“No yeah yeah. I’m not playing around, Lucy.”

“I got ya and I said I got ya. If I see anybody, you’ll be the first to hear about it.”

“Good. I don’t doubt you, babe… just double the effort you put into the complaining you did outside and we’ll be cool. I really want to get this over with as fast as possible. I’m tired and gettin’ cranky. So don’t forget to call out if you see anybody.”

“Jordy, wait. I don’t know if I can do this. This is some hard ass physical work at ten o’clock at night. When have you ever seen me do this?”

“Dammitt,” I hissed, trying to muffle my annoyance. “Just do it. You’re wasting valuable time.”

“But I don’t even know where to start.”

“It’s really very simple. Find the outlets, the electrical outlets… the plug-ins in the walls. This is drywall. Find the outlet and to the right right next to it should be the stud. Make a hole around there and you’ll find your wire. Cut it loose with your tin snips there and start ripping it out. Got me?”

I couldn’t make out the particulars of her face but her body language told me I was being stared down. The heat was radiating off of her, which wasn’t entirely a bad thing since the house was an icebox.

Not a fool, I left her without an answer. I hauled my tools in a duffel bag into the kitchen which was easily highlighted by the beautifully stained, hanging cabinets like I wanted to do for our place. I knew Lucy would adore them if I could ever finish the job. I loved her but she could be a controlling bitch from time to time. After her stubborn furors would fizzle out, she would be exhausted and reluctantly do what she had to do. She could also be predictable and I learned to read her with some practice. Maybe that was a reason I stuck it out with her. Despite some her selfish traits, there was no doubt she knew, tolerated to a fault, and accepted my foibles, constant fuck-ups, and my equally lesser character flaws.

There were times when it seemed like each time I’d get a job with some labor crew doing commercial piping and excavating or roofing crews or framing starter houses, I’d come home foolishly gushing to her that this was the best job I’d ever had. Best pay, best boss, other guys were whatever. But I was never really one for working two days in a row. I’m more of an every other day worker. That way I can always look forward to saying, “tomorrow’s my day off”.

Inevitably, something would always come up. I’d find that silver lining wasn’t as silver as I’d maybe thought. A shame, given the price of silver now. Yet, sure as shit, Lucy would stand behind me through all the financial bullshit, the hardships and the darkness that would follow the newest windfall. She’s been there for me when nobody else would so I really, really love her, even when she’s crazy.

It hadn’t taken five minutes for me to sever the plumbing underneath the kitchen sink. The copper pipes went into a Hefty garbage bag. I left the bag in the hallway to collect on my way out. It was then that I heard Lucy singing something in between the pounding of her hammering.

The bathroom plumbing took no time at all, so before I started down into the basement I went to peak on how Lucy was doing. I saw her ripping, arm over arm, out a dangling wire, halfway up the wall. Her little tanned, muscle bumps were rippling from the strain. I asked her how she was doing in there.

“Not bad.” Her smiling, exhausted face pivoted to see mine. “This isn’t as hard as I thought it would be. Are you already done back there? You can give me a hand in here.” Still clutching the wire, she bounced her eyebrows comedically several times, trying to win me over.

Laughing, I spit out that I had the basement yet to finish up. It wouldn’t take too long. Then, I told her, if she still needed the help, then help I would. She, too, cracked up for a moment, briefly showing off with a few hard yanks, sending fissures sawing up through the drywall, dust flying.

“I’ll be back. Won’t be long, and dammitt, be keeping an eye out those windows for suspicious peoples.”

“How will I-“

“They’re all suspicious. Got that? All suspicious. I want you actively looking like you just can’t help it.” I said my peace, then didn’t wait around for her last laugh. Besides, there was work to do and it wasn’t going to get done, unless I did it.

No matter what they say, work is good for the soul. It’s like chicken noodle soup in that way. Work is an act that might not appear pleasurable but when finished, it calms the body and replenishes the spirit. I believe that because I can feel the effect. That sense of accomplishment is what I strove for, not too mention, the money.

People need to work. When they don’t, the body begins to decline. When there is no work, a body feels useless. The rest of man’s habits seem to suffer, accordingly. My work gives me pride and purpose. Work defines who we are and, when the job is finished, who we need to be. I love what I do for a living. I just wish there were more opportunities.

When I’m not working, I feel jittery, like I can’t sit down, like I’ve had too much coffee. But, either the job doesn’t work out or I don’t or the job is great but the money isn’t there, and nothing gets you nothing. No matter how close I get to settling all my debts and getting completely caught up, I never get all the way there. I can’t get over that hump. Never can pay all the bills, feed all the mouths. I can’t satisfy everyone all the time. I scuffle along from crappy, roach trap apartments run by fat, unmotivated landlords to slaving over brutally hard, back-breaking jobs. If I slow down any, I feel I’d just stop breathing and die right there. No, I can’t slow down, so I bundle up, wear layers, wipe away the streaming and steaming runny nose, walk my legs into a rubber funk all for the almighty dollar. No better than a dog chasing his own tail. As soon as my bills are paid, the next month copies arrive and the money I make is barely enough to keep our heads above water, which reminded me of a distant grade-school lyric of a poem. It went: The river is always churning, but I am slowly learning that it’s not what or how you do it but all in the power of your earning. Then and only then do you know what you’re worth.

I know for a fact there are many guys in my same predicament, living hand to mouth. No decent work, if any in their field. Unemployment benefits ran out ages ago. There comes a time where a dude’s tested and you find out if the dude’s gonna do what the dudes gotta do to survive, to pay the rent. All I really want out of this life is a refrigerator full of food and a roof that doesn’t leak, somewhere dry and warm. Also, a clean mattress, big enough for two, comfortably. A clean mattress isn’t too much to ask for.

Like myself in his day, Jim Baker complained about much the same problems, except he complained out loud to anyone who would listen. He was an old, cantankerous Navy vet and long-time commercial truck driver. Often speaking in a loud, barely restrained yell from hearing loss, his rants about being poor and getting stuck by the Man and still not being able to stack the numbers right always filled me with a far off dread. I felt bad for the guy. He was about thirty years older than me. He’s done the right things with his life, that things weren’t any better at his age was just depressing to me.

As much as I started out wanting to be exactly like Jim Baker, I was now terrified of ending up just like him; alone and in debt with shaky health. He used to be a stocky, intimidating man who was quiet unless spoken to and at heart a real, gentle soul. He knew how to do any type of carpentry project imaginable. I hadn’t heard from Jim in seven or eight years. I’d heard through the grapevine that he wasn’t doing well in anyway. Lately, he’d been on my mind wherever I was doing a job. I owed the old guy everything I ad and everything I was. For a crotchety, old white hair, he was the closest thing to a father I ever had.

