

It's All Good

By Linda Brewer

The thrift shop clerk, a plump girl in a gingham sundress, sorted through the suits and cashmere sweaters and offered Catherine an insulting amount of money. "Or you could take it in trade. You'd get fifty per cent more," she said. She stroked Howard's blue silk tie, an old Valentine's Day gift, with appraising fingers. Catherine glanced around the shop, pretending to consider. She didn't even want to touch the limp blouses and jeans, let alone wear them. Bedbugs, she thought. Crab lice. She accepted the few dollars and left feeling panic rise in her chest. The end was not nigh. The end had arrived.

A month later she took a suitcase full of her own clothes. She'd lost weight over the past year—throughout the investigation, the arrest and Howard's imprisonment she'd subsisted mostly on popsicles and soup. The suits she'd worn when she worked as Howard's secretary no longer fit her. The courier service provided her uniform, two purple polo shirts, two pairs of tan twill pants, one company cell phone. The aprons and clogs she had bought to cook in were irrelevant. The problem was that in her dreams she still wore her old clothes. Her friend Judy had advised her that by getting rid of the costumes of her previous life she would be able to forge a new one.

She had just opened her car door when a man came out of the shop carrying a bulging plastic bag. He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked around as if he couldn't remember where he'd parked. His hair was cut very short, and he was wearing a sweatshirt and baggy shorts that flapped around his knees. Howard, released from prison. She hadn't known. Catherine closed her door and slid down in her seat. Her stomach felt as if she'd swallowed hot coals. She closed her eyes and tried to breathe as her meditation book advised, in through the nose and out through the mouth, or was it the other way around? "Be here now," Judy preached, but Catherine didn't want to be here, not now or any time. When she peeked over the edge of the window again Howard was standing at the bus stop on Tucson Boulevard. He must be in sorry shape, to have to take the bus. She wondered if he'd seen any of his own old clothes in the shop. She imagined his shock at the sight of his expensive sweaters stranded like lost tourists in a shabby hotel. She waited in the hot car until she heard a bus brake to a stop at the corner. When she looked again, the bus stop was empty. She drove to a Goodwill bin on Flowing Wells and shoved her bags one after the other through the metal flap. She didn't need a receipt. She didn't make enough money to worry about taxes.

Later, when she couldn't eat more than two bites of toast, she called Judy. "I saw Howard."

"He's out of jail? How is he? What did he say?"

"We didn't talk. Just seeing him was like being pierced in the stomach." The arm of her wicker lawn chair, now situated in the living room of her apartment, was coming unraveled. She picked at a brittle strand. "He never apologized to me. I'm ashamed of myself for ever being married to such a jerk. "

“Shame is so unhealthy. It’s bad for your immune system. I saw a TV program on TV about it. You’ve got to forget about him for your own sake.”

“I should have run him over in the parking lot, but his legs looked so spindly in those stupid shorts I couldn’t do it.” She tried a laugh. “Maybe next time.”

Judy cleared her throat. “You know that church I go to?”

“Ugh,” Catherine said.

“Not ‘ugh.’ You need to focus on the less fortunate. It helps. It did me.”

“You just went to church to find a husband.” She wouldn’t have been so blunt before. She didn’t care now.

“Yipes,” Judy said. “Listen to you. Anyway, it worked, didn’t it? But helping others puts things in perspective. I know a gentleman who needs a ride to Saint Giles. He can no longer drive. You do that for him and you’ll realize how lucky you are. He’s a rare old bird.”

“I know the difference between birds and people. Birds are better.”

“Then go to a therapist. Do one or the other. I mean it.” Judy turned away from the phone and called out, “I’ll be right there.” To Catherine she said, “Tough love. I’m not going to take this kind of call again. I’m your friend, but I don’t need the negative vibes.”

When Catherine called back an hour later, Judy’s new husband, Paul, answered. “She’s right here,” he said, and handed her over to Judy.

“The geezer’s name and phone number. Where’s the church? What time do I have to be there?” Catherine asked.

“Raymond Dempster. It’s Saint Giles, by Speedway and Swan. It’s the kind of church where you can be any color, any gender, handicapped, whatever,” Judy said. “I’ll call and let him know you’re coming. I think the two of you will hit it off.”

Catherine wrote down the address. “Tell him I’m not a believer,” she said, but Judy had already hung up.

That week on her courier route Catherine drove by Mr. Dempster’s retirement home. It was ritzier than she had expected, with a large main building and a scattering of casitas on the xeriscaped grounds. The driveway circled around a garden containing three saguaros, some clumps of pincushion cacti and a rusty wagon wheel. A van was drawn up at the front door. A caregiver pushed an elderly man in a wheelchair onto the van’s lift platform and the driver began the laborious process of hoisting the man into the van. A water bottle fell out of the man’s pocket and the woman—no spring chicken herself—stooped to retrieve it and slipped to one knee. The van driver had to stop hoisting and help her up.

