

2023 Wind & Water Writing Contest
Honourable Mention
FICTION/NON-FICTION
Category: Fiction

Haggler

By Adam Cavanaugh

Simple and clean. Vintage. 1960s-70s. History, elegance, joie de vivre. For your delight. \$60 OBO.

A decanter can do more than hold wine, incidentally, could be a vase for flowers or receptacle for potpourri, and though one might not care about the versatility, an otherwise plain apartment such as mine could benefit greatly from a hint of refinement. Wine is the suggestion of pleasure. The decanter is the suggestion of wine. This one looked like a biased hour glass.

The advertisement included a single photo taken on a teak patio table. Greenery from the backyard bent and swirled in the convex of the glass. I counter-offered twenty dollars. We decided noon Sunday at her place near the foothills behind the strip malls where the city frayed into highways, suburbs and industry.

Gwendolyn met me at the door as if expecting someone else. Her age was a matter of speculation; there was a delicate beauty finessed by light cosmetic touches and bright red hair tightly wound into neat curls falling gently along either side of her head. Lush vegetation sagging with its own ripeness was at either side of us on the porch--fuchsias, bacopa--drooping over planters and overhanging the ledge from vines clinging to her house.

The decanter is inside, said Gwendolyn, opening the door wide enough for me to enter. As I did so, floorboards creaked overhead.

I want to get rid of everything, she continued with exasperation.

Moving? I queried.

Moving in, she corrected.

She led us to the kitchen where the decanter was sitting on the butcher-block countertop alone. The sink was steel, empty and the fridge was free of magnets. The smell of overripe bananas hung in the air.

Here it is, she said, leaning against the counter. Feel free to inspect or fill it with water. See how it pours. My dad, god bless him (father, son, holy spirit, traced, respectfully), brought it from France. The only thing it held was dust.

I lifted the object with pretence of inspection

Are you sure about twenty? I asked, half-apologetic.

It's what we agreed, she shrugged.

A crash in the alley between houses distracted me. Sharp, remonstrative whispers followed. Are you expecting other buyers? I asked.

No. But it could be movers to help with my dad's furniture. He's in longterm care.

We went to the front and I expected her to unlatch the door to conclude our transaction, but she passed it and placed a hand on the baluster, pausing momentarily to meet my eyes, then turned to lead us up the the wide stairs. I followed, compelled by politeness, or perhaps by the guilt of my lowball offer.

This is the guest bathroom, she said, waiting for me to step inside. We faced our reflections. It's the largest in the house, she said, her mouth cracking as if to elaborate but closed again for a punishing silence to be interrupted only by a sliding door downstairs.

Do you need to get that? I asked.

Next is the master bedroom. Seven rooms in this place and this was the master, she said, ignoring my question and moving to the next stop in my unsolicited tour. The window faces east, for God's sake. Good thing bad taste isn't genetic, she scoffed.

From downstairs I heard rummaging through cupboards. Sibilant whispers pushed my heart-rate to its threshold; criminal intent was beyond doubt but like politics or religion, I sensed it was impolite to take notice. She continued to talk about things, the relevance of which completely eluded me.

My father began making strange purchases later in life. He discovered unique opportunities on the internet. Boxes from all parts of world delivered by special couriers on a near daily basis. This is what his personal support worker told me. The shipping costs alone. He also became secretive. He wouldn't open anything in front of her. He asked that packages be brought to the top floor. Odd noises. Terrible smells, she said, leading me towards the closet of the master bedroom.

We walked inside a room bigger than my apartment, and through racks of clothing, shelves, shoes, patterned ties. At the back, another door. Gwendolyn opened it to an unfinished space. The windows had been installed but the framing was bare of drywall. Unfinished electrical hung between studs in the exposed partitions. Downstairs, the sound of windows smashing made me flinch.

Do you know how long this room has been unfinished?

Do you want me to guess, I asked, the adrenaline cementing my nervous system with dread. Ten years, she exhaled.

That is a staggering amount of time, I said, trying to remember my way out.

Of course it was in those ten years he slipped into dementia, she said. My father and I didn't speak much. He disapproved of my work with NGOs. In 2008 he offered to buy me a house to weather the storm, but it was just a way to invest money into a depreciated housing market -- his killer instinct. I refused and we didn't speak until his lawyer called, telling me of his decision to instate me power of attorney. The first thing he said to me at the care facility: enough is enough. I've rented until now but he was right. Enough is enough.

Gwendolyn tapped her foot. I looked outside into the backyard where dozens of men were entering and leaving the house with armfuls of belongings: plates, lampshades, speaker sets, rugs. One man held two spice shakers--anything they could manage to squeeze past others on their way inside to do the same.

Footsteps thundered up the first of two staircases. Soon enough they would surely turn attention to us. I gripped the decanter with sweaty palms, wondering if it could withstand defensive application.

She took us into a finished room, complete with fine trim, burgundy wallpaper, an oak desk faced west out another large window into their front yard. In the street, two people walking two greyhounds passed each other and waved. An neighbour struggled to parallel park between an Infinity and a Volkswagen in front of the tudor style houses. I admired the hedges at the gate to her yard.

This was my father's study. Where he spent most of his...anyway, what is it I was going to show you?

I wondered that myself, I said.

Bending floorboards moaned from the hallway and several voices approached, stopping short of the study.

Follow me, she said, opening the door.

Into the empty hallway we turned. Body odour, to which Gwendolyn seemed inured, lingered in the air as she weaved us through cardboard boxes of books and up the stairs to a converted attic where windows faced a cloudless sky. Beside a mahogany liquor cabinet on a Persian rug sat a telescope pointing into a corner. Gwendolyn kicked off her flats and walked slowly across the intricate patterns. The sunlight lacquered the room with unrequited splendour as dust collected in her father's life was lifted by the intrusion of hers. I sat on the leather couch, warm under the midday light while downstairs the sound of power tools began.

I know how it works, she said. Many of my friends' parents have died. They're saddled with stuff. Either I get rid of everything now or I'll inherit his attachments. This stuff is valuable, don't get me wrong, but it requires tending. It gets sentimental. For his industriousness and conservation, the man himself wanted to downsize. I think that's what his collection was all about. You can see for yourself, there, behind that door.

I rose from the couch and walked over, passing the stairwell, down which three men were

prying up treads. They froze while I passed, looking up with private indifference, then resumed loosening fasteners to remove the hardwood.

The cavity behind the door was soundproofed and vents descended from a bulkhead, below which was a six by three foot cage. A tropical musk flooded my nostrils. Inside, dozens of birds fluttered, evading one another, alighting onto sides of the cage and the seed trays below, like a painting come to life only to rearrange itself: blurs of turquoise, vibrant, glowing reds, orange, green spanning the spectrum in disjointed flightpaths wafting a warm, artificial breeze my way.

By nature they're not meant to occupy the same space, she said, reclining glamorously on a chaise lounge. My father sat for hours and watched them navigate one another, killing an offending inmate from time to time. Entertainment, I guess. When a bird died, he'd just order another. Months passed this way. He'd take meals up here. This is right before he moved, mind. I've thought about just opening the skylight then unlatching the cage but if I let them free, they'll die. I stay up here watching. Preventing accidents. All I have to do is keep them alive.

They're stunning, I acknowledged.

We stood entranced by the chaos of their movements. Screeches filled the attic. A macaw staring at me released a stream of excrement onto a limping parakeet below.

Well, she said, make an offer. On anything at all.