

**Barnett Kills an Armadillo**

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## Barnett Kills an Armadillo

Old Man Barnett opened the door and slumped onto the front porch of his blue-brick house, his beagle Geech at his side. Most mornings, after breakfast, he did this, dressed shirtless in white tennis shorts and rubber waders.

He eyed the trees for squirrels, which he called tree rats, and he spotted one gnawing an acorn on a high branch of the oak tree in the center of the sprawling yard. He took aim with his shotgun.

BLAM!

“Go get it, Geech!”

The dog shambled out to collect the fallen squirrel while Barnett found his lawn chair and sat down. Already the sun burned bright and hot.

Of all the months of the year, Barnett hated August the most. It forced him to seek the comfort of air-conditioning after lunch until after supper, unless drinking Schlitz crossed his mind, in which case he could tolerate the heat because the cold beer offset the mugginess and encouraged him to care about it less. He remembered when he was younger, when he didn't care about the weather, but this kind of remembering was new to him. He had never been prone to nostalgia, nor was he one to do much remembering or second-guessing, but he'd buried his wife Velmise a month previous, and his grief took the form of looking back.

The rediscovery of Schlitz was new, too. Velmise didn't want him drunk. She'd had bad experiences with drunk men, so he never drank when she was alive, but when she died he remembered how much he had enjoyed cold Schlitz when he attended Georgia Tech, so he started drinking beer again, both to tolerate the heat and because he was now free to become the old man he had wanted to be. He wondered why old people drove so slow and bought Lincolns instead of Corvettes, how the young ought to drive safe cars and practice carefulness and refrain from vices, and how old people's time wasn't worth much so they ought to be reckless and stubborn and determined to squeeze the fun out of what was left. He wondered why so much of the world was reversed from how it ought to be.

He missed having someone to talk to, though he never talked to Velmise all that much, yet her absence brought to his awareness that it wasn't the frequency of conversation he missed, but the potential to be heard. The silence plagued him. Her continual clamoring in the kitchen and her occasional fits of singing had been replaced by a barely-bearable quietude. So he had begun talking

to himself when he needed human ears. He'd always talked to Geech, but it wasn't the same kind of talk.

The dog returned with the dead squirrel dangling from his mouth, and he dropped it into a plastic pail next to the door.

"Good boy, Geech," said Barnett.

Geech had roused him from his spell of remembering, and Barnett again eyed the trees for targets. He spotted one out at the edge of the yard, too far to hit, but he shot at it anyway.

BLAM!

It scurried off.

"Christ, it's already hotter than a witch's teat," he said.

He'd killed hundreds of squirrels over the years, and it amused him that they never learned, that they kept coming, that Mother Nature provided him with an inexhaustible supply of the creatures, but he had nothing against them. He called them tree rats because he found it funny, and people often laughed when he said it, but he didn't mean it as an insult. They did their living out in the open, while true rats scurried away from the light.

"The truth is, I just like to shoot things," he said. "I like everything about it. I like loading my own shells, and I like cleaning my guns . . . and I like sharpening my knives . . . and I like eating tree rats." He laughed. "You got to shoot them before you can eat them."

He could clean one and have it ready for the frying pan in less than a minute. He cut one incision at the base of the tail, and he'd pull off the hide like a tube sock. Then it was meat, which he turned over to Velmise. She had invented at least twenty recipes for cooking them.

He'd had the idea she ought to write a cookbook about it as he considered her an expert on squirrel cookery. He didn't know who would publish such a book, or who would buy it, and she wasn't the type of woman who liked to sit down, much less for the amount of time it took to write, though sometimes he imagined that she was that type of woman and when he suggested the idea she lit up and told him it was the best idea she'd ever heard. After she'd composed the recipes, he'd add some humorous anecdotes and act as co-author, but he would refuse any credit and instead settle for a dedication in the front of the book. He liked to imagine what she'd write as her dedication to him. "To my loving husband and hero," or "To the love of my life, my savior, Bert Barnett."

