

D. E. Lee

KQ673

The squirrel is down in the parking lot. I don't mean downstairs. I mean down, the way you say a soldier's down. A real little guy. Nearly flat on the pavement, its head upraised, a miniature sphinx on the asphalt. I'm threading my U-lock through the back tire and around the frame and can see it struggling to keep its head up.

Emerson thunders in on his Harley. We bullshit each other about ride choice. He tells me to get a real bike. I tell him he could get a date with teeth if he'd give up the hog.

He climbs off. Decent prosthesis. Can hardly see the limp.

He holds the door open. Stands there holding it open. A long time, like that's his job.

"Morning, Rags."

Heels clicking. I look up. Belinda Rago in the killer blue skirt and knees like two scoops of ice cream. Great sportsmanlike conduct for a divorced mother of two. A few weeks ago down at Sully's she's measuring male ass. A few beers down and I'm doing it, too, on her insistence. Contours and curves and shit. What can I say? She's influential.

Emerson stands at the coffee table with Judith. Too bad they're both married to other people. They'd make a great recliner-chair couple. A wide box of doughnuts sits unopened on the table.

"It's not spelled like that," Judith says.

"Then how?"

"O-u-g-h."

"It's not like that on the box."

"The box is not the dictionary."

"Well, I always say *donut*."

"You can't say letters, Emerson. They sound exactly the same."

A great couple, really.

I slide the box toward me. “We gonna eat these?”

Judith looks over her glasses. Her upper lip moves like a snail over her bottom lip. “Mr. Blas brought them.”

Mr. Blas never brings doughnuts.

The four of us seem to know at once, but it’s Rags sitting behind her desk who names it. “No raise this year.”

The lull is brief. Like the wait for a download.

“Cost of living. They have to give us that.” I’m looking for support. Emerson looks at the doughnuts. Judith shakes her head.

Rags clutches her headset. “Did they give us one last year?”

“I think it’s like the law,” I say, reaching for a glazed.

“Big Square is the law,” Judith says and shuffles to her desk.

Soon the phones are ringing. Soon we’re dialing. Soon we’re on the net processing orders. What we do is distribute parts. Small, tubish, metal parts. Those parts attach to larger parts which attach to still larger parts. This is my theory. It’s possible the direction is reversed. Big Square has a motto: We Give It To You. There used to be a poster on the back of the bathroom door. When you did business you stared at the motto and two smiling people in silhouette. One handing the other what looks like a small tube of lubricant. This must be what our part looks like. I’ve never seen it. I only know its number: KQ673. The silhouettes are standing in a cow pasture or a football field. Behind them, a mountain or bleachers. I’m not being vague. Someone—I suspect Emerson—tore down the poster a day or so after it was put up. Someone—Emerson, for sure—replaced it with a wall sign from one of the mandatory motivational inservices. Now, when you settle onto the porcelain you’re exhorted to EXCEED EXPECTATIONS.

I’m moving a batch of KQ673 from Xiamen to Vancouver when Judith’s phone rings. Her voice is quiet, and her face is set on slow-leak. She mashes a button and looks at Emerson.

“Mr. Blas wants to see you.”

Emerson pushes back from his desk. “Did he say what?”

“Just said, now.”

He throws down his headset and stands and looks at Rags. “I don’t like this.”

Rags smiles all wobbly like she’s just discovered a boo boo on his leg and wants him to know it’ll be all right.

“I got a bad feeling.”

Judith also smiles. I guess I’m smiling too. Emerson’s limp makes his passage over the linoleum torture for the rest of us. He’s got death march in his gait. And the supportive smile on my face is killing me.

He lost his leg in Vietnam. We hung around Sully’s after Rags and Judith finished their martinis and had called it a night. The two of us sitting there working out the last laughs about Mr. Blas’s tales from his cheesy annual conventions, me especially; I just hate fakes and big shots.

“Two more,” he had said, and it took me a while to notice his mood had downgeared to sober.

