

New Fiction from Jane Snyder: “Mandy Schott”



They sent us home from school early because of the snow, just hard little flakes at first.

I didn't look in the garage for Dave's car because it was the time when he'd be at work. I went into the room he shares with my mother, took a five from the pile of change and bills on his dresser. When he said my name, I turned, smiled a dopey smile, took my hand out of my back pocket.

He watched as I put the five back. I told him I'd been looking for his miniature handcuffs tie tack.

Dave's a detective, wears suits. The cuffs on his tie tack work. When I was little and got bored in restaurants, he'd let me play with them. I'd snap them shut and he'd look down, say, "I see Seth has apprehended a napkin."

He unpinned it from his tie. "Here you go."

I jumped when he reached his hand out, said I was sorry.

"How 'bout that." He sat on the edge of their bed looking at me. "Not the first time you did it."

I wished it would turn out to be the way it usually does with Dave. Nothing.

I guess I'm not cut out to be a hardened criminal, I'd say.

Nope, Dave would agree. Amateur night.

"I won't do it again."

"I hope not." He leaned back, as if intending to lie all the way down, take a little nap before dinner.

I took a step toward the door. "If that's all..."

He sprawled back, looked bored. "I'm good."

I stayed.

He pulled himself up. "Is there something I can do for you, Seth?"

"I'm sorry."

"So you said."

I couldn't think what to say. "You're an awesome stepdad."

The way he looked at me then was scarier than when he caught me.

In my room I googled what you should do if your kid steals.

Talk to them about how they've lost your trust and what they'll need to do to get it back, serve cheaper food to recoup the financial loss, take them to jail and have the

police lock them in a cell so they know what it feels like, post a video of them wearing a sign that says Thief.

I didn't go when my mother called me for dinner.

Dave knocked on my door the way I'd told him to.

"I'm not hungry."

I got up when he opened the door because I didn't want him to see me lying on my stomach, my butt in the air.

He waited for me so I had to walk in front of him.

We watched the snow from the dining room.

My mother said it made her cold, looking at it.

They're predicting 12 to 14 inches, Dave said. The big dump, he called it.

A major transaction, I agreed.

My mother asked what was wrong.

Dave stood, said he was going to shovel. When he walked by me he reached over and tousled my hair. "Seth can fill you in."

He was the one who was mad. Why couldn't he tell her?

He was still in the hall, putting on his boots, when I said what I'd done.

"Why would you even do something like that?"

"I don't know." I thought of his hand on my head, my hair lifted from one place,

dropped to another.

"Oh, honey. You hurt his feelings."

He gives you anything you want, was what I thought she'd say.

"Am I supposed to be grateful?"

"Yes," she said. "Tell him you're sorry."

"I already did."

"Mean it."

Dave had taken my dog Bonnie with him, was showing her a good time, throwing one of her toys for her, still making quick work of the driveway.

He didn't look like someone you could hurt.

I started on the sidewalk away from him. Where I cleared was messy, not clean the way Dave did it.

He doesn't usually have me shovel, tells me to stay inside, keep warm, he needs the exercise.

"You're putting too much pressure on your back," he said. He'd finished the driveway, was working down the sidewalk toward me. "Bend your knees when you lift."

After we went inside I stayed in the laundry room with Bonnie as long as I could, rubbing her down. She's a beagle, short-haired, can't shake the snow off the way a longhaired dog can. When I walked by the kitchen Dave told me to bring him the money I'd taken. "If you have it. If you don't we'll work something out."

I had it. Also two hundred dollars of Christmas money and eighty dollars left from my report card money in November.

I scuttled to my room to get the money, thirty dollars.

He put it in his pocket without looking at it.

"I'm sorry."

"Go to bed now."

School had already been cancelled for tomorrow, Friday. I was hoping he'd want to watch a movie with me.

It was 8:30, an hour before my school night bedtime. I felt sorry for myself, lying alone in the dark. Dave's mean, I told myself. My real father wouldn't be this way.

My friend Carl would say I got off easy. When we talked about stealing, Carl said you won't believe what you can get away with. I'd said if Dave catches me it's the end of the world as we know it.

Bonnie stayed downstairs because Dave was eating. I could hear the microwave ding, got up and opened my door a crack, heard Dave telling my mom I'd just been feeling my oats, whatever that meant. "Kids do stupid stuff sometimes. Don't worry about it."

When they came up Bonnie jumped into bed with me, settled on my chest.

I woke at the usual time the next morning, couldn't get back to sleep.

Dave was at the stove, asked how I wanted my eggs, said he'd appreciate it if he could take me and Bonnie over to his folks today. Give his dad a hand with the shoveling, keep them company. He asked politely, like I had a choice.

I shoveled our snow after I ate. It was easier today.

"Looks good," Dave said, when he and my mom came out.

He could have said sucking up to him didn't change anything.

I don't mind going to my grandparents, Dave's parents. They're nice and they stuff Bonnie and me like Strasbourg geese, Dave says. I shoveled with my grandpa in the morning, was in the kitchen doing homework, drinking Coke, and eating the muddy buddies my grandma makes for me, when she called me to come

quick, my dad was on TV.

She meant Dave. My real father is in California, I think.

Dave and the chief of police, looking serious, were standing behind a woman named Mandy Schott. "Help me," she cried. "Help me find my baby."

They TV station showed a picture of the baby, Ciara, fourteen months old, in a fancy red dress, sitting on Santa's lap.

"Precious," my grandma said. "See how she's looking around like she just doesn't know what to think."

Mandy said she'd taken Ciara to the mall, had finished shopping, was walking across the parking lot to her car, carrying Ciara because she was fussy. "It was past time for her nap." She smiled sadly. She'd opened her car door, Mandy said, leaned in to put Ciara in her car seat, when a man, a big Black man, pulled her back, ripped a screaming Ciara from her arms and tossed her, Ciara, like a sack of potatoes, into his SUV, also black, and took off.

