

Endgame

2200 words

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It was tougher to find neighborhood hardware stores, but there was one on Lombard, run by a Chinese family, that mixed in household goods and a couple aisles of Asian food.

It was Friday morning, an unusually perfect day in the city for February, though they'd gotten a foot of snow overnight at Tahoe.

I found some decent wire, it reminded me of baling wire like they use on hay, or tying fences. The main thing, it was flexible enough, and I had the guy cut a nice three-foot length.

You didn't want to skimp on the gloves, and they had a brand with extra-duty padding, both the palm and fingers, and even the back--and they were a little bulky when you slipped them on, but worth it.

And oh yeah . . . the roll of duct tape, don't forget that.

So there you were . . . I was all set, and nothing to do now except drive over to Castro Valley.

The rental car I picked up was a Honda Civic, but it

seemed sufficient, and I threw some warm clothes in back and stuck the hardware supplies in the center console . . . and 40 minutes later I was dealing with Errol's community entrance, the bottom of the hill, the houses up above.

I wasn't positive he'd be around. I was going by what Errol told me the other night, that he worked at home Monday Wednesday Friday, and you hoped nothing threw that out of whack today.

Errol had been one of my bosses years ago, when I was a teenager working a summer job as a bicycle messenger. Now he'd done something very bad.

I leaned out the driver's window where visitors phoned up to the residents, and I took a moment and punched in Errol's code.

No answer. I gave it 30 seconds and tried again.

Errol's voice came on the intercom: "What do you need."

I picked up the handset. I said, "Dude I'm trying to help you here. Let me in." I hated the word dude but it popped out.

There was no more conversation and a good minute went by and the buzzer sounded and the iron security gate swung open, and I drove up the hill and pulled into

Errol's driveway.

He opened the door, no smiles today, not like he was going to challenge or attack me, but making it clear I didn't belong here now.

I pointed inside and said, "You mind?"

"I do," Errol said, leaving it there.

"Here's the thing," I said. "I'm not your enemy. You have some options, I know you do."

And I brushed past him into the house, Errol only making a half-hearted effort to stop me, and he followed me in and closed the door . . . and as he was doing that I smashed him over the head with the flashlight I pulled out of my rear pants pocket.

It was one of those heavy-duty jobs, the kind the police used, that took 6 full-sized batteries and could double as a night stick, or some kind of improvised weapon.

I'd picked that up from an ex-tenant who stiffed me on the rent and left his belongings in the apartment. The flashlight had been in a kitchen drawer.

Either way, Errol was in some trouble, but wobbling, trying to get up, and I smashed him with the thing again.

"Let's go," I said. "In the car."

Errol got back to a sitting position and I found a towel and brought it along. Let him at least dab his wounds, though it was more an impact thing, the guy taking some blunt force for sure. A cut was part of it, I could see now, but no serious blood.

Errol was stunned the way you see a fighter on TV staggering around when they don't know quite where they are or what just connected with them, and I was able to guide him by the arm, resistance free, into the passenger seat.

“Make sure you put your seat belt on,” I said, and he made a small motion toward where you pulled it, and didn't go any further.

Before I started the engine, I took the duct tape out of the console, taped Errol's wrists together, and it was a bit of a pain but I reached down and got his ankles as well.

“You can relax now for a while,” I said, easing it out of the driveway, onto Fox Ridge Drive, a right turn on Strobridge to the 580 ramp, then picking up the 680 interchange business through Walnut Creek-Concord, and connecting with I-80 at Fairfield.

“So far so good,” I said. “I'm turning into a grumpy old man, but I can't tolerate traffic any more. How about

you?”

Errol was staring straight ahead. He'd come around a bit, his eyes were showing some recognition.

I had to take a leak by the time we hit the Sacramento bypass toward Reno, and I considered stopping somewhere real quick, you could probably work it . . . but I better not fool around.

It wasn't until Colfax that Errol initiated his first bit of conversation.

He said, “If I might ask, where are we going?”

“And the second part of that?” I said. “And what are you doing with me?”

Errol didn't say anything.

“You ever a Boy Scout?” I said.

He shook his head very slightly.

“You're gonna require some winter survival skills. Snow-type ones. What I'll be doing, is letting you off in the mountains. You're going to need to keep your wits about you, and it's up to you, how bad you want it.”

He was looking at me more wide-eyed.

I continued. “You're a polite person. And that's why I'm giving you a chance . . . Jeez, good thing it's not snowing, currently, otherwise we'd need chains right now.”

Which was true, I hadn't thought of that. Meanwhile, dang, there *was* a fair amount of snow this winter, it was up pretty high already on the sides of the road from the snowplow, and you still had 45 minutes and a couple thousand feet elevation before you got to Donner Summit.

