

Linda H. Heuring

Bordering on Sainthood

Derwin Hooper stomped on what he thought would be the last cockroach to dance around his kitchen, but as it turned out, the last waltz was for Derwin.

“Die, you mother!” Derwin yelled. He mashed the crusty invader against the linoleum floor with a size 13 Wolverine and ripped the tape off the top of the last of a six pack of aerosol bug foggers. The other five were already spewing their grey smoke into the air in the eight-by-twelve foot kitchen. Derwin rubbed his burning eyes with the sleeve of his “Kiss Me I’m Drunk” T-shirt and accidentally poked fogger number four with a steel toe. The canister skittered through the swirling cloud on the floor to the base of the hot water heater like a hockey puck over fresh ice into an unguarded net. Derwin coughed. It was the last thing he would do.

Carol Ann became a widow while sitting in the drive-thru at Fat Boy’s Burgers and Bikes. She’d ordered the beefy V-twin burger for Derwin and the grilled Biker Chick fillet for herself, with extra fries. Her stomach was churning away at the Mountain Dew she’d downed for breakfast. She’d refused to cook a thing as long as the kitchen was full of roaches. Derwin was full of promises, but his empty stomach finally won him over. Since he was taking steps to fix the problem, Carol Ann was springing for carry-out.

The town fire siren wound up to a scream, and Carol Ann checked her watch. It was only 11:30. Too early for the noon signal. The sliding window on the side of the restaurant opened, and Darlene Applegate hunkered her shoulders diagonally in the square opening so she could get closer to Carol Ann’s Camaro. Carol Ann started to reach for her food, but Darlene was empty-handed.

“You might want to get on home, Carol Ann. Bobby tells me that fire truck’s headed your way.” Darlene’s husband, Bobby, was a dispatcher for the county. As tuned in as she was, Darlene might as well have been carrying a radio herself.

“Not without my food, Darlene. I already paid,” Carol Ann said.

Darlene clucked her tongue and disappeared inside. Carol Ann ran through the gears with the clutch in while she waited. If this was fast food, Carol Ann would hate to see how long it took Darlene to serve up a sit-down dinner. Darlene came back and handed over a brown paper bag with the burgers and drinks.

Carol Ann rummaged through the bag, looking for condiments.

“Got any extra ketchup in there? Derwin freaks out if there’s not enough ketchup.”

Carol Ann had finished half her fries by the time she turned onto her street. She couldn’t get near her own house for all the cars. They hadn’t had this much company since their wedding. It looked like every volunteer firefighter came on his own instead of riding on the truck. There were five pick-up trucks with blue lights still flashing, and there was an ambulance. Sitting on her lawn was the big fire truck, along with the chief’s Hummer the town had gotten with its homeland security money. Fire Chief Don Spradley stood with one foot on the passenger side running board, smoking cigarettes with two other firemen in T-shirts and yellow-suspended pants. Two more, wearing their buttoned-up canvas coats, double-teamed a hose spraying water at what once was her kitchen. Actually, from where she stood in the front yard with her now-greasy burger bag in her hand, there wasn’t much left of the whole north side of her place. It didn’t seem like much of a fire, but something had torched Derwin’s F-150, at least the side she could see. He always parked it in the drive close to the kitchen door. He was going to be pissed. She was surprised she didn’t hear him ranting and raving.

She finished her fries before the Chief noticed she was there. He was taller than her daddy, which was saying something, and he was nearly as wide as Carol Ann was tall. He walked all stiff-legged, and he wheezed when he breathed. Falling off a ladder and fighting rural fires for thirty years will do that to you. He wiped his face on his bare arm. There was a white ring from his eyebrows up where his hat had been. Below that his face was gray as ashes with black charcoal smudges.

“Carol Ann,” he began, then wheezed into a cough. He had one of those long-time smoker’s coughs that started way down somewhere and worked its way up. She handed him a napkin from the burger bag.

“Lordy, Carol Ann. I’m trying to give you the bad news, and here you’re helping me,” he said. He stuffed the napkin in his pocket and wiped his forehead again.

“If you’re fixin’ to tell me my house is half gone, I can see that for myself, Don.”

“It’s not that, Carol Ann. It’s Derwin.” He put a hand on Carol Ann’s shoulder. She wondered if whatever he had in his lungs was catching. “I’m afraid Derwin didn’t make it out. Well, he made it out, but not really. I mean . . . well, for god’s sakes, Carol Ann, he blew himself up. Things are just laying all over the place back there.”

