

TELEGRAPH PINE



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THE FIRST THING DAVE tells Eagle is that under no circumstances is he to go near his office. Dave's office is a walled-off square in the back corner of the dark storeroom at Med Mart, the shady medical supply off Oakland's Telegraph Avenue. Dave keeps the door to his office secured with two key-operated Master Locks and an industrial-quality deadbolt. He has been here fifteen years, since the beginning when Eagle's uncle decided the rich folks in the Oakland Hills were on the decline and the area was primed for a medical supply store. Dave intends never to fall victim to an armed robbery.

Dave sucks on a raw sugarcane from the Vietnamese grocery down the block and says through darkened teeth that he can tell Eagle has never been involved in a live robbery. "You may have been able to survive in those woods," he says. "But this isn't some camping trip. You're in Oakland now. This is the real deal. Bear spray don't work here." He sets his sugarcane down on a wax-paper

plate and reaches underneath the counter and produces an aluminum Easton baseball bat. The grip tape has been replaced with white athletic tape from the display rack near the door, what Eagle takes to be Dave's invitation to petty criminals, adolescent shoplifters and such, taunting them to try to rip off something from his store. Eagle holds the bat and looks for vestiges of bodily harm—blood, bone, gristle, hair—but finds none. He hands the bat back to Dave and Dave snatches it from him and takes a practice swing.

“Never worked with another person, never wanted to, but your uncle has forced you on me. So I have to change my plan. You and this here bat will be the first line of defense,” he says.

Eagle doesn't want to use the bat during a live robbery and he no longer wants this job at Med Mart. He wants his old life as a contract trail builder back, but none of the conservation companies will dare hire him after rumors hit the listservs that employees of Other Mountain Conservation, his former employer, helped themselves to a significant number of tools and equipment. The bigger contractors he wants to work for have figured out that leadership at Other Mountain instructed younger trail-builders-turned-grant-writers like Eagle to write bloated supplemental proposals for government funds, and they may have skimmed some of those funds or purchased certain equipment that employees simply kept after the contract expired. Everyone was doing it, leadership said,

asking the federal government for a little more cash than necessary, and so they told him to exercise exactly zero restraint when writing grant proposals. He wanted in at one of the high-visibility outfits, groups featured on Discovery and CNN and such, and so put those four years of liberal arts education at Saint Mary's College to work and authored long-winded, hellaciously complex grant proposals that most government contract specialists would approve without even attempting to read. "You're going places in conservation," his boss said. "No doubt."

He has sent out a few feelers to certain questionable friends in the business, but even they won't take him onto their ragtag crews as a grunt, a dirt mover or shovel cleaner. And so he lost his sublet in San Francisco and his Pontiac Vibe with custom roof rack and was forced to cheaper rent and shit jobs across the bay in Oakland. In exchange for six days a week as a sales-associate-slash-stock-boy at Med Mart, his uncle has offered him the kitchenless efficiency above the store and an under-the-table stipend of two hundred bucks a week. He took the gig and now waits with faint hope that one of the more clueless start-up conservation companies will call re: the impressive resume he submitted.

"Hey, tiny. I'm trying to show you something here." Dave snaps his fingers so close to Eagle's face that he swears the blade of white overgrowth on Dave's thumbnail grazes his nose. He checks the tip of his nose for blood or the catch of a cut. Underneath the double bridge of Dave's glasses,

he has a vicious unibrow that makes him appear as though he is always scowling, and Eagle wonders if his current expression is an actual scowl.

“Yeah, yeah,” Eagle says. He hooks his index finger through the ring crowded with keys that Dave has set on the counter.

“Copies of the keys to the chairlifts and motorized scooters, not that you’ll need them. If someone has a question, come get me from the office. Don’t want to lose any sales because you don’t know what the hell is going on.” He shoves a stack of four-color product catalogs into Eagle’s hands. “Some light reading.”

On the cover an old man and woman race down the street as their fat grandchildren on bicycles pedal after them. Eagle wonders if it is possible to get these scooters rolling that fast, fast enough to outrun a pair of doughy kids eating their way into childhood diabetes. He decides against asking Dave questions for fear of setting him off. Dave already launched into a tirade once, earlier in the day, when Eagle showed up to introduce himself as his boss’s nephew and Med Mart’s new sales associate. The initial meltdown consisted of Dave pacing little circles around the 800-square-foot showroom and muttering, “If you even, if you even,” a rather vague threat Eagle took to mean, “Don’t you even fuck this job up for me or I’ll end you.” Dave does not finish his sentences and this intensifies his menacing qualities.

