

¶ Poydras Review

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A Split in the Tree

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A fierce crack explodes my dream. Too loud for thunder. I spring up in bed. The window is black. The clock says 4:00 a.m. Was it a bomb? I'm seventy-five years old, a widow. Live by myself. I sit, listening, afraid to move.

~

Screaming sirens jolt me awake. Seven a.m. Can't believe I got back to sleep. I throw a raincoat over my bathrobe, slip my feet into clogs and rush outside. Fire trucks block the narrow road in front of my house, red lights flashing. Slick yellow raincoats everywhere. My neighbors are packed together behind the fire trucks. What's going on? But then I see. A tree split down the middle on the bank across from my house. Half of the Monterey pine is standing, needles green, untouched. The other half is splintered into jagged logs, lying on the bank, caught in the branches of trees, blocking the road, caving the roof of a car, its window glass shattered.

“Get back in the house,” a fireman yells. For the first time, I look around me. The railing on my deck is in pieces, a log wedged between the sharp edges of wood.

“Get back in the house!” But I don’t move. I see a body’s lying out there on the street. Its leg is pinned beneath a large log. The head is twisted to the side. It’s a man’s head, a young man’s head. Thick black hair; dark skin. He’s lying on something, maybe a backpack. Yellow raincoats are working to pull the log off the man’s leg. I hear a moan.

The fireman approaches, scowling. “Get in the house.”

“Who is he?” I ask.

“Lady, get in the house!”

~

Out the window I see flashing lights. More sirens. And then, finally, quiet. They’re gone. Neighbors are swarming all over the road, some are rolling logs to the side to widen the passage for cars, others are on their cell phones; most are just gawking and gossiping. Like me.

Who was that man? Is he dead? What was he doing here at 4:00 in the morning? Was that really just lightning?

“He’s a thief,” my neighbor Stan yells. “He got my iPad. Check your car.”

The trunk of my Prius flips open without my remote. My binoculars are missing, my Swarovski’s, worth over \$2000. Gone. My son Bobby gave me those binoculars for my 70th birthday. I treasured them. And I locked the car; I always lock the car.

“The lock’s broken,” Stan tells me. “That man under the log stole your things.”

Who is he? I want to strangle him.

~

Two weeks later I open the door to a short man with thick arm muscles and squinty blue eyes. He’s carrying a large satchel.

“Deputy sheriff,” he announces. He walks inside and pulls a plastic bag out of his satchel. “These yours?”

I nod. They’re in there, flattened, the lenses in broken shards. I start to cry.

“We got him in custody,” he says.

“He’s alive?”

“Oh yeah. Broken leg, that’s all. He’s still in the hospital, but as soon as he’s walking, he’s on his way. Kaput.”

“On his way?” I ask.

“To one of those Muslim countries.”

“Why?” I feel a tightening in my stomach.

“You can tell just by looking at him. He’s from somewhere in the Middle East.”

“You think he’s a Muslim?”

“Whatever he is, he don’t belong here,” the deputy says.

~

The next day I read in the local paper that a Syrian man named Jamal Hagar is the one who stole my backpack.

Lightning Strike Pins Son of Immigrant

A freak lightning flash Monday night split a Monterey Pine on West Caledonia Street in Cypress Hills. A flying log pinned Jamal Hagar, who was allegedly robbing cars at the time the tree exploded. Hagar’s father, Akram Hagar, who owns a computer repair business in San Jose, is an undocumented immigrant from Syria. As a result of this incident, he is in custody with his wife for overstaying their visas. Officials are looking into Jamal’s immigration status.

“They are illegals,” ICE officer Robert Green stated, “and will be deported.” As he was led away, Akram Hagar shouted to reporters, “Jamal is a good boy. I don’t know what happened. He’s a good boy.”

~

But Jamal Hagar is not a good boy. He broke into my car in the middle of the night and stole my binoculars.

Neighbor Stan stops me on the street, yanking his labradoodle's leash while the dog tries to jump on me. Stan's the kind of neighbor who gives you rides to the airport, carries your Christmas tree into the house, takes your broken washing machine to the dump. He's a retired fireman, thick body, thin hair, projects confidence. I like him, despite his annoying dog.

"I want the son of a bitch deported," he tells me. "If he isn't a terrorist already, he'll become one. They all do. You've heard how they're recruiting these young Muslims on the internet. I'll bet a million our little car thief is already in their hands."

I give it some thought, then ask, "Stan, what would a terrorist be doing breaking into cars in the middle of the night?"

"Who knows? Raising money for the cause?"

The cause? Could he be talking about al-Qaeda? I heard a lot about it on NBC after 9/11.

"Seems a little far-fetched," I say.

"Oh, Gracie," Stan says. "You're so naïve." He then tells me the boy's arraignment is coming up soon and he's going.

"Why don't you come with me?" he says. "It might open your eyes a little."

Well, why not? I've never actually been in a courtroom. Besides, I'm a victim and I'm still pretty mad about that.

