

SALVAGE YARD

Jeanne Koré Salvato

I walk and walk to get down to the double wide, past the cars without wheels, or fenders, or doors, with parts of their innards missing, their hoods up in the air. The heat makes everything shine—all this chrome on the cars shines. Even the air shines. I can't get used to it. Not like the rain where I'm from. Gary and his uncle laugh when I say it's hot. It's only May, they tell me. Silver is all I see, a silver haze on all sides. It's full of promise here. You know how Cortez must have felt, coming up on those golden cites of his, way down south.

I open a car door. I don't remember if I've checked this one out or not. I have to be careful, feeling in these seats for change. So far I've cut my hand on a knife, then on an old screwdriver. I found some gloves that I wear now since I heard about the scorpions down here. I find a lot of pens, crayons old tools, used condoms, some change, of course, which keeps us all in cigarettes.

Five hundred cars. That's a lot of potential cigarettes. Take this car. It's a rusted blue—something. Chevy Impala. I have to check the writing on the glove compartment—I mean glove box; that's what they call it down here.

I've got my own set of tools, thanks to Gary's uncle, after that big find. Seven hundred bucks. Now I've got a big fat screwdriver to pry open the glove compar—box. Like this one. The silver button's rusted shut. Insert screwdriver along the side, pry that door off. Owner's manual, toilet paper, a cardboard Marlboro box. Once I found some money wadded up in a cigarette box. I open it. Two cigarettes. Not what I had in mind. My luck hasn't been too good lately.

Gary gets a thrill out of my finds, the money anyway, at the end of the day. It was his idea to set me treasure hunting like this. His uncle—he owns the place—deals his junk cheap. Says his junk is spelled “junque” and his shit don't stink. Wasn't too sure about my staying on. A girl how old? Fifteen? After I found the envelope in the glove box with the seven hundred, though, his uncle gave us the double wide way down at the other end of the lot. No running water or toilet, and a window's out, but that's all right. At least Gary got the electricity going for the television. We shower in the bathroom over at the office.

I light up one of the cigarettes. Stale as hell. I hear some talking. I look out over the dashboard.

Two old people. The man bends down, jiggles the exhaust pipe. “Look, Henry,” the

woman says to him, which isn't too smart since he's looking underneath the car. She lifts her sunglasses up. Puts them down. "It's an old boneyard here, Henry. It gives me the creeps."

No way, lady, no way. I let my breath out, the smoke shining like everything else. It's silver; it's all shiny around here. Always something new. It's like anew city way down the road of time. Ever more machines will be around. These cars already give you that feeling. When I'm old, really old, it'll be a lot of flash and shine. Like this. Shine rising up to the sky.

And new things. Take that diary I found yesterday. Now there was a find. Could have belonged to somebody important.

"Hey, Mary!" Get your ass out of there. Uncle Jack and I gotta eat. Go watch the phones."

"Sure, okay. Fine, Gary."

They bring me back a taco from the Mexican fast food truck. I work a couple of cars pretty good in the afternoon, but I don't turn up anything.

I go back to the office. Gary and his uncle are getting ready to go out again. Now that Gary's twenty-one, they've been staying out late. His uncle is in the bathroom. His wife kicked him out a while back. She got the house and he moved into the office. He sleeps here; he's rigged up a Mr. Coffee, but that's about it.

"Get me a fake ID," I tell Gary.

"Goddamn it." His uncle hurries out. He slams his fat fist on the counter, his undershirt riding up over his hairy stomach. "No underage bitch, run off from some hell hole and I take her in, is getting my establishment in trouble with the law." He points out the door when he gets to 'the law.'

So, it's another trek down to the double wide. A few daisy-looking things on the ground. This is wildflower season? And these cactuses do not look much better with a ring of flowers on their head. At least there's no rain. Sure, Seattle has real flowers, but who wants all that rain?

When I get to where I'm going, I sit down at the card table I found in the back of a truck. One good chair came with the trailer, along with this lamp make to look like a ship at the bottom.

I'm starved. I get up, light up my last cigarette, slide open the tiny kitchen window. Down past the property I catch sight of a small fire. Just the Mexicans.

The diary's still there, at the end of the table. It's been there all day. Gary thought I ought to throw it out. Didn't even tell his uncle I found it. Just like he didn't tell his uncle he met me at the Truck Stop Cafe. He told me he liked my bony ass and my long blonde hair. He told his uncle he met me at a soup kitchen, trying to make ends meet. That's funny, isn't it? I wouldn't be caught dead in one of those things. In Seattle the food is lousy: brown rice and broccoli. Herb tea. So sixties. And store cookies. Give me a homemade cookie and I'll go.

