

DAVID WHITTON

The Lee Marvins

A WINTER STORM WAS ON ITS way—so said the guy on the radio, between commercial-free six-packs of classic rock. It was pushing east across the Great Lakes, bringing with it the promise of squalls, whiteouts, and dangerous roads. Its first intimations, a gentle flurry, had already arrived. Tomorrow the city would wake up to a blanket of snow four feet deep, but tonight there was only a fine, glittering sheet of it.

Gary and I were working, of course. When were we not? It was quarter to twelve on a Friday night, and there we were, standing in a nearly deserted downtown parking lot, in the middle of a hook-up. The rig idled behind us, its wheel lift deployed under the front tires of a late-model Lexus. Gary was hunched over, securing the pans. In about thirty seconds he'd straighten up, say something like "Okay, then," or "All right," and we'd jump back into the rig and disappear—no trace of us but our tire tracks.

"All right," Gary said.

We climbed up into the cab. Gary put her in gear and started slowly for the road while I, as navigator, stared vacantly out the side window. I liked it here. Particles of snow hung in the air like tiny diamonds, swirled in the orange arc of the streetlamp, flitted past a floodlit sign that read, "Monitored lot—Park at own risk." It was peaceful, a little island of serenity. Even the cars seemed to like it here, asleep under the white.

Gary slammed on the brakes, and I jolted into the dashboard.

"You just crushed my cigarettes," I told him.

"Sorry, partner."

He nodded toward the road. A young blonde woman stood in the snowy beams of our headlights, her hands on her hips, glaring at us.

Gary sighed and took the rig out of gear. "Gosh, what do you think she wants?" He gripped the wheel and squinted at her through the windshield. She was small, especially from up here, and jacketless in the middle of winter. "Attractive," Gary said. "A little on the skinny side, but she looks like she smells nice. This should be fun."

We stepped out of the cab.

"What are you *doing*?" the young woman demanded.

"Is this your vehicle, ma'am?" Gary said, nodding at the Lexus.

"Yes, I was driving it. It's my mother's car."

"Are you aware that you were parked on private property?"

"What do you mean"—and here it came, right on schedule, the unequivocal, poker-faced denial that kicked off our new client's journey through the seven stages of loss—"private property?"

Gary pointed at the sign. "Private property."

"No I wasn't."

"You weren't parked here?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"But this," Gary cocked his head toward the car, "would seem like some pretty solid empirical evidence."

"I was just...."

"You were just stopped."

"Uh huh. I was just stopped."

"You'd just stepped out of the car."

"Exactly."

"You were gone all of two seconds, you stopped the car, ran into the adjacent building to find the person who stole your coat, ran back, and here we were, mounting your mother's Lexus."

"Yes, that's right." She looked up at him—deeply, plaintively into his eyes; but what she saw there must have alarmed her and she quickly turned and tried a different angle. She tried bargaining.

"Please, guy. My mother will kill me. I'm not supposed to be out this late, and if I don't get home soon I'm dead."

Snowflakes drifted down and stuck to Gary's eyelashes; he batted them away like fluffy white tears. He had a daughter himself, and a wife and a minivan.

"Sure," he said. "No problem."

"Really? No problem, really?"

"Not at all."

"That's so ... *great*, thank you so—"

"We take cash or credit cards. No cheques."

"Pardon?"

"There's a service charge of a hundred dollars."

"But you said it's no problem!"

"Is that what I said? What I meant was it's no problem once you pay us. I forgot that last bit. Which, you're right, it really swings the meaning of the sentence around."

That's how it was with Gary at the end of a shift: naked aggression. The outfit we worked for, Aaaaa Towing, was notorious for its aggressive, and expensive, towing practices. Area residents loudly decried us on radio phone-in shows and in the opinion pages of the local newspaper—all of which served no purpose, unless the purpose was to egg us on. Gary especially seemed to feed off the negative attention. It sustained him. We worked twelve-hour shifts, six or seven days a week, out of pure spite. We worked till our eyes blurred, till our muscles seized. And why not? During the day we were nothing, we were no one, but at night! At night we were Lee Marvins. At night we were cynical, grim-faced soldiers, roaming the streets, armed with a hydraulic boom and an 8,000-pound planetary winch.

The young woman—I guessed she was about nineteen, twenty—was scrambling to process what was happening to her. You could see it in her eyes: her thoughts were in her eyes, underneath the shiny eye-shadow.

"A hundred *dollars*?" she said. "For what? For letting me go?"

