

“Men stumble over the truth from time to time, but most pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened.”

— Winston Churchill

“Truth is always present; it only needs to lift the iron lids of the mind's eye to read its oracles.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

“You've got to take the bitter with the sour.”

— Samuel Goldwyn

The Taste of Truth

Candid confessions of a dedicated liar.

by Beth Black

CHAPTER ONE: PUT ON

They never meant to start those fires. The Laguna Wiccans were so unsteady in their craft, however, that the only entity they ever managed to summon was a hook and ladder truck. Fortunately, no firefighters were needed on the breezy June night we walked in on one of their screwball rituals. That was the sole bit of good news. I couldn't really say what did upset my companions — the rooster, nude frolic, or glittered goat. Something made the men panic. But in the weeks that followed, I learned one thing will always be true. Whether you're a wannabe Wiccan or a practiced spellbinder, havoc can happen when magic is made.

To be fair to the Wiccans, we never actually *saw* a rooster. Though we heard it clearly enough as soon as my husband, his friend, and I climbed out of our car. The bird cackled and crowed from its hiding place in a hibiscus jungle near the front door. A stocky Wiccan woman, wearing little more than a brown broomstick skirt, shook the bush and tried to chase it down. I recognized her as one of Fiona's witch-pals, Devlin Montero, a UC Irvine English major who wrote all the coven's spells. At the moment, she seemed stuck on two words, "Here, chicky, chicky..."

BWACK! That was one cagey rooster.

Devlin paused, scowling. I took this as a cue to stick out my hand for a shake. Maybe not my best idea ever. But she ignored it, anyway, apparently coming up with a new rooster-

rousting idea instead. Clamping her eyes shut, she aimed both index fingers skyward. Round cheeks rosy and bare breasts billowing over a cat's eye pendant strung on a cord around her neck, she chanted:

Yet the leaves here thicken,

While men's hearts quicken —

I call on Zeus! Bring forth the chicken!

Zeus must have silenced his cell, because the bird stayed put.

Desperate, she returned to, "Here, chicky, chicky!"

BWACK!

We hurried past her. Now to be fair to my husband and his friend, Robert, they hadn't expected a Wiccan gathering when we arrived to ring Fiona's doorbell. We were there for her blind double date that I had arranged. It was supposed to be an elegant evening spent wandering through Laguna Beach's Festival of Arts. They expected to see my best friend, a willowy-silky redhead with a beauty mark at the corner of her lip. She would be sweet arm-candy for Robert that would match my husband's arm-candy, me. Brad once described me on the phone as his "Bambi-eyed, sleek brunette." Sounded to me like the detective's key witness in a noir fiction murder mystery. Could've been worse. Besides, I figured that would make me the perfect love interest for my man, since he worked in the legal trade.

Anyway, we rang the bell just as the rooster crowed loudly enough to wake Sweden. Other, stranger, noises emanated from inside. The men exchanged a glance that read: *What the hell?* Then they gave Devlin a sidelong, though, somewhat appreciative stare. In response, she

glared back and spat on the ground right next to their polished Rockports. Brad turned on me with the stink eye. *Like I had anything to do with this?* I held my breath and hoped Fiona could brush it all off as a joke. But I knew better. You see, in talking Brad into this evening, I conveniently forgot to mention my girlfriend's new passion, Wicca, because Fiona really needed a night out with a decent guy. So it came as a shock when we arrived and found her coven deep in the throes of a bacchanalian dance-off. Later, she told me they were simply trying to protect her from a bad date. Someone should have suggested protecting her furniture instead.

Fiona's house in Laguna Beach was something of an oddity in itself. Our brown-stucco split-level home would tremble at the thought of anything in less than perfect harmony with all Lake Forest HOA regulations. In contrast, her little Laguna Canyon cabin teetered vibrantly atop a hillside bluff at the edge of Laguna's city limits, breaking every damn rule it could. Its deep purple and aqua paint endowed the front with a sixties vibe and the wind gongs hovering over an abundance of greenery *soundly* rounded out the scene.

Brad never liked Fiona's house, or Fiona, for that matter. Her earthy tie-dyed skirts and dangle-bangle earrings spoke of a culture foreign to his legal world, where the only people he saw dressed like her had been arrested for possession. He disdained artists, in general, as scofflaws who broke too much decorum to be worth their trouble — with the distinct exception of me. He liked my paintings and said so occasionally, a gift that made me feel special to have won over such a tough critic. So it was funny to me, if no one else, that my girlfriend worked in the mundane world of real estate. She adored art, but Fiona's talents lay elsewhere.