I sit down, pull the diary over. The cover's missing, but there's a fine piece of leather at the back. Black binding like a Bible. I touch the top corner where there is a triangle of paper. A lot of pages must have been torn out. Then the ink's very faded. The writing's only on one side of the page. Small, neat handwriting.

1 January 1975

Expansive mood tonight. Saw Moon in a dream. He salutes me, then takes me into the swamps with him, like it was the old days between us. "Shitty way you were offed, man," I tell him. "You cook dinner for the little bastard—you know, slip the pint-sized gook a little something when nobody's looking. The kid brings you a grenade for dessert." Moon shrugs. Six feet of him went down that night in that damned old army jacket. He's had it on since high school; he's got it on now. "Don't matter," he says. The grenade is back in his hand, pin in, and he's bouncing it up and down like an orange. "Sooner or later it had to be something." He points up to the moon. "Remember me." Fucking Shakespeare, man. Hamlet.

Nineteen seventy five. I was born that year.

More pages are missing. I guess this guy went to Vietnam. My father did. But he's dead now, not from the war, but after. Overdosed on heroin. I hope it was an accident. My mother doesn't think so. Then she married this class A jerk, a probation officer.

Here's something.

15 January

And what happened after the rain? In the mud. Jeep stuck. First gear. Tires spin. Throw it in reverse, spin. Winston, Santos, Gugliemino, their boots go suck, suck. Rain. Shoulders cushioned by spare tire mounted on the rear. Push. Gun that engine. Only thing worth gunning. I get out too. Push and steer. Suck. Practically carry that jeep back to camp. Could have sworn I was in the shower. That's what the rain was like. Next day went out again. Same thing. Gives Sisyphus a new routine.

It could have been my father writing this. Rains like this up north all the time. He's right about the shower. It's like that itty bitty shower in the bathroom gets out of control, jumps out the window and takes over. I mean rain, rain, rain.

"Hi, babe. I'm home." It's Gary, drunk, probably.

"Shut the door before the rain gets in."

"What the hell are you on?"

I laugh. "Thought I was back home for a second. Sounded like rain."

"Jesus Christ. Don't go hearing things on me."

Gary's hair is so yellow I love it. Yellow with little flecks of white.

“You’re early.”

“Uncle Jack took up with some old babe at the bar.” Gary makes a fist. “Why? Sneaking somebody in here? Huh, doll?”

“Just this guy. Look. Here’s a picture.”

Gary picks up the diary, holds it up to the light bulb hanging down from the ceiling. A picture is glued on one of the pages. Four people stand in a row. On one end a man’s face is circled. He’s in a tux, not smiling. Underneath he’s written, “me.” The face of the man next to him has a big X through it. In front of a small fountain, a woman in a white dress stands in the middle.

“Not too bad looking.” Gary makes a fist again. “Now come to bed before I get jealous.” “No, I want to read more about this guy, he—”

Gary hits my cheek, hard.

I’m smart. I don’t say anything. If my mother yells, my stepfather only goes after her harder. Gary nudges me in toward the bedroom.

The next day I’m watching the phones again at lunch time. I make the sofa bed up real nice and push it back into a couch. I watch a green car snake along the dirt road up to the office. It’s the border patrol. Two cops. First time I’ve had to deal with them on my own. A tall, skinny guy gets out, walks in, his pointy boots shined up good. He kicks over the trash. “Get me Jack Slade. Official business.”

“Not here.”

He walks past me into the bathroom, steps back quickly. “Phew-ey!” He slams the bathroom door shut. “Where’s his hired help?” He walks outside, back in. “Can’t run a place this size without some help, huh, Missy?”

I shrug.

I look behind him through the open door of the office. Not a Mexican in sight. One minute they’re breaking down a semi, pounding like hell, then, silence. This has happened before. All three Mexicans, brothers, vanish into the shining air.

The cop jerks me right up off the sofa bed. Makes me go outside to look at his nasty dog in the back seat. Calls that dog “new equipment” to stop people from breaking the law.

I run back into the office, into the bathroom. I cry and cry. What if the juvey cops find me? The phone rings. I stay in the bathroom.

When Gary and his uncle get back, the cops are gone. Gary tells me not to worry. Border patrol comes around here every five minutes. His uncle says, “No illegals work here, right honey? Just us three white folks, right honey? All-American white folks.”

I go through a few cars in the afternoon, but I do it quick. I’m not in the mood. I find a five dollar bill folded up in an ashtray. I tuck it in my bra. I go back to the double wide. Gary’s not there but he’s got Judge Wapner on. Thinks it’ll keep me company.