Carol Ann was just going to let that little bit of information slide right on by for now. She wasn’t going to let it into her brain to start bouncing around like a ping-pong ball. No, she was going to just let it sit there, like a name tag on her chest or a sticky note on the

calendar until she was ready to deal with it. It might be there for a while.

“There wasn't much of a fire. I got them spraying things down good just in case,” he said.

She stared at Derwin's truck. Just underneath the passenger door were twisted pots and pans. A kitchen chair was shoved between the front tire and the wheel well.

“Carol Ann,” the Chief said. “You hear me? You okay?”

“I was just getting us some food,” she said. “Couldn't leave him alone for a second. Couldn't even kill a roach without supervision.”

“How, Carol Ann? With those fogger cans?”

“Bombs,” she said. “They call them bombs.”

“Who'd a thought that could really happen?” the Chief said.

He scratched his head and hollered to two guys over by what was left of the house. He was using his official words that Carol Ann always wondered if he learned in fireman school or from watching cop shows on the TV.

“Hey, canvas the scene for any of those fogger cans for bugs. Looks like he was setting them off,” the Chief said.

“Them foggers did this?” Danny Virgin said. He was sifting through the rubble with a rake. He had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. “Who'd a thought that could really happen?”

Carol Ann looked at Danny, then back to the Chief. She just shook her head.

The EMTs gathered up what they could of Derwin and put his various parts in a black plastic bag with a zipper. It wasn't like on TV where a whole team of people with expensive cameras and tight shirts picked up little pieces of glass and fingernails with tweezers. One of two town cops walked around the place for a few minutes and told Carol Ann he was sorry about her loss. Carol Ann sat on the shiny silver floor at the back of the ambulance, dangling her feet. The Chief put a blanket around her shoulders, but it was hot. She draped it over her lap and tried to work a loose thread back into the weave with her fingers. It kept popping back out, no matter how many times she tried. If it was her own blanket, she'd just bite the string off with her teeth. But it wasn't. No telling what that blanket had been on.

“Carol Ann,” one of the EMTs said real quiet, but quite close to her ear. She jumped up and dropped the blanket. Her rear end and both her feet were numb.

“We need to get in there now,” he said. They had arranged the body bag on a folding stretcher. She ran her palm over the top of the bag. It was warm.

“So that's it? That's him?” she said.

Kestrel

“Best we can tell, Carol Ann,” he said. She knew where he had sat in study hall, but she didn’t know his name. “I’m real sorry, you know.” He closed the double back doors of the ambulance one at a time and walked around to the front. Derwin didn’t really need any company in the back at this point. The EMTs drove off slow with their siren making little yipping sounds instead of the long wails it does when there’s the remote possibility of saving the passenger. Carol Ann watched them until they turned the corner.

The last of the firefighters rolled up their hoses and lugged them back to the truck. The Chief stretched yellow plastic tape around the yard, hooking it to the side of the house with a staple gun.

“That’s not for me, is it?” Carol Ann asked. “I got stuff to do in there.”

“Not right now, Carol Ann. Not until I get a fire inspector out here. It’s not safe anyway. Least not yet. We turned off the gas and the ‘lectric. You got someplace to go?”

Carol Ann ticked off the possibilities in her head, but not one of them made any sense to her. No, she was going to sit right here for now. She nodded at Don. It wasn’t really a lie. She did have someplace to go. She just wasn’t going.

A Honda Accord skidded into the front yard, tearing patches of grass out by the roots and coming to a stop just street-side of Carol Ann’s favorite peony bush. Her mother-in-law Peggy jumped out, leaving the door open and the key alarm dinging.

“Where is he? Where’s my baby?” Peggy shouted. She had one hand hooked in her hair and the other back across her forehead like she was going to faint.

“Now, Peggy,” the Chief said, moving slowly toward her with his arms out front, “just calm down, now, honey. It’s going to be all right.”

“Donnie, where’s my baby?” she said, staring hard at Carol Ann, who just stood there.

“He’s gone, Peggy,” he said. “Your Derwin’s gone.”

Peggy staggered. The Chief caught her underneath her arms and held her upright. She slumped against him and started to wail, like one of those women on the news from some other country with chanting in the background. Peggy’s background noise was the dinging key alarm from the Accord. While the Chief patted Peggy on the back and filled her in as to the circumstances of her son’s death, Carol Ann walked over to Peggy’s car and shut the door with her hip. She punched her toe at a patch of grass to see if she could smooth it back over. No luck.