When I was ten years old, I went to live with Jim and his wife Colleen. My mother, who was friends with Colleen, fucked up and had to go away for, what was supposed to be, a few days but ended up being thirty. I went to stay with them in their home, which was my first real exposure to what I would call “family life”, that was also when I met their only son, Gabe.

Gabe was a few years older, a real hell raiser. He was confusing to me then at that young age. He would do things that, to me, didn’t make a smidge of sense. I thought Jim and Colleen were great. Jim, in particular, was the coolest guy I’d ever met. I liked nothing better than to follow him around all, watching what he watched and walking his way, even miming his style of gait. I was so focused on all the cool “guy” things he was always doing. He taught me how to use power tools, how to hunt with rifles and operate other firearms, which, being ten or eleven, I loved. He taught me how to fish and string a fishing pole. He taught me how to throw a pigskin, how to ride different ATVs and then how to fix them. Cars, too. I became a wiz at breaking down and reassembling motors, welding, later on house framing and every aspect of home repair or construction imaginable. But what the old guy taught me through all those adventures, small and big, were patience, courage and humility. Gabe was never interested in any of those activities, no matter how much we tried to involve him in those early years. Until high school, Gabe was his own person by then, which is what he must’ve been fighting for the whole time. I never claimed to know what went on behind closed doors. There had to have been some terrible fights between Gabe and his father because they were estranged like that before I moved in.

Gabe resented me back then. I could tell from his stares, being obviously furious behind his silence and how he would only ever speak to me when he absolutely had no other choice, such as Jim would force him to the dinner table. However, I never felt anger towards the guy. He seemed like an ok but mixed up kid even then. I felt more confused that I could walk into his home and be raised in much the same kind of life and be interested, at home and in love with every aspect of it all. Gabe resented it in total and even me, since I had chosen to be part of it. We were choosing sides as we entered high school. To Gabe, I had become the enemy.

Gabe had lived a rough life, though some of his own choosing. Not that mine was your Disney version of what childhood and then adulthood looked like. But Gabe got a couple DUIs. Jim put him in rehab once that I know of, not sure if it was just for the booze or the cocaine or both. I know he did that for some time cuz he would try and get me to do it with him, at first. He used to freak Lucy out when he was geeked on that shit. I couldn’t stand to have him around, either. He could be a nice, charming guy if he wanted to but once he started mixing the booze with the coke he started getting weird, violent.

From what I’ve seen and heard lately, he seems to have pulled himself together. I have no hard feelings and wish him a better life. We talk on a somewhat weekly basis. He was coming over to help fix my break pads. I try to do my best to include him in some of our activities, whether it’s going out dinner or barbecuing out back. I try to make sure he’s invited whenever we go to church, which is, sadly, not as often as we’d both like. He wasn’t very good at working on cars but I thought he would want an excuse to get out, earn some money, do something in a controlled environment, socialize and be safe. As long as I could get the money from this house, the break pads would happen this weekend. I wasn’t worried, but concerned; that was a familiar feeling and one I was hoping Gabe would sympathize with. I was all he had left anyway.

For a moment, I stopped pulling loose on the pipes in the open ceiling. I thought maybe I heard something upstairs. What was Lucy doing? I didn’t hear a thing. The whole house went silent. It was obviously quiet. Something was going on upstairs.

I’ve always hated being caught off guard by the police. Not that it’s happened often, but when it has, that sudden sinking feeling springs loose and kicks you in the balls. I’ve always tried to keep my eyes focused forward. You gotta look out for those people who’re always looking down because they don’t see what’s coming.

When I suddenly find myself surprised by some cops, I try to remain calm and deny, deny, deny. I don’t care if they’re talking to you with the knife in your bloody hands. Deny it.

“Oh shit,” I said, stunned stupid.

“Oh shit is right, buddy,” said the first cop closest to me. He was a young guy about my age. With a black crew cut and a too-tight uniform shirt, he resembled a younger Henry Rollins. The other cop who had cornered Lucy looked like Barney Miller without the mustache and I am not making that up.

Barney Miller was taller than Henry, jet black hair, more athletic and lean than a straight muscle head like his partner. They were both intimidating; young, dumb and ready to fuck some shit up. I had walked in on some half-assed interrogation. Barney Miller had obviously been jabbing his finger, accusingly, into Lucy’s chest when I surprised them and they surprised me. It was embarrassing because we stood in a living room that Lucy had ripped to shit.

On my entrance, Henry Rollins started moving away from defenseless Lucy towards me in the doorway of the stairs to the basement. “You ‘bout to be in a world of shit,” he snarled, his hands on his hips. Then it dawned on me that neither cop had his weapon drawn, nor were their hands on their holsters in the standard holding pattern. This was really something else, I thought. They weren’t looking for arrests. This was personal. They wanted to take it out on our asses. I knew whatever I was gonna do that I’d better do it cautiously. The situation needed kid gloves.

“What the hell is going on here?” I barked out. I saw Lucy’s eyes jump over the house. But Barney Miller kept coming forward, pushing in front of his partner with his arms crossed, letting his forearm muscles strain.

“That’s funny,” Barney dead-panned, standing over me. “We were thinking about asking you the same thing. What brings you two down here? Tearing up a buncha property that don’t belong to you?”

“This is a good neighborhood,” the Henry Rollins cop chirped in from behind. “And it’s going to stay a good neighborhood.”

They were pissed. I didn’t know why. I didn’t have time to care. I needed to say or do something to save us both from what I could feel coming. It reminded me of someone staring at an attack dog, how they growl and tremble with anticipation for the attack, knowing any minute his fury would be unleashed.

‘Guys, honestly, we were just leaving, me and my girl here. This was like this when we got here.”

“Your girl?” Henry Rollins questioned, looking Lucy up and down with sincere disgust, as if to say, “this skank?” He then cracked his knuckles loudly through the sound of stretching, black leather gloves.

Despite Henry’s input, this was obviously Barney Miller’s show. Barney addressed his partner over his shoulder, saying, “Officer, you know what I think?” His dark eyes remained on mine. “I think you two musta seen the “for rent” sign outside and thought that was an invitation to come on in and rip out all the copper and aluminum you could scavenge. Just like a couple of pack rats. Fuckin’ goddamn junkies. I’m sick of all these calls me and my partner get about some assholes ripping up and destroying other people’s property. I’m correct to assume this isn’t your house? You all don’t live here, right? Your names aren’t on the deed?... You all probably don’t even care about the cost your causing to the real owners, who are just good regular people that-“

I tuned him out. He berated me from above. I knew I had to say something. Something to fix this quick.