Her smothered squirrel delighted him without fail. She breaded the squirrels lightly in flour and cornmeal, salt and pepper, seared them, and then braised them in a cast-iron skillet with onions and garlic and carrots and celery

until a rich brown gravy collected that paired perfectly with creamed potatoes. It was over that very dish he mentioned his idea about the cookbook.

She just scoffed, "I've never written anything in my life. I'd be too embarrassed to let anybody read it."

He'd graduated from college with a minor in English and felt confident he could help her edit. "You got to be the world's foremost expert on cooking tree rats. It'd be a curiosity if nothing else, a part of you to share with the world."

"I wish you wouldn't call them that at the table," she said.

He knew that she was far prettier than any woman he ought to have been able to claim. She was tall and skinny, with long white hair that had been black when he first discovered her, and she looked better in a bikini than many women half her age. When she was feeling amorous, she'd do her housework and cooking wearing a bikini, knowing how he couldn't resist her walking around like that, yet she'd act like it was nothing. Most days he felt lucky to have her, and he wanted to show her off to the world, but she wasn't taking the recipe book idea seriously.

Her squirrel stew tasted sumptuous, too, as did her squirrel and dumplings. Old ladies who are passable cooks are a dime a dozen in Middle Georgia, thought Barnett, but my woman is the real deal. Velmise had gone to culinary school just out of high school, many years before they met, and before she burned out and fried her uterus she had worked for ten years as an executive chef in Atlanta, during which time she had cooked for quite a collection of the rich and famous, Ted Turner the richest among them.

"Velmise, I'm serious," he said. "I'd help you in any way I could."

"I might take a stab at it, if I can find the time," she said, and smiled.

That was all she had to say. He imagined book tours and promoting the book on the morning show in Macon. The producers would break out the kitchen set and she'd walk the hosts through a recipe on live television, and it wouldn't come out exactly as planned, or there'd be some hilarious mishap like a spilled flour bowl and the camera men would get a huge laugh out of it. She'd have a front-page picture and write-up in the Telegraph.

The next day he drove to Staples and bought a desk and desk chair, a new PC, and a printer, and pens, and yellow legal pads, and he spent the afternoon setting up a home office in the spare bedroom. He scattered the legal pads around the house, on the end tables, on the kitchen counter, because he wanted to give her every excuse to write. But weeks passed, squirrels were shot, meals were cooked and shared, and then months, and then a year, and she'd not even once logged on to the PC, and the legal pads collected dust. He felt disappointed that she hadn't at

least shown an interest or even an inclination, especially because surely she had seen how excited he felt about the project.

“Horse to water,” he said. “You can’t make anybody get excited, especially if it just isn’t their cup of tea.”

Geech licked Barnett’s hand and pulled him out of the reverie. Sitting out there on the porch, the heat was getting to him, and he was just about to go inside when an armadillo scurried out of the woods and started digging in the yard. The old man’s blood boiled.

He’d shoot anything with four legs, but armadillos were different. The creatures deserved to die, he reasoned, because of their invasive nature, because they came from Mexico and should have stayed there, but also because they rooted and dug up the yard. Those two reasons alone provided sufficient justification for his hatred of the species, but when he figured in what they did to Geech, Barnett knew no man nor woman could gainsay his contempt.

Barnett rose early, partly out of habit, but also it made him feel like he was productive. In the mornings he tended to get things done. Velmise was just the opposite. She was a night owl who got a lot done at night, and she liked to sleep in. It was their unspoken arrangement that one would tiptoe and allow the other to sleep unhindered, so his routine was different back then. He would not start the day with the shotgun. Instead, he’d run errands, write letters, and other quiet work. When he’d just bought Geech and the pup was no more than three months old, he’d let him out first thing.

“Go out and do your dirty business, Geech. Time to get house-trained,” said Barnett as he let the pup out the door.

Barnett hadn’t seen the armadillo that had wandered into the yard during the night. It attacked Geech and nearly killed him. He’d just bought the dog, but already he loved it, and he panicked when he heard him yelp and then saw the Armadillo clawing at him. Adrenaline surged. He didn’t think. He darted out and scooped up the pup and jumped in his Jeep and raced into town straight to Doctor Goldbloom’s office, but it was still early morning and it was closed, so he raced across town to Goldbloom’s house and banged on the door, little Geech bleeding into his shirt as he held him close.

