

*Two midlife losers looking for the off-ramp to Dream City.*

## **TWO SCOOPS OF SEAFOOD**

by Gehla S. Knight

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# Two Scoops of Seafood



Gehla S. Knight

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**A NOVEL**

**BY GEHLA S. KNIGHT**

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First Edition

## **Dedication**

*This one's for Gus—the very best of the best who always  
inspires  
me to be better, do better and look for the best in everyone.*

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## ONE

The old Buick was running hot. A faint column of steam rose from the seams in the hood. The metallic dash was reflecting heat like a Miami window shade. It was a hundred degrees outside.

“Hey, Pal.” Mike jostled his partner slumped on the seat beside him. “Whatdya say we pull over and have a beer?”

He had already spied the neon sign up ahead. There was a loaded stake truck parked in front on the gravel apron. Hot roofing tar poisoned the breeze as he swerved the car over to the side of the road and found a space upwind from the smelly cargo.

“What time is it?” Lester blinked, still groggy from his neck-twisting nap in the stifling heat, sticking to the slippery seats with his long legs buckled under the jockey box and an unlit cigarette cold and damp between his thin lips.

“What difference does it make what time it is? You goin’ somewheres else?” Mike stomped on the parking brake and palmed the ignition key.

“I don’t drink before noon. That’s my rule.”

“Okay. So it’s ten past. Jesus. When’d you come up with that rule?”

Lester tapped his watch face. “It says six-thirty.”

“Well, it’s obvious it ain’t six-thirty. Why can’t you remember to wind that thing?”

“Well, if it ain’t past noon, I’m not drinkin’. What’s your watch say?”

“My watch says if you don’t shut up and get outta the car, I’m gonna go in without you. Let’s have a beer. I’m meltin’ in this damned heat.”

“Okay. But if it ain’t noon yet, I’m havin’ an orange pop.”

“Suit yourself. Come on, get a move on.”

They stumbled from the car. Their cheap suits were wrinkled like used tissue paper, and their skinny ties flapped like Hereford tongues in the gusts of wind blow-drying both drifters as they shuffled up the steps.

The eatery was peering out at the licorice-strip highway from the cover of a sick, old crabapple littering the tin roof. Two gas pumps slouched in a puddle of motor oil. Lazy magpies grounded by the heat sat on the split-rail fence and gawked at the two, disheveled men who staggered onto the porch and punched open the screeching screen door.

One mid-life schemer was Lester McKue, a tall, reedy stalk with a pencil mustache drawn like a hyphen over his stingy lips. His pointed ears stuck out from his Fuller-brush haircut like gull wings. At forty-five, he had wormed his wily way through three common-law wives, half a dozen semi-permanent girlfriends (ones who trusted him with the keys to their cars) and a score of dead-end, dumb jobs that kept him on the road lugging a battered sample case across Oregon, Idaho and Washington. At one time or another he had peddled vacuum cleaners, soap, spices, pots and pans, encyclopedias, wax fruit and magazine subscriptions.

His cohort was Mike Bochsleiter, as different in his morphological makeup from Lester as he could be—short and stocky with a face permanently wrinkled in a half-leering grin, blue eyes that tracked fast cars and loose women with equal agility and a pate painstakingly pasted with Vaseline to camouflage the increasingly obvious fact that Mike had more peach fuzz over his ears than hair.

He'd been driving a taxi in Seattle when he skipped over the state line one day after missing an inside straight and failing to come up with the back alimony some Superior Court Judge insisted he owed. Since his less than honorable exit from the Evergreen State, he had sold terminally sick junkers at “Don’s Honest Used Car World” where he poured sawdust in cracked blocks of rust-boats beached like dreadnaughts on a dead-end street. The secret of his modest success was wrapping a twenty-dollar bill around a wad of Monopoly money and stashing the roll in the driver’s side ashtray on test-drives.



“Check out those deluxe features, Mac,” he’d start once they got off the lot. “Driver’s own private ashtray in the door there. Clean as a whistle.”

The guy would get an eyeful of Mike’s phony stash and never even notice the plume of blue smoke belching out the tailpipe or the front-end shimmy. The sloppy subterfuge usually encouraged his dishonest clients to sign on the dotted line before some other lucky schmuck cashed in on the planted loot.

