

Chapter 1—The End of the Workday

The air grew colder as the sun set in the dark gray sky. When the wind picked up it felt like frost was biting at his arms, cheeks, ears, and nose. He put a jacket on over his wool shirt as he leaned out of the driver's seat of the dark blue two-door Ford pick-up truck while writing an invoice. His cousin loaded their two gas-driven push lawnmowers onto the gunmetal gray trailer with the paint flaking off of it.

He tried to do some creative writing with the invoice like he used to do when he had essays to write in school. He stretched out each word to make it longer and taller than it needed to be and included each individual task he could think of: Lawn mowing, weed control, edging, fertilizing, moss killing, then he paused trying to come up with anything else he could add onto the bill to get the price up. After a minute or two of thorough concentration he concluded that that was all he could put on the bill, so he wrote *et cetera* for effect. Then he wondered how much he could get that particular customer to pay for all the work he and his cousin had done for the past hour. He would have charged \$200 if he could have gotten away with it but settled for putting \$65 on the invoice instead. He took a deep breath and blew it out forcefully to alleviate the tension of not knowing if upping the price would displease this customer, and wishing he could just keep upping it.

His cousin opened the passenger side door and got into the truck and they both closed the doors in a vain attempt to banish the cold.

"It's getting cold out there Sean," his cousin said.

"It sure is Alan," he said then added, "I had to put on my jacket while I was writing the invoice."

"I'll bet you did."

Sean put the invoice book down on the seat between the driver's and passenger's seats and pulled his red and black checkered thermos off the floor, unscrewed the top, and poured himself a nice hot cup of coffee into the cup that the top of the thermos made.

Alan pulled his turquoise thermos with the silver top off of his side of the floor and poured himself a nice hot cup of tea.

"Ugh!" Sean said. "I don't know how you can drink that stuff. I can't even stand to smell it."

"What, tea? I thought you liked tea."

"I like *black* tea, not *Earl Grey* tea. It has that disgusting almost floral scent and flavor. It just grosses me out."

"Oh really?" Alan said with a smile that suggested a mixture of amusement and irritation. Alan took a big sip of tea then exhaled dramatically to spread the scent around the cabin of the truck.

"*Ugh! That's disgusting!*" Sean said, half joking. "I'm going to have to deliver this invoice right away just to get away from that awful smell," he said with a smile.

Alan smiled back. Sean put his thermos cup full of coffee down on the dashboard, picked the invoice book up, and tore out the white page to show the customer, leaving himself

the yellow page as his receipt and the blank pink page between written invoices. He opened the door and got out of the truck, instantly regretting not having zipped up his jacket first. He jerked the zipper up to his neck and took a knit hat out of his left jacket pocket and put it on his balding head.

He walked up the front walkway with a slouching posture to the customer's front door, rang the doorbell then stood upright and put on a smile as he heard the front doorknob turning. A woman of about 55 who was a little overweight answered the door.

"Hello Miss Barrington," he said.

"Mrs. Barrington, Sean," she said tersely. "Or Ms. Barrington now that Joe's gone and passed away last year," she added reluctantly.

"Oh no, you've got to start going by *Miss* again so you can start dating those young 35-year-old boys," Sean said with an even tone of voice but a big wide grin.

"Oh, Sean Flanagan," Ms. Barrington said, throwing her hands up at him as if to say he was hopeless, but at the same time smiling warmly at him. He handed her the invoice. "Listen," he began a little hesitantly, "I did a few extra things on your lawn today because I saw that the moss was trying to take over again."

"Oh was it? I thought we killed it last year."

"Yes we did," he said, not knowing why she thought "we" was appropriate when only he and Alan had done work on the lawn, "but you see in Portland the soil is too acidic for the kind of grass we have growing in lawns so you have to treat it every year, usually two or more times per year in order to make the ground more alkaline so the lawn can grow in west Oregon's clay soil."

"Oh really," she said, apparently not remembering that he'd told her this every year for the past eleven years.

"Yeah, yeah, that's the way it goes," he said.

She put on her glasses and strained to read his sloppy cursive handwriting on the invoice. He continued to smile but was a little nervous about raising the price on the new bill. But he had to. \$65 was almost not enough money for the time and gas money to drive to her house, the gas money to run two mowers and a power edger, the time and energy to spread out the ground limestone and use weed killer on the lovely yellow dandelions, and the fact that he had to split the money 60/40 with Alan. Lawn maintenance wasn't work for profit; it was work to stay on a customer's property in order to get bigger, better jobs, like trimming long rows of hedges or replacing fences.

He could see her struggling to read his handwriting then giving up because she really didn't want to spend the time on it.

"Oh why don't you come in a minute and warm up while I go get my checkbook."

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "Let me go ahead and close your door for a minute so we don't let all the heat out of the house."

"Thanks for being so considerate," she said as she walked off down the hallway.

"'We're not heating the great outdoors' is what my dad always used to say."

"Oh mine too. Mine too," she said and returned with a checkbook then leaned it on a dresser by the hallway under a lamp and started writing a check. He smiled as she handed him the check, relieved that she hadn't complained about the new price.

“Thank you. I’ll be on my way now,” he said, politely retreating out the door and giving her a wave good-bye. He was actually less concerned with being polite and more concerned that Ms. Barrington would talk to him for half an hour. Not that he minded talking to her. It was just that he didn’t have time to talk right then, and the more time a job took the less the profit, although sometimes talking longer meant upping the price. The prices were less about the work and what it warranted and more about how the customers felt about the work, especially with female customers.

He returned to the truck and opened the door to find that Alan had put on some album by the Irish Tenors. He began whistling along to “When Irish Eyes are Smiling” as he started the engine and pulled away from the curb and drove east, up east Burnside Street. He was in one of the nicer neighborhoods in Portland: one of the few neighborhoods where people actually worried about the greenness of their and their neighbors’ lawns and the sheeredness of their and their neighbors’ hedges. He turned right at 39th Avenue and drove into the southeast side of town.

