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Garnell tells you lots of things you don't care to know—how sex with his wife is like sticking his dick in a big mass of pudding. Or that gunpowder rubbed on a pit bull's snout will enrage it so much that it becomes a death machine, a guided missile with teeth. He tells you about the terrible ways someone can get hurt in the joint: "They got this concoction called a Freddy Kreuger. Make it with Magic Shave and some other shit. It's like acid. I seen some sissy throw it on this guy was hassling him. Face just slides off like hot cheese on a pizza." He asks if you would "hit" any of the girls you drive past: "Look at the ass on her. You know you would be all up in that." You grin and smile sheepishly and tell him you are married. "Shit, so am I. Don't keep me from being human."

Later, at the end of a day hauling cheap furniture up and down the wobbly, defeated stairs of another apartment building, with its bouquet of piss and garbage, you almost welcome the reek of Garnell there beside you in the cab. He smokes one last cigarette, you feel the sweat drying on your brow, and you are reminded that you took up smoking once in college for a period of one week. You brooded around the midnight campus, unfurling deep exhalations of smoke and agony like a typical fool, thinking the sensation of the mist from the fountain in front of the library so achingly ephemeral on your skin. Nothing at all, you know, like the feel of drying sweat.

The company's motto is "We'll get your stuff where you're going." After four years the guys all call you Professor. Some say it with a measure of respect. Others, lifers like Reuben, are just looking for an opportunity to show you how smart you really are. "You want to carry this here piano like a man, Perfessor, or should we get the straps?" He smiles so you can see the gleam of his gold teeth; his eyes are hidden by Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses. He

doesn't look it, but he is stronger than any of you, except maybe Louis, who is Samoan and played football for a junior college somewhere in Missouri.

"All right," you say. "Man up."

"Yeah, man up, bitch."

It's Reuben's catch phrase, but you use it now. You know what the challenge behind it means. Some guys can't take this kind of work. They could be big as a Clydesdale, it doesn't matter: man up when the time comes or let your partner down.

You've seen what Reuben can do, how he'll make your life hell if you show the least bit of weakness. He hated Benny, in particular, a mealy boy with mutton chop sideburns who complained incessantly and disappeared when the heaviest furniture had to be lifted. Reuben taunted him ceaselessly.

"You ever lick pussy, B? 'Cause when I get close to you that what I smell. I smell that ol' fish pussy smell. But I know you never even dip a finger, so where that smell come from?"

"C'mon, lay off," Benny says.

"I'm just saying you smell like pussy, and act like pussy, maybe you is pussy."

Later on, while wrapping up a dresser in blankets, Benny makes his case to you: "I don't know why he always got to be picking on me." You just keep working, trying your best to stay out of it, but he wants so desperately to be consoled, for someone to take his side, almost, you think, like your four-year-old son, who mewls in the irradiated darkness of a thunder storm. But Benny is a grown man, soft, torn, and fearful.

"He better watch hisself," Benny says. "One of these days."

Later in the afternoon, Benny loses his grip while carrying a wardrobe up a steep flight of stairs with Louis. Luckily, Louis wedges his massive shoulder underneath the bottom edge to keep from being knocked back down the stairs with the wardrobe tumbling on top of him.

"What I say?" Reuben comments to no one in particular. "Boy gon' get someone killed."

Sometimes you are amazed that it has come to this—that you find yourself at seven in the morning punching in the security code to the office: your old basketball number from high school tripled. The repetition makes it even more pathetic.

You are the only one that the owner, Troy Spears, will trust not to rip off the place when he's not around. He has taken you aside into the office filled with boxes of paper and old weightlifting trophies to praise your dedication, your reliability.

"I know what I'm getting with most of these guys," Troy says as he strokes his yellow-colored goatee, "which is why I have so many rules. These guys could care less. But you're a real find, John. A real find." Nausea grips you, a cloying feeling that sits in the center of your chest all day.

And later that week when the Indian convenience store magnate takes you by his side and says in a too loud voice, referring to Reuben and Garnell, and even Louis, "What will we do about these guys? You get them to work. I pay you good money," you want to say to him: "I'm just the same. I don't want to be here either. I'd chunk your fucking Stairmaster over the balcony if I could." Instead, you grin and tell him you are all working very hard to make sure everything will make it safe and sound to his new mansion on the golf course in Fairfield Acres.

