

# The Bargain Hunter

In the late summer of 1989, the transmission in Helen Foote's Toyota Corolla froze, right in the middle of downtown Arva, or, to be more precise, that slight congealing of business around a country intersection that styles itself "Downtown Arva." Arva is on the way to Clinton and a ten-minute drive north of London on Highway 4.

"I can always put in a used transmission," the mechanic told her, "but we can't guarantee it." He glanced back at the paralyzed Corolla. "That buggy's ten years old, Mrs. Foote. If I was you, I'd tell the Professor to get me a new car."

So that night Helen, a small, dark, highly concentrated woman, a little potty, with big eyes the colour of celadon, told her husband she needed a new car. "Not a new new car," she clarified. "An old new car. One that works."

To which Marshall, who hated to spend money on anyone but himself, replied, "Why do you need a car anyway?"

"To get to work," Helen reminded him. Helen was an Information Technologist. She worked at the Law Library.

"You could take the bus," Marshall suggested. "Cut down on fossil fuel emissions. Do your part to save the planet."

"Marshall," Helen insisted. "I have to pick up groceries and your dry cleaning. I have to drive Margaret to her soccer games and to piano." Margaret was their daughter, a sturdy and pensive child of eight with blonde haircut like Buster Brown and a reserved manner.

"OK! OK!" Marshall conceded, pouting. "But let me ask around first. I might be able to . . . you know . . . cut a deal."

Helen sighed and, when Marshall wasn't looking, rolled her slightly bug eyes. It was a wonder Marshall had time left over from his haggling, scavenging and importuning to prepare his

classes. And he was forever extracting *deals*, or *bargains* or, best of all, according to Marshall, *tribute* from mysterious *friends*. He was also prone to random dreadful discoveries, which he categorized as *finds*.

All these were words with very special meanings.

For example, by *friends*, Marshall meant desperate and pathetic homosexuals whom he had unearthed at the Oasis, an unsavory local bath house.

By *bargains*, he meant those objects he purchased at yard sales or flea markets -- such as answering machines that didn't work and really hideous lamps. Marshall would alternatively lambaste and harangue the vendor or whine until Helen grew embarrassed and walked away, pretending to have married someone else entirely. Possibly Hugh Grant.

*Tribute*, on the other hand, constituted that detritus that someone of his acquaintance had, voluntarily, free of charge and, (at least in Marshall's mind) as an act of homage, offloaded onto him.

Then there were the *finds*.

Marshall lived for the City's annual Spring and Autumn Cleanup Days. This was when his fellow Londoners consigned to the curb their discarded bits and pieces for the garbage men to haul away. At these times, Marshall became like the pauper at a feast. He made Helen drive him up and down the streets of the better neighbourhoods of the City, until he saw something in appalling condition that he *had* to have -- such as moldy cinder blocks inhabited by strange, unidentified bugs or a ripped out kitchen cabinet in sticky, faux oak. At this point, he would shout, "Stop! Stop the car," leap out just as Helen was drawing up alongside the curb and, falling upon the object, claim it as his own. (By the way, Marshall had never had any intention of fixing any of these items. Not ever. "I am not your handy man," he used to remind Helen, who already knew.)

"I'm embarrassed to have anyone over," Helen told her mother on the telephone, muttering out of one corner of her mouth so Marshall wouldn't hear. She glanced about her and winced. The walls had holes in them the size of cats; over some of these holes

Marshall had artistically arranged duct tape. His *finds* lined the perimeters of the room, like *amputées de guerre* waiting with the infinite patience of the permanently wounded. “It looks like the hospital for terminally ill furniture!” she tried to explain to her mother, who, having vowed seven years earlier never to leave Florida again, hadn’t and, as a consequence, had yet to see Helen and Marshall’s home in faraway, only just sub-arctic Ontario.

“I think it’s a shame Marshall won’t let you have any *nice things*,” her mother fussed. “You were brought up with *nice things*. That’s what you’re used to. That’s what you expect. Why wouldn’t you?”

Her mother was right. Helen expected nice things. Why wouldn’t she?

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In the same year, 1989, Marshall met Peachy. They met at the Oasis. This was serendipitous, because Peachy didn’t often go to the Oasis. The mold that clung greenly to every surface of that establishment tended to trigger his occasionally heart-stopping asthma.

It was difficult to know what Marshall saw in the twenty-eight year old geriatric aide. After all, Marshall was blandly good-looking in an uneventful sort of way, with blue eyes, brown hair and a thick beard. This was to disguise the fact that, sadly, he had been born without a chin.