“Are you sure you want to take 39th?” Alan asked.

“I’m going to take 39th to Holgate and Holgate to 122nd —it’s the fastest way to get back to your house from here,” Sean replied.

“I don’t know about that. I would have taken Burnside to 122nd.”

“How would that be any faster? Burnside stalls after the I-205 freeway because of the MAX light rail.”

“It might not be faster but it would be easier.”

“That wouldn’t be any easier.”

“It would be to me.”

“But you’re not driving.”

“I prefer 122nd in case I want to stop at the Safeway grocery by the corner of Powell.”

“Why do you ever want to stop at Safeway—it’s overpriced.”

“It’s not overpriced.”

“WinCo and Fred Meyer both have lower prices. It’s overpriced.”

“The items I get aren’t overpriced.”

“All of the items in Safeway are overpriced. You can’t be getting the only items in the whole store that are at a reasonable price when all of the items are overpriced.”

“Maybe that’s what you think.”

“That’s what I know.”

Alan said nothing else. He just stared in front of them and rigidly turned up the music on the cassette tape player. They said nothing else as they drove the nearly two and a half miles down 39th Avenue to Holgate Boulevard. Sean turned left and drove up Holgate Boulevard, through dull suburbs going down in tax value as they got progressively farther from the center of the city. At 63rd Avenue he decided to turn right, onto Foster Road instead of Holgate.

“What are you doing?” Alan asked.

“I thought we might want to eat at the Evergreen Diner. I mean, I don’t know about you but I don’t have the energy to cook anything at home.”

“I know I don’t want to cook anything at home but won’t Sadie have anything for you at the cabin?”

"I still have to get the groceries and drive out to the cabin. I won't be home for another two or three hours. Besides, I don't know if she will or she won't. Sometimes there are dinner leftovers and sometimes there aren't."

"You'd think she could leave you some dinner since you're paying for everything."

"Yeah, you'd think."

"You should really talk to her about that."

"And say what? No, it would just cause trouble and I'd probably wind up looking bad in front of the kids."

Alan sat there irritated, attentively trying to think of something else to say in favor of his opinion but he couldn't think of anything new.

Just before 72nd Avenue Sean slowed down and waited out the traffic before turning left, onto the parking lot of the Evergreen Diner and turned off the tape player. They left the truck, being sure to lock it, and walked towards the front of the diner. Alan reached the front door first and didn't hold it open for Sean, just as Sean wouldn't have held it open for him.

The diner was small, the inside crowded. There was a squarish front counter with stools immediately to the left of the front door and two rows of booths immediately to the right. The style of the place was the same as every other small diner in America except that it had cheap Chinese-style decorations added to the place after the fact.

Five years before then the owner, Mr. Sanders, had married a woman from China who was 20 years younger than him. Sean and Alan had both assumed that the only reason she'd married him was to get American citizenship and perhaps even the opportunity to inherit the diner some day. But Mr. Sanders had been falling over himself with infatuation for the 30-something Chinese woman who could only speak broken English so Sean had told Alan not to say anything.

Sean didn't see any reason to try to spoil Mr. Sanders' happiness and he figured that if American citizenship meant enough to Ms. Liang-Sanders for her to willingly marry a gruff old guy like Mr. Sanders then she deserved it. Besides, Sean was in general tired of his cousin sticking his nose where it didn't belong. That was why they couldn't go to Farm Kitchen, the diner on 82nd Avenue, anymore. Not for at least three years, Sean thought. That was the only way to avoid the immense awkwardness...and possibly spit in the food.

Sean and Alan had been going there fairly regularly when they were coming from the northeast side of Portland to the southeast side and to the Evergreen Diner when they were coming from the close-in southeast side or southwest side. They went to these diners because they were there, they were cheap, and they knew what to expect from them.

At Farm Kitchen they'd always sat near the front counter in order to get good service, but sitting there they'd started overhearing what all of the waitresses were saying to each other. They'd overheard that one of the waitresses had had an abortion and one of the other waitresses—a stern Christian—was very angry about that because she condemned abortion and anyone who got one.

Sean and Alan had been raised Catholic and both had abandoned Catholicism as soon as they were 18 years old. But where Sean was uninvolved with religion Alan took the stance of a staunch Atheist who was adamantly opposed to all religions, which was fine with Sean. However, yelling at a waitress for being a religious zealot and loudly announcing for the whole

restaurant to hear that abortion is acceptable because fetuses aren't people was not fine with him. Not that Sean really disagreed with Alan's point of view. He believed that every person's private life was their own business and that they should be free to make their own decisions, but he didn't want to know about anyone's private life or get involved in it. He really wished Alan would learn to get control of his temper. After his outburst Alan had been asked to leave the restaurant and then he'd said, "Sean, let's go!" Sean had emerged from the booth he'd fully sunken into and paid for the meal as Alan stormed out and stomped off to the truck.

Alan would have gone back to Farm Kitchen after that, even hoping for another confrontation, another chance to espouse his views, but Sean couldn't bear to. Not until enough time had gone by that the waitresses would have forgotten or, hopefully, there would be all new waitresses. It was just as well to Sean though since he'd always preferred the Evergreen Diner. It reminded him of how diners had been when he was a kid in the 1950's. When people were friendlier, the economy was better, and life seemed full of friendships and endless possibilities.

Sean and Alan walked up to the counter and saw only two spare seats, not next to each other. They looked at each other. Sean shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe someone will move," he whispered. Alan walked up to a lone man sitting on one of the stools as Sean cringed.

"Excuse me sir," Alan said, "but my cousin and I would like to sit together so we'd appreciate it if you'd move over one spot." The man sat up from his slouching posture and looked over his right shoulder at Alan and Sean.