Catherine almost called Mr. Dempster right then and backed out of the arrangement. The thing that stopped her was the memory of the chirpy calls she’d made to Howard’s elderly clients, letting them know that she was stepping aside to pursue a new line of work. “A very nice young lady named Jasmin will be helping out in my husband’s office now,” she’d told them. Jasmin, a plump brunette teetering on high heels in her first job out of community college, was not as smart or as pretty as Catherine, plus she was polite and eager to learn. It seemed a win-win situation. Howard would be giving a young girl her start, and Catherine could follow her dream. The clients all said they would miss talking to Catherine and hoped Jasmin would be as helpful. “I wish you all the best in your cooking career. Maybe I’ll eat at your restaurant some day,” one elderly lady told her, and Catherine thought, maybe she will.

The van drove away and the woman retreated, limping, into the retirement home. That'll teach you to be helpful, Catherine thought.

Mr. Dempster was waiting for her at the cactus garden when she arrived on Sunday morning. He was tall and thin and wore a black beret and an ascot. He used his cane to direct her around the drive, as if she might not know how a circle worked. When she came around to where he was standing he raised his cane to stop her. It took him time to climb into her Element. She'd originally bought it to carry food and cooking utensils, looking forward to the day she could launch her catering career. Now she was grateful for the dowdy little car for other, more realistic reasons. There was plenty of room to stow the coolers and envelopes she transported on her courier route. In moments of panic she comforted herself with the thought that she could sleep in it.

"I imagine you drive your friends all over town in this car," Mr. Dempster said.

Catherine nodded. She'd never transported a living human passenger, only specimens of their blood and bones. She waited with what she considered admirable patience while he untangled his shoulder bag from the seatbelt and strapped himself in.

"I'm not religious," she said once he was settled. "Just so you know. I'm not looking to be 'saved'." She made finger quotes.

"Don't worry," Mr. Dempster said. "Nobody's going to try to dunk you. This is the most sedate, gray-headed old flock you'll find." He had gray hair himself, but obviously he didn't think of himself as a sheep.

"I won't know what to do, ritual-wise," she said.

"Do what everybody else does," he said. "If I snore, elbow me in the ribs."

She grinned in spite of herself.

"It's Lent, for your information," he said with a phony scowl. "Try to look miserable."

She grinned again.

For all Judy's talk of "everyone is welcome," it was not a particularly diverse congregation. She counted five aluminum walkers and eight canes, as well as two motorized wheelchairs. It seemed a miracle that Judy had found a viable husband here. She'd hoped to see Judy and Paul, but they'd gone to visit Judy's parents in Scottsdale.

The minister's sermon was titled, "What is Your Passion?" The word "passion" made Catherine remember an evening when she and Howard, newly-married and poor, had gone to a drive-in movie and made out like teenagers. She remembered the blare of the speakers, the soft rasp of the seat cover against her bare skin. On the way home, with the warm night wind blowing through her hair, she couldn't stop smiling. I was happy, she thought. I didn't know any better.

A hymn woke her out of her reverie. She stood and mouthed the words to an unfamiliar tune. Beside her, Mr. Dempster sang in a hoarse but confident baritone, tapping his foot and swaying when the chorus came around. She was glad they weren't related. He could yodel if he wanted, and it wouldn't reflect on her.

He didn't put anything in the collection basket when it came, which surprised her. He passed it along to Catherine with a casual air as if he couldn't be bothered with these bureaucratic chores. Embarrassed, she put in three singles, folded to disguise their meagerness, and handed the basket along to the next person. She made a mental note to stash a couple of

dollars in her jacket pocket next Sunday, to give to Mr. Dempster for the collection basket in case he'd forgotten. Two dollars wouldn't break the bank.

She thought of her own finances, and nothing else for a while.

Mr. Dempster nudged her with his elbow. She saw that the minister was pouring liquid into a goblet. He raised a small loaf of bread and snapped it in half. A trick loaf, pre-cut, Catherine thought. Communion time had arrived, as forecast in the church bulletin.

The elderly woman on her right stood up and began to shuffle up the aisle. Catherine remained seated. Mr. Dempster leaned over and said, "This is why we came." Heart thumping, she stood up and followed the woman toward the altar. When her turn came, she scrabbled a cube of bread from the proffered basket and dunked it in the cup of grape juice the minister held out to her. She popped the soggy bread in her mouth. It was home-made, not store-bought, with a rim of hard crust. The minister murmured something she couldn't hear because the bread was stuck in her throat and it took all her self-control not to cough it back in his face. All the way back down the aisle she promised herself she would never participate in such a charade again, Mr. Dempster or no.

