

U and I Paint Supply

by H. W. Moss

The store was open six days -- 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 weekdays with abbreviated hours on Saturday. Gordon always arrived first, parked out back in his reserved space, unlocked and entered through the rear exit coming forward switching on lights as he went, interior darkness evaporating as he approached the front door.

Waiting on the sidewalk outside the wide windows, a man in his mid-thirties and a boy of eleven with his bicycle.

The tumbler in the lock clicked, the glass door opened. The boy knocked the kickstand up and the spring made a twanging sound as he rolled his ten speed into the store proper. Anthony stepped into the shop behind the boy and said, "Thanks boss. Kind of chilly out there."

The boy guided his bicycle into the back with one hand on the gooseneck that connected the round drop down handlebars. "Yah, thanks Mister Miter."

The cool morning air was deceptive. Riverside lay inland on an arid plain: cold to freezing over night, but the temperature rose with the sun. It was going to be another hot desert day, perfect for watching paint dry, Gordon thought and chuckled at his own wry sense of humor.

The boy picked up a broom and began sweeping the floor in the customer area. Both Anthony and Gordon stood behind the counter with cigarettes dangling from their lips. Occasionally they flicked an ash toward where the boy worked, but Saturdays rarely

got busy. The contractors and building crews mostly took weekends off so the only people who might wander in were homeowners looking to match a sample.

“Hear about them Ruskies?” Anthony was a news junkie easily influenced by David Brinkley. “Every family’s got a backyard bomb shelter. Gov’ment subsidy or something.”

This was a touchy subject with Gordon who had just completed his own fallout shelter. He found the do-it-yourself blue-prints and parts described in an article in Popular Mechanics magazine. But he did not publicize this fact except among a few friends, of whom Anthony was not one.

“We had a duck and cover drill yesterday in sixth period,” the boy said as he rested on the rectangular broom’s upright handle.

“That’s just stupid,” Anthony said as he tossed the unsmoked nub into the pile of dust and rubbish the boy had collected. The boy dutifully stepped on the butt to extinguish it without remarking on the casual, even careless act or the insolence someone watching might infer from it. “Duck and cover. Duck and kiss your ass goodbye is more like it.”

All three turned toward the front door when the bell above it jingled. A short fat woman stood expectantly, but at a respectful distance from the men.

Gordon took the lead. “Help you ma’am?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I want to re-decorate my daughter’s bedroom. Thought I’d paint it.”

“Then you’ve come to the right place,” Gordon said enthusiastically. “That’s what we sell here at U and I Paint supply where we’re grammatically correct.”

The boy understood this remark, which Miter made whenever possible, but not why it bore repeating or why Miter thought it so amusing. Anthony, on the other hand, really had not a clue. The woman must have got it because she chuckled.

However, she said again, “Oh, I don’t know.”

“Well you just come right on over here next to these color wheels and tell me what you like.” Gordon had a personable salesman’s style that was not country but neither was it city slicker. It was a well practiced genuine delivery that could get the toughest nut out of its shell. “Got a color you like from a magazine or a piece of wall paper or some cloth you admire? We’ll match it up right here for you, blend the color into the base, give the can a good shaking to be sure it’s thoroughly mixed and send you off with brushes and rollers and drop cloths and all the things you’ll need to make that little lady’s room look spic and span and new.”

Her refrain, “Oh, I don’t know,” was already old. But she reached into a satchel size purse that dangled brownly from a shoulder strap and began rummaging around inside until she at last pulled out a two inch piece of thread.

“How about this color?”

Miter did not say it, but matching something that thin and that small would be a major challenge. He started by asking, “And what color do you think that is Mrs. . . .”

She eventually bought one gallon for the walls saying she would be back for more if she needed it, and a quart of darker color for trim. She bought a roller with an extension handle saying she did not need a ladder. After Gordon explained how spackle and wall tape worked, she bought a box and a roll, sand paper and a three inch wide spatula as

well. It took Anthony two trips to her car to deliver the goods and when he returned and passed the boy, he said, “Earning your salt today? I’m earning mine.”

The boy washed the front windows as high as his short stature allowed him to reach and Anthony took over for the areas he could not. Then the boy turned his attention to the glass counter tops and sliding sides which he sprayed with a blue liquid that smelled sweet. He wiped the glass down with bunched newspaper being especially careful to remove fingerprints and coffee spills, both of which were abundant. As he worked, customers arrived and ordered various supplies and the loud electric paint can shakers were turned on intermittently which made it impossible to think until the timer ran out and they came to a rattling halt.