“Officer, we’re not junkies. I swear. The truth is we’re just a regular, broke couple, down on hard times, dude, trying to survive. We can’t find-“

“Shut up. Hey! Shut up! I don’t want to hear it, buddy. Okay? What’s your name? You have warrants? Do I need to run you and your girl’s names?” He wasn’t yelling but the veins in his neck sure stood out.

“We’re clean all around, I swear to… officers… c’mon… what can we do about this?” I pleaded.

That must’ve really pissed him off. “What’s all this shit then?” He finally bellowed, yelling for the first time in a monstrous roar and jabbing his finger like a spear wildly at the shredded drywall and the garbage bags full of wiring and pipe.

“That? Oh… uhm… well…” I mumbled, not knowing what was left to say at that point. They wanted a fight. Nothing I was saying seemed to change their state of mind. I didn’t know where from but I found some balls, puffed up and threw a sucker punch across his left cheek bone that connected awkwardly due to the height disadvantage. It didn’t drop him but Barney did stumble back several steps somewhat dazed, shaking his head back and forth. That was all I saw as Henry Rollins knocked me to the ground with something hard and heavy upside my face. Might have been his fist but everything was moving so fast, the adrenalin had kicked in ferociously so I couldn’t be sure. Then he was on top of me, pummeling me with lefts and rights. I caught my breath for a second and I yelled at Lucy to “get outta here!” She was frozen in fear, staring at me with bug eyes. I couldn’t yell again. That’s when I got my ass knocked out cold and handed to me from the combined efforts of Henry Rollins and the recuperated Barney Miller.

I estimated later I was unconscious about 25 minutes. Lucy said it was more like forty or fifty but what does she know. In my time, I’d been involved in plenty of fist fights and dust-ups so I would say I was more accustomed to the effects of being physically assaulted, although not by some cops. That was a new one. I was the one that picked up her shaking, whimpering, bruised and battered body and carried her like a rumpled sack of laundry out to our truck.

There I saw all that we had scrapped had disappeared along with the fuzz. For the moment that was not at the front of my mind. I couldn’t comprehend what had just happened or why. The whole thing was like a dream, were it not for the nauseating pain I felt through my whole body. One look at what they’d done to my girl, my baby, my only baby, caused me to actually puke next to the truck once I had safely stowed Lucy inside. My stomach heaved and my ribs hurt. There was blood in the vomit.

For some reason, they had spared my truck any harm. They took what we had worked hard for and given us a beating that would take days, days I didn’t have, to fully recover from. Yet, the truck was untouched, a confusing, last act from the police. They could’ve just as easily let the air out or slashed the tires or fucked with the engine but they didn’t. So we took advantage and got the hell outta there, just barely with our lives and our freedom.

Overall, a complete waste of time. At least if we had gone to jail, they would’ve checked to see if we’d broken anything, cleaned us both up and fed us. That part didn’t seem so bad, but nope. Everything has to be the hard way. I dragged us home late at night, early in the morning. Lucy had passed out the moment I had laid her in the cab.

On the ride home and in between trying to stay conscious myself, I was having some desperate thoughts. Those were thoughts of the two of us getting evicted because we couldn’t afford the rent anymore and my truck permanently breaking down; stuff like that. It was always scary when I took time to realize just how close to some awful kind of disaster we really lived. I had all those intense worries and not a damn clue as to how to try and fix any of them. I wasn’t even sure who I was, anymore.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lucy asleep, slumped up against the passenger door. Her beautiful head with blood-matted hair pressed up against the cold window. I pulled her closer to let her lean on me. Her lip was split, crusted with blood. I kissed her lip anyways.

When we got back home, I carried her in, across the threshold, as it were. I sat her up on the toilet seat and wiped her face clean of blood. I could see the black eyes taking shape and her eyes were still closed when I laid her softly to bed. I tried myself but I was unable to go to sleep. I rested there next to her for a time until morning gradually began to fill the room through the blinds.

I felt Lucy stirring once the room was well lit. When I looked at her, she was already looking at me. Her face was still swelling so I looked in her eyes so she wouldn’t get subconscious first thing in the morning. She must’ve read my feelings because she asked, “is it really bad?” She managed to snatch my hand in hers with a speed and strength that surprised me, considering.

“It’s not as bad as I first thought.” But that wasn’t true. I just tried to be comforting.

“Will you get some ice?” She squeezed my hand.

“Sure, baby. I gotta use the bathroom and then I’ll get the ice for you, okay?”

She nodded several times, while I freed my hand.

“Are you okay? Is there anything else you need while I’m up? Anything I can get you?”

“No… thank you.”

In the solitude of the shitter, looking at myself in the vanity, I looked like you’d expect, like someone who got seriously worked over. All I really wanted at that point was to go to bed and begin the process of forgetting last night forever. I couldn’t even get that accomplished. Forgetting wouldn’t be some easy task. Few things in my life ever were. The bruises would be visible for weeks. What I couldn’t forget was the money… and yes, I fucked things up, royally. We couldn’t get paid. I had nothing to scrap, nothing to take the landlord, nothing to show for all my work. I knew the landlord wouldn’t be forgetting.

Running the sink faucet, I splashed cold water over my face, washing away my own crusted blood. I tried wiggling a few teeth to see if they would give. Luckily, that wasn’t the case. One minor bright spot on a cold, painful evening. Then, outta nowhere, I was hit by a stomach cramp and an immediate urge to drop a deuce. It was nearly six thirty in the morning and I was thoroughly whupped. I hoped by moving my bowels I could find some sleep.

I was half-asleep by the time I’d finished doing my business. As I opened the bathroom door, Lucy was there, waiting and slouched against the nearby wall. I told her that I was sorry for making her wait and I honestly didn’t know she was waiting. This was true as I hadn’t heard her knock or yell or anything. I could’ve been wrong but I didn’t think she tried those things, either.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re fine,” she said in a winy tone, while scooting past me. The door slammed shut behind me. I hadn’t even walked away when I heard her yell out in a fury. “Goddamn it, Jordy! It fuckin’ smells like shit in here!”

“Well, sorry don’t make the smell go away… asshole!” There was so much hate coiled screaming slam that the sudden loudness felt like another body blow. I even winced. All I could really offer was one more feeble-sounding sorry. I knew somewhere deep down that the animosity was due to the state she was in so I didn’t really hold it against her.

