

SUSAN FERRARO

Old Guys

WE WERE AT MAE'S CUPPA, me and the other Coots, having coffee, reading the paper, watching the college kids drift in sleepy-eyed and rumpled around ten, ten-thirty. They're not so different; God knows we all like to shoot the breeze. But when they slip into that zone they talk about, hunker down over their laptops? A bomb could go off and they wouldn't notice. You don't want to think about what'd happen in those virtual realities if there were an emergency, if they had to do something that wasn't plugged in.

"You think," I said, asking for what I knew wasn't the first time, "You think these kids ..."

"Don't start," Tom said.

The bell over the entrance jingled and a big guy stepped through the door in a whoosh of cold blue morning. He looked around, went to the counter, ordered a double mocha latte, pointed at a bran muffin in the case, added a *Financial Times*, and came straight at us like he knew us.

"Mind if I join you," he said, not a question, but like he didn't think we'd mind, or even had a choice, like we'd been waiting for him.

Tom grunted, could've been a yes, hell, probably was a yes.

"Wesley Knox," the guy said. "Family name, Scotch, but most folks call me Op, as in Opportunity Knocks." We looked up, then, all four of us. And I'll say this for Op Knox—he didn't sound like shit at the time, not at all. Sounded pleasant.

"You?" He smiled at Tom, then looked at me, stuck his hand out.

"Skip," I said. "Skip Riley." I noticed the Rolex—hey, once a newsman, always a newsman—and the long-sleeved shirt, starched, open at the throat and casual but putting us on notice, too, that whatever he had to say was going to be important. His hand was out, waiting.

God forgive me, I shook it.

He was in construction, Op said, not bricks and mortar, but “the man with the plan,” a guy who made deals come together. He’d built a hotel in Duluth, a bridge in India—“amazing place, small people, a lot of them brown as black if you catch my drift, but high-class accents, the ones who speak English, respectful, take orders, good soldiers, strictly *semper fi*”—and a luxury resort in Mali.

“That’s in Africa,” he said.

“You in the corps?” Tom said.

“I was until my blood pressure spiked in boot camp, a helluva thing, very unusual. I was just a kid, gung ho, had to leave, worst thing that ever happened to me, at least until then. Maybe ever. But once a marine, always a marine, in my heart anyways.”

“So I’ve heard,” Tom said, and the rest of us shifted in our seats, considering. Tom joined the marines right out of high school, did three tours in Vietnam.

“Yeah, well, you had to be there,” Op said. “But that was then. Nowadays, I hate to admit it, I’m supposed to be retired.” His hand floated over the table and business cards dropped in front of us. They were tan colored, with a drawing of a fist about to strike a door. Underneath was “OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS” and his name and number.

“It’s hard not to see deals just begging to be made,” he said. “Even with this Democrat Depression that’s going on, and that new boy in the White House dishing out the same-old, same-old, there’s money to be made on every corner if you know where to look. Like this subsidiary I’ve got, ConnectDot Ltd.? Sole purpose is to match Chinese producers to American markets, though I won’t lie to you, that one’s pretty much in the toilet. Those poor suckers can’t afford to produce if we can’t afford to buy.”

Nobody said anything.

“I take it you’re all fans of the Great Black Hope?” He tilted his head to the side, looked around the table.

“He got my vote, and he’s the president,” Murray says. “Not to mention that schmuck before him left a shit storm.”

I was surprised: Murray’s a retired jeweler, a businessman. This is Palo Alto, plenty liberal, but there’s plenty of old money around, and Republicans to go with it—here and next door in Atherton, where citizens inclined to buy diamonds and rubies have always lived. Murray sat on the hospital board, was donating a wing in memory of his wife. He never talked politics. Never.

“No offense meant, none taken I hope,” Op said. His cheeks pinked up a little, and his eyes glinted bright blue in the light. “Amazing young man, absolutely. I couldn’t agree more. And we’re all Americans, in this together,

right? Right.” He had a good smile, Op did, and he lit it up big-time like he’d just won the Nobel Peace Prize.

