

5780 words

My Earnest Plea

“We’re killing Muslims,” he said with conviction.

I leaned in, both elbows on the table. “So you’re saying this is a holy war?”

“It’s Muslims that attacked us.”

“But is killing all the Muslims the Christian thing to do?” Bill was big on church; he wore his Christianity on his sleeve.

“It’s us against them,” Bill said with a cool certainty.

I didn’t even flinch when Susan kicked me under the table. I was wandering into dangerous territory and I knew it was coming, the hardness of her shoe on my shin. Bill and Loretta were nice enough people, and we were just out for some drinks and dinner at the company Christmas party; no point in getting into it. Susan was right: it’s better just to get along.

“You selling any houses?” I was doing what she wanted, getting back to safe ground.

“It’s been a little slow, but it’s going to pick back up.” Bill had given up his electrical contracting business a couple of years ago and now he and Loretta were both selling real estate. Bill had an assured confident manner and his career had taken off. After about a year he and Loretta had built a four thousand square foot home in the Boise foothills in which, Susan had told me earlier, they were no longer living.

“How’s that?” I asked, curious about his take on the market.

“Have you heard of negative amortization loans?” Bill asked. I shook my head. I was still trying to comprehend the allure of adjustable rate mortgages.

“Well, we know about zero interest loans. We’ve all been doing those for years, but now they’re offering negative amortization loans. It really drives your payments down. It’s so revolutionary that it’s going to turn this market around. Everyone can afford the house they want now. You just watch, by spring this valley will be humming again.” I had to admire the clarity and authority Bill projected when he was talking about real estate. There wasn’t a hint of doubt in his voice; I felt better just listening to him. It didn’t even matter that the house in the foothills sat vacant; that Bill and Loretta and their four kids had abandoned it and purchased a tract home in the outer suburbs on which they were now three months delinquent.

We made it through our prime rib and cocktails, Susan talking to Loretta about her kids and the details of Bill and Loretta’s move. Loretta said she liked living in the smaller house; it forced them to interact with each other, she said. In the big house she hardly talked to her kids. And they were doing better in school, she said, getting straight A’s. Still, there seemed to be something strained about her, like she was holding on as hard as she could. It was as if all the doubt and fear that Bill didn’t allow himself to feel had settled inside her. Looking at her I got the idea the palms of her hands and her armpits must be really sweaty.

After dinner the realtors began milling about the room, visiting with each other. Susan didn’t know anyone beside Loretta, so we just sat in the corner watching until we had spent enough time so that we could leave. Bill circulated about the room, but Loretta sat with us. I noticed him moving

from group to group, his shoulders back and head erect as he spoke with authority to his admiring listeners.

On the drive home Susan commented on Loretta's appearance. "She doesn't look healthy," she said. "She's lost a lot of weight."

"It must be a strain losing their home," I said.

"Let's drive by the houses," Susan said.

"You sure?"

"It wouldn't be far out of the way. Loretta told me something and I want to try it."

We pulled up to the houses: one a four bedroom three bathroom two story and the other a three bedroom two and a half bathroom stucco job with a full hip roof, Offered by George Dent Custom Homes, contact Susan Dent at Prestige Real Estate, the signs said.

"Have you got a shovel?" Susan asked.

"What for?"

"Just for something I want to try. What difference does it make? Have you got one?"

I opened the garage door on the four bedroom and got the shovel. I'd left a few yard tools there so I could keep the place clean, keep it looking good for potential buyers.

"Dig a hole here," she said, pointing to a spot just inside the sidewalk.

"You gonna tell me what this is all about? Am I digging my own grave?" I asked.

"Just dig it, George. It doesn't have to be big. Just dig a small hole."

I stuck the shovel in the sod and put my foot to it. The ground yielded and I turned the dark rich earth in a pile next to the hole.

“That’s good, George. Just like that,” Susan said as she got on her knees in front of the hole. She took a small plastic statue from her pocket and placed it upside down in the hole, facing the house. Then she unfolded a piece of paper and began to read.