Peachy, on the other hand, affected a geek style so extreme that he poked out of a crowd like a gouty toe -- Elvis Costello glasses, clip-on ties, dacron and cotton short sleeved shirts and slick-backed hair with a knife’s edge part on one side. Then there was his body -- gangly, stoop-shouldered, pot bellied, knobby-kneed. And his head – jug-eared.

It may be said, however, that what Peachy lacked in desirability, he made up for by availability. As one of his very few friends once said of Peachy, “He’s as loyal as a dog, as cynical as a cat and as unlovely as a moose.” And so he was.

Marshall and Peachy's regular trysts took place at Peachy's East London bungalow on Starlight Avenue, Tuesday and Thursday evenings. (Peachy's mother had died the previous autumn and his father had choked on a sandwich a decade before. Peachy was an only child, so the tidy brick house – the mortgage long since paid down – was his.) Marshall told Helen he was teaching a course for Continuing Ed: "Introductory Euthanasia."

"That's nice," replied Helen, who had just started in on a Twelve-Step Program for self-improvement junkies and was thinking about Step One. Step One was admitting that she was powerless over the impulse to improve herself and that her life had become unmanageable. True enough, she reflected, surveying the train wreck of a living room with its wounded walls and suppurating couch, oozing, through several long gashes, musty beige stuffing.

"I have this one student." Marshall decided to push the envelope. "Very keen. Works with old people."

"I see!" said Helen and wandered disconsolately off.

One night shortly after Helen's transmission froze, Marshall told Peachy, "Would you believe that I sometimes imagine Helen and Margaret dying in a car accident? I mean, what would have happened if her transmission had frozen on the 401 instead of in Arva? Oh, and that reminds me! Helen wants a *new* car. Well, a *used* car. How in the world am I going to afford that?"

Peachy tapped his chin. "Hmmm."

Moored in Peachy's garage was his father's Chevrolet Impala convertible – white with a red vinyl interior, monolithic and crusty with dehydrated rodent droppings. "There's Pop's car," suggested Peachy.

"Does it run?" Marshall asked.

Peachy shrugged. He had never driven the Impala. He had his own car – sporty and cheap -- a red Pony that his mother given him in the ill-founded hope that he might use it to pick up girls.

"Not very well, I wouldn't imagine," Peachy answered Marshall. "It's a '74 and the engine hasn't turned over since '79."

“When can I have it?” Marshall asked.

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“What do you think?” Marshall asked Helen, extending his arms to either side like an impresario introducing a spectacular act. There, in their mutual driveway, stretched the Impala.

“Isn’t it . . . missing bits?” Helen asked.

“Bits?” Marshall demanded indignantly. “What bits?”

“A side-view mirror, an antenna, a fender and that brake light’s stove in.” Helen itemized the bits. “And that’s only what I can see.”

“So!” Marshall was defensive. “I never said it was perfect!”

“And those huge rust spots. . . .”

“Car snob!” Marshall accused her. “I’m appalled by your status seeking! How can you be so shallow? All anyone needs is a safe car that gets one from point A to point B.”

Helen was incredulous. “Don’t tell me this car passed its safety test?”

“Well, it did,” Marshall insisted. “With flying colours! Anyway, it’s yours!” He tossed her the keys. “A lot of thanks I get!”

Later he asked Peachy, “What’s a safety test?”

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As the months wore on, Peachy, emboldened, took to hanging around places where Marshall might be.

He hung around the University. He hung around Marshall’s office. Then he actually went so far as to hang around Marshall’s terrible old house on St. Ives Drive. Helen kept coming across him in odd places, such as the vestibule beside the umbrella stand or out by the garbage cans.

“Who is he?” Helen asked. “He give me the creeps! He’s like . . . lurking!”

“You mean Peachy? Oh, he’s taking my night course – Introductory Euthanasia,” Marshall was quick to explain. “I told you.”

What kind of a name was Peachy, Helen wondered, although she did not ask.

Once Margaret even stumbled upon him in her bedroom, examining her collection of headless Barbies. To Helen he cited but one reason for his presence. “I’m waiting for Marshall,” he would say and this was true enough. Peachy *was* waiting for Marshall. To leave Helen. To be his alone.

To Margaret, however, he was more forthcoming. “Barbie,” he said to her and sniffed, looking as if someone had just farted. “The best kind of female. The kind *without* a tuna sandwich.”

This puzzled Margaret. She couldn’t make it out.

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Two years previously, in September 1987, Marshall’s father had died of a seismic heart attack. At the time, he was seated at the wobbly formica topped kitchen table of his ancestral hovel in Trouty, Newfoundland, washing down seal flipper pie with a shot of Captain Morgan’s and smoking one of those bulging, untidy cigarettes that he rolled himself.