I said, "But you let me down. Guy from the newspaper business, old friend, he laid a tip on me, and I put it together . . . Inconceivable as it was . . . I wished I never asked him about the case, honestly."

Errol said, "Please Matt. I can't expect you to understand. Everything it just . . . got away from me that night."

"I understand. Like a perfect storm."

He didn't say anything.

It was good to hear the guy confess, in actual words. I was pretty sure I could go through with it even if I didn't get that out of him just now, but still.

What I meant by *it*--no, I wasn't going to be dropping the guy off in the woods, letting him test his winter survival skills.

The bogus nonsense I was feeding him--he better be ready to dust off his Boy Scout stuff--that was to relax him--hopefully--so he wouldn't be fighting me for his

life on the way into the woods.

At least until you get the baling wire around the throat, then yeah, all bets are off.

We exited Highway 80 onto Soda Springs Road. I was familiar with the area, I'd been coming up here since I was a kid, a little skiing, a little summer stuff. There'd been a rental cabin I'd gone in on once at Northstar, 10 people, though there was a party at the end and it got crashed, and that was a mess.

From the exit, the human activity was on the south side. That's where you had your Sugar Bowl ski resort, and if you stayed that direction you'd wind your way down to Donner Lake.

If you crossed over though, the north side of I-80, there wasn't much, it got remote in a hurry. One time mountain biking over here, perfect conditions, middle of summer, I took a wrong turn off the trail and realized it a couple hundred yards in--and I had a heckuva time finding that trail again, and plenty of crazy thoughts swirled around before I got there.

I drove a couple miles and turned onto a side road. This was going to be tricky, since they'd plowed the main road, but not this one. This is when you wish you'd thought ahead, rented a Subaru, Jesus--or at least

something with front wheel drive.

Though the Honda was handling it okay, and maybe I was mixed up, and I said to Errol, “This thing got front wheel? Do you know?”

“I believe it does,” Errol said, very faintly.

So that was good then, and you couldn't have laid out better timing, the afternoon was getting on, it was a little dark already, which it tended to do real early in the mountains.

No one around, no houses, no cabins, no vehicles in the distance . . . nothing.

So I turned off the engine.

Errol sat there rigid, facing forward.

It occurred to me who am I kidding, this guy sees right through my bullshit, and is expecting the worst.

We'll find out.

Off to the right was a cut-through in a stand of pines, and then it closed in again on you and opened up in back, and you could see just a bit of light filtering into the spot back there, which looked clean and simple and logical. The snow was thick along the way, but you could handle it.

I got out and opened Errol's door, and I had to help him out on account of the wrists and ankles being

locked together with the duct tape . . . and Errol started hopping ahead, as though he knew where I wanted to go.

I thought back to an incident on the job at Speed-King delivery service, where I had been the teenage bike messenger. I was a pretty conscientious worker, and I didn't screw up a delivery very often.

On this one day, I did. I was supposed to pick something up at Number Two Embarcadero Center, and take it to the 38th floor of the Bank of America building, on California and Kearny.

But my brain wasn't working right, and instead I dropped the package on the 38th floor of the Transamerica Building. They didn't seem to be expecting it there, but I didn't think much of it, and they signed for it and that was that.

The shift ended and I was back in the Speed-King offices on Pier 7, checking out for the day, and Errol is on the phone and puts his hand up toward me.

The woman from the Bank of America building company is on the line, and it wasn't *any* company, it was Roche, Winston and Meyer, one of the most respected law firms in the city, and needless to say a huge account for Speed-King. And apparently the

package I screwed up was a legal document that had to be filed that day in court.

Errol asked me about it, I realized my mistake and explained what happened, and for a minute Errol stood there with the receiver held out to the side, and you could hear the woman yelling.

Finally the conversation concluded, and Errol winked at me and told me don't worry about it. I found out later, through the grapevine, the woman insisted the messenger be fired if Speed-King ever wanted any more business from them, and Errol had calmly informed her that that wasn't going to happen.

I looked at the guy ahead in the woods now, and told him to come back.

We drove out to Highway 80 again, I headed east, toward Reno, and five minutes later I took the downtown Truckee exit.

I went south on old Brockway Road, and it felt like we were heading out into different wilderness now, except I veered onto North Shore, and then a little left turn, and the Honda came to a stop in front of the Truckee Police Department.

I cut off the tape on Errol's hands, then his feet.

"Take care of it," I said, and I watched him slowly go

inside.

After a few minutes, it seemed okay to leave. You could head back down toward Sacramento, probably get most of the way out of the mountains before it was completely dark.

Then again you had the town of Truckee, with an old main street, some character to it, a few establishments. A little bit of a bar scene.

I was thinking maybe there's a game on, you get into a conversation with someone. I could use that now.