When Fiona opened the door, the next thing to strike us was the odor — a pungent-sweet blend of pot and jasmine incense. It made a strong impression. But not as strong as the

noises now blasting from her living room. The rooster outside provided mere backbeat to the cacophony in the house. They played no melody, but made up for it with gusto and a horserace sense of rhythm. Above their voiced mantra, it sounded like a flute, lots of chiming bells, and maybe some drums — all topped off with a good-sized Chinese gong.

“You’re early!” Her beauty mark danced as she shouted above the din.

“Just five minutes. You know my man is always neck and neck with the clock.” It was true. Both men were judges with the Superior Court of Orange County, California. As judges, they spent their lives acutely aware of time. I supposed it was because they made so many people pay for their misdeeds with hours, days and years.

“Oh! We must have run long.” She held closed her long, colorful robes, snatched a wreath of roses from her head and jerked the door open fully. At the motion, her robes opened enough to reveal a bare stretch of thigh that made my husband catch his breath.

She cleared her throat. “Come in. I have to change, but it won’t take long. Please excuse my friends.” She turned her head and roared in the women’s direction, “They’re just getting ready to leave!”

She scurried down the hall to the left as we were drawn in the opposite direction by the noise in Fiona’s living room. There, candles provided dim light, flickering in a circle around six naked women of varying ages. Well, not quite naked. They wore rainbow-dyed robes that flew open each time they swayed in time to the chime. They looked like hippies with explosive tie-dye clothing that flew from their bodies as they heaved, arced and spun to the chant. The women were too busy to pay us much attention, and for sure they weren’t planning to leave anytime soon. I would have liked to grab my pad and sketch what we saw, if we hadn’t been

thunderstruck by the spectacle. Instead, I managed to squeak out, “What’s up with the hysterical fish?” Nobody heard me. We were pushed back from invading their little circle by head-knocking crystals — vibrant purples, blues and greens — orbiting on strings attached to the spinning ceiling fan.

Inside their circle, they chanted:

Beguile, beguile and ban, ban, ban!

Beguile, beguile and ban, ban, ban!

Each “ban” whacked at our eardrums like a witch's broom swatting an errant black cat. The women hip-thunked tambourines and *chinkle-chinkled* their bells. A goat bleated furiously.

But that was just the beginning. One woman held a live fish that could fill a good-sized dinner plate, and on every “*beguile*” she raised it over her head, doing her best to hold onto the flopping monster. Calling over the bedlam, she recited:

Cast the net and the spell.

To catch a man both fine and well!

Twice, she lost her grip and the poor creature smacked the tile floor. She retrieved it only to lift the wide-eyed mackerel again.

A thin young girl wrestled with the goat while shouting:

Fierce of temper, beard of man,

Chase away a Peter Pan!

Their struggle turned violent. The goat had been dusted with glitter and was not happy with its current situation. I wondered if it sensed a ritual sacrifice coming on. These events historically ran bad for goats. And things weren’t going well for the fish.

The men stood gaping, as the goat wriggled free from the Wiccan's grasp and butted the couch a few times in a raging attempt to escape. Each butt caused a cloudburst of glitter to escape from the animal's hide that sparkled down to the tile, creating the illusion of a scintillating snowstorm in Fiona's living room. The women played on furiously, rainbow robes parting to reveal bare skin as they gyrated, and long hair flying while they threw their heads about, each one pausing in turn to cough out her sucked-in portion of the sparkly cloud. Things apparently weren't going so well for them either.

I had to admit they put on a good show, and I stifled a laugh despite the fact that I knew I was in for it with Brad. Damn! How could I have allowed this to happen? My husband was the opposite of Fiona. Where she searched for answers, he already found what he needed. Where she led lovers with her heart, he marched into attack with his brain. A judge must always do that, I reasoned. And it didn't mean he was incapable of feelings, he just didn't show them in conventional ways. Then again, neither did she.

But it was Robert who first regained the power of speech and mumbled, "Oh, I don't know about this." He turned to me, shocked and quizzical, like he thought I was going to go bite the head off the rooster if I could only catch it.