John Arthur Foote had been a bureaucrat, a highly placed civil servant in the Department of Fisheries. He was also a Bay Man. That’s how they referred to such persons in St. Johns – a man’s kind of man who might work in town, but who hailed from around the Bay and returned there at every opportunity. Every Friday night after work, he would climb into his battered old, rust-pocked red pickup and, over the considerable protests of his wife, which escalated to howls and threats of suicide as the truck pulled out of the driveway and onto Laurier Street, head north towards the tiny fishing village clinging to the rocky shore of Trinity Bay. On the day he died, he had portaged a walnut canoe that he had carved himself over a kilometer and a half of boggy marsh and chopped six weeks worth of wood.

It was only in 1989, when Marshall could at last be at least reasonably certain that the old man was not going to clamber from his grave, greasy and censorious, that he began, ever so slowly and oh so gingerly, to back his way out of the closet -- brain stuck in neutral, emergency brake on and all gears grinding. He was afraid, and justifiably so, for, as you will recall, he had managed to acquire Helen and Margaret along Life's Highway and now he must think of how he could dispose of them. Preferably sooner than later.

"What on earth induced you to marry That Woman?" Peachy asked Marshall. "She's so. . . ." But Peachy could not find the words to express his horror.

"Father Leo," Marshall replied.

"This is what you must do, my son," the priest had advised the tearful teenager through the grille of the confessional. "Find a girl who is isn't very observant or who is, perhaps, slow and marry her quickly. The holy sacrament of marriage is the best way to cure the shocking and deplorable inversion that is homosexuality. Oh, and Marshall, try not to act like such a sissy!"

So Marshall had married Helen Cobb shortly after finishing his Masters degree in Medical Ethics. She listened well, which was useful since Marshall always had a great deal to say. She was calm, orderly and highly organized, which was also essential since Marshall was volatile, messy and highly disorganized. Moreover, Helen was not hugely interested in sex, which was more than excellent since Marshall's fantasies centered for the most part around sailors, cowboys and outlaw bikers. As for Margaret, she had come about largely at Marshall's instigation. He had wanted offspring to dangle before his father -- living proof that he was not, as John Foote used to put it, "One of those Tutti Fruttis."

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"If you want her to progress, you have to get her a decent piano to practice on," Margaret's piano teacher advised Helen. "Frankly, it's amazing that she's gotten as far as she has, given the instrument she's had to practice on."

“Marshall,” Helen told her husband when he banged through the door at 5:30, “Margaret needs a new piano.”

“A new piano?” Marshall demanded, wrestling his windbreaker off. “What’s wrong with the old one?”

“The sound board is cracked. The damper pedals are broken. The keys are chipped. The hammers are worn to nubs. . . .”

“That was my grandmother’s piano!” Marshall protested.

“That was never tuned and never maintained and sat in a damp root cellar for thirty years,” Helen reminded him.

“Pianos are expensive,” Marshall countered.

“A used piano would be fine,” said Helen. “As long as it in working order. Amanda says we might be able to pick one up for under one thousand if we’re lucky.”

“One thousand!” Marshall was aghast. “Where do you think we’re going to get one thousand dollars? Does Margaret really like piano? Is she any good at it? Every time I listen to her, it sounds awful. Thumping sounds.”

“That’s because the piano is completely non functional!” Helen pointed out. “Half the keyboard is dead wood.”

“Fine! Fine!” Marshall capitulated. “But whatever you do, don’t answer any advertisements. I’m going to check around, see if I can get something going. You know. Rustle something up.”

Helen sighed. Not again, she thought.

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“You’ll never guess what Helen is insisting we buy Margaret!” Marshall told Peachy.

“What?” asked Peachy.

“A piano,” Marshall replied. “Can you imagine?”

“You know, I might just know about a piano you could have for free,” Peachy told him. “Do you remember me telling you about Ned Hobyan, my Alzheimer’s on Mayhew Road?”

“The old guy who always wondering where his wife is and when she’s coming back?”

“That’s the one. There’s a piano in the living room -- an old upright that looks in good nick. He doesn’t play. She did. He still has it tuned every year – a birthday present for her. He can’t remember what year it is or who’s Prime Minister or even who I am, but he knows everything there is to know about Peggy except that she’s dead. The long and short of it is he’ll never notice if the piano walks. Not in a billion years. Or if he does, he’ll forget. Of course, I’d need your help moving it.”