Dave jabs Eagle’s upper arm with the Easton and aims the

bat toward the double doors that exit the store. “Outside. I’ll show you how we lock up.”

Eagle pulls one of the glass doors and it creaks and scrapes the frame’s floor plate as it opens. The difficulty of opening Med Mart’s door seems like a quality unsuited to the store’s aged customers. So too seem the wads of chewing gum and cigarette butts and Burger King sandwich wrappers, typical city-street trash, littering the front walk, which Dave never sweeps. The parking situation is equally unappealing, with the front curb painted bright red to indicate a tow-away zone.

Dave walks over to a gate retracted against Med Mart’s eastern wall and drags it out a few feet to show Eagle the steel diamonds that protect the store from nighttime burglaries. “This is the only defense against an all out break-in. I have three Master Locks in the storeroom to lock this baby up.” Dave tells Eagle he puts three locks on everything before Eagle can point out the uniform security measure. “Don’t get lazy and use one or two. Those fuckers have no problems breaking one lock.”

Dave jabs Eagle with the Easton a second time, probably to make sure he has Eagle’s complete and undivided attention, so he nods to reassure Dave, even though he is thinking about his bum ankle and how it has begun to throb again. The ankle is another reminder of recent failures in cheap affairs, the injury the result of a not-so-erotic encounter with his bicycle mechanic friend and a semiprofessional dominatrix in San Francisco. After the

incident, Eagle's last buddy willing to drink six pints of double IPA and follow him into the backrooms of the city wouldn't return his phone calls. Eagle lost his subtlety and couldn't manage one more call to beg for a couch to crash on.

"Now, I understand you're staying upstairs for a while. I expect you to keep an eye on the place, even when you're sleeping. They're always hurling rocks through the front windows." He taps the bat against the window where a rock has created a crater in the tinted glass.

Eagle again nods and nods, even as his gaze drifts past Dave and down the street to the Vietnamese market where Dave buys his sugarcane. He wonders if they sell booze strong enough for him to drink himself to sleep so he can ignore the ankle's throb and the rocks crashing through showroom windows.

THE EAST BAY IS on fire. The blond grass on the ridges burns to black, and the smoke rolls down the hills. Tonight is a rare night in Oakland, one of the few each year when the Pacific fog does not hang over the streets, and people must sleep with their windows pulled open. The suburban folks in the 680 corridor have probably stoked up their air conditioners. The rising temperature of the building forces Eagle to slide open the few windows in the efficiency and sit in his living room-bedroom and breathe the ash-laden air of the many grass fires in the hills. His uncle did not

equip the efficiency with any kind of air conditioner, so he sits shirtless on a folding chair and drinks down the twelve pack of Tecate he bought at the Vietnamese market. The owner welcomed him to the neighborhood with a handshake and two free limes to accompany the cans of beer, bag of rice, and Morton salt he purchased. The owner is one of the few good people Eagle has encountered in a city; he prefers the environmentalists he worked alongside in the field, friends he has lost. Even surrounded by all the denizens of Oakland, he feels more isolated than he did living alone in a stone cabin on Mount Rainier.

The rice boils the lid off the pot, so he drags the pot off the camping stove and onto a towel on the hardwood. He leaves it to sit and will not eat the rice after all because it'll only fill his belly with starch and weaken the nice buzz he has going. The tingle of intoxication begins and his ankle has numbed, even if still turgid with fluid. He cracks open another Tecate and squeezes a wedge of lime into the can's mouth and shakes some salt over the lip. He catches the foam and drinks down a quarter of the can. Dinner.

Eagle and his worthless, uninsured ankle stumble down the stairs and into Med Mart's showroom, twelver in tow. He makes his way through the boxes of hospital gowns and wound-care products and adult diapers. The storeroom reeks of factory-fresh vinyl from the cases of diabetic shoes stacked high along the staircase. Dave has assigned him the unpleasant task of inventorying the shoes after the company's sales rep came into the store and threw a minor

shit fit when Dave failed to provide sales figures. Although an ancient Dell desktop with a dial-up connection purrs in the showroom, Med Mart has no inventory system and all products are instead labeled with little orange tags spit out of an old-school price gun.