“Hang on, little buddy. Hang on.”

Goldbloom was half Choctaw and had escaped the reservation to go to vet school at Mississippi State, and then he escaped Mississippi to marry a Georgia peach. His black hair pulled back in a pony tail and his wire-rimmed glasses on the tip of his nose perilously close to falling off, he answered the door wearing his robe and holding a mug of coffee.

“Give me that pup,” he said, and Barnett handed him over.

Goldbloom worked on him on the kitchen table. He grabbed hemostats out of a drawer in the chifforobe and clamped a vein. Then he wrapped the dog in a kitchen towel.

“I’ve stopped the bleeding but we need to get him to the office so I can stitch him up proper,” Goldbloom said. “Follow me to the office.”

Goldbloom drove the dog in his pickup with Barnett trailing close behind in his Jeep, praying the whole way that the dog would survive the trip. When Goldbloom stopped at a red light, Barnett cursed him, “Forget the goddamned red light!” he yelled.

At the office, Goldbloom inserted an IV and the pup went to sleep. Goldbloom stitched the cuts. Barnett appreciated what he saw, the skill of it. He couldn’t imagine ever developing such a skill, to sew on a living thing with the confidence that a tailor might have sewing pants. Goldbloom worked quickly, and then he eased the pup into a padded kennel.

“He needs to stay overnight so I can keep an eye on him, but I think he’s going to make it.”

“You gonna keep an eye on him, right?”

“Yes sir, I will,” said the doctor.

“Whatever it takes, Doc,” said Barnett. “Money is not an issue.”

Barnett drove home. It was 9 am, and Velmise was still asleep. She had missed the entire episode.

The armadillo had lingered, and it was rooting in the yard as if nothing had happened. Barnett walked inside and grabbed his shotgun and unloaded all the bird-shot he used for squirrels and reloaded it with special buckshot, loads he himself designed for an occasion just like this. When he shot the armadillo, it exploded like a cantaloupe.

The shot woke Velmise, and she darted to the porch to see the commotion. She stood there wide-eyed and topless, dressed only in her panties.

“What the hell is going on, Burt?” She said.

That was the first armadillo he’d remembered invading his property, but since then they came with regularity. He’d googled armadillos and learned that there’s four identical twins for each one, a biological curiosity, and that made sense to him. Something about them was unnatural.

Goldbloom arrived at the office the next morning to find Barnett waiting for him.

“How do you know he survived the night, Doc? Does anybody come check?”

“He’s going to be all right,” said the vet. “Biggest worry now is infection.”

Barnett was surprised to see the pup up and sniffing around his kennel.

“You’re a miracle worker,” said Barnett.

Goldbloom handed him a bottle of pills. “Give him two a day, one at breakfast and one at supper. Hide it in a piece of cheese if you have to, but make sure he takes them. All of them. Finish the entire bottle.”

“Will do.”

Geech survived and even thrived, but he would always have a limp in his hindquarters so that when he ran he shambled like his hind legs weren’t quite in line with his fronts, and Barnett had paid \$1500 for the dog, a lot of money for a beagle, but he had sought out a champion bloodline as this was to be the final dog he’d ever own and he knew it, and he wanted a good one. He paid another \$500 to Goldbloom for the impromptu surgery that patched Geech back together. When he got the bill in the mail and saw that figure, he could hardly believe it. But Goldbloom had itemized every action he’d taken, and every stitch he’d sewn was tallied. The last item on the list said “house call”, and Barnett laughed when he read that. He considered that a fair accounting of events, and he did not complain. He appreciated Goldbloom’s competence, he being one of the few people he’d met in life who knew his job and did it well. Barnett was glad to have the dog alive and Goldbloom as a resource to keep him that way.

He directed his ire to *Dasyus novemcinctus*, the nine-banded armadillo. That \$500 was money to be extracted from the unnatural species each time one of the animals had the misfortune to wander into his yard.

“It’s hotter than a witches teat,” said Barnett, a phrase he’d heard all his life, but when he googled it, it came back *colder than a witches teat*, which made a lot more sense to him. August in Middle Georgia. By noon, there was nothing else to do but go inside and google things.