“Glad we got that settled,” Tom said, the first time in fifty years I’d heard my best friend give sarcasm a go. I laughed out loud: couldn’t help myself. Murray stared at Op, then at Tom. Across the table, Henry, the youngest of the Coots, looked up from his crossword puzzle and smiled.

“What’s a four-letter word for counterfeit?” he said.



That should have been the end of it: Op wasn’t entirely stupid, he could’ve gone somewhere else, bothered other people. Maybe he did. But he kept coming back to Mae’s. He offered us “the inside track” on a company selling reverse mortgages to older folks—like us—who owned houses but might be short of cash. “We can start,” he said, “by being our very own first customers.” We gave the opportunity a pass. The next time it was an invite to get “in on the ground floor” buying shares in Missouri Cement, “a company based in Bahrain and dedicated to supplying raw materials to rebuild that bridge that collapsed.” We said no. By July, he was peddling something so stupid I can’t even remember what it was. “What—you think we’re idiots?” Murray said. Even he was a little exasperated.

“Of course not,” Op said. Give the man credit, he had the hide of a rhinoceros.

“Jesus,” Tom said.

Op laughed—and went right on laying out one crappy chance of a lifetime after another. And we got used to him. In a funny way, Op filled a void. He was something to talk about when he wasn’t there. As my Katie would’ve said, he was dumb but he was alive.

And we were just a bunch of old guys, killing time and missing our women.

We called ourselves the Old Coots, then just the Coots, because we figured Old Farts might not go down too well at Mae’s, especially after her daughter, Maybelle, took over. She put plug-ins in the floor for computers, ripped out the booths to make room for little tables and plain wooden chairs—hard on a old man’s ass, I can tell you, even if the kids loved it. She got a new menu too, but along with the lattes and mochas and happy frapes, she kept a pot of the same stuff Mae’d always had, black and bitter.

I usually got there a couple of minutes after six, right after she opened—come most mornings, lying awake, I had to get out of the house. Get anywhere that wasn’t where Katie still seemed to be. Ought to have

been. I'd have a prune Danish, pick up a *Times*. If I saw a Coot, I'd sit there. If I was first, I staked out a table to wait.

Most times, Tom was there already.

It was weird, the four of us all being widowers or, in Henry's case, without Mrs. Morrisey. She was his mother. A widow herself, for a long time. Lots of old ladies were back then. It was the men who died. But now, I don't know, there seem to be a lot of us old guys, ships without a rudder, listing and longing. Murray's Lucy, dead at sixty-one, second marriage but the real deal, thirty-two years. Tom's Anne killed in a head-on, right on Alma Avenue: some lunatic hopped up on speed, and the only good thing was the crash killed him, too. My Katie, who never smoked a day in her life, gets lung cancer—and there's nothing I can do except hold her hand and wish it was me.

"Look at this," Tom said one morning. We were on our third cup of coffee and he was peering at the style section in that piss-soaked San Jose rag that bought and shut down the paper where I used to work. "Story here, with a picture, 'How to date while pregnant.' And the one next to it, 'How to flirt like a pro.' Pro what?" He waved the paper in my face, I swear, just to make my blood boil.

"And they're off!" Murray said, and got up to go to the can.

I ranted—"death knell of journalism," "end of democracy as we know it," the usual crap—and Tommy pretended to listen. We met over a bloody nose (mine) in the sixth grade when he busted up a bunch of cheesy little thugs who were smacking me around at recess. After Vietnam, he joined the police and we crisscrossed, him keeping the peace, me reporting the unpeaceful. I never got the column I wanted, and he didn't finish his night school law degree. But he was acting chief for a while and retired a captain. His hair was grey and thin, and he had that big policeman's belly, but looking at him I could still see the good kid with the big fists. It's a comfort to be around someone who knows what you mean by the look on your face. And you him.

