

Because We're Human

By H. W. Moss

The kid was punctual. John was not.

“Knock, knock, knock,” the kid said when he realized the doorbell did not work and the front door was wide open behind the screen. It was a warm Humboldt afternoon and you could smell the salt air even from this far inland, about half a mile.

John finally poked his head around the corner of the house after the kid banged the loose fitting screen loud enough to be heard in the yard.

“Can I hep ya?” John asked while wiping a screw driver with an oily rag.

“Come about the Seville.”

A look of questioning wonder washed over John's face until he smiled and said, “Right. I forgot. You called about buying the Caddy. Well, c'mon over here. I got it in back. My name's John.”

“Mortimer,” the kid said shaking John's hands despite the obvious probability of getting grease on his own. “Mort for short.”

“Funny that. Mort for short. Rhymes. Ok. There she is. Ain't she a beaut?”

The 1980 Cadillac Seville was gold and shone like a polished stone. It was obvious the owner was proud of the pristine automobile even if it only got fifteen miles to the gallon on the highway, ten in the city.

“Six liter V-8 in that baby. Lots of power.”

Mort walked around the nearly 4,000 pounds of steel and glass admiring the paint job, peering in through the windows, touching both side mirrors as he walked to the front where he reverently held his hand aloft above the hood insignia.

John pulled a set of keys out of his pocket, got into the driver seat and started the engine. He turned down the radio as it came on and listened to the vehicle purr. He gave it a couple throttle pumps and the engine roared like a giant dynamo waiting to be let loose on the highway. “Wouldn’t part with her ’cept the wife, you know?”

“I’m not married.”

“Well, then, you don’t know. She’s a good woman, but says I got too many cars, they’re clogging up the yard.” He waved in an unspecified, all encompassing gesture that took in the back yard, a tool shed, picnic table and four other vehicles in various stages of repair. “Those two run fine. And this.” He slapped a rag covered hand on the roof of the Seville. “This one runs great, looks great. Know what I mean?”

“That I do know,” Mort said as he took out his wallet and began counting hundred dollar bills. “Seven, eight, nine, ten. One thousand. You said you wanted two grand? Eleven, twelve . . .”

John said, “You ain’t even going to haggle?”

“Fourteen, fifteen. Nope. Seems like a fair price to me.”

“Blue Book. It’s high Blue Book, but it’s still Blue Book.”

“Nineteen, twenty. Two thousand dollars. Worth it for something so pretty. I think it’ll do the trick.”

As he took the money and began counting the bills himself, John said, “Trick? What trick is that? Runs great. She’ll get you around town all right.”

“Impress a girl. Isabella, the love of my life. I want her to ride in style.”

John pulled out the pink slip, signed and dated it. He filled out several official pieces of paper including a bill of sale which he handed to Mort. He leaned inside, read

the mileage, wrote the number on a piece of paper then got out and gestured Mortimer to sit. “Full tank of gas. Holds 23 gallons. Make it to San Francisco on that.”

“I’ll be taking it south to L. A. to meet her parents.”

“Two tanks then.”

Mort put both hands on the wheel and sat there revving the engine slightly. He adjusted the rear view mirror on the windshield, reached over as if to change the passenger side mirror when John said, “They’re electric.”

“Oh.” The mirrors came into align with a whirring sound.

Then Mort put his hand on the column gear shift lever, put the Caddy in reverse and waved goodbye.

“Happy trails,” John said as the car and driver disappeared into the Arcata evening.

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“I can’t believe you fell for my fucking brother,” Gloria said with indignation rattling in her tone. “He’s such a goddam nerd. He’s always been a nerd. He eats, drinks, thinks nerdy. He was celibate until he met you and you, you’re what, two years older? I mean, you’re a junior for chrissakes, you graduate next year. He’s a nerdy freshman.”

“But he’s soooooo cute,” Isabella replied hugging the couch pillow close to her chest.

