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## A Serious Job

Joshua Gray

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# A SERIOUS JOB

Joshua Gray

Danny kept an eye on his father from inside the Peugeot sedan. His father was stroke-addled and stoop-shouldered, pale skin sagged around the jaw. The old man had spent the afternoon sitting in a tired Naugahyde recliner, just inside the bay door, arguing with himself, searching his memory for the year he first met his wife, dead now. He knows that. It's the year he's lost.

"72, wasn't it," Danny said, voice loud in the Peugeot cab, the only car in the mechanic shop. He waited for an answer, but Irving was watching the rain.

The sky had blackened at noon as the rainclouds that'd churned up from the Gulf gathered overhead. Danny hoped the storm would pass before nightfall. He was installing polycloth covers over the lacerated leather seats. Not to Irving's standard. He would've spent hours on the phone—to dealers, collectors, scrapers, hoarders—until he found the necessary leather. But Danny wanted the car for tonight, for Patricia.

"72" Irving said, no certainty in his voice.

"Yeah, first date was at, where, a drive-in?"

Irving grew antsy in his recliner. He hated the confusion. He was a man who'd lived by exact figures—flat eight, double cam, cc, hp, gasoline weight vs. performance. On the small shop's walls hung memorabilia from Irving's peripatetic youth in the racing circuit. Photos of him in NASCAR pit crews, when the drivers were moonshiners turned gods of American muscle. A picture of a young Irving with Paul Newman at a celebrity race in Riverside, an Indiana license plate autographed by A.J. Foyt.

The shop had been Irving's for decades. The best mechanic for analog cars, specifically Europeans models, on this side of New Orleans, even the Big Easy collectors sought him out. Irving had mainly made his living by renovating and selling antique cars, like the 64 Peugeot and the 82 BMW out front next to the 77 Mercedes, impulsive purchases left to rot by owners or lost to banks. Cars that, if

cared for, could last fifty years, but also no GPS, no wifi, no heated seats. Retirees and rich men and the occasional hobbyist arrived to kick the tires, talk shop, but rarely did the checkbooks come out to play.

“Remember the movie you took her to,” Danny asked, choking the frustration out of his voice. “Think it was one of your favorites.” The old man’s mouth moved but no words came.

For the last fifteen months, their days had passed in such a way. Danny was stateside when the stroke happened, waiting out his last contract of service. Eight years in, thinking about being an EMT, nursing school, state police. But, Danny came home.

Reopening the mechanic shop was Della’s idea, the hospice caretaker, who tended Irving two nights a week. The place offered familiarity to Irving and a routine for Danny. Also, if left alone, Irving would fall. Falling on blood thinners was a dangerous game. Even a blunted edge could rip Irving’s skin, draining him with no more speed than a pinprick in a water balloon.

“A drive-in,” Danny said, answering himself. “Took her to a Steve McQueen movie for your first date.” His voice echoed in the shop as he stood to stretch. “I got a first date tonight too,” he mumbled. “At Café La Fleur—”

“In Waveland,” Irving interrupted, a fillip in his memory.

“Yeah,” Danny said, leaning on the Peugeot. “Then you two went for a long drive.”

“Drove down I-10,” Irving said, voice more certain.

“In the Galaxie, along the beach with the windows down.”

Danny wondered if the two of them had made love that night—in the back seat, on soft sheets, on the warm hood of the Galaxie. Danny wouldn’t arrive for another fourteen years. A miracle child for parents close to forty. He watched Irving’s face soften. He was there again, beside Vera, the smell of the ocean. The year didn’t matter.

\*

The bruise-black clouds had moved north, leaving the afternoon air cooler and

laced with light rain. Danny was buffing the Peugeot when he asked, "Need to use the restroom?"

"Keeping count," Irving asked, eyes clearer now.

"Smart-assed," said Danny. "Somebody's feeling better. How about dating advice, got any of that? I've been on a hiatus."

"Don't expect anything from each other," Irving said.

Danny put the buffer away, said, "You met Vera in 1972. She said you looked like Steve McQueen."

"Just not as handsome," Irving said, laughing. Vera, she could always make him laugh. Irving winked at him. They'd shared that, the wink, could stop Danny from crying as a child.