"Oh, okay," he said.

"Thank you," Alan said.

"We appreciate it," Sean added as the man got up and moved over one spot. Alan could fortunately have very good manners when he wanted to.

Sean and Alan sat down and picked up two menus; a simple four-page pancake, sandwich, and meat and potatoes menu except for the Chinese menu on the back page. The waitress came out from the back of the diner with a pot of coffee. "Hi, did you guys just get here?" she asked.

"Yes," Sean and Alan said.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes," they said.

"Okay...oh, I'll have to go get some coffee cups," she said and walked back into the back of the diner as Sean gave Alan a knowing look.

"Good ol' Cara," Sean whispered while shaking his head.

Cara was a short woman with nice Caucasian skin—not too pale, not tanned—with dark brown shoulder-length hair, light blue/green eyes, and clothes that were more colorful than almost anything anyone from the Pacific Northwest would wear. Cara was from Florida she'd said during an August heat wave that Sean, Alan, and most Oregonians had considered unbearable, while she had considered it delightful. She was always friendly but she was like a cloud floating by.

Nearly five minutes later Cara returned with two coffee cups. Why it took her five minutes to get just two coffee cups no one could figure out. She set the cups down on the counter and poured them both hot cups of coffee.

"Do you guys want cream or sugar?"

"No, none for me, thanks," they said. Cara began to walk back to the back room.

"Uh—we'd like to order our meals," Sean said.

"Oh, okay," Cara said in her light voice while taking her notepad and pen out of her apron.

"Yeah, I'd like pork chops and a baked potato with vegetables," Sean said.

"I'd like ham and a baked potato with vegetables," Alan said.

"Oh okay guys," Cara said, writing their orders down. Then she disappeared into the backroom again, without the coffee pot. Sean realized that the man who'd moved over for them had been holding up his cup in the hopes that Cara would refill it. Sean picked up the coffee pot from the counter and handed it to Alan, pointing to the man on Alan's left. Alan handed the coffee pot to him. The man poured his coffee while shaking his head.

"That Cara," he said under his breath with a half smile. Sean and Alan shared a knowing look with him.

All of the customers stared up at with glazed over eyes at the lone TV screen in the corner of the room to their left, which was showing a syndicated episode of *Star Trek: the Next Generation* as it always was on the nights Cara was there. Sean thought about watching *Star Trek*, the original, when he was a kid and dreaming of adventures on other worlds.

He'd always wanted his dad to watch it with him but his dad had always been too tired after work, usually sitting on the front porch with a single beer nursing a headache or an all over body ache. Now his children were at home watching *Star Trek: the Next Generation* and he couldn't be there to watch it with them. He liked to catch episodes of it when he could so he could at least make comments about the different episodes to them later if he got the chance. They were watching so many new TV shows and listening to so much new music he knew he'd never be able to keep up with it all. Sometimes listening to his kids talk to each other was like listening to a foreign language for all the new TV show and music references they could make.

About 45 minutes later Cara reappeared with their dinners. "Oh, so that's where the coffee pot went to," Cara said. She smiled at the pot that had been passed down the counter.

"I'd appreciate a refill," Sean said.

"Okay," Cara said with a smile. She picked up the coffee pot and disappeared into the back room again. Sean and Alan continued to watch *Star Trek: the Next Generation* as they ate their dinners while propping themselves up on the counter by their elbows out of sheer exhaustion.

"It sure is getting cold out there," one of the men at the counter said.

Yep, Sure is, That's true, Does this every year all the men agreed. A while later Cara finally returned from the back room with a fresh pot of coffee and refilled all of their cups before stopping to stare at the TV. She smiled with the curious and amazed eyes of a child as Data talked to Samuel Clemens and Guinan on his way to figuring out how to get back to the future in one of their old season premieres. At the commercial break she disappeared back into the back room leaving Sean to wonder once again what she did in that back room all the time.

After Sean and Alan were done with their meals they each paid their own way then each left a \$1 tip under their plates. That was less than the going rate for tips Sean knew and his wife had always badgered him to leave better tips since she'd once been a waitress and had told him

that waitresses get taxed for tips they don't even make but he couldn't afford to keep waitresses on his payroll. Besides, he never got any tips in his job. And he really couldn't afford to eat out in the first place but at the same time he didn't have the energy to make his own dinner and he needed the fuel.

They took turns using the men's room then returned to the truck and Sean drove down 72nd Avenue, turning right at Holgate Boulevard and driving up to 122nd Avenue, where he pulled into the turning lane and waited to turn right. He drove up 122nd Avenue to Schiller Street and turned right again, driving down to the third house in and pulling up in front of it.

Two wiener dogs whose black hair was turning white ran from the dull, weathered front porch through the parched lawn that was slowly coming back to life in the autumn rains. They jumped up on the four-foot high rusted chain link fence and yapped enthusiastically. Sean and Alan stepped out of the truck with their nearly empty thermoses in hand.

"Why can't you ever park straight?" Alan asked.

"I parked straight, it's the yard that's crooked," Sean said with a little laugh as Alan went to the light gray mailbox that used to be white.

"Hmm, nothing but bills," he said.

"I'm surprised PGE hasn't started billing us for the fact they have to bill us," Sean said as he unlocked and opened the front gate, careful not to let the dogs get out. He knelt down to pet them and said, "Hi Carrie, hi Barry."

Alan walked to the front door and opened it to the sound of the radio[♪], which they'd left on in the front room to make potential thieves think someone was still home. He went to the kitchen to open a can of cat food for the dogs since they didn't like dog food. Sean went into the front room and turned off the radio[♪], then he sat down in an old wooden chair next to a phone table and began to check the phone messages.

"Dohring wants to see us this next Thursday for some general things on her properties," Sean said as Alan put food dishes down for Carrie and Barry.