After the service, while the organist in the choir loft played a roiling toccata, the congregants drifted out into the courtyard. The day was clear and cool. Steam rose from a coffee urn on a table under an olive tree. A platter of cookies sat beside the urn, pale discs on a pink napkin. Catherine recognized homemade snickerdoodles and allowed herself whether they'd been made with butter or margarine. An elderly woman offered Mr. Dempster a cup of coffee. Catherine saw by the simper she added like a spoonful of sugar that she had her eye on him. Mr. Dempster, she realized as another woman offered him a snickerdoodle, was considered a catch.

He wasn't bad-looking. His face was longish, with a good chin and a beakish nose. He wore glasses, but his gray-eyed gaze penetrated the lenses. He wore his gray hair combed straight back. He carried his cane as an accessory rather than a medical device. He could have been a frontier judge, Catherine thought, or played one in a movie. He could have directed the movie.

She smiled. Mr. Dempster glanced over at her and smiled back. Another woman began to speak to him. Mr. Dempster patted her shoulder. "I can't stay. This young lady and I are going for a drive." He scooped up a dozen cookies, folded a napkin around them, and stowed them in his shoulder bag.

Catherine felt herself the object of many eyes, including the minister's. Tim something, his name was. She had won many staring contests as a child. The thought rallied her now, and she outlasted him—he gave up and turned to shake the hand of a young Hispanic man. An up-and-coming demographic, she thought. A warmer body than the aluminum walker brigade.

Mr. Dempster smote the dusty bricks with his cane. "Let's get a move on," he said. He took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. Like a Victorian couple on a Sunday stroll, they traversed the courtyard, passed through the wrought iron gates, and headed for her car. His arm was warmer and stronger than she'd expected. She felt an old stirring, a young woman's curiosity about what this man could show her. He gave her a conspiratorial smile. "You're not entirely tame, are you?" he said, and she shook her head in surprise.

The phone in her purse rang. Catherine snatched it out and answered.

“How’d it go?” Judy asked. “We were just talking about you.”

Catherine eyed Mr. Dempster as he climbed into the car. “If only he were forty years younger, ha ha.”

Judy was eating something—an apple, it sounded like. “You’ll find a guy your own age to share your woes. Well, not woes, hopefully. Did I tell you Paul and I are going to Hawaii? His parents have a timeshare and we’re all going together. I’m dieting like mad. Anyway, don’t pay any attention to Mr. D’s backseat driving. He’ll give up if you ignore him.”

“You’re going to Hawaii?”

“I’m going to learn how to surf. How cool is that?”

“Pretty darn cool,” Catherine said. She hung up and got behind the wheel. Howard had surprised her with a trip to Hawaii “just because” three years earlier, before the investigation. Now when she thought of surfing she imagined killer waves on the horizon, waiting for the right moment to wash everything away.

“That was Judy, who used to drive you,” she said to Mr. Dempster.

“Very pleasant, but very strict. She always drove straight here and back,” Mr. Dempster said. “Never wanted to take the scenic route.”

The neighborhood around the church was modest verging on shabby. Still, the little house on the corner by the stop sign had a neat porch with an array of potted plants. Catherine decided that after she dropped Mr. Dempster off she would go to a nursery and buy a ponytail palm. She’d had a big ponytail palm in a Mexican pot at her marital house. She loved it for its graceful fronds that seemed to grow whether she remembered to water it or not. I’ll buy one and water it just the right amount, she thought.

“I wonder if you’d like to join me in a little adventure,” Mr. Dempster said while she waited to pull out onto Speedway.

She’d thought that just getting through the church service was adventure enough. Mr. Dempster winked at her. He was a charmer, she had to admit. “Only a little one?” she asked.

He clapped his hands. “Atta girl. Head west and keep going until I tell you to pull over.”

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

“Good,” he said.

It was fun to drive on a Sunday afternoon with someone to keep her company. She turned on her CD player and saw Mr. Dempster nod his head to the music. He was old, but he made her feel younger. When they came to the acre of faded grass at the corner of Speedway and Stone he said, “This is it. Pull over here, please.”

Catherine knew the park from driving past it during the work week on her courier route. Homeless men hung out there. Perched on top of the picnic tables, thin-boned under their dark layers, they reminded her of buzzards, carrion birds.

She slowed and stopped at the curb. “Now what?”

“I see someone I want you to meet,” Mr. Dempster said. Before Catherine could stop him he had the door open and was walking across the grass.

“Be careful!” she called after him. Once, driving past on an early morning courier run, she had seen one man chase another with a pair of scissors. Mr. Dempster didn’t stop. She locked the car and hurried after him. A man called out, “Lady,” but she ignored him and ran to catch up.