“I’m going to eat lunch,” he said, not to himself, and not to Geech, but to the armadillo digging in his yard. “I’ll take care of you later.”

For lunch, he warmed up some leftover tacos and dipped them in a tub of sour cream, and then he sat down at the PC and watched some YouTube videos about Star Wars. That’s when he remembered that he hadn’t written to Carrie Fisher and given her the latest news about Velmise dying.

He’d fallen in love with Fisher the first time he saw Star Wars, then he saw it again six more times just to watch her. The movie changed him. It was the premise, *A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away*. That was an idea he wished was his, and he never thought anyone truly appreciated how brilliant it was to set a science fiction movie in the distant past. That one sentence put the absurdity of

the universe in a nutshell. The old man took a perverse joy in the moments in his life when he felt small because they filled him with a nebulous and impotent anger, the frustration of knowing that he wanted to understand far more than he ever would. Sometimes during a full moon, he'd sit on the porch with his binoculars and stare at it, and the more he stared, the more nothing made any sense. He fantasized about blowing it up, and he felt certain that if he had a cannon big enough he would pull the trigger.

He clicked the word processing program on the PC and wrote Carrie Fisher an update.

*Dearest Carrie,*

*Velmise died. It happened a month ago. I have no idea what caused it other than people die. It's the one thing we have a right to do. She seemed fine the day before, but when I woke up that morning I reached over to kiss a corpse. Most horrifying thing I've ever experienced.*

*I miss her, but don't put any energy into worrying about me. It is what it is. Aside from missing her being around, barely anything has changed except I'm drinking beer again.*

*My daddy died at 55 of a heart attack. Pretty paint-by-numbers way to expire. Mom hung on far longer than she should have at 95. She had dementia and didn't recognize me at the end. You hear about that a lot, too. Pretty paint-by-numbers, but it was ugly. I can't help but wish she'd gotten hit by a car or something about five years earlier. That would have had more dignity. I realize these aren't pleasant subjects, but we're getting old, you know? I'm 65, so if I split the difference between Mom and Dad, I figure I've got ten years left.*

*I hope you are doing well. I much appreciated your last letter, but I'd be lying if I said it didn't trouble me. My only response is don't ever let those bastards get you down. You're a treasure and you ought to get that through your thick head once and for all. You've given a zillion of us nothing but joy. Go easy on yourself.*

*Love you,  
Bert*

He stuffed the letter into an envelope and scribbled the address on the front, affixed a forever stamp, and set it on the desk. He reclined in the desk chair, proud he'd gotten it done. His mind was such so that when it came to handling his obligations, once acknowledged, they lingered there like a dull itch, barely perceptible enough to even prompt a scratch, but enough to persist and be



remembered, and he celebrated the times when another itch wasn't waiting in line to take the place of the one he'd just scratched, when all of his ducks were in a row. This was not one of those times. The big one, the one that had lingered and persisted like a gadfly since Velmise was carted off, came to the front of the line and stung him.

He had to sort out the bedroom. He had to burn the mattress.

“Looks like today is the day I get things done,” he said.

He stood up and slumped to the bedroom door and paused there. It had been shut since she died, when after they'd carted her off he had gathered all his clothes and sundries and moved them to the spare bedroom. Waking up next to Velmise's corpse had shaken him, and her corpse had left brownish stains on the mattress, and he couldn't go back in there or sleep on that bed, and more pressing matters were at hand. He had to bury her and write an obituary and make phone calls to interested parties. Sorting the bedroom went to the back of the line, and then once he'd buried her and paid the undertakers and heard the condolences, he pushed it to the back of the line again. The door stayed closed.

He opened the door, stood there and surveyed the space, and all her things, her brushes and makeup trays and jewelry, and all of her scattered knickknacks on the dresser, and a closet full of clothes, and who-knows-what tucked into the nooks and hidden in bins under the bed, seemed more numerous than he'd ever noticed. He had no knowledge of these things, and heretofore no interest in them, and he felt overwhelmed. It was too much, so he retreated. He closed the door behind him.

