



by
Lynn Koller

© 2002 Lynn Koller

Tom only found solace on the toilet, reading shampoo bottles to avoid leaving the coolness of the green porcelain seat. One morning on the john, Tom clipped his toenails and smoked. He tossed crescents at the trash can. As they piled on the floor, the forces of the world, invisible and unknowable, coiled around him. He bent toward his toes and inhaled, defecating without fanfare and without suspicion.

The sun remained hidden, unwilling to jump ahead of itself. Janet snored with her prosthetic leg protruding from under the faded floral sheets. Tom showered quickly. The county had begun rationing water, and each household swallowing more than its share must pay a penalty. He dressed in an untucked blue oxford shirt, carefully pressed and starched by Janet, although despite her attentiveness to the task several creases fell across his chest. Blaming her did not occur to Tom. He clipped a phone to his belt and struggled to fasten the top button of his jeans over his softening stomach.

Tom drove his heavily financed SUV past nine miles of desolate strip malls and industrial warehouses to Foodworld, the grocery store in Rosyville, Texas that the couple owned and managed, though the thought occurred to him as he drove that the store really owned them. There was no profit and Tom could barely pay the bills, much less fulfill his role as a conscientious American consumer. Janet had confronted him the day before, in her typical non-confrontational way, for three bounced checks that their bank had politely returned without paying. On top of the bank penalties, their lawn mower man, drycleaner and electric company were all charging Tom for the bad checks. Janet handed Tom the envelope of bank notices and quietly ... respectfully ... whispered, "We need to be more careful, don't you think?" Tom's chest tightened as he pressed the gas pedal and accelerated toward the store, where god only knew what problems awaited him.



The parched earth and unbridled industrialization made the central Texas landscape look like an environmentalist's hell. Abandoned buildings attracted inept graffiti artists high on smack and a small but growing homeless population who crouched near doorways rustling bags of cheap beer and smoking cigarette butts found sprouting from ashtrays stuck outside every operating business. Until a few weeks earlier, the alcoholics, mentally unstable, society's rejects and self-exiled outcasts had among their population one who amused the bejesus out of them with riddled speech and funny anecdotes about what he tagged his universal travels. He had convinced more than one of them to marry, find religion, lose religion, and even brush their teeth. One homeless woman described him as "like the wind."

"Not in a bad way," she had said to a phantom inside her paper bag. "He kind of blew in here and pushed people into different places. It's weird."

Not only that, but the enigmatic guy kept them supplied with fragrant soaps that required no water. They felt cleaner in his presence, and certainly more aromatically correct. But alas, all that is good must move on or die, and that's what this fellow did. He got a low-paying job and moved not too far down the road.



Tom ignored the backdrop of the town this morning—he was too busy considering how Foodworld would make it through the month without going belly up like the dead armadillo that his vehicle nearly just crushed. As he navigated around the road kill, a bird dropped its mottled waste on his windshield. His wipers smeared the droppings across the glass. The bird soared off in search of greener territory.

Tom glanced at the global positioning system that he had installed as a present for his fiftieth birthday last year, for no practical reason and at great expense. Janet had winced and remained silent when he had proudly showed it to her. As long as he stayed in his vehicle, he could not get lost, even with great effort, because a giant conglomeration of metal and wires floating miles above in space tracked him like an overprotective mother. Out of the vehicle, of course, he was on his own.

After parking, Tom walked across the cracked asphalt lot and entered the backdoor of Foodworld by placing his right index finger on a device installed to insure that only people possessing authorized digits could enter the building. With everything slipping from Tom's hands—his store, his money, possibly his marriage—he felt a modicum of power knowing that at least he controlled who entered his primary domain. Even his staunchest competition did not have such sophisticated security. Full-Mart Supercenter managed to fill 200,000 square feet of floor space with the town population's

material hopes and dreams, including a prominent grocery section, and in Tom's mind, suffocated Foodworld each day with its omnipresence. It lacked, however, a biometric entry system.

As the mini-computer processor verified that he was in fact himself, Tom recalled purchasing the system. It was immediately after box-cutter wielding terrorists brought the nation to its knees, crashing hijacked planes into its icons of strength and power and disrupting the comfort and security, not to mention the shopping habits, of American consumers. And as a grocery store owner, shopping habits stood in Tom's top-10 list of things to be concerned about. However, in this instance, while the economy suffered as people swore off excess in favor of indulgent simplicity, Foodworld had experienced a surge of activity. People stocked up on toilet paper, beer, batteries, canned meats, and bottled water, as Tom had seen them do in every potential crisis from storm warnings to the passing of the millennium. He chuckled imagining a housewife warding off nuclear holocaust with a can of

tuna. If only the nation could sustain interest in a catastrophe for more than a few weeks, Foodworld might actually make a profit.