Mandy was wearing one of the orange T-shirts Trucktown passed out at the fair this year. I could have gotten one but they weren't great and I didn't want to stand in line.

She was large and the shirt was too small.

She cried. "Please help me."

The chief said they'd welcome any information from the public.

Dave's the head detective and the other detectives hang out in his office. "How big is that big Black man?" one of them would ask.

As big as Quinton Lamar Spain, someone would say, bigger, and they'd laugh.

"I'll bet it was her," I said. "Mandy."

My grandma got mad. "How can you say that? Her own mother hurting that sweet little girl."

My grandpa winked at me. "Seth, do you think we should tell your grandma what your dad does for a living?"

"Surely you don't think she's lying?"

"A Black man with a white baby would attract attention."

"You're terrible," my grandma said. "Just terrible."

"Yes, dear," my grandfather said, fake meek. My grandma laughed when we did, said she was ashamed of herself.

Dave came to get me early.

My grandpa gave me a twenty for shoveling. I felt funny, because of what I'd done, tried to hand it back. Dave said I'd probably already eaten my pay in cookies, "but you can take it, Seth."

That was nice of you, he said, when we were outside with Bonnie.

We walked home. Dave said he'd be sitting on a hard chair all night working on hemorrhoid development, needed a break. I imagined him talking to his parents about me stealing. "I hate it," he'd say, "but we have to face facts. Let me know if anything goes missing."

"Are you going to tell Grandma and Grandpa what I did?"

He looked surprised. "Of course not."

I wondered if I'd hurt his feelings again. "I'm sorry."

"That was my line."

Bonnie stopped to take a whiz. I bent down to pet her.

"You get any closer she'll splash your face. Give the little

lady her privacy and stand up and listen to me.”

That’s why he’d come home early, he said, to talk. He hadn’t handled it right, should have put a stop to it as soon as he knew I was stealing. “I was wrong to trick you.”

I was embarrassed.

“Shouldn’t you be telling me it’s wrong to steal and it doesn’t matter if I’m sorry, all matters is if I steal again?”

He looked at me the way he did yesterday afternoon. I don’t know why I didn’t take what he was offering, let things go back to the way they were.

“I think you knew that all along, Seth.”

Bonnie finished, kicked a little snow over the yellow spot. Good girl, I told her, though it was snowing again, covering everything up.

“Yes sir.” Dave doesn’t like being called sir. I told him I was sorry again.

“I got that part.”

We went a block without saying anything.

When we were in our yard he stuck a foot in front of me, an old trick of his I never see coming, caught me when I lost my balance, lowered me to the ground, said I was a dirty bird but he’d take care of that, rubbed my face with snow. Cold, but the new snow was soft, didn’t hurt the way the dirt-cruste old snow would. I grabbed his arms, donkey kicked. He slid backwards, letting me get to my feet.

Bonnie barked, ran in circles around us. We were hiding behind trees, throwing snowballs, yelling ‘you’re going down,’ at each other, when my mother came home from work, told Dave, smiling, he was getting me too wound up, what she used to say

when I was little.

“Not my fault, Honey Gal. I wanted to build a snowman.” Then he went back to work.

Because of the extra day off, maybe, the weekend seemed long. Dave came home late Saturday night after I was in bed, went to bed himself. I heard his phone ring as it was getting light.

Before he left he came into my room to take Bonnie out, told me to go back to sleep.

He came home Sunday smelling of dirt and pine. My mom and I were eating supper and he looked at the spaghetti on our plates, said it was too slippery for him, trying to joke. I’m too tired to swallow, he said, when my mom offered to make him whatever he wanted. She helped him to bed, but he was up before I was Monday morning, frying bacon.

“I made plenty,” he said, loading my plate.

During Biology, I turned on my phone, wanted to know if they’d found Ciara. Dave was on again, getting out of his car. Mandy Schott was in the passenger’s seat.

“You’re going to jail, Piggly Wiggly Woman,” Carl said, looking over my shoulder.

Dave spoke into the camera, before he walked around to open the door for her, said Ms. Schott was cooperating with the police investigation, needed a break.

They didn’t look like a couple on a date because Dave is too old, forty-seven.

My mother is thirty-six. I’d thought Mandy Schott was her age or a little older, but on TV they said she was nineteen.

I recognized the restaurant. Dave takes us there.

He’d put his hand on what was probably the small of Mandy’s

back when they were walking across the parking lot but he's that way with all women. Stands up when they come into a room, opens doors, helps them with their coats.

Mandy would like the way Dave looks at you when you talk, interested.

He'd have a salad because he likes the bleu cheese dressing there. But the soup is good too, he'd tell Mandy. The Firehouse chili, maybe. He wanted the Reuben with homemade potato chips but the Monte Cristo is also excellent.

They'd have the sugar cream pie, a second cup of coffee. Or, if Mandy wasn't used to drinking coffee, Dave would tell her to have another Coke.

At the counter where you paid they had candy like Twin Bings and Malty Meltys, stuff you don't see much, and he'd take his time helping her figure out what she wanted. After they left the restaurant, when they were in his car, he'd asked her to tell him, please, where Ciara was, and then he and Mandy Schott drove around the lake long enough for her to eat her Charleston Chews before he took her to the police station.

My mother asked him if he'd put the lunch in his expense report. He said no, he didn't need to buy Mandy lunch for her to tell him what he needed to know. "I just felt sorry for her."

My mother said Dave was the one she felt sorry for. All that work and nothing to show for it but a dead child.

"You're not making sense," I told him. A nice meal wouldn't make up for prison.

"You're right. I hope I didn't make things worse for her."

You couldn't, my mother said. "Her life can't get any worse."