Men in white bib overalls with hands crusted in paint that never came off and the skin of their palms like leather occasionally trickled in between arrivals of housewives and husbands.

“I’m terribly sorry Sir, we are completely out of six footers,” Anthony said sounding genuinely apologetic. “We still have a few sixteens and a couple 21 foot extension ladders, but we’re just plumb out of six footers. Sorry.” Anthony gave as good a face to the lack of inventory as he could, but there was a level of annoyance in his voice in addition to the dissatisfaction displayed by the customer.

“What am I going to do with a sixteen foot step ladder inside a house with seven foot ceilings? Hunh? Tell me.”

When the disgruntled patron was gone, Anthony muttered another comment under his breath. “I say let him dry on the vine.”

Gordon overheard, said, “I think the phrase is ‘die.’ Let him die on the vine.”

There was a dearth of customers around noon and the boy made himself busy wiping dust off the tops of gallon paint cans that lined the walls. As he wiped with a damp cloth, the two adults smoked.

“Saw a John Wayne movie last night on tee vee,” the boy said casually.

Anthony asked, “Yah? Which one?”

“It was a war movie.”

Anthony asked, “Yah? Which one? ‘Sands of Iwo Jima’?”

“‘They Were Expendable.’”

Gordon asked, “What’s it about?”

The boy stopped working and began explaining the intricacies of the plot as he saw it. “It’s about PT boats and how they blew up Jap ships.”

“Yah?” Gordon seemed genuinely interested. “And what do you think ‘expendable’ means?”

The boy stood thinking for a moment. “It means, um, well, it means . . .”

When it was obvious he was not going to be able to supply an answer, Gordon said, “You could do without ’em. You could expend them. You could use them up and nobody’d care. That’s what ‘expendable’ means. Not worth much, you don’t need to save them.”

The boy puzzled over this for several seconds before saying, “But that’s not what I thought they were doing in the movie. John Wayne was valuable. They needed him to fight the war. They needed John Wayne.”

Anthony said, “Where were you, Gordon, during the war? Weren’t you in the Navy?”

“I was all over the Pacific. Guadalcanal, Midway, the Coral Sea. Gun crew. Saw a lot of action. Got hit with a Kamikazi. But I wasn’t hurt. Lucky.” He fell silent as the door opened and the bell rang. He stubbed out another cigarette and said, “Help you ma’am?”

The boy only put in four hours a Saturday and much of it seemed to be work the owner thought up on the spot. The boy kept checking the big round clock on the wall, its black hands clicking with every minute that passed, and said at precisely two o’clock, “I think that’s it, Mister Miter. I gotta go deliver my paper route.”

Gordon was waiting on a customer; it took him at least a minute before he drew his attention away. He reached in a pocket and pulled out a clip with folding money in its jaws. “All right, son. How much I owe you?”

“Dollar and a quarter an hour, four hours, five dollars total, same as last week.”

Miter peeled a bill from the top. “Yah, well all I got’s a sawbuck.”

The boys’ eyes lit up like two pieces of licorice centered on white dinner plates when Gordon handed him the single bill.

“You owe me a week in advance now, right? I mean, next week you don’t get paid because I’m paying you four hours in advance right now. Understand?”

The boy nodded vigorously indicating his pleasure with having cash in advance. Then he had the audacity to say, “I need a nickel for the pop machine.”

Gordon squinted like a miser aghast at such an absurd request, began digging around in his pants pocket. He came up with two coins which he pressed against one another and moved back and forth next to his ear as if to hear the sound they made and

said, “You want a Nehi or an RC? Why don’t you get an RC for yourself and pull out one of the special ones for me.”

The soda dispenser was a box with a hinged lid. Inside were rows of bottles dangling by their necks, filled with various flavors in racks that paralleled one another. To retrieve a soda, the boy dropped a five cent piece into a coin slot which unlocked a gate. When a bottle was slid to this gate and pressed against it, a metal flange snapped open and the drink could glide past. The boy pulled out an RC and a Pabst and stuck their heads into the maw of the opener on the side of the refrigerated box. He returned and handed the beer to Gordon.

“Thanks,” Gordon said as he took a pull.

Anthony looked at him ruefully. He was not allowed to drink on the job and did not take it lightly that his boss flaunted this in his face.