“Why not?” I was still feeling good. It was Thursday, no major party available, and casual Friday loomed over the horizon. Casual meant jeans and Hawaiian shirts. Rags complained about having to wear Hawaiian shirts every Friday, so Mr. Blas entertained suggestions. Bowling Shirt Friday got a few votes, as did ’50s Friday. My contribution, Lederhosen Friday, was DOA.

Emerson lined them up, two each. “Can’t drink like I used to,” he said, winking. He then asked what I knew about *his* war.

“Not much.” I’d seen that movie with the soccer players and the one with Charlie Sheen or Martin, one of them, or both, I couldn’t remember.

“Oh.” It came to me like that. “That photo hanging on Woody Allen’s wall. I saw a picture of that.”

He looked confused.

“You know, the guy has a gun pointed at the other guy’s head. And that guy has a look of *Fuck! Bad day!* on his face.”

“Naw,” Emerson said. “Don’t know it.” He slung the first shot down. “But that sounds like my war.”

He was on his second tour in Trảng Bàng. His platoon got hammered three days straight.

“Night and day,” he said, eyeing the last shot. “It was grisly. Then it all stopped, like a mist retreating over the paddies. Morning. Nothing. Afternoon. Nothing. Like they’d booked over the hill, late for an appointment.”

I glanced at his leg and drank my first shot. “That when it happened?”

Emerson sighed. I had never seen him do that before. More like him to growl when he started getting contemplative. Like the presence of thought just pissed him off.

He stretched his arms back on the barstool. Bartender went by fingering the counter. Emerson shook his head.

“It was grisly,” he said and drank his last shot.

I’d pictured a mortar blowing him over a hut or something. A scatter of gunfire tearing up his leg. I watched him, doing my best to encourage him to tell it. His face was lit up by the call-shelf lights. Glowing reds, yellows, and greens, like something hanging on a door at Christmas.

“Deuce-and-a-half got me.” He stood, his arm on the counter. His eyes had a quaggy look.

I sucked down my shot and stood with him.

“What do you mean? Like a tank? You were hit by a tank, or what?”

“Run over.”

He began to laugh. I heard his prosthesis clanking against the metal of the barstool.

“What? I don’t get it.”

He clasped my shoulder. His eyes were wet and red.

“PFC Thompson gunned it straight-to-hell back. Didn’t even look. Straight back, like he was going down a highway.”

“Shit,” I said. And I felt stupid later for asking, “Do you get a medal for that?”

Truth is, I still feel pretty stupid about it, every time I see him. He refuses to tell me what I really want to hear, the *grisly* firefights, the wholesale carnage, the blood stories of the ground game. But none of my business, he says, and he's right. But that doesn't stop me from guessing. I'm pretty sure I'm right about most of it. I've seen the films.

He comes out of Mr. Blas's office like he's been smacked upside the head several times. Judith goes to him, reaching out, all over him, but he dodges her, his leg scraping a little with the effort to find his desk.

Rags is up too. Her hands pressed against her stomach. Making little fabric-smoothing motions. I can tell she wants to say something.

Emerson stops, holds Judith's hand, looks at us. "Don't get excited." He looks at Judith. "I'm out," he says. "Downsizing."

"When?"

He looks at Rags. "Two weeks, the usual."

The phones are ringing. What can we do? Then Emerson does what I'm certain he did in the war. He takes charge. He gets to work.

Not five minutes later, Judith hangs up and looks at Rags.

She's in no hurry. She opens her purse, lays it out on her desk like a workman's tool bag. Takes out a mirror. Coats her lips and bites down on tissue. A few brush strokes to the cheeks. The compact snaps with confidence, and she rises, smoothing, going toward the door like she's stalking prey. God, those legs.

She's out as quickly as she went in. Doesn't say a thing until the headset is snuggled in her hair, bud in the ear. The sound of her voice is a clear but meaningless jumble, all except KQ673.

