

Noel Hudson / RECENT MUSIC

I don't know just exactly why I let him in. He had what sounded like a password, maybe that was it. I cracked open the apartment door enough to get a look at him, and he bent forward his ice axe of a nose and said, conspiratorially, "Carpets."

"Carpets," I whispered.

It wasn't his looks. I didn't like the looks of him. He was big, with huge sloping shoulders and a massive bovine chest, and his silver coveralls were too small, pulling up short of his red nylon socks. There were a full two inches or more of smooth, hairless white flesh gaping between his pant legs and those socks. Across a single breast pocket the name "Wendell" was embroidered in a shaky, home-sewn script.

"Carpets," I whispered again, watching my hands unlatch the protector chain and fling the door open wide.

He towed a knee-high chrome unit behind him as he entered. It had a see-through amber bubble on top and a long black hose by which he pulled the thing around.

"No halls," he said.

"Okay."

"No bedrooms. Guy'll be along tomorrow with a smaller machine for those. Saugenmeister 410. You ever seen one?"

"No."

"Incredible little machines."

I just kept quiet.

"Anyway," Wendell continued, "He'll be along tomorrow early."

"I see."

"Elvin."

"Pardon?"

"Guy's name's Elvin."

"Fine," I said.

"Just so you know."

He appeared to be looking directly to the left of my head as he spoke, so I stepped to one side, allowing him full view of the livingroom carpet. There were a few mysterious stains and it was slightly faded, but it was free of burn holes and paint spots. I felt almost proud. He chewed at a corner of his mouth and closed his eyes tight a few seconds.

We moved in a week early because the previous tenants had already moved out, and we managed to persuade the landlord, saying how we wanted to get in and settled as soon as possible, and how the people who bought our house weren't scheduled to take possession yet but had nonetheless begun putting up new siding. As a result, we'd been forced to endure constant interruptions by apartment maintenance people: a plumber, a woman with light-bulbs, a window cleaner, a man to take crayon marks off one of the bedroom walls. "Kids," he'd said, like it was detective work.

That was three weeks ago. We assumed they'd all come who were coming. We'd positioned the furniture how we wanted it and restocked the end tables with their collected miscellany.

"All gotta be moved," pronounced Wendell, coming out of his meditation.

"Couldn't we just shift it to one side?" I asked.

Negative.

As he dragged his carpet shampooer into the kitchen, something leaped into my peripheral vision. Eleanor. Eleanor stood nude in the hallway, half-asleep. Stood there like a wrinkled flamingo, rubbing her right foot against the inside of her left leg. I signalled exaggeratedly for her to get back in the bedroom. She held up a toothbrush.

"Now now now now now," said Wendell, surveying the room.

Her modest breasts went ways of their own as she pivoted and slipped back into safety.

Wendell and I commenced shoving furniture into the hallway. It occurred to me to suggest to Eleanor that she get dressed and come out instead of allowing herself to be blockaded in the bedroom for a couple of hours, but our visitor placed the heavy love seat squarely in front of the door, then stacked a coffee table and footstool on top of that.

"Plug," he said, hands on his big hips and eyes scouting the baseboard of the empty room with a slow careful sweep.

"There," I said, pointing to an outlet beneath the livingroom window and partially hidden by the curtains.

He handed me the plug and began filling his old chrome shampooer with blue fluid from a root beer jug, absently dripping on his foot.

The machine fired up, emitting a high rotating whine, as I plugged it in. He threw himself backwards and slapped off the toggle switch.

"Loud," he said, grinning.

I fully expected Eleanor to be pounding down the bedroom door, wanting to know what precisely was going on. But she wasn't. All that furniture was probably soundproofing the hallway.

I thought seriously about making myself some breakfast, before I realized I would have to eat standing up. That didn't seem healthy. I couldn't think of anyone who ate standing up. Instead, I leaned against a stack of dining chairs and attempted to recreate the image of my sixty-nine-year-old flamingo-imitating wife. A rosy-white blur.

Wendell waltzed around the livingroom in tight steps with his incessantly whirring shampooer, working lather circles into larger lather squares. The overhead light reflecting off his high unlined forehead made him appear to be visibly balding.

"It'll take some time," he said.

"No problem," I replied.

"Forgive the inconvenience."

"That's all right."

"You just go ahead with whatever you normally do."

"I've got plenty of time."

"That a fact?"

"I've nothing planned."

"Your day off, is it?"

