

Potlatch

By Linda D. Brewer

Past the water cooler in the corner past the poster at the end of the hall that urged him to Seek, Strive, Succeed, Richard was almost out the door when his father-in-law launched a command like an assegai and brought him down. "Come in here a minute." Richard pressed his hand to his side against a sudden cramp. Psychosomatic, he knew, but it still hurt.

Back down the hall to the paneled room. He said, "Good morning, Lamont," and glanced at his watch to indicate his burning desire to get out there and get to work.

"I've got a present for you," Lamont said.

"You don't have to--" Richard began.

"Catch." Lamont pulled a set of keys from his shirt pocket and tossed them across the desk. Richard made a grab, too late, and they bounced on the carpet at his feet. He leaned over and picked them up.

"What do these go to?"

"The fireweed house. Might be just the right place for you."

"Thanks for the tip," Richard said, thinking screw you, you fat toad. He left the office and went out into the sunny, humid July day, the keys pulling at his shirt pocket like a lead sinker. He smiled for the benefit of Steve, the new guy, who was just pulling into the parking lot. Richard unlocked his car, still smiling, and got in and put on his sunglasses. Three deep breaths, four, and the cramp in his side began to relax. He pulled out onto Lakeview Way and discarded the smile. The fireweed house had been on the market since before he'd become a realtor. He'd attempted to look at it once, on a winter day, and got stuck in snow halfway up the road. He'd come home as if from an Arctic adventure and taken refuge in his wife's exasperated embrace. He wondered if Lamont had ever even seen it. He was probably laughing about it with Steve right now.

His clients were staying at the Lakeway Inn, close to the freeway. They had flown in from California three days earlier and he had spent the previous two days driving them from one house to another in the Bellingham area, including a jaunt out to a farm in Ferndale just for laughs. Indeed, they had laughed. Floyd Hildebrand had amused his wife by mooing and clucking as they walked around the property. They were in their early sixties and newly-weds. "I saw her at a street fair and sparks just flew," Floyd said. So

far sparks had not flown between them and any of the houses Richard had shown them. They were losing interest, and tomorrow they were leaving.

Richard stopped at the stoplight on Cedar a little too hard and heard something rolling on the floor behind his seat. He groped around and retrieved a Costco-sized bottle of vitamin D capsules. His wife had started taking two a day over the winter to combat seasonal affective disorder. He shoved the bottle into his briefcase and hoped nothing else was hiding under the seat for the Hildebrands to trip on.

A homeless man began to push his cart across the street just as Richard's light turned green. He waited, drumming his fingers on the wheel, trying to figure out just what-all the man had heaped in his cart. A bag of aluminum cans, a couple of blankets, a bag of ragged clothes and a wooden box, contents hidden. The rack under the cart was stuffed with lumpy plastic bags, and the man himself wore a bulging knapsack. The pockets of his too-big brown corduroy coat bulged with more belongings. He waved at Richard as he passed in front of the car and Richard beckoned him over and pulled a ten-dollar bill out of his wallet and handed it to him through the rolled-down window.

"Thank you," the man said. His face was burned dark, and his smile was a mixture of teeth and dark spaces.

"Not a problem," Richard said.

A Jeep honked behind him and he drove on. The Jeep was red and there was a shiny red sea kayak strapped to the top. At one time he had wanted a kayak just like it. He'd brooded over brochures and studied the Herald and the Seattle Times want ads. It was around the time Crane had turned two, before Sorrell was even thought of. He had a kayak from his college days, short, broad, slow and safe as a bathtub toy in Lake Padden, inadequate in salt water. He hadn't used it in years.

The Hildebrands stood side-by-side just inside the front door of the motel, staring through the plate glass like day laborers waiting for a job. The sight of them brought back a ghost of his side ache. They wanted something he wasn't sure he could identify, much less provide. Some special dwelling that would push the prospect of decrepitude away, yet keep them comfortable when it arrived, that was what most clients their age wanted. Something on one floor, with flower boxes. He drove up in front of the motel and leapt out to assist them into the car. They both needed help. Floyd Hildebrand's hemorrhoids, the man wasn't too proud to say, had started acting up on the airplane ride from Los Angeles. His wife Rona was just getting over a cold. "I don't really believe it's a cold. I feel sure I'm allergic

to titanium dioxide. They put it in everything these days,” she’d told Richard moments after they met. Their plan had been to find a new house in the brisk Northwest air, far from the toxic fumes of LA. Floyd was a retired hydrologist, a stocky man with a bald head that segued into a gray ponytail. His wife Rona, thin arms and legs, glasses, gray, rather straggly chin-length hair, created hand-painted T-shirts, one of which she was wearing over a purple gypsy skirt. “See if you can get me one of her T-shirts before they leave,” Sarah had told him that morning.