Mike had never met a man or woman he couldn’t sell, and so it was something of an anomaly he wasn’t in far better circumstances than the summer of 1967 found him—pounding the pavement of western Idaho with Lester hawking burial policies for the Peaceful Assurance Burial and Cremation Company of Hackensack, New Jersey.

“Check the time,” Mike grumbled, pointing to the COKE clock on the wall behind the counter. It showed eleven-fifteen.

“It ain’t noon yet.” Lester hopped onto a stool and rolled up his shirtsleeves. “If it ain’t after twelve, I’m havin’ a sody pop.”

“So have a pop for crissakes. Suit yourself.”

“Hey. The minute hand on that clock ain’t even workin’. It’s broke.”

“So?” Mike mopped his brow and neck and wet his lips, anticipating the icy brew only minutes away from his parched throat.

“But on the other hand,” Lester argued with himself, “if it’s broke, then maybe it’s already past twelve, and I’m entitled to a beer.”

“Make up your friggin’ mind, will you?”

The bored waitress came over and raised an eyebrow at Mike who seemed to be the more articulate of the two rumbled travelers.

“What’re you guys havin’?”

“A draft.” Mike grabbed for the nut bowl. “Make it a tall one, Honey.”

“What time is it?” Lester asked.

“About noon. What’ll you have, Mac?”

“You sure it’s after twelve?”

“I guess. My watch is a little slow. What’ll it be?”

Lester twisted his skinny tie. “Gimme a draft.”

Mike pulled out his wallet as the waitress went back behind the keg dispenser to draw their beers. "I'm payin' for mine. You spring for your own tab."

"I paid for breakfast."

"Yeah, well breakfast was just coffee and a couple rolls. I sprang for dinner, and that was four-fifty with the chicken-fried steaks. So I figure you owe me."

She brought the beers and set them down as Mike dipped both paws in the Spanish peanuts, popped a handful in his mouth and washed it down with a huge slurp. He glanced at his partner between swallows. "What's the matter? You all of a sudden don't like beer?"

Lester watched the bubbles rise in his glass. "I'm holdin' back just in case it ain't quite noon."

"I don't believe this. What the hell difference does it make?"

"It's the principle of the thing. See, I never take a drink before noon. That way I know I'm not an alchy."

Mike tossed another handful of nuts in his mouth and drained half his beer. "That's the stupidest thing I ever heard," he burped. "It don't make no difference when you drink. If you can't say no, then you're a drunk. Doesn't matter what time you do it."

"Yeah? Well, I read different."

"Bullshit."

Lester dipped a finger in the beer and lapped up a dollop of foam. "See, anybody who has to have a drink before noon—say, like when you roll outta bed on Sunday and pour yourself a straight shot."

"That's an eye-opener. It's not like a regular drink. It gets the circulation system runnin' properly. Thins the blood."

"You're closer to bein' an alchy than me."

"My pink rosy ass I am."

"Hey, I read up on this stuff."

"Yeah?" Cynicism oozed out his pores like Swiss cheese through a grater. "The hell you say."

"Yeah. And it says that if you're drinkin' before noon, then you're on the road to bein' an alchy. So I'm watchin' my drinkin' times."

"What a buncha bullshit. What time is it now anyway?"

“What’s your watch say?”

“Twelve oh-four.”

“I think that’s pretty close.” He raised his glass and drained it before coming up for air.

“That’s bullshit. All a buncha nonsense.” Mike guarded his cache of peanuts from Lester’s stalking eye. “My old man was a pants pisser who drank his way through a fifth a day, and he never tipped the bottle until after sundown.”

“Don’t make no difference, Mike. You take a drink before noon, and you’re on the road to bein’ a bona fide drunk. Hooked. An alchy. A certifiable lush, a red nose, stumble bum, booze hound, sot, tosspot, bibbler, barfly, tippler, guzzler, swiller, souse, rummy, wino, gin hound, dipso, juicehead, stewbum, elbow bender, dribbler, drunk —”

“You said that one already.”

Lester shot a glance at the ceiling. “Oh, yeah.”

“It’s all bullshit.”

“No, it ain’t. I read it.”

“Where? In some *Ladies’ Home Journal* article for crissakes?” He snapped his fingers to signal the waitress for a refill.

“Nope. *Readers’ Digest*, and you know it’s nothin’ but pure scientific information in there. I read all about it.”

“Bullshit.”