Marshall blinked, uncomprehending. “Doesn’t it have . . . I don’t know . . . wheels?”

“No,” replied Peachy. “And it weighs a ton.”

Marshall grimaced. “Manual labour is really not my thing,” he explained. “Surely we know *somebody* who’s strong. Aren’t there a lot of gay guys who work out?”

“Well, yeah,” replied Peachy. “Only I don’t know them. Or, to be more precise, they don’t know me.”

“Oh! Oh!” cried Marshall. “Dexter!”

“Dexter DeLeuw?”

“Who else? Who could be more perfect? And he’s so gullible!”

Dexter was one of Marshall’s advisees. It wasn’t easy being Dexter. He had the misfortune of being a dyslectic English major. In fact, reading was such a chore for him that he went to university only part-time. He had been doing this for the better part of the past decade, taking one or two courses a semester. When he wasn’t clawing his way through Beatrix Potter and A.A. Milne (at Marshall’s advice, he was doing a concentration in Kiddy Lit), Dexter framed houses and hung drywall.

Marshall didn’t believe in dyslexia. He thought Dexter was just slow. However, the advisee’s craggy good looks were such that

Marshall continued to humour his academic aspirations for the opportunity of ogling him – Dexter was tall, blue-eyed and bulky and possessed of a thick, unruly thatch of white blonde hair. He was, also, completely and touchingly sincere.

“But what shall we tell him?” Marshall asked now. “You know how ponderously *moral* he always is!”

Peachy thought for a moment. “We’ll say that we bought the piano from Ned’s son for your daughter, but that, because of Ned’s dementia, he can’t process that fact and to just ignore him if he fusses.”

The plot was hatched.

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Ned Hobyan’s Alzheimer’s was not advanced enough for him to require 24-hour care. The seventy-four year old widower grew increasingly crotchety and paranoid as the months since his diagnosis wore on, but he could still manage stairs, urinate more or less on target and open himself a can of chicken noodle soup and heat it on the stove without mishap. His son, Edward Junior, was an oil company executive stationed in Saudi Arabia. There were no other children and the son had not been back in Canada since the diagnosis, eighteen months previous. He wanted his father to remain at home as long as he was able. This meant some form of home care, which, from one to five on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, was Peachy. Peachy’s job was to fix the old man a hot meal, make sure he took his various meds, do a little light housekeeping and an occasional errand, and, in the course of so doing, monitor the old man’s decline.

On the day of the heist, Peachy bustled through the kitchen door of Ned’s house with a bag of groceries. Ned was sitting at the dinette table, staring into space and chewing on the inside of his cheek. His memory was dissolving like an Alka Seltzer in water. Pop. Pop. Fizz. Fizz. There was a sense in which he was aware of this and it puzzled him. “Have I got a treat for you!” Peachy greeted him.

Ned started. “What?” he asked. “Who are you?”

“You don’t remember me? I’m hurt! It’s Peachy.”

“Peachy? What kind of a name is Peachy?” Ned demanded.

Peachy ignored the question. “Aren’t you wondering what your treat is?”

“Is it candy?” Ned asked. “Because, if it’s candy, I don’t want it. Never had much of a sweet tooth. Not like Peggy. If it’s candy, I could give it to her. She’d like it.”

“It’s not candy,” Peachy told him.

“Shucks!” replied Ned. “I would have liked some candy. I wonder where Peggy’s gotten to.” He looked about as though half expecting her to materialize. “She should be home by now.”

“Now, Ned, Peggy died six years ago,” Peachy reminded him, but Ned just shook his head.

“She’s never this late,” he said. Then, turning to Peachy, he demanded, “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“We’ll have some nice tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich for lunch,” Peachy announced smoothly, moving to the counter. He took groceries out of the bags and placed them on the slightly sticky counter – Peachy’s housekeeping was, indeed, light. “Oh! And a tea biscuit. *Mmm! Mmm!* Good.”

“I don’t think Peggy would like you in her kitchen,” Ned warned him. “She would wonder what you’re doing here.”

“And, after our nice lunch, we’re going to have a nap,” Peachy continued.

“Together?” asked Ned. He looked worried.

“No,” said Peachy. “You’re going to nap and I’m going to watch my soap opera.”

“But I’m not sleepy!” Ned protested.

“Yes you are!” Peachy contradicted him. “You are getting very sleepy!”

“Am not!”

“Are so.”

“What soap opera do you watch?”

“*Days of Our Lives*,” Peachy told him.

“Peggy watches *All My Children*,” Ned reflected. “You’d better tape it for her, or she’ll be sore. You know, I am getting sleepy.”