Maybe Patricia and I will laugh like that, Danny thought. They'd met when she came to inquire about the 77 Mercedes, a 450SL, convertible. Patricia had good posture, a little taller than Danny, but he didn't mind. She didn't buy the car, but there was an attraction.

She'd also commented on the Peugeot's uniqueness. That's why Danny wanted it ready for tonight. Sure, the car was drafty, but anything would beat driving the Peugeot to the VFW bar, to the old men, fat men, broken men who sniffed him like hungry dogs, greedy for war stories, men who spoke of service like the narrators of tv specials with titles like Okinawa Bonsai or Blitzkrieg's Thunder, but who knew little of how the mechanic shop, the diesel stench, the musk of oil, could remind Danny of patrols where dead dogs could go *boom*, where toys could go *boom*, where trash piles could go *boom*, even they didn't know how he sometimes had to pull over to let traffic pass, white-knuckled and sweating. He closed the door to the sedan. Yeah, he thought, maybe Patricia and I will laugh like that.

Irving squirmed forward in the recliner.

"Bathroom," asked Danny.

Irving nodded. Danny placed the walker before him. Irving leaned forward, kept his head low, looked at his feet. They hadn't moved. Danny had replaced Irving's work boots with house slippers, but Irving still wore a blue chambray shirt and

matching polyester work pants. Danny pressed them every morning on a creaky ironing board in the kitchen.

“Take your time, Pop.”

Irving became animate at the sound of Danny’s voice and hunched forward, readjusted his hands on the walker. Danny took him by the arms, lifted. Irving turned in half-steps, his soles never leaving the dusty concrete. It was a slow trip from recliner to bathroom. Danny hovered close behind, watching for trip hazards and sharp edges.

“Doing okay, Pop,” Danny asked, worried about accidents. Those were the loneliest moments for Danny, cleaning his father of feces, both men silent, Danny workman-like while Irving bowed his head like a monk at prayer.

“Got to,” said Irving, arriving at the door, already sweating.

“Potty?” Danny winced at the word. Not a child, he thought. “Number two, I mean.”

“No,” Irving shook his head. “Sprinkle.” Words didn’t always come easy. “Pee.”

Irving took the portable urinal in one hand, leaned against the walker. He struggled with the buckle. The old man’s hands had weakened quickly after the first powerful stroke. Irving used the heel of his palm to force the catch. Danny didn’t allow the jean button to be used. Like shoelaces, Irving’s hands couldn’t work it. As he pulled the buckle the zipper went with it. Danny heard the fumbling of fabric. Irving could sometimes retrieve himself. Mostly, he could only pull his underwear aside, pushing his penis and testes against his thigh, from there the old man could fish the tip of his penis into the portable plastic urinal and relieve himself.

Danny waited, door ajar. It could be a long wait. Danny never wanted to be like this, hollowed into a shell, ruined. Strokes, Danny often thought, were like regime changes of the mind and body, the world was familiar but disingenuous, astatic, someone else making the decisions. I’d rather be dead, Danny thought, than to lose control of the body, the mind a maze full of dead ends.

Finally, a splatter of urine, a few drops. Barely enough to cover the bottom.

Danny looked at the wall before him, old advertisements of cars with names like

Judge, Charger, Mustang, Roadrunner, all racing for vanishing points on empty highways, a slogan stared back at him: For Those Reaching New Horizons.

He heard a few more drops, kept waiting.

Yes, he wanted new horizons. If Irving died he'd sell it all, the shop, every scrap of metal, every racing artifact. Take one of the cars, maybe the Peugeot, maybe the Merc, and go. Travel light. Race across the Atchafalaya Basin, sprint the near-endless stretch of Texas, slip over the border at Big Bend, search out the Sonora, return to the desert, to another language, work at a clinic, help the needy and grow a beard, maybe a woman would love him, have his children, and he'd never again think of what lay to the North.

Danny shook those thoughts away, felt hollow, fucked-out.

He heard urine rattle in the plastic beaker, kept waiting.

But maybe Patricia would be worth staying for, Danny thought. Maybe.

Irving emptied the contents with barely a splash. His jeans had fallen to his knees. He was hunched over in the slim bathroom groping for his waistband.

"Let me help you, Pop," Danny said.

