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DORA'S AGITATED AT THE STRAITJACKETING traffic. Pulsates like a dragster. Edges forward. Bluffs a dash. Rakes the street parade for a gap. Singles out but doesn't dwell on an elegant woman in a stylish black suit, blonde hair pinned up, in a jazzy red convertible. Assumes she's a lawyer from an office in the adjoining towers.

The lights change at the intersection, dam the flow and the street is momentarily clear. She shoots across in a swagger hindered by the resistance of her stout thighs and sciatic sparks down her left leg.

Orville steps off the curb and crosses leisurely. If challenged, he could closely estimate the number of measured strides required to reach Memorial Square on the other side. He understands Dora's impatience just well enough to disapprove. Why summon all that energy to then squander it on a spurt? Isn't the result similar—to sit apart on the nearest park bench, opposites repelling rather than attracting?

Memorial Square has been salvaged—controversially—from downtown development. It is, in fact, irregularly shaped. A pedestrian oasis clasp to itself the spared trees, the war monument, a half-dozen benches, circular flower beds elevated and encased in concrete, and the cinder paths and well-worn grass patches that stitch everything together.

The sun is hours from setting but already being shortchanged by two commercial columns of staggered heights. Light tunnels from between their elongating shadows, breaks free and fans out warm across a good portion of Memorial Square. The highrises are shaking out their nests of workers.

Orville settles comfortably on the bench, apparently intent on laying an egg. His wife should soon pick him up and start their Friday shopping routine. The intersection lights are green but people are jaywalking and farther up someone is botching a parallel park, again paralyzing the rush of cars and vans. On the side street, outside the bank branch he sometimes uses, a driverless SUV is idling, awaiting the getaway. Its bumper sticker reads: "I am blessed." It's in the process of being ticketed.

Two body widths west on the bench's wooden plank, Dora fidgets. Rearranges her blouse collar. Firms up her glasses. Stabs at a newspaper page gamboling in the breeze. Rejects it. Glances at the stone soldier's bowed head and downturned rifle barrel. Drags her scan over her sloped shoulder. A squirrel teeth-gripping an apple bigger than its head scoots up to the higher limbs to enjoy it in safety.

She's finally at rest. Places on her lap the brown-and-white woolen purse she herself crocheted. Removes the plastic-wrapped sandwiches and quartered mini-cucumbers and broccoli stems. About as much as she can digest in the half-hour evening meal she's allotted. It's a new purse on its inaugural public display. She wishes Orville would admire it. Vocally. Confirm it with the precise tilt of his head since she can't make out the eyes behind his sunglasses.

Fat chance. Orville's attention is upstream, for his wife.

Rebuffed, after a few more seconds resigned, she tucks the purse securely against her girdled buttock. Unwraps a sandwich. Adolescents are lolling on the grass. Doesn't trust them. The usual congregation from the nearby youth and homeless centers, waiting for their doors to open and supper to be dished up. They all seem to have the money needed for trendy clothes, tattoos, cellphones, holes drilled into their faces to hang rings. The previous week, from an adjacent bench, she'd overheard one ruffian—unconcerned about lowering his voice—tell his pal: "Yeah, I know. It's tough out here. I'm not gonna punch you out for fifteen bucks." What else but drugs and a cunning merchant protecting his market? Consoling him if you could believe it.

The one that sticks out this late afternoon is a male with legs thin and long like exposed tree roots. Of indefinite age. Stubby beard. In another neighbourhood, the bony face of a suffering artist. Hair sheared on either side and dyed saffron while the surviving strip on top has opted for lime. What would that have set him back at a hairdresser's? Easy at least to describe—these scoundrels weren't especially swift—to the police. When you find one.

The *Courier*—the city's "quality" paper according to her late father—has reported "a troubling spate of young thieves making off with valuables in the downtown area." The tabloid *Morning Star* reduces it to a punchier "rash of snatchings." For the *Star*, anything more than two represents a "rash."

Dora prefers the *Star*. Likes the colour of their words. If she was robbed, they'd blow up her photo on the front page. VICTIM 63 TACKLES PUNK. In a vertical headline. In the *Courier* she'd be squished at the bottom

of the third section city page. Named but faceless. Elderly Woman Catches Thief. Maybe they'd substitute "nabs."