Eagle told Dave he would get a head start on the shoes, but now decides against it in favor of lounging on one of the chairs with a sample seat cushion along the showroom's front windows. He polishes off the can of Tecate and opens another and forgoes the lime and salt that he's grown so fond of. The night traffic of Oakland—beater Civics and Cadillacs and Crown Vics—rolls past, loose exhaust systems rattling over the hum of the Dell. He catches a glimpse of himself in the front window and sees that he is looking more and more like his father, raccoon bags underneath his eyes and creases more pronounced, the terrible cliché realized for its truth. His hairline retreats from his face, amplifying his expressions so that he is now unable to hide his true emotions. He should not have let that hack in Redding mow his hair to a length beyond conservative. The barber had a waddle like a brown bear's belly that shook when he jabbered on about all the high-and-tights he shaved back in the Korean War. The haircut cleared the stench from his tangled, almost dreadlocked hair, but in the end only made Eagle look older and sadder and more hopeless.

He still has the ridge of scar from lip to nostril, of course, like a seam of putty no one bothered to sand, the scar that

gives him an unintended snarl. He reaches to pat down what is left of his hair, but now realizes the tight lines expose the divot of flesh where the surgeon harvested the pad of skin that became his right nostril. He tried for the pity fuck once, before he'd had it with cities and escaped to the woods. A woman in a bar thumbed the scar and asked what'd happened, so he told her the story of the golden escaped from the puppy mill next to his father's vineyard and his father sending him to fetch the pup so it wouldn't spoil the grapes. How playful the puppy was, even as it bit him. She seemed disappointed by the story and invited him to a cuddle party in the Marina the following weekend, an invitation he turned down after he learned such parties were limited to cuddling, whatever the hell that meant. He sensed she wanted to continue to paw at his scar during this event, perhaps the fulfillment of some benign fetish.

The only real pride he has left is that he succeeded in not begging his father for a small personal loan—not that he could have helped anyway—or for a couch to crash on for a few months. The truth is he can't stomach the sight of his father, festering in his worn-out elegance. Three Augusts ago, the last time Eagle drove out to Livermore Valley to visit him, they got shit faced on Jack Daniel's and walked through the rows of scorched leaves and shriveled cabernet grapes. Two nonsequential summers of drought nearly ruined his father, his wine company unable to complete the modern bottling facility he'd worked toward

for years. The facility sat roofless, the stonework of the walls spotty and unfinished—a gigantic, humiliating mess that told tasters to stay away. Even tourists from Nebraska wouldn't stop. His father shut down the tasting room and started a consulting firm, which everyone in the business knows is just another way of saying I am unemployed and flat broke.

His mother recently offered her analysis of the graceless arc of Eagle's life, that it is in close alignment with his father's. He did break down and phone her for money after a man with cheap loafers reclaimed his Vibe, but she said loaning him any money would be a poor investment. His mother has no money of her own, actually, and instead ran off with a man she described as a silver fox, a man who directed medium-budget action films that aired exclusively on SpikeTV and possessed an unimpressive viewership of unemployable meatheads and college athletes. But she was thrilled to be away from the vineyard and its sudden collapse, thrilled to have swapped a quiet glass of cabernet for multiple martinis, a crowded ranch for a gated mansion off Mulholland.

Each time a heaper cruises past Med Mart and the muffler rattles he is reminded of his father in his shaky BMW convertible from the Reagan era, driving through the Livermore Valley to visit other vineyards and push his consulting services. The thought of the sad kit, his father divorced, face sagged, designer suit pillled and worn at the wallet pocket and elbows, causes him to wince and set his

beer down on the commode beside him. He starts back upstairs, back to the air mattress in the efficiency. He works at a medical supply store for below minimum wage, but will not become the kind of drunk who sits around alone and duplicates the path of a broken father.