Peggy continued to cry but slid one eye over to Carol Ann. It wasn’t that Carol Ann thought Peggy shouldn’t or wouldn’t be upset

about Derwin. Heck, she had a right to be as upset as anyone, next to Carol Ann herself, of course. It was just how she went about things. Derwin called her “the drama queen.” He used to say that’s what he liked about Carol Ann, her being so different than his momma. Carol Ann thought Peggy just put on that excited act for attention, but she never told that to Derwin. It didn’t matter to her one way or another what Peggy’s intentions were.

Carol Ann, she just took things in stride. As far as Carol Ann was concerned, it was the only way to be in this town where there were always boys jumping off cliffs into the river, shooting each other with BB guns for the fun of it, or playing chicken with their cars on the old highway at night out by the drag strip where the real drivers counted down the pole for the green. The drag strip radio ads had an echo, “Be-be-be there-there-there. Sun-sun day-day. Raceway Park. Be-be there-there.” If you half-listened it almost sounded like “be-be ware-ware,” but that would never occur to the boys hopped up on testosterone and the fumes of burning rubber who floored their Mustangs and Nissans on the count of three, flying with no chute. Derwin was more likely to be found under a hood than looking over one. His best buddy, Trevor, was always blowing up his engine or something equally tragic, and Derwin was the one up to his elbows in grease with a trouble light swinging above his head and a socket wrench stuck through a belt loop. Carol Ann’s big sister Annie was in love with Trevor, and Carol Ann just came along for the ride. After a while, people just considered Derwin and Carol Ann a couple, and in a town that small, that was good enough.

“I drove like a bat out of hell to get here,” Peggy said, “soon as I heard.”

“We noticed,” Carol Ann said. “Me and my grass. A few more feet and they’d a had to get the Jaws of Life to get you out of my bedroom.”

The Chief unwrapped Peggy from his torso. “I got to get back and call the fire inspector.”

He put his hand on Carol Ann’s shoulder for the second time that day. “You need anything, you call me,” he said.

“Peggy,” he nodded to Derwin’s mom and limped to his Hummer and hauled himself up the running board into the seat.

Peggy eyed the bags from Fat Boy’s Carol Ann had put on the porch.

“I rushed all the way over from Princeton. Didn’t even stop for lunch,” Peggy said. Carol Ann sat on the porch and opened the bag. She pulled out her chicken sandwich and munched a few of Derwin’s fries.

“You going to eat all that?” Peggy asked.

Kestrel

Carol Ann pushed the open bag over toward Peggy. The porch boards squeaked when she sat down.

“Got any extra ketchup?” Peggy rummaged around in the bag, and then stuck her finger inside the bun on Derwin’s sandwich. “Pretty cold.”

“Well, my microwave may be out back somewhere,” Carol Ann said. Peggy started crying again. Carol Ann re-wrapped her own sandwich and put it in the bag. She couldn’t swallow right, and she wasn’t even crying. Peggy seemed to manage somehow, maybe by washing it down with a drink.

“Kind of watery,” Peggy said.

“Ice melted,” Carol Ann said. “I did have some tea made . . .”

They both looked toward the back of the house. Peggy cried some more.

“Who’d a thought that would happen?” Peggy said when her shoulders stopped shaking. She blew her nose on a napkin from the bag.

Maybe the people who wrote the directions, Carol Ann said to herself. To Peggy she said, “It says on the box to turn off any appliances with a pilot light.”

“So?” Peggy said.

“So, there’s a pilot light on the kitchen stove and on the water heater, and that’s in the kitchen.”

“Are you saying my boy couldn’t read? He was good at readin’.”

“He can read, Peggy. He don’t bother to read anything like directions, but he can read just fine.”

“Don’t be bad mouthing him. He could read,” Peggy said.

