

CLOVER

A LITERARY RAG

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Darrell, In Milwaukee

Laurel Leigh

Guy name of Ken—that Darrell knew from around—had picked up a '62 blue Chevy van at the junkyard run by that Dakota fellow. Ken cut out the roof of the van and framed in the top section of a camper shell he found at the same junkyard. Most of the camper windows were busted out and had plywood over, but the van had all its windows so a guy could still see out the sides if he needed to.

Not bad, Darrell said, when he first saw it.

The Chevy's engine ran rough and one of the front wheels was an under-size spare, but Ken rarely drove it farther than the mini mart for cold ones. Which he and Darrell drank while sitting on the lawn chairs Ken kept in the van. Sometimes they watched TV. Ken ran an extension cord out the laundry room window of his house and in through one of the van windows to plug in a portable set. But then Dot grew embarrassed by that wreck of a—well, she hardly knew what to call it, and right there in the driveway where everyone could see. She told Ken it went or she went.

I'll go a buck and a quarter, Darrell said. About half what Ken was into it for. But Dot wasn't happy, which meant Ken wasn't happy, so he told Darrell, You're an asshole, and handed over the key.

Leigh, con't.

Darrell felt a freedom in the Chevy. He'd been without wheels for a while and liked that he could go somewhere and his new house came, too. The first place he drove was to the Y to collect his gear and ask for a refund on a week's rent. Against policy, but Mickey was good that way and handed him the cash right back.

Going off with *la mujer*? Mickey asked.

Darrell had sneaked the same gal up to his room a couple nights. Also against the rules but, unlike the weekday manager, Mickey never hassled a guy.

Ain't seen her around, Darrell said. I think she quit at Goldmann's.

The elevator was still broken, but to keep fit, Darrell liked to take the stairs anyway. He got his duffel bag out of the fourth-floor room and jogged back down the steps.

Buena suerte, Mickey said, when Darrell went by him again to leave.

You too, Darrell said, and held out his hand.

He spent what Mickey gave him and then some on a used rim and tire for the Chevy. Since getting to Milwaukee, he'd been taking day jobs, banging nails, pouring concrete, but it was time for a step up. After swapping out the wheel, he went to see about a job driving backhoe for the same outfit Ken worked for.

The job was to dig out one of the foundation holes for a pair of reinforced concrete towers that would be office buildings. The towers had to be ready for the Bicentennial 4th of July fanfare, and the job foreman said there was pressure from up top to finish the dirt work ahead of schedule.

Darrell told how he'd run the only backhoe on a big job up in Sheboygan, and he had a reference on official company stationery.

On this job, we got to go hard or go to hell, the foreman said.

That don't bother me, Darrell said.

They shook hands and the next morning Darrell walked onto the dig site.

City lets us make noise between eight and four, Slim told Darrell.

Slim was the other backhoe driver.

Lunch is whenever the puke wagon shows up.

Sounds pretty standard, Darrell said.

They went over to the Poclairn that Darrell would be running.

Leigh, con't.

Slim picked at his ear. I'm gonna have you start digging on the south hole, he said, as if he'd been the one to decide and they both knew otherwise. Darrell kept a poker face when the foreman walked up and Slim had to quit pretending.

Darrell climbed into the cab of the Poclairn, which he'd found out from Slim was a European rig the foreman had picked up on a trade. The bucket was wider than usual but otherwise it had a slick setup. The foreman had marked out where he wanted the south ramp going into the hole and Darrell got to it, setting a pace that had the dirt haulers moving. Altogether noisy as hell, not to mention hotter than hell inside the cab, but Darrell liked the power of the big trackhoe. How he could guide the shovel to knock away the packed earth and then scoop it up and plunk it right into the back of the waiting truck, just as smooth as if he was dropping in handfuls of dirt, but with each massive shovel-full he could see a difference in the deepening hole. The trackhoe left its mark. Just like the tower going into the hole would leave its mark, growing up out of the ground like a tree putting down its roots.

At break time, Darrell got in line at the puke truck. He bought a roast beef sandwich and a bag of peanuts, smiled at the chunky gal working the window. She reminded him of this nurse he'd met in 'Nam. *Over in the shit*, as he thought of it. The one time he got shot was in the shoulder and the doctors had decided to leave the bullet in. The nurses, the one gal in particular, had been real sweet to him. A helluva gal, wide end and all—if he'd been telling someone he would've held his hands apart to show just how wide,

but meant it in a nice way, because when it was all said and done she'd been the kind of gal a guy might've put down roots for if he could.

On his day off, Darrell worked on the Chevy. He spent the morning replacing the timing chain and got the engine running pretty smooth. For inside he used scrap wood to build a box bench that would be good for storage and sleeping. Then he wanted a shower, which Ken had been letting him use while Dot was out getting her hair done. Erecting the beehive, Ken called it, but in a way that let on he was still sweet on her after ten years. This time she got home a little early and accidentally walked in on Darrell lathering up. To say the least, she was not happy about it.

To get back on her good side, Darrell offered to help Ken redo the bathroom, which Dot had been wanting. They pulled the old shower and put in a fancy one delivered by the Dakota. Pulling a contact on a day job he'd worked, Darrell got Ken a good deal on some tile so there was enough left in the budget for the oak sink cabinet Dot had her eye on at the home supply. She warmed up quite a bit over that. When the bathroom was done, she said Darrell could use the shower again and also got in her head to sew him curtains for the Chevy. At first it was funny, but Darrell had to admit they made things look homey. Dot still didn't like the Chevy in the driveway, so Darrell parked at the end of the block when he visited and they all got along fine after that.

Leigh, con't.

Take a Komatsu, for instance, Ken was saying. Some might say they build shit, but they build a good excavator, even if you might say under-powered.

It was after work and a few of the crew were at the A-Frame, a couple blocks from the work site. Poor excuse for a bar with only outdoor tables and the one homely bar gal, but the beers were cold. Darrell set his empty beer mug down on the wooden picnic table and held up three fingers until the bar gal nodded. He and the boys had been talking about the job—their other main topic aside from gals and government.

A lot of it's economically driven and all that, how they build the new equipment, Ramon said.

Ramon had a way of talking real slow that could get a guy tapping his foot, but Darrell had to admit junior knew how to hustle. Ramon now worked under Ken, who'd got promoted to lead mechanic last week.

They all thought Slim was a rough operator.

Point is, you might say Slim is a mule in the kitchen, Ken said. He's gonna rip that Case apart he ain't careful.

A jackass is cute when it's young, Ramon said in his same drawl.

That busted all three of them up. They laughed harder when Slim and his buddies showed up and took over the end of their table.

What's so funny, Slim said.

You had to be there, Darrell told him.

Slim tossed a small bag on the table.

What's that? Darrell said to go along.

Genuine Indian arrowheads, Slim said, only he said 'Injun.'

You got those here?

Slim picked his ear.

Hell, I dug up Cochise for all I know, he said.

On a Saturday, Jake came in from Whitewater, where he'd been framing tract houses. Darrell was glad to see him. He liked Ken and the boys at work just fine, but when it came down to it, Jake was his best friend. They'd been together in 'Nam and that bond stays. Jake wanted to go get his kid, who wanted to go to the zoo again.

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