I'd looked at my phone again on the way home from school, saw

the cadaver dog, Dagwood. I know him. His handler, Sergeant Mays, brings him to the Super Bowl Party we have at our house every year. The first time he came, when I was seven, I'd asked Dave if he could live with us after he retired from police work. "Did you see how much he liked me? He can sleep in my bed. I'll take good care of him."

"I know you would," he'd said, "but he's young, won't retire for a long time. Anyway, Ken Mays, and his wife, and his kids, are crazy for him. They'll want to keep him."

He brought Bonnie home the next weekend. Eight weeks old and, like Dagwood, a beagle.

On TV Dagwood was excited, jumping high as he could on his short legs. When he sat down, which is how he signals he's found something, the police moved around him to block the cameras so you couldn't see what it was.

The next time I saw him, Sergeant Mays was kneeling in front of him, giving him a treat, smiling and making over him, so Daggie Dog would know he'd done something good. If Sergeant Mays were to cry Dagwood would think he'd disappointed him.

Dave said the cops could see the outline of Ciara's body under the mud as soon as Dagwood headed there.

I thought Mandy hadn't made the grave deep because she didn't want to let Ciara go. I know it sounded stupid, but Dave said he thought so too. "She loves that little girl."

"Is that what you talked about at lunch?"

"No. We talked about high school and all the fun she had getting high with her stoner friends, shitting on toilet seats in the girls' room, banging the lids down on top to smear it, skipping class to go shoplifting at Dilliard's, spray painting gym lockers with the N-word, harassing the Korean shop owners on Townes Street, trashing the teachers' cars."

“Really?”

“Best years of her life.”

My mom sighed. She felt sorry for Mandy too.

Dave said it was going to storm. “I’m glad we found Ciara when we did. Dag can work through snow but they’re expecting eight inches tonight and we might not have been able to find the landmarks Mandy gave us.”

I wondered how Mandy was doing. She’d be on suicide watch, I knew, because Dave had told me that’s what they do at the jail for at least the first 24 hours, if someone’s charged with a high profile crime. One of the jail officers would check on her every fifteen minutes, maybe sit in front of her cell talking to her, trying to keep her spirits up.

I asked Dave if blunt force trauma, which was listed on the arrest warrant as the probable cause of death, would hurt, or if Ciara would have passed out right away.

“Passed out,” he said. “At her age, the skull isn’t fully developed, so she couldn’t take much, but her injuries occurred over time and she’d have periods of consciousness when she hurt.” He stood, knelt by my chair, held my right foot, still in my shoe, prodded it. “Tight in the box.”

“They feel okay.”

“They won’t for long.” He said he’d take me to the Nike store Saturday.

“You just bought him those.”

“When his little tootsies are sore he can’t concentrate on his school work.”

Once my mother had said when she was in foster care it was a treat to go to Walmart for school clothes, instead of

Goodwill.

"I hope you realize how lucky you are," she said tonight.

"What's for dessert?"

Dave laughed, my mother too. But nobody likes a smart aleck, she said.

"I like this one." I didn't hear anything sour in Dave's voice. "I like him a lot."

"You shouldn't swear in front of him. If he copies you he'll get in trouble at school."

"Seth's too smart for that."

He'd said shit, I remembered. Maddy spread shit, wanting someone to sit in it.

It started snowing for real after dinner. Dave said we might as well wait till morning before we shoveled. "You want to watch Justice League?"

Dave fell asleep on the couch as soon as he'd finished his lemon drizzle cake, his head back, his mouth open.

"He's tired, poor sweetie," my mother said, spreading the afghan over him, though we were warm, before she sat down on Dave's other side.

I slumped against him. Bonnie got in my lap and I scratched her head the way she likes. There's a velvet pillow on the couch I used to pat when I was little. Bonnie's coat is better. Soft, thick, sweet.

Dave snored a little, singsong.

I saw I was holding onto Dave's hand, the way I did before I was allowed to cross the street by myself.

He woke, kissed the side of my mother's face, looked down at my hand, smiled before he went back to sleep.

New Nonfiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: "Othello Avenue"



In the cold autumn dawn shadows blanket Othello Avenue, the parked cars and vans little more than gauzy, damp lumps, like furniture hidden beneath old sheets in a darkened room. The rising sun reveals a towering red sign with white lettering

promoting, Wentworth Automotives, like some sort of beacon to the new day, and the increasing light penetrates the San Diego fog until it offers a display of dewy windshields and the dented metal of damaged bumpers and wet, warped cardboard in place of broken windows. In a 2003 VW station wagon, Robin sleeps on her right side, mouth open, the back of the front seat pushed down so that her body can conform to this rough and barely endurable estimate of a bed, and in a white Chrysler Town and Country behind her, Michael lies prone where there once had been a passenger seat. Out of the open passenger window of an RV rise the sounds of sleep from another man, Steve, snoring amid a disaster of discard-castoff shirts, pants, cereal cartons, plastic bottles, generator cords, pop cans, stained styrofoam plates, magazines and mountains of crumpled paper.

Across the street behind a Target two cats, a Siamese and an orange tabby, stare out the windshield of a 1982 Chevrolet P30 Winnebago. Its owner, Katrina, rouses herself from a bed in the back, stretches, yawns and presses the heels of her palms against her eyes.

She found the Siamese cat tied up in a plastic bag in bushes behind Target. She can't believe what some people do. Her boyfriend, Teddy, still asleep, rolls onto his side. He manages a gas station and gets off at six in the morning. Husband, Katrina calls him. Marriage a ceremony neither can afford and perhaps the fragility of their lives warns them against. Tweakers both of them but clean now. She looks out a window at the cracked street still wet from the calm night. A block away, the silence is being nibbled away by cars on Interstate 805, soon to be a madness of rush-hour traffic. Not long from now Katrina will awaken to other noises. She wonders what those will be. Some traffic, sure, this is San Diego.