A man in a red knit cap lay under a eucalyptus tree near the volleyball net. Mr. Dempster leaned over and said, "Rise and shine." The man raised his head, then sat up. He seemed befuddled, nowhere near ready to shine. Run, Catherine thought, anticipating a weapon pulled from its hiding place in the layers of coats. Mr. Dempster reached into his shoulder bag and handed the man a small napkin-wrapped bundle. They shook hands.

"I thought I knew him," he said when he and Catherine got back to the car. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose in a downcast way.

"I guess you do now," Catherine said. "I'm sure you've made a friend for life." These were words she assumed the church women would say.

"You're my friend for life," he said.

That week the dispatcher, a man named Rene Ruiz whom Catherine thought of as The Voice, directed her to pick up specimens at a doctor's office near the park. The morning was cold, though the air was too dry for frost. Several of the men huddled under blankets and one lay entombed under a sleeping bag and a blue plastic tarp. They looked like residents of a wildlife preserve, trained to stay where they were, no bars necessary. Tears of pity came to her eyes and she thought with gratitude of Mr. Dempster. She must be a good person if she could feel like this. The feeling was almost like medicine. Dessert, she thought. I deserve it.

The following Sunday she resisted Mr. Dempster's elbow at communion time and turned aside in the pew to let him pass. Once again he handed along the offering basket without contributing, even though she had pressed a couple of dollars on him before they went in. She decided to discuss the offering situation with him on the way home, but he beat her to it with his own question. "Are you allergic to wheat?" he asked as she pulled out of the parking lot. "They have gluten-free bread, those yellowish pieces in the middle. I don't like them, but you might."

Catherine steered around a pothole. "All those fingers in the basket. I have a bit of a germ phobia."

"Even dirty fingers can do good work."

She waited at the stop sign. Traffic on Speedway was heavy and she had to drive east with the flow before she could find a place to make a U-turn. "I just don't believe in it. I told you I'm not religious that first day."

"There's nothing wrong with religion that a little adventure can't fix. Could you stop here, please?" He pointed to a service station, one she never went to anymore. A year ago she had stopped here for gas and a man had asked her for ten dollars. He'd told her a sad story about his sick little girl and how he needed to get home to Texas for one last visit before she "passed." Catherine had given him ten of her twenty dollars, and discovered belatedly that the gas station charged more than the one closer to her apartment. She'd felt foolish twice over.

"Let's not stop here," she said to Mr. Dempster. "I think we can find a better adventure than this one."

"Please pull over. I beg you." He raised his clasped hands in a gesture worthy of a silent movie. Catherine slowed and pulled around to the side of the gas station. Mr. Dempster hadn't mentioned his prostate, but he was at that age. "I don't think they have a restroom here," she said.

"Not a problem," Mr. Dempster said.

As soon as she stopped the car a man approached and rapped on her window.

Catherine recognized him as the same man who had asked her for gas money. He wore the same brown coat and had the same boyish cowlick at his temple. He didn't seem to recognize her, which made her even angrier. She yelled, "Go away!" through her window. The man went around to Mr. Dempster's side.

"Don't roll it down!" she said, too late. Mr. Dempster was already listening to the man's lies. He pulled his collection basket money out of his shoulder bag and handed it through the open window. Catherine reached across him and tried to get the money back, but the man pulled it out of her reach.

"God bless you, sir," he said to Mr. Dempster, in an oily tone that made Catherine sick.

"I know that man," she said. "He's a con man."

"Please don't raise your voice," Mr. Dempster said. He rolled up the window and waved goodbye to the man.

"He probably makes a hundred dollars a day with that story."

"It may be true," Mr. Dempster said. "He showed me a picture of his little girl. She has a beautiful smile."

Catherine accelerated into the street.

"We have wings on our wheels," Mr. Dempster observed.

"You could have given that money to a decent, deserving person," Catherine said.

"Some actual sick child might not get to see her father because you gave the money away."

"It was only two dollars. It's not like I bought him a yacht."

Catherine took a breath. "I just don't think you should encourage bad behavior. It's called enabling."

"He reminds me of my son," Mr. Dempster said.

"But that wasn't him," she said. "Good thing."

"They tell me he's dead," Mr. Dempster said.

Catherine stepped on the brake. The car jerked and Mr. Dempster put out his hands to brace himself against the dashboard.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't know. I am so sorry."

"Don't be. He's alive. Who do you think told them to tell me that? He did." Catherine cast him a sideways glance. She thought she detected a mad glint in his eye and her heart sank.

"Does he live in Tucson, too?" she asked.

"He travels," Mr. Dempster said. "He crisscrosses the country. He sends me postcards." He glanced in the side mirror. "We can't just sit here in the road. There are cars coming up behind us."

Catherine put the car in gear and they moved on. "I know you must have been a wonderful father," she said.