“Yah, and he’s also very Jewish. Have you thought of that? He’s going to want you to raise your kids Jewish and send any boys to a Yeshiva. Know what that is? Ya don’t, do you? It’s where they teach the Torah. In Hebrew no less. My folks will insist on it. And meanwhile, your folks will have a shit fit because they’re Christian Chicanos who

lost their daughter to a Slavic heretic. I'm telling this to you as your best friend, not just your roommate, you don't want to hang with my brother Mortimer."

As if satisfied with her argument, Gloria rose from her chair and reached into the hall closet where she pulled out a coat and began pulling it on. Then, with a quizzical expression on her face, she produced a second garment, an expensive full length rain coat.

"Jesus. You know who left this? I bet it was Virginia and Dan. She had a raincoat when they drove up from San Francisco. Aw hell. I'll mail it to them." At that moment the doorbell rang. "I hope it's not Mort. He takes too much out of me."

Isabella flung the front door open, spread her arms wide and embraced Mortimer in a big hug. "Morteeeee," she said with exaggerated glee.

"Hey guys," Mort said when she finally set him free. "C'mon outside, I got something to show ya."

"Oh, goody," Isabella started jumping up and down. "A prize. I love surprises."

"I don't," Gloria said sotto voice as she followed her brother and her roommate out to the sidewalk where he proudly showed them the Seville.

"Just picked it up. About ten blocks from here, guy was selling it. I'm driving it down to your folk's place over spring vacation. So I can meet them and drive you around Hawthorne in style. What do you say, baby? You like it?"

"Oh, Morteeeee," Isabella left the pavement once or twice more in a hopping frenzy. She giggled and clapped her clenched fists together. "I love it. A Cadillac. A classic. A classy Caddy. Oh, Morteeeee. I love it." She fell into his arms, "And I love you."

They kissed in front of Gloria who made a gagging motion, pushing a finger partway down her throat to indicate what she thought of their liaison.

“I’m going to the post office to ship this back to Dan and Virginia. While I’m gone I’m sure you two will fuck your brains out. Don’t forget to wear your wet suit, Mortimer.”

* * *

John entered the kitchen re-counting his hundred dollar bills.

“You sold the Seville?” Dusty asked incredulously.

“Yep.”

She reached over and plucked a bill from his hands and held it behind her back.

“Hey, whatcher doing? Gimme my money.”

“Not so fast there, Mister Big Shot. I asked you to contribute to the card and flowers we’re sending Eddy Lopez, remember? The guy at your club who made the television news the other night. It said Eddy was seriously injured in an accident on the set. He’s part of the crew of the weekly sit-com ‘Old and Angry’ which is filmed right here in Arcata.”

Everyone at the club knew Lopez worked in the television industry, he made it well known whenever he had the opportunity, but no one knew exactly what Eddy did. And nobody liked Lopez, not even John who could get along with a rattlesnake.

One day John was at the gym sitting on the big couch watching the news. He used the remote to turn the channel when a commercial came on. Eddy ran storming into the room from the other side of the wall where the sinks were. His mouth was foaming with toothpaste riming his lips, like a hydrophobic dog John thought, and his eyes were wide

like an owl. Eddy was also quite naked. He yelled something about having worked on that piece and John shouldn't turn the damn channel and he bent down, his bare ass staring John in the face with its vertical smile, and switched the television channel back.

John said nothing in response which is how he managed to get along with vipers.

Another time, John was watching a televised account of an American fighter pilot shot down over a foreign country we had not declared war on, but were merely fighting using contemporary weapons of mass destruction. The pilot had gone missing for seven days and was finally rescued thanks to his modern electronic tracking transponder. Afterwards, in good health if suffering some weight loss, viewers were informed the hero had subsisted on, among other things, grubs he dug from rotten logs.

"He's no hero!" Lopez shouted from his seat on the smaller couch to the right. "He ain't no goddam hero!" Lopez seemed downright indignant the pilot was referred to in such terms. He also appeared to want someone, John perhaps, to argue with him, to disagree or at the very least to put his own spin on the subject. John remained silent.

That was John getting along.

Ironically, the members of the club learned Eddy's accident was life threatening from the television news. The reporter said he might die or, at the least, lose a leg.