Every city has traffic but maybe she'll hear birdsong, too. Waking up to birds as she did as a child. Imagine. She and Teddy recently found an apartment through the housing authority. Of the nearly 8,500 homeless people in San Diego County, more than 700 live in vehicles. Almost 500 emergency housing vouchers became available in 2021 to address housing insecurity worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Katrina and Teddy got one of the vouchers, but it took them nearly a year to find a place. One landlord told her, All people on Section 8 have bedbugs. She felt he was just lumping her into a stereotype. In her opinion, there're the bums who are content being homeless, and then there are people like her and Teddy who are working but don't have a place to live.

The landlord who finally accepted their application rents apartments on Loma Way. She offered Katrina and Teddy a two bedroom with brown linoleum floors. Much better than that cheap brown carpet so many apartments have, especially with cats. Katrina checked it out on Google Maps and thought it looked like crap. But the photo she saw was old. When she and Teddy met with the landlord they found that all of the apartments had been recently remodeled and freshly painted. Nine hundred and fifty square feet. Beats the thirty-two square feet of the Winnebago and the leaky roof. When it rains, water pours into the bedroom and kitchenette. Teddy will shove her to one side of the bed so he can stay dry, her body pressed against the frayed particleboard of a cabinet. The other day, her mother called from Utah and said a foot of snow had fallen. Tell her we got a foot of rain inside, Teddy said. When they were using drugs they draped tarps over their tent to keep out the rain. One night, Katrina had to be life-flighted out of a riverbed near the golf course behind Fashion Valley Mall because of flooding. She was detoxing from speed and shaking so bad she couldn't climb out ahead of the rising waters.

The landlord did not hold the history of drug arrests and

convictions against them. As long as you tell me the truth before I do a background check, you'll be fine, she had told them. They can move in two weeks. Hard to imagine having a place after living in the Winnebago for a year. No, eighteen months. A year and a fucking half. She and Teddy didn't sleep much when they lived on the street before the Winnebago. Afraid who might walk up on them. Katrina knows three people who died, one stabbed, two OD'd. Bad stuff. If you make someone mad they can hide anywhere and come for you about just stupid stuff. Could be a guy touched someone's backpack. People are nuts about their packs. This one dude took a guy's pack because he owed him money. The pack had his heart meds and he died that night of a stroke. At least that's what the paramedics said. Scary out there.

Robin stirs, opens one eye and watches a man walk past her car wheeling a garbage can. He picks up pieces of paper with a trash picker, peers at her, glances away and moves on in a desultory fashion suggesting that the sight of her provided only a temporary diversion from the mindless tedium of his task. She sits up, opens both of her eyes wide, squints, opens them again allowing the morning to sift around in her head until it settles into the beginning of yet another day, then she pulls the door handle, gets out and stretches. She wears a faded, green sweatshirt and gray sweatpants. Short, stocky. A wrestler's build. Her brown hair falls around her cheeks. She holds a hand over her eyes against the sun. No clouds. Down the street toward The 805, a sign promoting Hawthorne Crossings shopping center shines in the sun as do the names of stores listed beneath it: Staples, Cycle Gear, Ross, Book Off, Dollar Tree.

The staff at Cycle Gear throw away bike helmets like confetti. The slightest dent and scratch and they're tossed into a

dumpster. Robin has seen Teddy collect them to recycle. Teddy's out there, a hustler. He says he even finds Rolex watches but he's got to be bragging or lying or both, right? C'mon, Robin tells herself, selling just one Rolex would get him off Othello. But he and Mike keep the tweekers away. Othello Avenue is quiet for the most part but if someone parks here to get high, those two are on them and get them gone, they sure do. Robin doesn't know Katrina and Teddy well, or Mike for that matter. Talks to them but not all the time. What's the point? Get to know people and then they leave. Katrina and Teddy aren't staying. If all goes well, she won't be far behind them.

Robin has lived in her VW for about a year. Stick shift. Saving for a new clutch. She has a clutch kit but needs someone to install it. The car is her everything. It's a mess of Burger King wrappers and coffee cups but it ain't horrible. She's not a packrat like Steve. When it becomes a mess, she cleans it and when it turns into a mess again, she cleans it again. Like her life. She works as a caregiver for a grandmother and her two-year-old granddaughter. The child's mother lives on the street turning tricks for crack, a toothless, emaciated figure peering wide-eyed into the slow trolling cars. In four weeks, Robin will move in with a man who needs in-home care 24/7. She has known him for eight years. Not well but they talked a lot over the years. A Polish guy, Harold. In his sixties, maybe seventies. He lived next door to a mutual friend. He sorted mail at a post office before he retired. He wanted to be a cop but, he told Robin, in those days the San Diego Police Department wouldn't hire a Pole. Injured his hip on the job and it's given him problems ever since. He's in Carmel Mountain Rehabilitation & Healthcare Center now. Comes out in about four weeks. She's ready to move in with him, ready for a room of her own. She'll sleep a lot the first couple of days, she's sure.

The median home price in San Diego County has surpassed

\$500,000 and the median monthly rent is almost \$2,800. Some studios downtown rent for \$2,000 a month. With prices like those, Robin feels grateful for the arrangement with Harold. It won't be her place but it'll be better than living in the VW, and she'll still have time to help the woman with the grandchild. With two jobs, she should do all right. She used to clerk at a day-old bread store for four years until she screwed up. Was going through a divorce.. Was going to casinos and losing money. She stole one hundred dollars from a cash register at work one afternoon. Got caught, got fired. Then one night at a casino she lost what little money she had left and in her fury she punched the window of a slot machine and broke it. Damn window must've been pretty wobbly because she didn't hit it that fucking hard. Prosecutors charged her with a Class A misdemeanor for destruction of property. Had to pay \$1,800 for that little bitty window plus the one hundred dollars she owed the bread company. People in charge don't play. Stuff follows you. Background checks screwed her when she put in job applications. She left her apartment with only her clothes and took to the streets. When she got tired of being in her car, she pitched a tent in one of the many canyons around the city. She tried to think of it as camping, but she missed her bed.

