

## Grant Buday / TWO STORIES

### TOADS

Svoboda already had five TVs from tenants who couldn't pay their rent in cash. He didn't want another one, especially from Boyle Rupp. He wanted Boyle out and this was his chance. It also meant he could jack the rent as much as he wanted on the next person, especially as the vacancy rate in Vancouver was zero. So when the opportunity came, Svoboda turfed Boyle just like that. Nineteen years Boyle had been there, nineteen years.

Svoboda was a reformed alcoholic whose teeth looked like rusty nails. Instead of a case of beer each evening he drank a case of Coke. He was there when Horst Nunn came over to help Boyle move. Svoboda was in working greens. He was one of those guys who lived in working greens. Boyle said he'd seen him in Bino's on Saturday night with his wife eating Baron of Beef wearing those same clothes. He even went to church in them.

While Boyle and Horst packed stuff out, Svoboda inspected the suite hunting for excuses not to return the damage deposit. When Boyle had moved in the rent had been a hundred a month and the damage deposit half that. Still, Svoboda meant to keep it. He managed to write up a list — using one of those flat carpenter's pencils — that included *skuf florz, holz in wal, brokn ice tray in frezer*. He estimated the costs at fifty on the nose.

When Boyle complained Svoboda said he was lucky he didn't make him pay more. "Look at that oven!"

"I haven't used the oven in six years!"

"You're the worst tenant I ever had! Noise all the time!"

"Noise! I'm never here! How could I make noise?"

"What about those whores?"

"Whores! With the rent you charge? Who could afford it!"

Argument was futile. When the place was cleaned out, Boyle didn't even stop for a last look. He and Horst just got into the car.

"Goddamn Bohunk. I never made a sound. Nineteen years."

"So this is it?" Horst was looking into the back seat piled with boxes.

"That's it." Boyle pulled out. "You're saving my life."

Horst said nothing.

At first, Boyle had planned to move into his car. But, as he'd said to Horst, "Where can I park without the cops getting on my ass?" Boyle had asked the question out loud, knowing damn well there was room in the alley behind Horst's place to park. The problem was Boyle drove for Pink Lady Messenger Service, so he couldn't have his own car full of boxes. Boyle also knew that Horst's Pacer was parked out back and had been off the road for a year. So it was let him sleep in Horst's car or have Boyle camped out on the living room floor, and no way, Horst wasn't having that. Never. This way Boyle could use his Beetle for work and have the Pacer as a temporary home. "Temporary." Horst had emphasized that.

So Boyle moved into Horst's Pacer. He poured gas in the tank so he could run the heater and pinned up towels for curtains. That first night Boyle used Horst's phone to order up a pizza. Yet Boyle couldn't convince the guy that the address really was a red Pacer in an alley. Horst, listening, finally said, "Fuck. Just deliver it here."

When the pizza arrived, Boyle insisted on taking the delivery kid out back to show him the car so that next time he'd know he was on the level. Yet the kid still thought they were shitting him.

"It's a new trend in urban living," said Boyle.

The kid was wearing a Corvette Stingray t-shirt. "Okay, but a Pacer?"

When the kid was gone, Boyle invited Horst to sit in the car and eat pizza. They played the radio and drank beer.

"So you're finding a place soon, right?"

"Jesus Horst. I'm fifty. You think I like this?" Boyle insisted Horst take the last piece. Horst knew it was bribery, but after a month of Kraft Dinner, he went for it. "I never brought a whore there once," said Boyle.

They arranged that Boyle use Horst's bathroom in the morning before work, then again at night before bed. Beyond that, they were living in separate houses.

That night Horst's landlord, Leo Buljan, discovered Boyle out back. Leo was huge, so Boyle, terrified, refused to get out of the car. He rolled the window down an inch and they argued. Then Leo lost his temper and grabbed the window, and Boyle cranked it up tight, pinching Leo's fingers. Horst came running when Leo started howling. It took a lot of talking before Horst had him calmed down to where he wasn't going to get a hammer, break the window, and drag Boyle out.

