

MAUREEN AITKEN

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## SCAVENGERS

**P**AULA WAS SO INSANELY HOT she stuck to the vinyl seat. She smelled. The Dart smelled. Neal leaned over the engine and the way he slowly tipped, with dull misunderstanding, made Paula want to kill him.

It was August 1987 in Detroit, ten months after Black Monday. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard splayed out: a raw nerve of dry grass patches, a liquor store, and rows of one-story projects. In a cement court between the projects, a girl jumped on a metal sheet wedged between a pipe and a parking block. A woman with white hair, maybe the girl's grandmother, watched from a folding chair.

Neal let the hood drop and it slammed like a shot. He took off his wet T-shirt. He wiped his face with it and then threw the shirt onto the back seat.

"I'm calm," he said. "We are all calm in this car. Anyone who isn't calm is going to have to walk."

The temperature gauge on the dash crept from H to C. Neal slumped over the steering wheel and said, "Thank you, Gaw-hawd."

Neal threw the shift into drive and looked back quickly. An Olds 98 with a bad belt whined past.

"We're not going now, right?" Paula asked.

"Yes," he said. "We are going and we are *glad* we're going."

SHE PUT HER HAND OUT THE window, and even the breeze ate her up. This weather started things: riots, family fights, and mistakes. The weathermen fried eggs on cars, and Paula couldn't believe someone actually got paid for such work. The weathermen, weather *people* couldn't get a heat wave right.

"We shouldn't go," Paula said. She put her feet on the dashboard. "Let's just go get a drink."

"You're scared," Neal said.

"I'm not scared," Paula said.

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Of course not," she said.

"Do you think anyone will even be watching, that anyone even cares?"

"No, I don't think so."

"It's not stealing," he said. "You should know that."

It wasn't stealing, Neal reasoned, because the houses died anyway. People had been leaving the city for over two decades. Some just abandoned their houses, like old cars, or sweaters. No one saved them. Wasn't the worst sin letting them turn to dust unnoticed? Not seeing anything worthwhile? Salvage something. That's what Neal believed. Remember, through the wood and the furniture: there used to be a house. It used to be beautiful.

Paula and Neal had been late to college and late to leave. They had attended Wayne State a mile up the road. They met in a painting class. Both had registered on a whim. Paula couldn't paint so she ripped up some pictures she'd taken, and painted scenes around them. In one piece, Paula glued a picture ripped in two onto the canvas. The picture of two men carrying a tub from an abandoned house looked right; she painted doors and windows, and houses all around the men. "Lovely," the instructor said. "Really good."

Neal liked it too. He had already been reclaiming tiles and wood for years — entering into the belly of the beast. But she had taken the pictures from a safe distance. So they took more classes together at the

University priding itself on “nontraditional” students, which usually meant broke. Many students took their time, preferring the reading and intellectual arguments to the products a degree offered – 9-5 jobs, which were lies. Everyone in Detroit knew an uncle, a brother, laid off

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by car companies during record profits. In the 80s, the entire city sat at a kitchen table trying to figure out how to pay the bills. These layoffs taught the young lessons. Paula paid for college working two jobs. She spent \$78 dollars a month in rent and had three roommates. When someone robbed the apartment (with Paula asleep in her room) the police said, “You’re lucky to be alive.” It was that kind of place.

One of her favorite professors taught contemporary theory. He said *oppression* and *rebellion* a lot. One day the professor came in and said: “You’ve got to read this.” He passed out a chapter from a new book called *Chaos: Making a New Science* and read a section: “The first mes-

sage is that there is disorder. Physicists and mathematicians want to discover regularities. People say, what use is disorder. But people have to know about disorder if they are going to deal with it. The auto mechanic who doesn’t know about sludge in valves is not a good mechanic.”

A couple of anarchists in the class hooted and hollered, beat their desks with their fists and ranted, “Yeah, disorder!” A girl yelled, “Know the sludge? Hell, man, we *are* the sludge.”

Neal graduated from college two years ago. Paula had been out three months.

“When we get there, you’ll see,” Neal said. “It’s not scary at all.”