"So what do you gents do for fun?" Op said, pulling out a chair one day. "Besides peruse the classics, I mean?" He nodded at Henry, who was reading *Macbeth*.

"Henry's our scholar," Murray said, taking the bait. "Literature. Won a teaching award. I wanted to teach, when I was young and knew it all, but my father had the store. And I liked working with beauty, helping people choose wedding rings, gifts."

"Good money in it too, I'm guessing," Op said.

"Not bad," Murray said. He picked up the business section.

The guy was a jerk, but I like to have my coffee in a demilitarized zone.

“I went to one of Henry’s lectures,” I said. “At the high school. It was great, made me want to read the *Odyssey* myself.”

“It’s the kids who make it work,” Henry said. He was the palest person I’d ever known, with white hair close-cropped like a monk, skin that didn’t tan, and neat hands. He was a thin person in general, tall, mild-mannered, but with sharp grey eyes.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It seemed clear, the questions they asked, those stories are wasted on the young. Odysseus weathered and beaten, going home after twenty years? Those kids aren’t even twenty years old. I tried reading it myself, but it wasn’t the same without Henry pointing out things. Like how Penelope is the only one who recognizes Odysseus, who sees her lover in his old man disguise. They have that married telepathy. She helps him figure out how to kill those bastards stealing his kingdom even though they’re surrounded by spies. Katie was like that—hell, Lucy and Anne and Henry’s mother too. Smart.”

“Remember how Mrs. Morrisey used to chase after us when we got in her rose garden?” Tom said. He got that far-away look he’d had sometimes.

“Had a little switch,” I said. “Lashed at our heels, never touched us, she never would, a wonderful woman. But it made a thin high zip in the air I can still hear.”

Henry stood up. “Staff meeting,” he said, and he was gone. I could’ve kicked myself—the only time I saw him lose it was at his mother’s funeral. Made it all the way through and then let out a howl, a real howl.

“What a pansy,” Op said. The corner of his mouth bent in a thin twist.

“It’s not that,” Murray said. “Or if it is, nobody cares. He was a good son, a good friend to her.” Beside Murray, Tom’s eyes went all cop. He looked hard at Op.

“Medic with my unit in ’Nam was gay,” Tom said. “Bravest man I ever knew.”

“Didn’t ask, don’t tell me,” Op said, waving his hands like he was swatting a fly. “But what about the rest of you? What do you do, if you don’t do women?”

Tell people like you to fuck off, I thought, and I picked up my paper and got ready to remember an appointment. Truth was, we did a lot of things. Henry taught. Tommy did security two nights a week, said if he couldn’t sleep half the time anyway, he might as well get paid for it. Murray liked to go to the shopping centre, check out his old store—it’s a Chinese

jade bazaar now, beautiful stuff, too expensive—and ogle women. What the hell, he'd say, the only part he was sure still worked was his eyes—if he didn't forget his glasses. Me, I went to city council meetings and plotted The Great American Novel about small town shenanigans. And I looked at women too. We all did. Fine, pretty things—smart, don't get me wrong. Colourful.

“We kill time,” Tom said. “And we mind our own business.”

“Or not,” Murray said. His trouble, which didn't seem to trouble him at all, was he liked to talk, even more than me. And he liked people to like him, so they'd listen.

“Last year, I went down to the San Jose paper—the local one's been kaput for years, Skip could tell you more than you want to know about that—and applied for a guest editor slot. It's a community program. There were twelve of us for eight slots, and one of the questions was, Why do you want to be a Visiting Editor. I said, ‘*Welllllll*,’ and I stretched it out like that because for once, thank you Jesus, there was no wiseass old reporter at my elbow interrupting, ‘*Welllllll*, I don't have anything else to do.’ They took me, took pity on me more like, Skip said, and I sat on that editorial board for six months.”

“Learn anything?” I knew the answer, but I hated that goddamned paper.