“No kiddin’. That’s all factual stuff in there, researched and all. I never take a dump without browsin’ through one of these babies.” He pulled out a ragged copy of the *Digest* from his back pocket. After a cursory wave to prove his case, he shoved it back and sucked the last drop from his glass. “Keeps me up to date.”

“So who gives a rip?”

“I read an article in there once about a guy who used to live with polar bears—even learned to speak their language and everything.”

The waitress brought Mike a fresh brew and ignored Lester.

“Learned to talk to polar bears?” Mike belched and scooped up more nuts. “That’s pure bullshit. Bears don’t talk.”

“It was all there, Mike. This guy had reglar conversations with ’em and everything. They raised him from when he was a kid and his folks lost him on a friggin’ iceberg or somethin’.”

“My ass.”

“It was for real. The mama polar bear taught him to dive under the ice and catch seals.”

Mike rolled his eyes. “What a buncha hooey.”

“He dove in that freezin’ water and wrestled with a walrus and everything like the mama bear taught him. It was all written up in that *First Person* article they got. He was wearin’ walrus skins and eatin’ blubber and all just like the polar bears when they found him.”

“Lester, I can’t believe you fall for that stuff. There’s a sucker born every minute, I guess. You’re so thick-headed you swallow all that junk hook, line and sinker. Wise up.”

“Hey, it was in the *Readers’ Digest*. I ain’t makin’ it up. He caught seals and stuff all by himself.”

“No knife?”

Lester rubbed his cheek. “Jeez, I don’t remember. But I guess the polar bears wouldn’t have no knives, right?”

“No, they ain’t got no knives for crissakes.”

“Well, I read it. I ain’t makin’ it up.”

“Why can’t you make some intelligent conversation once in awhile instead of comin’ up with this drivel?”

“It ain’t drivel. It’s scientific fact.”

“Polar bears raisin’ Eskimos?”

“He wasn’t no Eskimo—he was from Detroit.”

“Oh, Christ.”

“So he was from Detroit—don’t matter. He was probly on some expedition to the North Pole and got lost.”

“So a grown man falls off a friggin’ sled and gets himself lost—”

“Yeah. Probly.”

“—and a mama polar bear finds him?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“And teaches him to dive under the friggin’ ice and catch walruses and shit?”

“Yeah.”

“Bullshit.”

Lester hunkered down over his glass. “Well, I read about it. It was in the *Digest*.”

“There ain’t no such thing ever happened. Look, Lester, in the first place, if he got lost, he woulda froze to death. And if the polar bears found his ass, they’d had him for lunch, right? Why would some polar bear wanna drag him back and take him walrus huntin’? That definitely don’t make sense to me.”

“Maybe she was lonely. You know, maybe she was a widow bear or somethin’. You ever think a that?”

“Bears ain’t that lonely. It’s a bullshit story. I think you just made it up.”

“It’s in the *Readers’ Digest*, I’m tellin’ you.”

“Sure. Sure it is.” Mike finished his beer and unfolded a bill from his wallet. “It’s a buncha bullshit is what it is. Bullshit. That’s all you ever come up with from that rag—bullshit stories about some kid drowned in the swimmin’ pool until he’s as purple as a grape popsicle and then how his folks prayed ’emselfs blue in the face and brought the kid back to life good as new. All a buncha bullshit for suckers like you, Lester.”

“They screen all the articles in the *Digest*. This is authentic stories only we’re talkin’ about. The *Digest* ain’t no rag.”

“*Argosy* is a man’s magazine. They got stories about *real* men, African safaris and shit with big-ass elephants, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. Guys are huntin’ bears not shackin’ up with ’em.”

“Okay. So we’ll stop at the next town, and I’ll go in to the library and find the back issue of the *Digest*. They even got a pitchure of the polar bear in the article.”

“Bears eat guys. They don’t show ’em how to catch friggin’ seals and sew up walrus booties or whatever the hell it said.”

“Well, she did. And she taught him how to survive up there by eatin’ frozen fish sticks, makin’ seal blankets and buildin’ those ice houses. You know—igloos.”

“*Igloos*? Bears don’t live in no igloos. That’s Eskimos. I don’t believe any of this shit.”

The waitress swaggered over and leaned her elbow on the counter. “Hey. You guys gonna order somethin’ to eat or not? I gotta close the grille. It’s too damned hot to cook.”

“Sure,” Mike reached for a plastic menu with egg crust glued to the front. “Why not?” He skimmed the list. “What’ll you have, Lester?”

