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# Moving Day

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Russell searched through the last of the boxes marked "clothing" for his favorite baseball cap, finally dumping the box upside down. When he moved in over a month ago he'd stacked the grocery store boxes that held his belongings against the walls of the apartment, placing each box, labeled with black magic marker, in the room where its contents belonged. Clothes and shoes were in the bedroom, towels and linens in the bathroom, books and videos in the living room. The only things he unpacked right away were his sheriff uniforms, and the few kitchen items he brought from the house he'd shared with Carolyn, his wife of eight years. Now, after weeks of picking through boxes to retrieve needed items, the place was a jumble of clean clothes and dirty laundry.

He stared at the pile of clothes, picking up a pair of Carolyn's gym shorts he'd packed by mistake. The divorce had taken him by surprise. He was trained to be aware of details, vigilant of his surroundings. This had been like a car coming out of his blind spot when he was changing lanes, blaring its horn, jolting him out of his complacency, leaving his heart pounding. She said she'd outgrown him -- as if he were shirt, or a child's bike.

In frustration Russell gave up on finding his cap, and on any plans of unpacking today. He took a deep breath and let out a sigh, noticing the fleeting scent of confederate jasmine drifting through the open windows. This mess could wait. It was his day off, but he had one small official assignment to take care of this morning. A vagrant had set up camp on some nearby undeveloped private property. He needed to stop by, tell the transient the owners wanted him to move along. He'd been supposed to stop by yesterday afternoon, but his last call took longer than expected. He'd told his chief he'd make the call this morning. It wouldn't take long. He put on blue jeans and a golf shirt. Why waste a clean uniform on a brief job?

His squad car was dripping with dew from the damp morning. The ground fog intensified the smell of diesel and car exhaust from the nearby highway. Soon the mid-morning sun would dry up everything. The sky promised a bright April day.

Russell turned off the highway onto a side road and drove about a quarter of a mile before pulling the squad car to the shoulder of the road. He looked around until he spotted a barely visible trail going into the woods. Oak and pine trees formed a canopy of shade. It always pleased him to find a pocket of wilderness in the city. With all the uncontrolled development, eventually the woods will all be gone; it hurt him to think about the loss.

As he walked further into the woods the traffic noises became fainter, and the sounds of birds became louder. In the trees all around him were more than a dozen blue jays, squawking and screeching to each other in shrill piercing calls. Russell looked around. About a yard in front

of him was a baby jay, fallen from its nest. He couldn't do anything to help the fledgling so he hurried past it so as not to upset the adults any more than they were. He passed a huge punk tree, its massive fleshy trunk tearing as if it were shedding a skin of damp cardboard. The water hungry trees, Australian natives, were choking up the Florida wetlands.

Walking deeper in to the woods Russell smelled a wood fire. Shortly in front of him, in a clearing, he saw the camp. He expected to find the type of homeless camp he'd seen a dozen times over, especially in the northern part of town, in the area of cheap run-down apartments where people moved in and out so often and quickly it was called Suitcase City. Small camps of makeshift beds, shopping carts with meager belongings, and pieces of blue tarp for shelter pockmarked wooded vacant lots.

What first caught his eye was the large three-sided tent, the open end facing him. Inside he saw a mattress with a faded striped sheet. A milk crate and an orange colored ice chest served as end tables. Their surfaces littered with the usual bedside clutter: a bottle of aspirin, some magazines, and a wind-up clock. From the tent to a tree a droopy clothes line held a couple of sad towels. Nearby, two large cinder blocks, set a couple of feet apart, with an old refrigerator shelf over them straddled the fire he'd smelled. The makeshift stove warmed a coffee kettle. In the middle of the camp were a couple of pieces of a grimy sectional sofa, with a wooden crate and a piece of plywood for a center table.

He heard her before he saw her. Her steps crackled on the fallen oak leaves that carpeted the ground. From behind the large tent came a white, heavy set woman of medium height.

“You one of them suits that was here?” she asked, looking straight at him.

“No, but they sent me.”

“So who are you?” She kept looking right at him.

“Officer Russell Davis,” he said, pulling his badge from his back pocket and showing it to her.

“You come to arrest me?”

“No ma’am, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Leave. Where am I gonna go? Them suits, they walked all around here. Said they owned the land. They’re gonna build a warehouse, one of them storage places. I’ve been here six years. Never seen them before.”

She walked to the stove and prodded the embers with a stick.

“You want some coffee? I ain’t got much ... but I have manners.”

He was startled by her offer, and looked suspiciously at the kettle.

“This ain’t no dumpster food I’m offering you, it’s good fresh coffee. My cups are clean too, if that’s what you’re worried about. I fill up water jugs from the spigot behind Circle K.”