“Come on, Geech!”

The dog shambled to his side, and he grabbed the letter off the desk and struck out for the mailbox. Geech followed, sniffing and limping down the long driveway, and when they arrived at the highway, Geech stood back and respected the road just as he'd been taught, and Barnett opened the mailbox and set the letter inside it like he was placing a delicate egg. He gently closed the door and raised the red flag and turned back toward the house.

Walking back, he heard the rumble of an 8-cylinder engine, and he turned and saw a sparkling white F-150 turning onto the driveway. Barnett squinted. He recognized Goldbloom's pony tail behind the wheel.

“I'm nobody's daddy,” he said. “But if I had had a son, I'd be proud if he had turned out to be a veterinarian.”

It was true that he had no children. No one that he knew about could rightly call him daddy. He thought there was an outside shot, maybe two, that he could have progeny out there somewhere, fruit from his exploits in his teens and

twenties, but Velmise was infertile from having fried her uterus from ten years of abusing every narcotic known to man. That was the restaurant business. They put out these spectacular dishes and service, but back in the kitchen and outside next to the dumpsters the debauchery flows unfettered, something he didn't know about until he met her. Any bedraggled crackhead could work at a restaurant. She smoked crack. Dropped LSD by the gallon. Cocaine. Mescaline. And the men and the abortions. She'd had three. Three men had succeeded where he never could.

Her backstory fascinated and repulsed him. How could he hold against her her youth before they met? He had shot down that specter as surely as any squirrel, and he recognized that she was devoted to him, that he was, in fact, her savior, yet always in his mind, unspoken, he wished that she had been fertile.

Goldbloom wheeled the Ford up to Barnett and rolled down the window.

"I remember that dog," he said, smiling.

"You ought to, Doc."

The old man walked to the back of the truck and let down the tailgate.

"Come on, Geech!" he yelled.

The dog jumped into the truck's bed, his tail wagging while he sniffed the new environment. Barnett sat on the edge and slapped the sheet metal and Goldbloom wheeled them up to the house. Once there, Barnett hopped off the tailgate and walked straight to the refrigerator and dumped a few ice trays into a small cooler and stocked it with cold Schlitz and then carried that outside, where Goldbloom had sat down on a lawn chair, Geech sitting beside him as if he remembered.

Barnett found a second chair and sat down next to him, opened the cooler and pulled out two bottles, one of which he held out to Goldbloom.

"I can't," Goldbloom said, "I got to get back to the office here in a minute."

Barnett put it back into the cooler.

"Sometimes," Barnett said as he twisted the cap off the beer bottle. He took a deep drink. "Sometimes, things happen in such a way as they are supposed to happen."

"What do you mean?" asked the doctor.

"I'm saying, I'm happy to offer you a beer, and you're free to decline it, but I'm the one who needs to drink a few before you help me burn a mattress. And if you're the type to let a man drink alone, that's just the state of things."

Goldbloom nodded and started to speak, but closed his mouth. He grabbed a beer back out of the cooler and twisted off the top and took a sip. Then he took a Winston out of his shirt pocket and lit it. He scanned the beer bottle.

“Schlitz,” he said. “I didn’t even know they still made this. Where do you even get it?”

“Morton at the package store special orders it for me,” said Barnett. “Cold Schlitz . . . the preferred beer of broke college kids, or at least it used to be, back when I was at Georgia Tech.”

“We got to burn a mattress?”

“Velmise died on it.”

“Oh, I see.” nodded Goldbloom. “Of course, I’m happy to help.”

“It was ugly, Doc. Shit was leaking from her orifices.”

“Yeah. That happens. They don’t show you that part on TV.”

“Yeah,” Barnett drank and swallowed. “I just need help getting it out of there and onto the burn pile.”

Goldbloom petted Geech behind the ears and sipped his beer.

“What did you major in at Tech?”

“Engineering.”

“I never knew that,” said Goldbloom.

“Worked on special projects in furniture manufacturing for twenty years. If something non-standard had to be done, a special kind of chair or table, I’m the one who drew it up and then saw it through.”

“Why’d you quit?”