EAGLE DOES NOT UNDERSTAND why the woman sitting next to him is dressed up like a skunk. Even though she has bought him two-and-a-half beers—he counts the double IPA as a half beer because the bartender poured half foam—he still does not know. He does know that her name is Posy, or Po for short, and that she has cobbled together a career as both a yoga instructor and a physical therapist. But in the course of their conversation she has raised several questions about her childhood in a Santa Barbara work commune that go unanswered.

Tonight he is sporting an Aircast again, the support device necessary for this little trip to downtown Berkeley. The Aircast is a reminder of his brief, particularly violent reunion with Sage, a woman who never much cared for him and never cared enough to ask about the scar, which was fine by him. He felt the scar was often a deal breaker with women, especially the vain women he tended to gravitate toward, and they always seemed to demand some kind of explanation. But not Sage. Instead, she took out the stress of her sixty-hour-a-week gig at corporate Gap on him. She threw a lamp at him one night and he wrenched

the ankle while hitting the hardwood.

And so, here he is, drinking beers in a brewpub crowded with underage college students and Berkeley hipsters. He knows he is older than most of them—save for Po—but not so old that he should not have been carded, or so he thought. When he presented his ID to the kid at the door, the kid held up his hand and said, “No problem, sir.”

He has been away from Berkeley and Oakland for some time, so he spent three evenings down in the better light of the Med Mart showroom studying the AC Transit route map and schedule so he’d know when to quit and be able to find his way home without a terrible walk no matter where he strayed. Even so, he spaced and AC Transit dumped him somewhere on Shattuck in the Gourmet Ghetto and he had to hoof it six blocks back to the brewpub where he hoped to hear some live tunes, down a few real beers, and find a decent, one-time sexual partner. Instead, he is allowing Po to buy drinks while he calculates the likelihood of her actually accompanying him back to Med Mart. He can hardly talk over the guitar screeches of a bunch of Berkeley dropouts with a Radiohead complex, but his forced silence is perhaps for the best because he has lost touch after being in the woods for so damn long.

Po grabs the bartender by the shirtsleeve and orders another round and again refuses his money. He allows her to buy the round, though for the first time in a while he has a few crumpled bills in his pocket. At the end of the day, Dave handed him a pathetic bonus after he

sold a discontinued chairlift to some asshole from Albany who'd grown tired of driving over to Montclair to help his mother-in-law up the steep stairs of her home. But Po seems happy to pay and for the third or fourth time expresses her sorrow for his unfortunate ankle situation, especially with him being uninsured and all. She encourages him to take one of her yoga classes at the granola pharmacy on Shattuck when he's well enough and he says yeah, yeah, sounds great. He throws back the splash of beer in the pint glass because he has nothing left to say and must soon come up with a scheme to get a free ride back to Med Mart, at the very least.

The wall clock reads midnight and he has missed the last bus back to the store, so he decides to broach the subject, but Po cuts him off before he can begin. "I lied to you," she says. "I don't live in Berkeley. I'm from San Jose." She stares deep into the amber of her glass as if guilty.

"I don't see why that matters. Listen, is there a chance you can give me a ride back to my place?"

She says sure and they both exit before the bartender can bring their miserable pours. Out on the street, he finally asks her why the hell she's dressed like a skunk, and she says something about a library reading at a local elementary school where her friend teaches. She offers her hand and instead of grabbing it he thinks of the shitty place she will deliver him to. He can't imagine doing anything other than drink with all the mannequins and posters of people very much satisfied with their work scrubs looking

down at him. He knows this much: he won't allow her to follow him upstairs to the air mattress because he does not want anyone knowing how he sleeps each night, with poisonous spiders rappelling down to attack him. He does not want anyone to know how each morning he wakes pocked with little red bumps that grow in redness and diameter no matter how vigorously he scrubs in the shower. Dave's office is a possible landing spot, eventually, if he can figure out how to pick all the locks. Dave has all but conceded sales duty to him and he rarely sees Dave during store hours. He suspects Dave has stashed a twin mattress or large wingback in the office for extended naps.

Po shows him to the car, which is not the sedan he expected, but a dated Dodge minivan, iced-mint paint and spotted with patches of rust along the lower panels. The bottom half of the Montana license plate is curled from an attempted theft. He begins to climb into the passenger seat but stops to brush the Gold Fish cracker crumbs off the fabric. He suspected that she might have been bullshitting him all along, that she was married after all. Po apologizes—he's not sure for what—and he takes his seat and buckles in and says one of his weird, agnostic prayers asking that her husband not lurk somewhere nearby. As she puts the minivan into drive, he looks through the finger smudges on the window and watches a group of college kids pile into a comfortable cab.