I’m not in the mood for the Judge. I change the channel. What am I going to do? For right now, well, all I’ve got is the old vet.

I walk into the kitchen. The diary's not on the table. I walk around the trailer. Not many places for it to be. I go in the bedroom. Not on the TV. Not on the orange bean bag. I look in the refrigerator, take out a beer. I notice Gary's tied up the garbage. What's with him? He never ties up the garbage. I open up the bag. The diary's on top, the match stick still where I put it to mark my place.

11 March

Dark as shit out here. Too many trees in this Georgia swamp. Can't see the moon. Snake just dropped onto the car roof. Rage, rage, rage. Rage against the dying of the light.

That's impolitic. Impolite. Impotent? What do I do, write a letter to my Congressman?

Dear Fucker—

Or to Columbus, the old bastard. Didn't discover anything besides his own ass. Columbus, c'est moi. Me.

PS. Why bother? It's a black black hole no matter what. The black foot of a black ant on a black stone on a black night.

My father got in these moods. Black moods.

I turn back to the picture. A big tree with wide leaves and big flowers. "Magnolia," he's got written next to it. And under the picture he's got names of people. So faint. "Bus, Earl, Lily, C."—I can't make that out. Bus. That would be him. Is that a name? I flip through, looking for more pictures. Nothing. The ink is too faded. Can't read most of it. Too bad. Must've got wet. Oh, here.

9 May

Her face. Moon of its own. Round, white. Eyelashes fan out in a half circle.

Not much. A girlfriend?

I'm starved. Can't see me writing anything in a diary about Gary. I go over to the window. I watch the small fire shine out back. I go to sleep early.

Lunch time rolls around. Here's me heading back up to the office to look after the phones. What is it about this blue? Next to the white building it is even bluer than the rest of the sky. This, I would say is impossible, except I have seen it with my own eyes. They say the Eskimos have all these words for snow. Probably, if they lived down here, they'd have a lot of words for blue.

It'll be a long lunch, Gary tells me. They've got to go out to Sierra Vista for some tires for his truck. Huge tires.

Just then one of the Mexicans shows up. He collects the pay for all of them on Fridays. "Sorry, man." Gary's uncle takes three twenties from his billfold and places them on the counter. He turns his wallet upside down and shakes it. "Not good times."

The Mexican slowly picks up one twenty at a time, his small thumb carefully peeling them back. He looks at Gary's uncle. "Sixty is for one man each week." Gary's uncle laughs. "What are you going to do, sue me?" The man shrugs.

Late afternoon, after they get back, I decide to head out for a different corner of the lot. I walk along the far edge of the property, marked by a couple strands of barbed wire. A purple butterfly swoops back and forth in front of me and settles on the wire. I see it isn't a butterfly, just one petal of a flower. I look around but I can't find where it came from.

In the back of a station wagon I see a tan suitcase with a thin red line running across it. I pull it out. A few faded stickers are half-peeled away. "Tucson," appears a few times. I push the latch but it doesn't give. I bang it on the ground. Nothing.

I see the key's in the ignition, but the battery's probably out. On a lark, I turn it over. The car doesn't start, but the radio goes on full blast. It's a Mexican station, with that singing polka music. It's cheerful and happy like the sky here.

I leave the radio on. I get my tools out. I still can't do anything with this suitcase. As I push it back into the rear of the station wagon, I happen to see green curtains slide across the window of an old rose-colored VW van two rows over.

I walk down that row on my way back to the office. At first glance, the VW looks like any of the other VW's scattered about the place. I notice that this one has wrap-around windows. Then I see a small skirt, a child's skirt, hanging off one of the side mirrors. No way. A kid in there?

I pass one of the Mexicans bouncing a pair of tires, fast, like balls in each hand. He smiles, nods. A red bandanna is wrapped around his neck. His face is wrinkled, but his body is small, light, like a cat.

By the time I get back to the office, it's closed. Another trek down to the trailer. Gary's not here. Shit.

I drag the diary out from under the mattress where I've hidden it. I sit there, flip through the pages. Nothing. Nothing more, that's it. Wait. Here on the back. It's the last thing.

I wanted to go. I signed up even. Like they told you: get rid of the gooks, the Comm-u-nists. But one thing they didn't tell you. That face. A moon of its own. Is she still there? Alive? I brought her home with me, inside. Vietnam, too, inside.

I keep flipping through the pages. Nothing to do tonight. This is getting old fast. Real fast. One of the pages doesn't feel quite right, too thick. I get out my screwdriver. Carefully, I separate the pages.

12 June

Two men each sit on chairs in the kitchen. One is a vet, the other is, say, a Social Worker? No moon. It's in that land called Nosunandno-moonland.

