

Greg Cohen
POB 630158
Lanai City, Hawaii 96763
gcacme@wave.hicv.net

4300 words

Published Eureka Literary Magazine, Eureka College, Eureka, IL - Spring 2003
© 2003

The Oarsman

The increasingly rare sight of Bobby walking into the store caught David Franklin off-guard...flat-footed really, thinking one thing. "I never mailed him his check."

Icy tremors coursed from the pit of David's belly to the nape of his neck where the soft hairs stood erect and quivering. It must have been twenty years since he'd encountered this particular brand of nausea. Yet across the gulf of decades, he instantly recognized the prickly heat at his temples, the same grey churning of his stomach. What he remembered most, heightened by the discreetly alert presence and postures of all his new employees, was the leaden feeling of being caught out.

David hadn't been able to walk into the Pic N' Save the rest of that long-distant summer without feeling like he might vomit. He was certain every clerk, mother or wide-eyed little kid who idly looked at him focused on the word "Shoplifter" emblazoned across his forehead and in his eyes, not even really seeing the hesitant boy in soft cotton summer shorts and a t-shirt with Mighty Mouse zooming across the chest.

The day he'd been caught, facing his old man's flinty eyes in the rear view mirror of the Buick all the way home had been the worst agony. It had taken even longer for vestiges of that panicky moment to cease plaguing the boy when he had to sit squirming across from his father at the dinner table, or was pierced by David Senior's judging gaze from the front porch while his son played in the front yard, trying to look innocent.

Today, there had been no stern-faced security guard or even rockier-faced father demanding he hand over the small plastic Corvette he'd slipped into his jeans, yet David grimaced, remembering how he'd stood in front of his employees and customers alike, a rictus grin locked on his face, forced to sit and take it like he had so long ago, this time from the likes of Bobby Mitchell. The man had slouched against the counter, wearing the devil-may-care, new-found freedom of a former owner like a cape. Fixing David with an annoyingly pitying gaze, as if he knew horrors David hadn't even dreamed of yet, Bobby's thin, arrogant face was as disapproving as David Senior's had been twenty years ago in the Buick. What was even worse than that familiar adolescent sensation of guilty illness, was the realization that it was just as pervading now.

David was chagrined at the feeble, falsely casual way he'd looked up at Bobby and barked, "Hey! Good timing...you saved me a stamp."

Bobby's instantaneous, set, disgusted look showed he wasn't buying it one bit as David hurriedly searched for his checkbook from one of the piles on the counter, trying not to look sheepish. Bobby's voice sounded over his shoulder, businesslike but tinted

with a humoring, patient tone, as if he were addressing a child.

"Hey Dave, I didn't mean to be rude when I ran into you in the grocery."

David stopped his rummaging and looked back at Bobby, who said, "You came around the corner and three different things about this place popped into my head, none of which you would want to hear. Then I realized...hey, this guy has owed me money for almost four months. But it wasn't the time or place. When you didn't say anything about the outstanding invoice, it was simpler to walk away. If I could just have my check, I'll get out of your hair."

Trying not to show his relief when the checkbook was in the first stack he tried, David scribbled out the check, blithely saying, "I don't remember the late fees, how about if I just add an extra hundred onto it?"

Bobby had nodded, but the fact that David was throwing a little money at a problem to make it go away hovered in the air between them like smoke. Beneath that lurked the shared understanding that David would need an hour to unearth any of the three statements Bobby had mailed him that listed the escalating late fees. As Mitchell pocketed the check, expressionless, David hadn't been able to help himself. He drew the man away from the counter, out of earshot by the Classical section. In a low voice he said, "So...I have to ask. What were the three things you didn't want to tell me?"

Bobby flashed that irritating patient smile and said, "No, it wasn't that I didn't want to tell you, it was that you wouldn't want to hear them. Why bother, David? We went down this path after you bought the place, it's nothing I didn't warn you about six

months ago." In a vaguely superior, sweeping gesture, Bobby encompassed the chaos behind the counter and the matching mountains of it back in David's office.