“How are you both feeling today?” Richard asked them as he stowed them in the back seat.

“Not sitting pretty,” Floyd said.

“He spent half the night in the spa,” Rona said. “He still smells like chlorine.” She blew her nose on a crumpled tissue.

“It’s a beautiful day to find a new home,” Richard said.

“Everyday is a beautiful day if you’re healthy,” Rona said in an accusatory tone.

He drove them first to a neighborhood of old but expensively restored houses with a ringside view of Bellingham Bay. He’d taken them there the first day out, and he was hoping they wouldn’t remember that they had objected to the proximity of the railroad. “This is where the sea captains used to live, back in the old days,” he said, stopping in front of a pale green three-story with gingerbread trim.

“Beautiful homes,” Rona said. “They look familiar. Have we been here before?” Richard suspected he’d used the sea captains line the other time and gave himself a mental kick in the pants.

“Not this specific house.”

“I remember those wind chimes, though,” Rona said. “Tacky.”

“How do you get up and down these streets in the snow?” Floyd asked. He’d asked the same question the first day.

“It doesn’t snow that much,” Richard said. He and his wife lived on Alabama Hill and when it snowed he wove his way down using lateral streets as much as possible, doubling his mileage and travel time but saving himself the risk of sliding straight through the stop sign down at the bottom.

“I think we should move on,” Rona said.

The next house was a split level, not much of a view but a well-tended vegetable garden in back. “You could reap the previous owner’s sowing,” he said.

Rona waded cautiously into the exuberant vegetation that filled the back yard. “That lettuce is as big as your head, Floyd,” she said, pointing.

“Everything grows here. You can’t stop it,” Richard said. He picked a blueberry and ate it and invited them to do the same.

But then they came around to the front of the house just as a pack of kids on bikes zoomed down the street, followed by a barking dog. The Hildebrands didn’t want to live on a street swarming with children. “Been there, done that,” Floyd said. Richard already knew that the idea of a condo turned them off. The previous day, when he’d driven them past the beautiful old Victorian that overlooked the cemetery, they’d laughed—they thought he was pranking them.

“Let’s take a break,” he said. He bought them lunch at the Colophon and looked at pictures of Rona’s T-shirts. They were interesting, dark backgrounds painted with vaguely tribal designs in bright colors, and they sold in Los Angeles for up to a hundred dollars. She hadn’t brought any with her to sell, much less give away, and he was glad he hadn’t asked.

The lunch made the Hildebrands logy. Richard stowed them once again in the back seat and they leaned against each other, eyelids drooping, the way his kids did on car trips. He scanned his tablet for more listings and saw meaningless variations on the houses he’d already shown them. The only thing left was the fireweed house. The owner had died fifteen years earlier and his elderly daughter, ensconced in a nursing home in Everett, seemed to have forgotten about it. What the hell, he thought. They were going back to Los Angeles in the morning where they would gripe about their incompetent real estate agent. Might as well give them something to complain about.

“I don’t intend to sell you this next place,” he told the Hildebrands. “The only reason I’m going to show it to you is because I want to see it myself.” He drove out Chuckanut Drive and turned up the hill onto a gravel road that switchbacked up the mountain. Blackberry canes scraped the car, and the scent of crushed berries came in through his open window. The road was narrow, with a strip of grass down the center. Rocks pinged off the bottom of the car, an adventurous sound. It made him want to bring his old mountain bike up here.

“I hope this mountain has a top,” Rona said. Richard glanced into the rearview mirror and saw Floyd leaning forward with an intent expression, like a dog sniffing the breeze.