Mr. Dempster said, "I worked for a window company, but I was a magician in my spare time, years ago. I used to make my son disappear and reappear at parties. Once for Mother's Day I had him jump out of a gift-wrapped box. My wife loved that. He disappeared all by himself one day and now I can't make him reappear."

Catherine couldn't think of a soothing response to that one.

"Do you have children?" Mr. Dempster asked.

He was a sweet old man, crazy but sweet. She decided to tell him the truth. "I was

married for fifteen years, no children. My husband had an insurance agency, and I worked in the office with him for ten years, which was about as long as either of us could stand. He went to every seminar that came along. I can't tell you how many times I talked him out of signing up for some ridiculous program. Eventually he branched out into investments. He had this boyish enthusiasm about his work. Meanwhile I was bored to death" She saw herself sitting at the front desk in her pale green suit, calling clients, encouraging them to upgrade their home-owner's insurance, reading from the script Howard had given her. "I hated insurance. I wanted to work in my own chosen field."

"Which was?"

"Cooking. I can be a good cook under the right circumstances. My husband promised me I could go to a master class with a famous chef in Santa Fe once I finished my community college class." She stopped at a red light. "What month is it?"

"March," Mr. Dempster supplied.

"So I guess the class is happening now, and I'm not there." She swallowed away the lump in her throat. It wouldn't do to cry.

"We hired a young girl to take my place." She tried a smile. "Famous last words. She turned out to have a talent for fraud. I don't think she thought up the schemes, but once Howard put them in her head, she went right along. They'd talk about it over my head if I was around. I just thought it was boring old insurance chit-chat."

"He got caught, of course."

Catherine nodded. "Some of the clients complained. There was an investigation. Jasmin got off with a fine and probation. My husband got two years in jail, although he's out now so I guess he got time off for good behavior. I found out you have to pay taxes on ill-gotten gains, of which he had many. I knew nothing about any of it. Thank God the judge believed me." She frowned into the rearview mirror. "I would be a single mother now, if we'd had children, so I'm glad we didn't. So. Now you know all about me." Mr. Dempster didn't offer any platitudes. When she let him out at the retirement home he said, "Catherine, you're very brave. I look forward to next week's adventure."

"Just a little one." She managed a teasing tone. He grinned and flourished his cane as he went up the front walk.

The next Sunday Mr. Dempster waved away her two dollars. When the collection basket came around he dashed off a check and dropped it in with a flourish, as if he were a cavalier in a plumed hat, a dashing, philanthropic hero.

The sermon was about how ordinary people lived in Jesus's time and place. Catherine wondered if his followers were tempted to pick a pocket in the crowd when funds ran low. Did they think the end justified the means? She wondered if Jesus knew and overlooked their sins, or if he was unaware of the specifics of how he was fed and clothed. She wondered what kind of car he would have driven. Maybe a bus, with a slogan on the side?

Afterwards the elderly woman who sat beside her said, "Wasn't that a wonderful sermon?" Catherine nodded. She was not like them, not like them at all. Only the funny face Mr. Dempster made as he sipped the weak coffee afterwards cheered her up.

As block after block went by on the ride home she thought there might not be any wayward men tempting Mr. Dempster to adventure today, no undeserved and inadequate

charity given. He began to list the various cars he'd owned during his lifetime. "My first car was a Packard. I wish I still had it. I loved that car."

"It sounds charming," Catherine said. She'd become convinced that going to church was merely an excuse for Mr. Dempster to take a car trip across town. He pointed out buildings under construction and counted potholes. His world, she thought, was very small and she was glad to enlarge it once a week. It was only as they came to the underpass below the freeway that he sat up and stared like a dog on the hunt. Two men stood on the sidewalk at the edge of the northbound on-ramp. They mimed combat, using their cardboard signs like shields. Cars whizzed above them on the freeway, heading to Phoenix or Nogales, oblivious of the gladiators below. One of the men had very short hair and wore floppy shorts and a sweatshirt.

Mr. Dempster said, "This looks like our adventure."

"I can't stop," Catherine said. "I can't block the onramp." She drove on under the freeway. The Tucson Mountains rose on the near horizon. She'd often hiked in those mountains. She'd even offered to take Jasmin on an easy hike. The sight of them, big, rough, and vulnerable, made her want to cry. She refused to wonder if one of the men was Howard.

"Turn around, please, Catherine," Mr. Dempster said.

"I don't really have time for an adventure today."

He reached over and gripped her shoulder so hard she could feel how little meat she had on her bones. "You have to go back. That was my son back there." He burst into tears.