As the boy rolled his ten speed out the front door, he said over his shoulder, “See you tonight Mister Miter.”

Anthony followed and appeared simply to be about to have another cigarette. But while cupping his fingers against the breeze to light it, he said, “He pays you in advance. What’s with this guy? He put me on commission three months ago. But we’re running out of inventory. The suppliers aren’t bringing in our orders. And with nothing to sell, how can I earn anything? I put in my hours and get shit for pay. Yet he gives you money in advance. What’s with that? I don’t get it.”

The boy had no answer. “Gee, I don’t know Anthony.” Rather than stay and listen to any further complaint, the boy jumped on his bike and began peddling.

* * *

“Does he know?”

“I don’t think he has any idea you’re giving me the money to pay him. He thinks he really earns it. And he does.”

The two men were outside on the patio lighting the barbeque preparatory to cooking up steaks. Gordon and Harry were also matching each other’s alcohol consumption although neither would have as yet, by the standards of the day, been considered drunk.

“The kid’s industrious,” Gordon continued. “I gotta hand him that much. Really makes the countertops look good and scrubs the window glass. So today when he asks for his pay, well, I gave him the whole thing, a ten spot. All at once. Told him he owes me in advance. You don’t want me to tip him or anything, right?”

Harry acted surprised. “Tip? No. Course not. Just a reasonable hourly rate is fine. I don’t think there will be any problem you having paid him in advance come next Saturday, he’ll work just as hard.”

“And a smart kid for numbers. You can’t sneak anything past him. He calculates in his head and knows how much I owe.”

Harry said, “Runs in the family. I have two brothers who graduated in engineering and one of them is a rocket scientist.”

Gordon said, “A blind girl never sees ya sneaking up on ’em.”

Harry considered this aphorism briefly, then asked, “What the hell is that supposed to mean? Betty isn’t blind.”

“Metaphorically. I’m speaking metaphorically.” Then, to change the subject, Gordon asked, “What did Elizabeth and the boys think of the fallout shelter?”

The tour began near sunset shortly after Harry brought his family over to Gordon's house for what was billed as the Grand Opening. The device was almost hidden in the green lawn of the one-third acre lot located where you might otherwise have placed a swimming pool. If you looked closely there was a black oval in the lawn center. They approached and saw it was the size of a manhole with a handle in the center. Gordon bent and gave a slight twist. The cover popped up like a jack-in-the-box and a light shown from the interior.

“Opening the hatch automatically turns on the air circulating pump and a light. Just like a refrigerator door opening. What do you know? The little light, it stays on.”

Ice rattled in their glasses as Gordon invited Harry and his family, Elizabeth declining but investigating the interior from above, to climb into the hole in the ground. Gordon's wife, standing next to her, beamed with pride.

Harry junior was first. He wasted no time clambering over the lip and finding placement for his feet and hands on the metal ladder attached on the inside. His younger brothers fought to be next and there came an echoing yell from deep inside, “C'mon down Dad.” Harry took his turn on the rungs being especially careful not to spill his whiskey as he went. Gordon followed until all five stood at the base which was one large room.

No one interrupted as Gordon began describing the various areas and features of the underground shelter.

“Over there's the kitchen with a compact propane stove and a sink that uses gray water. That's underground fallout shelter talk for non-potable water. It's a recycling concept. And then you have the family room,” he made an all encompassing gesture with

his arms, “which is where everyone eats or plays or reads or whatever it is you have to do until the all clear is sounded.” He extended an open hand to indicate another demarcation. “A six month water supply over there, fold out beds are there.”

Harry junior was fascinated with a cabinet full of canned goods. He twisted them around the better to read labels until his father asked, “Whatcha doing, son?”

“Looking for Canadian bacon. It comes in cans.”

Gordon said, “You won’t find any. The shelter doesn’t have the ability to vent something like bacon grease. We try and keep stuff you just have to heat, not fry. Want a tomato juice? There’s a church key in the drawer there. Pour yourself a tomato juice.”

The youngest boy said, “Where’s your tee vee?”

“Can’t have such luxuries in an emergency. That there’s a vacuum tube radio. In an emergency you have to turn your ham system off and tune to a Conelrad station. Toyed with the idea of a crystal set, you know, ‘that runs on nothing, forever,’ but you gotta get real in this day and age. Much better to have up to date technology.”