Then Brad swung toward me, annoyance crinkling his face like brown paper. "You promised. It was going to be a nice night out." He caught himself and forced a weak smile. "Honey, I'm really not up for her shenanigans."

Now that's a word you don't hear much anymore. But I didn't even consider whipping out my tiny pocket dictionary to note it. Brad used *shenanigans* from time to time, especially in conversations about my girlfriend. And while I'm a certified logophile, habitually logging new

words, this one didn't qualify as new or interesting – just odd. So I spent my energy instead trying to calm him down.

“Honestly, I didn't know she was into this kind of thing.” Yes, I felt the guilt associated with lying to my husband. But it wasn't a huge lie, and I hoped it would help the situation. No luck there. It always seemed to me that the worst thing with men was when they wouldn't allow anyone to assuage their rage. I'd been calming men my whole life and lying developed as an unhappy device in the toolkit that sometimes helped me with this nasty task.

“It's not that bad. Really. She's kind of funny. Kind of wild, right?” Robert giggled and stopped abruptly like a man in church caught laughing at the sermon.

“Yeah, sure.” Brad shrugged at Robert. “But I guess I owe you, buddy.”

What did that mean? *Owe him what?*

He swung back toward me, and his face crinkled again. “I know it's hard, but after tonight you probably shouldn't see this crazy woman again. Don't you agree?”

Wow. Fiona was my best friend since second grade. You don't just throw that away like some poor dropped fish. I knew what he wanted me to say, and I knew it would hurt to live up to it.

“Please don't ask that.” I would have dropped onto my knees if I thought it might have helped.

We stared at each other, silently testing one boundary of our marriage. I wanted to hold my ground. I wanted to win this one for my friend. Fiona, the closest-thing-to-a-sister I had growing up. The one who held me when my mom died and later cheered at art school graduation when my dad skipped it. I could always count on her. I wanted her to count on me

too.

But I wavered. It was quick yet devastating. My usual overwhelming urge to appease Brad kicked in and I stammered, “Okay, sure, yeah, uh-huh, probably, um, okay.” I knew the message going out wasn’t right, again, but I just couldn’t help myself. Fibs and half-truths like this just squashed me. But it stopped the stink eye and the head shaking. Only then — right after my betrayal of Fiona — did I notice the fresh stillness in the room. The chanting, chinkling and drumming came to an abrupt halt, leaving the silence palpable by contrast.

I glanced at the other women who stood still now, staring at the floor. They had obviously heard the conversation and it showed. Damn.

CHAPTER TWO: PRETENSION

An older woman was the first to break the silence. Raising an ornate carved-wood wand in her hand, she turned slowly, counterclockwise, repeating, “The circle is open but not unbroken.” While she quickly thanked Aphrodite, the others blew out all the candles one by one. Finally, they joined hands and recited in unison:

West and South, East and North

You are released! All free! Go forth.

They broke hands and someone flipped on the houselights. Show over.

Goat woman caught her animal and wrestled it into submission. She mouthed “I’m sorry” to me while steering it toward the back door leading to a small fenced yard. One could hope some shrubs and grass would calm the beast. Net-Casting woman gathered up the fish that lay once again on the floor and dropped it into a bucket of water where it took a minute

before fluttering back to life. A bona fide miracle. This whole escapade brought new meaning to the term, “battered fish.”

The chanters stuffed away their bells and chimes as fast as they could. Each woman removed her robe and threw on street clothes, which for two, meant broomstick skirts. For others it was a mix-up of jeans, business suits and summer dresses. Even with their heavy use of jewelry, they seemed to me like people who could meet the men’s approval. And though the men had uncomfortably turned their backs while the women dressed, I caught Robert peeking at a reflection on a window. Seemed he didn’t mind the nudity part, after all.

Fish woman glared at Robert, and then at Brad, alternately. She bared her teeth. It wasn’t a smile. “Cowen jerks,” she stage whispered on her way out the door. The others followed.

That was apparently what Wiccans called non-practitioners who behaved badly. I wanted to believe that woman meant the men, but I knew I deserved to be included in the label.

Brad sighed and said, “We’ll be waiting in the car, honey. Why don’t you see how long your friend will be?” He let the door slam on their way out.

From the back yard, a few woeful goat bleats provided the only sound now.