"For heavens sake," Catherine said. The sound of his weeping was something she could not stand. She doubled back and found a parking spot on a short street that overlooked the onramp. A wire fence enclosed a small, weathered adobe house so close to the freeway that she wondered who would live there. The door of the house opened and several pit bulls ran across the yard to the fence. Mr. Dempster got out of the car and headed down the short, steep sidewalk to the underpass. He had his shoulder bag, but he'd forgotten his cane. If that was Howard down there, she thought, he might not understand Mr. Dempster's intent. He'd always had a hot temper and prison had probably made it worse. Catherine grabbed the cane and opened her door. The dogs growled and lunged against the fence. She waved the cane at them and ran down the sidewalk.

The man in the floppy shorts wasn't Howard, but his look of desperation reminded her of Howard when he'd sat beside his attorney in courtroom. The man with the bigger sign pushed the man in the shorts and he staggered backward. Mr. Dempster stood a few feet away. He was trying to smile, but he looked frightened, as if he realized he was in over his head. Catherine went to him and handed him his cane. It seemed to buck him up. He moved closer to the men, twirling his cane, and she heard him say, "Which one of you gentlemen wants to disappear?"

The men stopped yelling and stared at him. He said, "We're giving a free ride to the man who wants to claim the southbound onramp. How about you?" He nodded to the more belligerent man. "What's your name?"

The man thought it over. "Wilbur."

"We can transport you to fresh territory," Mr. Dempster said. "All new customers. This young lady is an excellent driver."

The man looked around as if calculating the worth of the northbound onramp. He

shrugged, swore at his enemy one more time, and followed them up the hill. The man in the shorts waved and yelled, but his words were lost in the echo of the traffic overhead. “Now he’ll want to come with us. We can’t take everyone,” Mr. Dempster said to Wilbur. “This offer is only good for one person, and that person is you.” Wilbur nodded. Catherine thought that if Mr. Dempster had given him a contract for snake oil he would have signed it on the spot.

The dogs were gone from the yard. Catherine saw a curtain move in the front window of the adobe house. Down the block a teenage boy paused by a garbage can and watched them. Mr. Dempster opened the rear door for the man and settled himself into his customary seat. It took Wilbur a moment to haul himself and his sign and his faded backpack into the back seat. He wore a tan T-shirt with a picture of Geronimo on it. His long, graying hair hung down his back in a braid. He smelled, in the closed car, of urine and dirty feet. Catherine drove to a motel parking lot near the southbound onramp.

“Behold opportunity,” Mr. Dempster said.

Wilbur leaned over the back of her seat and decanted a hoarse “Thank you” into her ear. She could feel his awful breath stir her hair.

She yelled, “No problem! Good luck,” and kept her hands on the steering wheel while Wilbur unloaded himself and his belongings.

“Nice guy. Good manners,” Mr. Dempster said. He craned his neck to catch one last glimpse of Wilbur as they drove away.

“He wasn’t really grateful. He would have been really grateful if we’d bought him some beer.”

“I think you’re right. Do you want to go back and get him some so we can watch him be really grateful? Would that make you happy?”

She looked over at him. His beret had shifted and a few strands of white hair stuck out on one side. He was old. He was adorable.

“Silly,” she said.

He smiled. “I’ll have to stock up on cookies next week.”

As soon as she got home she got out her antibacterial soap and cleaned the back seat where Wilbur had sat. Deep in the fold between the seats she felt something hard. It was a box cutter, its blade extended a workable inch. She picked it up and carefully retracted the blade. She imagined Wilbur leaning over the seat and slitting her throat, then driving the blade into Mr. Dempster’s heart and stealing her car. Whoever owned the pit bulls would have found their bodies and might, or might not, have reported their murder to the police. Wilbur hadn’t killed them, but he could have. She couldn’t think of who to tell. Judy had e-mailed her from Hawaii that she and her husband had decided to move there. “A company in Honolulu made Paul an offer, so we decided why not. Come and visit us any time!” Catherine had deleted the e-mail without replying.

The following Sunday she told Mr. Dempster as soon as she picked him up that she wanted no more adventures. “That man had a box cutter. He could have killed us,” she said. “I went along with you before, but I draw the line at sharp objects.”

“He probably only used it to cut the cardboard for his sign,” Mr. Dempster protested. His naivete, which she had found so sweet, now irritated her.

“You can’t be a simpleton. You have to see people for who they really are,” she said.

“Tell me how to do it,” he said, as if he wanted to know.

A man with white-blond dreadlocks sat on the median on Drachman with his back against the yield sign. A small dog sat beside him. It was almost as good a prop as a sick little girl, maybe better, Catherine thought. She sped up.

“Just this one last time,” Mr. Dempster said.

“We’ll be late for church. It is our destination.”

“Stop. Please. When Catherine didn’t stop he reached for the steering wheel. She slapped at him, harder than she meant to. Her hand stung with the impact. When she looked at him his glasses were hanging off his nose and his beret was askew. She saw fear in his bare old eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

He put his glasses back on and adjusted his beret. “It’s all right.”

