

Sue Davidson

Night Art

Scott waited in his mom's van, bound for college. His family did not come outside to see him off, which was a bad sign. Maybe they were just not 'The People of the Long Goodbye?' He gave up and drove onto the Interstate, the green road signs urging him on as he made mileage north. He had to get to Erie, Pennsylvania by lunch and then Buffalo.

This was his big moving out moment and his parents had somehow managed to wreck it for him. Scott had long ago decided their relationship could be categorized by the equation: 'tens marry tens.' Which was: everyone's a ten in their twenties. You lose a number for each decade. So if you're 30 years old, you're a nine, still good, if you're 40, an eight, 50 a seven, 60 a six. And as long as you stay within your decade, you should be okay. Except that it wasn't. Okay.

Yes, everyone's at their max for their age group no matter what the decade. This was in theory. Scott reconciled himself to the fact wouldn't be able to marry a ten because he, a twenty year old guy, was actually in reality only a five. His looks must have skipped a generation and he pointed the finger at his parents for that misfortune. In grade nine he collided in hallways with low hanging exit signs. Big curly

hair, a pair of glasses and no interest in competitive sports crowned off his mortification at 'Jockville High'.

Mark, older brother by four years, was just the right measure of fat and muscle with an unstudied aloofness the girls found charming. It was derived from a ground deep lack of caring about anything academic, but combined with a sincere reassurance on his part that he was trying his best; most teachers left it at that, concluding he was just not a scholar.

They lived with their parents, Fran and 'Lucky' Luciano on a side street in upper Pittsburgh. Dad was the handy, mechanical type. Not the enforcer; that was Mom's job. She had read all the books and knew all the theory, but she had to throw it out the window when it came to Mark. He argued back about everything. Mom said that Mark reminded her of Lucky when they first got married. Mom continued to have high hopes for Scott; he made the grades, no problem. Not so much Mark. Scott guessed he was Dad's project now.

Whenever Scott threw his backpack over his shoulders he had a sense his father was watching to see how he manned it up and over. Maybe it was because Scott liked art and Dad lived in the backdrop of car repair. He didn't outright disapprove of the summer job he got last year at the Warhol Museum downtown, but he didn't relish it. Mom bought into it. *You never know how far you will go, Scott*, she whispered to him in the living room while watching TV; Dad and Mark safely out of earshot in the garage. It had been her idea to give him the old Caravan for the school year in Buffalo, studying art history.

Things had started out that morning with Mom worrying about food. *You know you only like certain things*, she had said. Scott had crept downstairs to say good-bye to Mark and got mashed on the shoulder

in a brotherly farewell. Dad blurted out to ‘watch out for the ladies.’ Mom hugged him and it felt weird to be leaving behind the yellow flowered walls of the kitchen, the honey oak cupboards, Mom’s kitchen towels hanging up - the hand towel that he always mixed up because he couldn’t tell the difference between the towel for the dishes and the one for his hands – it all made for a forlorn moment or two, but that vanished as soon as he walked out, the spring sun blinding him.

He saw miles of forested uplands on each side of the highway but then truckers began following closely, only swinging out at the last minute, laughing at him. Driver’s Ed had not been like this. The hills only added to the hellish merriment as he drove north, his U-Haul trailer jarring up and down with each change in grade.

In Buffalo he got distracted and missed the university exit, but after some valiant loop-arounds on the elevated highway finally arrived at the university. His plan was to find work and a place to live before September. Today the last of the winter students were making their way out.

“Hurry up!” He heard one Dad shout at a young man carrying loose piles of laundry and binders with a nonchalance that threatened to topple everything. “You know Mom likes to be out of here and out on the road before dark.”

Why? Was the city that dangerous?

He hustled over to the Housing Office and found listings on a board for off-campus. As he scanned the postings one caught his eye on Linwood Avenue. The address he was looking for spread itself out on a corner lot, surrounded by tall maple trees and a side veranda. Voices drifted from people nearby at the Buffalo Medical Centre. Their worries wound up into the air; a cylinder of stress. Scott’s car door echoed uncannily loud as he closed it, given the small effort he used. He knocked in a friendly way

on the side glass door. The wooden interior door was wide open, and he could see stained glass windows in the style of artist Rennie McIntosh with large coloured orbs of blue and red.

“We run the bed and breakfast out of here. Lots of visitors with the hospital, they stay a few days when someone is sick. It is room and board for \$600 a month. You could take your furniture and store it in the garage over the summer, if you want to hang onto it. Renata will do the paperwork with you before you leave this afternoon.” The man introduced himself as Peter, and said Renata was his wife.