I should kiss him now, she thought. It was all Paula could do not to reach over and rip Neal’s face off. What did he know about it? Neal had never been grabbed on the street. No one ever came up to him and said, “Hey baby, want to suck my dick? You got a nice pussy there.” He never knew – couldn’t possibly know that some days you were meat. As sure as the flu, or the heat, the feeling sat in you and everyone saw and no one cared.

ON THOSE DAYS YOU STAYED INSIDE or the street mocked you: wrappers, Big Mac styrofoam lids, bottles. A man pulled the riot fencing closed on his shop, snapped the padlock, and jiggled it.

"I think you need this," Neal said.

"Need what?" She saw more to lose. A woman always had more to lose. A guy could get shot. A woman, well, she'd known friends who'd lived through worse.

"Uh-oh," he said.

"What?"

"I forgot my extra bag."

Neal used the extra bag for delicate items. His apartment was across town, but they found a parking space right in front. The old man who owned the building always sat in the window and stared. Paula said, "Give me a kiss," and Neal did. She didn't want to be kissed. She wanted to annoy the man, who thought Paula was loose and wore too much makeup.

"I love you Neal," she said. "I really love you."

Neal took her hand.

"Then why do you sound like you're trying to convince yourself?"

They walked up the stairs, past the petunias and the crisp lawn. She loved walking through the tall wood doors. Paula imagined that once many elegant people lived here. Maybe they wore tuxedos and ball gowns. Her legs hurt from the vinyl seats. She didn't want a ball gown but she wanted something.

Inside she sat on the old rocking chair. The room felt cool. He gave her a beer.

"Let's not leave."

"I'll just be a sec," he said.

Paula dubbed Neal's apartment "The Land of Misfit Toys." A Tiffany lamp and a Buddha with a clock in the belly, a mannequin, and a re-

upholstered chaise longue. A row of velvet red seats from the closed Palms Theatre. A Miles Davis picture next to a poster of Archie Bunker with "I like Nixon" printed on the bottom. Saved, every one of them, from dumps and bulldozers.

They had talked of leaving—moving out of the city or to another state. But it all seemed so plastic, and the people so boring. Face lifts and big cars, and entire neighborhoods without sidewalks. Paula applied for a grant-writing job in the suburb of Birmingham.

"You might as well apply someplace in North Carolina," Neal said. "People are that different, with the same rod up their ass."

Seeing Neal's fervor today made Paula understand. Neal would never leave. He saw himself as an amateur archaeologist. Plus, he liked living this way.

The list-makers, as he called them, the capitalists, frightened Neal at first, and then only reminded him of a life not worth living. She knew, too, such a world collected piece by piece—the new car, and a house, and even mowing the lawn—would kill him, kill the best part of him. Often, living here meant humor and oddity, a real experience. But how to get through the bad days—the heat and the dirt—how to get through those times that threatened to swallow you proved impossible. On those days (days like this one) a broken-down car or one wrong move could lead to an avalanche of consequences. They were there, everywhere. Examples. Hookers wandered. The drugs—Jesus the vials and the bullet casings and the shots in the night. Anyone could slide. Anyone.

But opportunities could arise. Paula's boss talked recently about full-time opportunities. She wanted the work and didn't want it: not monotony, not the 9 A.M. every day forever, not that life. But she also didn't want to choose anymore between gasoline and groceries, between money for rent and money for clothes.

"Margaret Thatcher is too much," Paula said. "Take her down."

"Really? I thought she added a little femininity."

"Jesus," Paula said, studying Thatcher's face. "Nixon is more feminine."

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"Huh."

"It's too late now, you know," she said. "Let's go tomorrow."

"We can make it," Neal said, and he grabbed the extra bag and the keys.

He kissed her neck and said, "Well, *I* love you."

He locked the door and they walked downstairs and out onto the street: West Grand Boulevard. The church bells rang nine times, and the air hadn't given an inch all day. The breeze smelled of gasoline and sweat. They got in the car and she put her feet on the dash so her legs wouldn't stick. Paula hadn't brought Mace, but she had keys and they could gouge an eye out. Making a fist, with the keys popping out between the fingers—the firm grip kept the keys from slipping. Mace offered more protection. But keys worked as a last resort.