“Not so fast!” Peachy advised him. “First we eat.”

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“Alzheimer’s rough,” Dexter said feelingly and shook his big, shaggy head. He and Marshall were sitting in the cab of Dexter’s battered red pickup, waiting for Peachy to run out on the front lawn of 33 Mayhew and give them the high sign to let them know that Ned had gone up for his nap. The truck was parked around the corner but within view of the house, so as not to excite undue suspicion among whatever neighbours happened to be home midday. “I have a disability. I can empathize. I have poor sequencing skills. My memory sucks. But at least the lights aren’t going out all over Capistrano.”

“Capistrano?” asked Marshall. “Isn’t that swallows and aren’t they flying home?” The prospect of committing a crime so thrilled him that he could barely contain himself. He had always fantasized about joining an outlaw biker gang – his sobriquet would be “Doc”. Marshall’s right knee vibrated wildly and he bounced up and down on the seat like a child.

“Could you not do that?” Dexter wanted to know. “I have to pee as it is. What I mean is that one minute there’s a memory, then *pouf!* It’s gone. Until there’s nothing left.”

“Could we talk about something more cheerful?” Marshall asked. “I know! I can tell you all about the new book I’m writing. That would be interesting, wouldn’t it?”

Before Dexter could reply, Peachy appeared at the front door, wearing an old pink gingham apron of Peggy’s and carrying a lime green feather duster. He ran down the steps and halfway down

the walk and waved the feather duster in their direction. Then he turned on his heel and flounced back into the house.

Dexter revved the engine softly and eased the truck around the corner and up the driveway alongside the kitchen door. They were going to offload the piano through that door. Dexter had brought a ramp for that specific purpose.

The kitchen door swung open and Peachy leaned out, holding a finger to his lips. “*Ssshhh!*” he hissed. “He’s a light sleeper.”

Marshall leapt out of the truck cab and dashed up the stairs. Dexter hauled the ramp out of the back of the pickup and secured it over the stairs to the kitchen. Then he retrieved the dolly from the truck bed, grabbed an old Army blanket, draped a couple of straps around his neck and dragged the dolly into the house.

“*Stop clumping!*” Peachy warned Dexter, whose heavy work boots rendered advance on tiptoe awkward. Dexter responded to this admonition by adopting the crabbed posture and exaggerated gait that in cartoons denotes sneaking. There was, however, no helping the high pitched squeaking of the dolly.

Peachy led them through the kitchen and the dining room and into the living room. The television in the corner was tuned into *Days of Our Lives*.

“Do you watch this?” Dexter asked.

Peachy shook his head. “It’s to cover our noise.”

“Because it’s my favorite,” said Dexter, looking longingly at the television.

“No TV for you, young man!” Marshall hissed. There, against the wall stood an old Nordheimer upright. Marshall examined the piano. “No chipped keys!” he whispered to Peachy.

“I told you it was in good nick!” Peachy whispered back.

“She’s a heavy one,” Dexter commented. “The newer spinet models are a lot lighter than this baby. She must weigh close to eight hundred pounds.”

“Must you refer to it as ‘she’?” Peachy asked. “I find it very distasteful.”

“This must be his wife!” exclaimed Dexter, picking up the framed photograph that stood on the piano and staring raptly at it. The subject was a woman in her early twenties with brown, wavy hair and puffy bangs. Her head was tipped flirtatiously to one side and she appeared to be laughing. The young Peggy Hobyman had a full face, broad, high cheekbones and hazel eyes. She was wearing a white, slightly fuzzy sweater with a sweetheart neck and a string of pink tinted pearls. “There’s a picture of my old Gran looks like this,” Dexter remembered, choking up.

“Stop that!” Marshall insisted. “I hate it when people go on about their ‘old grans’. Mine was an Old Gran From Hell!”

“But she’s . . . cute!” Dexter insisted.

“Was cute. Not cute anymore. Dead,” Marshall countered.

Peachy took the photo from Dexter and set it on a bookshelf. “Chop, chop! The old man’s not exactly Sleeping Beauty, you know. He won’t sleep a hundred years.”

Dexter took a couple of steps back, cocked his head to the left and eyeballed the piano. “What we’re going to do is wrap it up in this blanket and secure it with the straps. Then we’re going to lift this end up here and slide the straps under the piano and up on the other side. So we’re tipping the piano forward, then backward.” He handed Peachy a strap. “You get down on the floor and, when I say so, poke the strap under the piano.”

“Why me? Why can’t you do it?” Peachy complained. “I have bad knees, you know!”