“No, except they're going *pfffttt* like all the other papers. Point is, the editors passed over a nice little woman next to me. She was wearing a short black skirt and a hot pink blouse and looked out of big, honest-to-god amethyst-lavender eyes, probably contacts, but who cares? They did the job, believe me. She'd just moved to town and wanted to meet people. And I'd've liked to get to know her better.”

Op sighed. “You guys really need to get out more,” he said.



But he couldn't resist us, or maybe the goldmines he thought we were hiding somewhere. He even went to the dedication of the Lucille L. Stern Breast Cancer Facility at the start of August. The place was already open, but Murray had wanted to wait for the official ceremony. “High summer, that was Lucy through and through,” he said. It was a big event, filled the hospital auditorium. The bigwigs took turns speaking—how wonderful Murray and Lucille were, how dedicated—absolutely true but, yada yada yada. And then it was Murray's turn.

I thought he'd do what people always do: thank those who cared for Lucy, thank the administrators who helped make the facility a reality. But

he shot right past all that, like he didn't have time, like he had a different map in his head. He grabbed the sides of the podium and leaned close to the microphone.

"I wish we'd been luckier, because God knows it comes down to luck sometimes," he said. "I wish Lucy were here now. I didn't expect her to die. First, or ever. It gives you a helpless feeling. It swallows you. Lucy was the light of my life. My sun." His voice wavered, and he waited for it to come back to him. "The ones that leave us," he said finally. "We can't replace them. I understand that. But doing something for others the way they would have, it makes it seem like they're just away. That they'll be back. So Happy Birthday, honey. Today is Lucy's sixty-fifth birthday."

He looked like he might say more, but he just stood there. Then everybody was on their feet, clapping, and a lot of people were crying and laughing at the same time, which I guess is how it's supposed to be.

The next day, at Mae's, we started planning the campout—it was two weeks away, but we needed to change the subject. Not that it took much planning, a bunch of old farts setting up under the trees in the Santa Cruz Mountains. We'd been doing it since we were kids, and it was one thing that hadn't changed. Tom brought beer. Murray and I filled a cooler with food. Henry packed fruit or other healthy stuff—he was the only one who ate it—and brought something to read aloud under the stars of the deep, dark sky.

When Op showed up, we'd quickly change the subject, no matter who was talking.

"He'll want to come," Henry said. "Talk us to death, try to sell us cemetery plots in space."

"Or Chinese sleeping bags made with that dog food poison stuff," Murray said. "Right, Tom?"

Tom wrapped a thick hand around his coffee and took a sip. "Guy's a shit."

Somebody should have told Maybelle, because a few days later, while Op was going on about a Ponzi scheme his friend's brother-in-law said would return 300 per cent in the first two years, she came over with a tray of prune Danish that had just arrived. She offered me one, and Op too, because you better believe he'd made friends with her.

"So," she said. "You boys all set for the campout this weekend?"

"Camping?" Op said. "Where? I love camping."

"It's just something we do," Tom said. "The four of us."

"But I can come, right? I mean, I'm one of the coffee guys. Aren't I?"

For the first time the man seemed genuine. Even pathetic. I was glad he wasn't asking me because I hate to see a man so needy. But he wasn't asking me.

"Not a good idea, Op," Tom said. "This is just us."

"Oh," Op said, and the real guy, if he was there at all, disappeared back inside the easy breezy, eye on the main chance self. He sucked in his lower lip. "Wish I could come, but I have to meet a man."

"With a plan?" Henry said.

"No need to stick the knife in, professor. I'm not stupid."

I should have felt bad, maybe said something then or later. But time passes fast when you've got something to do, and the pines smelled as sweet as always when we got to the campsite. Henry was in charge of the campfire—there's a scooped out area, logs in a circle to lean against, but campers build their own fire. The rest of us blew up the air mattresses (we'd decided years before they were okay because we'd used them when we were kids). We also had ponchos in case it rained, extra socks, matches, flashlights, a snakebite kit. We left the phones in the cars: no reception. And that was the point: it was like going back in time.