Carol Ann took in a deep breath and let it out real slow. She dumped her watered-down drink in a pot of geraniums at the corner of the porch. It wasn’t Carol Ann who was the critical one, and it never had been. Carol Ann dealt in facts. If the roaches were in the kitchen, it wasn’t sanitary to cook. It didn’t matter to her if Derwin or one of his buddies dragged them in the house inside a cardboard case of fresh long necks or if she herself carried the eggs home in a paper grocery sack. What mattered is they were there, and they were multiplying. Derwin’s mom, though, she would have cared plenty who brought the nasty creatures into the house. And once she knew? Pick, pick, pick. Derwin didn’t say a thing that day Peggy told him he wasn’t welcome at her dinner table unless he scrubbed the grease out from under his nails. Carol Ann could see with her own eyes that the stains were pretty much permanent. He used that liquidy paste cleaner and soap with real volcano lava, but his hands never came clean. Peggy’s car ran just fine, though, thanks to those hands. At home that night Carol Ann kissed

each finger, even though Derwin tried to pull them away. "They're all stained and rough, Carol Ann," he protested. She kissed them anyway, and rubbed them against her cheeks.

Peggy dug a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket and offered one to Carol Ann. Carol Ann shook her head.

"You know I quit," she said.

"I thought maybe you'd need one about now," Peggy said, inhaling deep inside somewhere.

Carol Ann felt like she had been smoking something awful. The air was not real smoky, but it had that fire smell even though it was mostly an explosion. It smelled like burnt food and insecticide. Her tongue tasted like bug spray. She dug another napkin out of the bag and wiped her tongue.

"Gross," Peggy said. She tapped her ashes onto the porch.

Carol Ann closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the side of the house. "Say it ain't so, Joe," she heard Derwin say somewhere inside her head. She and Derwin had watched *Eight Men Out* on DVD just last night. They usually picked up a pizza and rented a movie on Friday nights, but last night they watched one they owned. Derwin had almost every word memorized. She'd gotten him the DVD for Christmas because the VHS he had was taped off the TV and had commercials. This summer they wanted to go to Chicago and see a White Sox game. They weren't playing at Comisky Park anymore, Derwin explained. That stadium was torn down in 1991. He had begged his parents to take him there before it was gone, but no dice. He was just six, so they didn't take him serious. Even then his baseball card collection meant as much to him as his Hot Wheels. They built New Comisky, but then some phone company handed over \$68 million to get it named after them. "That makes the hundred grand the Black Sox were to get seem like chump change," Derwin told her. She'd left those Chicago pamphlets she sent off for on the kitchen table when she went to pick up some lunch. She imagined them fluttering to the ground in the backyard or maybe into the bed of Derwin's truck. Say it ain't so.

"You call the insurance?" Peggy said.

Carol Ann shook her head. "I haven't left the place."

"Where's your cell phone, then?"

Carol Ann pointed at her car.

"You just going to leave it there?"

Carol Ann nodded. Peggy lit another cigarette.

For the most part the gawkers driving by slow didn't interrupt them. Carol Ann knew it was just people paying their respects. Darlene Applegate drove by after a while and hung half out the window of her Toyota. Carol Ann thought she must have a thing about hanging out

windows. Darlene didn't say anything, just hung there for a while and then moved on. One car broke from the informal procession, though, and parked right in the drive behind the truck. The guy who got out had a badge hanging around his neck and a camera.

“You that fire inspector?” Peggy called from the porch.

“You expecting an inspector?” the man asked. He walked closer, right along the line of the police tape, and put one foot up on the porch step. Carol Ann looked at his badge. It was just a business card hanging in a plastic case. The print was too little to read his name, but the *Herald-Dispatch* was on there in big print. Not so official after all.

“Ben Darnell, *Herald-Dispatch*.”

“Peggy Hooper, mother of the deceased,” Peggy said. She wiped crumbs from her lap with the back of her hand, then wiped her eyes. “This here’s the widow, Carol Ann.”

Carol Ann looked at Peggy. What, now she was in some episode of *Law and Order*? She’d seen the reporter before. He sometimes came in the hospital late at night, trying to talk to families. Sometimes he’d walk right over the floor Carol Ann had just washed, as if the “Wet Floor—Caution” signs were invisible. Maybe he was the one who couldn’t read. He pulled a notepad out of his hip pocket and held it close to his eyes. He wrote right next to his face with his left hand. Then he looked at Carol Ann.

“With an ‘e’?”

“No, ‘y’. Like Peggy Lee,” Peggy said.

“Who?”

Peggy looked crushed. Carol Ann shifted her weight. She felt like the whole house was pushing on her where she sat.

“Where have I seen you before?” he asked Carol Ann.