Mike sits in the driver's seat of the Chrysler, left elbow out the window like a bored taxi driver waiting for a fare. His blonde hair falls to his shoulders. One side of his scruffy beard skewed from sleep. Heavy set, he looks much younger than his sixty-one years. Thick body, his belly spills over his belt buckle. His black shirt, speckled with dandruff, stinks of his unwashed body. The stale air within his vehicle carries his funk. He rolls down the passenger window and feels the breezy crosscurrents. Steve appears in his side mirror walking up from behind the Chrysler, a skinny little dude the same age

as Mike, T-shirt and jeans sloppy with wrinkles hanging off his body. He pauses, pokes his head in, Hey. Mike. Says he'd gone to Target for coffee and dropped his phone but someone found it and gave it back to him. Pretty lucky, huh? Stressed him out. Feels exhausted. Gonna take a nap. See you, Mike. He walks to his RV, turns to face Mike again as if to fix him there. Mike makes a face, folds his arms and looks down and shakes his head. Steve'd lose his arms if it they weren't attached to his shoulders. He's OK. Harmless. Suffered a head injury in a motorcycle accident, or so he says. Might have TBI. Mike considers himself lucky that he doesn't have it. Or maybe he does. He can be forgetful. When he was in the army, a tank hatch cover fell on his head. Dropped him like a stick. He receives VA disability, about a \$1,000 a month.

The other day, he saw Katrina, and she told him that she and Teddy had found a place. They don't talk much but if he splurges on a pizza, he'll offer them a slice. Steve and Robin, too, if he has enough. Good for them. So many homeless people. Mike keeps his head down, minds his own business. If he sees someone shooting up in their car or loading a pipe, he writes the license plate number and calls the cops. They show up eventually. He tells the tweakers, I know what you're doing. Get out. He doesn't yell at them. That'd be a good way to get a gun in his face. Teddy always backed him up. Now, Mike just might have to settle for calling the police and leave it at that.

Every morning he drives four or five blocks, gets something to eat. He has received tickets for being parked in one place too long. Five of those and the city will tow him, and then where'd he be? Carl's Jr., it's close. Gas costs too much to go far. He has up-to-date tags so he's good there, and insurance, he's got that too. It's hard to get insurance being homeless. He lies. Gives the DMV an old address. They don't check. He loves to cook but can't in his car, of course. He warms soup at a 7-Eleven. McDonald's, Denny's, Jack in the

Box, they're not too expensive. His doctor says he has high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes. Blood pressure off the charts. Well, doc, I eat nothing but fast food. At Costco, he gets grapes, cherries, and water. Bananas, too, but on hot days after hours in the car they begin to turn brown and spotty. In cold weather he'll buy up to six bananas. If he eats one a day, they'll be gone before they spot.

He worked as a home healthcare aide for his old man for thirty-eight years after a driver ran his dad off a highway in Arizona. It was 1979. The old man had dropped Mike off at a boy scout jamboree near the Grand Canyon and got hit on his way back home. Never did catch the guy. Mike was something like a junior in high school at the time. Yellow paint from the driver's car etched into the old man's passenger door. He flipped into a ravine. His headlights tunneled straight into the night sky. He broke about every bone that could be broken and remained in St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix for a year. Came out a paraplegic but he didn't quit living. He met a woman from San Diego, got married and moved with her to California. Mike stayed in Arizona, married his high school sweetheart and joined the Army. Bootcamp at Fort. Lewing, Washington. Served three years on the DMZ in South Korea. That was enough. Came home, got his wife pregnant. He worked at KFC, Jack in the Box, and Jiffy Lube. Bounced from one job to another. Eight months later, he and his wife divorced. Young love gets to be old love and then no love at all after a while. He had gotten into speed by then. The old man told him to come to San Diego. Mike had nothing keeping him in Arizona, so he moved, settled next door to his father in Oceanside. In 1986 he began taking care of him full time after the old man's wife left him. Like father, like son. Shot speed with his sister, who lived in Santee, a suburb.

The old man died in October 2018. Eighty-nine years old, three months shy of ninety. Had dementia in his final years. He served in Korea during the war, won a Bronze Star, three

clusters. Before he got dementia in 2011, he volunteered at the VA. Mike didn't know about the medal until he sorted through his dad's things. That sort of bothers him. After so much time together, they shouldn't have had secrets. He thought they were as tight as Siamese twins. Guess not. Goes to show. He's not sure what but it does. The old man never talked about the war to anyone so he didn't deny Mike anything he hadn't denied others. And he never confronted Mike on his drug use. Fair's, fair. But Mike wasn't anyone else. He cared for him for decades even when he was high. So much for family. Caring for the old man for so long, Mike didn't have much job experience. No résumé that'd count for shit. By May 2019, nearly a year later, almost out of money, he moved into his Chrysler. He's not using drugs now but his sister still is so he won't stay with her even if she offered to take him in which she hasn't. He stares out his windshield at Steve's RV. Steve has two grown sons. They aren't offering him a bed. So much for family.