“Think I’ll have some chili. Pitchure looks good, don’t it?”

“Chili? Christ, it’s a hundred degrees outside, and you want chili? It’s miserable enough in this weather, McKue. Not ridin’ in my car you ain’t eatin’ no chili.”

The waitress poked her hairnet with the tip of her stubby pencil. “We ain’t got chili today anyways. That’s Wednesdays only.”

“Okay.” Lester slapped the menu closed. “How about the cheeseburger with fries?”

“What kinda cheese you want to go with that?”

“Cheddar.”

“Ain’t got it.”

“Okay. Swiss.”

“All out.”

“How about good ole Velveeta?”

“We ain’t got Velveeta neither.”

“Okay. Make it plain.”

“And we’re outta buns.”

“Huh?”

“We’re outta hamburger buns. You shoulda got here sooner.”

Mike handed his menu to the waitress. “Gimme the fish basket.”

“No fish today.” She snapped her gum. “Fridays only.”

“Then gimme the grilled ham on rye.”

“No rye. I got regular white sandwich loaf.”

“Okay.”

“Spam okay? We’re outta ham.”

“You got the chicken basket?”

“Nope. Ran out.”

“Do you have anything to eat in this friggin’ joint?”

“Yeah, but it ain’t on the menu.”

“Jesus.” Mike stood up, set his sweat-stained hat on his head and thumped his partner on the shoulder. “Now I ain’t hungry. It’s too damn hot to eat anyhow. Let’s go. This conversation is givin’ me a headache.”

“Hey, I was thinkin’ of havin’ a waffle.”

The waitress flounced back to her grille. “We ain’t got waffles neither after twelve.”

Lester shot a glance up at the broken wall clock, shook his head with a dubious grin and then followed Mike toward the door.

“Hey, you owe a buck,” Mike dunned him at the door.

“I only had one beer. I only gotta pay for one.”

“Bullshit. It’s your turn to pay—give the lady another two bits.”

Lester begrudgingly took out a dollar bill and laid it on the counter. “Well, you ate a buck’s worth of nuts.”

“They’re free. Come on for crissakes.”

“Wait. I gotta drain the tank first.”

“Well, hurry up, will ya?”

Lester strolled toward the back and disappeared beneath the purloined State Highway **DETOUR** sign with an arrow pointing to the Gents’. Mike thumbed through a couple of magazines at the rack near the front door and then headed back for the john himself. Usually, he didn’t mind just pulling the Buick off onto the shoulder and watering the sagebrush, but as long as he was here, he might as well be civilized and use the can before they started across the searing scrubland toward the next stop on their route.

Mike and Lester stood elbow to elbow in the cramped lavatory. While Lester was rolling a brown paper towel from the dispenser to dry his hands, and Mike was just finishing up at the urinal, they heard the noise.

*BAM! BAM!*

“A backfire?” Lester asked, jerking his head toward the door.

“That ain’t no backfire.” Mike hurriedly zipped his trousers. “Sounds like gunshots.”

Lester pressed his nose against the frosted windowpane as Mike grunted and with one burly shove raised the frame up a foot. From the cafe they heard the waitress let loose with a shrill scream as loud as a fire alarm along with another bang and a gruff voice yelling like a shore patrol sailor. Mike heaved again, and the window raised another foot.

“Let’s beat it!” He clambered up on the stool and hoisted his heavy body out the opening. Wriggling like a caterpillar, he managed to get one leg out then somersaulted onto the gravel, ripping the back pocket on his trousers. “Damn!”

Lester scrambled out after him. More yelling and screeching erupted from inside the cafe followed by a crash as they sprinted like long-eared jackrabbits for the Buick parked out front. As they closed in on the car, Mike had his keys out and whipped open the driver’s door just as a middle-aged man in a red flannel shirt lurched through the restaurant’s front door and raised an arm in their direction. He was hollering at the top of his lungs, and neither Mike nor Lester could make out what he was saying as the Buick fired up all eight cylinders and cleared the carbon out of its pipes with a throaty roar.

“Let’s get the hell outta here!” Mike hollered, shifting into low. The Buick kicked up a storm of gravel fishtailing back to the road.

Out on the highway, Lester cranked his head around and saw a green and white police car pulling into the cafe’s lot, raising a yellow mushroom plume. A moment later, Lester stared as two red, reptilian eyes blazing like iron ingots emerged from the dust cloud. A county cruiser tore onto the highway in hot pursuit with its dome lights flashing and siren screaming.