“It has been hard finding people who are into the lifestyle, you know,” Po says.

He glances in her direction and says, “What lifestyle?” Of course, he knows damn well what she means.

“Oh, I thought—never mind.” She falls quiet and places her hands at ten and two and accelerates a few miles per hour.

He won't direct her to the store, but to a house on a side street a few blocks away. The efficiency grows stuffy at night and so he has started to walk around his new neighborhood, if he can call it that. Three blocks down Telegraph, he found a paint-stripped ranch with a sickly pine in the front yard, its needles dropped onto the dirt. The leaning pine looked as though its shallow roots would give at any moment, and the owner of the house would have a serious tree removal project. Eagle tried to learn the trade of sustainable harvesting one year by joining the crew of Duke Kates, a legendary sawyer in New England. Duke was less lumberjack and more Cambridge chess player, a tree scholar. He trimmed his beard to shape and kept a thin scarf wrapped tight around his neck. Eagle spent the year trailering Duke's mobile sawmill as the crew chased blowdowns and retrieved beachcombed firs as far as Maine. They'd located an Eastern white pine in the fall, and milled the tree for trail-bridge planking. After the year was up, he begged Duke to keep him on, but Duke said he just couldn't mill worth a damn, he had become a liability, and sent him on his way.

He asks Po to turn off Telegraph. “Yes, right here. The house with the old pine. That's where I live.”



AFTER EAGLE'S SECOND WEEK at Med Mart, Dave gives him a promotion of sorts, an event that Dave considers a promotion at least: he invites Eagle into the office. Dave takes up the glass pot from the office coffee maker and pours a cup in his MEDI COMPRESSION THERAPY mug. Eagle pretends to sip the coffee but doesn't let it anywhere near his lips because the surface heat of the mug is roughly equivalent to that of pottery straight out of a kiln and would scald and blister his flesh upon contact. Dave then hands him a faded polo shirt with the Med Mart logo custom-embroidered on the left breast and says, "I think you're ready for this. I want you to start wearing it. You know, to look more professional."

Eagle unfolds it and holds it up in front of him and feigns excitement over this second-hand shirt with white deodorant crust formed on each armpit. Despite its grotesque condition, he will wear the shirt because he doesn't want to wear Dickies work shirts with logos of conservation companies anymore, reminders of the life he had and ruined. He has sent out two dozen resumes in the last three days alone, none of which have yielded so much as a polite acknowledgement. He thanks Dave and refolds the shirt and places it on some boxes filled with arm slings.

"No problem-o," Dave says between licks off today's sugarcane. He works the cane for a minute, then takes a few swallows of the nuclear coffee. For the first time, Dave smiles at Eagle and he gets a good look at Dave's

crumbling grill of cracked and coffee-stained teeth. Dave wipes his brow with a stray diabetic sock from his desk and Eagle wants to ask him if he has ever been married or the year of his last date.

“Well, hey. You’re just standing in the doorway. Come on in and I’ll show you around.” He pulls the gold cord on a small lawyer’s lamp and the faint light illuminates the collection of antique weapons Eagle had failed to notice. Before he can comment on the swords and knives and bayonets, Dave says, “Nice little collection, huh? Thought you’d be interested.”

Eagle starts to say that he has never much cared for knives, but stops because Dave has been kind enough to allow him into the secret world of medical market offices and vintage weaponry. Dave removes a long, Civil War-era bayonet from the wall and hands it to Eagle, just as he handed him the Easton.

“This one isn’t for self-defense. Just for show. Don’t even have the musket that goes with it.” He then trades the bayonet for a more contemporary combat knife, a serious affair with a hyperserrated back. “Those ridges tear out the victim’s guts when you pull the knife out.” He takes the knife back and sheathes it and hangs it back on the wall. “Hope those fuckers think about that before they come into my store again.”