The middle son wearing big frame glasses seemed concerned. At last he said, “Is there a bathroom?”

Gordon chuckled. “You’re standing in it.”

The boy looked at his feet and realized there were two shoe prints marked on the floor around a four inch hole.

“Sorry, boys. Not much privacy in a fallout shelter.”

“Did you see Twilight Zone last week?” Harry junior was enthusiastic. He was an avid fan of the series and loved to recount plot lines. “It was about how this family locked

themselves inside a bomb shelter. They wouldn't let their neighbors in, so the neighbors broke the door down."

Gordon was unfazed. "Well, they were stupid enough not to build a shelter of their own."

Later, with the coals lit but not ready to cook over and fresh liquor in their glasses, Gordon became contemplative. "How's she doing?" They watched their wives through the kitchen window. Harry took a long swallow, glanced up at Elizabeth who sat on a stool near Betty as she chopped chives while chatting with her friend.

"Elizabeth? Honestly, not so good. She's tired all the time, sleeps most of the day. I barely got her to come out tonight. Doctor says her kidney functions are at best twenty percent. I don't know what's going to happen. It's scary." He looked long and hard into his nearly empty scotch glass, twirled it so its contents spun, drained the last few drops, set the glass on the patio table. "Nephritis they call it. A fancy name for kidney disease. They have this new thing called dialysis she's about agreed to try. Cleans your blood but it takes all day and they stick a tube in your arm so it's kind of painful."

"Sorry to hear that," Gordon said sympathetically. He wrinkled his brow and pursed his lips and finally said, "You still keeping that piece of paper for me you had me sign and had notarized?"

There was a testiness in Harry's response. "Yes, Gordon, even though I told you it was completely unnecessary. California is a community property law state. Anything happens to you, she gets the real estate automatically."

Gordon was not arguing, but said enigmatically: "If only it were that easy." He poured refreshers for each of them from two bottles on the table. "So how much you earn a year as a lawyer?"

Harry was moderately put off by the question. He believed his income and how he would vote in the next election were nobody's business but his own. However, he also knew he was doing rather well as one of two partners in a law firm that specialized in civil litigation. Besides, Gordon Miter was a good friend, one whom he had known since his last son was born. They met in the waiting room at Riverside Community Hospital where both smoked incessantly as they waited for word on their wives who were in labor. Gordon came to Harry for representation when he wanted to bring suit against the hospital which eventually resulted in a reduced settlement. Gordon had been good both as a friend and as a client. It would not matter if he gave a ballpark figure.

"Oh, I don't know. Between ten and twelve I predict this year."

"Right. You were an assistant D. A. and now you're in private practice. Mind if I ask what you earned last year?"

"You mean what I reported to the IRS? Just under ten grand."

Gordon rose and examined the coals. He spread them out, placed the grill over them, picked up a large platter layered with meat and forked steaks onto the BBQ. He closed the lid and smoke began pouring out in earnest. He stood back to admire his work and said, "That's what I'm getting at, Harry. That's chicken feed. You'll be proud when your practice grosses ten fucking thousand dollars a year. Nothing! That's nothing."

Harry drew long and hard on his cigarette and said at last, "I don't look at it that way. I can afford a family, three boys, a house and a new car every couple years." He

took another sip of his cocktail and added, “I disagree completely. In fact, I think that’s good money, damn good money. Way more than my father, who was a baker I might point out, ever earned in his entire life I earn in one year.”

Gordon had something on his mind and he wanted to spill it. “Know how much my business grosses every month? Well, I’ll tell ya. About thirty thousand. Trouble is, half that goes to buy supplies, there’s rent, insurance and up keep on the place plus an employee and everyone else who gets a piece of that means I’m lucky if a thousand makes it into my pocket. Two-fifty a week I figure I’m making. That’s what I call slave wages.”

Harry listened quietly. Perhaps Gordon would get around to his point. But, ever vigilant to the timing of the steaks, instead he lifted the lid and turned them one by one. The lid descended, Gordon exhaled a puff from his cigarette, sipped his drink, said, “Ever wish you could start over again somewhere else? Mexico maybe?”

“What? Run away? You’re kidding, right?”

There was a defensive note in his voice when Gordon answered, “Hypothetically speaking, of course. But it’s easy for you to say no. You’ve got three sons.”

Harry stared with his eyes fixed on his friend and client. “Girls? You talk this way because you have girls and not boys? Are you kidding? I’d give an eye tooth to have a daughter.”