“It’s the cops,” Mike said somewhat relieved as he took his foot off the gas to slow for a turn. “They must be hot on the track of those stick-up bums.”

“Yeah, right. Pull over and let ’em by, Mike.”

He reined in the V8 and let it roll onto the shoulder as the police car rapidly closed the distance between them. To Mike’s dismay, the cop car swerved in ahead of the Buick and shivered to a dusty stop. Two uniformed troopers jumped out with their guns pointed right at Mike and Lester’s mid sections.

“You there!” one of the troopers barked with a menacing snarl. “Get out of the car! Put your hands in the air!”

“What the hell *is* this?” Mike sputtered as a trooper reached in and clamped a pair of steel handcuffs on his hairy wrists.

Lester was pulled from the passenger seat like a sleepy carp on the end of a line, frisked, splayed on the hood of the Buick and



handcuffed along with his partner. Both men were then tossed in the back of the patrol car.

“Ain’t this a shitter?” Mike muttered, banging his head on the door frame.

A trooper slid behind the wheel and flashed them a toothy smile. “Thanks for pullin’ over for us, Boys. It’ll make things go a lot easier for you with the judge.”

“What judge? We didn’t do nothin’. You got the wrong guys,” Lester spluttered.

“Sure. We always get the wrong guys, right, Assholes?”

While Mike and Lester broiled in the backseat of the police car, the troopers tore through the Buick, tossing empty beer cans from under the front seats, throwing Dairy Queen cartons out of the musty trunk and scattering papers like oversized Texas snowflakes on the shoulder. Nonplussed at their failure to turn up either the loot or the weapon, they slammed the doors closed and mopped their beet-red faces.

The taller of the two cops leaned into the sedan. “You sonsabitches gonna tell us where you stashed the money you took from Margie’s till back up the road?”

“We didn’t take nothin’ but bar nuts,” Mike pleaded. “We was in the john takin’ a whiz when we heard those stick-up guys shootin’ up the joint. So we took off.”

“Yeah, Officer,” Lester chimed in. “We thought you guys were gonna pass us up and catch those bastards.”

“Smart asses, huh?” the trooper sneered, putting his hat back on. He got in the car along with his surly partner. The engine revved up, and they headed back for the cafe. “We’ll just have Marjorie and Earl take a look and ID you fellas for us, and then we can go on into the Courthouse, book you smart guys armed robbery and see Judge Mellon.”

“We didn’t do nothin’, Officer,” Lester protested. “We ain’t even got a gun.”

“You throw it out of the car, did ya?”

“We just stopped in for a few beers,” Mike explained. “We heard somethin’ goin’ on so we hightailed it outta there. That’s all.”

“Save it for the judge, Boys.”

They pulled in to the parking lot. The waitress and the fellow in the red flannel shirt came over to the car, stuck their faces in to eyeball Mike and Lester, shook their heads at the troopers and wagged their fingers.

“These ain’t the ones with the guns, Officer. These two guys just came in and ate all the bar nuts—didn’t even leave a tip. But they ain’t the ones robbed us.”

The tall trooper gulped, wiped a bead of sweat from his upper lip and hooked both thumbs under his belt. “You sure? You damned sure, Earl?”

“Fraid so. These ain’t the ones robbed us.”

“Ain’t, huh?” The trooper lowered his shades to take a better look at the motley duo.

Earl spat across his boot tops. “For crissakes, Wayne, these two dumb fucks don’t look like they got sense enough to rob a blood bank.”

“Yeah. I see your point there, Earl.” The trooper adjusted his dark glasses. “I’ll have to ask you boys to get out of the patrol car and return the handcuffs. We need to put out an APB on these other fellas before they reach the state border.”

“Sure. No problem, Officer.” Mike was already nudging himself against the trim panel, willing the back door to open and expel him.

The other trooper unlocked the cuffs and motioned the two men out. With a quick click and a snap, the handcuffs hung limply from the cop’s belt. The doors slammed shut on the cruiser.

“Wait!” Mike halted them. “Can’t you fellas give us a lift back to our car?”

“Sorry, Boys. We gotta couple robbers to track down.”

The police car squealed rubber as it shimmied across the sticky asphalt. Earl hitched up his trousers and walked off without a word.

Lester slapped a fly on the back of his neck. “Damn! We gotta walk all the way back to the car? In this friggin’ heat?”