"Do you mean *next* week or the week *after* next week?" Alan asked.

"Next week—next Thursday," Sean said.

"Then you should have said *this* Thursday."

"This next Thursday."

"*This* Thursday."

"In any event we've got to be there," Sean said with a smile even though he was a little irritated with Alan's driving desire to correct everyone's speech. Sean got up and walked about ten feet into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

"I noticed you got a new coffeemaker," Alan said.

"Yes," Sean said, "I found it at Finders Keepers the other day. I found three actually but only two of them were in good enough condition to buy. I took the other one up to the cabin. It's a percolator as you can see."

"Like we grew up with."

"Exactly. See, I haven't had a strong effect from the coffee for quite some time now and I ran into a man in WinCo on the breakfast aisle a while back who reminded me that modern coffeemakers don't heat the water or the grounds as hot as the old percolators did and I realized that that was a part of the problem with the coffee these days. Ever since then I've been looking

for percolators and I finally found some. Now I'm going to try this and see if it doesn't give me more energy. I think if the water and the grounds are getting heated hotter I'll finally be able to get the full effect of the coffee."

Alan stood listening to Sean's coffee monologue as intently as one might listen to a groundbreaking philosopher, then said, "That's good but I'm going to stick to tea."

Alan turned and took a pot off the stove, filled it with tap water, and set it back on the right front burner, which he turned on. He opened one of the cupboards and pulled out his last few bags of Earl Grey tea, which he dropped into the pot.

Sean and Alan sat at the kitchen table and waited for their respective half gallons of water to boil. A third chair sat at the kitchen table by the front window. They both looked at the chair. Then they looked out the front window and onto the dirty street outside. No matter how often either of them picked the litter off the street there always managed to be more in the dirt between the asphalt and the lawns where there was no sidewalk. Sean thought, it seemed like most people had no respect for their own neighborhoods anymore. They looked at the dusty curtains, the muddy shoe and paw prints on the worn white and green linoleum floor, the cobweb covered ceiling. Both of them were thinking about how much cleaner the house had been before Sean's mother passed away and they both knew it but neither of them would say it.

Not a day went by when they didn't think about the loving mother of three boys who'd taken Alan and his brother in after their parents had died when their house had burned down. She could never be forgotten and no one could ever take her place, and they both knew it but they would never say a word. They just returned to looking out the window at the street as one of their neighbors, a short American Indian 28-year-old dressed to the nines, came stomping home in tall high heels with her face in her hands, sobbing audibly. They sat back from the window and stared at their respective pots, waiting for them to boil, not wanting to wind up getting involved in anything.

Eventually their water was boiling and they refilled their respective thermoses. Then they took turns using the bathroom to brush their teeth and floss.

Sean picked up his thermos, walked back to the front door, and said, "See you tomorrow."

"You're coming in tomorrow?"

"I have to. I have five mouths to feed, and all the pets," Sean said as he closed the door and walked back to the truck. He unscrewed and unhooked the trailer hitch then locked the trailer to the fence with a large chain. He locked the lawnmowers to the trailer with another chain and threw a brown tarp over them to conceal all of the contents of the trailer.

He got into the truck, put his thermos on the floor, started the engine, which almost stalled, did a U-turn, and drove up Schiller Street to 122nd Avenue, where he waited until he could turn left, skip the turning lane, and get right into the fast lane before he reached the stoplight at Holgate.

When he reached the light at the almost always-congested Powell Boulevard intersection he picked up a tape carrier he had in an organizer on the floor and picked out an album. He chose *The Best Classical Album in the World Ever* and turned the volume up♪, savoring Vivaldi, Puccini, Chopin as he drove down southeast 122nd Avenue past rundown strip malls, residential homes that had no front yards since the street had been widened, car lots for

both new and used cars, a Chinese restaurant or two, the Midland Multnomah County Public Library, and the cheap sleazy topless bar that drunken string-haired forty-something men were always frequenting.

He crossed over Burnside Street, and drove up northeast 122nd Avenue, past more car lots and strip malls. He eventually reached San Rafael Street, turned right, into a strip mall that included a WinCo, and turned off the music. He parked the truck then took out the grocery list that Sadie had given him that morning.

Incredulously it included VitaMax—the most expensive multivitamin available at WinCo. Sean threw the grocery list down onto the floor as forcefully as he could, slapped his hands against the outside of the steering wheel, and shook his head in irritation and confusion. “Why does she always want the things we can’t afford?” he asked himself aloud. He breathed deeply a few times, then picked the grocery list up off the floor and smoothed the new wrinkles out of it.

He left the truck and a few moments after he began to walk away he returned to the truck to check the door handle just to make sure he’d remembered to lock it. When he walked away from the truck again he still couldn’t remember having locked it but he could remember having checked to make sure it was locked. He wondered about aging and memory, exhaustion and memory, and anger and frustration and memory.

On his way into the store he tried to find a shopping cart with four good wheels and no squeaking parts. After three tries he settled for a shopping cart that had only a slight limp. He walked down a long aisleway to the produce section and picked up some bananas, apples, and oranges, then moved on to the bins to fill up bags of bulk cereal, nuts, seeds, pasta, rice, pancake mix, and dry cat food but no dry dog food since the dogs at the cabin preferred cat food. He moved onto the coffee bean grinder and ground himself some very basic Colombian beans. When the bag of grounds was full he smelled it almost longingly, wishing he’d remembered to drink another cup of coffee before shopping. He could have almost fallen asleep while standing there if it hadn’t been for the forklifts backing up around the store, restocking it.

He rolled the cart along to the last stop: the health and beauty aisle, where the vitamins were. There was VitaMax for \$22 and next to it was a no-name knock-off with essentially identical ingredients for \$9. He looked at the grocery list then shook his head in irritation, threw the list into the shopping cart, and grabbed the \$9 multivitamin bottle.