Gordon leaned in close as if sharing a secret. He said, “You have to keep anything I say to yourself, don’t you? I mean, it’s sort of like a priest in confession. What do they call it? Client attorney something or other?”

Harry could see the direction Gordon was taking and did not much care for it. “Attorney-client privilege. Yes and no. In California it protects communications only with regard to pending litigation. But I wouldn’t divulge this kind of talk to anyone in any event. Why? What you planning? You running out on Betty and the kids?”

Perhaps the liquor was having an effect on his judgment. In any event, Gordon refused to be mum. “Hey, we’re just talking here, right? I mean no law’s been broken when you talk out loud, right? Just hypothetically speaking. I mean, what if?”

Harry was both interested and concerned where the conversation might lead and said, “What, hypothetically speaking, are you thinking?”

“Well, a fella needs money, right? I mean, let me put it to you this way: A man could retire in Mexico with the right amount of moolah. But where do you get that kind of dough? I mean, say my paint store grosses thirty thousand a month. Now I have to buy supplies and insurance and gasoline and all those sorts of things to keep the business going. But if I stop paying out, I can keep the money. Oh, the suppliers won’t let you go more than a couple months and the landlord might start evicting in two, three months, but it’ll take two or more months after that. So you have to play it right. You string them all along. Give the landlord an excuse about business being bad. Maybe pay half the rent for a couple months. Don’t pay a supply house at all and when they squawk, shift to another paint manufacturer. There’s gotta be a dozen and they all want the business. I mean, in six months a fella who played his cards right might save almost two hundred thousand dollars, maybe even a quarter of a mil if he has a few high volume months. A guy could go south of the border, live real well, start a whole new life for himself, maybe with a young new señorita with that kind of money. I mean, hypothetically speaking, of course.”

Harry junior showed up at his father's elbow. "Betty wants to know if the steaks are ready."

Gordon smiled, held his drink aloft and asked, "What's the difference between proof and percent alcohol?"

"It's double," the boy said brightly. "Sort of like binary. Zeros and ones."

"What the hell is he talking about?" Gordon was unfamiliar with the term.

"Some kind of math, is what I'm told. What they teach kids these days. Got to do with machines that think. Whole future of America is hanging on our children to win the Cold War and this has something to do with that."

Gordon set his glass down after he drained it, slammed it hard enough on the table to hear the ice tinkle and he belched. "So I'm drinking one fifty-one rum. How much percent is that?"

Without batting an eye, the boy said, "Seventy-five point five percent."

"I'll be damned. That was quick. Corpus apprehensive, spirit serene." He pulled the last steak off the grill, tossed it onto a platter and said, "Let's eat."

* * *

Both men came out of the war unscathed, at least physically. Gordon was younger. Drafted by the Army toward the end of the war in Europe, he joined the Navy.

Dad already had his law degree and was immediately sent to officer's candidate school from which he graduated. He was trained in ordinance, stayed stateside mostly at White Sands and was demobed as a Second Lieutenant.

But war has an invisible and lasting effect on everyone it touches. For my father it reinforced his view there was good and evil and evil had been defeated and the moral standards by which he was raised remained in place.

For Gordon, there was a desensitization, a sort of detachment, an almost distancing of his presence in the real world into that of a nether world, one that existed on the very edges of what my father would have called morality. You could not see this on the surface because Gordon never revealed his inner secrets unless emboldened by the need to boast. Or a need to at least tell someone what was happening inside his brain.

Of course, Miter's unburdening may well have been due to nothing of the sort. It could have been some bizarre survival mechanism meant to insure that someone knew, that someone could put two and two together afterwards. And my father's sense of morality was itself a product of those times. I believe he admired what Miter did when it dawned on him, but had he lived to today, Dad would have looked upon the man, his actions, the law and how it affects individuals entirely differently.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Fast, we simply cannot take your case." Dad had fingertips to fingertips, palms apart, and moved his hands in a flex that was reminiscent of a living thing breathing.

"But why not?" There was astonishment and hurt in the woman's response. "The man was drunk. He hit three parked cars before he ran me over on the sidewalk. The police arrested him and charged him with driving under the influence."