"Okay," said Leo. "He can stay. But I want rent. Hundred a month." He hulked off to ice his fingers.

Horst was secretly pleased. It was great. Boyle got the message, loud and clear, that he better get his ass someplace else. It also meant Horst didn't take the rap for being too cheap to let him stay.

"That guy's gonna kill me!"

"You oughta see his gun collection," said Horst. "Goes to the Barnet Rifle Range twice a week. Drinks vodka."

"A hundred a month," said Boyle.

"Yeah." Horst tried sounding sympathetic.

"That's pretty good. Goddamn Svoboda was bleeding me for four hundred. What's this guy's name?" Boyle had his cheque book out.

The next night Horst heard singing. He peeked through the blinds and saw Boyle and Leo in the Pacer, drunk, singing Serbian songs.

In the morning, Boyle knocked on Horst's door carrying two cups of coffee.

"Leo hooked up an extension cord for me so I can use my perk. He's a good guy!"

"How're his fingers?"

"Not even bruised!"

Horst sat at the kitchen table while Boyle used the toilet. Horst hated anyone using his toilet. It disgusted him. He shut his eyes trying not to think about it.



"Jesus," said Boyle when he came out, "been holding that dump all night. So. See you at the track?"

"You just got evicted for not being able to pay your rent and you got money to bet?"

Boyle peeled off a couple of twenties. "Leo's gonna lay down a piece of plywood and some foam rubber to level out the back seat. This should cover it. Hey." Boyle looked at Horst's plants. His suite was a jungle. "I'll give you ten for a couple of these buggers."

When Boyle pulled in about midnight both doors of his Beetle opened and shut and Horst heard a woman's laughter. He made it to the window in time to see a hooker getting into the back seat of his Pacer. Boyle had his hands all over her ass as he crawled in behind. Horst went from the bedroom window to the living room window for a better view. He shifted some of the plants and watched. For a minute the light was on and he could see the silhouettes of two bodies moving about behind the towels. Then the light went out. Pretty soon the Pacer was rocking side to side.

In the morning Boyle appeared at the door with two coffees.

"Where were you? I got the triactor! Bunce got it too. Paid three-fifty!"

Horst smelled Boyle from across the table. "You stink."

Boyle grinned.

"My car probably smells like dead fish."

"Jesus Horst. It's been so long I forgot what it looks like."

"Where'd you find her?"

"Mr Submarine on Hastings."

"I'd prefer you didn't fuck whores in my car."

"OK, OK." Boyle strolled whistling to the bathroom.

A minute later Horst heard the water running in the tub. He shouted and ran to the door. It was locked.

"I need a bath!"

"This isn't part of the deal! Go walk through a car wash!"

"Can't hear you!"

When Boyle came out he said he'd buy Horst another toothbrush, and by the way he was out of dental floss.

"You used my toothbrush?"

"I had something stuck. Hey. Me'n Leo're going to the casino tonight."

"Leo doesn't gamble."

"I'm gonna show him the ropes."

When Boyle left for work Horst took a deep breath then pushed open the bathroom door. The window was steamed and the tub had a brown ring and was full of hair — Boyle Rupp's hair. Horst felt ill. Two wet towels lay on the floor and the toilet hadn't been flushed. Horst stared at his toothbrush. Picking it up with a piece of toilet paper he threw it away. He spent the morning scrubbing and disinfecting. He had an aversion as deep as his horror of snakes to people using his toilet.

The next morning when Boyle knocked with two coffees, Horst opened the door but kept the chain on. He stated the New Order.

"But we had a deal!"

"The deal didn't include you shitting up my bathroom or using my toothbrush."

"So what'm I gonna do?"

"There's a hose around the side of the house. Wash with that. As for your other needs," Horst pointed out the garden of the Chinese lady across the alley. "She'll appreciate the fertilizer."