Eagle doesn’t ask what happened before he took the job at Med Mart, but hopes there is no next time. Dave’s taunting is a pretty big invitation to robbery motivated by

spite, and by now he has learned that some of the locals, possible gang members, do not much care for Dave. He learned this from some underage kids after buying beer for them at the Vietnamese grocery store. They offered him twenty bucks, but he refused after he remembered what it was like when he was in that situation. They like Eagle and promised not to vandalize the store, though last week he found several tags on the back wall of Med Mart, which Dave made him cover up with the white paint he keeps in the storeroom for such purposes.

Eagle excuses himself from the office and walks to the telephone in the showroom. He dials his uncle's number. His uncle has said not to call except in an emergency, but he must tell his uncle about the lunatic who is managing his investment. His Aunt Linda answers. In a hushed voice Eagle asks to speak with his uncle, but she says he is out of town and will not return until next week. He decides against leaving a message for his uncle because his Aunt Linda has twice been hospitalized after severe panic attacks. She asks if Eagle is well and he says, yes, yes, couldn't be better. "I'm learning a lot from Dave," he says for good measure.

So he now imagines himself in the pitted-out Med Mart shirt, Easton bat readied in hand, with Dave beside him waving the combat knife and the robbers with firearms raised and demanding Dave open the safe so they can remove the contents and slip back into the Oakland streets. They kick Dave and him to the shag carpet of the

showroom, bind their hands and feet together with duct tape. He imagines describing the situation to apathetic detectives and to local news reporters afterward. There he is with the Med Mart shirt and his scar, snarling at the general public as they digest their dinners. He will need to be ready. Tonight he will bring the Easton up to the efficiency and take practice swings in the dark.

PO'S NAME IS NOT Po, as it would turn out, but Amy. She tells him this when she corners him near the restroom pay phone in the brewpub. Against his better judgment, which he does not really possess, he returned to the pub with the latest cash transfusion from his uncle. He seems to be what people call lonely. The twelver of Tecate he drinks in the showroom each night convinces him that the tingle in his forearms is anxiety, anxiety perhaps caused by isolation. He walks around the neighborhood with greater frequency, but never explores the areas beyond the house with the pine tree unless he walks to the pub in Berkeley. He often visits the pine, where he stands at the chain-link fence and considers entering the yard to pay the tree a visit. But then the owner came outside last night—a fat, messy man with a bathrobe that did little to conceal his body—and told Eagle to move along. “You’re scaring my kid,” he said.

And so he has been stupid enough to return to the brewpub. Po, or Amy, offers to buy him a drink, but he

says, no way, no way. He has been down this road with her once now and does not want married women who may or may not live the “lifestyle” pawing at his body as they transport him home in their shaky minivan. Most sane adults wouldn’t consider Eagle a realistic possibility for her anyway; she shouldn’t get involved with him because he lives above the place where he works, has teeth that are more and more looking like Dave’s, and is the only person in Berkeley who would go to a bar while wearing a new-old, pitted-out Med Mart shirt without trying to be ironic. Dave has also requested that he not welcome guests into the store or the efficiency because he believes most people in Berkeley and Oakland have a genuine interest in history and antique weapons. Dave fears his collection is known to certain members of the community and might be the target of future burglaries, which raises questions about why he chooses to keep his collection locked up in the office and not somewhere more reasonable, like his own home.

Po wraps her hands around her drink and says, “I can tell I make you uncomfortable.” And she’s right. He doesn’t understand married people. In the ten years since high school graduation, many of his friends have fallen victim to marriage, which has made most of them broke, overweight, and disappointed. And though he is broke and disappointed with his current share in life, he is at least not overweight. In fact, despite his ankle’s deterioration he now walks the three miles to and from the bars in Berkeley

just so he will not end up bloated from unrestrained IPA consumption.

He is paranoid that Po's husband lurks somewhere nearby. He surveys the pool tables and watches the men who appear to be alone. Several middle-aged men with receding hairlines—the type of people he has never seen here before—lean against the far wall and twirl pool cues and gnaw at their upper lips as they study the tables. Any one of them could be Po's husband. He wonders for a moment if he is dealing with another animal altogether: a couple from Montana who gets in good with mellow folks in Berkeley and Oakland so that they can beat and rob them. But perhaps the creepy vibe originates in Po's commitment to the “lifestyle.” He does not know much about people active in the “lifestyle,” really. His knowledge is limited to the handful of former acquaintances who spent their Saturday afternoons crafting and responding to Craigslist ads for singles who enjoyed dressing up like stuffed animals and such. He once knew a barista in the city who really got off on this sort of thing, though the guy had several stories that involved dark warehouses in South City, wall climbing equipment, and workaholic spouses who were not, as it turned out, all that cool with what happened with their husband or wife. No matter how desperate Eagle gets, he does not want to end up hiding in the store with Easton in hand while some pissed-off guy screams at him through the gate and windows.

