

# **Cooley Avenue**

**3 Stories by Joe Cottonwood**

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## Dewey

"Are you married?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"The first time?"

"Yes."

"For both of you?"

"Yes."

He studied me with good-natured puzzlement.

"And you?" I asked. "Married?"

"Coupla times. Not today. My name's Dewey."

He had a shaggy mop of reddish-blond hair and a bushy mustache. He appeared to be my age, which would be 25. Dabs of paint speckled his blue jeans and shirt.

"You a painter, Dewey?"

"Sorta. I draw a lot." He looked around the garage, where I had been setting up tools. "You a carpenter?"

"Sorta." I was touching these tools for the first time in four years.

"You make furniture?"

"Sometimes," I lied.

Which is how I got the job of building a chest of drawers. Dewey was my downstairs neighbor. We shared a stucco box that was basically a three-car garage. My wife and I lived above the garages; Dewey lived behind them. He'd scavenged six drawers that somebody had left out on the street. My job was to build something - anything - that would house the six drawers. He wasn't going to tell me how it should look because, he said, "You wouldn't want some clown tellin' ya what to do."

We had just agreed on a price when a silver Porsche pulled into the driveway. A woman - blond, gorgeous - leaned her head out the window

and shouted, "You don't answer your phone. You're never home."

Dewey walked to the car. Leaning down, he said something I couldn't hear.

With a screech, the Porsche backed out and was gone.

"Me, I don't hold grudges," Dewey said as he returned to the garage. "One of my exes lives just down the block. The other is a banker's daughter. Guess which one you just saw."

"Miss Banker."

"Hey. You're smart."

We lived in a neighborhood of struggle: Cooley Avenue, East Palo Alto, a town famous at the time as The Murder Capital of the World because of drug wars that were raging on the other side of the freeway. Our garage box was located on the quieter side of 101. We were bathed in traffic noise, but at least nobody seemed to get killed on our block. The rent was as cheap as it ever could get in California.

I already knew a few things about Dewey, the kind of things you learn when you share a building. He played the same three record albums every day, in the same sequence, once in the morning at 9 AM and once in the evening but never after 9 PM. Don McLean, Sinatra, Nilsson. He kept it soft, though the bass beat reverberated in the walls. I could recite every bass line for three dozen songs and every word of Bye Bye Miss American Pie.

He had two cats, one with a limp, one with no tail. The no-tail cat liked to climb the ivy and bask in the sun while staring into my kitchen window. Some nights I walked into the kitchen, switched on the light, and saw a pair of eyes staring in at me. I told this to Dewey, who seemed to have decided to spend the afternoon in my garage, and he said, "That's Nilsson. Yeah, he's kinda friendly that way."

Dewey had a 1961 blue Chrysler, tail fins, chrome, the works. He

kept it in the middle garage and used it as an office. There was a two-drawer file cabinet in the back seat.

Dewey, I learned that afternoon, created and sold several posters which were popular in college dorms - I'd seen a few myself. He'd sold 30,000. He'd also published one book of sketches, which he gave me and then hovered, watching as I flipped through. Every page was a cartoonish drawing, and every image was some variation of a penis.

"Some people say I have a phallic obsession," he said, "but I don't know where they get that idea." He said he had a second book ready - drawn in a different style. Then he said, "Do you mind if I talk to ya? I'll try not to be too depressin'."

"You're not depressing."

"I just killed Sinatra."

"Who?"

"Gray cat? Limp? Fed her some downers and she went to sleep peaceful. Purrin' till she stopped breathin'. I just buried her in that garden there." He pointed to the house next door. "Don't tell the girls."

Two female graduate students - "the girls" - lived very quietly in the house next door. I wondered if one of them would try planting flowers soon, turning a spade of earth and finding a surprise.

"There's a gallery in Frisco wants to show my stuff," he said.

"Cool! Are they - like -?"