I wanted to go to sleep so very badly and forget this nightmare. But I went to the freezer and busted some ice outta the trays. I found a clean wash cloth and filled it for her with the ice cubes, tying off the top with a spare rubber band. Ice pack in hand, I crept back to the still shut bathroom door and rapped lightly. My knuckles were soar.

“Hey babe, I’m sorry but I’ve got your ice pack out here.”

Without words, she opened the door a crack, just enough to squeak her hand out and snatch the pack but I held onto it firmly.

“Let go,” she whispered.

“Will you come out and lay down with me when you’re done?”

“Well, I’m not sleeping on the couch. Now, let go of my pack.”

“You gotta say ‘thank you’ first.”

“Jor-dy… thank you… let go… please.”

I then went to the bedroom, which was very bright, stripped and collapsed into bed. Feeling like I was sinking deeper into the bed, I knew this time I’d get to sleep. Later, I wouldn’t even hear the creaking slouch of the mattress whenever Lucy tumbled onto her side.

When I finally woke up, it was dusk and I could see the sun setting in shards through the blinds. I expected pain and soreness to swoop down on me when I started to move. I lingered but decided I had to get a move on and salvage something outta what was left of the day

Yet, when sliding out of bed, I was amazed how easily I accomplished this. I thought to myself that maybe today was gonna be a good day. Lucy was already up and out of bed and I could smell eggs and bacon. My mouth and appetite were instantly whetted. My love for Lucy reaffirmed the day. Try as I was, I couldn’t seem to get rid of my fool’s grin. There was no denying it. I’d admit to having sung love songs by Rod Stewart in the shower. So when I went into the kitchen smelling great and looking the best I could, I saw Lucy, herself looking good despite the effects of the previous night. Despite black eyes and multiple bruises, she was there with my breakfast laid out on the small, circular four-seater that we used as our kitchen table.

“Good morning,” I said to her, happily, while seating myself. Before I began to pound the food, I thanked her and told her everything looked great. She told me she thought she could tag along while I turned the scrap in for our pay. She recognized that I was about to object so she promised that she wouldn’t talk too much and behave herself and stay outta my way. The food between my teeth started to taste bitter until I reluctantly agreed to let her come.

All the rolls of wiring and piping were still bagged up in the back of the truck. All that needed to be done was for some able-bodied guy to take the keys and the initiative. I was that body.

Outside, the day wasn’t cold, not even really chilly. The sun was out without a blocking cloud. I couldn’t believe how good I felt, considering what I’d been through. For once, everything seemed alright.

In the cab, I didn’t check the fuel gauge. I didn’t check to see if I had money for gas. It didn’t matter. It was okay.

When I started up, music played outta the radio, one hit after another. We had to head outside of town to the recycling center. It was a scenic trip with plenty of long, rolling farm land, now barren and winterized. On this day, however, even the winter frost appeared bright and glistening. A trip that was an unavoidable twenty minutes flew by while I made Lucy crack up laughing by making funny faces along with the rock ‘n’ roll. Once there, I was in and out in no time at all. Lucy waited and watched from inside the cab while Dave Krokowski, or Krok, owner and operator, and I unloaded the haul from the bed.

Paid in full. We suddenly had money to burn and the urge to light some matches. Before I took my favorite girl out for a mild and carefully watched shopping spree to some of her favorite chick stores, we went to an expensive resteraunt that promised fine dining, one which we had driven past many times, hungry and wishing that we had the money to stop there. The freedom that went with being able to afford a place like that. To choose what to eat without checking prices first, wine if we wanted and dessert, too. Tip like I wasn’t worried. Without any of those troubles, we spent what seemed like hours, taking our time, eating and drinking and talking. Although, Lucy did most of the talking, as usual. When the waitress left the bill next to my half-eaten salad, I confidently reached for my wallet, ready to start peeling off twenties. Only my wallet wasn’t in my back pocket, where I always carried it. Getting nervous, I patted down my front and rear pockets. My mind caught vertigo, trying to remember when and where I last had it. The hovering waitress asked me if there was a problem. Lucy had become alarmed by then and asked,“yeah, Jordy, is there a problem?” Why did something like this always have to happen? Everything was going so well. I couldn’t have asked for a better…

When I finally woke up, it was dusk and I could see the sun setting in shards through the blinds. After a moment of deja-vu, I decided to get up and get going, although when I tried, my whole everything felt raw. A burning sensation. I really couldn’t take the time off to rest, no matter how much physical pain I felt or how many fantasies I could spin together in bed.

Lucy was still, deep asleep beside me. There was no breakfast cooking. I decided to let her rest, so I strained myself and rose, focusing myself because our situation demanded it. That’s what a man does. That’s what Jim would’ve done. If I were to crawl back into bed and snuggle with Lucy, only later would I wake up feeling like a loser, who would wind up hungry and homeless.

I dressed, bundled up, grabbed my keys and dashed out to the truck. It was 30 degrees out, felt colder. The cab was an icebox, so I sat and ran the heat for a while and tried to figure out what to do. I needed gas but money was a problem. All I had was a buck thirty five. I couldn’t do anything without wheels, though.

I headed out to the nearest BP. The cold weather made my breaks squeal every time I tapped them. I squealed up to a pump, then spent the next twenty minutes out in the cold, hustling other people with a story about over-pumping. I’m sure I looked like hell, too. My hair was a mess. My face was a mess. I had some blood on my clothes. I was lucky that scam worked at all. Most people were kind enough and gave me what they could. Having raked in almost twelve in ones and change, I filled the tank with the little that would buy, sorry for the people who felt sorry for me.

As part of my story, I had told the other people at the pumps that I had been mugged, that explained my appearance. When a trying-to-hide-the-fat soccer mom in black sweat pants and hoodie bitched at me, I thought she was upset over the way I looked. Then I heard how she said that I could blow us all up and endangered her children and a buncha other bullshit, because I was smoking while I pumped my gas. I stood there and took the abuse, also taking my time with the cigarette. She tried getting louder, shaking herself in her hoodie, imploring any passers-by who kept walking, assuming she was a crazy woman. She was incredibly over-excited that I would blow us all sky high. For me, the oddity soon lost its’ fascination, no matter how much it squawked for attention. I saw no one was looking so I gave her the finger. She acted like she was shot, cursed me over and over in different combinations. From there, she retreated to her pump, paid there with a credit card from her saddlebag, and resumed giving me death threats and hateful looks. Her screams were thankfully muffled when she slammed shut the door of her Pontiac minivan. Two mini-soccer balls wrapped in netting dangled from her rearview mirror. She continued to scream at half-volume.

