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Vynl Recliner

Right up till Ted Koczynski's arrest, just about all the people I know believed the Unibomber was somebody they used to date. Even my old friend Frankie, who's a lesbian.

"Frankie," I told her, "the police sketch has a moustache."

Frankie snorted. She teaches Theatre Arts. The snort meant "as if a moustache is any kind of permanent or necessarily men-only feature."

My knowing all these claimants to a Unibomber relationship may be a socio-cultural-geographic thing. I'm the Writer in Residence (read ill-paid part-time creative writing teacher) at snooty little St. Anne's College in St. Anne, Maryland, a non-town which houses huge, funky St. Anne State University as well. It's also the county seat, so the adult population of St. Anne consists mostly of college teachers and lawyers: people who share a magnetic force field with psychopaths.

Crazy Angel was my psychopath. Even his mother and brother and sister, who were all crazy too, and all named some permutation of Angel, called him Crazy Angel as if it was just a regular two-word name, like Billy Joe. I thought vaguely about Crazy Angel every time the Unibomber sketch flashed on the TV screen, but I started thinking about him in earnest back when my car blew up.

Crazy Angel used to blow up cars just for fun. Or so he told me. The one time he tried to demonstrate—using a Coke bottle of gasoline and a St. Anne State minibus—nothing happened. But his story about doing time for fragging an officer while he was still in boot camp had turned out to be verifiable, so when my little hatchback exploded in my driveway at the time I usually get into it to go teach my Tuesday night class, I figured it was his way of saying Hello. His previous helloes had taken the form of twenty-page hand-scribbled letters and the occasional dead animal part.

The car explosion proved Crazy Angel couldn't be the Unibomber. When, with difficulty, I persuaded the police to investigate the explosion ("We only investigate *suspicious* car explosions," they told me), they found out that Crazy Angel had been locked up in a California prison for the past two years. Convicted of felony and assault with intent to maim.

The car explosion was number one in the series of disasters that I'm now

working through number three of, hoping and praying the old superstition about 3's holds true.

Number two may not seem like much, but it holds an integral place in the chain of three. Right after the car explosion, with the specter of Crazy Angel haunting me, I adopted a pit bull from a friend who was leaving St. Anne College to marry *her* psychopath, a womanizing Australian drunk. About a week after Sandy headed Down Under, the pit bull had to have a thousand-dollar operation on her left hind leg.

The dog's leg operation led seamlessly into Disaster Three. This happened just before my mother's eightieth birthday. Despite her bone troubles and herniations, she insisted on helping me load the dog into my car. Both she and the dog weigh about eighty pounds. You know that Step on a Crack rhyme? Well, I (well, my dog) really did break my mother's back. An hour after the pit pull was stashed in the dog hospital, my mother was in a people hospital with three compression fractures in her spine.

"Goddam old bitches," she murmured in the ER. And started to laugh, till the pain cut her off sharp.

When I went to see Mother the next day, her hospital bed was empty, giving me a very scary moment till I located her in a corner huddled in a small plastic chair.

"I've been here all night," she said in the whisper that has become her regular voice ever since her spine broke.

"My god, how could they leave you like this?" My mind was already cutting to the lawsuit.

"I made them. Getting into bed hurt too much. They tried. But I wouldn't let them."

I could picture the scene. Doctors, nurses, orderlies, social workers, clergymen, security guards and St Anne herself didn't stand a chance of getting Mother into bed if she didn't want to go. On the pretext of getting her a fresh jug of ice, I took a walk around the seventh floor—the Geriatric Unit, "GU," "Goo," the staff called it—to see how other people's mothers were arranged. I'd hardly rounded the first bend in the hallway when I spotted what would be just the thing for mine.

It was just sitting there, shaped like a parody of a recumbent human, facing the wall as if being punished: an immense tan vinyl recliner with so many movable parts it was clear a person could sit, lie down flat, get up again, and, in short, assume most positions known to human anatomy just by pressing buttons.

I should ask somebody, I said to myself.

Nah, I responded.

Nobody batted an eye when I wheeled the huge recliner right past the nurses' station and into my mother's room. In fact, an aide came in to help me rearrange the furniture so the thing would fit. Within minutes my mother was propped in the chair.

"This is wonderful," she whispered.

I don't remember my mother ever saying anything I ever did for her was even okay, much less wonderful. I was proud.

Crazy Angel would have been proud too. The thing he said drew him to me was that I had significant criminal potential. He felt that, under his tutelage, I could have been a contender, so to speak (he actually did sound a little like young Marlon Brando). My refusal to accept his invitation to accompany him while he knocked over a Seven Eleven "just to see how it's done" was what led to our noisy breakup. During his brief stint working in the Media Center at St. Anne's College, from which many tape decks, slide projectors and video monitors disappeared, he came to admire the way I walked in and took whatever stuff I needed for my class without bothering to go through all the paper rigamarole. To me, doing this had nothing to do with criminal tendencies; it was the only way to get what I needed when I needed it. And *I* returned the stuff. Yet I suspected I was, if anything, potentially a better criminal than Crazy Angel. My few illegal activities—ordinary childhood shoplifting from the Five and Ten, copping the occasional nickel bag of weed—were, without exception, quietly successful, whereas Crazy Angel got caught all the time. I shared this thought with Crazy Angel.