Every morning for the next week Horst watched Boyle head around to Leo's with two coffees. It was late April and the weather was warming up. In fact, it hadn't rained in five days, which had to be some kind of record for Vancouver. Horst knew Boyle had no intention of finding a proper place. The fucker liked it here. It gave him three hundred more to piss away at the track and the casino. Horst decided he was demanding rent too. It was his car, after all. It was only fair. A hundred to Leo and a hundred to Horst. ... Yet he wondered. If he took money from Boyle, then Boyle suddenly had rights. He'd be a tenant. Hell. He almost was already. No. The only way to really get rid of him was to pay up the car insurance and get it back on the road. And that meant getting a job. What a choice: a job or Boyle. Horst usually worked as a gardener. And it *was* spring, after all.

Saturday was not only sunny, but hot. Suddenly everyone was

outside, waving hello to neighbours they usually hated. Boyle had the windows down and the seat cranked back, reading the Racing Form. Horst wanted to go out on the back porch and drink his coffee — but he didn't want to see Boyle. He especially didn't want to see Boyle smug and relaxed like he had the world where he wanted it. After an hour of pacing and picking dead leaves off his plants, Horst stumped down the steps to the car. Boyle saw him coming.

"Ever think of getting a sun roof?"

"Ever think of getting a proper place to live?"

Boyle picked up the classifieds on the seat beside him. "City's tighter than a frog's ass. You can get sun roofs for a couple hundred."

"If I had a couple hundred I'd renew my car insurance instead of riding the bus."

"Couple hundred? You live under a rug? Insurance'll cost you a grand." Boyle paged through the paper. "Here. Found you a job."

Horst was both offended and intrigued. "Who're you, my mother?"

Boyle slapped the paper and showed Horst a job he'd circled. "Telemarketing. Work from your home. No traffic, no boss, no hassles."

"No money either."

"You gotta be a self-starter. I'm telling you Horst, I'm out there all day, it's hell. Driving's the shits. Gives you ulcers. If I could work from home I'd be happier'n a clam. Here's the number." Boyle passed Horst a losing ticket from the track with a phone number on it.

"What else did you find?"

Boyle plucked the paper from Horst's hand and tossed it into the back seat. "Fuck all." He picked up the Racing Form.

"Gimme the paper."

"The newspaper."

"Told you. Nothing there."

"Just let me look."

"I'm doing the crossword."

"I'll give it back." Horst spoke with exaggerated calm. Boyle was hiding something. Horst smelled it. He took the paper and went inside. It took a while but he found it: *Long Weekend Every week! Wanted: Experienced gardener for indoor plant maintenance throughout city. Four days per week. Good wage, great benefits. Reliable car a must.*



Horst looked around at his plants. Boyle knew that of the hundred some jobs Horst had held, a dozen had been in gardening and nurseries. "The motherfucker. So that's his game. I let him live in my car and use my bathroom and this is what the guy pulls!" Horst swung open the door intending to throw him out. Boyle however, was gone. He'd headed for the track.

Horst wrote out a resume and cover letter. He'd kill two birds with one stone: turf Boyle, get a job, plus have his car back on the road again — three birds and one weasel.

Horst felt sure he had the job in the bag. So he went ahead and told Boyle that was it, he needed the car. Boyle surprised him with his calm.

"No problem. Leo said I could store my stuff in the basement here."

Horst was actually disappointed there wasn't more drama. Not a word about the job, nor any mention of how Boyle had tried hiding it so Horst wouldn't get it and pull the car out from under him.

A week later two things happened. The first was that Horst got turned down for the job. He kept his secret. The second was that Boyle rear-ended a bus. A wrecker left the smashed-in remains of his Beetle beside the Pacer. Boyle was in tears.

"Horst! Lemme buy your car. Lemme rent it! I'll give you two hundred a month, three hundred! I'll live in the Beetle and use yours for work. How about it?"