For days after the terrorist bombings, Tom had remained ensconced between the small television on a shelf in his office and his computer monitor. He had heard enough times that information was power, so he was stocking up. Tom switched between a steady stream of televised news and a Web site that offered him respite from the terror with glimpses into what it billed as the Secret Lives of Sexy Sorority Girls. It wasn't that Tom took catastrophic world events lightly—he simply needed a break. As Tom viewed continually looping film of towers crumbling and people diving to their death from buildings that touched the sky, dread grew in his mouth, tasting like metal, and he wanted fortification, against what he could not say. Janet had tried to convince him that a tiny grocery store in a small Texas town was an unlikely target for international terrorists bent on holy war.

“Even if we were attacked, what good is a fingerprint reader going to do?” Janet asked. “Do you think the terrorists are going to see it and say ‘Oh, we can't come in here without authorization.’ Honestly, Tom, let's use the money to pay bills that we already have.”

Tom went ahead with the purchase. The saleswoman for the biometrics company admitted that she had never sold a system to anyone in his area. Tom responded with smugness that his store was more advanced than most local businesses. (He neglected to add that its balance sheet showed more red than a maraschino cherry.) The technician installing the biometric security system assured Tom that news stories of unscrupulous people “borrowing” official fingers had been addressed by the company. This particular system only recognized live, pulsating fingers.

“I hope your company has informed the villains of this security feature,” Tom had responded, sorry that the technician was addressing a problem he hadn't even considered.

◆ ◆ ◆

Clicking off the nighttime security alarm, Tom became edgy. He turned around, paranoid that he had been followed inside. The security technology quelled his fears some, though its very presence was a constant reminder that he needed physical protection. Financial protection was something in which Tom had once heavily invested. He had purchased health insurance, automobile insurance, home owners' insurance, disability insurance, property and personal liability insurance for Foodworld, credit card insurance that he knew was a rip-off but he purchased anyway just in case it wasn't, mortgage insurance, and an eerie life insurance policy that made him feel guilty to live. (If Tom had been as cautious as a teenager, things might have turned out differently for him.) Regardless of his intentions to insure against financial calamity, the policies had begun to lapse

for non-payment. This and their other unpaid bills caused Janet a great deal of dismay. Just a week earlier, they had received a certified letter from their liability insurance carrier, asserting that policy had been canceled. Foodworld was now vulnerable to the dubious slip-and-fall cases that it had experienced at least five times in the past couple of years. While the liability carrier normally absorbed the damages of these lawsuits—where a person claimed to have slipped on a squashed grape or other fallen vegetation and been egregiously injured—Tom figured anyone suing Foodworld at this point would not get much for his troubles. That theory would prove somewhat incorrect down the road, and prove that there is no way to insure against the unexpected.

Tom walked through the storeroom, checking inventory and clenching his fists. Foodworld did not have the funds to cover payroll checks and the utility bills this month, and had showed no real facility for ever being able to pay for itself. The electricity shortage overwhelming the state had

helped drain the dicey financial resources of the store as well. Electricity costs had skyrocketed, even though power flickered on and off arbitrarily throughout the day.

Jay, former friend to the homeless and now Foodworld's stock clerk, entered through the highly secured door that Tom had forgotten to close. Tom looked over his shoulder as Jay ambled up behind him.

"Shit!" Tom screamed.

"Hey, it's just me."

"What the hell are you doing here this time of the morning?" Tom asked. "You're not due for another hour."

"There's a blackout at my apartment right now, so I came in early," Jay said. "Plus, I thought you could use the company. Do you want to share a peach?" Jay asked, pulling one out of his vest pocket.

The lights blinked unexpectedly and a fluorescent bulb went out.

"No thanks," said Tom as he lit his fifth cigarette of the morning. "And I've managed to open the store alone every morning for eight years. I think I can handle it. No offense," Tom said.

"None taken, dude. Just keep in mind that I'm here to help."

Jay farted prodigiously and headed to the men's room. Tom ignored the gastric activity. Over the last three weeks of Jay's employment, Tom had grown used to his oddly aromatic character and androgynous appearance with acne resembling old raspberries. Jay had applied for the job the same day that it had become available, immediately after the previous stock clerk was unexpectedly accepted into an elite actors' school in New York City. Though the happy would-be actor had been applying to schools, he did not actually remember sending an application to this particular institution and rushed off before anyone would rectify the error. When Janet commented to Jay on his good timing during the job interview, he chalked it up to opportune coincidence.