**T**HEY TURNED LEFT ON THE STREET just before the Ambassador Bridge to Canada. The cars and trucks idled in lines at U.S. Customs. Gasoline exhaust hazed the bridge. They drove two blocks farther, into a neighborhood. Grass and weeds grew on empty lots there, and between those lots were two-story brick houses. People who lived in some of the houses maintained them religiously with fresh paint and flowers and the rest looked abandoned. Rooms stayed dark. No porch lights blinked on. Neal turned right and Paula thought she marked the house. Kids played in the yard of the first house, the one on the corner. Then an empty lot. Plywood covered the windows and door on the second house.

"We'll never get in," Paula said.

"That's not it." Neal passed the third house, then the fourth, and parked at the fifth. Neal parked one house ahead so curious people wouldn't know where they'd gone. Sometimes neighbors called the police. Police investigated murders, car thefts, domestic violence. Police didn't have time to go to abandoned houses where some drunk probably just needed a place to flop. The problem frustrated people. Paula heard of one angry neighbor who walked over to an empty house, lit a match and tossed it inside. The fire department and police arrived in ten minutes.

"Sure, now you come," the neighbor said with a shrug of his shoulders.

Paula looked back, but thought this couldn't be right, since someone had cut that lawn, maybe even today. Someone had washed those windows. Flowers grew in the yard.

"Someone lives there," Paula said.

"I checked it out already," he said. "We've got to hurry."

They put on black baseball caps and jackets with hoods, but she forgot the big black pants at home and had to make do with her shorts. They walked to the corner, then around and through the alley. "Hurry," Paula said. She felt thirsty. No one stood in the alley and no one jumped out unexpectedly. They walked by the garage and through the yard. The backyard weeds grew high and drowned the basement windows. Paula knew from walking by other overrun houses to clap her hands so any rats would run. Neal walked up to the side of the house, and pushed a window open as far as he could. The window was five feet above ground. Neal threaded his fingers together and motioned Paula to put her foot there.

"You first," he said. She thought once more of calling it off, but they had come this far. She put her foot in first, wavered, and fell down on her other foot. The second time she grabbed hold of the sill right away and up she went, hip on the sill, and turning carefully to avoid the nails. She jumped in and took Neal's bag. He braced his arms on the sides of the windows and climbed up and in. She smelled fall in the leaves. The color of the leaves had already dulled. It wouldn't be long.

They turned around and surveyed the dining room, with wood floors and pink walls. White curtains hung in the windows. Neal hit the light switch.

"See," Neal said. "Power's gone."

**W**OOD COVERED THE DOORS, the arches, and the floor. A dewdrop glass fixture hung from the wall. Stairs leading to the second floor were detailed with honey-colored wood banisters with engraved flowers. This place was a home, Paula thought. Someone should save this, not the parts, but the entirety.

"Somebody's already started," Neal said. "They already took the lead glass."

He stared at the door in disappointment. They looked around. The sink in the bathroom had been ripped out.

“Let’s hurry,” Neal said. There was so much more to take, so many reasons for people to come back.

Neal wanted the tiles above the fireplace, and he told Paula to get the fixtures — the small antique ones brought in the real money. He showed her how to take the one in the hall first: he pressed a screwdriver into the wall, and twisted just deep enough not to nick the brass. He pulled out the fixture and cut the thick wires.

Neal took the bubble wrap from the extra bag and covered the fixture. He put it in the bag. Paula grabbed the screwdriver, and the shears and walked upstairs. From the hall she saw three bedrooms and a bathroom. A beautiful fixture with leaves on the metal and a frosted glass shell hung in the bathroom. The frosty glass rose to a point. The wall gave easily to the screwdriver and she pulled the fixture out. The wires hung on and she cut them. She forgot the bag downstairs so she carried the fixture into the nearby bedroom. The morning-yellow wallpaper with little purple violets looked new. A stuffed dolphin sat abandoned in the corner. Paula wondered if she would ever own a home herself, if she would ever be like the family who once lived here, and surely they had been a family. This place resonated with hopes and childhood. Something. Since she didn’t see any light fixtures in the rooms, she walked to the largest bedroom and looked up. She saw an oval gold piece, as big as a platter, with lines and small droplets of crystal around the bulbs. The sun set on the tops of the houses; she saw the Ambassador Bridge, and the moon. She smelled liquor.