He pushed the cart to the registers, where two lanes were open, with six people in one line and four in the other. The six people had fewer items each in their carts than the four, who all seemed to be stocking up for a holiday get-together even though there were no holidays coming up for a couple of weeks. He waited at the end of the six-person line as the forklifts started up again. The eardrum piercing back-up beepers compelled him to turn his right ear towards them, the ear that only had about 60 percent of its hearing ability left because of a fire-related accident that had happened to him while he was still working at Stumptown Irons.

He couldn’t help but think about how it would never have happened had he not grabbed a fire extinguisher and run towards the fire. Several large pressurized cans of cleaning chemicals had exploded and luckily not spewed all over him as he was trying to douse the flames. As the safety inspector for the industrial plant he’d felt it was his responsibility to put out the fire, to make sure that no one else got hurt. That had been in his third week on that job.

The former safety inspector had worked for the company for 40 years and had been angry that because of how big the company president's family was and how generously he gave jobs to family members he hadn't gotten a promotion in 33 years. He'd retaliated by not doing a very good job for a few years before his retirement.

Because of how hard he worked Sean had gotten the job after five years with the company, two years sooner than the previous safety inspector, which had only added to his frustration as he was leaving. He'd left Sean with a year's worth of damage around the plant to fix. And in five years in that job Sean hadn't gotten a promotion and had only gotten two slight pay increases.

Sean had watched the men around him closely in his 12 years at Stumptown Irons, seeing how drastically a man could age in that place in only a couple of years. He'd seen a jaunty middle-aged machinist develop a severe heart condition. At times he'd had to rush the man a couple of nitroglycerin tablets from the first aid cabinet in the plant then almost drag him to the nearest clinic to have his heart checked out by a doctor while thinking to himself "*Don't die on me! Don't die on me!*" the whole time. He'd watched that man retire with little but the gift of a single gold watch. And he'd seen that man come back six months later to visit and he'd looked 15 years younger and had had no heart problems anymore. Sean had realized that the plant, the job, had been killing the machinist off. That was when he'd decided that he needed to stop working at Stumptown Irons before it killed him.

Finally there was only one person in the line in front him... but she had apparently just realized that she was going to write a check to pay for her groceries. She rifled through her purse for a very long time then found a checkbook but it was empty, so she had to look for another one. Sean wanted to scream and slap the woman in the face the way Bugs Bunny might on *Looney Toons*. It was almost 10 p.m. already, it was a long drive back to the cabin, he felt like he could just curl up on the grocery counter conveyer belt and fall asleep, and to him every delay at the grocery store was a few less minutes he'd get to spend with his kids, if he got to spend any time with them at all.

Finally she found the second checkbook and wrote a check for \$35.64, then she complained, "God—my purse has gotten so messy," and began to organize it in front of the cashier.

"Actually," the cashier said in a pleasant tone of voice, "you really need to do that elsewhere. There are *other* customers." The cashier smiled and pointed towards Sean and the other six customers that had lined up behind him.

"Oh," the woman said in a very annoyed tone of voice. She pulled her purse away from the counter and walked the few feet to where her groceries lay, still unbagged. "Isn't there anyone to bag my groceries?" the woman asked, demandingly.

"No," the cashier said with a smile. "No one can help you. Everyone here bags their own groceries. This is a no-frills store, that's how we can keep the prices so low."


"Oh," the woman said. Most of her groceries were small cosmetic items like lipstick and mascara that weren't going to be difficult to bag. The cashier rolled her eyes back towards her customers, shaking her head and throwing up her hands.

Sean and the other six customers in line looked back at the cashier with the same look of irritation at the other woman, then the cashier rung up Sean's groceries. He tried to think of some comment to make since he always liked to talk with everyone but he couldn't think of anything to say so he just paid for the groceries, bagged them, and pushed his cart out of the store and to the truck.

He loaded the groceries into the passenger seat so they wouldn't get drenched. He could tell rain was coming by the smell in the air and the feel of the wind. He put the shopping cart into one of the stalls for carts in the parking lot then got in the truck and drove back down 122nd Avenue, really noticing for the first time in a long time the bicycle lanes, one on either side of the street.

He didn't really understand the need for bicycle lanes, especially on a wide boulevard like 122nd with its four traffic lanes, continuous center turning lane, parking strips along the curbs, and wide paved sidewalks. When he'd been a teenager in the 1960's he'd bicycled to Barton Polytechnic Trades high school and there certainly hadn't been any bicycle lanes back then, there hadn't even been sidewalks on most of the streets. He'd had a few run-ins with cars though so he had to consider that maybe the lanes weren't such a bad idea. What he really hated was that the bicyclists didn't pay the road tax that he and the other motorists did to maintain the street system, including the bicycle lanes. He shook his head at the inequality of that. As if he and other motorists had all the money in the world. He would have preferred a rebate on his taxes to helping to pay for bicycle lanes that he never got any use out of.

He drove down past Alan's house to Foster Road, turned left at the lights, past the Shell and Chevron gas stations, and drove through a semi-rural part of suburbia that was torn between different stages of human development. It had all been discovered as beautiful, pristine forests, cut and turned into farmlands, some of which still lingered, but now it was interspaced with pieces of monstrous suburbia; worn two-story residential homes and brand spankin' new large, cheap apartment complexes painted in shades of rosy beige vomit and industrial chemical gray with minuscule studio or one-bedroom apartments and landscapes made of no trees and a few choking flowers surrounded by bark dust. As if a few wilting pansies in yellow and purple would somehow make up for the forests they cut down to glue industrial waste into sawdust board and nail it together to make barely livable spaces for the junkies, starving career Welfare mothers, wife beaters, and others who overpopulated the typically white trash suburbia of the long wasteland that was between outer east Portland and west Gresham. Sean figured that if they insisted on destroying the natural world he'd grown up with they could at least paint the cheap buildings bold colors like red, purple, orange, or even green. He wondered why they always picked the ugliest possible colors. He wondered if they got them at a discount; bulk sums of paint because the paint companies couldn't sell those piss-poor colors otherwise? But then he had to wonder why the paint companies manufactured those colors at all. It was yet another of life's many questions that he knew would never get answered.