Fiona appeared, finally, dressed in nice jeans and a pretty top. We rushed outside and leaped into Brad’s car like we were escaping demons. The ride to the art festival held no surprises from that point. Still, Brad threw me a couple of dark glances. He could really hold a grudge. But this time it was all my fault. I made a mental note to apologize as soon as I had the chance.

* * * * *

The next morning was Sunday, and I didn't have to wait long for Brad to get up and leave on a carwash run. Fortunately, he was a creature of habit, and I could count on him to rush out of the house as he did every Sunday morning in order to beat the deluge of dirty-car drivers. I needed him to leave temporarily so I could speak with Fiona. She and Robert had hit it off, after all, and he even took a while walking her to her door when we drove her home later that night. I wanted to find out the scoop, so I called her despite my promise to my husband. Hell.

It really wasn't Brad's fault that he hated her. For one thing, he despised surprises, and that ceremony, or whatever it was, certainly qualified as one. I blamed myself. After all, I did know a little about her Wiccan adventures. A few months earlier, after one of her bad boys left her life skidding to a halt, my poor heartbroken girlfriend sought solace with a group of fellow single women who wanted to develop some sense of control in their lives. When Fiona told me she had joined the Laguna Explorers of Wicca, aka "LEW," I misheard and thought she had joined a group of *wicker* weavers. I even pictured her relaxing on a homemade white wicker lounger, laptop on lap, punching the send key as she accepted yet another horrible date with yet another frightening Internet guy. But I was mistaken. And while her new friends had indeed offered Fiona a solid share of comfort, they also gave me the creepy willies. Just a little. I mean, really, who holds up a live fish like a checkered flag? But since she and Robert might become an item, I talked myself into believing that Brad would forgive the call, especially when I asked her a pointed question for him.

“Why would you invite them over when you knew we were on our way?”

“I didn’t. They showed up. All I did was tell Ursula that I was tired of dating and that you were bringing someone for a blind date.”

“Ursula, eh?”

“Yeah, sorry. She of course spread the word. They all figured I needed protection and just showed up before you. Devlin concocted this cool new spell to reel in the good catches and repel — *ban* — the bad boys. We were supposed to have a full-sized recently-used fishing net, but the guys down at the Dory refused to lend us one. So we pretended with the fish from Esther’s tank.”

“Somehow, it all makes perfect sense.”

“Go ahead. Laugh.”

“No, really. I get it. The net, and the bit about banning bad boys.” I cleared my throat. “But ... what about the goat? And the glitter?” The animal really had been hilarious, but I wanted to try not to laugh directly at her, even if she deserved it. So I tried to keep a smirk out of my voice, though she probably heard it.

“See, putting glitter on my goat was an idea that Hilde had. She couldn’t attend, but she called it in. That way, the goat could represent all the good things I need in a man.”

“But, isn’t your goat a female? You named her Gertrude, right?”

She hesitated. “Yeah, sure. Gertrude. But that’s not the point. The idea was, Gertie represented all the good things like strength and ... energy. And the glitter represented how my perfect man would sparkle in my mind.” Drawing a breath, she added, “Okay, and the rooster was supposed to be the cock. Well, you know.”

Uh-huh. Well, I've heard dumber things come out of people. But this won some sort of prize, I'm sure. Still, she was fragile, and I wanted to spare her feelings. "The goat was a great idea. I liked the special effects when it hit stuff."

"Oh, I must have missed that."

"You won't the next time you sweep your living room."

"Oh." She grew quiet and I felt bad again. Fiona was fragile, and I didn't want to hurt her. Men had done plenty of that.

"The chants were ... poetic. Did Devlin write the whole thing?"

"Yeah, you know she's done really well studying writing at the local university. Straight-A student. We all go to her for spells."

It must have made sense to her, if not me. There were no words forming in me to respond.

After a moment of static, she sighed. "It's not like there's any kind of local school for this sort of stuff. We all took the correspondence course in Witchcraft from West Virginia. Mostly, though, we've had to learn the spells and the rest of it by ourselves. But it's real. I know it is. There is amazing power out there. And our group is trying to capture it. We make a lot mistakes, I know, but we're doing our best to learn. It's just ... tough."