"Dongs? Naw. New style. I'm goin' up there tonight. Put on my best blue jeans and all. Get the final word."

"Good luck."

"I quit the Post Office."

"You were a mailman?"

"That was after I quit the clown profession. Actually, maybe mailman was the same profession, new venue. So I was an agent of the

U.S. Postal Nonservice for three years. Saved up.” He said he’d always planned to open a coffee shop, a late night thing, coffee and donuts.

“Where?”

“Whiskey Gulch.”

The main strip on our side of East Palo Alto was one block long, lined with liquor stores and bars. Hence the nickname.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Couldn’t get zoning. For sellin’ *coffee* in a strip of booze.”

It had made him so mad, he’d drawn three posters: one about politicians, one about landlords, one about God. In spite of their popularity, he’d lost money on the production and distribution - the rest of his savings.

My tools - what few I owned - were all unpacked, hung in racks over a worktable.

Dewey and I stepped out of the garage into bright California sunshine. You could smell eucalyptus from the trees all around. “You heard of Dewey Paints?” he asked.

“No.”

“Chain of paint stores in San Diego. My father owns it. Named for me. Or me for it. Me and the stores, we both started about the same time. I’m supposed to come down and run it when I’m a grown-up.” He laughed. “When can you make the drawer thing?”

“I have to get some wood.” Also, though I didn’t say so, I’d need to quickly study a book about furniture-making.

“Okay, rock on,” he said. He ambled back to his living quarters. A few minutes later, I heard the first notes of *American Pie*.

I kept the garage door open, cutting plywood on the sidewalk, assembling inside the garage. Woodworking soothed my soul. The flow

of street life on Cooley Avenue was like an impromptu circus, and I became one of the acts, part of the neighborhood and the life passing by. A pack of boys were pedaling stunt bikes while throwing rocks at each other, laughing, screaming, dodging behind cars, jumping curbs until a fat man started waving a shotgun at them, shouting about a chip on his Mustang.

While I was bent over marking lines on wood, a wolfish-looking dog appeared from somewhere and started licking my butt. From his tag I learned his name was Bilbo. He curled up next to the work table in the garage.

A young woman in a stunning blue dress ran barefoot down the middle of the road, tears streaming down her face. Sauntering after her came a tall thin man, hands in pockets. The woman stopped at the edge of the freeway. She curled her fingers in the chainlink fence and stared at the endless roaring passage of cars and trucks. Catching up with her, the man placed an arm around her shoulders and guided her gently back to his apartment building.

It was a neighborhood of transience. Rentals. A ramshackle purgatory. People who were just starting out, or people whose lives had suddenly changed, or people who had no idea what they would be doing next - who, sometimes, had never known and never would. The traffic noise was unending. But in California, even the slums have great weather.

Dewey walked down the sidewalk holding hands with a woman on one side and a little boy on the other. The woman was round-faced, red-haired, with shiny skin and a ready smile. The boy, also red-haired, was unsteady, lurching. One of his feet turned in. If Dewey hadn't been holding his hand, I suspected the boy would fall. In front of the garage, the woman said, "Bet you thought I was gonna invite you over for dinner

ha ha.”

Dewey kneeled in front of the boy while transferring the boy’s hand to the woman. “Keep on truckin’,” Dewey said, and he tousled the lad’s hair.

Woman and boy walked slowly away.

“How’d it go with the art gallery?” I asked.

“Sucked,” Dewey said. Without a glance at the cabinet I was building, he stalked around the side of the garage to his rear door.

Carpentry was hard work - physically tiring - something I’d known but forgotten during four years of computer jobs and selling photography and writing unpublishable novels. Forgotten tools, forgotten muscles were returning to service. I felt insanely happy, puttering away. It was like a reunion with an old lover.

Half a block away, boy and mother had stopped, turned around, and the boy was waving. Dewey was inside his apartment behind the garage, out of sight.

I waved, subbing for Dewey. With the sun at my back, all the boy could see would be my silhouette.