I was in the bushes, pissing on a tree, when I heard a car crunch up the road.

It was Op Knox in a grey SUV. "Did I miss the cook out?" he yelled.

He had a bottle in his hand and stepped out of the car with the elaborate care of an inebriated giraffe. He pulled some blankets out of the back seat.

"So boys, not glad to see me, I can tell. But my meeting was cancelled and a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. I brought scotch, help yourselves."

It occurred to me then that maybe he didn't know anybody but us. That we'd never asked about him. Not that I cared. What I felt was—let down. Furious.

Murray didn't look happy either, but he took the bottle, poured some in his cup, and handed it to me. I followed suit—I guess I didn't want Murray to be the only one. Henry turned back to the fire. Tom ambled over to check something in his car and locked it up. We ate—there was plenty, though Op was pretty much drinking his dinner—and sat around the campfire. The night was cool but not cold, clear as ice wine. Up through the canyon of tall pines, the sky was that deep dark blue, not black, and the stars—the stars were everywhere. I speared marshmallows on a stick and Op pulled out a pocketknife to sharpen a stick for himself. Henry took out a paperback and turned on his flashlight.

“The school wants to add more nature writing to the curriculum,” he said. “One of the titles they’re thinking about is *John of the Mountains*, by John Muir – lovely images, breathtaking. But for kids today, with all the stuff that fills their air, I don’t know.” He opened up the book at random, or at least it looked that way.

“Like this,” he said, and his voice fell into the deep, quiet rhythm of a man who hears the words. “‘How hard’ Muir writes, ‘to realize that every camp of men or beast has this glorious starry firmament for a roof! In such places standing alone on the mountaintop it is easy to realize that whatever special nests we make—leaves and moss like the marmots and birds, or tents or piled stone—we all dwell in a house of one room—the world with the firmament for its roof—and are sailing the celestial spaces without leaving any track.’”

“I like it,” Tom said.

“It’s beautiful,” Murray said. “They’d have to be dead not to get it.”

I was about to agree—what’s not to like, and it’s even about California—when Op’s big, splintery laugh crackled through the night like static.

“Jesus Christ, what a fruit you are, Henry. Marmots? You ever had any real tail? Or was it just that mom of yours, the one that chased all you little girls with the switch?”

“Shut up,” Tom said.

Op was too drunk to hear, or maybe he didn’t care.

“Sad sacks, worshipping dead women—Maybelle told me, not that you don’t talk about it all the time anyway. Very sad she was, good ass she has, too. You ought to get yourselves some of that live bait, if you could handle it. Skip, here, and his wife. Murray mooning around for, what was her name, Lucille? You think you’re the only ones? Happened to me, my second wife. Thin as a rail, breasts hacked off, looked like hell. Tubes stuck all over her, dying but not dying, nothing anybody could do. Jesus.”

He tipped the bottle to his mouth but it was empty and he tossed it into the woods. “Do it your way, no skin off my nose. But you’ll never catch me that stupid. She was dying, there was nothing left but insurance. It was a classic call for action.” He burped. “Covered her face with a pillow. Hell, she was unconscious anyway.”

“You killed her?” Murray’s voice was thin, high.

“I committed a mercy, ass-kisser. Something you and your airy fairy little friend over there, other side of the campfire, wouldn’t have the balls to do.” He nodded at Henry. “Not that he matters. It’s holier-than-thou

guys like Tom who're the worst—you look down on me, big fella, but you couldn't keep you own wife safe on your own turf.”

Tom's fist hit Op in the face, and Murray and I were right behind him, pounding and kicking. Op roared and bucked, flipped Murray like a bug, threw dirt, somehow got on top of Tom. His pocketknife was in his hand. He raised it, aimed at Tom's belly. A grey shape swung down, fast, and there was an ugly, hard smack. Op rose straight up, lurched, and fell. A rock the size of a softball stuck out of his head. He twitched, once, all over, and lay still.