Dora's no stranger to the front page. Nearly eight years before. Stunned along with the other workers at the factory's sudden washout, as if literally slapped by the notice taped to the glass above the padlocked door handles. *The Star* photographer had arrived minutes late. Asked them to re-create the look of anguish before dispersing. Three snapshots before the anguish was considered just right.

Orville, she bets, has citations and autographed framed pictures from his retirement party at the car plant. Forty plus years, something astronomical like that, of "loyalty" to one company, he told Harvey when he applied for the part-time job. If she had his pension, she wouldn't be caught dead at Loose Change. Whose pension plan couldn't feed the squirrel in the tree. Tempting to put the dig into Orville that he stayed for decades because it's all he knew. But that would be too off-base.

"I envy you. Pension in your pocket," she says, not having meant to, as if the microphone in her brain has mistakenly been left on. Examines her sandwich. "Work for fun. Buying stuff on a Friday night instead of selling it."

"All good for the economy."

He's spoken a truth, Dora concedes. Its aim is rebuke, not explanation or even defence.

Orville has stocked merchandise on Loose Change's shelves for five weeks. Immediately after retirement, he realized he hated the confinement of a house. Dora's break lasts a mere 30 minutes but he's counting on his wife to rescue him long before Dora has to scurry back to her cash register. He's already been familiarized with—serially and at length—without ever inquiring, her entire work history: the odd stints of her youth; the bankrupt manufacturer she'd laboured for during her best years, 29 of them, answering to lackluster bosses, some decent, most heartless, and now the lawyers' fees eating up the disputed company pension they were supposed to be preserving; 27 months, two robberies and five manager gropings at the liquor store; the days mounting up—"dittoing" as she likes to term it—to almost five years at Loose Change. She's worn down his ears of their polite listening.

"Free weekend to boot. How can you beat all that?"

"Scanning items and handing out receipts isn't exactly backbreaking," he rubs it in.

“Three fingers hold the pen but the whole body toils.”

One of her occasional phrasings that startle him to turn towards her but he conceals it by pretending to check the progress of the traffic from the opposite direction though his wife has no reason to take that route. “Where’d you scrounge that?”

“My father kept the books at the factory when it opened. He’d say it to the neighbours and relatives who thought he had it cushy. From the monks copying texts. They couldn’t stand up for themselves, so they wrote it in.”

She bites into the sandwich, forgetful of the ingredients. Surprised by the taste. The jaws grind, unenthused.

“I applied at your place. Twice. Too old by then. They don’t tell you that. Not hiring at this time. They want them young and beholden. We might’ve been on the same shift. Sort of sets your blood racing, don’t it?”

“Mmm.” His eyes have returned to searching out his wife’s silver sedan from its accustomed approach.

Smug bugger. After 40 years, Quality Control Supervisor. That’s screaming to the top. So why hasn’t he said a word about her purse’s finely-needed craftsmanship?

Across the street, Loose Change’s pair of expansive windows are unadorned with banners promoting discounts or products. Its naked interior reveals a line-up at Dora’s cash register and the rack of greeting cards in a corner. At the factory, they forklifted in metals and plastics, pushed out branded faucets and toilet bowls. Loose Change is a chain peddling hundreds of near-weightless objects cheaply: tea towels to mugs and lightbulbs, houseware necessities and gizmos. No idea which company makes what. Experience with hands and arms, not forklifts, sufficient for employment.

Dora chomps again. A few teeth grumble as they slosh around the tomatoes, mayonnaise and chicken bits. The complaint is old hat, downplayed as always.

“You still ticked about Wednesday?”

“It’s Harvey who got mad.”

“Name me a day he’s not mad.”

“Goes with being the manager. You should know better than to sell smokes to a 16-year-old.”

“He was mature for 16. No acne. Clean and very civil.”

“Oh, the law allows that as an exemption?”

“Don’t you think that ...”

“When the law’s the law, I don’t think.”

“You think you don’t. You think you’re reasonable.”

“I’m extremely reasonable—until I meet unreasonable. You ... we’ll just say you view things in your own light. Maybe you missed your calling after all.”

“What calling’s that?”

“Couldn’t tell you. With your gab, you’re wasted working cash.” Although she gets her licks in there too. Yak, yak, yak. No purchase completed till she’s had her jabber. And if the line’s halfway down an aisle, so many more chats to look forward to. “Sales would be right up your alley.”