The garage already seemed full with art work and supplies. “Renata, she is really into the whole art thing,” he explained.

Scott was looking at a graffiti spray marking on their house - blue and black with swirls.

“Why don’t you report that to the city?” he asked.

“I can’t afford to get the city to clean it.” Peter said.

“I could do it.” Scott had heard of this problem of tags at his summer job.

“It comes from gangs but this could be one person trying to make a statement. I could probably take care

of it. Shouldn’t take more than a day or two and I could do it all for \$400.”

Peter smiled. “Let’s make it \$250 and I’ll let you park your van in the back here for nothing over the summer.”

Scott’s got his idea for a summer job then and there. He would call it ‘No More Graffiti Grief’ and he would clean the marks of gang members and so-called street artists all over the city of Buffalo.

His first call was from the 'Greek is Good' restaurant near the hospital. One June evening he went over to meet the woman in charge. She had ironed out hair and white tipped nails. "I'm Tamara, she said, 'Tam for short."

She was quick to show him the graffiti. The yellow paint clashed with the red brick and he tried to puzzle out a meaning. "This is pretty neat. Looks like you've got the *Hero*," Scott said. "I've seen a few just like this downtown but this is a first for the medical district. It looks like a gang did this. We can get it washed off and done by next week for \$500." He handed her his card, thinking *Wow, my first customer*. Tam said gangs were the result of the dominant culture trying to impose its hierarchy on an underclass. Scott nodded in agreement, not understanding a word. He threw his notebook onto the dash of the Caravan just like the real contractors did.

Why he decided to even major in art history, was a question Scott asked himself one October day; after watching the 400th slide of a saint flip by in a darkened lecture hall. School was so boring. He realized then that he was just done, he meant, OVER and OUT already, get him out of there. He dropped out of every course, so that his record at Christmas showed a total of all big "W's" for 'Withdraw' everywhere. His mood changed; he was alive with the idea of being his own boss and was full on into the business.

When it came to friends, Scott had the twins: Damien and Dante. 'How are things, Double D?' That's what they'd say to each other, as a greeting. Double D worked as bouncers. Damien was this six foot three guy, very approachable but comfortable being three inches from your face too. Scott had ended up with this great seat in July watching some local rock band, after Damien moved some talkers

away. Damien had smiled at him and said 'happy now?', and Scott had said 'sure', sipping his import beer which seemed kind of pretentious; looking back - everyone else had been drinking domestic.

And then there was Pauly, who played heartland rock at the university radio station. Scott and Pauly were now room-mates living in what they figured must be the most cultured off-campus apartment in town, decorated with Scott's art history textbooks tipping over a coffee-table and Pauly's milk crates full of vinyl albums from the 70s - ('they were my Dad's, and he didn't want to keep them anymore, so I brought them all to Buffalo!'). At times Scott called out Pauly's excessive grooming, especially with the big head of curls Pauly had, and Pauly would just smile back, letting the negative slide, saying it was all about the ladies.

Mom called Scott in mid-October to say that Mark had just stolen her credit card and was coming his way. He wanted to party like he thought Scott was doing.

"Um, that's not me, but whatever,' Scott said. 'I'll go to the bus station tonight and make sure he gets in okay."

"What's going on with your towing job, Mark?" Scott asked.

"All the crap was just getting to me. The owner guy, every time I made a mistake, he would turn on me." Mark sat down on the couch but wouldn't look Scott in the eye.

"Mom told me you were missing a lot of shifts." Scott said.

"They stopped calling me in."

"Let's talk about it tomorrow. Just sleep on the couch for now." Scott was tired of listening to the story.

The next morning Scott stumbled over a buddy Coleman cooler that Mark had left open full of prescription drugs.

“What is all this and where did it come from?” Scott asked.

“They’re prescriptions” Mark mumbled, trying to open his eyes.

“Have it out of here by four, okay?” Scott snapped.

“I can’t. I’m couriering across State lines,” Mark said. “The Coal Boys scoop it out near the border in West Virginia, and send it up to Pittsburgh, and I work alone, Scott, I swear I do, I just needed some money for the tow truck, for the loan, you know how much that is.”

“I hurt my back hooking up a truck and I got into the painkillers and then the ADHD. You just cut in half; you know how easily they crumble.”

Scott could recall the commotion on school mornings getting Mark to take ADHD tablets. They made him super hungry and angry and because Mom had enough problems just trying to get him educated, let alone medicated, they had stopped.

