

America's Most Wanted

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I'm coming home from City Market when I spot the other vehicle in my drive.

"Look," I say. "Visitors."

The dog lifts his head. He wags and shifts on the seat.

It's been a rough week. I had the kids that weekend. When Jo Ann came to pick them up, she told me she was thinking of relocating to California. She said she wanted to get a new start. Jo Ann has a sister in Santa Clara, a secretary at a software place.

"When would all this happen?" I asked.

"June or July," Jo Ann said. "After the kids get out of school."

Jacob and Brianna were already in the car. I picked at the edge of the door jamb, distracted in spite of myself. I noticed the wet spring light, the scraggly lawn. I thought, *I have to re-seed that.*

"This rut I'm in," Jo Ann said. "There are opportunities out there, Dennis." She's started to call me by name. It puts our relationship on a businesslike footing. I half expected her to open her purse and hand me her business card. Especially when she said I should think about moving to California, too.

I pictured Jo Ann typing in a sleek building, in an office park with its own freeway off-ramp, instead of the little insurance office here in Cedar Springs. I pictured Santa Clara—the palm-lined boulevards and attractive shopping malls. Disneyland for grown-ups.

"What's so funny?" she said.

I told her I wished her well.

“Okay, Dennis. Okay,” she said.

The kids twisted around under the seat belts, waving good-bye.

All this is on my mind as I turn in the driveway, foot off the gas, gravel crunching under my wheels, and pull in behind the car—a white Cherokee, a rental.

It’s a couple. They’re poking around out back, where the trail where I walk Moose goes down to the wash. Technically, they’re not trespassing. The trail is public, part of our development’s conservation easement. I let Moose run up and give them a friendly greeting.

“Hello there,” the girl says to the dog. “Hello there.” She scrunches the agreeable fur around his neck. “Hi,” she says to me. “Sorry. We thought this place was empty.”

The blinds are down. It’s April, and the Christmas lights are still strung along the eaves. I can see why she would think that.

“I was just out doing some grocery shopping,” I say. Thank God for grocery bags! They make anyone look normal and well adjusted.

The girl is skinny, small-boned. Her legs show through her flowered dress. I take in the dress, the flutter of hair, the expensive leather hiking boots.

And then the guy comes up, muttering, “They developed this place. I don’t believe it.”

“The sign back there said Jacks Mesa?” the girl says to me.

“This is it,” I say.

“Okay,” she says, looking around. “When I saw these houses, I thought we made a wrong turn.”

"It's changed," the guy says.

"This community was built about five years ago," I say.

"That was after we were here." The girl shades her eyes with her hand, scanning the ridge to the east. She's not as young as I thought at first. Late twenties, maybe.

I understand their confusion. They remember the mesa from before the houses were built, and before the new nine-hole golf course, green as poured paint against the red rock. I remember it too. But the houses don't have that raw new look some places do, like they were hauled in on a trailer. There's landscaping. The lots are big. I used to play a little golf myself.

"Sorry," the guy apologizes. "I don't mean to be rude. You think a place won't change. Everything changes."

"I hate to be a bother," the girl says. "But do you have a bathroom I could use?"

Sometimes it takes another pair of eyes to show you. Things not picked up. Dishes, glasses, meals on the couch. This just since the weekend.

"Why don't we go into the family room," I say. I scoop up the newspapers, the cans and bottles, and whisk them away. It feels like I've cleared a space.

The family room is an extension off the kitchen, one step down. The back wall is glass. I pull back the blinds, let some light in.

"Wow," the girl says when she comes back. "Wow."

It's the same view you see from outside. I admit, framed in the window, it's impressive.

I go back and forth from the kitchen to the family room, first with three cans of soda, then with three empty glasses. I'm out of ice again.

"We haven't seen too many tourists this year," I say. "Not since the incident this winter."

The girl gets up from the couch. "You know," she says, "I have to go out on the deck. Your view is amazing."

"Be my guest," I say.

"It must get hot in the summer," the guy says. "How about winters? Are the winters bad?"

"We get some snow," I say. "It's usually gone in a day or two. More snow the higher up you go, of course. We're about five thousand foot elevation here."

"Right," the guy says.

"You get four seasons," I say.

Out on the deck, the girl snaps a picture with a pocket camera. She leans in through the doorway. "We've thought about getting a place out here."

"It's a good place," I say. "You could do worse."

"What would you say a house goes for around here?" the guy asks me, in a serious voice. "A house like this."

"Well," I say. I name a figure for some places I happen to know are available. "That's just ballpark, of course."

"That's wild," the guy says. "If I told you what you get for that price in the Bay Area. Maybe a one-bedroom. Maybe."

The girl comes in from the deck. "You mentioned an incident," she says. "I heard about that." She turns to the guy. "There was a shoot-out. It was on America's Most Wanted. Cedar Springs."

She tells the story we all know. I watch her mouth. How, one day this past January, three men from a town near us took their guns and went for a ride. One of them drove, and the other two shot from the truck as it went up and down our quiet roads. They shot a man in his front yard. Then, when the sheriff's men went after them, they shot and killed two men before getting away. They're still at large.

"The funny thing is," I put in, "they were going thirty, thirty-five tops, until the end. They stayed under the speed limit. If you think about it, it makes some kind of sense. They weren't being chased yet."

"Right," the girl says.

"Incredible," the guy says.

"They came down this road, the same road you took to get here," I say.

"Oh, my God," the girl says.

"Come on outside," I say, setting down my drink. "I'll show you something."