They reached the top at last and he parked in a weedy patch of gravel in front of the house. It wasn’t a chicken coop, but a two-story cabin made of logs and stone. Dark green moss furred the shake roof and the stone chimney. The windowsills were bare of paint. Windows up and down faced the Sound. Richard turned to see what their view would be. There was Mt.

Baker, there were the ferries plowing across the blue water to Canada, and in the evening the sky would fill with rose-colored clouds.

Oregon grape and salal had overgrown the flagstones. He unlocked the door and stood aside to let the Hildebrands go in, then went past them to find the lights. He found a switch inside the door, but nothing happened when he flipped it. He groped his way through the house, guided by the greenish light from a skylight in the kitchen. There were candles on the kitchen counter and a box of matches. He lit a candle for each of them.

“It’s rustic, like some kind of lodge,” Floyd said. The plank floors were strewn with old, dark-patterned rugs. Some furniture had been left—a wooden rocking chair and a table, an old, silent refrigerator Richard decided not to open.

He began to explore the house and let the Hildebrands roam as they wished. He ran his hand across the thick plank mantel, not to check for dust but because he knew how smooth it would be. He thought that if he lived here he would build a fire in the fireplace in the winter and listen to the house talk to him. In the summer he’d get a telescope and study the stars. And the whales. Orcas. He hadn’t thought about orcas in a long time.

The bathroom had a forest view. He imagined taking a bath, and looking out and seeing a deer or a bear. He went through the kitchen to the back door. The back yard was only about twenty feet wide, and the hill went up steeply beyond it. There were big leaf maples, with a narrow trail taking off through them..

He stepped back inside the kitchen. The Hildebrands materialized from the bedroom, shielding their candles. He said, “I just want to see where this trail goes. Anybody want to come with me?”

“I will, I guess,” Rona said, “as long as we’re here.” Floyd nodded.

At first they climbed upward in a green tunnel between the trees. Within a hundred yards the trees gave way to blackened snags, thimbleberries and fireweed. “Something serious happened here,” Floyd observed.

“A fire,” Richard said. The snags looked like standing stones, and the fireweed blazed deep pink around them. They made it to the top, to a stone bench in a patch of bracken. “Somebody carried these stones all the way up here and put them together,” he said.

“It was a labor of love,” Rona said. Floyd sat on the bench and winced. Richard took off his jacket and folded it into a pillow and Floyd took it and wedged it under himself. He held out his hand to Rona and she came and sat beside him. Richard felt a stab of envy. He would have liked to sit on the stone bench and have Sarah come and join him. She didn’t even

know the house existed.

“If I bought it I’d put on a new roof and check the water coming in and out. They must have had electricity at one time.”

“It is unique,” Rona said. “What’s that squawking?”

“Somebody’s mad at us,” Floyd said.

“Stellar’s jay,” Richard said, and added as if he already lived here, “We have bald eagles, too.”

“That so?” Floyd said. They sat and looked out, but no bald eagles appeared, though the jay kept up its chatter.

“Well,” Floyd said after a few minutes. “It’s been fun. Very nice place. Very unique property.”

“Thank you for the adventure,” Rona said. “We’d better make our way back down.”

“Back to the spa,” Floyd said with a plucky grin. “Did you major in botany, or what?”

“Anthropology. Chinooks, Kwakiutls. That’s how I ended up a realtor.” He laughed the way he always did when his course of study came up.

“I love their basketry,” Rona said.

“Baskets, bentwood boxes, canoes. Blankets. Totem poles. They were talented artisans, whatever they put their hand to. This house makes me think of them. I can just imagine a chief looking out over the water, watching his people set out on a fishing trip.”

“He’d be out there with them if he had any sense,” Floyd said.

The Hildebrands didn’t say much on the way back to the motel. “The air here makes you sleepy,” Rona yawned, and Floyd agreed. Richard stopped in front of the motel and jumped out to open their doors. “Thanks for bearing with me up there. That was a real getaway. You were very patient.”

Rona said, “We’re patient people.”

Floyd said, “Come up to our room and let’s talk business.”

Lamont was gone for the day but Steve was still there, putting papers into his briefcase. The briefcase was new and more expensive than necessary, a gift from his girlfriend. Richard said, “My place, this time tomorrow. We’re having a barbecue. Bring your girlfriend.” He picked up the phone and called Sarah. She said, “We were going to go out tomorrow. I got a sitter.”