"That's merely a misdemeanor," Dad's partner, Boyd Brisken, replied. "He already served his two week sentence and is out of jail. But the real truth, Mrs. Fast, is yes, you were hurt terribly and may never recover. You have medical bills large enough to make

Midas weep. You will probably never have children, you won't be able to work at your old job which was labor intensive and like you told us, your life is ruined. But the plain fact of the matter is, Mrs. Fast, neither the drunken driver or you have any insurance. The state does not mandate drivers carry insurance, probably never will, and so long as that is the case, we cannot afford to represent you. There's simply no money in it."

Brisken turned to his partner for confirmation. Harry nodded in sympathy and agreement. Mrs. Fast and her husband made eye contact in an apparent full and complete understanding of the fact they could hope for no legal remedy. The husband stood and grasped the handles, backed the wheelchair slowly out of the room. Brisken motioned toward the legal secretary who crossed and accompanied them to the stairwell. There was no elevator in the two story building, so the chair had to be wrestled down each step backward. It was a job for two, one holding the front to prevent the entire contraption with the trapped human from falling over.

When they were alone, Boyd said, "Anosmia. Does anybody even know how to pronounce it let alone what it means?"

"I'll teach them."

"But this woman wasn't hurt. I mean, beyond a few scrapes and bruises, what's wrong with her? The transit company has already said they'll pay for the hospital bills, loss of income, damage to her clothing, even throw in a little pain and suffering. But smell? She can't smell anything? What the heck's that worth in a court of law? A jury will never go for it."

Brisken said all this with a tone of warning. Now that they were alone, the discussion turned to other potential clients. "Sure the city has liability insurance that

would probably pay a tidy sum and produce a handsome fee, but it's not like she broke her leg or had a permanent injury. Sure, the bus hit her when she was stopped at a red light, that much is clearly in her favor; the bus driver wasn't paying attention and admitted that in the police report. But we don't want a case like this, believe me. It's a waste of our company time. I don't want to pay half the stenographer's transcription fees or pay a court reporter to take a deposition or sit in on discovery. You get me? I mean, since when is there any damage when someone can't smell? Her nose doesn't work. So what? And just how subjective is that, anyway? I mean, how you going to prove to a jury that someone can't tell when you farted? Everyone else can smell it, but she just pretends she doesn't. And can a jury put a dollar figure on that even if it is true?"

Harry steepled his fingers and nodded. "Oh. I don't know. They probably could and quite a lot, I expect. We'll just have to let that jury tell us how much. I'll take the case, even if it stinks. Hah!"

My father was always proud of how that particular litigation turned out. He convinced the jury that loss of the olfactory sense was a serious handicap which could, for example, result in death under the right circumstances.

"After all, if you can't smell smoke, you don't know your house is on fire."

But Bill Parma was another client Boyd Briskin did not want the firm to take. Parma was an unlikely spy. Built like a linebacker, he stood out in a crowd of basketball players because he towered over them. He had to buy a truck instead of regular passenger vehicle because an ordinary driver's seat compartment was too small, had no leg room. Parma was also on the slow side, some said, and did not "get" a lot of what was told right in front of him or behind his back at parties, around the water cooler, in the locker room

of the gym. This may explain why everyone felt comfortable saying anything they felt even if he was standing right next to them staring at the floor, chewing gum, tying his running shoes.

Turned out that was all part of his act.

“There’s something I just don’t feel comfortable about suing the Riverside Police Department.” Brisken lay out his case against taking the case. “They’re looking for the rifle, they know who owned it, they just can’t find it to link it to Parma. Taking on the entire Riverside Police Department is bad mojo.”

Harry was silent, waiting for Brisken to finish. “I’m sure it will turn up at the right time.”

In fact, the Mossberg bolt action .22 would appear magically in the middle of the trial and everyone would see that it did, in fact, have a shoulder strap which put a large hole in the defense’s case.

But until then, I got to take this incredible rifle out to the city limits, strung across my ten speed’s handle bars as I rode my bicycle, a box of shells in my pocket, out to plink cans on Sunday. Dad owned several other guns, but the borrowed, or hidden depending on your point of view, Mossberg was the only one Dad let me take out on my own. Another I was not allowed to handle without Dad present, the one which was probably my favorite, was a nickel plated lever action 30-30, a beautiful silver Remington with a walnut stock that was a trophy won in a rodeo. After the rodeo rider used it as a mouth wash, brain scan, the widow, coming upon the body, called her attorney before she phoned for an ambulance.

“What should I do?”

“Hang up the phone and call the police,” Dad said. “I’ll be there by the time they arrive.”