I was trying to forget that ugly woman when I stepped into the checkout line inside the store. At the end of the three person deep line, I stood with the others, thumbs up our asses and watched an older, white man in a blue cardigan over a button down that bulged around the rolls of belly fat, who screamed and berated the un-amused, arms-crossed Pakistani man behind the counter.

From what I could understand, the Pakistani had refused to let blue Cardigan’s wife, who waited in the Denali with the doors locked, use the station’s restroom. One crooked look at the Pakistani told you that he wouldn’t budge. No matter how much hate-filled, racist venom Cardigan spat, the Pakistani observed him with an Old World annoyance. “Call Me” by Blondie blared out on the store’s overhead speakers. I felt both amused at his frustrations and annoyed that he was holding us up. The young brunette in between us in line was becoming more agitated than I, as she tapped her foot on the tile and kept shifting her weight, side to side.

“Jordy? Whatchu doin’ here?” I heard a man say, followed by a laugh made of turned-over gravel.

When I turned to see who it was, I looked up into the gap-toothed grin of Gabe. His gnarly grin exposed all the upper missing teeth from the center on back to the molars. How he really lost them, I never knew. He smiled and sounded as if he was in a good mood. I could never be quite sure. Gabe was like an animal, capable of suddenly springing off in any direction… at any given time without the least provocation. He had served at least one prison term that I knew of. He had his on-again, off-again cocaine addiction. He was a scrapper, involved in numerous bar brawls. I wouldn’t say that I was afraid of him, but whenever he was around, I stayed more alert than usual. With his shaved, Aryan head, ear lobes studded, and a wife beater that displayed his faded, blue prison-made tattoos, he cut an imposing figure. Running into him then and there was an unfortunate coincidence since I had promised to pay him for helping me replace my break pads, before last night left me broke, battered and bruised. It was also then I realized he was grinning at the wreck of my face.

“Who left that skid mark on your face?” He asked, letting loose another chortle that smelled laced with beer.

“Oh, hey, Gabe. This? It was nothin’. Are you hearing this shit?” I asked, nodding in the direction of the hate crime taking place. Also, I didn’t want to get into explaining what happened the night before.

“Yeah, man. How can you not hear it?” He shrugged, having heard worse. “Fuck ‘em, fucking towelhead. Gets what he deserves. I’m just glad somebody’s standing up to these coward-ass terrorists.”

Although I didn’t share his view, I nodded and watched the chaos. Then, he asked about the break pad job, but I didn’t want to upset him or get his hopes up.

“So what’s the story with this break pad gig? We still on for this weekend? Cuz I haven’t heard word one from you or Lucy… hope so. I need the cash.”

“Well… Gabe… I’m still working on it. For now, yeah, we’re still on but I’ll keep you posted.” He made me think while Cardigan screamed like a child.

Gabe grimaced, rolled his head and cracked his neck. “I don’t know, Jordy. You’re sounding kinda wishy-washy now. You ain’t gonna pull an indian giver on this one, are ya?” He made a toothless, mock smile that came off as anything but friendly.

In the midst of his interrogation, young Brunette, who was stuck between myself and racist Cardigan, had had enough and cried at Cardigan to “please stop”, “hey stop it”, and “leave that poor guy alone! He probably doesn’t even understand you!”

For a moment, Cardigan paused. His hairless head whipped around with a snarl and yapped at her to mind her own business. He dared her to provoke him with piercing, wily eyes, then he was sure she wouldn’t and called her a “dumb cunt”.

The ok-looking brunette, thoroughly offended, checked back at me, her mouth on the floor. She unable or unwilling to believe that had happened to her and from an elderly, grandfather-looking guy, too. She looked to me for consolation. Unfortunately, my consolation went to her in the form of a gentle, sly smile. Something that just happened, nothing I could do about. A nervous reflex. For her holier-than-thou turn, she quickly proved Cardigan correct with his name calling. Reverting to her social self-defense mechanism, that she was no doubt honing at any East Coast liberal arts college on mommy and daddy’s dime, her outrage transformed into entitled anger. Loans and grants are for the poor, she probably would say. But so is dignity… bitch, haha.

Brunette studied me up and down, plucked eyebrows narrowed, accusing me with her facial features. “Creep,” she hissed, left her place and stalked outta the store, threw her arms up in frustration when she did. The door didn’t hit her in the ass.

I really had meant to offer her some sympathy but I was never very good at that sorta thing. On some lever unknown to me, she most likely deserved what she got. As lovely as she was physically, her head was full of peanuts and I had no sympathy for any of them. Not her. Not Gabe and not even that Pakistani. She was a dumb cunt.

“What a bitch!” Gabe chimed in, reminding me that he was still there. “I know what she needs. Know what I’m talking about? He nudged me, flashing me that hideous, aerated grin. But before I had prepared an answer, he wretched out in laughter, “oh, shit! Look!”

I shifted back to the tubby Cardigan, having reached his breaking point before the Pakistani reached his, had suddenly spat on the clerk. I didn’t see the actual spittle fly. I saw the unhappy man wiping it away with the back of his uniform’s sleeve. Then, as obese as Cardigan was, he managed to duck-tail and scamper outta the doors before anyone could react. Outside and visible through the display windows, he slowed to his normal, shuffling pace on his way to the black Denali. He was muttering to himself while watching back through the display windows, in case someone wanted to come after him for all that.

Suddenly, caught in a moment of inspiration, I was next in line. I slapped the gas money down on the counter. The Pakistani, finished with wiping off the spit, shook his head, frowned, like “what did I do to deserve this, man”. I felt for him because he really didn’t deserve that. On the other hand, I didn’t have time to show him any sympathy, either. I had an idea and I needed to track down Cardigan before he got too far away. I looked back at Gabe and reminded him that I would get in touch with him soon about the job. He seemed baffled by what I was doing, but I was just thankful to be escaping his company. The Pakistani, meanwhile, looked at us like he was still not amused.

“Excuse me,” I called out to Cardigan, attempting to slime into his vehicle, his wife’s eyebrows carried over her shades, while the rest remained frozen. It was a funny scene. My face hurt when I laughed. There was some early nineties pickup truck, an ’02 Jeep Cherokee and their black with silver trim 2012 GMC Denali all parked in the front of the store. I could see that Cardigan’s wife was a still attractive, older blonde, sporting black, bug-eye shades, that looked like the definition of ice cold. I called out again, “excuse me, uhm, sir.”