One morning Reuben is riding Benny again before you've even left the building, and Benny is looking at Reuben with hatred, but you all know he won't lift a finger.

"C'mon," Reuben says. "Let's pump a little iron." He sits down at the weight bench, a castoff off from Troy's steroid days. There are mirrors and rows of dumbbells. Reuben puts two plates on each side—225 in all—and pumps the bar three times without even straining.

"Now you go, B. We need a warm-up."

Benny edges to the open back door where a few guys are smoking. He has a sulky, sour look on his face. He dons those glasses with the hazy lenses that always make the wearer seem guilty. "Shit, why I got to lift that?" He looks at you, then Louis, for support. Garnell lets out a strangled laugh. No one says a word. "I ain't got nothing to prove," Benny says. "Why you gotta be that way?"

"'Cause I want to know what I'm working with. Do you have it in you?"

"Shee-it."

Louis gets up from one of the horrible, abandoned couches that populate the back room. He motions to Reuben to move off the bench, then lifts the 225 five times. Now you all feel it; some line has been drawn. You take your place and bring the bar down across your chest. It sits there for a second, and then you haltingly get it up. When you are finished your arms feel rubbery and hot, but you are also strangely exultant.

"See, even the Perfessor can do it."

Benny seems most hurt that you have taken Reuben's side.

"Fuck all y'all. I don't need this job," Benny says. Then he starts muttering. "Big screen half paid off. Let them come take it. I don't care."

At the same time, Reuben is crowing, "Go on, then. Go on. You go. Call you momma to come pick you up. Go on."

The next morning a guy, some temp, is standing out front waiting for you to open up the place. He has on jeans but shivers in the early morning cold.

"You ever done this kind of work before?" you say.

"Naw, man." He grins, showing a grill of chrome. "Another day, another dollar, right?" He won't last long, you think, but at least Benny is gone for good.

It is amazing what some people find dear. The wife of the convenience store magnate has hundreds of saris, cream and hunter and puce, bangled and stitched. She could never wear that many in

a year if she wore a new one every day. Some are encased in plastic, perhaps containing still the desiccated air of the sub-continent, all baggage that must be hauled around.

Like the old couple moving to Sun City. He had been a biology teacher. They still have an entire room of their children's toys. You pick up a brittle, sun-bleached plastic dolly, her blond hair now a tangle, one leering eye opened, the other drooped closed as if she is falling asleep. "Sometimes the grandkids come," the man says to you, knowing he can't really defend this silly nostalgia, this unnecessary burden on the moving van's precious space.

You find teething marks on the legs of dressers and bureaus. The indentions in the wood are soft. You like the feeling when you run your fingers over the ridges. In the closet or perhaps the pantry, you find the chart, the progression of childhood. Look how much he grew that one year. Even when the house is sold, they can never bear to paint over it. Leave it to the next occupants to cover up, add their own hieroglyphs. You interpret the artifacts, follow the migrations, carry with your hands and shoulder the accumulation of a lifetime, however sad or superfluous.

Others are more haphazard and will just give you things, because they are the castoffs, the out-of-date and just plain ugly, the kind of stuff that makes them say, "What were we thinking?" This is where the couches in the shop's back room come from: all golden harvest yellow or avocado green Naugahyde and wrapped in duct tape to cover the scars made by some dog or rambunctious child. The pressboard dressers with crooked drawers like misshapen mouths. The forgotten exercise equipment: a bike that will take you nowhere, those red plastic weights filled with sand. And TVs all faux wood and heavy as hell, heavy as all your burdens. Reuben calls them "Sega specials." Sometimes after work you all sit around and play, hooting at the blips as if you were eighteen again without wives who have transformed into Jabba the Hutt, without kids who should be medicated, without bills. In those last few minutes before you step out into the deep blank of another night, you sit and

try to breathe in the lingering sweetness of late-blooming honeysuckle coming from somewhere in the back lot. You try not to think at all.