Holding his mother’s hand, the boy staggered away.

Sometime during the night I heard the clatter of glass bottles. I heard a motor start in the garage below our bedroom, and I heard a behemoth car pull out and drive away.

In the morning as usual, Nilsson was staring into the kitchen window. On the sidewalk was a garbage can full of empty wine bottles. Four of them on top had handmade labels which said: TO OUR ESTRANGED MASTER FROM MRS. CLOWN AND TRUCK. Dewey’s garage door was open. Gone was the gas hog tailfined monster with a file cabinet in the back seat.

I was putting the final touches on the cabinet when the woman with the shiny skin stepped into the garage. The boy was not with her.

"Will you feed the cat?" she said. She had a friendly smile.

"Nilsson?"

"He left it behind, didn't he?"

"He *left*?"

"Gone to sell paint in San Diego."

"Yes. He left the cat."

"It belongs to Truck. But it keeps coming back here." She noticed the wine bottles in the garbage can. Wincing, she ran her fingers over them, turned away, reconsidered, and gathered the four hand-labeled bottles into her arms. "He really means it," she said sadly. "Letting go."

I drummed my fingers on the top of the cabinet. "I was building this for Dewey."

"He couldn't have paid you, anyway."

"He *conned* me?"

"No. Please don't think like that. He was a hopeful person. Until ... very recently. He believed in Disneyland." She contemplated the empty bottles in her arms. "One's enough," she said, and carefully, gently, almost lovingly she placed the others back on top of the garbage can, labels down. "Bye bye," she whispered. "No grudges."

I felt like a cat staring into her window.

She turned to me. "Thank you for waving to Truck," she said.

"Oh," I said. "Cute kid."

"Not everybody thinks so."

"Dewey does."

She smiled. A sunbeam. "Bless you."

I never saw Dewey again. In fact, after that day I don't believe I ever saw Nilsson again. Or Mrs. Clown. I heard she moved back home to

Napa County.

Thirty-five years later I still have the cabinet - sturdy, crude - which is stuffed with my socks and sweatshirts and, in the bottom drawer, an errant blessing, one empty wine bottle with a handmade label.

## Em

Our mission: To taste wines and hang drywall. It started with a dozen of us in a room reaching over each other, tripping on stepladders, spilling wine, banging those thin black drywall nails, laughing and playing loud music on a stereo. One guy, Em, a young curmudgeon, started yelling at people as they goofed: "You broke the paper. Don't hammer so hard. You bent the nail. That won't hold. You missed the stud. Get out of here."

"It's just *sheetrock*," somebody said. "We're here for fun."

"There's no fun in bad work," Em said.

After about a half hour, only two people remained in the room: Em and myself.

"I can tell you've done drywall before," Em remarked.

"Uh huh," I said.

A sweet freckled woman brought us some Viennese sausage wrapped in dough. "Won't you join us?" she said.

"Naw," Em said.

"Later," I said. Neither of us had touched a drop of wine.

In the other room, the music got louder: Elton John, Crocodile Rock. I could hear people making jokes about Em the grouch, the control freak, the social misfit. Em was short and stocky with a broad nose and the deep dark facial hair that always looks unshaven.

We developed a rhythm. Em would cut and lift a sheet, holding it in place as I tapped the first nails. Then Em would measure and cut the next sheet while I finished nailing. We were working up a sweat even though there was no pressure other than the dynamic of teamwork, of sensing the other guy's hustle, of wanting to match the energy level, of not wanting to keep the other guy waiting. The job was an art form like a

pickup basketball game, one on one, where strangers size each other up, make adjustments, try to keep it a fair match and then raise it up a notch.

It was Goldie's house. Temporarily. That is, Goldie was caretaking for a wealthy couple who were on an extended trip. Goldie was a seminary student with a wife and a baby. Instead of rent, Goldie was supposed to drywall and paint this room. Not having a clue about construction, Goldie had the idea of a drywalling party where everybody could sample fine wines and maybe get some work done. The house had an extensive wine cellar. The owners had told Goldie that he and his wife could treat themselves to an occasional bottle.