*O, Saint Joseph,
you who taught our Lord
the carpenter's trade,
and saw to it
that he was always properly housed,
hear my earnest plea.*

*I want you to help me now
as you helped your foster-child Jesus,
and as you have helped many others
in the matter of housing.*

*I wish to sell this house
quickly, easily, and profitably
and I implore you ...*

“Jeesus, Susan! What are you doing?”

“Never you mind, George. You can wait in the car if you want.”

“You don’t believe in that mumbo jumbo, do you?”

“What harm can it do? Just go wait in the car, would you?”

I watched her from the car as she finished the prayer and covered up the statue. She repeated the ceremony in front of the other house, putting the shovel back in the garage when she was done.

We didn’t talk much on the way home. I was going through my routine, adding up the interest we owed on the two spec houses and the four lots I’d bought. I ran the numbers in my head over and over, like my mind was stuck in a rut and couldn’t get out. For a couple of years I’d rolled nothing but

strikes, but suddenly I was watching the ball turn in slow motion, moving closer and closer to the edge of the lane, and I was trying to will that ball to keep from falling over the edge into the gutter. I guess that's what Susan was doing, too, trying to invoke some magic to keep us out of the gutter.

I'd struck gold, I'd thought, being qualified as a builder in the Elk Ridge Golf Course Community, and I'd been eager to build as many houses as the bank would let me. But the market turned and I'd been sitting on the houses for months. The interest alone came to six thousand a month. Add in taxes, insurance and utilities and it was enough to keep a guy awake at night.

Susan and I had done all right for a couple of years. I built the houses and she sold them. The money was rolling in and we honeymooned in Tuscany and flew to Cancun for a couple of weeks in the winter. For her fiftieth birthday I bought her a Lexus. She said a realtor couldn't drive just any old car; it had to be special, something with class to show how successful she was so people would want to list with her. It was all about the listing, she said. Just get the listing and the buyers would come to you. You didn't have to do anything, just rake in the dough at closing, she said.

When she first got her license we started going out more. Invitations would come in the mail: a benefit for the local museum; a fund raiser for homeless mothers. We even started going to church.

"It's all about networking," she said. "It's all about the numbers. If you hand out one hundred business cards a week and get just one listing out of it, that adds up to one hundred thousand dollars a year. And they all have friends. It's word of mouth, George. "

She ordered five thousand business cards with her picture on them. "An Experienced Professional," they said. The cards looked good. She looked good.

“You know what this is?” she asked me when they came.

“Your new business cards?” I guessed.

“This is one hundred thousand dollars, George,” she said, as she placed the four small boxes carefully in her desk drawer.

They are still there. I saw them the other day while I was poking through her desk looking for some white out I needed because I had screwed up the daily crossword. One of the boxes had been opened and a hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty, cards were gone. It turned out that handing out business cards to people you’ve never met at a charity for Somali orphans where the room is filled with pictures of starving children whose mothers have been raped and killed is harder than you’d think.

They came to get the Lexus not long after we buried St. Joseph. Susan was in the tub, soaking in bubble bath.

“It may not be Grotta Giusti, but it’s as close as I’m going to get,” she’d say, lying back in the tile rimmed soaker tub, her bright red toe nails seductively resting on the rim, a glass of Chianti by her side.

I was in my office when I heard the truck pull up and then the clanging of metal and equipment, the hurried steps on the walk. By the time I got outside they already had the chains hooked to it and the winch was pulling the rear wheels onto the flatbed. The plum colored Lexus that Susan had cleaned and left outside to dry in the sun bobbed helplessly on the end of the chain. The two men were experienced in their routine, never even glancing at me. Within seconds they were disappearing down the street, the gleaming grill of the Lexus smiling goodbye. I turned toward the door and there was Susan, wrapped in her towel, soap clinging to her shoulders with the glass of Chianti hanging from her limp hand.

She spent the rest of the evening in the bathroom with the door locked. I knocked on the door a couple of times and asked if there was anything I could do, but she never answered. The house was silent. There was not even the rustle of an arm or leg in the suds or the sound of running water warming the tub.