I hesitated. Brad would be home, soon, and I wanted to get to the reason I called. "Speaking of tough, it looks like you managed to work things out with Robert." In my hopes for her, I pictured her smiling while giving me the scoop on their plans.

"Yeah ... Robert. Not so much. He demanded a booty call. I told him to forget it."

Whoops. Maybe not a smile. "Damn. I thought he liked you. You two seemed to hit it off

at the art festival.”

“I thought so too, until he kissed me goodnight while you waited in the car. The idiot grabbed my ass and wouldn’t let go until I threatened to yell for help.”

“Damn. That’s what took so long? I thought you two were making plans for a second date.” *So much for that.* “Sorry, I didn’t think he’d pull such crap.”

“I guess the Wicca stuff made him think I was a player. And, hey, it wasn’t a terrible offer. When you think about it, he’d be every bit as cheap as his conquest, giving himself away like that. Anyone he won would be on equal ground. But ... I told him I was holding out for someone better.”

“Good for you!”

“Yeah. And he laughed and told me not to hold my breath.”

It occurred to me that Brad and Robert were going to talk about this if they hadn’t already. For all I knew, Brad had called him from the carwash. Well, I hoped to send a message to him through my husband, if I could get the chance. That clod deserved a smack across his chops for treating my girlfriend that way. He made assumptions, which by the way showed him to be a jerk. I sure wouldn’t want him as my judge. Now I’d have to help Fiona recover from this guy too. Good thing it had been only the one date – one wasted evening. But I knew that in her mind, he added to the total number of assholes in her life, and there were already too many.

CHAPTER THREE: EXAGGERATION

“You’re an incredibly attractive woman.” Brad slipped an arm around my waist. He

pulled me closer and nuzzled my neck. Home from the carwash, he had a more intimate errand to take care of next.

I pressed against him and whispered, "I love you too."

He pulled away and stared at me. I chose to laugh it off for the moment and returned to the empty pie crust awaiting its fill of fresh peaches and hot glaze. *Men! It's so cute how they can't communicate their feelings.* It didn't really take all that much effort to stomp the assurance into my heart.

Outside, a thick marine fog had wisped its way inland all the way up to the foothills of Lake Forest, and only a gray shudder of daylight peeked through the living room window. We climbed back into bed and played while the pie cooled. Brad made love like he was conquering the world. It was exciting to be with him, and I loved him so much it didn't matter that we never kissed when we did it. How could we, with my face buried in a pillow and my lover plowing into me fiercely from behind, all warrior and hero? His strength made me feel safe, which was the sexiest thing about him. When the late-morning sun finally burned off the June gloom, we got dressed and drove to the beach.

He took my hand as we made our way along the bluff overlooking Newport Bay. I breathed in the salt air and couldn't help but revel in all of it: *beach breeze, palm trees and the husband I adored ... loving me.* It was like a little poem. So what if he choked on those three words? I mean, really, so what? We had so many other words to share. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my tiny dictionary, a gift from my brother in recognition of my logophilia. I motioned to the beach below and said, "I have a new one: *Littoral*, a shore. Seaside."

"You and your words!" Brad rolled his eyes and snorted at me. Snorted! I shoved the

dictionary back into my pocket.

But it would have been horrible if I'd allowed his little mannerism to ruin our romantic day. Squeezing his hand, I screwed up my courage. "And speaking of which, I have a question."

"Yeah?" We paused at the spot where you could see up and down the coast until the land curved away to the north and south.

"Earlier, when I said I loved you —"

Before I could finish, he pulled me in for a kiss.

"You know you're my sweetie." He held both my hands in his. "You're very special to me."

"It just seems a little —"

Something dark crept up his cheeks then pinched the corners of his eyes. "I think you're trying to control what I feel."

Ouch. I retreated. "Why don't we go to the island and grab some Balboa Bars."

Whatever had been on his face vanished. "You have a pie waiting for us at home."

"Yes, I do."

"I wouldn't want you to lose that figure of yours. It's your best thing."

Did he just say that? Once again, I convinced myself that he must have misspoken. "I'll work out a little extra."

"That's my girl. And I'll even go with you to the gym." He beamed at me, and I told myself I had imagined any problem.

Brad was a reliable guy, a well-regarded judge. When we first met, he had his bailiff call me up to tell me what a good man he was, how everyone trusted his judgment and how much

he said he liked me. How could a girl not be swayed by that? It was an affidavit of sorts. So I went out with the judge from the Second Circuit Court, the one who handled wrongful death cases. And I had faith in him when he said we should get married.