Goldie was the first to be kicked out by Em.

"Are you a friend of Goldie's?" I asked.

"Naw," Em said. "Never met Goldie before. My girlfriend is in a macramé class with Lu." Lu was Goldie's wife. "You?"

"He's the son of a friend of my father's," I said. "I don't actually know him and," I glanced around to make sure we wouldn't be overheard, "I think I'd like to keep it that way."

"Amen," Em said.

We hung all the gypsum. Em had a knack for sizing. The cutouts for electric switches and outlets were snug. The sheets butted tight, no gaps. The nails were my pride: straight as a laser, each with a slight dimple of paper.

"Pretty," Em said.

Lu, the sweet freckled woman, returned. "Is it the music?"

"Partly," Em said.

"How about Roberta Flack?"

"Better," Em said.

"Got it. Now won't you please join us?"

"After we tape and mud," Em said. Then he looked at me. "You in?"

"Yep."

Lu pouted. "Won't you at least have some wine? We've got dozens of bottles open in here."

"Later," I said.

Em wasn't a talker, which was fine with me. Together we embedded the tape and smoothed the mud. Cool gray joint compound clung in globs to our hands and arms.

We stepped back and surveyed our work: Smooth and simple. We breathed the moist, slightly sweet smell of joint compound.

"You take it for granted," Em said. "You only notice drywall when it's bad."

"Yeah," I said. "Which means you notice it all the time."

"Exactly," Em said, and he grinned. "Think Goldie can take it from here?" The wall would need a second coat of compound, followed by sanding, priming, painting.

"Doubt it," I said.

"Yeah." Em grinned. "Good work. Been a pleasure."

We slipped out the side door without taking official leave of the party. "Glad to meet you," Em said, offering his hand.

"The honor is mine," I said, shaking his hand. "Nice party."

"Yeah. I had a good time."

We climbed into our separate junker cars and drove past ivied walls, out of the gated community to our separate scrappy neighborhoods, never to see each other again.

## Pat and Amy

"Do you hear the cats?" she asked.

I looked up from my woodwork in the garage.

"I'm Pat," she said. "I live next door."

I set down the chisel and brushed some chips from the hair on my arm. "Cats?"

"At night," she said. "They make a racket. We can't sleep."

"We" would be Pat and her housemate, Amy. They lived in a shabby bungalow. Ten feet away I lived above three garages. Inside one of those garages Pat and Amy kept a white 1963 Cadillac, Arizona plates, an artificial red rose in a vase attached to the dashboard.

"At night, yeah," I said. "I hear cats. Fighting."

"Could you do something?" Pat asked. She was pale white as if sun never touched her. Tall, thin, rigid, she had straight black hair that hung to her waist. Up close, I saw that she had a bit of a mustache, which I found instantly endearing.

"It's not my cat," I said.

"I know, but it happens late at night, and ... I wouldn't feel safe."

Pat and Amy lived within walls - the bungalow, the Caddy - two white girls going to Stanford. Graduate students. Other than walking to and from their car you never saw them except when they were visible in their kitchen window cooking together, always chatting, under a poster for the San Francisco Symphony that said *Ozawa!* They never had visitors. Self-contained in that little house, they were not a part of this very mixed neighborhood - and the neighborhood took note.

"I'll see what I can do about the cats," I said.

"Thank you." She glanced at my wood, my tools. "What are you

making?"

"A roll-top desk."

"Wow. You know how to do that?"

"No."

"Sounds like an adventure." She smiled. "May the journey be its own reward."

"Well, I hope to sell the desk. Speaking of reward."

"Good luck," she said. And she left.

It wasn't only cats that prowled. She had a right to fear the night in this town. On the street in front of her bungalow somebody had painted FUKN DYKZ.