"Retired," I said, and watched his facial muscles do a dance. The word still felt strange in my mouth—like I knew it was the correct answer but had no idea what it meant.

"Oh?"

"Afraid so."

"Part of the swelling ranks of mature individuals," said Wendell, staring intensely at the rug. "The country's most wasted resource," he said.

"I thought I'd try it for a year or two," I said.

"Retirement," he said, putting some weight on his machine as he approached a dark spot. "Now this is an area about which I am very curious."

"It's all still new to me," I said.

The low double-window in the diningroom was open, and the growing clamour of cars and people below on Grant Avenue rose to join Wendell's machine. Traffic and voices tuning themselves. Rounded then stammered vowels, hissing and pipping consonants. Blurts. Wheezes. Saxophones.

"Ours is an ungrateful society," the big man confessed.

"Not at all," I said.

"I don't for one minute blame you retirees for being disenchanted with the system. No, I don't."

"I think I'll like it fine."

"Man like yourself—I suspect differently."

"Best to view it as an extended vacation, I think."

"Vacation," said Wendell. "Is that what you think? If you mean being forced to vacate your hard-earned position at a time of peak mental maturity."

"It was my choice," I said.

Wendell stood up straight as his great body would allow and, completely ignoring the rising froth from his stationary machine, said, "*I am* sorry."

His eyebrows floated around his expanse of forehead. He rolled his silver shoulders. "*I am* sorry," he repeated.

Eleanor would have put him back on track, told him to keep to his own side of the fence, but I didn't want to stir him any further.

"A man's daily work must be recognized and appreciated," Wendell explained. "If it isn't, he winds up feeling inadequate, inconsequential, ineffectual. And he gives up. He retires."

"I—" I said.

"I've seen it happen to too many people," he continued. "My own uncle checked himself in and let senium praecox have at him. Now that's voluntary retirement for you."

"Senium praecox?"

"Premature senility. Pick's disease got him, they said."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"*I'm* sorry," insisted Wendell. "Both as a nephew and as a tithing member of the blessed world community, I'm sorry. If my uncle had enjoyed the occasional scrap of praise while he was working, I truly believe he'd be alive, sane, and toiling his tail off today."

"Perhaps if he'd had a hobby,..." I said.

"Hobbies won't keep a man alive. He was a philatelist, a philumenist, and shrewd as a Philadelphia lawyer where chess was concerned. I say you have to have a purpose. A mission, if you will. A man must have a calling."

Saxophones honked in the window like defensive geese, like offensive tenors. A street sweeper drove slowly by, making his brush-against-cymbal percussion clash with Wendell's shampooer's whirl. Eleanor, my Eleanor. You might be calling to me this moment and I'd not hear a peep.

"Depression," said Wendell.

"Pardon?"

"Depression," he repeated, his back doing a serpentine movement as he returned to serious cleaning, push-pulling the large chrome unit, moving his soap in advanced geometric variations. "Depression is where it generally starts for most retireds. A lowering of overall mood-tone, feelings of dejection, difficulty focusing their thoughts, that sort of thing."

I walked over to the diningroom window not having a clue.

"You and your uncle must have been close," I said, sitting on the windowsill.

The warm wood breathed through my pyjama bottoms. Three stories down and across Grant, a woman was hanging a USED ADULT BOOKS sign in the window of a secondhand clothing and antique shop. She made a couple of leveling adjustments, stepped back, cocked her head to one side, then went off, leaving it hanging crooked. My first thought was to yell to her—yell, above all of this, yell: "It's still out of kilter, my dear!" Then, more realistically, I considered phoning the shop. But the phone was in the bedroom trapped with Eleanor. And if I did call, the woman might think

I spent my time watching her every move from my perch and decide to call the police. Or she might get self-conscious, paranoid, and quit her job, or have a breakdown. And what if the crooked sign is only an advertising gimmick to attract attention, like the upside down ads in the classifieds, or the spastically-posed mannequins. She might say thanks for telling her, but she'd think, *Gotcha, you old fart*, and set every sign in the place askew.

Wendell forged ahead. "But the thing about depression... the thing which separates the cured from the cursed is simply an understanding of the strategy of the ailment. Once you have depression's plan of attack, there you go."

He'd worked his way over to where I was sitting and was presently shampooing where my feet would have been if I hadn't raised them onto the windowsill. His silver mass lunged.