“She can watch the kids anyway,” he said. For the first time since they’d been married he said, “We can afford it.”

The problem came when Sarah called Lamont and invited him and Norma to the barbecue. Richard could hear his voice across the kitchen. “You want to celebrate, let’s do it at our house,” Lamont said. “We’ve got more space for the kids to play and we have a bigger grill.”

“Richard and I are inviting you to our house, dad.”

“Bring anybody you want. Bring the kids. We’ll have it at our house. Six o’clock.”

Sarah shrugged. “We might as well have it there. It’s just easier. He likes to be the big chief.” She called Steve to let him know the change of plans. Richard heard her say, “You don’t have to dress up. It’s supposed to be a fun time.”

“We’ll bring the steaks,” Richard said. “I’m going out to Kenny’s in Ferndale. How many, do you think? Eight?”

“We could get by with six. The kids won’t eat much. The babysitter’s a vegan. I’m going to get some good Italian bread and olive oil, and I’ll make a salad.”

He went to Kenny’s the next morning, Saturday, and bought eight all natural, hormone-free steaks. He put the meat in a Styrofoam cooler Kenny provided and smiled as he drove home. “Mighty hunter,” he said to Sarah when he got home. “I’ve got half a wooly mammoth in here.” It was the most money he’d ever spent on meat. She kissed him, a kiss like a promissory note.

The next afternoon was eighty degrees, hot for Bellingham. The lawns, front and back, glowed incandescent green. Lamont and Norma, Sarah’s stepmother, kept the grill on the long patio at the back of their house, under a canvas awning that rolled up like ship’s sails in sunny weather and rolled down to make a sheltered space for the kids to play when it rained. The grill was big enough for a dozen steaks and already giving off heat when they arrived. The patio table was stacked with dishes and silverware and cloth napkins and a camper cooler was full of ice and drinks. Steve and his girlfriend, a plump girl named Jamey, were already there when Richard and his family arrived. Steve said under his breath, “We brought strawberries and ice cream. Is that okay, do you think? Should I run out for something else?”

Richard shook his head. “Don’t sweat it.”

Norma came through the sliding glass door to greet them. She was Lamont’s third wife, a pretty, fifty-year-old blonde alcoholic. Sarah couldn’t stand her. Richard was glad he wasn’t married to her, but she sometimes made him laugh. “We brought the steaks,” Sarah said. She hefted the meat cooler. “Where do you want me to put them?”

“We have steaks,” Norma said. “Your father went out this afternoon and got them.”

Lamont had been fiddling with the grill. He came over and said, “Our steaks are better than the ones you get at the store. I get them from Kenny, out in Ferndale. He cuts his own meat.”

“That’s where Richard bought ours,” Sarah said.

“We just thought you might not have time to get everything ready,” Norma said. She made an overly-concerned face that told Richard she was already two sheets to the wind. He saw the look on Sarah’s face, knew she was calculating the cost of the steaks, and said, “We’ll use some of yours and some of ours. We’ll gorge ourselves.” He carried the cooler over to the patio table and set it beside the silver salt and pepper shakers.

Ashleigh, the babysitter, took the kids to the end of the lawn, out of range of Norma’s elderly, lethargic pug, and dumped out the bag of toys they had brought with them. Steve’s girlfriend told Sarah how to make tomato salad. Sarah reassured her it looked delicious and showed her the bottle of gourmet olive oil she’d brought. Richard accepted a beer from Lamont and drank it down. He expected Lamont to congratulate him on selling the unsellable house, but Lamont only said, “Glad to you could make it,” and coughed as if the congratulations stuck in his throat.

The sun hung above the horizon, not quite ready to subside into the Sound. Lamont fussed over his coals, holding out his hand to test the heat coming off each pile. Then he forked his steaks, one by one, onto the grill. They were ten of them. Richard counted them as he drank another beer, and noted the grill space remaining. He opened his cooler and unwrapped the steaks he had brought. Using his fingers he added them to the grill.

“Get those things off there,” Lamont said.

Richard said. “I sold a house. I provide the steaks.”

“They’ll change their minds.”

“They won’t.”