~

The judge, a pudgy woman with untidy red hair, flips through a stack of folders, opens one and calls out: "Appearances for The People vs. Jamal Hagar."

A scowling young man clomps his way to the council table on crutches, his leg in a full-length cast. He looks younger than I remember.

The judge reads the charges against him in a monotone without looking up. My binoculars, Stan's iPad, several other items from my neighbors' cars.

"How do you plead?" she asks.

The man mumbles something.

Without looking at his client, the public defender asks for an early trial. And the thief is led away in handcuffs.

Two men in dark suits stand up to leave the courtroom. "ICE agents," Stan whispers. "They're waiting for him."

“What do you mean?”

“If the jury acquits, they’ll nab him. If he goes to jail, they’ll arrest him when he’s released.”

“Is he illegal?”

“If ICE is here, it’s a sure bet,” he says.

As I leave the courtroom, I see two children sitting on a bench in the hallway. The boy’s dark hair is curly and tangled; his jeans have holes at the knees. He looks to be about ten. A little girl in stained sweatpants stares at me with black eyes. Her skinny wrists poke out of the sleeves of her faded blue sweater. She looks to be the age of my granddaughter, Katy—eight. As I pass by, the boy jumps up.

“Lady,” he says. “Did you see my brother? Jamal, my brother, is he in there?”

Before I can answer, Stan rushes me past.

“Who are those children?” I ask him.

“Who knows?” he says.

The next day the local paper has the story.

Alleged car thief Jamal Hagar pleaded not guilty yesterday in Cypress County Superior Court to Auto Burglary. Jamal’s father, Akram Hagar, owner of Hi Tech Computer Repairs, and his wife Leah, have been deported as illegal immigrants to Syria, their home country, by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Jamal will be incarcerated in the County jail until his trial. Two younger children have been placed in foster care.

~

A couple of months after the arraignment, Stan invites me to a meeting of a group called *Sensible Citizens* at the Cypress Hills Community Center.

“We need to make some decisions about that Muslim car thief,” he explains.

“Is this one of those anti-immigrant groups?” I ask, looking him straight in the eye. As I said, I really like Stan. He’s been good to me, but I don’t want to get caught up in some America First business. That’s not me.

“We’re not against immigrants per se,” he assures me. “It’s more like neighborhood protection. It’s your neighbors who’ll be there, Gracie; you know these folks.”

Well, I can’t argue with that. I think about my stolen binoculars and get angry all over again. We do need protection. So I join a cluster of my neighbors as the president of *Sensible Citizens* welcomes our group. Stan whispers that the president is the CEO of a finance company. “A big deal,” he says.

What I see is a young man, maybe in his forties, about six feet, wearing a Giants cap and sweatpants. A nice looking fellow. He looks around at the audience.

“Folks, I don’t like to frighten you, but the man who recently victimized your neighborhood could well be a terrorist.”

A gasp. A few heads nodding.

Stan takes over. “You know from the paper that the thief’s parents have now been deported and the thief has been convicted. What does that tell you?” He pauses for effect. “He is now parentless and ripe for the onslaught of terrorist propaganda. That is, if he isn’t already a terrorist.”

“The jerk’s in jail, right?” A male voice. I think it’s the man who bought the old Shelburn house.

“In jail for the time being,” Stan says, “Unfortunately, that leftist judge agreed to reduce Jamal’s crime to second degree burglary, a misdemeanor. Something about his youth, his injury, and his previously clean record. He’ll be out in less than a year. Meanwhile, the jails are rife with terrorists.”

Like I said, I’m an old lady. I’m not against immigrants, I’m really not. But I’ve known Stan for years; I trust him. And what he says has me scared.

“We need to organize,” Stan continues. “Make sure this thief never returns to our community. Write to ICE, lots of letters, making sure they’ll get him when he’s released from jail.”

“I heard he’s a citizen,” Matt Jefferson says. Margie Jefferson’s teenaged son, a smart boy.

“Apparently, there’s some question about that,” Stan says. “He claims he was born here, but they can’t find a U.S. birth certificate. Whatever, he’s a criminal. He doesn’t belong in this country.”

Even if he’s a citizen? That doesn’t sound right.

~

I zip my down jacket against the late autumn chill as I wait with Stan and other neighbors outside the gate of the Cypress County jail. Two men, wearing

sweatshirts with the words, “Police ICE,” across the front, lean on a government car.

Stan rounded us up this morning, said it was imperative, that’s his word, that the neighbors show some solidarity. So here I am. But we’re not the only ones waiting. Several women hover together, chattering in a strange language, their eyes fixed on the jail. A boy pulls one of the women toward the gate. I look closely. I’m sure he’s the boy I saw at the courthouse. The girl with him stands silent, shivering. Her black hair strings down practically to her waist. She’s looking at me with dark eyes, like she expects something. I look away.