When a guy makes you his damsel in distress, what's a girl to do? A year after we met, I was injured. Not badly, mind you. Just a minor parking-lot accident between my little blue Mini-Cooper and a fast-moving wall. No one died, but my neck hurt. At that time, I had just finished college and didn't have a real job yet. So I had very little medical coverage. They treated it, but the financial part became a nightmare. Months went by, and his office sent me a bill. Then, a bill with red ink on it. And then I had a call from a collections agency. I was scared by their demands and couldn't earn enough to hand over what they wanted. Brad swooped in and paid the bill for me. He was the hero I knew I needed.

But he said, not long after, that if we were married, his insurance would cover me. It wasn't the most romantic proposal, nothing like I'd ever imagined, but it did make sense because I seriously thought I could not take care of myself. And besides, I loved my hero. We were married at the courthouse by a fellow judge the following week. The friend did it for free as a professional courtesy. Brad had helped his pal's kid avoid a drunk driving charge.

I thought about inviting my dad and brother, but it seemed an unnecessary bother for my brother, and I really didn't want my dad there carping about anything. Brad's mom, Rosalie, came in her dressiest dress and hugged us all repeatedly through the whole thing. I couldn't help loving the woman — her affection toward me made me look forward to having a mother-in-law. She and Fiona even made the event seem a little more festive than we'd planned. The judge read some words solemnly from his iPad, Rosalie snuffled back a tear, Fiona winked at

the bailiff, and just like that, we were married.

On the steps of the courthouse, Fiona brushed her curly mop out of the way and stopped us to snap a few shots with her phone camera. "Smile!" she commanded, the beauty mark near her lip lifting while she cajoled Brad to join in.

The pics arrived in my email the next day. They weren't exactly professional wedding shots, but, they too somehow made sense. The only thing that disturbed me was that, while I grinned like a lottery winner in all of them, Bradley looked serious. Almost angry.

"How come you're not smiling?" I asked the first time I saw them. It was an innocent question. I thought he'd just say that she caught him off guard with the camera. But what actually happened was, I'd caught him off guard with the *question*. "I wasn't happy," he said simply. "I had too much on my mind to be stopping for pictures on the steps. Your friend was pestering us." After that, he never wanted to discuss it again. He insisted he was content with me, as content as any man could be. "Now please drop it."

So I did. And a week later I landed my job, complete with health insurance. But I still loved my hero.

CHAPTER FOUR: SUBTERFUGE

The sky was still murky early Sunday morning when I pulled off the 405 onto the Beach Boulevard ramp and came to a halt at the red light. There he was, the same tattered little man in a worn Army jacket. He held his cardboard sign that read: *No Jobs for vets in the OC*. Lines spread across his face like a map to all the wars he'd fought. As always, it broke my heart. He'd been there every time I made this stop for the past six months. Of course, the light turned red

without fail. And I had to have something for him. In a sack beside me, resting on the passenger seat, were two man-sized sandwiches. I pulled one out. Didn't matter which — they were identical roast beef and cheddar. Rolling down the window, I held one up along with a five dollar bill.

“Hey, Samuel. How's it going today?”

“Hi Claire! Not so good, but I have a new one for ya. *Algor*. A-L-G-O-R. Means 'chilly' I think. It's *algor*, ain't it?” He bounced a little for emphasis.

I chuckled and passed him the sandwich through the window. No time to waste during a red light. “Good one! I'll add it to my list. Thanks!”

He laughed along while grabbing the sandwich and the cash.

“One for you, and I have one for my dad, like always. And that cash will help you fight off the *algor* with some hot coffee.”

The old man nodded in appreciation, tucking it into his jacket's chest pocket. When the light turned, I touched the gas and inched forward with the line of cars. He stepped along for a couple paces with a parting wave of his hand. “Your old man is lucky,” he called out as I rolled up my window. Another touch of the gas and he was gone from view until the next time. I didn't doubt that he'd be there.

A quarter-mile down Beach Boulevard, I made a left into the Golden Country Mobile Resort Village. Six years later, and I still couldn't believe my dad sold his pleasant little Irvine home and moved into a tin can. After Mom died, he said he just needed out of the house. I tried talking him into waiting until he found something better than this. But as usual, Dad didn't give two centavos what other people cared about. If you loved something, you could bet that

he would despise it. Maybe he didn't mean to be oppositional; it just turned out that way.