Judith is next. She's got tissues balled in her hand. When the door closes I tell Emerson and Rags I'm going outside. Truth is, we're being treated badly, and I'm about to puke.

Emerson swivels in his chair. Those quaggy eyes, like at Sully's that night. His lips aren't moving, but I hear a growl. For a moment I think he's going to command me to stand and fight. I shrug to tell him it's not that kind of war. As I go out I hear Rags saying, *KQ673*.

The air is warm, a shift from the arctic air of the office. My bike's black frame absorbs the light of a high sun. Gonna be a long ride home. I sit on a parking curb and stare at the cracks in the asphalt. It's easy to imagine those cracks being the beds of dried-up rivers. Easy to see how they wend through pretty green valleys and in places are overshadowed by rises in the asphalt that would look, if you were small enough, like mountains. A lost civilization. A golden age, when the right things were done for the right reasons. I put myself in a canoe and start paddling the length of the river or what would have been a river if it weren't asphalt. I'm paddling in breezy, warm air, high sun, green valleys all around, and the sphinx just in the distance.

Poor sphinx. The squirrel lies same as it did that morning. It must be a baby. Very little hair. Its mouth doesn't seem formed right. Maybe it was ejected from its nest. Anyway, it's dead now. Flies land on its haunches,

scamper around the purple skin. That isn't a blink, it's the sun glinting off its drying eye. How does its parents know it's the runt, the one that isn't going to make it?

Whoa. Double take. Head move? No. Light and shadow. Those flies are laying eggs in the skin, snacking on the flesh. I stare hard. Incredible. The squirrel lifts its head, twitches a back-off move at the flies who circle around in crazy patterns.

I brace against the parking curb, rising, but what am I going to do? An impulse. Step on its head. Put it out of its misery. But it doesn't look miserable, only sedate, meditative. But it must be miserable. Would some agency, Humane Society or something, want it? No, it's too far gone. Nothing can be done for it.

The air inside is icy. Judith thumbs at the door. I knock and go in.

Mr. Blas says, "Sit down."

I feel sorry for the guy, and not just because he mixes pinstripes with running shoes. He does what corporate dictates. He's the bastard we'll make fun of later.

Mr. Blas strokes his neck.

"You've heard"—he indicates *out there*—"we're downsizing. This office is closing."

I'm watching to see if he's reading from a corporate cue card hidden on his desk.

"It's regrettable," he says. "I feel we've done important work."

I want to tell him that I, too, feel we've done something important, like we're the International Red Cross of KQ673.

He leans forward. He smiles.

I'm ready to get it over with. "Will I get to cash in my PTO?"

He seems startled.

"If you like," he says, taking his time, pushing the smile. "But the good news is that you're being transferred to the Houston office. So you might want to hang on to it."

"But—"

He opens his hands. He knows where I'm going.

"Corporate wants you up the ladder. Congratulations."

I'm stunned. I should feel relieved. Elated.

"I don't get it."

"You're young," he says. "The position was there, and they wanted a recommendation. Don't look gloomy. I'm off to St. Paul. Think I like snow? I'd say you got the better deal."

Now I get it. I *am* young. I'm mobile. Versatile. Flexible. I'm not missing a leg, burdened with children, or gray-haired and arthritic. My needs are minimal, my pay the lowest. Corporate loves me, this I know.

As I'm turning the doorknob I realize I can't tell anyone. They're already feeling down, and it would devastate them. I saw the stricken looks on their faces when they came out. Imitation without exaggeration is the proper course.

Judith is there to catch me. Nice of her to worry I might fall. I shake my head, stiffen my face to convey to them that if they can handle it, so can I. Emerson asks if I'm all right. Rags is looking motherly. I sit behind my desk. I hang my head. I mumble that it will get better. Big opportunities ahead. That sort of thing.

"That's the spirit," Emerson says.

He's smiling. We're buddies now. Pinned down by enemy fire. We won't abandon each other. I'm lifted by a feeling of intense fellowship.