Steve stirs from his nap as the draft from a passing car rocks his RV. He has so much crap he can't open the side door. To get out, he wriggles through the sliding window that separates the cab from the back of the RV squinching his nose, and while still on his stomach, sprawled across the driver and passenger seats, his legs bent, toes balanced against the driver's window, he opens the passenger door and crawls out to the sidewalk. Loose tennis balls and a fishing pole, follow him. He bends and tugs at his belt and a man walking past glances at him and keeps going. Steve picks up the pole and tennis balls and drops them on the passenger seat. He went fishing the night before, caught one small fish, and threw it back. Watched it swim crookedly to the bottom and felt bad he had hurt it. He decided not to fish again giving up a diversion that began in his childhood. Loved the rhythm of tossing the

line, reeling it in. Kind of hypnotic. Almost disappointed when a fish took the bait and broke the spell. He was born in San Diego but spent a big part of his childhood in a Fresno ranch house. He just saw it after God knows how many years, decades really. Super cool. He had driven his niece, Nicole, to Washington state where her husband was stationed in the Navy. She had been visiting friends in San Diego and needed a ride. When the bottom fell out of his life, Steve lived with Nicole for a time in Liberty Military Housing – Murphy Canyon until her husband was transferred to Washington. He keeps in touch with his sons, Jacob and Gabrielle. Gabriele is in the Air Force in New Mexico. Jacob lives in University Heights, San Diego. Computer guy. Steve uses his address for mail. Jacob lives with his daughter, Scout, 7, and his girlfriend. Not enough room for Steve, at least that's what he assumes. Jacob gave him one hundred dollars one time. That was nice. He wants to believe his boys have faith in him. He doesn't pull alarms. He doesn't complain.

Steve was on his way back to San Diego after he'd dropped Nicole off when he decided to stop in Fresno and check out his old childhood place. More developed now, nothing like it was in 69' when he was kid. He had pulled over and just looked at the low-slung brown house, closed his eyes and his memories played out like a movie. He took a bus to school, walked down the long driveway when it pulled up. Cows nearby strolled in their heavy, head-bobbing way, pausing to pull at grass, and chickens wandered fields. That night as he slept in his RV, someone stole the generator he had strapped to the bumper. In the morning, when he realized what had happened, he shook his head with the innocence of someone who could not fathom how such a thing could happen anymore than how he could comprehend inadvertently injuring that fish. He continued his drive back to San Diego and Othello Avenue.

The morning progresses. Emaciated weeds grow through cracks in the sidewalk, vine-like and pale green. Palm trees sway. The noise of children and women drift from the Target parking lot. Gulls bob on currents staring down at the confusion below them and a few alight on the hot pavement of Othello Avenue snagging a speck of something before flapping their wings and rising again.

Katrina starts work at ten in the morning, stands behind the counter of the Häagen-Dazs store in Fashion Valley Mall and opens a box of paper cups. She wears a black T-shirt with the Häagen-Dazs logo and she ties her long hair in a ponytail. This is her time, the early hours. Gets more done working by herself, restocking for the afternoon and evening rush.

You have chocolate? Someone asks, poking their head in the door.

Of course.

I'll be by after lunch.

I'll be here, Katrina says.

She has worked part-time at the store for about a year and earns about \$1,600 a month. A customer, a four-year-old girl named Sophie, recently asked her to be her best friend. Katrina smiled and agreed. Another asks for pumpkin ice cream, a combination that sounds disgusting to Katrina. She has gotten to know a hairdresser and her three daughters. Another customer said he'd miss her when she told him she had applied for a job at the Target store where she and Teddy park. It would be a wonderful opportunity to work there and so convenient. Even after they move, it would be closer than Fashion Valley and better pay with benefits.

She finds a stepladder and climbs onto the bottom rung so she can reach a box of styrofoam bowls from a shelf. Raising her arms, she arches her back. Her body curves, her shirt and pants tight to her body. A man pauses by the door and admires her. She grins. It's good to be noticed. Good to feel attractive. Good to like herself, her figure. She pulls the box and sets it on the counter. Reminds herself to call her mother. She normally does every morning but she was running late today.

Katrina was born in Orem, Utah, and moved to Huntsville, Utah, when she was eight. She liked Huntsville, a small, quiet town. No weirdos. As a little girl she could hang out with friends in a park at night and play hide-and-seek near their elementary school. Rode their bikes. In the winter they met at the ice-skating rink. Father a diesel mechanic. She has two brothers in Washington near the Canadian border. Can't recall the town. Another one still lives in Utah. Doesn't hear from any of them.

Her senior year in high school she met a guy and got pregnant four months before graduation. She doesn't know what she liked about him. He was cute: she was in love. They were young and she thought he was perfect. Even when she realized he wasn't, she stayed with him. Her parents had divorced and she didn't want her kids to grow up like that.

Stupid, she says to herself.

He didn't work, sold drugs and introduced her to heroin and pills. In 2016, they divorced. She kept the kids until her mother informed the Department of Social Services about her drug use. Katrina had tried to hide it from her, but she knew. She saw her hanging out a lot with a crowd that looked like they hadn't bathed in a month. Katrina didn't allow her to see the kids because she didn't want her mother to see her. So, yeah, she knew. Her ex-husband's aunt ended up raising the children. A blessing, Katrina thinks now. They've done better

without her. A twenty-year-old son joined the Marines; her eighteen-year-old son is about to graduate high school, and her thirteen-year-old daughter joined the girls 'eighth grade wrestling team. She hasn't spoken to them in two, three years. The last time they talked, it didn't go well. Pissed off at her for leaving them. They'll come around. She's different now. She writes letters and sends gifts, tries not to beat herself up. Does it hurt? Yeah. Does she feel bad? Yeah, but she can't change the past. Guilt makes her want to get high. She's no good to them high. That's how she lost them. A lot of tweakers don't quit. Or they do but just for a minute. They stop and look around and all they see are the bushes and dirt where they live. They start thinking about the mess they've made of their lives and they get high to stop thinking. So, yeah, she feels bad but she's happy for her children. And for herself now.