Po hands him a business card and he does not look at it.

He slips it into his back pocket and plans to discard it in one of the trash cans outside the brewpub. She encourages him to call her. “You seem lonely. I think we can help each other.”

Over curses from men near the pool table, he thanks her for the ride a few weeks ago, but must go before his ankle swells to the point of uselessness.

DAVE FINDS THE JOB posting Eagle had been checking out the previous night. He rarely comes into work early, but today he found Eagle asleep, reclined on one of the lift chairs in the showroom and covered in stale Tecate from the evening before, and the job posted on New Wilderness Conservation’s website pulled up on the humming Dell’s screen.

“You are dishonest,” he says. He clicks around the desktop, picks up the mouse, shakes it, and calls it a piece of shit. The mouse is a piece of shit, one of the stock roller ball deals that clogs with crumbs and stalls when you’re navigating a webpage. The problem is compounded by Dave’s general incompetence with electronics. He doesn’t use the Dell often, so Eagle used it for non-Med Mart purposes without much anxiety, never expecting him to discover the automated response from the human resources department at New Wilderness Conservation. The job is pathetic anyway, a glorified map printer, but Eagle has taken to spending his late evenings drinking

a case of Tecate and responding to terrible jobs with a fake name and resume. In a week's time, the inbox for the e-mail address he created in support of this effort is packed with pornographic spam messages, which he has not bothered to delete.

“You are a sick fuck,” Dave says, not understanding. Eagle agrees with this statement on some level, though. Even with the weapons stockpile Dave maintains in the office, Eagle is still more fucked in the head. He has spent the last six years of his life living in and out of the wilderness, often living alone in a tent in a pine forest that needs a small trail bridge repaired. While Dave has wasted much of his life talking old folks into home healthcare products they don't need and can't afford, Eagle wasted much of his early life talking bears and coyotes and mountain lions out of stalking and skinning him alive as he went about his work assessing trails.

“Sick. Just sick,” Dave says again. He unplugs the computer and reaches underneath the counter for the Easton. Now Dave will kill him, this much is sure. Dave grips the bat's midsection and slaps the end against his palm. “You, friend,” he starts, “are not long for Med Mart.” He twirls the Easton as if it is a baton. Eagle sits up in the lift chair and prepares for impact. His ankle remains swollen from the long trek back to the store after his last night of drinking at the brewpub in Berkeley. This is how it will end for him: clocked in the head with an aluminum Easton while inside his uncle's medical supply store on

Telegraph in Oakland. He is somewhat relieved, now knowing.

Dave raises the bat's tip at him and says, "Now, I am going to lock myself in the office so I can call that bat-shit crazy uncle of yours. And I'm going to tell him what a sicko you are and that I want you out of my store."

"No problem-o," Eagle says with his best attempt at Dave's voice. He stands and slips off the Med Mart shirt and folds it up and hands it to Dave. "I won't need this anymore."

Dave snatches the shirt out of his hands and retreats to the office, Easton tucked under his left arm. Eagle stands there bare-chested for a moment, then follows Dave to the storeroom to lounge on boxes while Dave places the awkward call to his uncle. His uncle will not defend him, this much he knows. He has twice failed to be a productive employee at one of his uncle's train-wreck business ventures. The first time was in high school, when he worked at his uncle's smog check station in Tracy and simply passed vehicles without bothering to connect them to the machine. This was hot, dirty work that paid shit and required him to don a tight-fitting, one-piece mechanic's suit, but it was also the lousy job that later encouraged him to find something well paying and outdoors.