As he passed 162nd Avenue the roadway turned from eastbound to southbound and he was surrounded by small country properties complete with the occasional livestock. At Tillstrom Road he stopped at the light and quickly poured himself a cup of coffee. He put on Leonard Bernstein's *The Encore Collection, Vol. 1*  and felt like he was going into autopilot as he drove along the same unchanging line of pavement he'd been driving for almost the past 20 years. He

couldn't believe this was his life after all the dreams he'd had. He remembered when he was a poor working class kid he'd dreamed of being a millionaire by the time he was 35 years old.

He'd begun collecting bottles for the then \$0.03 return at stores when he'd been six years old. He'd begun working at a tire and general engine repair shop when he'd been 12 years old. When his two older brothers had been having wild drunken parties and both of his brothers and cousins had been getting into fistfights with each other he'd been saving up his money and buying their mother a washing machine, the first automatic one she'd ever had, so she'd no longer have to toil with hand washing everyone's clothes or all of the boys could wash their own clothes.

At 18 he'd left the tire shop for the draft for the Vietnam War. He hadn't wanted to get his arms and legs blown off, get killed, or kill anyone so he'd joined the Army National Guard instead of the regular Army just like his brothers and cousins had. But unlike his brothers he hadn't done things like steal a gun to get kicked out of the Service or gamble in a poker game when he was supposed to be on guard duty or have sex with the fort commander's daughter at a party.

When the Guard had seen another Flanagan boy come in they hadn't been happy with it for quite a long time. He'd been stuck with seven years of unwanted military service, but he'd tried to make the best of it even though he'd hated every minute of it. He'd had to go to Fort Sill in Oklahoma for four months in the middle of summer. And when the endless desert heat, snakes, and tarantulas hadn't been nearly killing him off the other National Guardsmen had. They'd often gotten the simplest directions to follow, like "Pull the pin and throw the grenade" and there had always been some idiot who'd pull the grenade and throw the pin. He couldn't even remember how many times he'd almost been killed due to someone's incompetence while he was in the military but it always made him glad he'd never signed on for full military duty.

After Fort Sill he'd had to go to Fort Ord in California for two months. Then after six months of basic training he'd finally gotten to go back home to cool, rainy Oregon, while still being obligated to the Guard one weekend per month and two weeks per year. Back in Portland he'd taken an entry-level janitorial job at a hospital and he'd worked there while paying his own way through Portland College with the help of some student loans. He'd run out of money after almost two years of study with a major in history and several classes in creative writing.

He'd gone to work at Stumptown Irons after Alan had already been fired for losing his temper and punching a foreman he hadn't agreed with. They hadn't known what to expect from another Flanagan but he'd advanced quickly with his solid work ethic and frequent lack of a personal life. Then he'd just saved most of his money and by the time he'd been 27 he'd been buying houses and turning them into rentals, with the rent being a little higher than his monthly mortgage payments, which covered the cost of paying for the houses while leaving him with a small profit. He'd saved money by doing all the maintenance on the houses and properties himself with the gardening and other tools he and Alan had accumulated over the years. He'd believed he was well on his way to his childhood dream... by maybe 55 rather than 35, but that would be close enough for him.

By 32 he'd been making enough money from his rentals that he could afford to quit working at Stumptown Irons. He'd known that quitting would set him back financially but he'd

known he couldn't afford the physical and mental strain of working there. No paycheck was worth his health and longevity.

The following year he'd met an intelligent, independent, and vivacious woman at the Toastmakers Speakers Club he'd been going to for over a year and then he'd made one fatal mistake: he'd rented a house to her and her two year-old daughter. After three months she'd stopped paying her rent because they were dating. That had left him with an unfunded mortgage payment to cover. But then she'd gotten him an incredible deal on her parents' old two-acre summer vacation home near the Mount Hood National Forests. He'd bought it with money from his savings with dreams of turning it into an RV park or a bed and breakfast or some other moneymaker. The old cabin had been dilapidated and he'd had to start working on major repairs right away but he'd figured he'd have years to keep working on it so he hadn't been worried about that. The important thing had been that it was an excellent investment for the future, especially since he'd paid practically nothing for it.

Then she'd suddenly been three months pregnant in spite of her claims of not having known she was pregnant up until then and in spite of her claims of having been religiously diligent about taking her birth control pills every day. She'd said she wanted to quit her job as a sales representative at the Meier & Frank department store in downtown Portland in order to spend all of her time with her daughter and the new baby that would be coming soon. He'd asked her to consider having an abortion because they couldn't afford another child. She'd insisted that he had enough money to support them all but he hadn't. He'd had a house of cards that wouldn't be stable for another decade, when some of the mortgages would finally be paid off so he'd be making a real profit. She had just gotten emotional about the whole thing and had completely disregarded his opinions as if having a baby was only her decision and it affected no one else.

She had quit her job and lived in the former rental house on southeast 104th Avenue doing nothing. Feeling the sense of duty and obligation that his parents and his Catholic upbringing had instilled in him from the earliest age he'd married her in their backyard with her fishing ship captain father in the place of a minister grinning proudly at the fact his daughter had finally been getting married, and young enough that he and his wife might be able to pretend that Sadie's pre-existing daughter Becca was also Sean's and therefore "legitimate".

Just before their son Brian had been born she'd taken \$10,000 out of Sean's savings account and bought a large RV trailer and driven it up to the cabin for them to live in while Sean continued to work on reconstructing the cabin. And when she'd delivered their son in the hospital she'd almost bled to death and had left Sean with the medical bills, bleeding out his remaining savings.