Maybe she could afford a house in Neal’s neighborhood, and maybe she could fix it up. Maybe this fixture could go in her new house and suddenly Paula wanted it — the fixture and that life. She wanted it badly. Paula turned around to get Neal so they could prop up something, find a way to get the fixture down.

Then Paula saw him. He had been crouched in the corner, looking at her. He had a beard and his eyes were wild. Starving. A few plastic grocery bags scattered around him — a blanket spread out. He held a Wild Irish Rose bottle. He had been, she knew then, keeping quiet, deciding what to do. She put her hands in her pocket, and grabbed the keys, and clenched them in her fist. She felt life rushing through her. She sussed him out — could she take him? He looked hungry, which could mean weakness or psychosis. Paula knew enough about attacks. Friends and roommates offered real experiences laced with advice. One roommate told Paula that people in psychotic episodes have three times the power and you might as well give up, unless you have serious training or an episode of your own. As Paula thought this, it was al-



ready too late. He got up and said, "I was just sleeping here," plaintively, like a parent comforting a troubled child. He was coming at her, saying, "I was just sleeping." Paula did not step back.

You never know what you'll do until you're there, you reach for what you need, and she needed to yell. She yelled down the code Neal and Paula had decided earlier that day: "Neal, get the gun" she yelled, "Neal, get the gun!" and she heard a loud kaboom, which was also part of the plan. It jarred the man. He was still trying to decide: could he get away with this, was she faking?

"I've got the gun," Neal screamed and he kept on screaming, not like a person, loud and deep and seizing, like a bear coming closer, up the stairs, and the man pushed himself deep into the corner.

The man yelled, "I'm just sleeping I'm just sleeping!" but Neal charged further up the stairs holding a wrench in one hand and a hammer in the other. He flailed them around and howled. The man slithered across the floor and out the door—ran down the stairs and then they didn't know where. Neal and Paula went to the window but they couldn't see him running. They went to the window in the main bedroom. The man walked quickly now, trying not to attract attention.

"Let's go let's go," Paula said, and she held the bathroom fixture—how could she have held the glass piece the entire time?—but she did, and now she held the piece to her chest as though the fixture was her life, and she ran down the stairs and Neal followed. She heard Neal in the yard saying, "He's gone. Come on he's gone."

**B**UT SHE KEPT RUNNING. She would run all the way home. The man could be gone or he could be getting his friends. Neal grabbed his bags and the tools and they jumped out the window—how easily she jumped down, without thought—she ran through the front yard and to the car and she ran so fast she had to wait by the car for Neal to catch up. Down the street she saw cars parked and cars abandoned, and a factory stack past some trees. A man on the stoop with a child watched them. She thought this was wrong, living like this and being like this.

They got in the car and Paula set the fixture down on the floor. Neal drove two blocks and pulled over on a dead corner.

"Are you okay?" Neal asked and she said yes. But she couldn't feel anything outside her body. She felt her heart race. Her legs tingled. She was alive. But she couldn't feel anything past that—not the heat and

not the day. She put her legs up to her chest and held them there. She bit her knee. Neal drove down one block. It was abandoned except for one house. On the next block, house lights beamed. They passed the bridge with the long lines of trucks and cars trying to get into Canada. Then they drove through the blocks, towards Neal's apartment.

Past Bagley, someone ran in front of the car and Neal screeched on the brakes. Paula thought, *he's the man from the house*, but she was wrong. Paula wondered who might be in the houses and apartments. What might be happening? Was it true that a split second changed everything? Was this chaos theory happening now? A butterfly fluttering in South America changed climates. What about a woman who wanted to live? What did the yearning change? How would such desire save her, save anyone? She couldn't look anymore. The lights, the life of them, came and went in flashes but she couldn't look so she turned to Neal and saw the streetlights reflect off his chest, how golden he looked, how the breeze hit his hair. She put her palm on his arm.

"I love you," she said, and a dark patch came and then lights and she felt a sharp pain, like something plucked. Paula placed her palm to her stomach, but when she pressed her fingers there, she couldn't name the feeling taken, like a dream or a wish; something that, once you named it, was already gone.