He raised the jeans and buckled Irving's belt. Both men sweating now, close, touching, intimate. Danny lifted the walker from over the toilet, stepped out, waited. Irving, relieved, smirked before ambling down his path towards home, another recliner, a warm blanket, a long sleep.

\*

The sun slumped behind the tree line. The clouds were purple-hued, the color and texture of torn plums. Della Summers had the windows open, cooling the small house. The air was heavy with the smell of rain and wet jasmine, fecund and clean.

Della was heating up leftovers for Irving when Danny came into the kitchen.

"Handsome," said Della, a woman of warm smiles and strong hands. She'd been caring for Irving for over a year, the only woman to enter the house since Vera's passing.

Danny, with shirt and jeans pressed, clean fingernails, said, "Feel like I'm going to a job interview."

"Looking good is he," Irving asked, rested now.

"Good's a stretch," Della commented. "But it's an improvement."

Irving laughed. Danny felt that if the date went nowhere it'd be worth it for that.

"Della, I haven't been on a date, a real date in, I dunno, a long time. Do men still wear cologne on dates?"

"I bet this tramp does," she said, looking slyly at Irving. "He's got a stash somewhere."

"I mean, on a first date, you should, right," Danny asked, patting his pockets in a dazed way as if a cologne bottle hid there.

Della began pilfering under the kitchen sink.

"Stash's not there is it, Pop?"

But Irving didn't laugh. He was lost in the television, eyes gone soft, Della out of the room.

"Well, how about this?" Della held out a lemon-scented countertop cleaner.

Danny laughed, said, "Maybe I'll gurgle some Windex too."

"Leave the jokes to me. Better yet," she said, squeezing his shoulders, serious now, "get all the bad jokes out before the date."

Della held him in her dark arms, whispered, "Don't be nervous and don't worry about cologne. Just act nice and gentle. Like you are. She'll like that."

"Thank you, Della," Danny said, making for the front door. "You two gonna be okay?"

"Don't worry. Kidnapping an old white man's only a crime when he's got money."

Danny left in the Peugeot. *Act nice and gentle.*

\*

“So, you were a soldier,” Patricia asked.

They sat near the café’s front window. On the pane, a large fleur-de-lis was hand-painted in gold. Their nearest neighbors were an older couple, holding hands, their table littered with a lipstick-stained coffee mug, crumpled napkins, and dark-puddled wine glasses.

“Yes ma’am, four tours,” Danny answered. The main course had only just arrived, the air stiff between them. Patricia was beautiful, if a bit pale, with an intelligent face, straight shoulders.

“I protested as an undergrad when Bush invaded.”

“I was only a few months outta basic.”

She blushed slightly. Danny kept eating, didn’t know what to say. He felt the questions coming: Why’d you enlist? What was it like? Why didn’t you just say no?

“Must’ve been difficult, being over there,” Patricia said.

“At times,” Danny said, too quickly. “Did you go straight to your Ph.D. after undergrad,” he asked trying to recover.

Patricia brightened. She told him about writing dissertations in Boston and how much she loved New England.

“Must’ve been a bummer, landing a job here. It’s pretty isolated in comparison.”

“Well, yeah. New Orleans is an hour away. That’s nice. I mean, it’s not Boston.” She took a sip of chardonnay. “But I’m lucky to have this job. The market’s shit.”

The waiter refilled Danny’s water glass. He hoped his sweating wasn’t noticeable.

“Is that how you usually meet women, at the mechanic shop,” Patricia asked, eyes

playful.

“No ma’am,” Danny replied. “None that aren’t collecting Social Security.”

Just single mothers come into the shop, Danny thought, and old folks, until you. It’d been different between tours, taking his chances in dive bars and cheap clubs, waking beside mascara-smearred faces, smelling of cigarettes and Jäger, and feeling so hollow and stained that the only cure was a fast drive with all the windows down from Pendleton to the Pacific for an early-morning cleanse in its cold waters. No one else around. No one.

Patricia smirked and said, “No more ma’ams. Class isn’t in session.”

She looked at him and did not hide her attraction, and she let him look at her. He saw a woman, still young, with laugh lines and strong bones. Pampered maybe, but smart and tough in an academic way. His eyes drifted to Patricia’s clavicle, its texture nakedly architectural under her skin, and her breasts below it, smooth and natural. He looked up quickly and met her eyes.