“Twenty years is enough time to do about anything.”

“All I ever knew that you did was drive the garbage truck.”

“Did that for fifteen after I moved down here from Atlanta.”

The two men sat on the porch and sipped their beers as the daylight faded a shade, and as soon as Barnett finished one, he twisted open another, and he felt looser and his courage grew, and Goldbloom kept pace and became funnier, and more than once Barnett burst into a fit of laughter, which startled the armadillo. It glanced at the two men and then went back to its digging.

“It ain’t death that’s the tragedy. It’s life that is,” said Barnett, “but it ain’t over til its over, and I want to sire a damned child. I still have desires, Doc. I need a woman. Tell me what to do.”

“I’d import one from the Philippines.”

“The Hell you say.”

“I mean if you ain’t keen to undergo the trials of courtship and all the rigamarole. A buddy of mine did it. There’s web sites that specialize in it. He just imported her like a crate of mangoes.”

Barnett burst out laughing at the sound of the word mangoes. “Did it work out?”

“It seems to be,” said the doctor.

Barnett collected himself. “Fuck it,” he said. “Ain’t much daylight left. Come help me get this goddamned bed out. I got a burn pile out back. I want to burn the entire fucking thing, headboard and all.”

Barnett marched into the house and entered the bedroom with Goldbloom and Geech close behind. They picked up the mattress, angled it out the door, and walked it outside and tossed it onto the burn pile. They marched straight back into the house, where Barnett knelt down and disassembled the bed, took the metal rails out of the foot and headboard. Goldbloom carried the headboard and Barnett carried the foot. They carried them out and tossed them onto the burn pile.

Barnett walked into the shed, which he called his workshop, where he’d tried a dozen different hobbies over the years. Where he’d built model planes and refinished furniture and rebuilt carburetors, all of which he proved he could accomplish, but all had failed to sustain his interest until he’d arrived at gunsmithing and discovered he could file down triggers all day long and never get bored.

He emerged with a red gas can and doused the burn pile with gasoline. The mattress soaked it up like a sponge, and satisfied everything was sufficiently doused, he walked off a trail with the gasoline ten feet, then almost twenty feet. Goldbloom joined him at the end of the trail, and he produced a cigarette lighter and looked to Barnett for the go ahead. Barnett scanned for Geech, and found him sniffing the grass behind them.

“Do it,” said Barnett.

Goldbloom struck the lighter and put the flame to the grass. The flame raced up the trail and the burn pile exploded into a bonfire. Goldbloom lit another Winston. The two men stood there and watched the blaze.

“When I was in the fifth grade, a kid named Mackey showed up at school a couple of months late toward the end of October, with huge horrible bandages on his legs. All over his legs, every inch. I’ll never forget it. He’d show up for school for two or three days, then be gone again for two weeks. He’d gotten a hold of a gas can and thought it would be fun to burn some ant hills. Nobody ever taught him to make a trail. Every time I light this burn pile I think about him. I don’t know, but I’m willing to bet he didn’t have a daddy. This fucking world. Or if he did, the bastard failed to do his job. I do know that. If you know how to make a trail with gasoline, it’s a veritable fucking certainty your daddy taught you how to do it.”

“I can’t say I disagree,” said Goldbloom as he flicked the cigarette into the fire. “I’m going to get on home, Bert.”

“I appreciate you doing this. It means more than you know.”

“Let’s do it again sometime.”

“Next time I burn something, I’ll give you a call.”

Goldbloom laughed. The men shook hands and Barnett walked him to the Ford. Geech and the old man stood beside the truck and Goldbloom rolled down the window.

“That’s a fine dog you got. He stays out of trouble.”

“Give you satisfaction to see it?”

“It does,” said Goldbloom. “Nice to know I made a difference.”

The doctor wheeled away and Barnett walked back to the house, climbed the steps and sat down in his lawn chair. He opened the cooler and found two beers left. He stared into the night sky, clear and lit by stars and a half moon. He thought about exploding it, then he thought about killing the armadillo, but it was nowhere to be found.

“I’ll take care of you tomorrow,” he said.