The rifle ended up in Harry’s collection along with the Mossberg and a semi-automatic 12 gauge shotgun he picked up from the Army on his way out of White Sands. In order to make it legal in California, he had a block placed in the magazine so that only three shells could be chambered in a row.

A long time gun fancier with a strong belief in the Second Amendment, even Dad felt that was enough weaponry in the house. Well, there was a pistol in the drawer beside his bed, but we were not allowed to touch that either.

The secretary buzzed and said over the intercom, “There’s an urgent call from Mrs. Miter.”

Harry looked at Boyd who sat quietly but did not leave the room. Harry picked up the phone, punched the flashing white button. “Yes, Betty. How are you?”

“Have you seen Gordon?”

“You mean since Saturday night? No. Why?”

“No one’s answering the phone at the shop and I can’t find him anywhere. At breakfast he said he was going to work late tonight. I thought maybe he was with you.”

Harry shook his head even though she was on the end of a telephone line and could not see the motion. He said, “No. Haven’t heard from him.”

“And this strange piece of paper arrived in the mail today. Do you know what a reconveyance is?”

Harry knew exactly what the word meant and had an instant reaction which he was very glad she could not see wash across his face. The reaction might best be described as

“startled.” He motioned to his partner, covered the mouthpiece of the heavy black handset and whispered, “I have to take this call in my office.” Then, to Betty, he said, “Let me put you on hold. I need to change phones.” He punched the button, set the handset in its cradle, went back to his office. Behind the big oak desk he opened a drawer and searched until he pulled out a brown manila folder. He opened the folder on his desk, picked up the phone and punched the blinking light.

“Betty? Yes. I want you to read what that paper says to me, would you?”

When she finished, she asked, “Does that mean what I think it means? The building and loan says we no longer have a mortgage. It’s all paid off. Is that true?”

Harry knew the further implications of this document, but did not know quite how to proceed. “Yes, Betty, that’s what it seems to be saying.”

“Well, isn’t that wonderful? I mean, we owed six thousand dollars in a first mortgage, at least I thought we did when we bought the place two years ago. Now we don’t owe a thing. I’m just thrilled. I wanted to tell Gordon right away, but I can’t reach him.”

“Betty, I know this is going to sound harsh, and it is, but I have an idea he won’t be coming home tonight.”

“Why? What do you mean? Of course he’ll be home. It’s Cathy’s birthday tomorrow. He said he had a present for her.”

“Betty, Gordon’s gone.”

“How can you say such a thing? What do you mean, ‘gone’?”

“I hope to hell I’m wrong and if I am you can shoot me. But I have here a quit claim to the property Gordon had me prepare. Essentially, it leaves the house to you. I

think he paid the loan off last week, probably didn't expect a reconveyance to arrive so soon. When you record this document, the house is yours free and clear. You won't have to go through a divorce or have him declared dead. I think he planned this and I'm just as much a patsy."

* * *

Ten years went by and I thought little of those days. By the time I was in my junior year at State University I don't believe I had given a single thought to Gordon Miter whose existence simply stopped influencing me one day and I was five dollars ahead. I figure I still have that five dollars.

I stopped by Dad's new office in downtown Long Beach one afternoon just to see the place and in the course of the visit, I voiced my suspicion that he had been fronting the money I got paid at U and I Paint Supply. He looked at me with the squint I knew meant he had a secret and it was not about to be revealed.

"Say, whatever happened to Gordon Miter? Remember the bomb shelter he built in his back yard?"

Perhaps to divert me from my previous question, Dad told me how Gordon had planned his disappearance. Dad was quite contemptuous as he described the conversation they had at the last barbeque, how Miter ran out on his wife and daughters, how he abandoned the business but, thankfully, held it as separate property so Betty was not liable for any of the many debts accumulated.

"Community property state. Can't go after separate property for restitution. And he did pay off the mortgage and gave her the house free and clear."

With a bomb shelter in the back yard, I pointed out.

“I always thought that was Gordon’s way of offering them some kind of security.
What a shit.”

“So did anyone ever hear from him again? Did he really go to Mexico?”

“I don’t know where he went. But I did get a phone call from him about two years later,” my father said. “It was Gordon all right. He called me at the office and told me he couldn’t tell me where he was, that no one could find him. He said he was just passing through Riverside and wanted me to know one thing. He said, ‘It worked.’”

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