Katrina did four months in a Utah prison for theft and other charges resulting from her drug use including prescription fraud. When she got out, she met a truck driver whose route included California, Colorado and Utah. He'd stop at the Flying J Truck stop in Ogden where Katrina panhandled for drug money. The trucker bought her a sandwich from Denny's every time he came through. They became good acquaintances if not friends and after five years, he told her if she ever cleaned up he'd put her up in his San Diego home. In 2017, she got on a Greyhound bus and took him up on it. He died a year later at sixty-two of cancer. Katrina started using meth again and stayed in Presidio Park. She met Teddy about the same time outside of a 7-Eleven, tall, skinny and handsome and high on speed. He had just done a ten year stretch for drug crimes. He kept getting busted until his most recent release from prison in January 2019 when he decided to clean up. He told Katrina he was through with drugs and had even stopped smoking cigarettes. He wouldn't see her unless she also quit. She did. When they received their housing voucher Teddy told her to leave him, that she'd have better luck finding a place alone.

His extensive prison record, he said, would hold her back. Why would I leave you when you helped me get clean? she asked him.

With Katrina at work Teddy awakens alone. On his off days, he hustles with the instincts he honed scoring drugs. He found twenty-six helmets from the dumpster behind Cycle Gear one night. Abandoned shirts, pants and jackets he sells at swap meets fifty cents to a dollar. Jewelry, iPhones, he finds it all. He buys aluminum cans from homeless people, a penny a pop, and sells them to recycling centers. He has \$250 worth of cans in the Winnebago. The cats squat on the sacked piles like royalty. His babies, Teddy calls them. Coils of tattoos snake down his arm and both sides of his neck. Braided hair down his back. Not like he was when Katrina met him but filled out. Buffed. A presence. He stops shoplifters busting out the back doors of Target with carts full of stolen stuff. One man yelled at him, At least let me keep the shoes! He didn't. Teddy runs Othello Avenue.

Robin knows a lot of people, even a few with homes. There's a woman she works with now while she waits for the postal worker to get out of rehab. She helps her raise a two-year-old granddaughter. The girl's mother runs the streets. This woman, the grandmother, used to live on the streets. Just got a place. Everybody Robin knows needs a little bit of help, and she's not afraid to help herself. Robin loves to work. Never once was she on welfare. Always found some kind of job even if it was only day labor. She passed those values onto her daughter, now thirty-years old living in Colorado working as a teacher's aide. Married with two kids. Robin can go out and see her anytime but she ain't no beggar. She'll visit when she

has money. She's never been like the guy she sees now on the sidewalk by the shopping center, flat on his back, using his T-shirt to cover his face from the sun. No, never that bad. She always had a tent, a stove, and a good place near a highway or in a canyon when she got tired of the cramped conditions of her car. Police charged her with vagrancy more than a few times. She probably still has bench warrants from all her citations. Was it vagrancy or trespassing? She doesn't know. Whichever, it's not worth the time of any cop that's not an asshole to bother her about it. She's met all kinds of homeless people: the desperate, the meth heads, and the general trouble kind. One guy slammed her face with a rock in a Starbucks parking lot in Clairmont. Crazy. What did she do? Nothing. Still sees him jabbering to himself. Robin knows she's a mess but she's not crazy. A little touched maybe. Takes that to survive out here.

Steve has a 1973 sHonda CT90 in a carrier on the rear of the RV. Sweet little ride. Nice orange job. Sort of a keepsake, he guesses, from his good, younger days. He was into motorcycles as a kid. In high school, he rode a Honda Cl 175. He loved the way it turned, getting low to the road. Wind in his hair bugs, in his teeth. It was all that. Not a team sport, really, motorcycling. Just him and his bike and the road. All that. He moved up to a BSA DB350 and then a Yamaha RD 400. It was fast but heavy, it felt like he was riding a bus. He traded it for a Yamaha RD 350. Smooth better handling. Nimble. An extension of himself. His wife Sandi would sit behind him, arms wrapped around his waist. First date with her was on the last day of his senior year in high school, 1979. Pretty as all get out. Captain of the drill team. They had a history class together. Married in 1985. He scrolls through old photographs on his phone. There he is in a blue helmet showing all his teeth in a wide grin; there he is crouched low over the handlebars; there

he is posing with a white Labrador retriever, his two young sons and Sandi, her mouth open with the same tooth dazzling smile he has.

Steve stopped riding after he crashed his 350 in November 1988. He was out with his buddies on California-78 and Banner Grade when they stopped for a break.. A beautiful day. One of those clear days where the sky stretches forever. The road ran into a flat stretch flanked by scrub and desert. Steve had a sip of a friend's beer, put his helmet back on and said, I'm going to see the rest of this road. Sightseeing, staring at distant mountains going eighty miles an hour. Not paying attention. He skidded, lost control and hit the pavement striking his head, brains scrambled. He remained in a hospital for three weeks. Sandi had just given birth to Jacob three months earlier. Steve tried to return to work but he couldn't focus on any one task for very long. He forgot what he was doing almost as soon as he began it. At home, he tried to help Sandi with Jacob. He understood he needed five scoops of formula to make his bottle but he couldn't remember how to count to five.

He lost his job but found another as a maintenance man with a packing company. His boss wrote down what she wanted him to do so he wouldn't forget. He was named an employee of the month one year but was laid off a short time afterward. In 2009, after years of taking odd jobs, he went on disability. Eight years later, he found a love letter to Sandi in the glove compartment of her car from another man. Steve called her all kinds of names and she slapped him and he shouted, Hit me like you gotta pair, bitch! She moved out the next day. He remained in the house until 2019 when they sold it, and then he moved in with a woman he had met on an online dating site. After two months and endless arguments, he left her and stayed with Nicole and her husband. When they left for Washington, he settled into his RV. He doesn't know where his money from the sale of the house went. He believes the IRS took thousands of

dollars for back taxes but he doesn't know why and amid all his junk he can't find any documentation to confirm that. He cashed out some of his savings with the idea of moving to Mexico but he thinks he left the money in a bag somewhere or did something else with it. Whatever. He doesn't have it. He knows that much. Some days, he scrolls through his phone and looks at old family photos. He sends angry texts to friends condemning Sandi. *She's a narcissist, cheated. I discovered her dirty, little secret.* He looks at pictures of his bikes like a lover. My beloved RD350. My beautiful RD 400. My gorgeous Super Sport 750 Ducati.

