

Keeping Their House in Order

The elders were wise. They knew that a man's heart, away from nature, becomes hard; they knew that lack of respect for growing, living things, soon led to lack of respect for humans, too.

Chief Luther Standing Bear, Lakota Sioux

It's the summer of another year

A little world weary a little more to fear

Hold those cards tight to your chest

Outside World, Midnight Oil

KEN DONNELLY HAD BEEN ALEX'S NEIGHBOR FOR SEVEN YEARS and every May drove up Highway 50 from the Sacramento Valley to spend his summers at Lake Tahoe. He wasn't particularly fond of mountain life and hated to shovel snow, so the house remained vacant during the winter months. But from spring to fall he loved the solitude that the vacation home offered and time away from his auto dealership in Sacramento. Leaving the management duties in the hands of a trusted employee, the business practically ran itself. Weekly updates by telephone and sales reports received via e-mail provided any needed information—he was perfectly content to be away from the office for five months out the year. During the days he enjoyed sleeping late and spending time alone. And most every night, a cab would pick him up and drive him to the casinos where he sat at a blackjack or craps table until sunrise the next day.

To satisfy his gaming appetite in the valley, he would often patronize the local Indian Casinos, but too often would see someone he knew; a client or business associate. At his mountain home away from work, he was free of worry.

He once thought of buying a place down in Laughlin, southern Nevada. There were more casinos there, he could get a larger home for his money and it didn't matter to him that it was out in the middle of the desert. But Tahoe was closer, and as much time as he spent test driving cars with customers, he did not want to travel much farther than the Nevada border. Tahoe was the closest gambling town, and because of that, his summer escape.

Ken got out of his car and stretched his bulky body, invoking needed motivation to unpack after being on the highway for so long. Across the street, he noticed Alex walking out his front door. Sometimes when Alex was working in his garage, Ken would take him a can of beer and discuss mundane topics such as the current weather, the rising cost of homes and how big a winter it had been. He accepted that it was probably wise to at least attempt to be friendly with one neighbor and Alex kept an eye on his house during the off-season. After seven months of meeting quotas and working the crew, Ken mostly wanted to be alone during the days and gamble away the nights. If he did happen to get lonely, there would be the occasional trip deeper into Nevada to visit one of the "ranches."

"Hey, Ken how you doin'?" Alex shouted from across the street and walked to the end of his dandelion infested lawn. "I always know summer is here when I see your car in the driveway."

"You bet." Ken scratched at a corner of his grey, receding hairline. "Couldn't wait to get out of the valley."

"It must be good to escape the heat—get up to the cool, clean air."

"Nothing better." Ken thought about how he really didn't give a shit about the heat or clean air. The casinos had climate control and he had been smoking Pall Malls since he was thirteen. Forty years later he wondered if his lungs had ever experienced clean air.

“Well, welcome back.” Alex’s eyes squinted from the brightness of the morning sun.

“Thanks. I guess you guys didn’t have much of a winter up here.”

“No, not really. What little snow we got is melting fast. It’s going to be a dry summer.”

“Yeah, they’ll probably be rationing the water for our lawns again,” Ken said thinking that he probably would not even bother working in his yard this year.

“I’m doing an interview at the utility district next week. It’ll be interesting hearing firsthand what they expect to do this summer. Speaking of meetings,” Alex said looking at his wristwatch, “I’m going to be late for one if I don’t get going.”

“I won’t keep you.” Ken turned to unlock the rear hatch of the dealer SUV. The compartment area was a tightly packed conglomerate of varying suitcases and boxes, a systematic stacking of luggage making efficient use of most all usable area.

“Yeah, we’ll talk later—looks like you have some unpacking.” Alex walked across the lawn to the driveway. The Jeep started, idled roughly for a few minutes then rolled out of the driveway. The transmission whined in rebuttal as it sped down the street leaving a haze of blue smoke hanging in the air. Ken couldn’t remember Alex owning any other vehicle and a new purchase was definitely overdue. Maybe he would talk to him at the end of summer—offer him a deal.

Ken carried a suitcase up the stone path to the front door of the house. Slipping the key into the lock, he anticipated the musty smell of the house. After unboarding the windows it would soon air out, then a couple of cigarettes later it would be home again. The house was never rented out to skiers or offered to any friends over the holidays so he was always assured that the place would be exactly how he had left it.

As the door swung open, he noticed a small piece of circuitry lying on the stone tile of the entryway. The house was filled with cave-like darkness, the open doorway casting muted light across the front room. A chip of black plastic rested against the leg of an end table. A lamp, tipped upside down, leaned from the top of the table to the floor, held in that position by a taut black electric cord like a dead man hanging from a tree. The piece of circuitry glittered through the dimness, small wires criss-crossing over a slick green surface. Ken sat his bag on the porch and shuffled sideways back to the car. As he opened the passenger’s side door and then the glove compartment, his eyes twitched rhythmically to the house. Pushing aside neatly arranged maps, pens, and packs of matches, his fingers found the butt of the .22 revolver. Ken hated two things more than anything else; surprise and disorder.