"Toni Lopez and I play bridge together," Dusty said. "She told me her husband goes to your gym and when he was hurt you said maybe we ought to send flowers. Remember? So that's what this is for, flowers and a sympathy card."

John reluctantly acquiesced. He did not voice his misgivings that perhaps Eddy Lopez was not worth one hundred dollars' worth of flowers.

Not voicing his misgivings was another way John got along.

“Well, okay if you insist. I’ll take the card to the gym and see if any of the guys want to sign it. I doubt anyone else is as thoughtful as you, babe.”

Calling his wife of twenty years “babe” was one way he got along with her.

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Sunday evenings Raphael stayed home and barbequed, drank brewskies and watched Mexican sit-coms on cable. He did not like interruptions and he did not like his routine altered.

“Raphaelito, your sister is flying down next weekend and she has a boy she wants us all to meet,” his mother yelled from the kitchen. At that moment a car alarm began going off somewhere in the neighborhood. It was a common enough occurrence, but because he was deep into an Old West show about silver thieves, Raphael became upset.

“That chinga noise is driving me crazy! Can’t chew do something about that, mama?” he raised the beer can to his lips, realized it was empty, shouted, “And bring me another cerveza, hokay?”

His mother dutifully arrived with an open can which she handed him. She stood by the recliner wiping her hands on her apron, a lingering frown on her face.

After taking a long pull on the beer, at last Raphael said, “Whasssa matter mama? You look P O’d ’bout someting.”

“You did not tell me would you be here next Saturday or not. Isabella is coming over the vacation and wants us to meet this new boy of hers. I think it’s serious the way she talks about him on the phone.”

“Facking pendejo! The asshole’s car alarm won’t shut off.” Raphael set the beer down on the coffee table and launched himself out of the leather reclining chair into the

living room proper. He wobbled toward the front door, stopped in the hallway to pick up a pen and piece of paper, left his mother's question unanswered as he went angrily out into the warm Hawthorne night.

He wandered down the block listening for direction, searching out flashing tail lights. He located the car with the offending alarm.

Two things are necessary to get a vehicle cited for breaking the noise ordinance, an infraction of the Municipal Code. First, the vehicle's exact location must be identified. The color, make, model and license plate are good to get. Second, the vehicle must make the sound continuously for more than five minutes. There is also the necessary element that the transgressing vehicle be in that location when and if the cops arrive. This last is problematic at best.

Raphael carried the note pad to gather the necessary information. While scribbling, it dawned on him he might leave a nasty message. After all, the police rarely got there within two hours, if they arrived at all, and he wanted to be sure the jerk received some kind of reprimand. However, he did not want to be observed. No point in getting into an argument if the owner was around.

He wrote: Fuck You Noise Maker -- The police have been called. They ticket and tow. Fix your goddam alarm or next time we'll slash your tires. Signed -- Annoyed Neighbors.

He looked left and right to be sure he was not being watched. When he was certain no one observed, Raphael jumped off the sidewalk and darted over to the driver side where he quickly stuck the note under the windshield wiper.

Then he ran across the street, walked past his own house, took a meandering route back to his front yard to make sure no one followed. His mother was no longer standing in front of his easy chair, so he fell into it and picked up the phone. He called the police to report a noise problem, anonymously gave the location and license number.

Hours later, the alarm finally stopped. He looked through the living room windows out onto the street and saw that the offending vehicle was gone. Most likely the driver returned without the police ever having responded. Noise complaints were not considered important to the Hawthorne constabulary.

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Isabella was an advocate for planetary husbandry and helped found a non-profit organization to protect the Honduran biosphere designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. She filled out the papers to qualify the organization as a California corporation which was the first step before applying for 501 (c) 3, the special tax status the Internal Revenue Service designated all non-profits.

When they were notified they qualified, the president of the newly minted corporation took several staff members out to dinner to celebrate. Ted was president, Paul and Prudence were on the board of directors. Isabella was essentially volunteer office staff, but she got the work done, correctly filed the papers, which is why she was invited to the dinner as well.