"It was bad enough to get paid to give advice that's ignored. Now you want me to do it for free...well, here's the worst of it. In ten years, not once was this place on the delinquent sales tax list in the newspaper, David. You've made it there twice now in less than a year. And it's not because you don't have the money, it's because your organization is so piss-poor. I get people calling me at home, asking if I'm still involved, if I've got any influence, if I can help them get paid. Christ, they ask if you're solvent! Nobody believes a guy doesn't pay his bills because he can't find the invoice, or worse yet, his damn checkbook. Even I find it hard to believe, when I know it's the sad truth."

David saw himself in one of the large mirrors placed to make the store appear larger, but it only made him seem smaller; the hang-dog look of his face, with cheeks flushed and tight, shoulders tightly arched all combining to undermine his resolve. He admitted, however silently, that he should have kept his mouth shut, didn't really want to hear any more. He felt like that small boy in the Mickey Mouse shirt again, choosing not to defend himself, hoping only for his accuser get it over with. Bobby was relentless now.

"Back in the spring you told me that you weren't going to start on the remodel until Fall because, I believe the phrase you used was, 'It's just more than I'm ready for right now.' I said that with this business, any business, sometimes you have to push beyond what you're ready for and you got pissed off and didn't talk to me for two

days."

Bobby ticked off points on his right hand.

"You needed to do it before the summer rush. You needed to catch all the people who don't shop as much when the weather's forbidding and there's 3-foot snow berms out there. And you needed to do it during the slow quarter of February through March, because you have too much going on in the Fall."

Bobby looked him right in the eye and David found himself involuntarily gripping a display rack that swayed and he noticed his knuckles were white, remembering how much he'd always hated amusement rides that spun and whipped their screaming cargo, subjecting you to unexpected, intense sensations beyond your control. Bobby's voice had grown firm, sharp and cutting.

"So. Your Christmas newsletter was delayed and full of errors because you were writing it while supervising the remodeling. You chased people away in droves while all that work was going on, not to mention it should have taken three weekends, max, not the seventy-five days you had this place torn up. Then the Christmas newsletter hit mailboxes on December twenty-third! Why even bother? If the record labels who paid for the ads in there knew that, you wouldn't collect a dime. Not to mention how haphazard that made you look in the eyes of your customers."

Bobby fixed him then with a look that revealed both his anger and pleasure at getting to say I told you so.

"I think you've had enough, eh?"

David managed a grim smile that was meant to convey agreement but came out as feeble and acquiescing. Bobby shrugged, took a couple of steps towards David, piercing him with a look of pure, unmasked pity. David's stomach clenched even tighter as Bobby spoke, his voice flatly unemotional, like Jack Webb just stating the facts, Ma'am.

"You better get your shit together, man. I have bad dreams about that pig sty of an office of yours and I don't need the grapevine to tell me that you're running a month or longer late in getting your paperwork to the bookkeeper. That means you never know how much money you have in the bank. That was alright when you had a chunk of extra cash floating in savings for the remodel and your new lines. But now that money's gone, spent, and don't forget that according to your lease, you're looking at hefty rent increases every Fall from here on in. Here's what all this says to me -- I sold this place to the wrong guy."

Then, to add insult to injury, Bobby had touched him, briefly rubbing his shoulder in the consoling manner in which people sympathetically comfort mourners at a funeral. With a brusque, "See you around, man. Good luck.", he was out the door.

Despite the lingering disfavor of Bobby Mitchell and the haunting, miserable sense of failure it had seeded, David stood there for a long time looking around the cheerful active space. The remodel was finished, the store bright, pristine and beckoning, racks packed to bursting with tons of new titles, many of which Bobby had turned up his nose and sniffed, "This'll never sell." The store buzzed with activity, suburban teenagers dressed like ghetto kids with money in their pockets oohing and aaahing at new

releases. Two little words supplied David Franklin a brief lift. "My store."