“Because I don’t think either of you two is strong enough to hold the piano up on your own which means that you might drop it on me,” Dexter told him. “I know you think I’m stupid, but I’m not that stupid.”

Marshall and Peachy giggled like horrified, but titillated schoolgirls.

“Dr. Foote, you take that end now and very, very carefully . . . tip it . . . forward . . . taking care . . . not to . . . let go!” Dexter and Marshall tipped the piano sufficiently forward that Peachy could poke a strap underneath it. “Now the second strap. . . .” Peachy poked the second strap under the piano and Dexter and Marshall quickly lowered it back into place. “Now we tip the piano backwards while Peachy grabs the ends of the straps and pulls them through.”

Carefully Dexter and Marshall started to tip the piano back at the same time as Peachy lunged for the straps and, seizing one with either hand, yanked them through. Marshall, taken by surprise by the suddenness of Peachy’s maneuver, gasped, stepped backwards and, in so doing, lost his grip on the piano’s back left corner, which stabbed into the living room wall, gouging out a big chunk of drywall.

“*Damn it!*” Peachy retorted. “How am I supposed to explain that hole?”

“You said he wasn’t going to notice the piano being gone!” Marshall countered. “Why would he notice a hole in the drywall?”

In the meantime, Dexter was securing and tightening the straps. “Each of you grab hold of a strap and, on the count of three, pull up. One. Two. Three. Lift!”

Marshall and Peachy tugged mightily at the straps, elevating the piano’s right end the half a foot required to slide the dolly under it.

“Good,” said Dexter. He glanced behind him towards the dining room. “I wish the doors weren’t so narrow and that there weren’t so many of them.”

“What does it matter how many doors there are?” Marshall asked.

“Well, damage to the doorjambs . . . or to the piano, if it gets stuck,” Dexter told him. “I knew this guy once tried to move a piano. It got away from him going through a door, fell, cut a gash in the wall deep enough to sever an electrical conduit. This started a fire and the whole house burnt down, including the piano.”

“Everything will be fine!” Marshall insisted.

“I guess,” replied Dexter, still looking worried. “I’ll drive the dolly. That means I do the lifting and I steer. What you have to do is hold the straps and keep the rest of the piano off the ground. And you have to keep it steady, too. Don’t let it fishtail. That’s going to be the hardest part. It’s more than just the weight of the piano. There’s inertia and balance issues.”

“Let’s just do it.” Marshall was growing bored.

“OK,” Dexter warned them, “I’m lifting!” Bending his knees as he applied pressure to the handle of the dolly, he gradually straightened up and, as he did, the piano’s right end snugged into the dolly and the left end cleared the floor. Marshall and Peachy grappled with the straps, but not fast enough. The piano fell forward, knocking a Royal Doulton shepherdess off an end table. It shattered as it hit the floor.

“What’s that commotion? What’s going on down there?” they heard a muffled voice from upstairs.

“Nothing, Ned!” cried Peachy. “Not to worry! Go back to sleep!”

A door banged open.

“Shit!” muttered Peachy. “Go back to bed, Ned!” he shouted. “I was dusting and there was a little accident! That’s all! I’m cleaning it up now. There’s nothing to worry about!”

Ned appeared at the top of the stairs, wearing a sleeveless t-shirt and faded plaid boxer shorts. What remained of his sparse hair was disheveled and his cheeks were grizzled with beard. “Who are you?” he demanded of Peachy. “What are you doing in my house?”

“It’s Peachy!” Peachy told him. “Your aide.”

“My aide? What do you mean: my aide? Are we in the army? Have you got AIDS?”

“No,” Peachy replied. “I’m from Home Alone Health Services.”

Ned hobbled down a couple of stairs. "What broke?" he demanded.

"Bric-a-brac. A figurine." Peachy replied. "Go back to bed. Go back now."

"Was it . . . the shepherdess?"

"Yes, the shepherdess! That's right! Now, chop, chop! Upstairs!"

"I gave Peggy that shepherdess on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary! She loves that shepherdess!" He looked worried.

"Can it be glued?" He hobbled down an additional couple of steps.

"I'll buy her a new one. She'll never know the difference."

"Well, I guess," conceded Ned. "OK. But you'd better do it soon. I expect her back anytime."

"I will. I'll do it right after work," Peachy promised. "Now back to bed, Ned. Hurry along."

Ned turned and, using the banister to haul himself up, slowly retraced his steps. Marshall, Dexter and Peachy stood quietly until they heard the door to his room shut.