“Shut up and start walkin’.” Mike started off with his hat brim pulled down. He slung his jacket over his shoulder.

“Is this gonna be some kinda omen or somethin’ for Idaho?” Lester whined, catching up.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you know. Maybe it’s a sign or somethin’ that we should go straight through and start up somewheres else. Scratch Spudville. Whatdya think, Mike?”

“That’s one of the stupidest things I’ve heard all day. Right next to the Polar bears buildin’ igloos.”

They crunched across the gravel lot and started hiking along the road melting like a licorice whip in the summer sun.

“You know, Mike, I figure maybe the Eskimos learned how to make those igloos from the polar bears in the first place. Don’t that make sense?”

Mike wiped a rivulet of sweat from his cheek. “Shut your trap, will you, Lester?”

They walked for a mile in the sizzling sun until their white shirts were soaked through with sweat; their toes squished in their stinky socks, and their tongues hung out like playground slides. Then they topped a rise and saw where the highway patrol car had boxed them in. Their rubbish was still littering the shoulder, but the Buick was gone.

“What the hell?” Mike swept off his hat and scratched his head.

“Ain’t this the place we left it?” Lester made a full three-sixty gander. “That’s our stuff, right?” He picked up a cigar butt and sniffed. The end was still wet with spit.

“Yeah. Only where is our friggin’ car?”

“Cops took it?”

“Naw. Don’t figger.”

“You got the keys?” Lester was blowing on the recovered stogie. He ran his lips along the cigar and then pressed it into his jacket pocket.

“Course I ain’t got the keys, you moron. The cops yanked my ass outta the car and slapped the cuffs on before I could say shit.”

“Well, if you ain’t got the keys, then they were in the Buick, right? And if the cops didn’t take it, and it ain’t here where we left

it . . .” He scratched his head. “Maybe those bums that robbed the joint took it.”

“Figures. Musta switched getaway cars right here.” He took a quick survey and spotted three jettisoned beer bottles, a white sock and not much else.

“So where’d they ditch their wheels, Mike? I don’t see nothin’.”

“Yeah, well maybe they ran it into the ditch over there.” He pointed toward a culvert full of brackish water. They walked off the shoulder, slid down the bank and saw a crumpled fender poking through the marl.

“Looks like a Ford custom, don’t it, Mike? Rotten paint job, too, if you ask me.”

“Damn! I got all my gear in the car. All our sales leads and receipts. Christ!”

Lester frowned. He hadn’t thought of that. No clean socks. His medicinal bourbon gone. And all his back issues of the *Digest*. “Well, guess we hitch, huh?”

Mike was several steps down the road already.

## TWO

The blue-over-tan Olds 88 rumbled by at first glance then peeled off on the sandy shoulder and idled while the two tired trudgers caught up and leaned in through the open window.

“Give us a ride, Mister?” Mike beamed, sweat dripping from his bushy brows.

The man took a closer look, spied a couple of harmless drifters in cheap suits with Hershey-bar shines on their Sears wingtips and jerked his head toward the backseat. “Sure. Where you fellows headed?”

Mike and Lester tripped over each other climbing aboard.

“Boise,” Mike answered before Lester had a chance to tell the truth: anywhere with shade and liquid refreshment.

“Well, I’m goin’ far as Nampa. I can drop you off.”

“Perfect. Appreciate it.”

The Oldsmobile took off, and in seconds a cooling breeze was drying Mike and Lester’s sweaty faces.

“Your rig break down? Overheat on you?” their benefactor asked, appraising his passengers from the rear-view mirror.

“Some assholes stole it,” Lester said. “Stuck up a cafe back there and stole our car.”

“Izzat right?”

“Say, you haven’t seen a black and yellow ‘56 Buick Special, have you, Mac?” Mike wiped his face dry. “Probly tearin’ up the road with two mangy s.o.b.’s smokin’ my best cigars.”

“Nope. Haven’t.”

“Damn.” Mike sank back and mopped his neck.

“You boys ought to stop in and report it to the Sheriff in Nampa. They’ll find it.”

“Yeah. Thanks. We’ll do that.”

The Olds pulled in at a Chevron station stuck on a slab of hardpan recently populated by jackrabbits, gophers, sagebrush varmints and diamondbacks. The shimmering horizon was ringed with endless waves of sugar-beet greens.