Danny blushed. She laughed and he blushed harder.

“He does laugh, and blush.”

Danny nodded, laughing more freely.

“Gotta save it for effect. How about you? Are we breaking hearts in the anthropology department tonight, slumming with a mechanic?”

“A few, but you’re more than a mechanic. A small business owner, an entrepreneur of antique automobiles.”

Danny smiled, felt himself relax a little more.

“Besides,” Patricia continued. “I dated enough professors in grad school. Found it fascinating at first. The thing is that, eventually, our conversations became lectures. They’d basically repeat what they’d read, before sighing and saying,” her voice fell into a lazy lisp, “all I want is a good bottle of wine.” Another sip, a clever smile. “All they know is office politics and Heidegger.”

“Heidegger? That’s a kind of drill, right?”

Patricia threw her head back, laughing. Faces turned to them.

“Yes. For your brain. To find joy and kill it.”

She looked at him warmly, hazel eyes drinking him in.

“You feel like dancing?”

He nodded.

“There’s a place in downtown. For adults, not undergraduates. We should go.”

They looked at each other, food gone, but hungry nonetheless. Danny glanced for the waiter, didn’t see him. The vibration blasted his outer thigh.

Please, he thought, please not now, don’t be. He stopped himself before thinking the name Della, hoping that if he didn’t think it, it wouldn’t be her. The vibration again, Patricia noticing.

He took out the phone, apologizing for the need.

“It’s fine,” she assured him.

Della’s cell phone number on the screen. A feeling of cold, of nausea. He excused himself, turned from the table and answered the phone.

“He fell. I can’t get him up. Sorry to call.”

“Where?”

“Going to the bathroom. Fell on his walker too, so he can’t pick himself up. He’s confused. Ministroke, I think. He hit his scalp on the doorframe. It’s bleeding like crazy. Got a rag on it now.”

Danny said nothing. Della’s breath on the other end, waiting. He thought of the darkness of the dance floor, Patricia coming closer, how she might feel against him.

“Danny,” Della said from a great distance.

He calculated the costs of an ambulance. They could help Irving up and Della could then refuse the ride.

No, this was his job, his duty, his father.

“I’m on my way.” He hung up. “Patricia, my father fell. Della can’t pick him up.”

He had to choke the pity out of his voice, not now, no time for that.

“Of course,” she said.

“All the neighbors are old,” Danny said, his hand already reaching for the keys.

“There’s no one else—”

“Of course. Not a problem. Please.”

“I’ll run you home,” Danny said.

“No, please. Let’s go.”

Danny paid. Patricia waited at the door, slipping into a cardigan.

\*

Irving lay as he had fallen. In the hallway outside the bathroom door. His head in Della’s lap, a bloody rag between his crown and her knee. His legs were tangled in the walker.

Danny went to him. Patricia lingered in the kitchen.

“How is he?”

“Same,” answered Della. “Not talking much. He keeps trying to stand.” Her voice was direct, controlled, a veteran.

Irving lay soaked in sweat. Danny smelled the sourness of urine and beyond that the faint, noxious scent of feces.

“How you doing, Pop?”

Irving's eyes tried to find the voice. Panicked eyes, confused.

"Hello, miss. I'm sorry this had to happen tonight," Della said.

Danny had forgotten Patricia in the kitchen.

"Is there anything I can do," Patricia asked, arms crossed against her chest.

"No, ma'am. Thank you," said Della.

Danny inspected the bleeding.

"Stopped," Della said. "But it took its sweet time. Ministroke, no doubt."

Irving's mouth opened, as if to moan, only a gasp.

"I'll get the walker free," Danny said, stepping past his father. "And we'll go from there."

He glanced at Patricia over his shoulder. Maybe the date could be saved, he thought, maybe the club and a cool drink. Her eyes were locked between Irving's legs, her weight towards the kitchen.

His father's aged and distended testicles had fallen loose from his briefs. Danny hooked a finger inside the hem, righted the wet fabric. The carpet beneath him felt damp as well. Danny closed Irving's robe and heard Patricia retreat into the kitchen. There's still time for us, he thought, just let me get through this. He shook his head to clear it, had to work now. He lifted his father's leg and pulled the walker free. Irving tried to rise.

