

TUG

As Reed gazed through the restaurant's rain-streaked picture window, his forehead Tugged.

Sighing, Reed forked the last bit of sausage, ketchup-dabbed it, and chewed quickly. He glanced around the restaurant, looking for his waitress. In the booth across from his, a smiling young woman held up a forkful of hash browns to a just-as-young man's lips. With a slight tilt of his head, he looked up from his financial page and accepted her offering.

"Smooth," he said. The woman laughed, a loud, short chortle. Reed didn't understand the joke but the woman's laugh, so much like Susan's, gave him a momentary sense of loss.

"Refill, hon?" said the waitress. She carried a silver coffee pot, half-full.

"No, thanks, Mitzi," Reed said. "Just my check, please." His forehead Tugged again, a throbbing that left no physical mark.

"Leaving early again, hon?" Reed nodded. Mitzi took her order pad out of her apron and found his check. She slapped it face down on his table and took away his plate.

Reed got up, leaving his Sunday copy of the *Sacramento Bee* on the table, the local news page on top, the want ads untouched. There had been no mention of a late night mugging in a deserted parking lot, since, thanks to Reed, it had not happened. He paid his check, put on his coat and walked outside.

The rain had stopped. As Reed waited for the next Tug, he took in a breath of the

late morning air. Branches of the aspen trees outside the diner swayed gently in the rain-accented breeze. The whitewashed sky idly spread over Randolph Street as if a giant's bed sheet had been stretched to dry. A blackbird hopped rapidly from branch to branch, song notes written to a quick-metered melody. Reed contently enjoyed the living tableau for several seconds when his forehead Tugged. Insistently, this time.

Following the Tug, he started walking. The sodden sidewalk buckled from ground-level old growth tree roots. The oak tree, tall, gnarled and home to mate-minded songbirds, dripped translucent droplets, steadily and noiselessly. Someone had taken the trouble to maintain a wildflower box – blue larkspur, orange paintbrush, scarlet gilia – within the coffee-shaded mud beneath the tree's dark leaf cover. Reed came here often during the late spring and would have preferred to stay here, soaking in the atmosphere. But his Tug would not allow that.

As Reed looked down Sixteenth Street, the right side of his forehead indicated he should go down P Avenue. He turned right and was then directed to turn left on Fifteenth. He kept his head down, his thoughts open.

They began over a decade and a half ago, when Reed was not quite thirteen. A sudden Tug caused him to turn a routine ninth-inning popup to become a bases-clearing triple. As the Tugs persisted, his mother gave him Tylenol and lectures about “thinking too damn much.” His seventh grade English teacher mentioned migraines, while his guidance counselor cautioned him about drug dangers.

Three weeks after school let out, Reed felt a Tug as he walked down to the

library. Jimmy Winters, a cousin of a friend's friend, stood on a street corner, next to a mailbox that was too hot to touch.

"Hey, Jimmy," Reed had said. He hadn't intended to say much more than that. The Tug now intensified to an insistent rhythm.

Jimmy glanced over at Reed. They had never been anything more than background acquaintances in each other's lives.

"Oh. Hey, Reed," he replied. Jimmy continued to stand on the corner. Reed thought that he was waiting for a ride to somewhere from someone.

For some reason, Reed felt compelled to say, "Jimmy. Look at this," and he pointed down in the gutter. Nothing was there but a small, dirty puddle.

Puzzled, Jimmy moved over to where Reed was pointing. Reed now felt quite stupid but he continued to point. It was then that both boys suddenly heard a sharp, whining noise whistle. In the fence behind them, Reed saw a blackened hole, about boy-head level, back where Jimmy had stood.

"Jesus," Reed said.

Jimmy straightened up. He never saw the hole. His ride then showed up.

"I gotta go," he said after an awkward pause. As he got in the car, he yelled back to Reed, "Weirdo."

Reed stood there for a moment or two, then slowly walked away in the opposite direction. He wasn't surprised to see three big kids target shooting at tin cans across the street in a vacant lot.

Besides a rusty news rack holding near-obscene tabloids, Reed stopped short. He

had left the restaurant about twenty minutes ago. He wasn't familiar with this part of Sacramento but wasn't concerned. After a second, he proceeded south, down the 2000 block of K Street.

The residential area here consisted mainly of fading Victorian-style two story houses. Scattered throughout the houses, in no discernible zoning order, were iron-barred liquor stores, windowless taverns, and plywood-boarded store fronts. No wildflowers graced the brown, barren patches beneath withered, neglected leafless trees. People of all colors sat on unswept stoops, talking low and drinking high, the residue freshness of the late Sunday morning post-rain washing over them. With every step Reed took down bumpy pavement filled with shriveled weeds, people watched him with bored wariness. He likewise passed similar people on the 2100 block, and on the two blocks past that. On Thirteenth Street, he turned right.