“No, really. I apologize. It was awful, what I just did.”

“I forgive you.” He said the words too easily. She didn’t believe him.

She drove back to the retirement center and ran around to open his door for him. He unfolded himself and climbed out with more effort than usual. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “You startled me. I was afraid we would crash. Would you like me to call a doctor?”

“Don’t be silly. It was purely a reflex action. My only regret is that we missed the Palm Sunday procession. Maybe next year.” She watched him into the building, taking consolation in the steadiness of his stride.

Monday on her courier route she relived the impact of her hand on his face, the sight of his dangling glasses. The Voice told her she had an emergency pickup for St. Mary’s Hospital and she imagined Mr. Dempster laid out on a steel table, being picked apart for specimens. As soon as she completed the delivery she called him at the retirement home. He didn’t answer. She left an apologetic message. He didn’t call her back.

By Friday evening she was back to eating soup out of a cup. When the phone rang she grabbed it and said, “Thank you so much.”

Howard said, “Hey, how’s it going?”

She would always know his voice. She despised him, but she didn’t entirely not love him. She sat down in the wicker armchair and took a breath to settle herself. “I’m fine. How about you?”

“I’m doing carpet installation for the time being but I have a lead on something better. I’m living in a house behind the convention center.”

“Is it okay?”

“It’s a certified historic building. There’s a plaque beside the front door.”

“Sounds picturesque,” Catherine said.

“It’s all good. I was thinking about you,” Howard said. “Remember when we first met at that party, when you brought the potato salad?”

She remembered. She’d studied recipes and chosen the best one she could find. She’d peeled pounds of potatoes, because she had a crush on the young man who’d invited her. Stewart what? He sold pot in a small way out of his garage.

“I was starving and that potato salad really hit the spot. I ate about six helpings. I thought that any woman who would bring that much food to a party knew how to make people

happy.”

“I tried.” She willed him to say goodbye. Mr. Dempster might be trying to get through to her at this very moment.

He inhaled, and she knew he’d started smoking again. “I have to take this class, which I didn’t want to do at first, but now I can see the value. It’s a program where you learn to take responsibility for your decisions. I need to contact people and apologize for what I’ve done. So, I’m sorry that by my actions you never got to take that cooking class.”

“I handed you over to that nitwit Jasmin. I knew in the back of my mind that she wouldn’t keep you on track. And once you got your plan going I’m sure she couldn’t see past the diamond earrings.”

“She loved earrings,” Howard said. “She told me she had a dream since childhood that she wanted to be able to wear diamonds from head to toe.”

Catherine realized she’d picked away another patch of wicker from the lawn chair. She forced her hand to be still.

“I need to know if you can forgive me,” Howard said. She could picture him in his picturesque room in the historic building. There would be cockroaches floating in the dishwasher and mosquitoes breeding in the swamp cooler. There would already be a cigarette burn on the kitchen counter. He’d smoked when they were married and she’d made him quit. He couldn’t afford to start again, but without her there to keep him on track he would get hooked again and skimp on something else, like dental care.

“I’ll consider it,” Catherine said. “What you did was very wrong.” After she hung up, her head felt as if someone had turned it upside down and shaken it. She went outside and walked around the apartment complex’s parking lot. On her third circuit a man came out from between two cars and said, “Miss. Everything okay?” He was a young, overweight Hispanic man with a shaved head and a tattoo up his arm. He held a little boy by the hand. Catherine saw his wife or girlfriend sitting in the car looking at her through the window.

“I’m fine,” Catherine said. “I think better when I walk,” though what was going on in her head wasn’t exactly thought.

The man nodded. “Okay. Let us know if you need anything.”

Catherine turned back to her apartment. Behind her she heard the man say, “It’s okay. She’s harmless.”

The burning in her belly that had been there so long she’d learned to live with it was gone when she woke up the next morning. She called Mr. Dempster and left a message on his voice mail. “Call me back if you don’t want me to pick you up. Otherwise I’ll be there on Easter Sunday.”

Easter week was warm, and she turned her AC on in the afternoons as she drove her route. On her lunch break she went to the thrift shop and bought a yellow linen sundress for twelve dollars. “Enjoy,” the clerk said, and Catherine said, “That’s the plan.”

She had important things to discuss with Mr. Dempster. It seemed to her that forgiving someone too easily trivialized the offense and the relief that real, heartfelt forgiveness brought. Howard wouldn’t have respected her or himself if she forgave him right away. He needed to know she was thinking about him, weighing his actions as if they were important. If and when she forgave him it would mean something. Forgiving Judy, or even Jasmin, was easier. She had

never expected much of them. She wanted Mr. Dempster to take back his easy forgiveness and dignify her offense.