And I know for a fact that Mom had adored their house. I hated seeing him throw away the home she had prized for years: her garden with the snapdragons she'd planted, her custom kitchen festooned with fridge magnets from their car trips, and their den with the study of yellow roses she had painted as a young art student. That painting glowed with a piece of Mom's spirit. It was why I went to art school and way too powerful to be housed in a tin-can shack.

But he was a grownup and nothing I said would change his mind. He kept his answer short and pointed. For years now, Dad didn't allow much two-way conversation with any of us. My father figure, the most stick-like stick-man of all time, had made his decision. And he didn't mind drizzling in a little nastiness to seal the deal.

"Piss off!" he answered. "I want things simple."

Well, there's simple, and then there's *trailer park*. Alongside the gravel drive dividing the vehicular villas, a solitary lavender bush – the one eye-catching pleasure in the entrance – reached up to greet me with vibrant-purple flowers and tendrils I would paint in viridian. The poor thing was mocked on either side by patchy brown weeds, rocks and scattered trash texturing the dirt: a doll's head, one eye closed so that it forever winked at the passing cars, junk food wrappers and, of course, enough cigarette butts to prove that the tenants were all going to lung cancer hell. At the end of the drive, I found a spot, parked, grabbed his sandwich and trudged toward his door.

But then I froze. Dad's stone-black Doberman with one wandering eye scrambled to its paws. Tethered near the front door, this monster held a special enmity for me. I don't know

why. As always, it glared at me – and the sky – and growled.

“Nice doggie!” I pulled out my best weapon: a bribe. The sandwich was supposed to be for Dad, but what could I do? Same thing I've done every time Dad left her tied up alone. With a *thwap*, a good chunk of it landed right in front of her good eye, but the beast ignored it in her fury at me. No way was I going to toss Dad's entire sandwich away. I kicked myself for not packing a baseball bat. Then I kicked myself again for thinking that. I don't usually go around hurting animals, not even the weird ones — and my father's pet, at that.

So I almost retreated to my car. But I had come that far, and Dad had *asked* to see me. Such a rare invitation couldn't be ignored. I still remembered how different he was around Mom when she was alive — how different he was to all of us. And as much as I hated to admit it, I couldn't forget the flashes of absolute childhood joy, when I was very small, when he scooped me up to sit on his shoulders.

The dog let loose a symphony of snarling barks and lurched toward me, snapping her chain taut. A window cracked open at the front of Dad's trailer and through the opening a voice roared, “Rainbow! Knock it off!” A piece of charred toast flew out the window and skidded behind the miserable creature catching her attention.

“Thanks, Dad,” I called to the window.

No reply.

The dog turned for its reward. Slowly. One link of chain fell slack, then another and eventually the rest. Nipping at the ground, zeroing in and seizing the treat, she lay down with it. While chewing, Rainbow kept its one good eye on my approach. Her other eye seemed to be searching the skies. I edged past the beast and neared the door.

From inside, Dad yelled, "Don't let the cold air in!" And the window slammed shut. I took that to mean I was welcome to open the door and step inside. But how I was supposed to keep the air out when I did that?

I hurried in and shut it fast behind me. The inside felt a lot warmer and smelled of bacon and overdone toast. Low strains of the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil" drifted from behind the bedroom curtain. Dad's favorite radio station played 60s hits. It faded in and out; apparently you couldn't get good reception in mobile resort land.

There he sat in worn jeans and a grease-smudged sweatshirt that strained to cover his broad belly. He could have been anyone's dad, especially if their family belonged in the mob. Silver hair clung to the sides of his head, though the top had lost its last strand years ago. A beaky nose pointed to his thin, mean lips that seemed a size too small for those puffy cheeks. Once, when I asked Mom how she chose him to be her husband, she admitted she admired his blue eyes. She also argued that he was an unpolished diamond. I told her he was more like a rhinestone in the rough.

To me, his hands were his only endorsement. With them, he'd spent my entire lifetime fixing his cheap cars on the weekends. He had honest scars, calluses and grease under his nails. The grease didn't bother me, because I have paint under mine all the time. For a living, he sold