He knew Bobby Mitchell, and probably other people in town, weren't as impressed at that as they should be, just because the check he wrote to buy the business from Bobby required a second signature. The official overnight delivery envelope had contained more than a check with his old man's name in cursive. When ceremoniously slit open, it exhaled the pungent scent of victory.

The night the check arrived, David had propped it up on the coffee table as he watched a TV special on a group of American climbers attempting Everest. It wasn't long before he'd reverently picked up the check that contained several more zeroes than he'd ever seen, and held it over his heart like some kind of talisman. Seated in front of the flickering screen, almost mesmerized by his dad's familiar signature, gently clasping the check in his hand as if the slightest movement would make it disintegrate into a thousand tiny, tenuously fluttering snowflakes, he'd understood the fierce joy those climbers clearly experienced cresting the summit of a long-sought goal against impossible odds.

Sitting at the keyboard in the new practice room in the back of the store, David was only half-listening to his student haltingly pick his way through "The Pink Panther" as if it were a mine field. He was mostly waiting for the incident with Bobby Mitchell to recede like the vestiges of a bad dream. Regularly glancing out on the floor, David took heart from the fact that everywhere he looked he could see his own mark,

beginning with this very space that enabled him to continue teaching piano lessons, something he'd done in the basement at home for years. He liked the idea of doing two things at once, keeping an eye on his business through the double-paned glass window while teaching comfortably in the newly sound-proofed room that Bobby had only used for storage. David's piano from home glowed in this new space, happy to be here and newly tuned, to boot. His students loved it. This afternoon's pupil was not so much older than David had been when his old man had matter-of-factly wondered aloud why David couldn't be more like his brother, and for some vague reason, that pleased David Franklin too.

He savored the come and go of customers and bustle of his crew, while simultaneously instructing eager young faces in the encompassing, dark mysteries of sight reading and technique. Bobby Mitchell had simply sold music, a common merchant. To David's constant annoyance, the man had even referred to it as "product". David was selling creativity, while training young minds and hands to produce that greatest of arts, music.

His now-simmering resentful thoughts picked around his problem. Though David had worked part-time for Bobby for over five years, he'd never realized how much there was to do. The phone never stopped or slept, it seemed; from clerks begging to trade shifts to customers needing special assistance to charity organizations sensing a fresh, vulnerable new face behind the counter. Not to mention all the suppliers anxious to know if the new owner had plans to change anything, or the too-smartly dressed

advertising vultures, some of them wondering the same thing, others pressing hard, in his face, for it.

Then there had been the paperwork. He'd always thought Bobby spent too much time back in the office instead of out on the floor, talking music with the customers, making sales. David had always said that's what he'd do if he owned the record store, not even bothering to hide the derision in his voice from the rest of the crew. Not that you could find a vinyl platter in the store if you wanted to these days, but in David's mind, he'd bought the kind of place he'd grown up in and always wanted: A real record store.

Up to the day he took the keys in hand, it had all looked so simple. Slap down carpet, knock out the sound-proofed instruction room, add musical instruments, sheet music, purge Bobby's favorites that didn't sell enough to warrant keeping them in stock, and feature music by struggling local musicians. He'd have a music store in the true sense of the word.

But it was all David could do just to organize his time enough to sit down and write checks for the flood of bills, invoices and more that the operation generated. Bobby had warned him that it would be like riding some great beast, learning where to put your feet and hands, the very basics of how to do it, while you were doing it. Tough, but rewarding. Yet for David, it was as if he'd married someone only to discover a dark, secret, unsuspected side of them after it was too late; a revealed belief in The Reverend Moon, Scientology or that they thought Madonna was great.

He was further baffled because he'd seen none of this the night he threw the I Ching, looking for advice and confirmation. It was right after the huge argument, the old man yelling that David had never followed through with anything in his life, and what made this any different? David had been so enraged he had to practically run from the room. Once safely upstairs, he sat on the bed waiting for a long time before his hands would stop shaking enough to cast the sooth-saying coins. But the confidence he'd gained from the positive reading infused itself in his eyes, stiffened his spine and he strutted back downstairs, pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and concisely told the old man everything he thought possible from the store purchase. David Senior had finally gruffly said, not without some affection in his voice, "Well, what the hell. It's your inheritance. You might as well piss it away now, while you're young enough to enjoy it."