He didn’t want the coffee but knew it’d be a mistake to refuse.

“Sure, thanks.”

She handed him a coffee cup, and he noticed her nails -- gnawed, black-rimmed. He took a tentative sip and was surprised. It was strong smooth coffee, the kind you can always get at truck stops.

“Good.” He gestured his approval by raising the cup as if toasting her.

They sat on the sofa, and the fat of her body, ballooning out of her ash-smudged shorts and t-shirt, quivered when she plopped herself down. Her brown hair, streaked with gray, was pulled back with a rubber band. When she turned to face him, he noticed on her forearm a tattoo of a partially blooming flower. The red petals had thin streaks of pink and white, giving it texture. The rim of each petal was thinly outlined in a deeper red -- all delicate detail that made the flower look real. He'd seen lots of tattoos; this one was quality work.

“Those men said they was breaking ground in a couple of weeks.”

“Yes, ma'am Miss ...”

“Just ... Hannah.”

“Hannah. I'd be happy to drive you, and some of your things to a shelter, I know all the shelters in town, and ...”

“I won't go to no shelter,” she interrupted him. “Them places are full of druggies and crazies.”

“There are agencies that can help...”

She interrupted again. “I don't need no help. I done just fine here; for six years I've been here. Nobody messes with me here. I got all I need.”

“Sure seem to, this is quite a camp. So how'd you manage this, if you don't me asking?” Russell said with a blend of admiration and curiosity.

She looked into his eyes deeply, with still old-soul eyes, “All right.”

He thought it was spooky the way she did that, as if she could see right into his brain. Six years or not, she'd been here for a long time, and she'd managed to survive. Just having taken this long to be discovered was incredible. He'd seen lots of men living in the woods, but never a homeless woman alone. Even the men tended to team up for protection. This woman was resourceful.

She poured more coffee and started talking.

"I get my food stamps every month, I look through dumpsters, pick up cans. I never beg, you know. Sometimes I go to one of those places that hire day labor. Every once in a while they take me. They don't usually want me. I ain't lazy, you know. Just can't read -- never could learn. Something about my brain. But I ain't crazy, and I'm not stupid. Didn't go far in school. This stuff," she waved her arms about, "I've found here and there. I don't steal, if that's what you're thinking."

"No, no, I wasn't thinking that. This is well, just quite a set-up you've made for yourself."

Russell's eyes scanned the camp, catching sight of a thrasher as the honey colored bird moved in a nearby bush.

"It suits me," she said pursing her lips with pride.

"And nobody knew you were here?"

"I've been real careful. Never let no one see me enter the woods. I never told anybody I was here. I never light the fire at night, even when it got real cold. Too easy to spot. And now they're gonna tear up the land, this has been my home."

“I’m real sorry Hannah, but like I said, if you let me, I can help. I can drive you to any agency.”

“Your face don’t hold no meanness, that’s for sure. Don’t hold no judgement neither. Those men in suits and shiny shoes walked around here like they was going to get dirty just breathing the same air as me. Same way with most people. Nope, I tried those agencies after Fred died.” Her voice was flat, and tired.

“Fred?”

“Fred was my husband. Twenty years. He took real good care of me, and I took real good care of him. Especially at the end. His liver went bad,” she said in a low voice, and took a sip of her coffee. “He used to bring me home a flower every time he got a paycheck. Gave myself this one after he died,” she said, tracing the tattoo on her arm with her finger. “Figured it was the last one I was ever going to get. Lost our trailer soon after that.”

Russell felt uncomfortable, unsure of what to say; and said so.

“You can just say thank you for the coffee, and be on your way,” she said her voice strong again. “You won’t be driving me nowhere. All those buildings full of people with eyes I don’t like. Makes you feel like you can’t breathe. I learned, after Fred was gone. It took a while, but I learned. And I like being out here, where a person can breathe. And you Mister sheriff, you done your job. I’ll find me another place somewhere. Don’t you worry, I’ll be gone before they come to break ground.”

“O. K., I’ll let you do it your way. I’ll give you the rest of the week, but if you’re still here when I come back, I drive you to a shelter. Understand?”

Hannah nodded, “Yeah, you’re the law.”

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Russell parked outside the mammoth hardware store, running through a mental list of things he needed for his apartment. He could use a couple of shelves in the living room for books and videos. Maybe he’d get a lamp or two. He knew when he went back Hannah would be gone. The fire would be cold, the tent would be down. He wondered what else she’d take with her. He decided to unpack today after all. He’d throw away the grocery boxes, and start to clean up his things. Everything else would follow.