As they approached the table in a Chinese restaurant to take their seats, Isabella said what she always said when at a group dinner, including at family get togethers on Thanksgiving or Christmas. She pointed toward one of two corners, the only ends of a

table where she could be comfortable while eating, and said, “Anyone mind if I sit there. I’m left handed.”

Prudence said, “I’ll sit next to you. I’m left handed as well.”

Paul looked at Ted who said, “Impossible. That make’s one hundred percent, because we’re both left handed too.”

* * *

There was a three story, 16 unit apartment building next to Raphael’s parent’s house. It paralleled their property its entire length and part of it was across the fence from their bathroom. Raphael had to keep the bathroom window open or offend everyone who entered after him. He was contemptuous of the next door tenants and referred to the building as the “ghetto apartments.” The tenants threw things on cars in the parking lot, they played their music loud, they yelled at each other and had fights and were generally considered bad neighbors. Even Raphael’s mother thought they were annoying.

On Tuesday, Raphael became aware of a chirping noise, two chirps actually, repeated throughout the day and all through the night. Chirp chirp, then silence until they were heard again. They were loudest near the driveway; they infiltrated the house from the bathroom window convincing Raphael the sounds originated from somewhere in the back of the ghetto apartments. He hovered over the bathroom sink and listened, attempted to get the direction with his ears like he did the auto alarm. He narrowed it down until he believed the sounds came from a common area on the ground floor, a laundry room or the water heater room which he knew to be near the parking strip.

He timed the sounds. The chirps repeated at regular intervals of two minutes. Every two minutes, chirp chirp, night and day. It reminded him of a smoke detector losing its

battery. After two days of this he contacted the fire department and made an anonymous complaint to give the address of the apartment complex saying it was probably a smoke or fire alarm going bad, please look into it.

The annoying chirps continued. In fact, it was almost as if the owner never left the house, was always parked somewhere nearby whenever Raphael was at home. They were doing it just to bother him. Friday morning he called the health department and made a similar anonymous complaint. Nothing happened, yet no one else in his family seemed to notice, not his younger brother and two sisters, not his parents. It was driving Raphael crazy.

Saturday morning he lay in bed counting the 120 seconds between chirps. After a few hours, he called the police department, again without giving his name, to say it was time someone investigated.

Such complaints were never responded to by Hawthorne police.

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Mortimer was excited. He had driven eight straight hours, very nearly the entire length of the state, and was eagerly anticipating meeting Isabella on her own turf, in the family home occupied by siblings and parents and at least two dogs.

He wondered what her bedroom looked like. If it was anything like the feminine pink emanating from her room in Arcata he would fall in love with her all over.

The Caddy crawled the streets of Hawthorne, a residential area of Los Angeles indistinguishable from the innumerable surrounding cities that had been consumed by L. A.'s insatiable absorption during the last century. He read street signs, compared them with where he was on his map, slowly wound his way along the evenly spaced streets

with their evenly spaced lots with similar looking houses until he spotted the street name he sought and turned right. Half way down the block he found a '56 Chevy two door with a crisp candy-apple red paint job. Isabella told him the car belonged to her brother, Raphael.

He located the address on the mailbox, parked the Cadillac in front and got out. He stretched his legs, bent over to touch the pavement as a method of limbering up and approached the yard. He heard loud Latin music coming from inside the single level 50's style tract home long before he reached the front door.

The music was so loud Mortimer could not hear the doorbell. He was about to punch it a second time when the wood panel door flew open. There stood Isabella with a big smile on her face.

"Morteeeee! You made it!" She leaped to throw her arms around him and he carried her into the room. A muscular male, had to be her brother Mort thought, glared at them from the recesses of a leather lounge chair. He did not get up as Mort strode over with his hand extended.

Raphael slapped fingertips with Mort, said, "Yah, you interrupting the game, mon." He tried to look past the couple blocking his television. "She been 'specting youass all day, mon. Where you been?"

"Long drive from Humboldt. And you must be Mom," Mort said turning to the petite woman who entered from the kitchen wearing a very wet apron. He shook her hand saying, "How do you do? I'm Mortimer. Mort for short."