He'd had to start selling his houses and looking for a new job. He just hadn't been able to bring himself to go back to anything like Stumptown Irons. He'd tried selling real estate unsuccessfully. Then he'd been asked by a neighbor of Alan's, an older widow, to trim her 30 feet of seven foot high cedar hedge on her back fence line. She'd heard about all the maintenance work he'd been doing on his various properties and assumed he could do the same for her. He'd done the job for her and then she'd referred him to a friend of hers and before he'd even known it he was a professional landscaper and handyman.

The following year Alan—who could never seem to keep from losing his temper on a job long enough to make any real money—said he wanted to join Sean in his business. Sean had been reluctant to share his business but felt obliged because by then he'd been working entirely out of Alan's house since it was in the city and the cabin had no phone.

In spite of Sadie's great plans there had been no landscaping or handyman work out by the cabin or anywhere near it. It seemed that everyone east of Happy Valley did all of their own work for themselves or had a friend of the family that did it for them. So he drove into Portland every day and worked with his cousin.

He'd grown up watching his dad go to work every day six and seven days a week, until he'd died while on a logging job near Zig Zag, out by Mount Hood. Sean had sworn to himself that he would never, ever work as hard as his dad had, and when he was 33 he'd seen his dreams coming to life. They had been within his reach. Now he was working as hard as his dad and he saw no possible way out of it.

He was driving through Damascus right now, a little town that looked like it was caught in a time warp, dusty with age and having been forgotten. As he came towards the turn onto Clackamas-Boring Road there was a bend in the road and a very large Douglas fir tree. If he just kept driving straight ahead and didn't turn with the roadway he would run right into it. He stared at that tree as if he was outside of himself. His truck was headed straight for it, just as it was almost every night of the year. If he just hit the gas pedal he could end all of his suffering. He stared at it, hovering over the idea.

A car suddenly honked at him for being too far into the left lane. He turned his truck with the curve of the road and drove onto Clackamas-Boring Road as his eyes glazed over.

With Sean and Alan working together they'd been able to make a good, strong, profitable business. Then Sadie had gotten pregnant again, in spite of her insistence that she would be more diligent than ever about taking her birth control pills on time every day, and that he didn't need to keep condoms around. Three years after their son had been born their daughter, Devona, had been born. Their finances had been very bleak and over the years expenses had kept coming up; Sadie's father had died and there had been funeral expenses, later that same year Sadie's mother had died and again there had been funeral expenses. Sean's mother had gotten breast cancer and they'd spent two years trying to save her without success and then there had been even more funeral expenses. And of course there had been their eldest daughter's school expenses. Sean hadn't known how he was going to pay for the other two kids to go to school. Then Sadie had grown frightened by the increasing gun and sexual violence and drug abuse in public schools and had decided to home-school all three of their kids, when their eldest daughter had been nine, their son six, and their youngest daughter three. At first the idea of home-schooling their kids had sounded appealing to Sean in consideration of their safety and independence, and because he thought it would offer a reprieve for their finances but the cost of schoolbooks had turned out to be very stifling.

Just when he'd gotten a credit card for emergencies for the first time in eight years Sadie had instantly had a "dental emergency". She'd insisted on seeing a dentist right away, and he'd been a Middle Eastern man that had barely tolerated treating a woman and had just ripped her

infected tooth out, Sean had thought just to get rid of the nuisance of a female patient. She hadn't listened to Sean that she should find a different dentist, possibly a woman, and try to clear up the infection first and then see if the tooth actually needed to be extracted. She'd just said that Sean clearly cared more about money than her health. Later though she'd said she wished she hadn't let the dentist take the tooth out because it probably hadn't needed to be removed.

Sadie had insisted they spay and neuter all of their pets because although it would cost them a lot up front it would save them even more money in the long run. Sean had agreed with her but the problem had been that she'd left it up to him to take the pets to a veterinary clinic and pick them up before or after work, which he couldn't do most days.

And any time in between all of that that he'd managed to save up money Sadie had something go wrong with her car, or the kids needed new clothes, or Sadie would insist on buying the kids brand new toys they couldn't afford instead of toys from a thrift store like Sean had grown up with, or she'd suddenly "need" new curtains in the cabin to, "Brighten up the place and make it more homey—not that you'd understand because you're a guy," she'd always say.

He never wanted to give her money for frivolous things but she'd just keep talking to him about it... and about the past, her childhood, the oppression of women everywhere throughout time by controlling and domineering men like him, the fact that if he didn't cooperate with her the children would hate him so in the end he'd always just throw money at her to get her to finally leave him alone. No matter how hard he worked or how much money he made Sadie would always spend it faster.

He turned onto Clackamas Highway as he thought about the fact that now Becca was almost 18, Brian was 15, and Devona was 12. They weren't little kids anymore. He talked to Sadie about that from time to time, about the fact there was no longer any reason for her to not go back to work. She did after all have a car that he was paying for so she could easily drive to and from a job, and pay for the car herself one day. She said she couldn't work because there was no phone at the cabin so the kids couldn't call her if there was an emergency. He said he'd have a phone line run up to the cabin or he'd buy her and the kids cell phones. She said they couldn't afford any kind of a phone. He said they could if she was working. That conversation would ultimately go nowhere. She was determined to avoid work at all costs as far as he could tell, and there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn't physically *make* her go look for work.

He consoled himself that at least Becca would be old enough to work soon, or go to college. Sean hoped she'd go to college, then get a good job that paid well. The thought of Becca's 18th birthday made Sean feel the slightest glimmer of hope. He thought that maybe by the time Devona was 18 he'd be able to start saving up some money, in six more years. Or if she went to college then maybe by the time she was 22, in 10 years. He'd be 59 by then. He'd probably work until he died, just like his dad, and his granddad, and his great granddad.