Later that night, they'd sat poring over Bobby's financial statements and sale proposal, the old man asking in that way he had that told you what answer he wanted, "So this guy's looking for an additional 12 grand to train you for three months. Granted, Christmas will be your pressure cooker, but you've been side by side with this guy for almost six years. We don't need all that, do we?"

David could still hear the false bravery in his voice as he replied, "Of course not. If anything, that would slow me down in making the changes he should have made a long time ago. A couple weeks with him to show me details and the bookkeeping will be plenty."

Aglow in his dad's approving smile, reassured by his wise, white-haired nod, David Franklin had felt a tiny tug of apprehension, as if something very large had just passed through both the room and his life in the briefest of instants. That fateful night had led to this moment though. Looking around the shop, he took comfort in the fact that he had come this far, and on his own. With a start, he realized his student, a shy eleven-year old boy prone to sullenness at new challenges, still with the blush of childhood rosy in his cheeks, was succumbing yet again to his worst failure, drifting out of tempo. David called the boy to a halt gently.

"Wait, Ricky. You're doing it again. Let me show you the difference. Play last week's song that you got a sticker for."

Relief at being back on familiar ground flooded Ricky's face, and David wondered if he'd been that transparent as a kid.

"The Volga Boat Song?" Ricky inquired brightly.

"Right. Go ahead."

Ricky fell into a slow, simply but deeply patterned rhythm, music for men to row mightily through heavy, dense seas. As he played, David nodded, speaking softly over the music, lecturing.

"The slow, plodding meter of this song works because it's a simple structure of quarter and half notes. OK. That's good. Now..." He reached out to the keyboard. "I'll play it like you were just playing the Pink Panther."

David began fluidly enough, but then fell into hesitations as if he couldn't find a

his note, or had lost sense of where middle "C" was. He stopped and looked pointedly at Ricky.

"Now, even though sometimes I was playing too slow, and sometimes I was off rhythm, you could still tell what song that was, couldn't you?" The boy nodded instantly.

"Now, I'll play the Pink Panther the way it should be played." David jumped into the tune's snaking, sneaking opening bars, speaking as he played.

"Compare that to what you were playing. This piece is upbeat, hear the syncopation, the off-beats? 'Volga' teaches us the importance of sound in music, tones rolling and tolling one into another. The Panther theme teaches us the importance of silence in music. Hear that? The rests in between the notes are as important as the notes themselves."

David stopped playing, his hands hovering above the keyboard, all his annoyances forgotten. He raised a forefinger in emphasis.

"Do you see? Volga relies on melody, this relies on rhythm *and* timing. Hesitations and mistakes make this piece unrecognizable. You probably played the Volga song when you practiced yesterday, even though you should have been working on Panther. Am I right?"

Ricky nodded, caught out and surprised by it. David didn't even try to suppress his smile.

"I know what it's like. Working on something hard, music that makes your hands

or your head hurt , it isn't easy. But if you don't have any discipline, you'll keep playing the "Volga Boatmen" for the rest of your life. Everybody else at the recital will be playing new and challenging stuff, and you'll still be rowing those oars, buddy."

The boy slumped on the piano bench, silent and sullen, radiating frustration and displeasure. David rushed to smooth his student's ruffled feathers.

"Don't take it so hard. It happens to everybody. Look. Here's a piece I'm trying to learn that's very, very difficult. You want to talk about syncopation? It's by Thelonius Monk."

David made it halfway through the tune before he made a mistake, and stopped, realizing how hard he was concentrating. Ricky had shed his disinterested, petulant cloud without realizing it. David then slid into Count Basie's fluid intro to "Take The 'A' Train" and Ricky went from wide-eyed and alert to smiling and animated. Over the music, David said, "Of course, it would be easy for me to play this. Count Basie. It's all in the left hand, my man. I could play for hours, buddy, no mistakes. Or at least it feels like it."