Gary adopted a kindly tone. "It's a service charge. For services we've provided."

"What services?"

"Hook-up fee, time and labour, processing, capital maintenance costs, and a whole bunch of other stuff I'm probably forgetting. I can provide you with an itemized list if you'd like."

"But I don't have a hundred dollars."

"There's a bank machine around the corner."

"Will you take twenty? I can give you twenty. It's all I have. It's food money. Here: twenty. Two tens. Take it. Please."

Gary smiled sadly and shook his head. "I can't do that, ma'am."

I liked this part—the part where people offered us things. Over the years, we'd been asked to accept money, beer, sports equipment, blowjobs, portable stereos, DVD players, mountain bikes, and even a box full of chocolate Easter bunnies. Once, the summer before, a woman in her early forties (the mother of two surly brats, the driver of a sport utility vehicle, the drinker of foamy coffees) begged us to take a baggie full of heroin that she'd pulled from her glovebox. Needless to say, we almost always refused such bribes.

The young woman was looking at me, as if for some sort of arbitration.

"What, you won't take *twenty dollars*?"

"Professional honour precludes us from accepting your offer," Gary said.

She was wearing black platform boots, which added a good three inches to her height. Without them she would have been even tinier. "Can I ask you something?" she said.

"You sure can."

"Do you get off on this?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What is it you get out of this? Do you enjoy intimidating people? Does it give you a thrill? Do you go home at night and whack off while you think about all the power you've exercised?"

"I usually just watch TV," Gary said.

"Ooohhh, sarcasm. No, really: I'd like to know your answer. Seriously. Do you have, like, issues at home? Are we overcompensating for something here? Or is it larger than that? Maybe it's societal. Maybe you're venting your rage at being powerless in a larger sense. Maybe you're angry about being pathetic, marginalized animals whose opinion no one cares about. I don't know. What do you think?"

"Ma'am, I think you wield your introductory courses like a blunt instrument."

"And I think you're nothing but parasites, making your living off the sweat of others, adding no value of your own to the world."

There was something about her. Something in her voice, something in the way she stood, hands on hips ... it reminded me of my wife—my ex-wife—Cheryl. The way Cheryl stood when she was angry. Specifically, the way Cheryl stood the day she left me forever, one week after our seven-year anniversary, for something horrible I'd done. I still vividly and frequently picture it: Cheryl sobbing profanities into wads of Kleenex, her face pink with anger. That was the day I ceased to be a husband, ceased to be a dad (though technically still a father), and stepped into this humiliating new life, of junior one-bedrooms, microwaveable Thai food, hacked satellite TV.

As for this young woman, she had my number. "How is it that you justify yourself?" she said.

"Me?" I said. "Well ... I"

"Are you proud? Are you a proud man? Do you have a wife? Is she proud of what you do?"

"Clearly," Gary said, stepping in, "we are at an impasse. As you can see, there are a lot of vehicles here we've yet to process, so if you could just step aside"

"Step *aside*?" she said. "Do you have any idea who my boyfriend's father is?" She looked at us, from one to the other, waiting for a reply.

"Your boyfriend's father?" Gary said. "Let me guess." He caressed his mustache and frowned at the sky, simulating hard thought. "City councillor? No, too obvious ... chief of police?"

"*Wrong.*"

"Who is he, then?"

"I don't think I'm going to tell you now."

"Please tell us. We need to know what we're dealing with here."

After a moment's hesitation she said, "City councillor."

"Ah."

"And he could make your life a living hell if I ask him to."

"Ma'am, I doubt City Council could do much of anything to make my life any worse than it is."

From where I stood, Gary's world looked downright plush: he had a house, a family, a home theatre. Gary, though, saw nothing but the poisonous smoke of compromise. He saw money, once earmarked for new clothes and week-long trips to Florida, now frittered away on tap-dance lessons and gluten-free food for his

strong-legged, weak-stomached twelve-year-old. He saw a brown minivan squatting in a driveway that once harboured a 1979 black and gold Special Edition Trans Am with a 403 Olds, T-tops, snowflake wheels, and aftermarket Alpine stereo.

The young woman jabbed a finger at us. The threats were pouring out of her now.

"He'll bring it up at council meetings. He'll talk to the paper. They'll crack down on your whole industry for, for, for corrupt towing. They'll take away your permits. You'll lose your jobs. You'll lose your houses. Your wives, if you have any, your wives will leave you. You'll be even bigger losers than you are now."