Until lunch we're clicking keyboards and saying *KQ673* into our headsets. Mr. Blas finally emerges. He mutters to Judith. He stares at the floor as he walks past. He turns before going out. His lips have a parched quality. He wants to say, "I'm truly sorry about this. I did what I could. We're a team." But we're all pretending to EXCEED EXPECTATIONS, and he leaves us with silence.

"Lunch?" Judith's voice whistles through the silence.

We walk to Sully's. As we go I glance at the sphinx. More flies. Definitely dead. Then its ear twitches. I start to tell them but decide not to. Who cares about a dying squirrel?

Sully's is crowded. On the way we've been downing Mr. Blas. He's the effigy. Corporate is too vague, a concept. It doesn't exist. No feelings to hurt. No toes to crush. This strikes me as funny.

Rags asks.

"Mr. Blas isn't here," I tell her. "We're knocking him, and he's not here to feel it."

"It's about us," she says.

She's right. We feel better this way.

Pam seats us. Hipless in trousers, flat as day-old soda. Not quite a boy, not quite a girl. Friendliest smile, and swift as a tweet. She says it's a good day for the fish. It's a good day, she says, looking at each of us with that wholesomely seductive, androgynous smile. Something social then takes place, an inbred trait older than the Ice Age shows up to make our interaction go smoothly. We could rip Pam the way we're feeling, we really could. But we don't. We smile, laugh a little, and order the fish.

The low grumble of old men drifts from the table behind. In snatches between breathing and sipping I hear them speak of exchanges and dialysis, liver spots and *Desperate Housewives*. One says it's the best show he's ever seen.

Emerson and Judith sit away from the table. He's nodding while she's saying that the percentage of bonds should equal your age. Mixed in this late-life lesson are references to disposable income, risk tolerance, and lump-sum distribution. Judith is wagging a finger, and Emerson looks like he wants to get run over again just to change the subject.

On the opposite side three women laugh, not like they'd ordered the fish but like they all have the sort of disposable income Judith is talking about. They must all be in their mid to late thirties, easy and spontaneous as the pleats and flounces in their skirts.

"I feel guilty," Rags says.

"Disciplined financial planning," Judith says.

Emerson breaks his cornbread in half. "My strategy was to guess my way through."

Rags toys with her food. "I need to leave early today to pick up my kids."

I put my napkin in my lap. "And you feel guilty?"

"Isn't that the strangest thing?"

Judith jostles the table with her fist. "You could outlive your income."

"You always leave early on Fridays," I say. "Are you saying you always feel guilty?"

"Yes." She looks truly confused. "It made me work harder, to let everyone know I wasn't a slacker. But now? The guilt shouldn't be there, should it? But it is."

"It's a low-yield environment," Judith says. She divides her fish into quarters.

Rags looks the other way. I try to see what she's staring at, but the only thing in her line of sight is the giant fish tank where a sad-eyed grouper is pacing.

"If you know where you're at," Judith says, "you can figure out where you're going."

"It's not just the guilt," Rags says. She stares at the table and blinks rapidly like she's coming out of a trance. She looks at me. "I don't mean to go on like this."

"No, it's okay."

"I space out in the office. Have you noticed?"

I shake my head. Her legs, I've noticed her legs.

"But that's just one side of it. Say I've got some KQ673 that's got to go. Then I'm keyed up, hyperfocused, and do you know that I've *forgotten* my kids? And I'm late and they're worried?"

"Diversified portfolio," Judith says.

"And you feel guilty about it?" I say. "That's understandable."

"No," she says, loud enough that Emerson and Judith both stare.

Rags presses her hands into her face, her palms into her eyes, like she's ready to play peek-a-boo.

"No," she says again. This time there's restraint in her voice. "I don't feel guilty for leaving early, and I don't feel guilty about forgetting to pick up my kids. I feel guilty that I'm letting the company down. Isn't that awful?"