Henry sank to his knees. Tom crawled over, put two fingers to Op's throat.

“He's dead,” he said.

Henry turned away and threw up and we all sat there for a while, breathing.

“I'll go to the police,” Henry said. “I hit him with the rock. I killed him.”

“I am the police,” Tom said. He patted Henry on the back. “He had a knife. You saved my life. You all did.” He sat back on his haunches, rested his hands on his thighs.

“But.” We looked at him. “But it was four against one and we beat him to death.”



We got away with it.

Tom took charge of what was left of Op Knox—we didn't ask and he didn't say, just got a tarp from the back of his truck, dropped Op and his blankets into the back of the man's SVU, and drove off. In the morning, the three of us cleaned up like always. Henry found the whiskey bottle Op had tossed and put it in his car; I'd guess, if I had to guess, that he ran it through his dishwasher six or eight times and then beat it to smithereens with a hammer. I drove Tommy's jeep back to his house and left it there, keys under the front seat. The murder weapon? Tom took it—for all I know it's still buried in Op's head.

Monday, we showed up at Mae's as usual, told her we'd had a good time and showed off our mosquito bites. She asked if we'd seen Op Knox. She said he'd pestered her until she told him where she thought we'd be. We said, Nah, didn't see him.

At the table, I looked Tom over. He looked fine. Murray, too. Henry not so much.

“No regrets,” I said. “In fact, I'm glad.”

“Good for you,” Tom said. “Now shut up.”

So I did. We all did. But I admit, to myself and Katie when she seems to be there in the shadows just before dawn: it never stopped feeling good, beating the shit out of that bastard. Righteous, the kids would say. We did something. Made a difference. And it’s funny how things turn out, even when you know nothing can change what’s gone before.

Henry retired in June. He could’ve stayed part-time, but he said he needed to do something different while he was still able. He sold his house—people were surprised, he’d lived there all his life—and went to Sicily. Sent us a postcard, “Coots, c/o Mae’s,” with a picture of a temple overlooking the sea. Turns out the best Greek ruins are in Sicily, all over the place. The card said he had a little house, gave English lessons. Didn’t invite us to visit.

Not that we would’ve.

Murray went for his annual visit to his daughter in Vegas, came waltzing back brighter, spiffed up—shoes shined, comb-over perfect. He got coffee and a paper, but he didn’t turn to the business section, just sat tapping the front page with his thumb.

“So Murray,” I said. “Whadayaknow, whadayasay? Saw your car in the driveway last week, but you don’t come to Mae’s until now? You don’t like coffee anymore?”

“Of course I like coffee,” he said. “I got married.”

“No shit.” Across the table, Tom looked up from the sports page.

“Met a woman in Vegas when I was there last year, at the grocery. No spring chicken, but good looking, nice. Estelle. That means ‘Star.’ She smiled at me, and we got to talking. She likes those Sunday brunch buffets. So this time, I asked her out, to a buffet, and one thing led to another.”

“Congratulations,” I said. I felt happy for him. Jealous. Doubtful. He’d known this Estelle what, two weeks?

“Life is short,” he said as if he were reading my mind. And he did a strange thing. He reached over and patted my hand. “It’s okay,” he said.

He picked up his coffee, set it down.

“Tom,” he said. “What do you think?”

Tom looked at him.

“What does it matter what I think?”

“It just does.”

Tom shut his eyes, got so still it was like he was asleep sitting up. Or counting to ten. He opened his eyes.

“Make her happy, Murray,” he said. “Just make her happy.”

So now it’s just the two of us, older and uglier. Meaner too, probably. Real killers. We talk about the news and watch women—can’t help ourselves,

even if we're supposed to be past it. Truth is, you're never past it, never in your heart.

I have to say, a man without a woman is a sorry-ass son of a bitch.