He walked back to the front door, a pause between each step as he reentered the house. With the gun raised in one hand, he flicked the light switch with the other and scanned the front room. Next to the leaning lamp, a window shade hung limply with long tears through its fabric. Aside from this one area of destruction, nothing else in the room appeared to be out of place. Proceeding down the hallway he noticed another piece of plastic resting on an oval-shaped throw rug, this one with a small white numeral—the number “three.” Ken recognized it as being one of the buttons to his television remote control; the rest of the electronic fragments trailing down the hall as he made his way to the kitchen. His normally stoic face quivered when Ken turned on the lights, and a thin cry squeezed out of his mouth sounding like a high-pitched whistle.

All the doors of the new pine cabinetry he had painstakingly installed last summer were swung wide open. One of them, ripped from its brass hinges, now rested on the hardwood floor covered in a sea of broken glass. Cupboards had been wiped clean of canned and packaged food items, crushed containers strewn across the tile countertops and onto the kitchen floor. Dishes and plates once organized in neat stacks were now toppled over, none of them surviving the fall. Dishtowels dangled from an open cabinet dusted with a thin coating of green, the bi-product of a ripped-open can of Comet cleanser that once sat underneath the sink. The open refrigerator was mostly empty, the same way it had been left last summer. But the wire racks had been pulled out and were now a twisted ball of thin metal resembling an abstract sculpture. One lone item had been left in the side of the door from his last visit—a plastic Heinz ketchup bottle. It was now

ripped open and sat in the middle of the floor encircled by long tongue marks that looked like the passionate brushstrokes of a Van Gogh painting.

In the bedroom, Ken found the mattress lying sideways against the wall, the material shredded backwards off one end revealing a network of coiled springs. Reeling from the surrounding chaos, the calculator in his mind kept adding up the costs, the balance climbing higher. He figured it was now in the neighborhood of fifteen-hundred. Most everything he owned at the vacation home was replaceable except for one thing. He marched down the hallway to the entertainment room.

Ken always discarded anything that was not absolutely needed, never holding onto items that were not major necessities, especially ones that held any emotional baggage. But there was one thing he cherished and continued to maintain—his prized shot glass collection. The few times friends had visited, he would show it off with great pride, much to their amusement. He had five shelves filled with shot glasses from all over the world, all arranged in a perfect sequence of acquisition, a timeframe of his life. During his younger years he had spent a lot of time traveling and all the tiny glasses boasted of different countries, places and events that had been visited: Big Ben in England; the Eiffel Tower in Paris; Oktoberfest in Germany. The themes of the collection evolved as more recent glasses had a domestic flavor: Las Vegas, Nevada; Atlantic City, New York; and of course, Stateline, Nevada. The ones on the bottom shelf had the colorful logos of Sacramento and central valley casinos printed across their sides: Thunder Valley; Colusa Casino; and Cache Creek Indian Casino.

Walking into the entertainment room, he was relieved to see the big screen television still intact, allowing the calculator to take a brief rest. But in front of the row of bookshelves was a pile of debris, broken glass and mangled paper. A box once full of Cuban cigars that resided on the top shelf now lay wide open on the floor with only a few remaining. He picked it up and held it to his nose, the smell of sweet tobacco still lingering in the corners of the container. A variety of books and magazines rested in a haphazard heap with their pages crumpled and torn, teeth imprints embossed across the covers. And every shot glass had been knocked to the floor. The few that survived the descent looked as though they had been trampled, small shards ground deep into the carpet. In the middle of the broken glass a swirling mound of fecal matter had dried with a whitening hardness. The cost of destruction had now exceeded its limits and Ken kicked the remnants of his collection with the toe of his Tom McCann loafer, the pieces tumbling across the carpet like dice.

Cocking the pistol, he went back to the kitchen and followed the ketchup-stained footprints across the dining area and to the steps leading down to the cellar. He grabbed a flashlight from a cabinet in front of the open door and fed it three D-size batteries. As careful and meticulous as Ken usually was when locking the house up for the winter, he remembered being slightly dazed last year. He believed that leaving the Lake on an upswing would result in good luck awaiting him upon his return. But a frantic departure was made after a long losing streak—a scenario almost always avoided. The losses of those last two weeks could very easily have resulted in leaving the cellar door open and the ensuing destruction. His superstition confirmed.

The wooden steps squeaked with each footstep, puffs of breath piercing the darkness. The flashlight beam bounced across walls filled with gardening tools—a row of shovels, hoes and rakes in various shapes and sizes, most of them still having their sales stickers attached. A draft swept by his face and he turned to see that the cellar door had indeed been left open. Either that, or the lock had been broken.

A low groan caused Ken to swing around, tendons tightening across his shoulders as the circle of light brought the corner of the cellar into view. Standing statue-like on the cement floor of the basement, Ken tried to keep the beam steady as he raised the gun, the hairs on the back of his neck bending against his shirt collar. A rushing sound of escaping air followed by long draws of breath emanated from the darkness. The circle of light traveled across the floor to a small pile of chewed cigars as specks of dust floated in the air, each in their own independent orbit.

Completing its path to the corner of the room, the light beam encircled the massive body of the bear, its fur matted with crushed food from the kitchen cabinets. As it continued to snore, movement from under one of its arms caused Ken to reposition the light. Two small heads rested in the thickness of the arm, the cubs curled into one another like puzzle pieces. Lowering the gun, Ken walked backwards out of the cellar with carefully placed footsteps.