“We’ll see,” Lamont said. He had been obviously been drinking for a while. Everybody had. Even Sarah had sipped a prophylactic glass of wine once the baby sitter had arrived. Now she was bent over her stepmother’s chair, listening as the woman harangued her. Norma reached up and grabbed a hank of Sarah’s hair as if illustrating a point. Sarah’s eyes met his, but her gaze was blank.

“How much did your steaks cost?” Lamont asked. “I bet I paid twice as much for mine.”

Richard decided not to dignify the question with an answer. He picked

up the barbecue fork and jabbed it into one of his steaks. Red juice ran out and sizzled on the coals.

“Don’t poke them like that,” Lamont said. “Give me the fork. You’ll ruin them.”

Richard pulled his arm back. Lamont was wearing a red baseball cap with the insignia of the local realtor’s association on it. “Diamond Club,” it said. His eyebrows bristled white under the brim. He reached for the fork and Richard raised it over his head.

Sarah came out of the house carrying a plastic pitcher of lemonade. She looked over her shoulder at Steve and Jamey, side by side on the chaise longue. “Please. You’re making them nervous.”

“Our husbands are fighting over who gets to cook,” Norma said to the dog. She sat in a lawn chair with a glass of wine. The bottle was nestled in the grass between the chair leg and the dog, her favorite drinking arrangement.

Lamont made another grab for the fork. He was shorter than Richard, but forty pounds heavier. “Give it to me, you idiot.” He grabbed Richard’s arm and yanked. Richard dropped the fork into the middle of the grill. The wooden handle began to char.

Lamont made a grab for the fork, swore, and said, “Where’s an oven mitt?” They saw the mitt at the same time, a yellow daisy print number hanging on a hook on the side of the grill. Richard grabbed it first and threw it on the grill beside the fork. It smoldered briefly, and then the filling caught. Flames burst from the daisies. The steaks sizzled innocently alongside, like spectators.

“Richard!” Sarah said. She put the lemonade on the table. “Act like an adult.”

“Give me a role model,” Richard said.

“Get the tongs, you there,” Norma yelled at Steve from her lawn chair. “Get that garbage off the grill.” Steve stood up and moved uncertainly toward them.

Lamont said, “Sit, dammit.” Steve returned to the chaise longue. Lamont said, “I’m not going to eat your cheap crap.” He grabbed the tongs and shoved the charred mitt and the fork, and Richard’s steaks, off the grill. They fell to the concrete, splattering juice on their shins. He pulled his baseball cap low over his eyes and hovered over his steaks with his elbows out, guarding them.

On the way back from the Hildebrands’ motel he had told himself that when irritating situations came up, as with Lamont they did, he would

visualize himself back in the fireweed house and remain calm. Instead he now thought of the burned snags and the fire that had cleansed the mountain top. “You like the taste of money?” He pulled his wallet from his back pocket, took out a twenty dollar bill, and placed it between two of the steaks. His fingertips brushed the hot grill. He felt his flesh scorch, and smiled. “Chew on this.”

Lamont reached into his back pocket with one hand and pulled out his wallet. He pulled out his Visa card and threw it on the grill. The card melted into a black, toxic-smelling blob. Norma guffawed. “Money to burn!” she announced to the world.

“You stop this,” Sarah yelled. “Stop it this minute.” She tried to push between them. Richard blocked her with his arm. He took up the bottle of gourmet olive oil and drenched the meat. Flames shot up, singeing the hair off his arms. Lamont, he saw, no longer had eyebrows. The scent of burning meat filled the air, making his mouth water

Lamont threw his Diamond Club hat on the grill. A tongue of flame leapt for the canvas awning. Sarah screamed. Steve jumped up and began to pull on the line, trying to roll the canvas out of harm’s way. Wisps of smoke came from the near edge. The dog had risen and was ambling toward them, snuffling and drooling.

“That’s enough!” Sarah screamed. “You’re going to set the house on fire.” Even Norma was screaming, “That’s enough!” Richard knew that Lamont would burn down the house if necessary, just to prove he could. The babysitter huddled with the children by the fence, screaming, “That’s enough.”

“Congratulate me,” he said.

“What for?” Lamont said.

The wooden salad bowl didn’t count, Richard thought. Baby stuff. He looked around for the next thing to burn.

“Lamont, watch the dog!” Norma yelled, and he saw the flicker of an idea cross Lamont’s face.