Country Junction

TOM MILLER JUVIK

Talk to anyone in the county about the murder of Al DeLancy, the explanation will be the same. "Senseless. Absolutely senseless."

Prior to the day Charlie Munger shot the only man who gave two cents about him, he had never been accused of much beyond playing with a short deck, so it is easy to throw around the word "senseless" and all its synonyms. This assessment is true, but not the way most folks suspect.

Since Al's death, the self-proclaimed "Porch Potatoes" who hang out on the benches under the covered deck that forms the entrance to Country Junction Store have put aside their political debates and theories regarding the decline of salmon in Puget Sound. To most of them, the killing would seem more understandable had it occurred at one of those franchise convenience stores in the big city. They could almost accept such a deed had it been done by a stranger, some gang-banger or meth freak bent on robbery.

"But a friend?" They slurp coffee, light cigarettes, shrug at the traffic light that interrupts the busy road that runs from town to the new tribal casino.

Al was a tall, muscular man with a full head of curly, rust-colored hair. His laugh was so hearty, it resounded across the parking lot even when traffic was heavy. His smile was genuine, big enough to keep folks coming to his mom-and-pop grocery store even after the Texaco Food Mart opened across the road. Indeed, when Country Junction

started doing business twenty years ago, nothing but evergreen and madrona trees surrounded it. During the forty-three years Joyce and I lived on Hillcrest Road, the majority of our neighbors worked ten or twenty acre family farms. Now, developers have bought up much of this land, building tract house communities with names like Briarwood and Ravenwood and Woodridge.

In the midst of such change, Country Junction Store has remained what Al made it—a home away from home. Despite the asphalt parking lot and a reader board advertising beer prices, it really does look like a house—two stories with cedar shingles and a shake roof. Planter boxes surrounding the porch come alive with red, white, and purple petunias during spring and summer. Al's family lives in the five rooms above and behind the store. Business is transacted in what used to be the living room and dining room before a layoff at the shipyard forced Al to find a new line of work. At the end of the store closest to the counter is a cooler filled with beer, soft drinks, and dairy; at the far end, a small freezer section offers ice cream and TV dinners. Filling the space between are a half-dozen shelves filled with such essentials as bread, canned goods, and snack food. At Country Junction, a decent cup of coffee costs fifty cents—free refills. For "regulars" down on their luck, Al often ran a tab. If your bank account ran dry, he'd float your check till payday. Al DeLancy did this and more for the man who would eventually murder him, an irony so harsh it provokes talk of vigilante revenge.

During such conversations, I listen without remark. This was not always the case. For nearly two decades, I presided over the Porch Potatoes, a retired civics teacher and World War II veteran who could

hold forth until the cows came home. Three years ago, a stroke rendered anything beyond the monosyllabic nearly impossible. These days, when I'm not sitting on the porch, I can be found puttering around the premises. Not many folks would consider hiring an eighty-four year old mute who hobbles around on a cane, but Al did.

This was last year, a week after my wife's funeral. Since I hadn't shown up at the store to pick up the morning paper, Al came by to personally deliver a copy of the Tribune, bringing along donuts and coffee for two.

When he spotted the .38 Special on the end table beside my recliner, he gripped my shoulders with his big, farm boy hands and flashed that trademark single-dimple smile. "You know, ever since my kids got their drivers licenses, ain't neither of them around when I need a hand. Come work for me, Old Thing. The job don't pay squat and the boss is a total jerk. Talk about perfect!"

He got a laugh out of me on a day when I figured on never laughing again. For that, I will always be grateful (however long "always" may prove to be for a man my age), just as I am beholden for the nickname. While "Old Thing" doesn't sound any too complimentary, it has proven to be a great relief from the condescending "young man" the clerks, cashiers, and waitresses in town are so fond of tossing my direction. Al anointed only the most devoted regulars with such custom-tailored monikers. Everyone else was "Buddy," as in, "How you doing today, Buddy?" Or, the favorite among Porch Potatoes whenever Al stepped out the door to address the faithful, "Hey, there, Buddies, ain't you supposed to be somewhere?" Man, woman, or child—you were "Buddy" until he could think up something better.

Charlie Munger never received a nickname, but this is only further evidence of Al's kindness. Munger was not the sort of fellow bright enough to handle a laugh at his own expense. A burly wolverine of a man in his mid-thirties, he favored sweat-stained tank tops advertising alcoholic beverages. His beat-up, hand-painted camouflaged van would pull in around mid-morning almost every day. After purchasing a pack of smokes, he would sit on the porch for a time, eyes hangdog empty. Early in the evening, he would come by again, usually to pick up something for his mother. Unless she wrote him a note, he would forget what it was and Al would have to call the house.