I point out the spot where the bullet hit, near the kitchen window. The girl snaps a picture of the hole, a small nick in the stucco.

"A shoot-out," she says. "That's so wild west."

In the kitchen, when no one's looking, I freshen my drink. Then it's back to the family room.

"This area," the guy is saying. "There's something about it."

I ask where they're from.

"San Francisco," the girl says.

"Yeah," the guy says. "I still think of myself as being from New York though. I've been in California what? Ten years now?" He shakes his head.

There's something about them, or something about me. Something unlikable. I take a swallow of my soda, taste the whiskey in my throat.

"Did you grow up in this area?" the guy asks. He puts out his hand. "My name's Patrick, by the way."

The girl leans forward. "Bethany."

"Dennis," I say. "I guess you could say I grew up here."

We should have stayed strangers. Folks at a crossroads, about to move on. We don't need to know each other's names. A moment like this can stop a conversation.

The guy gets up. "Mind if I?"

"Just down the hall."

There's a pause before the bathroom door clicks shut. It's the hallway with the family photos. I think, fine. Let him look.

I turn my attention to the girl. She's cute. I rerun the last half hour in my head, only she shows up without her boyfriend. We strike up a conversation. What do you know? We have things in common.

"So, Dennis, what do you do out here?" she asks me, for real.

"I'm a contract archaeologist," I say. I figure this is still the truth even though my last contract was close to a year ago. "Say there's a development or a new road, I'll go in and do a site survey and do a

report and say okay, you can build here, or not.”

“That’s interesting,” the girl says. “Did you do it for this place? This development?”

“Me and a gal from Durango,” I say.

“So it was okay to build here?” the girl asks.

“No significant cultural resources were found,” I say, carefully.

“I probably shouldn’t be showing you this,” she says, reaching into her pack and taking out something wrapped in bubble wrap. Inside all the plastic is a small black and white Mesa Verde bowl. She passes it to me.

“I won’t turn you in,” I say. It’s a nice piece. About five inches across, with a pattern of bold black checks and stair-steps. “Where’d it come from?” I ask, handing it back.

“Out there. We came here to put it back.” She points out the window. “Do you think those men who are wanted are out there? Do you think it’s safe?”

“I believe they’re out there,” I say. “Hiding out.”

“I’m not superstitious,” she says, “but we’ve had some bad luck since we picked this up.” She touches the rim of the bowl. “I thought we could find the place. It looks all different.”

There was some friction between her and the guy. I could feel it. Between the two of them, it was minor. But this energy could turn on me. They were in my house, and I didn’t know who they were.

“We talk about getting a house,” the girl, Bethany, says. “But will we do it?”

The guy comes back in the room. Sees the bowl out on the table.

“Dennis is an archaeologist, sweetie,” the girl says, quickly.
“Guess what. When they built these houses, they didn’t find any significant cultural resources.”

“There was no evidence of a village, no extended occupation,” I say. “That doesn’t mean no artifacts. You can’t put a shovel in the ground around here without finding artifacts.”

“All this time,” the girl says. “I was worried we disturbed something.”

“Did you tell how you found it?” says the guy.

“No,” she says.

“Tell how you found it,” he says.

“Well.” She hesitates. “It was out there, on the other side of the wash. Along those cliffs. We were hiking. It just kind of caught my eye. That’s how you find things, isn’t it? You sort of unfocus your vision?”

“Sure,” I say.

“It was on a ledge, between two rocks. A tree branch had grown in front of it.”

“You always think you might find something,” the guy says.

I tip back my glass, get warm soda tinged with alcohol.

“So,” I say. “You two been married long?”

The girl laughs. “We’re not.”

“Married,” the guy finishes.

“I was married eight years,” I say. “My wife and I have two children. Their names are Jacob and Brianna. Those are their pictures in the hall.”

The bowl sits on the table, looking perfectly natural. It's not an artifact. It's just a bowl. You could put some nuts in it, or chips, or something.

I can't stand those museums with case after case of pots, the dim light. Preservation. The point of it escapes me just now.

"I'll feel so much better once it's back where it belongs," the girl says.

In my mind's eye I see her crossing the wash, kneeling, setting the object in the dirt. The false ceremony. Put it back and walk away? No. Life's not like that.

"I wouldn't have taken it if it had been broken," the girl says.

"It was just this perfect thing."

"You can't do this," I say.

"Excuse me?" she says.

"I'm speaking as an archaeologist, you understand." I get up from my chair. "You removed something from its original location. You can't just put it back wherever you feel like it."

"What are you saying?" the girl says. "Are you saying I should keep it?"

"That's not what I'm saying," I say.

The girl stares at me. "Well, do I put it back or do I keep it?"

Other people live on this road. They didn't have to pick my house, but they did.

"Moose!" I snap my fingers. "Here, boy."

He gets up from the spot he likes. He comes running.

"Tell you what." I get the keys from the shelf by the garage door.

"You like this house? You like this view? It's yours." I toss the keys, catching the guy off guard. He throws up his hand. The keys hit off his palm and drop to the floor.

"Excuse me?" the girl says.

"You did say you liked it," I say.

"Yes, but," says the girl.

The guy laughs. He picks up the keys and hands them back.

I see I'm not making myself clear. I push the keys into the guy's palm and fold his fingers over them. I say, "This is your lucky day."

Moose jumps into the truck, ready to go. I follow him. It's the easiest thing I've ever done. I drive nice and slow, under the speed limit, and no one comes after me. Only now I'm thinking about it. How I can't turn around and take it back. I've got to stay out here. □