The receptionist, a plump-faced woman with smooth blonde hair and the demeanor of the perfect daughter-in-law, smiled at her. That was a start. "I'm here for Mr. Dempster," Catherine said. "I'm taking him to church."

The receptionist checked her computer. "Mr. Dempster is no longer with us."

Her knees threatened to buckle under her. "He died? Surely he wasn't hurt that badly."

The receptionist looked askance at her. "He's perfectly healthy. I thought we called you. He said to call the church lady, so you'd know not to pick him up." She clicked her mouse. "Are you Mrs. Rollings?"

"That's my friend Judy. She hasn't driven him since last year."

"There must have been some miscommunication. Mr. Dempster is alive and well. He went to live with a family member."

"Was it his son? What's he like? Is he reliable?" As she asked the questions she glanced around the reception area. The woman might be wrong. He might be sitting in a chair right behind her.

"I can't go into details, for reasons of confidentiality. Mr. Dempster was very happy to leave, I can say that."

Catherine said, "I was led to believe--"

What had she been led to believe? She wasn't sure, but now she felt as if a rug had been pulled out from under her.

The phone rang. The receptionist answered it, turning her attention to the next person in her life. Catherine waited. When the woman hung up and acknowledged her again, Catherine said, "I just need to know he'll be safe."

"He seemed happy," the woman said. "It was like a happy ending. We don't get many of those."

There was no reason to go to church now. She drove for a while without any destination. She knew how quiet and empty her apartment would seem if she walked into it wearing her yellow sundress. It would be like popping out of a box with no one there to be surprised. She pulled into a grocery store parking lot and sat for a while wondering what she could buy to make the day different. Food would be good, she finally thought, and went into the store.

The "seasonal" section—a wide aisle with high shelves on each side and a row of tables down the middle—was being stripped of Easter merchandise. Half a dozen employees stood on ladders, or crouched in front of the low shelves, pulling stuffed bunnies and chicks and boxes of chocolates from the shelves. Candy Easter eggs, specialty baskets, packets of fake grass, cookies shaped like rabbits--there was a lot left over. The clerks tossed the items into a line of shopping carts with signs on them saying, "Discontinued, Marked Down."

Catherine grabbed one of the carts and pushed it around the store, balancing bread and sliced lunchmeat and mustard on top of the candy. She thought about apples and chose lunchbox containers of applesauce instead. On her way to the checkout line she added paper plates and napkins and a case of bottled water. One of the clerks climbed down off his ladder and helped her stow the bags in her car.

“Nice car,” he said. “They don’t make them anymore you know.”

Catherine said she did know and thanked him.

The men, eight of them, huddled around a picnic table as they always did. The air was warm but most of them still wore their coats, and Catherine realized they didn’t have any closets to put them in. She parked at the curb and walked over to them, breathing deeply, determined to show neighborliness rather than fear.

“I need someone to help me unload my car,” she said. “I have treats for you but you have to help.” Three of the men got up and followed her back to the car. They brought the bags to the picnic table and one of the men went back for the water.

She set out the baskets and added the fake grass. She ripped through the bags of candy and sorted it into the baskets, making sure each basket got a chocolate bunny and a couple of tiny plush chicks. One man grabbed a pink bunny, but when Catherine held out her hand he gave it back. She set out the paper plates and the lunch meat and mustard and cups of applesauce. She’d forgotten to buy utensils.

“Does anyone have a knife for the mustard?” she asked. A man pulled a Swiss Army knife from his coat pocket and showed her how to unfold the big blade. “You might want to clean it off,” he said, and she wiped it on a napkin as if it were no big deal.

“Lunch is ready,” she said, and handed the baskets around. The men accepted them like they probably accepted everything that was given to them—not judging either the gift or the giver, just taking whatever it was and saying thank you. One man made the sign of the cross and that appeared to be grace enough for the rest of them.

“Happy Easter,” she said. “Bon appetit.”

None of them had a full set of teeth. Their mouths were pink and gaping like babies’ mouths as they went to work on the sandwiches. She tried to think of something to say that would make them feel better about having to live in the world. The church ladies would tell them that God loved them, but she didn’t think they’d believe the words, the way she would say them. What else could she do for them? She didn’t have any drugs.

“I got dessert,” a man said through a mouthful of sandwich. He wore a faded blue T-shirt bearing the slogan, “It’s All Good”. He reached into his pants pocket and set a bundle wrapped in a napkin on a paper plate. “Open it,” he told Catherine.

There were four intact snickerdoodles, chipped around the edges and hard as plaster, and pieces of a broken one, sat on or slept on, carried around for who knew how long.

It wouldn’t do to take a broken piece. They would see that gesture for what it was, trying to have your cake but not eating it for fear of germs. She took a whole one and put it in her mouth before she had time to think. The crunch of it echoed through her head. “Thank you,” she said, and offered the rest of them around.