"Now, pay attention!" Dexter insisted. "You can't let it get away from you. It's going to be awkward." Once again he squatted while applying pressure to the handle of the dolly and slowly lifted the piano's left end off the floor. Carefully they inched it out from the wall a few feet. Then Peachy moved behind it and Marshall moved in front and, with Dexter steering the dolly, they maneuvered it, wobbling like an eight-hundred pound drunk, towards the door to the dining room. Dexter was edging it through the door, when there was a terrible scraping noise. He stopped, wincing. "Shit!" he said.

"What is it?" Marshall demanded.

"We've euchred the door jamb," Dexter informed him.

Again they heard Ned's door bang open and footfalls in the upstairs hall. "What's going on down there?" he called. "Peggy? Is that you?"

"Ned, it's just me!" Peachy called upstairs. "I was moving some furniture so that I could vacuum! Go back to bed!"

"How do you expect me to sleep with that racket going on?" Ned grumbled and returned to his room.

In the meantime, Dexter was fretting over the ruined door jamb.

"What's the problem?" Marshall wanted to know. "If he doesn't notice that the piano is gone and he doesn't notice the gouge in the wall, why do you think he's going to notice that the door jamb has been damaged?"

"But we're wrecking his house!" Dexter sounded anguished.

"Look, Dexter," Marshall told him. "In six months he'll be in a nursing home. The house will be sold and the new owners will fix the drywall and repaint. So what's the big deal?"

"Well, I guess there's no turning back now!" Dexter resigned himself to the situation. "The drill's the same. You lift and I pull. One, two, three. . . ."

They managed to wrangle and manhandle the piano through the crowded dining room with only a few casualties of the Prince Albert teacup variety. They did not succeed in sparing the jamb on the door to the kitchen, but, by this point, Dexter was beyond worrying about it. He was more concerned about the next stage of the journey: getting the piano through the kitchen door while executing a sharp right turn so that they could set the piano on the ramp that he had affixed over the stairs and ease it down to the driveway. "This is the hard part," he warned Peachy and Marshall. "We've got to turn it at the same time as we clear the door and we can't use the dolly anymore. We're going to have to actually carry the piano. What I propose is this. Once it's about halfway outside, I will carry it down the ramp and you guys take the other end. Now, you've got to hold onto it, because, if you let it go, all its weight is going to come at me. Do you understand?"

Marshall pouted. He turned to Peachy.

“Think of the money you’re saving,” Peachy reminded him.

“Remember!” Dexter warned them. “If you let go of the piano, I’m toast! “

“We won’t let go! Cross our hearts!” Peachy told him.

With some difficulty, they managed to jam the piano through the kitchen door without mishap other than ripping out the weather stripping and tearing a hole in the screened door. Dexter had just started to back gingerly down the ramp, feeling carefully for his footing, when an upstairs window flew open and Ned leaned out.

“Where are you going with Peggy’s piano!” he shouted.

“Robbers! Thieves! I’m calling 911!”

Startled, Peachy and Marshall let go of the straps that held up their end of the Nordheimer. The piano bumped down the ramp, driving Dexter in front of it, before falling to the right, penning Dexter against the brick wall of the house. Seeing this, Marshall grabbed a strap and yanked at it, which caused the piano to fall in the opposite direction, penning him against the wrought iron railing.

“Help! Help!” squeaked Marshall.

“I’ve got to get him before he calls the police,” Peachy cried and rushed back into the house.

Dexter righted the piano, releasing whimpering Marshall, and eased it down the short distance that remained into the driveway. In the course of being slammed against the brick wall by the eight-hundred pound piano, Dexter had bloodied his nose, sustained a contusion on his forehead and cracked a rib, “Are you all right?” he asked Marshall.

“I’ve ruptured something!” Marshall gasped. “Maybe my spleen. Do you need your spleen? If you don’t, what’s it there for?” Dexter blinked, as though he hadn’t quite processed Marshall’s words. There was a slight ringing in his ears. He hit the side of his head with the heel of his hand, hoping to dislodge the sound.

“Maybe we’d better see what’s going on with the old man,” he suggested.

The two men hobbled, wincing, up the steps, passed through the kitchen to the dining room and into the living room. There sat Ned on the living room sofa with Peachy beside him. On the wall where the piano had stood shone a rectangle of lighter green.

“You see, Ned, we’re taking the piano to Margaret,” Peachy explained. It was Peachy’s best effort at affecting the manner of a gentle, caring person. His tone was gooey, his words honey-dipped and he spoke very slowly, as if to a small child, his hand plopped on Ned’s hairy thigh like a dead fish.