I'm struggling to keep up with her. What she says strikes me as wrong, sort of, but—wrong to her, wrong to her kids, to us, to corporate? I'm not sure. It's probably the way she's saying it, overwrought, a bit emotional, and I'm feeling uncomfortable and can't fully process it the way she means.

I focus on the clatter of plates and utensils. The light, animated hands of the women at the next table. The complacent grumble of the men behind me.

“Cake,” Judith says. She says it like a fact. Simple and with a devious hint of a smile. She laces her twiggy fingers together. “We should have cake.”

Emerson pats his belly and laughs. “Not sure my portfolio can stand more growth.”

“Listen to the word,” Judith says. “*Cake*. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Delicious cake,” Rags says.

“Yummy,” I say.

Judith scolds playfully. “You didn’t say the word.”

“Cake,” I say quickly. “Yummy cake.”

“Is there a better word than *cake*?” Judith leans in. “You can hear the knife go in and slide out. *Caaa-k*. Hear it?”

Rags nods.

Emerson laughs. “I can taste it.”

“Moist, fluffy, light,” Judith says.

“Smooth, creamy, airy,” Rags says.

“The cake,” Emerson says, “is not a lie.”

Judith says, “Let’s say it together.”

We say *cake* softly, through awkward smiles. Judith motions, *Again*.

Cake...Cake...Cake...

Pam shows up. “Do you want some cake?” She leans on one foot, a slender hip braced against Rags’s chair. Her pencil ready.

Judith looks around, but we’re shaking off the cake. We want the idea the sound evokes. Having cake would spoil it. We don’t need cake. The sound, the idea, is too basic. It already makes us feel secure.

Judith asks Pam to list all the cakes. Pam knows them by heart. The way she leans, I think she wants nothing more than to sit with us, to fit somehow into our little group. And why not? We’re close-knit, like a family. We’re going down in solidarity. This image plays about on the walk back, and I feel inspired to save the squirrel as a symbolic act, but when we arrive the squirrel is gone.

The next morning I wander around the parking lot looking for it along the edges where a cluster of oaks throws down a heavy shade. Emerson roars in on his Harley. He asks what I’m doing. “Nothing,” I say, and we go inside.

Throughout the day, I wonder what has happened to the squirrel. I stand by the door when I should be working.

The emotions soon washed out in the urgency of the work, and during my next break I can no longer recall why I’m consumed with the fate of the squirrel. Standing at the door defies my good sense. Runts get rejected all the time, and it’s not my business to worry about the fate of squirrels who aren’t going to make it anyway.

I put the squirrel out of my mind, sensing, as I do it, a shift in my mood, which I attribute to a sudden blast of arctic AC. In a few days, the image of the sphinx is gone.

xxx

The following week, on the same day, Emerson and Judith leave. Rags brings farewell cards, balloons, and flowers. Mr. Blas has already gone for the day. He didn't even sign the cards.

"You could stand a few more days," I tell Emerson. "We're all so close. It'd be nice to go out together."

We're drinking soda next to his desk. Half-eaten slices of dark chocolate on paper plates rest in our hands.

He laughs. "Out of Big Square and into Big Store," he says. "The options are irresistible."

I listen to Rags and Judith laughing near the file cabinet.

"But, really," I say. "What will you do?"

Emerson's face seems to redden. He touches his leg.

"If someone had asked me that question before I got run over I would have said, 'Jump out of the way.'"

He growls under his breath.

"The choices that are mine to make," he says, "seem insignificant."

"Hear that?" I turn toward the others. "That's funny."

He looks. "What'd they say?"

"Judith's telling about her grandchild. Says she was playing a joke by looking into the boy's ear and saying she could see right through his brain. The boy says, 'No, you didn't. I don't have a brain.' That's funny."

Emerson chuckles. "Something, isn't it?"