He sat and finished the beer, then the other one, and then he walked inside, stripped naked, and lay on the bed. With a final burst of energy, he pulled over the blankets and fell into a dark sleep.

He arose the next morning and made coffee. He filled Geech’s bowl with kibble and topped off his water. Still naked, he remembered where he took off his waders and tennis shorts, and he stepped into them. He grabbed his shotgun and slumped onto the porch and scanned the trees. He spotted one close.

BLAM!

“Geech! Go get it.”

The dog shambled out and scooped up the squirrel and dropped it in the pail.

The old man had been so active the day before that he had forgotten to dress yesterday’s squirrel, which was unusual. Usually he was on top of it and dressed them and threw them into the deep freeze in a Zip-Loc. Since Velmise’s demise, he had quite a stockpile. He grabbed yesterday’s, crawling with flies, and carried it to the burn pile and tossed it at the center of the still-smoldering char.

“Something will get it.” He said. Unwilling to let this newest one go to waste, he went ahead and cleaned it. He bagged it and tossed it into the freezer.

He walked by the bedroom and paused for a second, the said, “Fuck it.”

He walked inside, but again looked at the pink plastic bins, the things piled up all over the place, and again he felt overwhelmed, but he refused to shrink. Instead, he walked out to the workshop, where he stored broken-down cardboard boxes behind a workbench, and he taped them together and carried

them two at a time to the bedroom. After seven trips, he was satisfied that he could make a dent in the clutter.

He took a roll of black garbage bags from under the kitchen sink, and one at a time he took Velmise's clothes off the hangers and shoved them into a bag until it was filled, carried the filled bags onto the porch, and continued that way until all of her clothes were bagged. He backed up the Jeep to the porch and threw all of the bags into the back. Geech jumped into the passenger's seat and Barnett drove to town and dropped off the bags at the Salvation Army.

When he returned, he felt proud. It was only mid-morning, and he'd already gotten rid of the clothes, and the heat was still tolerable, yet when he walked back to the room, despair took hold. He'd done the easy part, but the hard part, the little things, the things in the bins, the things in the drawers and the perfumes and the makeup still had to be junked. Beer crossed his mind, and he wondered if he ought to start drinking at mid-morning.

"Liquid courage," he said.

He walked to the fridge and opened it, and he had at least twelve Schlitz in there, so he took one. He sat in his lawn chair on the porch to drink it, the armadillo digging close by.

He hadn't met Velmise in a usual way. He discovered her. He'd found her unconscious behind a dumpster. He'd seen a lot on his pickups, but he'd never seen an unconscious woman. He'd seen loads of dead dogs. Bags of guts hunters left. Bags of hypodermic needles. Vagabonds loitering around the dumpster as if on an invisible tether. Things no one ever sees unless they poke through garbage were part of his daily routine.

Certain he'd seen just about everything, he forked the dumpster at a carpet installer and when the hydraulics lifted it inch by inch it raised and revealed Velmise lying on the grass behind it. At first he thought she was a corpse. Other towns hired hoppers, men who rode on the back of the truck and attended to the manual labor of dumping the garbage bins, and the driver just drove, but here in Macon, the city had bought trucks with hydraulic arms that grabbed the garbage bins and cut out the hoppers all together. In this case, he had to step out of the truck and see about the maybe-dead woman.

She was not dead, though, which he discovered when he administered a sternum rub. He'd climbed down from the truck, the dumpster still mid-air and undumped, and walked over to her and nudged her with his boot, but she didn't move. He knelt down and administered the sternum rub, and she moaned.

He stood up. She was pretty. Long and thin, her glasses ajar on her face but at least still on her. He looked her over. She wore a black blouse and a denim

skirt, and the skirt was hiked up to reveal her pink panties. It was a pretty sight, subtracting the context. She didn't look like a woman who would be discarded. She looked classier than that. He walked back to the truck and radioed for the police, then he walked back and sat down on the grass beside her.

"Why are you here?"

She mumbled something he couldn't make out, but then the thought hit him, and he waved away a fly that landed on her forehead. The thought hit him that this was meant to be.