He grabbed me by my ponytail and pulled my face up into his crazy face.

Don't. Ever. Say. That. Again.

He had the craziest eyes. They were not quite on the same horizontal plane. No wonder the Unibomber wore sunglasses for his sketch.

It may seem odd that commandeering a vinyl recliner for my ailing mother would set off Crazy Angel recollections, but it isn't. I'd seen that recliner before—maybe that's why I didn't think twice about walking off with it—and where I saw it was Crazy Angel's mother's living room.

Mom Angel's living room was in another universe. Beulah, Maryland, just across the rusting tracks of the defunct Ma & Pa Railroad (short for Maryland & Pennsylvania) was not even parallel to the ordered universe of St. Anne. Beulah sprang up in the early nineteenth century to house the families who worked for a now-defunct mill. Falling-down wooden houses leaned against and shared porches with gap-tooth brick houses, fieldstone houses, houses whose vinyl or formstone covered who knows what—one could imagine straw; Beulah seemed, till recently, to have had the Three Little Pigs as its urban planners. Each minuscule house had its own tiny front and back yards. Each back yard had its own vinyl pool. And each front yard had its own exotic animals grazing placidly behind chain link fencing: burros, geese, peacocks. Unlike St. Anne with its militant Community Associations, Beulah had no rules.

Crazy Angel's front yard held goats. Their number varied according to the appetites of Crazy Angel's rottweiler, Black Peter. Crazy Angel's brother Angie kept a .22 by the front door for when other people's dogs expressed interest in the goats.

Two things brought me to Crazy Angel's living room. One was that Crazy Angel often needed a ride home from the college. He drove a different old car every few days, I used to notice; he explained that his brother Angie was in the business of parting out stolen cars and often let him drive a car they hadn't started breaking down as long as it came from another state. A lot of times there weren't any available, though. Besides my reliable old Volkswagon, there was a second thing that made Crazy Angel take me to his home. He admitted it: I was a mark. A big mark, an important mark. College teacher, St. Anne society-chick. He wanted his family to see what a high mark he could hit.

Picture it: Crazy Angel's living room, a rectangle about nine feet by nine feet, stuffed with Crazy Angel, me, brother Angie, sister Angelina, Crazy Angel's wife Tiffany, and Mom Angel rocking Baby Angel. Note well: Mom Angel was rocking Baby Angel in a tan vinyl push-button recliner. The thing occupied at least two-thirds of the room.

It took longer for me to get used to the recliner than it took for me to adjust to Crazy Angel's having a baby and a wife.

"Hey, better you than me," Tiffany laughed. "I wouldn't go out with this son of a bitch if you paid me."

She punched him affectionately in the stomach. She wasn't around much except to check on Baby Angel. She drove a cab during the day and danced topless in a Beulah bar most evenings. She lived with the bar owner over the bar. But Baby Angel spent most of his time with his grandmother, so I got to know him pretty well. He called me Tee-chee, for Teacher. Crazy Angel's whole family seemed truly impressed that that's what I was, Crazy Angel himself most of all. That's half of what made me fall in love with him.

"Tell me things," he'd say after we made love.

He liked to hear about the seating arrangements in an Elizabethan theatre, and what the audience must have smelled like. He liked to hear about the lives of some of the poets. He thought Coleridge and Byron were cool, but he had no patience for the twentieth century confessionals.

"Dumb cunts," he sneered. "If you're going to do a job right, you can't be drunk." I don't know if he meant the job of writing or the job of committing suicide.

Crazy Angel was never drunk. Said it interfered with his concentration.

Concentration is the other half of why I was in love with Crazy Angel. He was the most intent, meticulous, CONCENTRATED lover I'd ever had. He was so deliberate and—what word shall I use—*accurate* in his lovemaking that he made me that way too, for a time. It used to freak me out to open my eyes under him and see that his own eyes were open, calmly serious, black with focus—not even close to rolled-back like mine. It was the same look he used to get while reading Sartre or Nietsche for the philosophy courses he took, free, as an employee of St. Anne College. It was ecstasy, but an ecstasy of attention, of analysis. If I'd ever seen Ted Koszynski's pale, vague, flicker-

ing eyes in the "Wanted" publicity, I'd never have even considered that the Unibomber might be Crazy Angel.

"Make something of this boy," wheezed Mom Angel, looking at me while whacking Crazy Angel on the back of the head. If Crazy Angel sounded like young Marlon, Mom Angel sounded like the old one, Brando of Godfather Part I. She was not bothered by the fact that I was almost ten years older than Crazy Angel.