While the attendant filled up the tank with ethyl and scrubbed the bug juice off the windshield, Mike and Lester ambled around the corner to the toilet and took turns draining their beer bladders. Lester stopped on the way back, slid a quarter in the drink machine and pulled out an icy bottle of orange Crush. When they ambled round the corner, the Olds was just rolling onto the highway without them.

“Hey! Wait up!” Mike yelled, raising a clenched fist as a cloud of dust coated his face like a flour-dredged drumstick. “Asshole,” he grumbled.

Lester swilled a mouthful of soda. “He musta took off cuz it ain’t that far to town. Let’s get goin’.”

“Fucker!” Mike was still swearing as the two loosened their shirt collars, hiked up to the highway and headed east again. “This is pitiful,” he hissed as he walked half a step ahead of the longer-legged Lester who loped along like a spastic walking stick with both spindly arms swinging at his sides. “Somebody of my background, hitching on a public highway to Hicksville for crissakes.”

“What sorta background, Mike? Sellin’, you mean?”

“No, for crissakes. Background. *Breeding*. I’m descended from a very distinguished line, you know.”

“You don’t say so,” Lester drawled as he kicked a beer bottle into the ditch.

“Bochsleiter is German.”

“Yeah. Kraut. I know. Like sauerkraut—all German like Nazis and the Katzenjammer kids.”

“No, you moron. My ancestors were cultured. Highly placed in society.”

“Oh, yeah? Not Nazis, huh?”

“Nazis are the new guys. My family tree goes way back, before all that goose-stepping shit. That’s how come I got a real dignified family name passed down.”

“Yeah?”

“B-o-c-h-s is how they spell box, see. And leiter is from the German word for song or singing. So it means box singer—like the opera where the fat cats gotta private box to take in all the sights up above the nickel seats.”

“Opera singer? You sure about that? They got boxes at Fenway Park, and the fat ladies just step up to home plate and belt out the Stars and Stripes from there.” Lester cast an unbelieving eye at his partner while he sucked up the last of the soda. “Who told you about your name meanin’ box singers? Was it in the *Digest* somewheres?”

“Will you get a brain for crissakes? *I’m* tellin’ you. I know what I’m talkin’ about. Whose family is this anyhow? One of my ancestors was somebody real famous in the opera.”

“The phantom? I think I heard a him.”

“No, for crissakes! I’m talkin’ about a real singer—a tenor maybe who starred in all the big operas.”

“I saw an opera once. It was on the television, hadda bunch a limeys prancin’ around in their longjohns, singin’ and jumpin’ over stuff. They all had big, bushy lip brushes and one of ’em had on some kinda uniform like a bellhop at the Multnomah Hotel, and then there was this gal with pink panties who came out and showed off her bare butt. I think there was a band playin’ the whole time they was dancin’ around and whatnot. Can’t recall the name exactly, but it had somethin’ to do with the Navy and ladies’ underwear. Somethin’ like the USS Panty Girdle or somethin’ like that.”

Mike slapped a hand over his eyes. “Jesus, Lester. You see what I’m talkin’ about here? You don’t know a freakin’ thing about culture or this art thing. I’m talkin’ about opera. Real, serious opera not some dance hall strip-show. All the best opera singers are German.”

“Dean Martin—he’s Eyetalian. So’s Mario Lanza. And Desi Arnaz—he’s Eyetalian, I think, but he could be a Spic.”

“They’re crooners for crissakes. I’m talkin’ about famous operatic *artists*. You know, the Wagoneer operas with the big-assed broad in horns.”

“Broads with horns?”

“Yeah. Sort of a hat that looks like a spud pot with these two horns stickin’ out. That’s Wagoneer opera—very famous stuff. Named after the composer, a German guy named Wagoneer.”

“He the guy they named the Jeeps after, huh? I thought it was some American like Henry Ford or Charlie Chevy.”

“Not the *car*, you moron. It’s Wagoneer like in German. Only they say it with a vee instead of double-u, see. The Krauts are sorta funny that way. But this Wagoneer guy’s famous all over the world for writin’ operas and shit. Ed Sullivan does that classy stuff on his show. The Met is famous for it.”

“What sorta horns?”

“I don’t know. Jesus H. Christ, Lester. What a cripple-minded sonuvabitch. How would I know what kinda horns? *Horns*. What am I—some kinda animal expert?”

“Well, were they like rhino horns or —”

“*Horns* for crissakes. Just plain, old cow horns.”