"Depression has to be on top of you to depress," he said. "If you're above it, then it's below you. Its push, therefore, can only lift. Am I right? You follow? I'm saying you can de-press depression."

He raised his eyebrows ceilingward and started whistling along with the muffled siren of his tool, creating spiraling crescendos and decrescendos.

"Now there are entire bookcases full of methods for helping a person rise above depression, but they're all temporary fixes. And I wouldn't expect many of them to lift something like, say, involuntional melancholia—but you don't look the involuntional melancholic type."

Right when I thought he was going to talk me out the window, he veered off toward the kitchen. A curious melody and argument lifted from the street and tested the air where he'd been standing.

"There *is*, however, no denying your gumption's been gunny-sacked," he said, disappearing around the side of the refrigerator.

It felt better just having him out of sight.

"That's how Pastor G.D. would put it," he added.

"Don't you worry yourself about me," I said.

"I cannot help but."

"I'm fine as a fighting cock."

"You look kind of washed-out to these eyes," he said, still out of sight.

"Never felt better."

"Well, that's a syndrome too." He emerged. "In many cultures you would be a revered member of your community. In some you'd be a national treasure. You, a national treasure. Think about that for a minute. I for one sympathize totally with the plight of the senior citizen in our western society. Neglected, ignored, forgotten, flushed. Nobody can blame you for feeling the way you do. I say something should be done about this whole state of affairs, and I say soon, don't you think?"

My joints ached. My lungs turned to wet flannel.

"Just how old *are* you, anyway?" asked Wendell.

Thrice the age of a dog is that of a horse;

Thrice the age of a horse is that of a man;

Thrice the age of a man is that of a deer;

Thrice the age of a deer is that of an eagle.

Thrice thrice thrice thrice, that's how the Celts of auld figured it. Thrice, three, the perfect number: beginning, middle, and end. I have definitely entered my thirddness.

"I'll tell you how old you are. You have reached the golden age of enlightened reason. At least you have the capacity for entering into this phase of life—if only you can shed this earthly depression. Am I making sense to you?"

He headed my direction again, fixing his look squarely upon me. I shifted myself around to face outside. There is no one home, I meant him to understand.

Down on Grant, a skinny Italian man was cursing and making a gesture something like the one football referees use to indicate face-masking penalties. His taxi had just been stolen. The guy summoned a chase cab and off they went in dangerous pursuit through morning traffic, the young Italian slapping the side of the car like a whipless jockey.

"Some guy just stole a taxi," I said, more to myself than to Wendell. I leaned further out the window to watch the action. Both cars went screaming around the corner at St. Blandina, narrowly missing assorted collisions, then vanished.

Wendell's head was beside mine. He smelled of perfumed soap.

"Our own little city of thieves," he said. "But don't you worry at all: 'Stolen sustenance shall not nourish them. Their plates shall be filled with poisoned meats and their empires lost in their own widows' weeds.'"

"Widows' weeds," I said softly.

“You can credit that one to Pastor G.D. too. What a gift. What a gift. What a vision.”

His machine whined on as he returned to finish the kitchen.

I stepped down from the windowsill and gripped my bare toes into the wet carpet. By carefully disentangling select pieces of furniture and rearranging them, I was able to squirm through the puzzle, down the hallway—on my stomach, back, knees, in a crouch, waiting for the complete buggered trap to collapse—until I was hanging over one arm of the love seat, my head thrust between the legs of the coffee table, my fingertips just reaching the bedroom door.

“Eleanor?” I said, my face pushed into the cushioned back of the love seat. “Eleanor? Are you all right?”

I listened.

“Eleanor? Say something.”

“You won’t believe this. This is incredible,” beamed big Wendell, two rooms away. “Last Sunday, Brother Horton called every last member of our church before service and set it up to where, when Pastor G.D. stood to deliver the principal sermon, the whole congregation rose on cue and did their best Cary Grant imitations. You should have heard all three hundred of us chanting away, ‘G.D., G.D., G.D.’ It was during our televised service. You didn’t happen to catch it, did you?”

“Eleanor?”

“That’s a true shame. It was plain incredible.”

Hum to me, Eleanor. Hum. Hum that soothing old-woman’s hum of yours. That hum swelling up from your diaphragm, trilling in your breast. Eleanor? Hum. Almost a childlike hum, toying with pitch, timbre, and tempo. Filled with familiar but elusive phrases. Bits of nursery rhymes. *All the king’s horses went to the cupboard to find the lost sheep.*

“Pastor G.D. laughed so hard his microphone squealed.”