“My friends were bugging me in Pittsburgh to help get refills for their courses. I was filling my prescriptions with doctors anywhere I could find them. Now I’m the courier for the south-east quadrant, like the State park near Falling Water up into Pittsburgh. I get what the Coal Boys send me, plus what I can get on my own for the ADHD. I send it up by my tow truck.” Mark explained.

“Well,” Scott said, “Are they coming for it or for you if you don’t get it delivered on time?”

“I’ve decided to give myself five days to get it into Buffalo, and then I go on my way. Pittsburgh was my usual route. Now I’m getting into more area.” Mark said.

One late November day the other half of Double D, Damien, was heading into the ‘Greek is Good’ restaurant before work. “Hi,” the waitress intoned, managing to sound both dis-interested and overreaching. He muscled his suit-jacketed body behind a table near the front window, waiting for her to

come over with a menu, but she disappeared into the back for about twenty minutes. He then saw Pauly go quietly by him, his curls dishevelled. When the meal came, Dante mopped up the plate in a few minutes, patted down crumbs, and could see the waitress turn her body in a little dance as if harboring some inner rhapsody as he got to the cash. *Had she been with Pauly?* he wondered as he headed off to his shift.

After the cooler's appearance in the apartment, Scott asked Pauly and Double D to come for a meeting the next day. They all decided, even Mark, on a plan. Tam from the restaurant and Pauly would pretend to be the new distributors for the customers on Mark's list and would be in the driver and passenger seat. Scott and Mark would be in the back of the Caravan, while Damien and Dante would be in the 2nd row of seats, riding as enforcers as necessary. It got a little surreal when Pauly wanted to blast some Bon Jovi as they paraded into downtown, and Scott asked him to turn it off, pronto. After that it was their first customer, and Pauly at the wheel explained in his gentle manner that Mark had to go to a stint at rehab, so he was out, and the new man in the Caravan was in. Tam offered a cool smile and the person was totally taken in. At that point, Double D slid the door open and cuffed their man in a citizen's arrest for buying a narcotic substance, and the police were alerted and picked them up. They were rolling along their route, easily, the police coming to their aid, when they came across someone in a laneway who recognized Tam. "Hey little miss crush, what kind of pills have you got for me today?" the young woman asked. The woman emerged closer and they all saw how young she was. Tam had gotten quiet and was moving her hand to the side of her face, shielding her from the girl as she crept forward out of the shadows. Had she been eating scraps of food from the next door bakery? Tam shrank into the back of the seat, sliding down, and started crying 'my girl, my baby.' Pauly came out of the van with Scott and they

asked her name. “It’s Tabitha – Tabi for short,” she said. In the passenger seat, Tam let out a sob, and Scott asked the girl if she had a home to go. “I left my home when I turned 16,” she said, and then turned to Pauly to ask who the woman was in the van. “That’s Tam, short for Tamara,” he said. The strange girl went over to the passenger side and put her fingers up to the open window, stretching them out to touch Tam’s cheek. Tam started crying. “Don’t cry, Mommy, it’s me, Tabi. I went away and never called. I couldn’t take the rules, so I ran away. Flight was always my thing, right?” Pauly watched as Tam stretched out an arm to reach the girl.

“Please come back. We’ll work on it. We can compromise. If you can stay off the drugs, and I can stay off your case, we can try to make it work.” Tam was talking slowly, the tears coming through the words.

But Tabi was shaking her head as she withdrew her own arm and moved away. “No, I can’t do it. I promise to never shut the door, but I can’t come back and stay with you.”

She suddenly bolted, even as Damien and Dante were heading out of the van, but they couldn’t stop her and neither could Scott or Pauly, though they tried and ran after her down the lane. They closed the doors of the old Caravan and called police to give them a detail of her sighting for the missing person report. Mark announced that he was off the circuit forever, after witnessing this incident, and he turned over the cooler and his contact list at the police station the same evening. Scott and Pauly drove him there and let him stay in jail for a night before Scott planned to bail him out next morning for trafficking. After that, it was Lucky’s turn to get him back on track. Scott called his Dad that night, to come tomorrow and get Mark into treatment and back to Pittsburgh until his trial. He was told Mom would let the stolen card go. Damien and Dante silently drank the coffees that Scott got at the late night Dunkin Donuts,

joking that this was the last time they would do drug patrol; for now and in the future it was going to be a regular security shift. Pauly put on some Springsteen and they rolled home to the apartment, Pauly taking charge now and offering Tam his bedroom while he took the couch. Scott moved the art books far away into a corner to make room for the newest member of their tribe.