Through Dave's office door, Eagle can hear him speak to his uncle. "Well, you better have him out of here soon. . . . Yes, there were photographs. Sick stuff. Really sick." Eagle reclines on a recent shipment of compression garments

and listens to Dave berate his uncle who, despite his rather serious demeanor, is known to avoid conflict. Eagle imagines Dave calling Med Mart after hours later tonight to harass him further and suggest Eagle seek employment elsewhere, not because he has received dirty e-mails on Med Mart's Dell, but because he has betrayed Dave's trust by sending resumes to other potential employers.

Eagle shoves his hands into his pockets in search of stray singles he can put toward dinner. Dave throws something against the wall, probably the phone. Dave will stay fortified inside his office for the remainder of the afternoon, unless he decides to remove Eagle from Med Mart himself. Inside his pocket, Eagle finds a ratty ten and Po's bent-up business card. He will be able to throw himself one hell of a going-away party.

PO IS ON HER way over to Med Mart, so he decides to make one last pot of rice on the camping stove before her arrival. When he called, a child in the background talked over her, and he wonders if calling her was a good idea after all. "One minute," she said. "I have to go outside." He tried to give her an out, said it sounds like this is a bad time, but she insisted on coming over. "Give me an hour."

His hi-tech camping stove boils a liter of water in just four minutes, so he will be able to eat the last cup of rice in his efficiency. In the field, he often needed quick fuel after a day of sawing trees off trails or boating pine

boards across still ponds. He goes to fire up the butane burner, but the canister is cashed. The stove makes a slight hissing noise as the last fuel drains. He checks his pack for one of the many spare canisters he poached from the conservation company's stock house, but he is already out. He is slowly losing the signs of ever having worked in the conservation industry. After six years, he imagined he'd become one of those industry folks who could no longer stay inside buildings or cook meals in civilian kitchens. When he first returned to the Bay Area, he refused to sleep in a building, thought he could not, and instead pitched his half-dome in friends' yards. But he has been sleeping inside the efficiency for almost four weeks now without even noticing.

He collapses the stove and stuffs it inside his pack and clips the pack closed. The gear inside is not properly distributed, but he heaves it onto his back anyway. He takes a few steps and nearly topples over; he hasn't carried a pack in almost two months and his body is not accustomed to the extra weight.

The showroom lights are still on, but he doesn't bother to turn them off. If Po and her husband are in fact burglars or whatever, he wants to make Med Mart an easy job, with plenty of light and no locks on the back door. He would pick the locks on Dave's office, where the cash is stored, but even after several Tecate-soaked nights he still cannot figure out how to release them. Dave has accused him of attempting to break into the office twice now, citing the

scuff marks on the Master Locks' metal, and replaced the locks with new, more severe ones.

Telegraph is quiet for a Thursday. A retired squad car rolls past him, its rear shocks blown, and the bumper taps the ground with each road seam. One more stroll around the neighborhood is in order before he catches BART back to the city to patch things up with his bicycle mechanic friend and find a couch to crash on for a few weeks.

He walks past the boarded-up shops, past the Vietnamese market, and toward the street with the pine. The owner of the market waves at him through the bars on his store's windows and returns to denying a liquor sale to a group of obvious minors. Eagle would have bought the kids booze had he been visiting the store for his own because he supports the store owner's business. No one makes it on Telegraph, but the man's still here after twenty-five years.

He turns the corner on the side street and sees the pine ahead, the trunk gone horizontal and fallen over the chain-link fence. Those shallow roots wouldn't have held much longer, and it looks as though a landscaping crew has felled the tree. The trunk extends halfway into the street, suggesting a general incompetence on the part of the crew. The homeowner has taped a sign to the trunk with a polite note: PLEASE EXCUSE MY TREE.

Eagle tears the sign off the pine and wads it into a ball. He sits on the curb's edge and tosses the note toward a city trash can across the street, but misses. He never was any good at traditional sports like basketball.

The house's front door opens and the owner, wearing nothing but a pair of revealing boxer shorts, steps outside. "Excuse me, buddy," he says. "What did I tell you about standing there looking at my house?"

"Sorry," Eagle says. He stands and brushes pine shavings off his jeans.

"Yeah, move along." The man waves his arm, his sack of bicep fat swinging with emphasis.

"Sure." Eagle starts to move down the street, but stops. He scoops up a fistful of the pine's meal in the gutter and brings it close to his face. "Just a minute," he says, and waits for the scent of forest to rise to him. ☺☹



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