He was pulling my leg.

"I'll be damned," I said, trying to jerk my knee enough to pull loose.

"I refuse to believe that," he said. "You know, it was at the very same service that G.D. spoke so fiercely about the raw deal being given our retirees. 'We must lend our voice to the silenced seniors,' he said. 'For they are rich with God's wealth of wisdom. They shall know welcome in his divine employ. Let their worth be magnified in his ageless workforce.' Let me help you out of there."

I allowed myself to be extricated.

He'd finished his three rooms and shut off the shampooer, but the whir seemed to continue, only slightly less deafening, as if the waves had a perpetual form and would forever haunt us. Wendell snapped the plug from the wall socket with a brisk yank on the cord and began winding it around his fist.

"I'd like you to meet G.D.," he said firmly.

"Of course," I said.

"He can explain much more convincingly than I how to make your retirement a fruitful and memorable time. There's no reason whatsoever for you to spend these years feeling depressed and alone. We can plug you into all kinds of worthwhile activities."

In Wendell's pulling, my pyjama bottoms had somehow been twisted and were hanging half-off one hip. He smiled and straightened things for me.

"Do you really have this prime time to waste?" he asked. "Let me share something with you before I leave."

He grasped me by the shoulders and I watched his eyes tear. Outside, the horns seemed to agree on a common riff.

"I was driving over here to work this building this morning, right?" he began. "And this was fairly early because I commute in from Morton Hill and I go speed limit."

I nodded.

"It was maybe six-thirty, maybe earlier. There wasn't a soul on the streets. Now visualize this if you can: this city was like a modern ghost town. It was like I was the only man left on the planet. Can you see it? The only man left behind. It was like The Rapture. It was like everyone had departed without me. I quote to you from *I Thessalonians 4:16, 17*: 'For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.' It was like I hadn't heard the shout, or the voice, or the trumpet, so I had been left behind on this sinful earth, to Tribulation."

He dug his thumbs in deeper.

"I was sweating plenty," he continued. "And I could hardly feel my legs—you know that feeling. So I stopped the van right there in the middle of my lane—I mean, who was going to hit me, right? I parked there and prayed for a good five minutes. Then I was taken by the urge to turn my radio on. Like in the gospel song, 'Turn it on, turn it on, turn your radio on.' And I did, I turned it on. But there was nothing at all. Dead silence. You can see precisely how this confirmed my fears."

"Yes," I said.

"I wept," Wendell said. "I sat back and wept, and I wondered where I'd stepped from the righteous path, which had been the wrong fork in my mortal journey. Then, about sixty seconds later, I heard Pastor G.D.'s voice speaking to me. 'That concludes our quiet time for this hour,' he said."

He released me with a quick slap on the back.

"Just you be ready is all I'm saying," said Wendell, hauling his machine toward the front door. He paused halfway out and said, "Elvin'll be by tomorrow."

I thought I heard my coccyx moan.

"You two will have a lot to talk about."

"Maybe so," I said.

"Elvin's a member of our Seniors Crusade. He was also a close friend of my uncle's. He'll help you prepare to meet G.D."

And he was gone.

I went to the window and watched him come out of the building's main doors and climb into an old white van with a long, thick antenna sprouting from the roof. Traffic was still heavy with working people. Good jobs, bad jobs, joe jobs, snow jobs.

I pulled the window shut and began dragging furniture out of the hallway, sliding across the damp carpet. I would take Eleanor out for brunch, and we wouldn't return to the apartment until the damp dried and the noise waned. I wanted to hear only birds. Meadowlarks. I wanted to buy back our house.

"Oh, Eleanor," I complained as I finally flung open our bedroom door. I wanted to be hushed and mothered. Hummed to. I wanted to be rubbed where it ached. I wanted her to cut up laughing at this monstrous silver man, exorcise him from these rooms. "Oh, Eleanor," I said again, and started to drop beside her on the bed.

But she wasn't there.

I patted her side of the bed. I ran my palm over the rumpled sheets. She was not in the room.

I looked deeply into the dressing table mirror, as if she might've been lured through it into another dimension.

The bedroom curtains flapped at me, and I went to the window and leaned out, expecting to see her rising up through the city's air with thousands of other pure beings.

She reached up to me from her seat on the fire escape, took my hand and gave it a squeeze, my sweet hummer did, humming faintly, bless her, "Onward Christian Soldiers."