Whatever the woman said in reply was lost in the air between them. He could not hear over the loud music and her thick accent made the words indistinguishable. He said, “Does anyone mind if we turn down the radio?”

“Why you gots to do that?” Raphael said indignantly from the lounge chair.

“Because I can’t hear. It’s too loud.”

Raphael said, “Yah, we keep it loud so we don’t hear the pendejo fire alarm make noise every two minutes.”

Mort was unaware of any other intruding sounds. The overwhelming amount of noise generated by the combination of radio and television turned up loud made even thinking difficult for him.

“Well, how about the TV, then? Maybe we could turn it off for a minute while I get to know everyone.”

Raphael, already in a bad mood, decided that was enough. “What chew fucking talking about, mon? Turn off the game? Chew kidding or what, mon? You know, I don’t think I like you very much, mon. You know what, gringo? I think mebbe you ought to get the fuck out of my house, now gringo, and don’t bother my seester no more.”

Mortimer stood astounded. He could not believe what he had just been told. All his plans and dreams of becoming a member of this family were suddenly deflated. He did not know what to say.

Isabella, never one to mince words, said, “What the fuck you talking about, Raphael? He’s my boyfriend. I had him drive all the way down here to meet you and you act like this? What the fuck you talking about, Raphael?”

“He’s a gringo and that’s it! I’ve had enough of this shit,” Raphael said angrily. He leaped from his lounge chair and pushed Mortimer out the still open front door. They grappled on the lawn, Mortimer no match for the more athletic young man.

Mort wriggled out of the other’s grasp, got in one punch which only infuriated Raphael who socked him in the eye. Isabella began screaming at them to stop, but she did not try to separate the combatants. Her brother, sisters and mother appeared on the porch and watched as Mort took a couple more body shots before turning to run. Raphael tackled him, but Mort broke free and again began to flee.

One of the girls dialed 911 on her cell phone before Raphael killed the gavacho.

Mort closed in on the Caddy. He pulled the keys from his pocket, opened the door and jumped into the relative safety of the vehicle. He hit one door lock and they all closed. He started the engine. Unfortunately, he was not fast enough.

Raphael approached with a baseball bat he picked up in the yard. Mort started to drive away and Raphael swung while running toward him. The bat hit the driver side window, smashed the safety glass spraying shards all over the interior and superficially cutting Mort’s face in several places. Bleeding, he was nonetheless able to drive around the corner where he pulled to a stop and sat sulking and crying getting angrier and angrier.

Mort brushed pieces of glass out of his hair and tilted the rearview mirror to see how badly he was cut. Then he made a decision. He drove around the block back to Isabella’s house where he spotted Raphael standing in the street near his cherry Chevy.

Mort did not hesitate. He attempted to use the Seville as a ram to mow Raphael down. But the man was quick. He jumped out of the way.

Cadillac's are heavy, especially those built in the 80's, so Mort made a shit pile of the Chevy. He smashed the Caddy into the parked car, the right front bumper and fender of the Caddy plowing a long gash from tail fin to headlight, boring a hole halfway through and shredding the interior upholstery. The bumpers hooked and the Cadillac stalled. Raphael became enraged. He went over to Mortimer's now windowless car door and dragged him through. Raphael began beating him until the family pulled them apart.

That's when the cops finally arrived. They demanded identification. One handed Mort a towellette from a first aide kit.

"You want to tell me what happened here?" The fat African-American policeman asked as his partner stood between the combatants.

"This fucking Jew gringo tried to kill me."

"This Mexican asshole beat me up."

Eventually, the cop said, "Way I see it," he eyed Mortimer. "You are a long way from home. New Yorkers belong on the East Coast." He looked at the Chevy, then at Raphael. "And you, you wetback. When's the last time you got to work on time? Never! Because you don't have a job!"

Raphael was able to contain his anger, but only just barely.