At the end of the day, Emerson and Judith go out together. Emerson opens the door. He holds it for Judith and takes a box from her. Through the glass, I can see him put the box in the backseat of her car. They stand a moment talking. They hug. Then Judith gets inside her car. I can barely make out her face. Only her hands are visible. They adjust the mirror. I imagine she is teary-eyed and that's why she's wiping her face. Then the *rum-rum bump-bum-bum-bum* of Emerson's Harley fills the office. The roar lingers long after he's gone.

Rags and I pound out the rest of the week. On Friday, Rags tosses her headset on her desk, puts pictures of her children, a blue bottle of lotion, and a pink coffee cup into a box. She grabs the edges, but instead of lifting the box she turns.

"I'm going," she says.

I lower my headset to my neck and nod.

"I've got to get my kids."

She lingers, looking around, as if she can't move, as if she's afraid she'll forget something.

"Nice working with you," I say. My face feels funny, like I've said something awkward.

She nods and says, "I've got a few feelers out."

Feelers. We are all insects.

"You?"

I shake my head. “Nothing.” I take a deep breath. “I’m thinking about going home.”

“Home? I thought you lived here.”

“No, I’m from Houston.”

“Really?”

Not really. Not sure why I said that. I just wanted her to know I was going somewhere, and Houston popped up.

She lifts the box. “You take care.”

I shift a little like I might stand but then settle back in my chair.

“You too.”

She struggles to open the door, juggling the box and her purse. I watch how her legs camber beneath her skirt, those delicious knees, like cake, they are not a lie.

Mr. Blas emerges from his office. Just in time to skip saying goodbye to Rags.

“Quiet,” he says. “Weird.”

He paces as if he’s on the deck of an abandoned ship. To the door. To the filing cabinet. Back to the door. A lot like the grouper. He stops in front of my desk.

“Still light out and it’s quiet,” he says. “Weird, isn’t it?”

I agree. *Quiet. Weird.*

“Let’s call it a day,” he says.

I’m all for that, but I have two orders left to process and tell him so.

He shrugs.

“I’ll be here all next week,” he says, “making sure the office is emptied. Then *brrrr* St. Paul.”

My smile is weak. I feel it hanging loose on my face like an old sticky note on a filing cabinet. I lower my head and tap the keys. Mr. Blas goes into the bathroom. I stop typing. The silence of the office creeps up on me. I wish he hadn’t brought it to my attention. Makes me feel jumpy.

Then, of all things, androgynous Pam takes up my thoughts. I have a vision of her wending among tables. Perky, bright, and boyishly girlish. Cute. That’s the only way I can see it. I’m struggling for a reference point between this and that, here and there. I need a word for the transition, the middle space.

Mr. Blas comes out laughing hard, and I’m glad for the distraction. He spreads his hands on my desk.

“I’m leaving the sign for the next occupants,” he says. “*Exceed expectations*—I just now got it. The deep and true significance.”

He wanders to the door, looking out. Hands clasped behind his back. He’s making noises, throat-clearings, nose-blowings, coughs. I lean back in my chair. Mr. Blas is a classic putz. I expect him to dig out earwax with his index finger. The sign on the door is a joke. He’s found significance in a joke.

A snarl of irritation forms high in my chest. Mr. Blas kept things to himself. He could have shared his discovery of significance long ago. He

could have signed the farewell cards for Emerson and Judith. He could have said goodbye to Rags or helped her out the door. He could have brought doughnuts on many more occasions instead of on the day he let us go.

Still, he's not a bad man, not evil. He recommended me for promotion. The irritation dissipates, and I laugh.

Mr. Blas turns. He's smiling. He strolls across the linoleum to my desk.

"Sorry," I say. "I just got what you were saying. I guess it is pretty funny."

"Let's get out of here," he says.

He shakes my hand outside.

"You got a look about you," he says. "You're not nervous?"

"It just occurred to me," I say. "You're the only one I know at the company now."

"Son," he says, "it's a fine thing. You've been anointed. Corporate didn't shake you out." He slaps my shoulder. "You're going to fit right in." He glances at my hands on the handlebars. "And you can get yourself a car, a real nice one."