“Longhorns?”

“I don’t know! Short horns—kinda stubby like. Cattle horns.”

“You know Unicorns ain’t for real? Somebody just made ’em up,” Lester volunteered, kicking at a Pall Mall wrapper. “I read that in the *Digest*.”

“You see what I’m sayin’, Lester? You have no appreciation of European culture like opera and shit. Means nothin’ to you because you have no breeding. The Bochsleiters have centuries of this high-class livin’ in their family tree so they appreciate the cultural things like opera.”

“Prong-horned broads singin’ in Jeep wagons on the Sullivan show don’t sound arty to me.”

“Just because some swab’s pecker snot ended up in Dolly McKue’s fertile spud plot and hatched a moron like you —”

“I ain’t no moron. He wasn’t no swab neither. He was a gunner’s mate.”

“Sure. Sure. Big deal, Lester.”

Lester’s chin scraped his top shirt button. This was a semi sore point with him, the saga of his beginnings from a wild weekend on Burnside Avenue in Portland’s seamy service clubs where his mother,



sixteen-year-old Dolly McKue, had a forgettable fling with a red-haired, pimple-faced apprentice seaman she never saw again. Every decade or so, Lester saw fit to promote the old man. By the time Lester retired, his father would no doubt be one step away from full admiral.

“Well, I wouldn’t pass it around if I were you about those fancy-assed Kraut relatives, Mike. Fat gals with big butts and horns sproutin’ outta their heads ain’t nothin’ to brag on even if they are singin’ operas about Volkswagens.”

“Not *cars*—Wagoneer is the guy’s name who wrote it.”

“Well, I seen about a dozen —”

“You’re so friggin’ uncultured. It’s a real pity I gotta associate with you, you know what I’m saying? It’s pitiful. Just pitiful.”

“Well, how do we know Bochsleiter ain’t German for leftover wiener schnitzel or fish wrapper or some damned thing, huh? All we got is your word.”

“I’m full-blooded German. I know about this shit.”

“You wouldn’t know shit if you fell in a privy.”

“Hey! It’s slowin’ down.” Mike grinned at a Chrysler stationwagon full of hollering kids, a large, yellow hound and a pudgy housewife with oversized dark glasses, bleached blonde hair and eyebrows as black as chimney soot.

The car stopped, and they pulled open a back door, crowded in and thanked their good Samaritan. She drove into town while Lester peeled the carcass of a peanut butter sandwich from his backside.

“Hey!” Mike twisted around to peer through the fly-specked window as they drove past their old Buick parked in front of the speed limit sign. “You can let us out here, Lady. That’s our car.”

They got out and walked up to the abandoned clunker. The keys were still hanging from the ignition. Their Idaho road map was unfurled on the seat along with Lester’s overripe socks.

“Hey, Mike, lucky we found it, huh?”

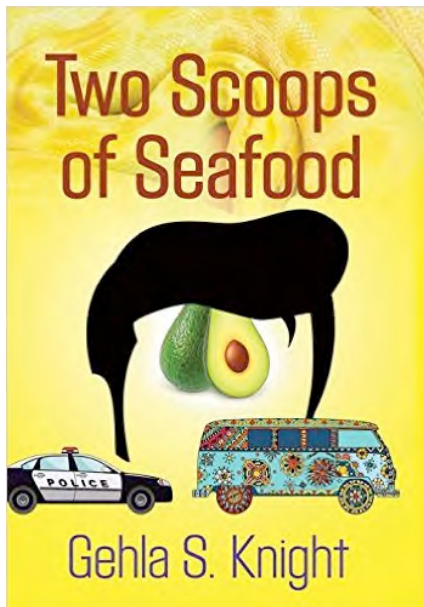
“Yeah.” Mike slid in and turned the key. There was a clank followed by a groan. “Outta freakin’ gas.”

They opened up the trunk and inventoried their property: a calfskin satchel bulging with burial insurance policies, address books,

telephone directories swiped from gas stations along the route and a battered Tourister stuffed with empty sandwich wrappers, wrinkled shirts, dirty laundry and a dead bottle of Wild Turkey.

“It’s all here,” Mike said, standing with one hand braced on the right fender.

“Hey, looky here.” Lester bent down and came up with a bottle of Jim Beam a quarter full. He was already unscrewing the top before Mike could even make a grab for it.



*Two midlife losers looking for the off-ramp to Dream City.*

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