Munger's only known companion was Tim, a pimple-faced, emaciated stoner whose reddish-brown mullet was becoming gray and threadbare. Early in the month, Tim would drive him around town in a blue Camaro patched with gray primer, helping him spend his Social Security disability check. The chain stores in town never even blinked when Tim hovered behind Munger's shoulder at the cash register, but Al was a different story. Sometimes, Munger would try to buy two, three cases of beer and a couple of cartons of cigarettes. Al always refused, reading Tim the riot act on several occasions and even going so far as to drive out to the Munger house to have a heart-to-heart with Charlie and his mother.

Although Al never allowed cruelty on the premises, the Porch Potatoes secretly referred to Tim as "The Leech." If his Camaro swung into the Country Junction parking lot, it usually meant he was tapped out and needed Al to extend his tab. The day after the murder, I checked the black book under the counter. Over the past three months, he had not paid anything on a balance of two-hundred-forty-seven dollars.

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The days between the time Al hired me until the murder go something like this: Just after dawn, I drive the half-mile down Hillcrest Road to the Country Junction Store. Good days, I work four, maybe five hours—sweeping the parking lot, dry-mopping the hardwood floor, rotating stock, refilling hotpots with fresh-brewed coffee. Whenever I feel ambitious, I grab the handtruck and move a couple half-racks of beer from storeroom to cooler, which takes just about forever. Some evenings, when things get too lonesome around the house, I head back to the store and sit on the porch, listening to folks chew the fat. If the night is cold, I settle onto a stool near the counter and supervise purchases of cheap wine and gallon jugs of milk. Sometimes I'll shadow the punks who drive up from town looking to score a five-finger discount. I have never run the till; never will.

Come Friday, it is Al's practice to pull two fifty-dollar bills from the cash drawer and say something like, "I'd give you a bigger paycheck, Old Thing, but you drank more coffee than I sold." A wink to go along with that single dimple. "Just glad you ain't that fond of beer and cigarettes."

Without fail, I refuse the cash. Tongue fighting me the entire way, I eventually manage to spit out the word, "Kids."

I had laid the whole thing out on paper right from the get-go. Between my pension and Social Security, money is the least of my concerns. Having an excuse to get up in the morning is compensation enough. In a few years, his son and daughter were going to start their own lives, maybe go to college. And so, when payday rolls around, a purse-lipped nod passes between Al and me as he slips those bills into a bank envelope labeled "Josh & Susie."

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Since the shooting, I have been thinking how those kids would still have their dad if only I possessed two decent legs. You see, the day Charlie Munger shot Al DeLancy, I was standing barely fifteen feet away.

Munger had come by the store earlier that day, buying a carton of Dorals, a case of Rainier, and ten bucks' worth of Lotto. His camouflaged Econoline returned early in the afternoon while I was sweeping the front porch. For twenty minutes, he sat in the parking lot smoking and talking to himself. You could see him gnawing the inside of his cheek, working his way up to something. Tim's Camaro crossed the intersection, honking once as it passed. Munger got out of the van and flicked his cigarette into the street. When he reached the porch, I barely shuffled out of his way as he bulled past.

Bart the Builder leaned over to Stumpy and whispered, "Looks like Charlie's got a bug up his butt."

Munger grabbed two suitcases of Budweiser from the display in the center of the store and hoisted them up onto the counter. "Gonna need a carton of Marlboros," he demanded in a voice that was too loud for such a small store.

Al craned his neck to glance out the window, then pursed his lips. My eyes followed the trail left by his vision, settling on Tim's Camaro parked at the Texaco.

Al came around from the other side of the counter. Wrapping an arm around Munger's shoulder, Al talked to him real quiet as he escorted him out of the store. "Listen, Buddy, you bought yourself plenty of stuff this morning. How much money you got left to take

you through the rest of the month? Hundred-fifty bucks or so? You can't spend it all at once, Charlie. We've talked about that."

"Maybe I got friends, Al. Maybe we're having a big party." Munger's voice was high-pitched, verging on tears as the two of them walked across the parking lot. "Why you always gotta tell everybody what to do, Al? Why is that?"

Patting Munger on the back, Al opened the door to the Econoline. "I'm not the one getting anything out of this deal, Charlie. Maybe it's Tim's turn to buy. Okay?"

Al turned and began heading back toward the store, calling over his shoulder, "See ya tomorrow, Buddy. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." The show looked as though it was over, so Stumpy and Bart the Builder went inside to refill their coffee cups. When Charlie Munger pulled a shotgun from the back of the Econoline, I was the only one who could have hollered, "Look out," the only one who stood a chance of pushing Al out of the line of fire. I would have given anything to take a bullet for him, to be as good a man as I was when I was nineteen and Anzio was raging all around me. But words did not come; my feet barely moved. I lifted my cane, alarm contorting my brows, but Al misinterpreted.

"Be right there, Old Thing."

Charlie Munger pumped once, then blasted Al DeLancy in the back of the head.