These threats, they were always the same. Everyone had a well-connected cousin or uncle-in-law who wielded astonishing power and who, if politely asked, would in the name of moral outrage happily set a match to my life. So it wasn't the threats that bothered me; what bothered me was the possibility of things getting physical. I was afraid this little blonde person would step up to the rig and kick in its fender with her platform boots. It had happened to us a few months before—an irate client kicked, and badly dented, our newly painted rig, and when it happened, I swear, it nearly doubled me over. I felt it like a kick in the balls.

The difference here was, everything she threatened us with was going to come true. A crackdown really was just around the corner. The bylaws, the heated public debates, the fuming press coverage—all of them were quickly approaching, and this young woman was just the first to make a point of letting us know.

"Ma'am," Gary said, "while these are startling threats, I think we'll just have to take our chances."

"You don't care what happens to you?"

"I'll take my chances."

"Do you have a child of some sort?"

"Of some sort."

"Don't you care what happens to your child, when its father can't make a living?"

"Its mother's parents are loaded."

"Well, fine. If you really don't care about anything or anyone
...."

"But I do care. I care deeply. I care about my partner here, who would really like to get these vehicles processed so he can go out and have a beer."

"Beer drinkers."

"That's right. So if you don't mind . . ."

"Okay. All right. Let me get this straight in my head. You're saying there's nothing I can do to make you change your minds and let me go?"

"You could give me five twenty-dollar bills."

"I can't do it, guy. I told you, I'm broke."

Gary just shrugged.

The young woman was wearing only jeans and a sparkly red sleeveless top; she hopped up and down and hugged herself against the cold. These college kids, you'd see them lined up in front of nightclubs with no coats on, huddled together like packs of wild dogs while their saliva turned to ice on the sidewalk. I wanted to ask her about that, but I was afraid of her now. I was afraid she'd say something mean to me.

"At least let me get my coat from the back seat," she said. "I'm getting hypothermia."

Gary looked at me. "What do you think?"

"Why not?" I said. The anger in her voice was flagging, which meant, I figured, that Gary had managed to break her, that slowly but inevitably she was slipping into an acceptance of her fate.

"All right," Gary said, after long consideration. "Go ahead."

"Like I need your permission."

She pulled a remote from her purse and beeped the door locks. We watched as she walked to the back door of the Lexus, opened it and poked around. Then we watched her climb in, close the door behind her and relock the doors. Through the side window we saw her pull out a carrot-coloured cell phone. She looked at us, flashed a wide, malevolent smile, and gave us the finger. She smiled like Cheryl, my wife. My ex-wife.

"Uh, ma'am?" Gary said. "Please remove yourself from the vehicle."

"Fuck you." Her voice was muffled by the glass.

"Ma'am, you don't understand. We're not permitted to tow an occupied vehicle."

"No, *you* don't understand. I'm not leaving the car. You're not towing me."

She was dialing the phone now. There was a pause, then I heard her say things in a voice that was hoarse with aggravation. After a couple minutes she hung up, and resumed dialing.

"My boyfriend's father says to call the police," she said.

A few months before, I'd come to realize that people don't like me. It was just one of a series of revelations that, since my wife left, had been popping in my head like firecrackers. It was around this time, I recall, that I was crying often and without provocation: in the middle of football games, or during sitcoms, or, once, in the middle of a denture-cream commercial that had struck me as especially poignant. Bit by bit the world was being rendered transparent to me, its skin peeled off so that I could see things as they really and truly were. And what things really and truly were was: hysterically, side-splittingly awful.

"Okay, you're fucked now," the young woman said to us, the cell phone pressed to her ear. She craned her neck to get a look at the rig's license plate, then gave up and scanned our coveralls. "Do you have badge numbers or something?" she said.

"No, ma'am," Gary said.

"Then I'll have to take down your names." She rummaged around for a notebook and a pen.

Gary lit up a smoke and rolled his eyes at me.

"Okay...you," she said to Gary. "What's your name?"

"Ernest Matthews," Gary said.

"All right. Well, you're fucked now, Ernest Matthews." She wrote down the name, and looked up again. "And what about you, what's your name?" she said, meaning me.

"Lee Marvin," I said.

"Oh come on."

"What?"

"I'm not stupid. He's a musician. A guitar player."

"I'm serious. That's my name. Do you want to see some ID?"

She regarded me blackly for a second, then said, "No, don't bother." She wrote it down, this messenger of misery, and smiled her vicious smile. "Well, Lee Marvin, guess what?" she said. "Now you're fucked."