"No," Della insisted, but all he could do was wallow. "Shhh. Stay still now."

Della was singing softly to Irving now, wiping the sweat from his face. Irving was blinking, confused. Danny checked his father's legs. No blood. Several deep bruises. No breaks.

"Alright, Della. Ready?"

Della nodded, and Danny slipped his hands under Irving's armpits. Danny

straightened his back and pulled as Della pushed against Irving's shoulders. Irving's sweat soaked Danny, but they rolled Irving into sitting position. Not enough room in the slim hallway for three people. No choice.

"Gonna lift you to your knees, Pop. Ready?"

Irving's eyes remained on the floor, sweat fell from his nose. Danny lifted the dead weight. A few inches off the ground, Della quickly folded his leg and brought him to a kneel. Danny stood up and stretched his back. It'd ache in morning. Della would need a day's sleep just to move again.

"Della, I'm sorr–"

"Not now. Get him up."

Irving was trying to rise, mumbling. Danny hugged him and lifted with everything he had. Irving rose unsteadily to his feet, tottered for a moment before Della stabilized him with the walker.

"One step at a time, Pop."

His father stepped forward as Della led the walker. Danny pressed behind him, body to body, sweating together, nearly lewd in their motion.

"Another step," Della said softly, a mother cooing a child to bed.

One footfall, shaky.

"Good, Pop."

Irving paused unsteadily, started to sit.

"Not yet," said Della. "Bed's close."

Irving stepped. Head down. Stepped again. They were through the door. Della moved the walker aside, braced him with her body. Danny took the robe off and lowered Irving's wet underwear as Della gently guided him backward. They wrestled him into proper position upon the bed, Danny at his shoulders and Della at his ankles both ignoring the phallus that flopped shyly between his thighs. Irving's eyes on the ceiling.

Afterwards, Della and Danny sat on the bed, both breathing heavily.

“Thank you, Della. You better go and get some sleep.”

“I’ll stay. Clean up the blood.”

“No need.”

“You’ve got to take her home.”

Danny had forgotten Patricia. He found her in the kitchen listed against the countertop. Not looking at him.

\*

Danny drove fast, but safely. The Peugeot’s headlights reflected in the puddles left behind by the afternoon thunderstorm. The clouds outraced the vehicle, but there was no wind in the trees. No radio. Danny was trying to think of something to say.

“I hope your father is all right.”

“He’s as alright as he can be,” Danny said, harder than he intended. “Don’t know what I’d do without Della.”

“No other family?”

“No” he answered. “An aunt’s got power of attorney, but there’s no money.”

They drove in silence. Patricia with eyes on the road, steady. Danny was white-knuckled and sweating. Hate rose in his throat like acid. A stark cancerous anger at the pitiful thought that the old man had willed this to happen, willed Danny away from her. He needed to pull over. He needed to stop this, to say something, could feel it like a fire in his belly, words at the window of his mouth ready to jump.

“I didn’t do it to kill people.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Enlist. You asked, earlier. At dinner. If it was tough over there. Didn’t go to kill

people. Wanted to serve. Be a nurse afterwards, EMT. Guess I got what I wished for.”

His back ached from lifting Irving. The pain made him realize how badly he’d wanted it to ache from making love to this woman—right there on the warm hood of the Peugeot or on the soft sheets of her bed.

“Of course. I never thought—”

“People ask about it. Wanting to hear war stories. What I remember’s the sky, you know, over there, like it never ends. One time they lit these oil rigs on fire. All that sky painted black by smoke, only the far edges were blue.”

The words were coming now, fire below, either jump or burn.

“I used to wake up and listen to the adhan. That’s the call to prayer. This major, real jackass, he’d use a megaphone, to, you know, interrupt, mock it. But I always liked the adhan. They’re different, you know? How they say it. Sunni. Shia. Every morning no matter what. City burning, no power, no plumbing, people screaming from finding a head on their doorstep. That muezzin’d still be singing. A serious job, you know? You gotta do it.”

She said nothing and he didn’t look at her. Fire in his belly, whole body shaking.

“Tonight. That was okay, you know. He, uh, bleeding stopped. Just a ministroke, TIAs. They’re like aftershocks.”