Horst spoke quietly, his voice soaked in sympathy. "But Boyle," Horst lied, "I'm working now. I need my car."

Boyle's eyes went dead as a clubbed cod's. He slumped to the steps and was having trouble breathing. He searched the ground. "Horst, what about that job I showed you? Telephone sales. Maybe I could do that — from your place! You'll be out all day!" The hopefulness in Boyle's voice was embarrassing.

Horst didn't know what to do. But whatever it was, he wasn't telling Boyle the truth yet. He wasn't letting him off the ropes so soon. "I don't know ..."

"I won't use the toilet or anything! I promise. I'll even clean the place up."

Horst drew a deep breath and gazed up the alley. "Let me think about it."

The next day, Sunday, it rained. The world had returned to normal. It might be spring according to the calendar, but in Vancouver that meant dick. The clouds slid in low, as dense and heavy as slabs of clay, and it poured. It was dark and cold and November all over again. Horst felt a kind of relief. The relief of one born in Vancouver. Of one whose earliest memories were of rain. Rain drumming down, rain hissing, rain drizzling. Rain. Relentless rain. From October to April. Eternal midweek mornings of rain. It calmed him. It made him feel at home. Horst wandered his place with a coffee picking at his plants. He liked rainy mornings, especially Sunday mornings when he could hear the church bells up the street.

He looked out the window and watched Boyle sitting in the smashed-in Beetle. The rain battered the metal roof, blurred windows and puddled around the wheels. Jesus, thought Horst, What a sight. Fifty years old and living in a car in an alley. Boyle was a loser. And Horst realized that's why he put up with him, that's why he hadn't turfed him. Not out of sympathy. No. Not at all. Watching Boyle sitting out there like a toad in a hole, Horst saw how much more of a loser Boyle was than he was, much more, a real bum, a write-off, and that's why he let him stick around. In fact, that's why Boyle should be kept around, so this fact would not be forgotten — by either of them.

Horst thought: Okay. Tomorrow I'll let him off the hook. He can use my car. 9 to 5. No evenings or weekends. And he's gotta fork over 2 bills rent. Horst went over the conditions again in his mind, then added one more. And you can't use my toilet.



## SAW-BLADE SKY

Horst knows he shouldn't, but opens the door anyway.

Werner — drunk. He jerks his thumb back over his shoulder at his apartment down the hall. "Got tired of sitting in my box."

Horst sees Werner's on one of those drunks where Horst doesn't know if Werner's going to hug him or slug him.

"So," says Horst, "What's up?"

"My box, man." Werner's pharmaceutical eyes travel up the wall. "You know what I'm saying?"

Horst nods. He knows exactly what Werner's saying.

Werner squints past Horst into his place. "Anything to drink in there?"

Horst leans into the doorframe, blocking Werner's view. "Shit no. I'm dry."

Horst's head races, thinking up excuses. It's Saturday night and he doesn't want to get stuck with Werner dumping his crap-cart of bitterness on him. Shit, thinks Horst, I should never answer my door.

"Fucking Lorraine, man. Took all that wine I made."

"All those big jugs?"

"Doesn't realize I love her."

"Where's she living?"

"Where's she living? There, man." Werner jerks his thumb to the right, which is west. "Living with the Volvos." Werner means the west side of Vancouver, west of Main. Lorraine dumped Werner last year. It was inevitable, but the capper was him accusing her of ripping off his car and selling it on him. A rusted-out Impala that sat for a year in the alley out back. Lorraine and Werner argued for days over it.

Horst avoids Werner's eyes, recalling the incident.

The car disappeared alright, but it wasn't Lorraine — it was Horst. He called a scrap metal dealer and got it hauled away. It would've sat out there forever with the cats screwing under it.

Horst misses Lorraine. She and Horst had some good talks. Then she picked up Werner, like a disease. After that when Horst knocked on Lorraine's door, instead of her swinging it open and inviting him in, the door stayed shut. Werner'd be standing behind it, all paranoid, saying: "Who's there?"