“What-goddammitt-what?” That was even rougher than it had been inside. Cardigan quickly freed himself from the car and squared up to me like his old ass would’ve really done something to me. The guy, besides being geriatric, was just a big, fat fuck nothing, used to using his voice to intimidate other people. There was no muscle beneath that girth. If I felt like it, I could’ve broken him over my knee into a thousand fat pieces. He looked like a fat banker or a fat politician. “You want to say something about the way I handled that sand nigger in there, buddy?”

“No… I just… that, back there you were just being patriotic. No, I heard your problem with your wife back in there. I live nearby. I’m headin’ back now, if your wife still needs to use the facilities, your more than welcome to stop at my place.” He stared at me, shaking with his pent up adrenalin. So I went on. “I’m just a few block away. Clean and private.” Jesus, I felt like a goddamn used car salesman..

I saw his face contort from anger to confusion and then to stiff resolve. “That’s alright, young man. We live nearby, too… not that it’s any of your business.” He walked back to the car, paused and then gave me another look that said what he was thinking. “What are you, stupid? Beat it and quit bothering me or I’ll put the law on ya.”

“Oh, well, okay. Just thought I’d offer.”

Cardigan dismissed me with a slam of his car door. His ice wife with her too-cool Kardassian shades stared me down with Stepford detachment. They backed up and pulled up to the exit. With them in motion, I stuffed my freezing hands into my pockets and hurried across the lot to my truck. My teeth gritted and ground while I followed them onto the road while my brakes squealed each time I pumped them.

It turned out true that the Cardigans lived near to the BP. I’d honestly thought he might’ve just said that to get rid of me. I kept forgetting how bad my face looked, even though it reminded me with periodic, shooting pain. I probably wouldn’t have used my toilet, either.

The Cardigans lived on Wonderland Vista in the opposite, more affluent side of town. The Vista was a winding subdivision formed with large, two-story vinyl homes, all built within the last twenty years. When I was a boy growing up, that place didn’t exist.

Keeping several blocks distance between us, I pulled my truck over to the curb, shaded by a few Oak and Maple trees, several houses down from where I snooped them arriving. They pulled into the paved driveway of a two-story, white vinyl and brick veneer home. Mrs. Cardigan shot out like a blonde cannon ball and goose-stepped her knee high boots through the front door. Her charming husband, gentleman that he was, remained inside with the engine running.

I cracked the window, smoked a cigarette and slouched down in my seat. I intended to remain comfortable. The first thing I noticed about their house was the Brink’s yard spike, driven right into the frozen lawn. In my experience, neighborhoods such as this one, every home was either armed with whole home security systems, or they had yard spikes, that said they had whole home security systems. They were both effective. But this was nothing like a breaking and entering. This was to profit, of course, but it also felt good screwing these people over.

Ten minutes later, with my body heat flying out the same window that was for my cigarette smoke, thankfully, the ice wife returned. The Denali whipped outta the driveway and sped right past me. They weren’t even looking, straight ahead for them. I continued to wait there in the cold to make sure they hadn’t forgotten something. When I became positive they weren’t coming back soon, I put on a American Electric hard hat, that I don’t know where it came from, and fastened my tool belt. Time for my game face. Time to do work.

In better times, I had a beautiful house like theirs. Mine, however, was almost a century old, built in a style of masonry construction that isn’t practiced anymore. I’d prefer something built with an eye to detail and really built to last, unlike these newer dwellings.

I had all the man-toys to go along with it all and a separate garage where I did my damage. My F-150 was brand new at the time and I had a utility trailer that I would hook up for my Seadoos, when I wanted to head off for a weekend at the lake, that it is, when I wasn’t too busy working. When I wanted to go for a chill cruise and take the scenic route, I had a ’98 Harley. No lil old rice burner for me. I loved… that bike. Times were better, to say the least. Life rewarded you for hard work. I miss those days. Nowadays, I just took whatever I could get my hands on, job or no job, and felt thankful, too. Those kinds of days reminded people of gratitude.

Their home reaked of potpourri so bad I could smell it from outside. Also, it was definitely wired. I knew. I felt they really had some sorta system. When I walked up to and around the front porch, I scanned over their neighbor’s houses and windows, snooping for signs of life. The coast appeared clear. Driveways were empty and the windows were vacant of little, old ladies and nosy housewives. I felt comfortable enough to proceed and maybe more importantly, I felt justified, as if I was doing the right thing. The Cardigans were real scum. It didn’t seem right that so many struggled so hard and suffered so often, while they had it all.

Following a paved sidewalk, bordered by frozen tulips, along the Western side of the house, I came to an unpainted, privacy fence and the doorway that opened into the backyard. I’m about six one and the wooden fence was several feet taller with a roof and steeple. In the backyard was where I found their Central Air unit. I took another cautious scan of the neighboring houses before opening the unlocked door of the fence.

The Central Air unit was settled on a special brick surface right next to the rear corner of the house. I withdrew my drill from my belt and went to work, dismantling the frame. I pulled out a garbage bag from the roll I kept in my belt and stashed the copper components. Usually, once I was finished, I would reassemble the unit, primarily as a way to buy myself more time, before the scrap yards and recycling centers checked in. However, this unit I intentionally left in pieces on the patio so the Cardigans would know that I had fucked them right away. The really funny part was that it was gonna cost them more to fix their box than I was gonna make from the scrapper.

The job didn’t take long. I wanted to get while the getting’ was still good. I had taken the bag out to load in the truck. The neighborhood was still quiet, but when I started back to get my tools, I spotted in the house on my immediate left on the second floor a middle-aged Asian woman with a cell or cordless phone pinned to her ear. Her mouth was flapping fast and furious. Something strongly told me that phone call was about me.

I put some speed to my step and replaced my tools in their pouches and a brief moment to reflect my handiwork, I dashed back through the fence, feeling pressed for time but still confident. When I nearly ran right over the same Oriental woman, who couldn’t have been more than five foot, she said, “excuse me? Can I help you?”

“Oh, wow, I’m sorry, mam. I almost didn’t see you there. You don’t wanna get ran over, do ya?”

“Can I help you? She said, nearly phonetically.

I could tell she was suspicious, not buying my hard hat and politeness. I also knew that she was probably stalling and buying time until whoever was on the other end of that phone got here.

“Do you live here?” I pointed at the Cardigan’s house. “My name is John. I’m with American Electric doing some routine maintenance.”