In the morning the bathroom was immaculate, everything in its place, no sign of soaking or sorrow save the lip stick stained wine glass sitting on the travertine tile in the corner of the tub deck. The kitchen was cleaned, too. All of the newspapers and fliers that accumulated on the granite countertop were gone. Everything was scrubbed and polished. The only thing out of order was Susan's cereal bowl in the sink. And the garage was empty; Susan had taken my F-250 King Ranch Edition. That's the way she is. She doesn't say much, but when she makes up her mind about something there isn't any drama, no contorted discussions; she just does it.

I fixed dinner that night, nothing elaborate but it was pretty good, really, and simple to make. I baked some tilapia with the Cajun sauce the way she likes it, and made a spinach salad with onions and tomatoes from the garden and roasted red potatoes with rosemary. By the time she drove in, her arms full of packages, the Brunello had been breathing for a good hour.

We didn't talk much. I didn't ask about the packages and she didn't tell me. What she'd done all day was a mystery to me. The next morning it was the same thing: cereal bowl in the sink and an empty garage. I skipped the shower and shave and turned on the TV. Where was I going to go? She had the truck and I was stuck. I read the paper and did the crossword puzzle and Sudoku.

After a week or so I learned that she had taken a job at Direct TV in customer service. It wasn't long before she made manager which bumped

her pay to eleven fifty an hour. It wasn't glamorous, but it was a job. She was in charge of fifteen people, most of them twenty or thirty years younger than her. She said it was nothing but drama all the time. The girls especially. They'd get worked up over nothing and made sure everyone knew how miserable they were and how unfair life was. They were just kids, Susan said. What did they know about life, about suffering. Wait until they're my age, she'd say. Then they'll know what suffering is. They're young. They're just playing at it, she'd say.

One night we were sitting around after dinner and things were going O.K. I'd opened a second bottle of wine, it being Friday night and the start of the weekend, when the phone rang.

"Hi, George. This is Bill Strong. I just wanted to call to confirm our meeting at your house tomorrow evening."

"What meeting is that, Bill?" I hadn't seen Bill since the Christmas party months earlier.

"Didn't Susan tell you about it? Loretta and I ran into her a few days ago."

"Not a word, Bill. What is this meeting about?"

"George, Loretta and I were sharing a remarkable story with your wife. We have discovered a revolutionary new product that practically sells itself and we would like to share this once in a lifetime opportunity with you and Susan. Now, we're only asking for an hour of your time, George, and..."

"What kind of product, Bill?"

"It's too complicated to explain over the phone, George, but we'd be more than happy to..."

"Gee, Bill, it doesn't sound like anything I'd be interested in, whatever it is."

“Quite frankly, George, Susan seemed very interested when we talked to her and we thought you, too, would be interested in pursuing an opportunity to not just make a living, but to build real wealth. Look, check with Susan and then get back to me. Is six o’clock still a good time for you?”

“O.K., Bill, I’ll check with Susan.”

They drove up in a large Mercedes sedan, the distinguished hood ornament poised on the gleaming deep gold finish, the darkly tinted windows conveying the importance of the occupants as being beyond the reach of the common man. Bill stepped out in freshly pressed linen slacks and a slightly starched blue dress shirt; his tall lean figure was sartorially immaculate and commanding. In the months since we had seen Loretta she had further diminished. Her long brown skirt and ruffled church-wife blouse draped loosely on her once voluptuous figure. Her unpolished nails had been chewed to the quick and her scalp was visible through drab graying hair.

Susan had some hors d’oeuvres and wine ready and she had purchased a bottle of single malt Scotch especially for Bill. After some pleasantries Bill started in on his sales pitch. He sat slightly forward in his chair, engaging us all with an easy, sympathetic manner more reminiscent of a group therapy leader than a salesman. This wasn’t just a product, it was the beginning of a whole new way of life, he told us, and by being privileged to be able to get in on the ground floor we were blessed with an opportunity that comes only once in a lifetime, if at all.

“George, how would you like to find not just a way out of your financial difficulties, but a path to guaranteed wealth, wealth beyond your wildest dreams?” he asked, turning his crinkled steel-blue eyes toward me.