"Horst."

"Who?"

"Horst. From down the hall."

"Oh. Oh yeah man. Whataya want?"

"Lorraine there?"

"She's busy."

Well, now Werner was at Horst's door.

"Kind of caught me at a bad time."

Werner stares with his nicotine eyes. He's fifty, has long black hair, a face shaved blue, and a little jaw, like he's been clenching it so tight so long it's shrunk. Then he's nodding, like he's got Horst's number. "Okay man. I hear you." And he's travelling back down the hall to his place, shaking his head at Horst: like — What an asshole.

Horst shuts the door. "Fuck." He goes into the bathroom to listen. Werner's got his TV on and he's making sarcastic noises at it. He's lonely. Horst thinks — Maybe I should invite him in after all? And in fact he does have half a bottle of red. But shit ... if I share it with Werner I'll never get to sleep. Horst sits on the edge of the bath tub. He can't believe he's feeling guilty. Werner's never given him the time of day. Christ, thinks Horst, that bastard wouldn't piss on me if I was on fire! And Horst knows if he lets him in once he'll show up regularly. He might even want to use the toilet. Besides, if he lets Werner in he'll see the plant-stand Horst pinched from downstairs. It was Lorraine's. She wasn't using it. Hell, thinks Horst, it was broken. Horst saw Werner chase Lorraine into the alley with that plant stand and break it across her back. Fortunately, Lorraine's three times Werner's size. She just turned around and flattened him. Fifty-year-old ex-junkie draft-dodger scam-artist. She liked all that. It was exciting. She told Horst so. Yet, hell if Horst'll have Werner shitting in his toilet. And if

he recognizes the plant stand, who knows, he might shoot him. Lorraine told Horst Werner's got a gun. Well, a sort of gun. A flare gun. Stole it from a boat. Still, it'd burn a good hole in you. Horst imagines his apartment lighting up like a nuclear blast and a smoking hole in his chest. And that'd be the not-so-glorious end of Horst Nunn. Done in by Werner Rugg. A fate with the charm of death by rat bite.

Horst wonders if Werner knows he slept with Lorraine. Maybe all this time he's been next door there brooding ugly revenge, thinking of ways to torture Horst for having made it with his woman. Though of course it wasn't like that. Horst and Corinne had been fighting and she was saying fuck this and walked out. Horst paced around then knocked on Lorraine's door. It was a Saturday night and Werner was doing weekends in jail on a possession charge. Lorraine kind of liked that Werner was doing time. It gave her life an edge. Made her feel inner city. She was very much into being the hip momma. So she welcomed Horst. She had a bottle of red and they got drunk. It was the hugging that got it going. Lorraine was into this New Age hugging and it went from there into some old time fucking. Horst remembers the bed had black sheets and smelled of cigarettes and b.o. Lorraine was the biggest woman he'd ever done it with. Not fat, but massive. Felt like he was humping a chesterfield, and when she got on top of him — Christ! — it was like he was trapped under a mattress. He spent the night though, and they did it again in the morning. Corinne was sitting at the kitchen table when he stepped in stinking of sex and cigarettes. Six months later they were divorced.

The morning after Werner knocked on Horst's door, Horst peeks through the blinds and sees Werner pegging sheets on the clothes line out back.

Horst nearly drops his coffee. And not just because he's never seen Werner do laundry before, but because Horst recognizes the sheets. Two sheets and two pillow cases, a set. When Werner's gone, Horst steps outside. Fuck, these are mine, thinks Horst. They are. They belonged to me and Corinne. The sheets are a deep blue with moons and clouds and a kind of night-on-the desert look. Werner's got my sheets! thinks Horst. And if that's not ugly enough, he's slept on them! Werner's probably jerked off or fucked some slut on them. Horst steps



back, appalled. Horst and Corinne got the sheets as a wedding present. And now Werner's got them. Werner, who's probably infested with lice!