That night, I heard no cats.

I'd finished a novel and mailed it to Atheneum, who seemed the most likely publisher, and while waiting for a reply I'd decided to make my living with wood, to build something people might want, to craft it well and sell it. For guidance I was reading a book written by some fussbudget Brit about how to build a roll-top desk.

I was unblended in my passions: an intellectual and a hippie, a writer in my head and a woodworker in my hands, a kid from the suburbs living with one foot in the ghetto.

I was naive. Or arrogant. I had never made a mortise-and-tenon joint in my life. The first two attempts were ugly. In the garage with the door wide open I set to work on a third mortise, third tenon with chisel and back saw, with brace and bit - for I was determined not only to build a roll-top desk, but to do so with hand tools. The priggish Brit would have approved.

The white Caddy, emitting a wisp of blue smoke, pulled into its garage, Amy steering. Amy was short and tanned, nicely rounded, with a

bowl of curly blond hair. She was alone. She stepped out with a heavy book - something like *Chaucer's Historical Canterbury: A Dichotomy* - and approached me saying, "Hi. I'm Amy? I live next door? Thank you for quieting the cats."

She offered her hand. I shook it, leaving some sawdust on the cuff of her pink sweater.

"I didn't quiet them," I said. "I didn't do anything."

There was a shyness about Amy. When I looked at her, she looked away. She pressed the book to her chest. "They must have known you were on the case," she said in an attempt at a joke. "The cats."

"Right," I said. "Word got out."

I had a sense she'd wanted to start a longer conversation but couldn't carry it off.

"That's a cool old car," I said, trying to help. "If you like 'em big."

"It's not mine." Abruptly she turned and walked to her bungalow.

An hour later a Ford Pinto pulled up in front of the garages. Scattered on windows were seven Stanford decals. On the bumper: IMPEACH NIXON. A bearded guy was driving with Pat riding shotgun, chatting as amiably as if it were Amy. Suddenly - it seemed like an impulse - the bearded guy stepped out, engine still idling. Laughing, he unbuckled his belt, pulled it through the loops of his jeans, handed it to Pat. Then he drove off.

Smiling, a spring to her step, Pat didn't even notice me as she walked to the house.

Again that night, I heard no cats. Before going to bed I stepped out on the balcony that ran along the front of the building just above the garages. At one end of the balcony was a landing with metal stairs from the ground to my front door. The rest of the balcony was ridiculous -

about 18 inches wide - useful only as a place to store my bicycle. This night, though, I squeezed to the far end of the balcony away from the porch lamp and waited, listening, searching for signs of the warring cats.

In the darkness a moist wind rustled the eucalyptus tree, scenting the air like medicine. Traffic growled on the freeway, just one block away. The sky was black but a warm glow shone upwards from a skylight in the bungalow next door. In the daytime I'd never even noticed that there was a skylight, but now on this night it was like seeing a well-lit stage from the dark balcony of a theater.

Pat stood not quite naked in front of a mirror. She wore white socks and was holding a black leather belt. She lifted the buckle to her nose and let the belt hang down in front of her like a sword. She had a bushy bush that fluffed out like a sponge, small pert breasts, tight ass, black hair flowing down her bony back. She tied the belt around her waist and studied her image in the mirror, pursing her lips, looking critical and almost bored as if choosing what to wear to school tomorrow - if she were to attend Stanford clothed only in a belt and socks.

Still facing the mirror, she began talking. I couldn't see the rest of the room but knew she must be speaking to Amy. Pat placed the thumb of each hand inside the belt like a western gunslinger. It was not a casual chat. Pat's face had that serious, painfully picky demeanor that I had only seen when a woman wanted to discuss a relationship.

Suddenly Amy appeared, throwing her arms around Pat from behind. Amy was still dressed in the pink sweater. Shoulders heaving, Amy was crying.

Pat stood rigid. Her thumbs remained hooked to the belt. On her face: surprise and self-doubt.