“Margaret?” Ned asked, blinking rapidly, remembering. “That’s what her family calls her. It was only ever me called her Peggy.”

“Margaret doesn’t have a piano to practice on,” Peachy continued. “She needs it.”

“That’s right! Peg can’t live without her piano!” Ned concurred. Then, gulping, he asked, “So, it’s true? She’s left me, has she?” He looked imploringly at Peachy, his lower lip trembling.

Peachy nodded in a way that mocked solemnity.

“I was wondering where she’d gone,” Ned said, sniffing. “Not that I blame her.” His bloodshot eyes filled with tears. “I never meant to hurt her. It was just my temper.” He hung his head and shook it. “My bloody temper.” He glanced back up. The tears spilled out onto his cheeks, inched down his face. “Course, I’d buy her things to make it up to her. She liked Royal Doulton figurines, teacups from the Bay. . . . That sort of thing. Candy. Flowers. The stuff you give women to say you’re sorry, or you love her, or . . . whatever you need to say to her. Did you know I broke her arm once? Snapped it like a twig. Dislocated her shoulder twice. . . .”

“Yes, well, enough of that!” announced Peachy.

But Ned was in full throttle. “Black eyes, bloody noses. . . . But – you got to believe me -- I never meant any of it!”

Peachy stood, briskly wiping the palms of his hands on his trouser legs. As he moved past Ned towards Dexter and Marshall, Ned reached up and grabbed his wrist.

“When you see her, will you tell her that I love her?” he asked.

“Of course,” replied Peachy.

“And that she’d be welcome back anytime? Tell her I’m a changed man. I am changed. You’ll do that for me?”

“Of course,” Peachy assured him.

Ned swiped at his wet eyes with the back of his arm. “Take the piano then,” he mumbled. “I’m not going to try and stop you. It’s Peggy’s piano. She needs it. I’ll go back to bed. I’m not feeling so good.” He stood shakily.

“Here!” said Dexter, starting forward. “I’ll help you up.” He took the old man by the elbow and guided him towards the stairs.

“Do you have AIDS too?” Ned asked. “Who beat you up?”

“Your house,” Dexter replied. “You know, I have a brain disorder. I’m dyslectic.”

“You think you’ve got it bad?” Ned demanded. “My beautiful wife just left me!” And he started blubbering.

“There! There!” Dexter comforted him.

As soon as Ned and Dexter were out of earshot, Marshall and Peachy fell into each others’ arms, laughing and patting each other on the back. “We did it!” they whispered gleefully, chortling and snorting.

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Helen was on her way back from picking up Margaret from her piano lesson when the accident happened. It was December, during one of those untidy, brown interludes between one white snow and the next. Crusty snow banks, pocked and pitted, pushed up against either side of Oxford Street, grimy with road dirt or poisonously yellow where dogs had peed. Mud-sodden

trash flopped like fish out of water in the middle of the road or careened in a desultory, lopsided way along the sidewalk. Coming up to the light at Cherry Hill, Helen applied the Impala's brakes. They failed to respond and, helpless to stop the ancient vehicle, Helen sat behind the wheel of Peachy's deceased father's car, frozen in horror, as Margaret screamed and the Impala sailed into the intersection, colliding with a truck that was turning into the shopping plaza. Helen and her daughter were killed instantly .

"Helen was always trying to improve herself. . . ," Marshall said at their memorial service. "She didn't how perfect she was! As for Margaret, well, what can one say about Margaret?"

"He does *seem* heartbroken," one mourner commented to another. "But who was that strange looking young man skulking in the corner?"

Of course there was that slight unpleasantness, when the police discovered that, not only was the Impala not registered to Helen, it had not been safety-ed . To drive it, therefore, was illegal.

However, that was all cleared up when Marshall explained, "If the truth be told, Officer, Helen was angry at me because I wouldn't buy her a new car. So, to get back at me, she stole the car from my student's garage and was on a mad joy ride when she collided with the truck."

"Well," said the officer, shutting his notepad and sliding it into his back pocket. "I guess that explains pretty near everything. Once again, Dr. Foote, sorry for your loss."

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"You know," Peachy told Marshall, "I might just have a buyer for that piano."

"Really?" asked Marshall. "Who?"

"An old folks home I work with needs one for their lounge. I think we can get a thousand for it."

"A thousand dollars!" Marshall marveled. "We could go to Toronto and stay at the Windsor Arms. Box seats to a few shows. . . ."

“Don’t forget the opera!” Peachy reminded him. “***La Bohème*** is playing. So sad!”

“I would never forget the opera!” Marshall assured him. “And ***La Bohème***, so *tragique!*”