Buoyed and inspired by what he'd heard, the boy nodded, looking David in the eye this time, accepting the even harsher words easily.

In the same way he knew he was a good teacher, David knew it hadn't been the best of lessons and that he'd only salvaged it with a bit of flash. He'd been distracted, his attention flagging, unsettled by his confrontation with Bobby just before Ricky arrived. Yet he felt he'd finally covered some significant ground against Ricky's

resistance to rhythm at the end there. With a satisfied sigh, David instructed the boy to practice only the Pink Panther theme, patted him on the back and stepped from the piano room flush with the clean pride of teaching someone something and seeing it take hold. He sat down at his desk and all those good feelings evaporated.

Everywhere David looked, stacks and piles of paper loomed, the same stacks that Bobby had apparently had been losing sleep over. Alone, slumped disconsolately in his office, the rush of his piano lesson long gone, the spot on his shoulder where Bobby had touched him practically burning, David picked up the phone and tapped a speed dial button.

"Hey, honey. Just wanted to let you know not to count on me for dinner. I've got to get through some of this paperwork tonight after we lock up. I'll just get some noodles from Peter's or something."

His wife's knowing voice cut through the line and his mood.

"Are you OK, Hon? You sound kind of...low."

"No, I'm alright. Bobby came by to pick up his check, is all."

Her silence was accusing as anything Bobby had said. She'd reminded him to get that check, along with others, in the mail at least a half-dozen times. He tried desperately to regain some ground.

"Hey, I had a great lesson with Ricky Marks. I think we he finally understands about counting out measures."

Her voice was mildly non-committal. "That's good, honey. Well, good luck tonight."

Are you sure you don't want some help?"

"No, that's OK. It's just sorting out all this stuff into manageable stacks, so I can get all the checks written tonight, and file and deal with the rest of it tomorrow. With a little luck, I'll have this place organized by Friday."

He hung up the phone and turned to the mountain of paper blocking his writing and work space with a large sigh. After a few minutes, he kicked away from the desk and stalked out through the store, grumbling at Tiny behind the counter that if anyone called, he'd be right back, he was just getting some food to go. By the time he'd returned and eaten, sitting up on a stool behind the front counter because there was no place to set down a plate in his office, it was almost time to close and he helped Tiny check out the tills, top up the change box, write up the bank deposit.

Tiny was hitting the front lights, when David told him not to shut off the stereo or lock up, that he'd be staying to get the office organized. The clerk's bright smile at that news depressed David even further. Finally alone, relieved at the shift of energy in the air, the knowledge that everything had actually stopped for a brief while, he walked aimlessly out on the floor among the racks where he liked to be, fixing some mis-files. When he finally dragged himself back to the office, it was as if he were trudging through quicksand. He stood staring at the mounds of paperwork, sat down in his chair, but didn't do anything, just put his feet up on the edge of the desk and leaned back in his office chair. He looked through the office window and wanted to be out there, where everything looked as if he was in control.

His gaze swivelled to the piano room, another place where he was in his element. Then the idea struck him. He'd play a little music. That would help him relax, shift gears and he'd be ready to dive into all this. He pulled out the sheet music for the Thelonious Monk piece, the small snatch of which had impressed Ricky so much. He turned to the measures he'd been struggling with, but when he played, his fingers were slow, his reflexes slack, his ear not quite right.

Reassuring himself that he just needed to loosen up before tackling this challenge, David swung into Basie's unadorned, sweetly swinging "Jumpin' At The Woodside". Before he knew it, David had played every Basie tune he knew, even throwing in a couple by Erroll Garner, and when he looked up at the clock, it was just too late to get anything serious accomplished. He was vaguely pleased and ashamed to turn the lights out on the untouched stacks of paper in the office, but turned his key in the front door with a decisive, loud clack of the lock. Striding through the cavernous, tiled space of the mall, his shoes echoing in crisp, leathery taps, he whistled "Song of the Volga Boatmen" in the darkened mall, the notes clear and bright and not portentous at all.