“Flogging junk?” She mulls it over. Higher on the pay scale, anyway. “That a compliment, Orville?”

He sighs, like an attorney getting nowhere with a witness.

She had in fact played with the notion of leaving home instead of ultimately deciding to follow her father into the factory. Living recklessly. Hand to mouth if need be, she so liked the vigour and impulse of words. But never quite nailing down the arena for expressing them.

She believes it would’ve transformed her. Can’t help but believe it. Kept her from slipping into this spinster—now there was a slur you no longer heard—quarreling with her elder sister. Who hadn’t done so well by herself either. Done zip beyond nod and fetch. What had it got her? Infertility, childlessness, widowhood. Whereas Dora had been primed from the outset. But not prepared. Later, when little else had come off, when her child’s cry would have been the only noise she’d make in the world, she’d kicked herself—oh, vastly worse than that—for the abortion. Now she had to stay on her toes or she’d outpity the neighbour: tramping around the backyard in a light snowfall at seven of a Sunday morning, in knee-high galoshes and a hooded coat over a bathrobe, to shovel up the doo-doo from her twin hounds.

Aspects absent from her and her sister’s personalities. Aspects in the family genes not passed on. Passed over. Neither of them engineered for applause.

Dora glances at unheedful Orville. The white carnation in the lapel of his jacket. For when it cools down after sunset. For presentability while dining out. For when he’s shopping with his beloved afterwards. Such practicality.

His appearance *is* smart. Still a worthy mate for his wife. Even someone like herself. She wasn't to be sneezed at. But her sexual shine has worn off. It came about when they stopped looking. Nowadays, here, on this bench, well, this was the face, these were the years. What really stuck in the knife was when they sold her a seniors' ticket without being asked. Or the lady at the supermarket deli being so sweet to her, making her feel even more doddering, as if she'd spotted in Dora an infirmity, a shortcoming, that she wished to be kind to. A shame that, because Dora treasured kindness. Love looked for an exchange, something for itself. Kindness, a greater good, never asked for anything in return.

But she might be wrong; she was new at being old.

Twenty minutes remaining. Too few cucumbers and broccoli stems to keep her mouth shut and chewing for that long. A bolt of sciatica down her leg. Time to stretch the nerve. Take a stroll. In a while.

"So tell me, Orville," she ventures, a gripe lingering in her attempted humour, "how's your failing health?"

"Nothing the matter with my health. I take care of myself."

"You sure do. Anything you haven't taken care of?"

"Go pick on someone else, Dora."

"Don't get riled." That would be something to see. "It's just talk. Having a conversation."

"Can't be if it's one-sided. You ever pause just to spit?"

"Couldn't on the factory floor. No DNA matching in those days but they'd know who did it. What I wanted to say, Orville, is that you're looking pretty spry. I gotta hand it to you." She swallows what she'd interrupted chewing.

Orville angles his profile another notch away from her and offers instead the well-trimmed graying hair behind his ear as he tips back for a more hopeful perspective on the oncoming vehicles.

Dora holds her tongue. Munches the second sandwich, disappointingly similar to the first. Another man cold-shouldering her is not news. This drone objecting she's too talkative. For his forerunners, too squirmy, too clutching for them to fully embrace her. Like they'd blundered in, becoming intimate with a light-fingered thief who'd pick their spirit of its valuables if they opened up. They held back, the ones she courted. Doled themselves out. Which left only a stranger who might pop out of the blue. Love blowing

on an unsuspecting heart as on embers. Didn't happen. Luck an additional element not in abundance in her family.

Their silence, alien inside the city's ruckus, is an embarrassment.

"If you're so bothered by my company ..."

"... good Jesus."

"... why do you come along?"

"It's you comes with me."

"This is the closest bench. I haven't got all night to finish my coffee and cake."

"See this 'No Parking' zone? My wife pulls over and in a minute we're gone."

"Yes. It's you being practical again. But if your good Jesus had been ..."

"... he wouldn't have got himself crucified."

He's back to profile and his tongue seems to be testing his teeth, feeling for a blockage between them, much as the moist bread has wedged into her own, but he flashes a smile at a woman pushing a stroller.

"Why do you smile when customers ask if we carry something?"

"I was asked to by Harvey and it costs me nothing."

"What if it did?"

"Then I might look for another line of employment."