Horst is halfway around the house to Werner's suite when he halts.

Number one: Werner's got that flare gun.

Number two: maybe he's simply got sheets with the same pattern.

Is it possible?

Horst dials Moose Jaw. Sunday morning the rates are reduced.

He's got to talk to Corinne and get this straight.

Gary answers. Horst tightens the cloth over the mouthpiece.

"Is Corinne there?"

"Who's calling?"

Horst stammers.

"That you Horst?"

He pulls the cloth away. "Yeah."

"Well fuck you."

"I gotta talk to her."

"Talk to yourself."

"Gary!"

"She's busy."

"What kind of sheets you got?"

"Why are you such an asshole? She's eight months pregnant. What the fuck you mean, sheets?"

Horst's voice fails. "... Eight months?"

"Eight. You got a message I'll pass it along. That's as close as you're getting."

"The pattern. Just tell me the pattern."

"White sheets, Horst, we got white flannel sheets. Now go back to bed and sleep it off."

Horst heads down to the Beer and Wine store at the Waldorf.

The basement of the house is a mausoleum to past tenants. Clothes, books, chairs and boxes left by people who no one, not even Leo Buljan, the landlord, remembers. People from the sixties and even the fifties. Maybe further. Leo says the place was built in 1908. Horst sets his wine bottle on a trunk and looks around. It's musty and dank and the rough cedar planks supporting the main floor are only

inches from Horst's head. In a corner lies a mattress gutted by mice, paint cans, a roll of carpet that stinks like a sack. Horst spots Corinne's wicker picnic basket ... a couple of rolls of wrapping paper stick out. Images of Christmases past suddenly plump tears to his eyes. He reaches for the bottle, realizing he should've got two.

The bells ring for five o'clock mass up the street. Drunk, Horst recalls a couple of weeks ago he was walking over to the track in the evening, and as he was passing the church there was an old lady going up the steps, real slow, pushing herself up on a cane and resting at each step. She was wearing her best clothes. Horst could actually smell her face powder from the sidewalk. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He nearly turned around and went into the church himself. But he knows what it looks like inside — he and Corinne got married there. He kept going. He bet heavy that night.

Horst watches those sheets float on the October breeze. Hell. Take them down. Just take them. IF Werner comes knocking, say — I don't know. Why would I take your sheets, man? What the fuck can Werner say to that? Horst finishes the last inch of wine, listens for sounds from Werner's suite, then steps onto the porch and takes them. He strips his bed then remakes it. He stands there looking at them for a long time. Then he sits, and slides his palm slowly over the surface. ... He remembers that time in Alberta, near Red Deer, way out in the middle of nowhere, all rock and dirt and flat land. The car broke down and he and Corinne were arguing. As usual, Horst was losing. Even when he was right he managed to lose arguments. They argued until they were exhausted. Horst remembers thinking how bleak Alberta was. Tumbleweeds snagged in barbed wire, coulees full of baked red dirt. What a fucking hole. They used up all the windshield cleaning fluid in one day! The car was crusted. They sat out there under a sky the colour of a rusty saw blade, the pebbly prairie wind nicking the windows and the gusts rocking the car. That's where it ended. That's where Corinne said she'd had it. She'd stared straight ahead: "I hate Vancouver. I hate the rain. The mountains make me claustrophobic and the sea stinks like a sewer." She'd turned to him.

"So, what's it going to be?"

Horst had avoided her eyes and said nothing, which pissed her off

even more. As usual, by doing nothing, he was forcing her to make all the moves.

“Well?”

Horst had shrugged. He was relieved and crushed at the same time.

Horst pulls the sheets up and pins them back onto the line. Then he stares out at the blue-black sky. The sun’s gone, leaving only a few bloody clouds beyond the rooftops. He hears the popping of a string of fire crackers. In two weeks it’ll be Halloween. Then everyone’ll be knocking at his door expecting something.