"Way I see it, there are two felonies here: assault and battery and assault with a deadly weapon, namely that Cadillac. Both of youse can come down to the station house and we'll book you. Or you can agree not to press charges or call your respective insurance companies and go home. The both of youse."

Mort's face had stopped bleeding and his head was clear. He saw the opportunity to get away and took it. Under the scrutiny of the two officers, Raphael nodded.

Mort drove off and, a few minutes later, the cops left.

Raphael went over to his beloved Chevy to examine the damage. It was serious. The side door was stove in and pieces of shattered safety glass littered the interior. The force of the impact raised the front bench seat on that side up almost to steering wheel level. Just then the car's burglar alarm went "chirp chirp."

Raphael realized he had been listening to his own car for the last several days.

One of his neighbors approached and said, "Hey pendejo, Raphael, you motherfucker. Your bad short is all fucked up, mon. Hey, I could hear your fucking car alarm as I walked past your shitty Cheby car to go to work this morning. I heard your goddam car alarm all night long, chirp, chirp. You better fix it, mon. Its battery is going bad, pendejo, or else we'll slash your tires."

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Isabella answered the door, but refused to set foot on her front steps. "It's all over between us, Mortimer. We can't see each other any more." Her arms were crossed and she refused to look him in the eyes.

"But why, Isabella? Is it because of your brother? I forgive him."

"It's much worse than that, Mortimer."

"But Isabella, why? Is it because I'm Jewish? Is it because you're best friends with my sister? We can get past all that."

"Much worse, Mortimer."

"Why, then, Isabella? Why can't we see each other?"

"Because your car is a gross polluter, Mortimer. It gets rotten mileage."

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Fourteen days later, Mortimer's father called John from the East Coast and explained the boy no longer wanted the Cadillac. John could pick it up, he could have it back the man said, and no, John did not have to return any of the money.

"Yah, I still have a extra set of keys." John agreed to take it back only if the car still ran and the father promised to mail him the pink slip. He asked why, what happened?

"Well, if you must know, the car has been in an accident. I haven't seen it, but Mortimer drove it back from Southern to Northern California, so it can't be all that bad. A fender bender I'm told."

"How's the kid? He told me he bought the car to impress a girl."

"He's fine. In fact, he's great and I'm ecstatic. He's decided not to return to SUNY and instead is entering Beth-El Yeshiva. My son wants to become a rabbi, can you believe it? I'm extremely pleased with how things turned out during his visit to California."

John found the car where he was told it would be. The Seville needed a new fender, parts to the grill and a turn signal which he picked up at a wrecking yard near Sacramento. He was back to owning five cars. Dusty felt like the Caddy was a bad penny that just wouldn't go away.

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John circulated a sympathy card around the gym and many of the guys signed it. The general gist of the comments were, "Hey, Eddy. Get well quick."

Weeks later Eddy Lopez limped into the locker room. Many of those who signed the card felt cheated. John especially, since he had spent real money. But he kept silent, in order to get along.

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Jorge, a neighbor, approached Raphael and said, “Hey pendejo, you motherfucker. I seen you put that note on that guy’s car a month ago, mon. I tried to say hello, but you were too busy. You wrote some fucking thing on a piece of paper and then you ran into the street and stuck it to this guy’s windshield. Then you ran away real funny, pendejo, like you was trying to shake off a spy. What was that all about, pendejo?”

* * *

Christine answered the doorbell. The mailman handed her a package from Isabella in Arcata. They had just seen each other recently. What could this be?

She held the raincoat up in the air between two fingers as if it were an animal skin. She did not like handling other people’s apparel, even if it was just an outer garment. Obviously, the coat was not new, it did not come in a retail store box nor was it specially wrapped.

Dan walked in and said, “Nice rain coat. Whose is it?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Christine replied.

At about that same moment in Arcata, Isabella answered her door. It was her neighbor three houses over. “Hi Denise. What’s up?”

“You find my raincoat? I think I left it in your living room closet after the party.”

Gloria had to think about how to answer that question. “Yes. I did find a raincoat.”

“Yah, well, where is it?”

“I don’t know quite how to tell you this. It’s in San Francisco.”

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