“No, I don’t live there. What kind of work are you doing? Who told you to come back here? I don’t think you’re supposed to be back here.”

I didn’t have time for her amateur snooping. Any minute somebody would be pulling into that driveway. I needed to get outta there five minutes ago.

“Mam, I’m actually all finished up here, so please excuse me. I have other stops to make.” I brushed past her. She kept barking like a little Chihuahua, but I paid her no mind. She followed me across the lawn, asking the same questions, growing more and more excited by my silence. Once I climbed into my truck and mercifully slammed the door, her nonsense was drowned out. But that didn’t stop her. She stood right outside my window still going at it. I fired up the truck. She went and stood in front, holding her hands out to stop. She still had the cordless in one hand.

“Get outta the way!” I shouted through the windshield, becoming pissed off. “Get outta the way now, lady!” I laughed at how angry I was. “I’m gonna run you over!” I wasn’t, as much as I wanted to then. I revved the engine but she just hollered louder. About that time was when I spotted the Denali speeding down the road towards us. Enough of this.

Rolling my window down, “Okay, mam, let’s talk. Can we talk a moment about this?”

She pointed a finger at me, like, “I got you now”, and said, “no funny business.”

“No, no funny business. Let’s just talk this over.”

Suspiciously, she crept from around the hood, alongside my front door. The entire time, through my peripheries, I’m watching the Denali charging towards us. Once the Asian bitch was next to my window, she was still muttering “no funny business”, I kicked my door open as hard as I could, slamming the steel force into her body. She made a grunt as the air left her body before a thud when she hit the asphalt and rolled. As my mom would’ve said, “that’s her ass fault”. With her incapacitated, I slammed the gas pedal beneath my foot and that house of misery receded into my rearview. I even gave the Cardigans the finger as we passed on their street. Their mouths were deformed and twisted. Yet, I couldn’t help laugh, picturing their faces when they discovered what I’d done.

After making my getaway, I headed straight for Krok’s recycling center. Normally, I enjoyed the twenty minute ride and the scenery. But the temperature was dropping, the sun was setting and all I wanted was to safely get home and tell my honey all about my crazy day. The Cardigans, along with a couple more jobs, should allow me to pay Gabe to have my break pads changed and get my rent money in order. My luck might’ve temporarily switched for the better.

Handing over the coils of wiring that made up the arteries of Cardigan’s Central Air unit, Dave and me made small talk. First, he made a crack about my face looking like a bruised tomato, which I kinda expected. True to his character, he didn’t get nosey and since I didn’t volunteer what happened, he didn’t ask. Generally, a good guy, small in stature, he was missing two molars from his bottom jaw that were noticeable whenever he laughed and a front incisor from his upper jaw. He cut a Farmer John figure, balding, glasses and his customary, well-worn blue jean overalls, from behind the counter in the office of his shop. Really it was just a place to ring up transactions, no bigger than a studio apartment and kept thrown together, just like Krok was.

Krok considered himself an honest, hard-working Pollock, trying to make a dollar and a living. Same as me. He never asked a ton of questions about my scrapping. He had his own business to tend to. Mostly, we talked baseball and the weather. Sometimes, Krok reminded me of Jim Baker. Both men had that stern, yet sensitive, almost European type of face with the same salt and pepper hair. He was always fair to me, didn’t take advantage of our dealings like I’m sure he was capable of. He always made a point of asking how Lucy and me were doing. If poorly, he would sympathize. He’d ask in a fatherly manner if we were eating well and paying the bills, just a concerned guy, working long hours, only to be able to afford to burn the candle at both ends, like we all were. In those vicious cycles, we worked hard on never-ending shifts to be able to pay our bills and nothing more. We weren’t greedy. We just wanted a little piece of the pie.

When Krok slid the cash, all in twenties, across the counter to me, I smiled and he smiled, missing front tooth and all. I felt somewhat relieved there was at least some cash in my pocket. I thanked him and assured him I’d be back soon. Before I left, he hollered at me to stay safe out there and keep warm. I thanked him and told him I would.

I was in a good mood by nightfall when I returned home. Those thoughts about our cold reality were usually all it took to spin me into a funk. The payday, I thought, was probably keeping me sane. We would get by for a little, while longer. We always managed something. I tried not to think about the job last night and how I would’ve made so much more. I tried not to think about all the money I actually lost. But that’s the way my cookie crumbles, right through my fingers. The story of my life: Almost, but not quite.

I hadn’t eaten anything all day, unless you count all the shit I ate this morning. I was starving, so it was a welcome surprise to come back to our one-bedroom to the smell of Lucy’s spaghetti and meatballs. My favorites. Lucy was like a quarter Italian, so you know she can cook some spaghetti. Not exactly a seafood banquet, but at least it wasn’t Hamburger Helper… again. More than ready to kill some food, I slung my Carhart jacket over the couch and headed for the kitchen, work clothes and all.

Inside my cramped, little kitchen, Lucy stood, back facing me, stirring the spaghetti.

“Smells great,” I said, giving her eyebrows. “You want to have dinner with Caddyshack? I’m in a good mood. I feel like watching something funny. Caddyshack sound good to you, babe?” I really did want to see Caddyshack again. For the kind of mood I was in, that and dinner would be a great way for me to get some sleep.

When she faced me, grinning from ear to ear, her beautiful face all swollen and smashed to hell, my chest ached for her. It made me sick to my stomach to see her like that, which was backed up by the fact that when it went down, there wasn’t a thing I could’ve done to protect her. I just shouldn’t have taken her, plain and simple.

She hopped across equally bruised up linoleum, bouncing into my arms. I wrapped her in a bear hug, inhaled deeply the smell of her hair that I always loved. She must’ve just showered because it smelled fresh somehow. “I’m so sorry, baby,” I whispered, cradling her face close to mine.

“Ah,” she shivered. “Your hands are freezing. What are you sorry about, Jordy?” She asked, shaking her head free of my frozen hands. I let her body go so she could stir the boiling spaghetti and frying meatballs. Our table was already set and I took my seat at the head.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Those cocksuckers last night… what they did to your face…”

“Oh…”

“So,” I lifted my voice and changed the subject. “Where’d the food come from?”

With her back facing me again, she replied, “my sister. She dropped by a few hours ago, took pity on us, I guess, on our situation and took me grocery shopping.”

I opened the fridge to find it full of goodies. The surprise was the best part. Scratch that. Free wins every time. It had been ages since I’d seen it like that. That would really come in handy because Lucy’s food stamp card had two more weeks before it refilled.