Two weeks after the incident with Jimmy, another Tug came, this one right outside his house. Reed felt it on his left side and, after a few more Tugs, realized that he was to follow in the Tug's direction. His path took him down four blocks, past Whittaker Drive, right up to a corner drugstore. Another Tug turned his head to where a small boy rode a tricycle on the pavement alone. He felt a kind of compulsion to speak to the boy but, stubbornly, Reed ducked into the drug store for a Snickers bar. He couldn't have been longer than two minutes, he thought later.

He had taken only one bite when, from outside the store, he heard an awful, awful metallic *crunch*, followed by the loud bray of a car horn that wouldn't stop.

Reed stayed at the crash site for over an hour, long after the ambulance had

departed, long after a sobbing woman had been half-carried inside a house with plastic toys scattered about on a well-kept lawn. A man with a sad face, absently holding a rake, bent over and asked him if he had known Kyle. Reed stared at a bent tricycle, stained on handlebars and wheels, and said nothing. The man patted Reed on the shoulder and left him alone. Long after, the taste of chocolate and peanuts stayed bitter and dusty.

From the intersection of Thirteenth and F Streets, Reed turned left. The streets thereafter had no signposts. He was glad he had left his car back at the restaurant. Even a '04 Tercel would be deemed upscale for this neighborhood. Not that he would use a car or even a bicycle for this. The unspoken mental commands were much too quick.

The sidewalks were littered with rainstorm debris of leaves and twigs. Two pit bulls, absorbed in tearing apart a black plastic bag filled with pizza containers, ignored Reed as he walked past. The rain had left this street with an unpleasant musty smell, laced with discernible traces of urine, vomit, and dog feces. Cars parked on the block seemed cluttered. Loud, bass-driven music emitted from one of the houses, its rhythms a shrill blend of rap, Latino, and punk. He passed three women conversing on a porch, huddled together as if expecting storms. The Tug reached an accustomed crescendo.

As a high school freshman, Reed responded to about two Tugs a month. By his senior year, the frequency rose to one a week. They came almost always after school or on weekends, and within walking distances, as if strictly held to schedule. Family and friends worried for his sanity when he tried to explain what he had been apparently chosen to do. When someone accompanied him, the Tugs would disappear, causing him

to feel guilty about unpleasant news in the next day's paper. Why he was chosen, he had no clue. He prayed, pleaded, protested and pretended before he finally permitted.

Reed graduated from high school a semester early. He took a job delivering medical supplies, his route coming to embrace four Sacramento-area counties. In his second year, his work performance reviews documented several unexplainable absences. The day after he prevented a disastrous apartment complex fire, he was let go.

The very next day, he was led to a street corner with no sidewalks. A tall, angry man, purple tattoos on his arms crowding out bare skin, gestured menacingly at a small, trembling man in a business suit. When Reed arrived, he walked straight up to the man and said, very calmly, "Your mother loves you." The angry man reacted as if slapped. Reed then added, "Your mother needs you." The man blinked, burst into tears, and then ran away, shouting out sobs of guilt.

The trembling man turned out to be a successful stockbroker with a Mercedes out of gas. He insisted on creating a modest portfolio for Reed. The stocks included a small start-up company that quickly dominated a brand-new industry. From then on, Reed could afford, albeit barely, to fill his non-Tug time with leisurely breakfasts, long afternoon walks and concerts after dark.

As Reed walked down the block, he found himself in front of a house badly in need of a second coat of paint. Windows on the second floor displayed large cracks. A washing machine with missing knobs stood alone on the far side of the un-mowed lawn. Longneck beer bottles lay discarded on the rough wooden front steps. The vacant lots on either side of the house were littered with nothing seemingly of value.

Reed went up the walkway. From the corner of his eye, he saw the three women on the porch across the street stop their talking and glare at him. One of them, her hair a dark shade of brown, gestured angrily with a rolled-up newspaper. The other two nodded, first in her direction, and then in his.

Susan understood, or at least said that she did.

“I *suppose* it’s possible,” she slightly slurred, after her third glass of Zinfandel. “I mean, no one ever said that gifts from God had to come with a burning bush, right?”

Reed was still not sure who was responsible for his Tugs, although God was surely on the short list. “Right,” he said to the fascinating woman lying on the floor next to him.

What had started as an innocent question in a vitamin store had evolved into vague-to-meaningful conversations, long past the Tonight Show hour. His confession of the Tugs had been fueled by wine, hope, and atmosphere.

“And so what? You go around, *helping* people? Like some kind of superhero or something?” Susan giggled. Her dark hair flowed in sinuous streams across her light blue T-shirt, eyes shimmering with the dancing fireplace flames. She sipped her wine and stretched her sensuous body sleepily upon her living room carpet, woven with simple Southwestern designs. Reed stared at her, still not truly believing he was where he was.