Suddenly, a man emerges from the jail. Is this Jamal? I don’t recognize him. He’s grown a thick, dark beard and his broad shoulders stretch the fabric of his Warriors sweatshirt. I remember him in court as a slender boy; he comes out a swarthy, hairy, beefed up man.

“You want this man back in your neighborhood?” Stan asks me.

No. I don’t. He scares me.

A guard lifts a large ring of keys from his pocket and unlocks the gate. The ICE men move swiftly. But just as they grab Jamal, the two children race forward, hugging his legs, his waist. “Jamal! Jamal!” I watch the ICE men knock the children away, grab Jamal’s arms, handcuff him, and push him toward their car.

Jamal is pleading. “I’m a citizen. I was born here. You can’t do this.”

“Prove it!” one of the men says, shoving him into the back of the car.

As the government car pulls away, Stan and some of the neighbors cheer.

Women are yelling at the car; the boy races after it, arms outstretched, screaming.

“Those poor children.” I say.

A short, heavy-set woman glares at me. “Those poor children are Mohammed and Rina,” she says in harsh, labored English, tugging her flowered headscarf down over her forehead. “Jamal’s brother and sister. Citizens,” she hits every syllable, “of your country. Like Jamal. How you feel about that?”

How do I feel?

Suddenly she’s in my face. I feel the heat of her breath, faint smell of garlic. “They’re children,” she says. “Little children. They need their brother.”

“I’m sorry,” I mutter. “But he broke into my car.”

“He’s done his time,” she hisses. “He’s a poor man, needed money. And he’s paid for it.”

“I don’t ...” I look around for an escape, but Stan is chatting with the rest of his group, paying no heed to this angry woman.

The boy rushes up to us, crying, fists clinched. “Where are they taking him?” He grabs the woman’s arm. “Stop them. Make them stop.”

“Please, Lady.” It’s the little girl, peering up at me. I feel her hand, touching mine. It’s small, so soft. I take it in mine. I know this hand.

I think of endless games of Monopoly, of sewing clothes for the Barbies. Of mac and cheese. We’re laughing, snuggled up together on the sofa, a book in my lap, her sweet soft hand on my arm. Katy.

“Hello,” I say. “Is this your grandmother?”

“Foster mom. Temporary,” the woman says. “Jamal’s the brother. They need him.”

“I’m sorry,” I say again. What else can I say?

She’s looking up at me, the little girl.

“Please Lady, I want to go home.”

So do I. I want to get away as fast as I can.

“A lawyer,” the woman says, looking straight at me. “Jamal needs a lawyer.”

“I can’t ...”

As I make my escape, the woman calls out, “Please. Please. A lawyer.”

I want to say I don’t know any lawyers. But, of course, I do. Half the elders in my church are lawyers. I’ve known them for years.

This is none of my business.

~

Several weeks later, at Stan’s insistence, I attend a meeting of *Sensible Citizens*. He says they are going to discuss Jamal’s case, and I admit I’m curious. Stan’s mood is jubilant as he tells the group that we have won a significant battle in the war against terrorism.

So that’s how he sees it. I think about the kids, Jamal’s brother and sister.

“On to the next step,” he crows. “I’ve learned that Jamal’s first hearing will take place on December 3 in the San Francisco Office on Sansome Street. That’s three weeks from now.” Stan tells us that this hearing is called a Master Calendar hearing, and if Jamal doesn’t show up, he will be automatically deported and not allowed back into the US for ten years. But since Jamal is being detained, ICE has an obligation to notify him of the hearing and tell him he has the right to an attorney at his own expense.

“And that’s our ace in the hole,” Stan says. “No way Jamal has money for a lawyer. And that’s good.”

“What would a lawyer do?” I ask.

“I guess the lawyer would try to prove Jamal is a citizen.”

Stan tells us he has written to the judge describing Jamal’s theft in detail and emphasizing that he is a danger to our community.

~

I go about my life, walking the neighborhood, volunteering at the public library, sketching live models in my college extension class. Active for seventy-five.

I hear that harsh voice screaming for a lawyer.

I find the telephone number of a lawyer I know in the Church directory.

I see the children. What were their names? The boy running after the car. Mohammed.

I pick up the phone.

I see the body trapped under that log, the dark curly hair, my shattered binoculars.

I feel a little girl’s hand. Katy. No, the girl’s name is Rina. *Please, lady.*

Through the window I see the tree, living and dead. Split forever.

I put the phone down. Maybe later.

About the Author: Nancy Bourne's stories have appeared in Upstreet, Carolina Quarterly, The South Carolina Review, Blue Lake, Poydras Review and numerous other publications. Two of Ms. Bourne's stories, "Once By The Pacific" (7/17) and "Faster Than A Roller Coaster" (1/19), appeared in Poydras Review. For a full list of her publications, please see nancybourne.us.

Since retiring as a public school attorney, Ms. Bourne has been writing stories, making pottery in her home studio, and working with prisoners and incarcerated minors on writing projects.

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