At least he didn't have to worry about any more surprise babies since Sadie had stopped sharing a bed with him shortly after Devona was born. And he knew Sadie had given all three of their kids thorough lectures about pregnancy, birth control including abortion, and HIV/AIDS and all of the other sexually transmitted diseases, which had been very important to Sean. With his

Catholic upbringing he'd had no idea how to talk about such things with kids. The only sex ed he'd gotten growing up was one of his uncles saying, "If you get a girl in trouble you'll marry her!"

He slowed from 55 miles per hour to nothing as he drifted into the only gas station in the spec of a town that was Estacada open after 9 p.m. He parked the truck then walked up to the front counter to pay a woman clerk for the gas as a man attendant filled his tank. Sean was bleary-eyed with exhaustion and the attendant could have been his reflection so neither of them could think of anything to say. They just shared a knowing nod before Sean was on his way.

He pulled onto the highway, past the last successful businesses on the way to the cabin, then he drove off into the long black stretch of highway with few guardrails and no streetlights that lay between Estacada and the cabin.

The traffic was still pretty heavy but it was thinning out and would be nearly nonexistent by midnight. It was almost 11 p.m. and the only thing keeping him awake was the occasional car that had forgotten to turn off its brights, which would wind up hitting him in the eyes. Eventually he fumbled around for his lightly tinted sunglasses and put them on to protect his eyes from the periodic visual assaults.

Just past a large blackberry farm a cop pulled in behind him and flashed the red and blue lights. "I wonder what this guy wants," Sean said to himself under his breath as he pulled onto the gravel on the shoulder of the highway. He took a good long sip of his now lukewarm coffee, turned off the music, then rolled his driver side window down. A man of about 30 leaned onto the driver side windowsill. "Yes sir," Sean said, blowing out as much coffee scent as he possibly could, "how may I help you?"

"Wow!" the cop said. "I thought you might be drinking but I guess not."

"No, sir. I never drink and drive," Sean said, truthfully.

"Okay. Good night," the cop said, and he turned around and went back to his car.

"They stop me almost every night," Sean said to himself as he rolled the window back up. "They must have some kind of quota they have to make in their job." He shook his head in annoyance and slowly, carefully pulled back onto the highway, continuing into the blackness. A light rain began to spatter on the road and on his windshield as he turned the windshield wipers on low. The light rain quickly turned into a heavy rain, then a sudden hail downpour so heavy that by the time he'd reached Faraday Road he had to pull off the highway and wait out the storm. He leaned back in the driver's seat and waited.

Sean opened his eyes and looked at the clock on his dashboard and saw that he'd been asleep for almost 20 minutes. He rolled down his window and threw his cold cup of coffee out as he breathed in the cold night air to slap himself awake. He rolled the window back up and shivered, cursing the cold as he poured himself a new hot cup of coffee. Then he pulled back onto the highway and continued his drive.

There was one lone streetlight up ahead, by the Cedar Bear Diner, an establishment that frequently changed owners and was rarely open. It was almost like the place was cursed, or it was just in a terrible location. No one stopped anywhere along that stretch of the highway unless their vehicle broke down or they were unlucky enough to actually live there. Once a new

owner had renamed it the Bohemian Forest and it had gone out of business in record speed. He'd always assumed that someone from out of state who'd moved to Portland had bought it and changed the name not realizing how very different Portland's Multnomah County and the Cedar Bear's Clackamas County were; Clackamas County was the kind of place where you'd get your best business with a name like The Meat and Potatoes Place.

Next to the Cedar Bear Diner there was a man who carved bear designs out of large logs with a chainsaw. Sean remembered that when he'd been a kid there had actually been a live bear at the restaurant, a friendly bear in a cage that had loved cola and would drink any bottle of cola that was handed to him. Sean sighed at how the bear carvings, though expertly crafted, could never compare to what had been there when he was a kid.

After that the highway was pitch black again. It was nine more tenth of a mile highway markers to the cabin and his mind was exhausted so he just stared a little to the right and counted them: nine..... eight..... seven..... six..... five..... four..... three..... two..... one!

He pulled into the center turning lane and turned left, onto one of the few side streets past Estacada, Fall Creek Road. The cabin property was the fourth property in from the highway, on the east side of the roadway; two acres of land lushly overgrown in myriad shades of green. The mercury vapor light that was mounted on the side of the cabin by the front porch could barely be seen through the abundant salmonberry bushes and fir, maple, alder, and cedar trees.

He pulled into the driveway and dreaded the cold he'd be walking out into. He was glad that he'd been able to fix the truck's heater that summer since he hadn't had heat in his truck the previous winter. He stepped out of the truck and walked a few paces to where he'd left an old rusting wheelbarrow that morning. He rolled it over to the truck, put all the groceries in it, and pushed it up the long, narrow, bumpy, winding, overgrown pathway up to the cabin as two large black dogs barked wildly and tugged at the ropes tied to trees that kept them from running off and nearly getting killed on the highway. He rolled the wheelbarrow up the ramp to the front porch, which was plagued with white patches of dry rot, and left it in the night drizzle. He walked over to the dogs and gave them attention. "Hi Merry, hi Sherry," he said, smiling.

The front door opened and a woman in stretchy, waistless pants stood there with her arms crossed over her ample and sagging chest.

"Hi, Sadie," he said.

"Why do you have to get the dogs riled up every night?!" she demanded. "And *god*—don't leave the groceries on the porch where they'll get wet and ruined! What is wrong with your brain?!"

"They're under the roof."

"*They're under the roof,*" she said in a mocking and irritated tone of voice. "Becca," she said, leaning into the cabin, "come put the groceries away."

(From *8 Days a Week: the Story of a Working Man*, a Novel by Ava Collopy;
Available through Amazon/Kindle, free on Kindle Unlimited, and elsewhere.)