“Helping people?” he stammered. “Well, yeah, it’s something like that, I guess.”

“Do you wear a costume?” Susan teased. “Fly through the air?”

Reed laughed. It felt good to be able to talk aloud, even if he was being slightly

mocked. “No, I’m just a walker. There’s the ‘Tug’ inside my head and I just follow it along, is all.”

Susan brightened. “Have you caught any bank robbers, maybe? Or maybe stopped a mad scientist from blowing up the world?”

“No, nothing like that.” He wanted to reach out and stroke her hair. “At least, I don’t think so. Usually, I walk until the Tug stops. Then say what I’m supposed to say.”

He smiled sheepishly, hoping he still impressed her. “Sometimes I can see that I’ve done something good, like someone isn’t being held up or . . . someone isn’t getting hurt.” He almost said, “Someone isn’t getting run over.” He sipped his wine, nervously.

“Really.”

“Other times, well, I’m not so sure. I’ll arrive at a spot and nobody’s there. And no one ever comes by. I like to think that, just by *being* there, I’ve prevented something terrible, like a possible robbery or assault.” Reed didn’t say aloud that sometimes he thought that he had possibly stopped two people from getting into the wrong relationship.

Susan rose from the carpet, supporting herself on her bare arm. “That’s some super power you got there, Mister Reed. You think it brought us together?”

Reed swallowed the remainder of his wine. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

Susan smiled. When she moved forward, he didn’t move back.

Reed ascended the steps of the house’s porch. Three mismatched kitchen chairs were on his right, a battered white plastic stool in front of them. Cigarette butts lay on the planks. He knocked on the screen door, its hinges screaming out for WD-40. He knocked

again, then once more. The door finally opened. A little boy, maybe five or six years old, showed only his dark face from behind a rusty chain. He glared at Reed.

“Whats *you* want?” The boy gripped the doorframe tightly. Behind him, smells of waste and dirt and alcohol stung at Reed’s senses like a slap. Smoky hues within the house illuminated a couch with faded upholstery.

Reed smiled down at the boy and said, “It’s all right to come outside now.” He found himself turning on his heel as he walked back to the sidewalk. The scent of burning wood, like a late evening campfire, whiffed past his nostrils.

Reed and Susan were inseparable for nearly three weeks, strongly considerate over seven more. During that time, Reed tried not to read the *Sacramento Bee*.

The fights did come eventually, escalating in tone. Reed’s growing guilt about spending time with Susan resulted into sudden, harsh words that hung in the air. More and more, she came to regard his “quests,” as she called them, as paranoiac fantasies.

Averting a three car collision on Laughlin Drive made him miss their four month anniversary dinner at The Olive Garden. As it turned out, an attentive insurance salesman bought her a drink at the bar. Then two more. When Reed finally arrived, the busboy conveyed Susan’s apologies. Repeated phone calls, over a period of eight days, led to a brief note pinned on his door, warning of legal action.

Something *popped* behind Reed, followed by several crackling sounds. The air surrounding him rapidly reeked of leather, metal and flesh. Behind him, a door creaked

open. Very small feet took very big running steps. Despite the growing heat, he resisted turning around. Like other times, he knew he must keep his presence very low-profile.

No other smells were on the street, save smoke. Across the street, the woman with the rolled-up newspaper screamed something incoherent, then ran down her porch steps and into the street. One of the remaining women raised both hands to her cheekbones, facial expressions switching rapidly from disbelief, to awe, to terror. The other woman, small and heavysset, turned to her rigid companion, telling her something urgent in sharp, rapid syllables. Reed could only make out “9.1.1.” Those two women then sped in different directions.

People now shouted from other houses, voices rising in pitch. Doors slammed, dogs howled. A man holding playing cards in his right hand dashed past Reed, followed by other men with fearful looks on their faces. One carried a small red fire extinguisher.

Reed worried about the boy. He always worried when his Tugs involved small children. But as he continued walking, fire sirens now prominent in the background, he heard shouts of relief, both large and small.

Reed put down the paper and accepted a coffee refill from Mitzi. Today, Monday, he sat outside at his favorite table. The morning air was pleasant, filled with fresh spring scents of leaves, flowers and moisture. He pushed back his chair back a bit, careful not to crush a budding daffodil.

“Everything all right, hon?” Mitzi asked.

q“Yes, everything’s fine.” He tapped the paper with his knuckles, inattentively.

The boy had spent a quiet night with relatives of his now-dead mother. Reportedly, he seemed amazed to sleep in a bed with sheets.

Across the street, a young girl walked a dog that seemed twice as big as she. A mailwoman smiled at a laundry store owner as she handed him his mail. Up in the sky, Reed saw a cloud that vaguely resembled the island of Sri Lanka.

As he began to read the sports section, his forehead Tugged. Sighing, he gobbled down his toast and looked around for Mitzi.