"I'll take care of you," he said. He took out a pen and wrote his phone number on the back of a Wal-Mart receipt he dug out of his wallet. He scanned her for a pocket, but found none, so he poked the paper into her Keds. But that wasn't enough, and he recognized that, so he administered a sternum rub again. She roused more. She sat up. She looked around. Police sirens grew louder in the background, cutting through the growl of his garbage truck.

"I'm Bert Barnett, and I found you. And I'll take care of you. I am a lonely man, and I want a woman in my life," he said.

She didn't respond.

"The police are coming. An ambulance, too," he said. "I put my phone number in your shoe."

"My shoe?"

"Call me," he said. "I will take care of you."

She looked him in the eye. "You'll take care of me?"

"I will take care of you," he replied.

The ambulance wheeled up, and the paramedics put Velmise on a stretcher. Barnett interviewed with the police while they took her away. He had to sign about twenty different forms, and about twenty more with the city. The ordeal put him behind on his route two hours, and he didn't make it home until nine that night. He showered and went straight to bed, and a couple of days passed, and he forgot about her.

Two weeks later she called. Highly unlikely, Barnett thought as soon as he hung up the phone and got in his Jeep to pick her up from rehab. Women don't work like that. Men will take chances, especially if there's the possibility for sex. They'll do stupid things like put phone numbers in a half-dead woman's shoe, just on the million-to-one chance it'll turn into something. Truth is, when she entered the behavioral health center they made her strip down and she found the receipt in her shoe, and she held onto it for dear life. They tried to take it away from her, but she refused to let it go. And for the two weeks in rehab, she stared at it, so that

when she was released, she didn't even have to look at it to dial Barnett's number. Truth is, she figured he was the safer of her other options, so she called.

Two months later they got married at the courthouse.

Barnett sat down on the floor and opened a bin. It was full of dolls. He carried it right out to the Jeep.

"Easy one," he said.

The next one was full of clothes. He stacked it on the Jeep.

The next one, though, was full of books and notebooks, which he cast aside to address last. And like that, for the next couple of hours, he went through everything. He boxed her shoes, and her perfumes, and her makeup, and the curios. The Jeep only held so much, so it took three trips to the Salvation Army, and one trip to the dump. It was mid-afternoon, and the heat was overwhelming, and he'd realized he'd drank half the beer. All of it was gone except the pink bin with all the books and notebooks. Barnett opened a fresh Schlitz and sat down in the middle of the room and dumped the bin on the floor. Geech found a stray blanket in the corner of the room and nudged it around in circles until he'd made an acceptable place to nap.

Magazines, mostly Red Book and Bon Appetit, and journals and a cookbook here and there. One by one, Barnett inspected and tossed them into the bin. Buried under all of it he uncovered a yellow legal pad, which was full of her handwriting.

"Squirrel and Dumplings," was the title of the first page.

The second was "Squirrel Au Vin." and the third was "Squirrel Cacciatore."

He read them all, pages upon pages of her squirrel recipes.

He stood and walked to the office to write another letter to Carrie Fisher.

*Dearest Carrie,*

*Two letters in a row? Well, on top of the fact that you're one lucky woman I absolutely adore, I'm writing to ask for a favor. Do you know anybody in publishing? Can you put me into contact with somebody?*

*Turns out, Velmise left behind a trove of recipes that I want to turn into a cookbook as a tribute to her. I want to get right after it. Could you help?*

*Bert*

The old man felt a surge of energy pumping through him. He sealed the letter in an envelope and affixed a stamp. He grabbed his shotgun and called for Geech, who was still napping.



“Come on, Geech,” he yelled.

The dog shambled to his side, and together they jogged to the mailbox. It was late in the afternoon but still bright and dry as a bone. Brown grass lined the road. He shoved the letter into the mailbox and raised the red flag. Geech kept his distance.

He spun around and scanned the yard.

“Where are you, you bastard?” he said.

The armadillo was nowhere to be found in the front yard, so he hiked along the periphery of the yard toward the back. The armadillo appeared, rooting next to the pecan tree, a bobbing gray ball in the distance.

“You can walk right up to them,” he said. “They don’t scare easy.”

Barnett walked close enough to make the shot. He took aim.

BLAM!