Vet: No light.

Social Worker: It's night. (Gets up, flips light switch. Light does not go on).

Vet: How many dead Vietnam vets does it take to change a light bulb?

Social Worker: (Does not answer)

Vet: 58,000. Ha, ha.

S.W.: (Still does not speak)

Vet: Get it? Dead? 58,000 men dead in Vietnam. Change a light bulb? Change your thinking? Do you get it?

S.W.: Oh, yeah (smiles). You mean you changed your mind?

Vet.: No shit, Sherlock.

Poor guy. A lot of regrets. My father could have written this. He changed his mind, too. My mother said he couldn't stand being called the gook sheriff.

I get a pen out of my tools. I write, "How many runaways does it take to change a light bulb?" I can't think of anything. Then I write down, "One who got hit."

This damn diary is getting to me. I push the thing away.

I look out the kitchen window. There's that fire. I go out quickly, walk towards it.

I hang back outside the circle of light. The three brothers sit on old tires. One Mexican woman and a child sit there also. I haven't seen them before. The woman's black hair hangs loose down her back. A dark shawl is tied at her waist. She holds a small girl, her hair also long and loose, bright in the sheen of the fire. They look nice there, real nice. Nobody yelling at the girl. Just wait, I want to tell her. They'll be yelling soon enough. The woman turns plump husks of corn which have been laid in the fire. The men unfold the corn leaves and eat the tamales slowly with their hands.

One of the men looks around. He talks to the others in a low voice. He looks in my direction again. He raises his hand, waves. In one motion, the woman gets up, picks up the child and walks down the wash toward the dark. The man scoops up the tamales from the fire with a blanket. He stops, takes a tamale and puts it on a stone. He waves again. Another man throws water on the fire from his canteen. Then they each walk away from me in a different direction.

I turn back, make the trip to the office, just in case Gary and his uncle are back. Nobody.

A car pulls up behind me. Border patrol. One of the cops from the other day. Not the mean one, the other one.

Hey, Miss," he pulls his hand through his black hair. "I came to apologize." The car lights are on low beam, but they're aimed straight at me.

"Come here," he says.

"Got a cigarette?" I walk over.

"Sure." He hands me one, leans back against the door. He lights it for me. "Hop in."

I kick at the front tire.

“You know, I got to thinking the other day.” He lights up a cigarette, stares straight ahead. “My partner—he was out of line.” He takes a drag. “I think you can help us.” He takes another drag. “Hop in.”

I don’t move.

“You’re a smart girl. I want to talk to you smart, okay?”

I nod. I walk around the passenger side. He pushes the door open. I slide in.

“You hear about the low pay around town?”

“Yeah.” I look at his face, his hair. He’s young, the youngest thing next to Gary I’ve seen around here. “You been doing this long?”

He shakes his head. “My first assignment.”

But his hands, they’re old. They’re like old tree roots back home. “Why’s the pay low, you figure?”

“Nobody’s got any money.”

“Sure. And why’s that? The wetbacks get in here and work for nothing.” He reaches over toward the ashtray, stubs out his cigarette. “Illegal aliens.” He extends an arm along the top of my seat; a circle of sweat under his arm stains his white shirt. “You know,” he says softly. “I’m authorized to show our appreciation.”

He takes out his wallet, fingers through it, pulls out a fifty dollar bill. He hands it to me.

“You tell us about any Mexicans around the place and the money’s yours.”

“I’ll tell you what,” I hand the bill back. “Let me get my purse. Then we can talk.”

He taps a cigarette out of his pack, hands it to me. “Take your time. It’s a nice evening. We’ll talk.”

I get out of the car, march down that quarter mile to the double wide. I figure I’ll collect my things first. I can’t stay here afterwards. A couple of stars shine out overhead. The blue’s gotten deep now. Indigo. I’ll take him to that rose-colored VW, the one with the clothes on the mirror.

I go in and get my large cloth purse. I stick some underwear in it, jeans and a T shirt. I tuck a beer inside. Oh yeah, the diary. I reach for it. No, I’ve got to travel light; I don’t need that thing. I leave it on the table.

I walk down the steps of the double wide, happy. I’m going to get me some money today. Sayonara, ol’ Gare and Uncle.

It bothers me, that diary in there. I go back inside, get the diary and a pair of Gary’s socks. I come down the steps again.

I look over at the old tires where the Mexicans were sitting. I walk over to where they set the fire. That tamale is still on the rock. I look back towards the border patrol car. I can’t see it. I put the tamale in my purse. It’s so quiet. I start walking again, but I just keep going in the same direction, heading toward the Interstate, which I can hear a long ways off to my left.