“Small town,” she said. He continued to stare at her.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a recent picture of your husband, would you, uh . . .,” he looked at his notes, “Carol Ann?”

Carol Ann started to open the front door, but stopped when she remembered what the Chief had said. What the heck, she thought. She put her shoulder to the door and went on in.

“You all stay there,” she said from inside.

Her living room was usually dark and cool in the summer, but today it was anything but. The whole left wall, the one that connected to the kitchen, was gone. Carol Ann could see the F-150 and part of the back yard, too. Books and CDs and DVDs were thrown everywhere. Some looked good as new. Others were ripped or burned around the edges, and there was melted plastic stuck to the couch that looked like part of the TV. On the other side of the room, where Derwin had made her special shelf to hold her three Precious Moments statues and a glass frame with his best baseball card, things weren’t so bad. The

baseball card frame had some water on the front. She wiped it on her jeans. Looked like it was okay inside. Her statues were wet, too, and one was knocked over. The one from the wedding cake was cracked. The other two, one for each anniversary, would dry off just fine. She needed a bag to carry stuff in. She turned toward the kitchen, but saw it wasn't there. She put the statues back on the shelf, shoved the baseball card and frame into the waistband at the back of her jeans and walked outside to the porch.

The reporter was sitting next to Peggy on the steps, writing fast, the notepad nearly resting on his nose.

Peggy was finishing a family story about Derwin rescuing the evil and overweight cat of an elderly neighbor. Somehow the psychotic cat became a frightened and helpless kitten. "How'd you think that cat got up in that tree in the first place?" Carol Ann wanted to ask Peggy. "Derwin flung him up there, that's how."

"He was always rescuing animals and bringing them home," Peggy said. "He was good with little children, too. And an excellent reader." She dropped an eyebrow toward Carol Ann with that one.

The reporter turned to Carol Ann.

"No pictures," she said. She leaned against the side of the house. The deep frame cut into her back a bit. It was the first thing she'd felt besides numbness and heat in a few hours.

"He was a real animal person. He used to fix the van for the animal shelter for free," Peggy added.

This morning Derwin was just Carol Ann's hungry husband who was finally going to do something about those roaches. Now to hear Peggy tell it, he was practically bordering on sainthood.

"Chief Spradley tells me those bug bombs caused this," he said. "Who'd have thought that could happen?"

Carol Ann shrugged.

"What would you want to say to the people who make those things if you could talk to them right now?"

"I think they should be outlawed," Peggy said. "I think they should pay for killing my baby." She started crying again.

"So, you'd start a crusade to get them banned?"

"That's it," Peggy said. "A crusade."

Carol Ann crossed the porch and opened her car door. She set the baseball card in its frame on the floorboard in the back. Derwin had given her this car for a wedding present. It took him almost a year to fix it up. They drove to Louisville and Cincinnati to get parts without even taking time to see the ballparks. Everything was original. Like the two of them. She slipped into the driver's seat that Derwin had mounted at just the right height for her and pushed in the clutch. One late night she sat on a little rolling stool in the garage, smoking and

Kestrel

sipping a beer, watching Derwin work on her car. He dropped a bolt that rolled underneath the car, and when she went to retrieve it she cut her arm on something sharp by the new bumper. She stopped the blood with a shop rag, but Derwin took her over to the sink and washed the cut and put on a Band-Aid.

“Cover it up, and it won’t hurt any more. Don’t even look at it until it gets its scab,” he said, kissing the bandage.

The Camaro’s engine hummed in front of her, muted, but powerful. “She’s just like you,” Derwin used to tell her, grinning.

“Carol Ann,” Peggy hollered. “What do you think you’re doing?”

In the rearview mirror, Carol Ann saw the reporter walking toward her. She rotated the mirror up to face the roof and put her in gear. The car ran like she always did, the gasoline pouring into the carburetor fueling the pistons in their cylinders that moved with precision to carry Carol Ann wherever she wanted to go.

About a mile from town she saw the Chief’s Hummer coming toward her. He stopped in the middle of the road and backed up. She did the same.

“Need anything, Carol Ann?”

She shook her head and adjusted the rearview mirror.

“When you coming back?”

Carol Ann started to shrug, then changed her mind.

“When the scab forms,” she said.

Don looked toward Carol Ann, but she knew he was looking past her, to thirty years of flames and soot and falling rafters and bodies beyond recognition.

“Till then,” he said, and he pulled away. She did the same.