“Danny, I never thought—”

“You gotta be good to be a muezzin. I got it on my phone now. I listen to it. In the mornings, before Pop wakes up. And at night, you know, can’t always sleep.”

Then he smelt the feces. He knew it well. It was with him, had followed him from the house, the hallway. He glanced at Patricia. Her fingers were at her nose. She looked contemplative, but Danny knew better.

He cleared his throat and cracked his window. He accelerated, miles to go. Nothing ahead, no horizon, only the naked startled world of the headlights.

\*

At her house, she exited before Danny could touch his door handle.

“I’m sorry about tonight.”

“Don’t be,” she said. “You couldn’t help it.”

She was standing straight-backed, voice calm, words studied. Professor on the first day of class.

“Wish I could start the night over,” Danny said.

“That’d be nice, wouldn’t it?”

He looked at her. Nothing left to say. Only smoldering ruins. Wash out the blood.

“I’ll call and check on your father,” she said, nodding like he’d asked a question.

She smiled falsely, brightly. Very professional, a keynote speaker smile.

“Have a good night.” He forced a smile, hated it.

She stepped back, not waving, made for the door immediately. Danny saw her shoulders drop. Her wait was over. She’d made it home. He started the engine and put the Peugeot in reverse.

He drove with the windows down. He turned the radio on, heard static and hit the knob hard. Her wait was over, but his wasn’t. The long drive home in a drafty old car. Back home to waiting. Waiting on the next fall and the thin blood, waiting on the next stroke, the final stroke. More waiting through the days for the nights of no-sleep, and when sleep came, so did dreams of pariah dogs tussling over a sandaled foot after an IED went boom and the smell of burning raw sewage and dark burqas like shadows of the damned queuing for propane. The people had begged him, hands pulling at his flak jacket *What do you want* he’d asked, begging him in a language that sounded like pleas for air. They have no electricity, the translator said, no plumbing *stand back* murderers move among us at night *There’s nothing I can do*. And now doctors telling him there was nothing they could do, no money, no insurance for 24/7 care. Just he and his father and the waiting and Patricia with the tense shoulders, waiting for the night to be over, for the old man to return to his bed, for the young man to walk out of her life, waiting

for this to be another lesson to be taught when a grad student groused about a lack of a love life in academia.

Something bolted through the headlights, dark and furtive.

He swerved too hard and hit a ditch, popped out, slammed the brakes. Danny stepped out of the car, looked behind him, smelt hot rubber. Nothing on the road.

A headlight had cracked. Grass and mud along the passenger bumper but he couldn't discern if there was any further damage. He came back and sat in the car, door open, headlights on. He looked in the rearview. Somewhere in the distance was Patricia. In her pajamas, wine glass in hand.

"Hope you enjoyed the show," Danny said, to the idling engine, the night. "Dinner, some wine, a front row seat to an old man shitting himself, but I forgot to wipe his ass so he'll probably get up to clean it and fall, this time he really hits his head and bleeds out."

Danny stopped shouting, standing in the road. No one out. Not even the moon. Not her fault, he thought. Not her.

\*

After Della had left and he found that she'd already cleaned his father, Danny changed clothes, washed, and ate a turkey sandwich at the kitchen table. No noise. Just silence and waiting for the night to end. He sat for a long time. Not thinking.

He went to Irving's bedroom. Danny watched his father sleep, his body pale and haggard, as if already in a tomb. And for the first time since he was a frightened child, he lay in his father's bed.

The old man snored gently beside him. Danny paced his breath with the snores, tried to fade into the night. A phlegmy cough rattled out of Irving, waking him. His eyes, clear now, looked at Danny.

"Had a spell, did I?"

"I believe so."

"Better now," said Irving, his hand patting Danny's.

Danny nodded, nothing left to say.

Irving smiled, winked at Danny, then turned his head away and fell into a deep sleep.

“I love you,” Danny said.

He took his father’s hand in his own. Danny closed his eyes and waited only a short while before he too fell into a sleep deeper than most dreams can travel.

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Joshua Gray was born and raised in the pine forests of the Deep South. He now lives along the Texas-Mexico border and is at work on a novel exploring *narcoviolencia* and sex trafficking. His stories have appeared in such places as *Per Contra*, *Juked*, *Nailed*, and *Portland Review*.