Enough theater. I turned away. Partly I was embarrassed to be watching; partly I was afraid somebody would catch me.

In the street I saw something creeping along the gutter. Not a cat. It was a small raccoon.

Then came a clatter: Another, larger raccoon had shoved aside the lid of a garbage can. The lid was held on top by a bungee cord, but Big Coon had displaced it far enough to enter.

Small coon stood on its hind legs and started rocking the can with Big Coon still inside. Big coon poked its head out the top and hissed. They howled and growled. Garbage war!

On the balcony beside the bicycle, a stack of several bricks were left over from a brick-and-board bookshelf I'd constructed - the kind of furniture I was capable of building. Grasping one of the bricks, I tossed it like a shot-put. The brick landed with a crash on the lid of the metal garbage can. Immediately a ringed body burst from the top of the can and hit the ground running. In seconds, both animals were gone.

The next morning, Amy and Pat departed together in the white Caddy, grim-faced and silent. I had begun sawing early that day, determined to create dovetails for the drawers, hoping I might gain confidence before I returned to the frustrating mortise-and-tenons.

The first dovetail sucked.

My second was okay. Almost okay. I had talked with the owner of a furniture store in North Beach, Columbus near Grant, an old Italian who showed me a desk he was selling, running his fingers over the side of a drawer, a look of distaste on his face, saying, "Feel it. Feel for yourself." Though the wood looked smooth, my fingers felt roughness that just a little sanding would have cured. "Nobody in America has taste," the man said. "Everything I sell is slightly shoddy."

I would rather *burn* this roll-top than have someone call it slightly shoddy.

I tried more dovetails.

By the time the white Caddy returned, I had built three drawers which, I had yet to admit, would go to the fire. Amy and Pat were speaking, if not chatting, as they rumbled into the garage.

"It was raccoons," I called to them as they closed the garage door. "Not cats."

"Can you do something?" Pat asked.

"I threw a brick."

Amy seemed stricken - as if I'd punched her stomach. "Please don't hurt them," she said.

"I just scared them," I said.

Pat and Amy exchanged a look.

Pat glared at me and said, "Don't you *dare* hurt them."

Together they walked to the bungalow whispering, shaking their heads.

For that one moment, at least, I had united them.

I tied a second bungee cord over the lid of the garbage can. Just before bed I went out on the balcony to, uh, check for raccoons. The skylight was dark. No coons, either.

Over the next few days I became almost good at dovetails. I resumed mortising - and chiseled the tip off my left ring finger. When I returned from Urgent Care, it looked as if somebody had spilled a can of tomato juice in the garage.

Amy and Pat became chatty again. For a couple more nights I checked the raccoon situation - just doing what the ladies had asked - but the skylight was dark or, if lit, nobody was visible. I wondered if they somehow knew. And the coons were gone, too.

Atheneum rejected my novel. The letter arrived seven days after I'd

mailed the manuscript. The swiftness was stunning - and felt like a door slamming in my face.

A job agency called. I accepted a temporary assignment operating a computer for a tax-preparation company.

All those romantic songs, all those commencement speakers who tell you to reach for the stars - it's idiotic. Here's my advice: Start small. Use veneered plywood, for Pete's sake, instead of solid clear fir. Use power tools and simple joinery until you get the hang of it. And write what you know.

In the garage I took a sledge hammer to the unassembled pieces of roll-top desk. Clear fir became splinters.

Without much hope I mailed the rejected manuscript to an agent in New Jersey. Up above the garages in my study, a door for a desk, wooden crates for shelves, I began notes on a new novel about a subject I might understand: a young man who with the best of intentions fails at everything.

For my remaining time on Cooley Avenue I never again saw the bearded guy, the Ford Pinto with seven Stanford stickers. I never heard another raccoon. I never again walked to the end of the balcony. Amy and Pat had a right to their privacy, their passions, their painful choices. They were picking their path among difficult desires. As was I.