Shutting the door and sitting back down, I told her, “that’s fuckin’ fantastic. That really is. She didn’t have to do that, either. Very cool of your sister. I need to remember to thank her next time I see her. So what time you get up today?”

“You should and I’d wish you talk to her more. Since my mom died, she’s the closest thing I got to family. Besides you.”

“What time you get up?”

“Dammitt, Jordy. What’s it matter what time I got up? I was tired, ok?”

“It doesn’t matter. I just wanted you to rest. I’m glad you’re feeling better, too. You really had me worried.” I meant what I said. Lucy’s expression changed to one of compassion and forgiveness, further driven home when she returned and sat on my lap at the table. I made a big show of rubbing my hands together, warming them up, for her. She cracked up laughing, tossing her head back so fast. I scooped the back of her head gently. I didn’t know what else to do for her. Without any better idea and her eyes wincing while closed, I leaned in and rested my forehead on hers. After 10 seconds, 20 seconds, I thought I felt her smile but my eyes were closed, too.

I was seriously almost asleep on her face, when she broke away and asked, “so, how was your day?”

“My day?” I asked, sort of drowsy. With the excitement of all the food in the fridge and the spaghetti, I temporarily had forgotten about the success and close call I’d had. “Oh right… We had a great day, baby. I worked this rich folks’ house. Some real trash. If you’d seen ‘em, you’d know what I mean. Then, get this. This Oriental neighbor lady tries to stop me, while the people were on their way back to bust me out.” I stopped, out of breath.

“Wow… wait, how do you know she called the homeowners?” Lucy started stirring the food.

“Because I passed them, while I was tear-assing outta there.”

“No shit, huh? You lucky do, you. I’m guessing then, you got paid. Tell me this story has a happy ending with a beautiful, scenic trip to Krok’s,” she rattled off, amusing herself.

“Yup, and Krok says to tell you ‘hello’.”

“And-?”

“And it wasn’t much. Shoulda been more. Always should. But this’ll have to do for now.”

“I know…”

“Don’t we always find a way?”

“I know…”

“Don’t we always make it somehow? Of course, we do. We’ll make it. Times are tough and we just gotta roll with the punches. I’ve got some projects I’m working on. Our turn will come. You’ll see, work will be better tomorrow.”

“I know all that, Jordy. You don’t need to give me a ra-ra, We Shall Overcome, rallying speech. I look and feel shitty enough.” Then she reconsidered her harshness. “But I appreciate you care enough to try and make me feel better.”

“Thanks. You know I’m always gonna keep trying.” I told her with a grin. Lucy stopped messing with the food and returned to my lap.

“That reminds me of something,” she began. “Once we get caught back up on everything… and put aside some money…”

“Yeah?” I asked carefully, paying her my attention and playing the low key emotion required by that scene.

“Do you think we could take a vacation somewhere? Anywhere? I feel like I’ve been stuck in this city my whole life. I just want to get out of the Midwest for a while and not have to deal with these grim, haggard people. Somewhere that doesn’t look bombed out.”

“I think that’s an awesome idea. We sure could use one but that’s not really the problem. Whenever we finally get on top of these bills, knock out our debts, dent it at the very least, then we start socking away a lil extra coin. First, we gotta get some extra coin.”

“I know, Jordy. Don’t be such a realist. I’m tryin’ to have a dream here. Share it with me.”

“Share your dream?” I asked, sarcastically. How corny. She quickly gave me a “don’t fuck with me” look, so I stopped. “It’s a great idea. That’s why I love you. I’m all for it.” She laid her head on my right shoulder. I brushed away the hair still sticking to her face from the steam.

I decided to share her dream and lift her spirits. “You know you’re right. A vacation’s just the ticket. Get outta Dodge for a while. Leave this rat trap in the dust. Burn this disco down. God knows, I’m sick of running around in the cold, trying to hustle up work for us.”

“I know you are, baby,” she hummed against my chest, rubbing her hand across my chest. “You’re right. Things are gonna start looking up for us. You’re a strong man. Strong enough for the both of us. My strong man. You do whatever it takes, which is one of the many reasons I love you.” She peered up, smiling hopefully, stretching to kiss me on the lips.

“So where do you want to go, Lucy? On vacation, I mean. Anywhere in the world. Have you thought about it?”

“I’ve got some ideas but I don’t have my heart set on anything 100%.”

“Ok, well, gimme some ideas.”

“I’m thinkin’ Hawaii. Somewhere where there is beautiful, white, sandy beaches. Clear, blue skies and palm trees. Somewhere exotic. I’m getting excited just thinking about it.”

“Hawaii would be awesome… and expensive. I’m gonna have to work harder than ever. But well worth it. That’s something to plug away for.”

“Tropical. I’ve always liked the idea of island life, don’t you? I think the island life would suit me. Do you think it would suit me? I think it would. I want to visit the smallest island in the chain. You know? I don’t know the name of it yet. But it’s the smallest one. The one that nobody visits. Wouldn’t that be great? Just the two of us alone on a deserted island. Not a care in the world.”

“Yeah, only the two of us,” I wisecracked.

I felt her sigh, easing down on me. “Sometimes you can be a smartass, you know.”

“Hey, you know what?” I asked her, suddenly so serious.

“What?”

“We’re going to Hawaii!” I shouted right by her ear.

She laughed and joined in. “Hawaii, woohoo!”

“Well, I’m hungry.”

“I’m hungry, too.”

“And Caddyshack, too.”

“Yeah, Caddyshack, too.”

“You know, “ I added. “I must be crazy ‘cuz you’re never supposed to let a woman cook spaghetti for you. Tell you what. I’ll handle the sauce.”

She laughed again, narrow-eyed and unsure. “What’re you talking about? I make great spaghetti. You are going crazy saying some shit like that.”

“Eh, it’s some shit I heard from some other guy in some other kitchen…”

“With some other girl?” Typical Lucy said. She tried to play along with my silly joke and she goes and has to add this little twist, where she’s still joking but also twisting the knife. That way I would have to tell her, “no-not-some-other-girl. I love you.” All the usual feel-good shit I had to say to make her feel good because she likes that sort of thing. She needs her self-esteem stroked once in a while. Sometimes she could be extremely strong and stubborn like a mule. Other times, she had the confidence of a damn, teenage girl. She might’ve acted like one but Lucy was no teenager. Tomorrow, when I woke up for another day of work, she’d still be there, warming the bed. So, at least I got that going for me.