"God sent you to take this boy off my hands."

She showed me where he had taken a big hunk out of her shin by kicking her with his high school football cleats on. Angelina pushed up her dark bangs to show me the scar from where Crazy Angel stabbed her with a fork, aiming for her eye. They seemed to be bragging. I wondered, but never dared to ask, about Angie's missing index finger joint.

Until I met Crazy Angel's people I never thought a family like that could exist outside a bad sit com. I never thought so much yelling and physical battery could fit into a house the size of theirs. I never thought people really had recliners like that in their houses. So many things I never thought, before Crazy Angel.

Which brings me to another thing I never thought, never thought I'd *have* to think about: my mother, infirm. The hospital more or less threw her out after about five days. Said there was no point. She couldn't sleep in a bed, or wouldn't, and she wouldn't take her medicine. They gave her a big bottle of Percuset to take home. She started to give the Percuset to one of the aides, but just as the aide shot out an eager, furtive hand to accept the gift, I intervened.

"Do you have any idea the street value of that?" I whispered.

"What? Oh."

Mother tucked the bottle in her big alligator purse.

"Well, it'll make a lovely present for Mildred."

Mildred being the old hophead Mother plays bridge with on Thursdays.

What I had to think about, long, hard, and fast, was how to get Mother something to sleep on. I explained to the hospital social worker there was no use sending a hospital bed to the house; Mother couldn't sleep in a hospital bed even in the *hospital,* for god's sake. I tried to rent a chair like the one I'd found for her in the hospital; Medicare wouldn't pay for it and all the places that theoretically carried such chair said they couldn't get us one till sometime around Thanksgiving. It wasn't even Labor Day. One place said they could get a chair delivered to her house within the week—for $230 a month. The doctor said she'd need it for six months.

"Mother, I'll *buy* you one. Okay? Then you'll have it. We'll save a pile of money in the long run. And it'll be yours."

"I'd die of shame," Mother whispered.

Die of shame to own such an object, obviously.

I'd considered just wheeling the hospital chair right onto the elevator, out

the automatic glass doors of St. Anne General and down the leafy boulevard to my mother's house, less than half a mile. Looking back, I'm sorry I didn't give it a shot when I had the chance.

Mom Angel didn't die of shame that day in about 1977 when the men from Sears and Roebuck came to her house to collect her recliner. The two men shifted from one foot to the other and eyed the rottweiler. Crazy Angel told the men the dog wouldn't attack them unless he told him to. The men politely helped Mom Angel out of the recliner with Baby Angel still in her arms; took apart the recliner's back and foot sections; and, in three trips, loaded the thing onto the truck waiting outside with the motor running. The living room looked a lot better without the recliner. I figured Mom Angel had phoned Sears & Roebuck to come take the thing away.

"Kids bought it for me last Christmas," Mom Angel told me. "Extended credit plan."

"Never paid a cent on it," Angie put in.

"Took 'em six months to repossess it," Mom Angel beamed.

As for dying of shame, clearly I was the only person in that living room who was.

I felt less shame, but still a twinge, rummaging through Mother's alligator pocketbook. Either it was the same one she'd had since I was a small child or she'd managed to find a chain of exact replicas. Either way it was sacred. I found her credit cards in a small Ziploc bag under her Raven Red lipstick and Dusky Violet eye-shadow. I flicked them front to back till I came to an old Sears & Roebuck charge card. It bore a shockingly short customer number and no expiration date. Revolving charge, it said. Okay.

A guy named Ken in Furniture at Sears & Roebuck told me by phone there was a sale of La-Z-Boys going on that very day. When I got there, I sat in all the recliners, great and small, plastic, velvet and leather. The Ladies' Model #10683 was on sale for less than three months' rental of a chair lift, and it had just as many up-down buttons.

"You deliver?"

"This Friday okay? Extended credit plan, right?"

"Deal."

My handwriting looks just like my mother's. Ken said he'd never seen such an old charge card, but it was okay, all the store cared about was the number. The number never changes. I knew my mother's credit had to be perfect. Using a Sears card was something she'd have died of shame before doing.

Friday the recliner arrived at Mother's house. Two delivery men, whose extreme good looks were not lost on Mother, deftly put it together, put her into it, and demonstrated the controls. When it first came in the door, she had raised her hands to her temples in the Die of Shame gesture. But now, sinking down into its discreet blue-green narrow-wale corduroy recesses, she mouths "It's wonderful."

"How long do I have to keep the damn thing?" she adds, louder.

"Six months is what the doctor said, remember?"

I drag the ancient portable Zenith out onto the sun porch where she already reigns from the recliner. Mother looks at a news-feature clip of Ted Koscynski and shakes her head.

"I used to think the Unibomber was Bob Hart," she says. "You know, that geezer Mildred dragged into the bridge group a while back? Remember how he was always lending me weird books?"

Now, all I have to do about the recliner is not pay for it. A gift from the angels.