Occasionally, the people can be ruthless, cutting to the bone, divesting what they loved most. You have more respect for this type, the ones who seem intent on what is to come, knowing they have to be light. The woman who tells you she wants to be sober when she sees her grandchild for the first time. Would you please just take away the contents of her bar? She doesn't care what you do with it, just get rid of it somehow. The collection is quite extensive—blackberry liquors and crème de menthes and Kahlúas—the exotic bottles tinted the color of an alcoholic's rainbow. Garnell's eyes get as big as the Cheshire cat's. You select one bottle of single malt scotch, about half full, and tell him he can have the rest.

That night you come home to an empty house because your wife has gone shopping at the outlet mall with her mother again. You sit down at the kitchen table, and before you even warm up some leftovers, you pour a glass. You pour several more glasses, and, when your wife finally comes home, bags bunching and rustling around her, she finds you lying on your back on the bathroom floor, giggling. You can't stop, even when you see her reddening face peer down at you.

"What's wrong?" she keeps saying.

If you knew, you would tell her. You swear you would.

There is a specific way to pack a van. Kitchen chairs first, in the attic above the cab. Then the mattresses. The couch is turned up on end, feet against the wall.

After the couch you get the boxes. Then dressers and book cases, anything rectangular. It's like building a wall, layer by layer, intricate and perilous. One mistake and you have shifts, you have furniture rubbing and cracking.

Over the years, you've learned your lessons well. You pack it in tight.

There is one particular move, though, that you just can't get out of your mind. You must drive out to a little town called Between—the whole ride over Garnell asks you at consistent intervals, "Are we in Between, yet?"—to help a woman move out of her daddy's house. "She's divorced," Teresa the secretary has confided that morning. "She finally has enough money to get her own place. Just about cried when she called." When you get there, you can see why: her father is a real piece of work. In the front hallway, he has dedicated a giant glass case to his collection of Nazi memorabilia. On the walls are various weapons—maces, axes, swords, and daggers. Garnell stands gaping at a set of crossed swords.

"Them's for sticking, not cutting," the old man says, poking Garnell in the ribs with his index finger. Garnell smiles and laughs hesitantly.

"Just these two rooms," the woman says, asking in her harried smile to be forgiven for her father, for everything you would see and hear for the next few hours. You notice, then, a fragility that you find beautiful. You wish you could wrap her in soft tissue paper. Two children, a pale boy and girl, peer silently out at you from around a corner. You know how terrible this house is.

"This ol' boy is bat-shit crazy," Garnell says when you are in the basement to get the refrigerator. "What you bet he's putting it to her. Them kids look like all in the family, you know." You dislike Garnell at that moment.

"She seems nice. She's in a bad spot," you say.

"I bet you'd put her in a spot."

You tell Garnell to shut his mouth and for once he obliges.

At the end of every day, you go through a routine. Count the blankets and make sure they are stacked correctly, crease facing out. Count the thick rubber bands you use to hold the blankets in place. Troy will dock your pay if any of the numbers don't work out right. A blanket costs $35, or so he claims. Make sure the truck has gas, look

at the oil dipstick. Write down your mileage for the day. Everything ticked off on a check sheet. Everything accounted for.

The new house, a rental, is not much to speak of, but you can tell how happy the woman is to be there. She smiles in a different way, begins to ask you questions and joke around.

"You look like you are in shape," she says.

"Well, you know, the job—. "

"I'd like to run in a marathon," she says. "Every day I try to run a little farther. But the distances wear on you."

You tell her that you used to run cross-country, so you know what she means. "Sometime, if you're lucky, your legs get numb. You're not even thinking about how long you've run; you just pick a spot and make for it." She nods her head.

Finally, there is nothing left to move. Everything is in its place.

"Can I get you anything?" she asks. "Something to drink? Something for the road?"

You stand before her, immobilized by some need you can't acknowledge. "Yes, that would be nice," you say.

She smiles at you one last time and, for some reason, reaches out and smoothes your hair down as she would a child. Unconsciously, you flinch and she looks embarrassed. "I'll go get that drink," she says and goes into the house

"Let's hit it," you say to Garnell, who is shaking his head and grinning.

"What's wrong with you?" he says.

Pulling out, you see her waving in your side mirror.

Later that night you fall asleep on the couch, hunched like a question mark. Even in your dreams you are lifting.