"You're hiding secrets, Orville. A bad business. You know, the pharaohs killed the workers who'd built the secret chambers in the pyramids."

A mother calls a warning to her child prancing on Memorial Square's paths. A city employee is hosing down the flower beds before the weekend. And there's Angus towing his owner like a water skier. Angus the Norfolk terrier. Legs barely, nature lively. The famously friendly, low-sniffing, leash-straining, chocolate-coated hairball. In the slush and run-off of spring snow, filthy. Endearingly filthy. Dora likes petting him. Less so when he defies his owner's gentle commands and leaps on the bench to manically share his dirty paws.

Dora searches for the whereabouts of the man with the ridiculous haircut. He's joining the pedestrian surge on the sidewalk, earplugs blotting out the urban sounds, head bouncing to his music like a dribbled basketball.

"I think you're still peeved about Wednesday."

"If you say so."

"Your grumpiness says so."

“Why shouldn’t I be? It’s just the rules.”

“I exercised my judgement.”

“The rules, Dora, not dares. Check for ID. When you took the job, you agreed to do that.”

“I didn’t sign anything.”

“Harvey yelling isn’t my idea of time well spent at the office.”

“It wasn’t you he was yelling at.”

“But it puts him in the mood to yell at everybody.”

“You just go along,” she bristles.

“Better than going off on a tangent,” his voice rises, hardened further by his refusal to face her. “What’s it have to do with anything except that you had to back down?”

This might be the excuse to do a little window shopping, dump him. But it would prove inconsequential. No thought of surrendering the bench to his wrongheadedness. Thinks he’s got it solved. Brittle man. Forty years of loyalty. Never to be forgotten. As he likes to boast. Dream on. Forty years with his face glued to the polish on the cars. The tiny imperfections filling his days. Supervisor of quality foolishness. His blessed life. This nasty Orville. This drudge. Can he draw the critical stares, absorb them, return to satisfy the customers and plough on? Not on your life.

She sucks in a deep, bruised breath. He seems to recognize that his posture, tilted forward slightly, a hand on the bench for support, is absurd. Consciously, he relaxes, recomposes an unruffled air. Bystanders will move on. Remembrance of his loss of composure, if any, will dwindle to the awareness of the war monument soldier invisible in their midst.

Dora doesn’t budge. Surveys again Memorial Square. Angus has dragged himself out of sight.

Mr. Notorious Hairdo has managed to double back unnoticed and is watching them, slouching against a stone flower bed, anxiety on his clenched lips. Sensing he’s aroused her suspicion, he saunters toward their bench, tucking the earplugs into his jean pocket. Halting in front of Orville, he says cheerfully, “Marvellous summer we’ve been having. Goldilocks summer. Not too hot, not too cold,” and looks skyward.

Orville shuns the figure. Dora, unimpressed by the remark because she’s recently heard the local weather girl on TV use the same description,

replies, "Very nice." She scents a hazard. But merely lays a hand on the purse beside her, not wanting to overreact. Not inclined to be harsh to goodwill.

He plops down between them. Orville twists his body outwards. The man stretches out his legs to a length that could trip a passerby, pulls them in again. Identical grass stains on both knees. Like he's been digging. Breaking into the basement of houses. Sockless. The sturdy sandals thick-soled, an expensive brown, mint condition. Ankles unwashed. Dora shifts her weight away. The features she'd accepted as those of a suffering artist are, up close, unaffectedly coarse.

"All these people going places," he says chattily, turning from the indifferent Orville, who appears to have dozed off, to Dora.

"Lots to do," she agrees.

"What's this?" he gushes, spying Orville's carnation. "That the real thing?" He bends his head to the flower, Orville deaf and blind, and inhales extravagantly, inflating his nostrils to sample the perfume.

A street performer. Dora's amused. Maybe he'll pull out the carnation with his teeth and gobble it. She imagines Orville snapping around at the touch, butting his forehead in slapstick comedy against that solid saffron and lime. She leans forward for a clearer view.

A hand shoots out, the distance gauged, the feint achieved. Dora feels the graze on her fingers, the yank. He's catapulted from between the human endposts, instantly sprinting and darting into the spaces among the pedestrians.

Dora's on her feet, furious but stuck fast. Tracking the lime thread weaving through the quilt of crowd, her shouted "Stop!" falters. Finally provoked by her latest quirk, and the futility of the cry, Orville looks over.