The thunder of the moment barely ceased echoing when Munger leveled a finger at my forehead. "Ain't got a beef with you, old man." He tossed his rifle inside the van and burned rubber out of the parking lot.

Although the shooting seemed slow motion, everything afterwards happened fast. A Dodge pick-up idling at the stoplight ran the red and gave chase while Stumpy knelt over Al, trying to quell the bleeding. Bart the Builder talked a mile a minute into his cell phone, and Al's wife Shelly came flying out of the house, throwing herself over her husband's body as though to shield him from another bullet. I found myself on my knees without knowing how I got there, eyes rising as Tim's Camaro careened across the intersection and down Hillcrest as though in hot pursuit. The thing was, when I replayed everything inside my head, I realized Tim had not pulled away from a gas pump. He'd been parked near the exit lane the whole time, engine running.

An aid car pulled in, emergency techs scurrying to set up oxygen and I.V. Sirens blaring, two police cars roared down Hillcrest. A moment later, two more lurched into the parking lot, the air crackling with radio chatter. The medics loaded Al onto a gurney, and soon their rig pulled away, sirens screaming—a sign of hope. Police cordoned off the area with barricades and yellow tape. Detectives arrived—took out notepads, clicked open pens. Fifteen minutes later, the red and white airlift chopper battered the air overhead, carrying whatever spark remained of Al DeLancy across Puget Sound to the trauma unit in Seattle. Crows squawked and swarmed, a throng of them chasing an eagle from the patch of woods beyond the Texaco. I thought how all those trees were going to disappear before too many years. While there would never be a shortage of crows, I wondered what was going to happen to all the eagles.

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That night, after police removed barricades, I scrubbed the asphalt where Al's life had spilled. People arrived from all over town, cars lining up on both sides of the road. Vases of flowers filled the parking lot; votive candles flickered on the porch, licking at the darkness. Fathers and mothers and children held hands with each other or whoever happened to be standing next to them. Many prayed silently; some sang Jesus songs and shouted, "Hallelujah." Chests heaving with unabashed tears, men clung to one another. Others turned their faces where no one could see their eyes. I melted into shadows beyond the shadows cast by the lights illuminating the gas station.

Before long, word arrived that police had arrested Charlie Munger in his home without a struggle. Bart the Builder buttonholed the county prosecutor, who admitted that whichever public defender wound up being assigned the case, an insanity plea would be the first thing on the table. At the edge of the crowd, some of the regulars faced cameras illuminated by bright lights, answering questions posed by well-dressed people holding microphones.

On the 11 o'clock news, I watched Tim shake his head, rub his whiskered chin. "He gave so much to this community. It's like, you know...unimaginable."

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I shed tears that look like everyone else's, but they are not the same. Mine are tears of regret and shame, anger and revenge. I consider that black book beneath Al's counter, remember back two weeks ago, when Al decided to cut off Tim.

"So, what are you trying to say, Al? That after all the years I been doing business here, you don't trust me to pay you back?" Tim finished

signing the black book and stood away from the counter, a smile that looked like a snarl.

"Until you pay her down, that's it, Buddy, there ain't no more." No single-dimple smile, one of those rare moments when you realized Al's hands had probably done more than farming when he was younger.

"Whatever!" Tim whirled around and stormed toward the door. Then, thinking better of it, he took a step back and grabbed a half-rack of Coors from the floor display. "Might as well throw this on there, too."

Pursing his lips, Al tucked the black book beneath the counter. A moment later, the Camaro's tires chirped against pavement and Tim roared off toward the casino, leaving a thick layer of burning oil in his wake.

The problem with being good-hearted is that no matter how much you do, there are some folks who will always demand more. When you don't deliver, nothing else counts; you have just betrayed them and they're going to hate you worse than all the people who ever kicked them in the head. At night, while I wait for sleep, I think of all the times I saw Tim whispering in Charlie Munger's ear, cajoling him to buy this or that or the other thing. I remember that Camaro parked across the road, and I know what I know.

Sure, I could lay it all out on paper for the county prosecutor, and although he might agree Tim is not good people, there will be no proof beyond an old man's hunch. No matter how much the police question Charlie Munger, he will never be able to distinguish whether the voice inside his head was his own or someone else's. He will spend his life in prison, and Tim will do what the Tim's of the world do, no matter what it might cost others.

There will be no justice in the death of Al DeLancy simply because, if there were such a thing, he would still be alive. I consider all the years I spent teaching high-school kids about the Rule of Law, Bill of Rights, John Locke's Social Contract—another case of the blind leading the blind. What I should have told them was that most of the time, justice comes down to what a person chooses to do or refuses to do. Sometimes it's as complex and inspiring as Henry David Thoreau or Martin Luther King. Other times, it's as simple and private as some Old Thing who happens to own a .38 Special. ▫