This morning, he considers the mess inside the RV. He has an older brother, Joe, in Las Vegas, a retired maintenance man. Move in with me, Joe has suggested. His son, Joe Jr., runs a pest control business in San Antonio. Steve could work for him. They've talked about it but he can't decide. Should he move to Las Vegas and be with his brother or San Antonio and work for Joe Jr? He doesn't know. He feels so overwhelmed sometimes his head hurts. Today, I'll throw away trash, he tells himself. He needs to do something.

A damp breeze tosses crumpled food wrappers across Othello Avenue. Pigeons strut, pecking at the ground. A slow moving semi-truck rattles a rusted sewer lid as it turns into the driveway of Wentworth Automotive. The driver swings out holding a clipboard and walks with a determined stride toward a door. Clouds collect in the distance above downtown .

A man pauses by Mike's car.
Two guys tried to break into my ride.

What they look like? Mike asks.

No idea. Had gray hoodies. When they saw I was in it they ran. Thanks for the intel.

Be careful, the guy says.

Same to you.

Mike sighs. A tweaker robbed him at gunpoint not too long ago. Ninety-five percent of the time Othello is quiet but not that day. Bastard got seven dollars, his eyes the size of dinner plates. Fucking tweaker.

Maybe it was payback for his own drug-addled days. When he was twenty-seven and doing speed with his sister, her neighbor, also a speed freak, accused him of abusing her fourteen-year-old daughter after he told her he had no dope to give. She hangs around your house a lot, she said. Maybe that's because you're fucked up all the time. She filed a complaint and the police arrested him. A public defender told him to plead guilty and she'd get him five years probation. You know what they do to child abusers in prison if you're convicted? she asked him. Scared, he took the deal. He thinks now that his lawyer screwed him to make her job easier. He checks in with the police once every thirty days. Has done that for thirty-six years. Nothing else on his record but parking tickets. He can forget about finding housing and a job. A background check will take him out faster than he can say, I didn't touch that girl. Othello Avenue allows him a kind of peace. Here he experiences no judgment.

Teddy scours neighborhoods on blue days, the days of the week when households put out their blue recycling bins. He knows the hotspots. One week he made \$1,000, and he and Katrina bought the Winnebago. He was ten years old when he arrived with his mother in San Diego in 1993, refugees from poverty

and civil war in Ethiopia and devout Muslims. His mother tried to steer him away from the street, but he saw drugs as a fast way to make money and followed a different path than the one she had chosen for him. He had money and women until he didn't. Before he met Katrina, he lived for four years camped in a parking lot. He has two kids in grammar school, one son at Georgia State University. His wages are garnished for child support. He doesn't complain. Past is past. He won't say more. Doesn't need just anyone to know his business. He lives for the future. He changed course, follows a different path.

The cats in the Winnebago settle on the dashboard and watch Katrina walk toward them after a coworker dropped her off from work. She opens a door and they rub against her ankles until she scoops food from a bag into their bowls. After being on her feet all day she would like to sit and relax but she knows if she does that she wouldn't get up again. Instead she finds a broom, goes back outside and begins sweeping the sidewalk, her way of showing appreciation for being allowed to park there 24/7. Teddy found a perfectly good generator in a dumpster that she'll use later to power a vacuum and clean the Winnebago. They purposely work opposite shifts so one of them is at the RV at all times to prevent a breaks-in. Once they move into their apartment, they'll try to work the same hours so they can spend more time together.

When she lived on the street, Katrina spent her evenings at a soup kitchen downtown. After she quit using drugs, she stopped by to show the staff she had changed. She wore makeup, had on a perky pink blouse and designer jeans. Teeth fixed. Told everyone to call her by her full name instead of her street name, Trinny. She wasn't that person anymore.

It'll be so good to get off Othello. People drive down it at seventy miles an hour, tow trucks barrel ass. What if someone hit the Winnebago while she was in it? There was an accident one time in the Target parking lot. A guy's car got smashed in a hit and run. Katrina heard the noise inside the Winnebago. The guy whose car got hit was dazed but unhurt. The airbag had knocked him almost cold. At first he didn't know where he was. She comforted him until the police came. He was so grateful that he invited her to his beauty parlor and did her hair.

She rummages for a jar of peanut butter to make Steve a sandwich. He forgets to eat sometimes. And Mike and Robin. They might want one. She won't be back here, she knows. She won't forget about them, but there's no need to return. She'll no longer be bound by the experience that now connects them. Being homeless isn't a group sport but they do look out for one another. So, while she's here. While she's homeless. Sheltered homeless, as social workers call it because she lives in a vehicle. She supposes that sounds better than plain old homeless but whatever they call it, it still sucks. A distinction devised by people who haven't been on the street, she's sure. She reaches for a loaf of white bread, removes six slices. After she makes the sandwiches, she puts them in a bag maneuvers around the cats and steps outside.

Thank you, Steve tells her in a breathless voice that reminds her of a child.

Thank you, Robin says.

She stops at Mike's van.

Thank you, he says taking the last sandwich.

I'll see you tomorrow.

I'll be here.

Shadows spread over Othello Avenue as late afternoon progresses into evening. A clear night concealing in its depths the sounds of desolate, unsettled sleep in the cramped confines of vehicles. Except for Katrina. She looks at the clear, night sky and stares into the light of one star until its yellow glow is all she sees. Her mind clears. She dreams in that kind of emptiness. Dreams quiet dreams of a yard, birdsong, and a cute little garden. Something small. Something clean. Something safe.