I'd never mentioned my financial difficulties to Bill. I glanced at Susan, looking for some hint of remorse for the conversations she'd apparently had with Loretta about my private business. Wasn't anything sacred? Wasn't I entitled to even a tiny shred of dignity? Then it occurred to me that she was guilty of more than just girl talk, two women commiserating over the circumstances of their lives, which was an act I was willing to forgive, but that she had apparently told Bill himself about the phone calls from the bank, the letters advising me of foreclosure procedures and the bank's right to pursue deficiencies. There wasn't a hint of contrition on Susan's face; just the loving glow of a savior. I looked at Loretta whose brief empathetic smile followed by a downward glance to her tightly clenched hands spoke of a shared sense of shame and sorrow. This wasn't a group session; it was an intervention and they were all in this together. They were here to save me and Bill had the ticket. I had to admire his style.

"George, I'm offering you a chance to save yourself. What do you say?" He leaned in, closing the sale before I even knew what I was buying.

"Sure, Bill. Anyone would want to be wealthy."

"Good, George, congratulations. You've just taken your first step to a new life." I could see the relief settle over Susan, thinking at that moment that our problems were almost over.

"Could I ask, Bill, just what this miracle product is?"

"George, we've gone from the industrial age to the information age and now we're on the cusp of a whole new age: the communication age. People are experiencing a level of connectivity never before known to man. The company you are about to become a partner in is taking it to a whole new level. George, how would you like to be able to communicate with your loved ones face to face, no matter how far away they might be? How would

you like to conduct business meetings with colleagues from around the globe just as if they were here in your own living room? What would you say, George, if I told you that you could do that for the simple price of thirty-nine ninety-nine a month?” Bill handed me the brochure. “And that includes your high speed internet, George.”

“That’s it? A phone Network?”

“It’s far more than a phone Network, George. The Patriots’ Communication Network is an instant audio-visual connection to anyone else on the globe.”

“But wouldn’t they need to have one of these?”

“That’s the beauty of this product, George. You have a built-in customer base. Your market is the entire universe of your friends and colleagues and all of their friends and colleagues and so on, ad infinitum. It’s an easy sell, George, and by getting in on the ground floor you’ll have a wide open field. When you sell a unit to your cousin, for example, all of your cousin’s acquaintances become potential customers. You get a cut of every unit your cousin sells. The potential is almost infinite, George.”

“So what you’re saying is that it’s like a chain letter?”

“What I’m saying, George, is that by putting in just a few hours a week visiting with friends you can become incredibly wealthy.”

“You’ve got to reach out to life, George. You can’t just sit around in your pajamas all day doing Sudoku. Bill’s offering us a chance to turn things around. ”

Susan spoke lovingly, but it was clearly an ultimatum. And she had a point. I hadn’t left the house for months except to get groceries, mostly wine which we were now drinking out of the box. Most days I didn’t shower or shave until just before Susan got home. I’d scurry around the house tidying

up, making the bed and doing the dishes, picking up the empty bags of chips and cookies. At dinner I'd invent stories about my day, painting a portrait of an industrious fellow who was temporarily down on his luck but fighting back, putting on my game face. But after a while I'd only shave every other day, and sometimes I'd still be in my pajamas when she got home, the bed unmade, dirty dishes everywhere. She'd find me in my office, the curtains drawn, a spilled bag of potato chips on my desk next to an empty wine glass, playing Sudoku on the computer.

"We need to talk," she'd say, picking up the bag of chips.

She seemed so efficient, standing there in her business suit, with a full day at the office behind her and still with the energy to whip up dinner and tidy the house. She brought stories home about people, real people who she worked with every day and who called into the customer service center. She was a part of the world, connected to the dynamic machinations of the great economic engine out there, somewhere, far beyond the darkened confines of my office. I was over matched.

"I just need a little time," I'd say. "As soon as this market turns around I'll be back on my feet," I'd say.

"You can't go on like this, George," she'd say, opening the curtains. "There has to be something you could do. It doesn't have to be anything special. Just a job, a place to go every day."

Bill's cold blue eyes looked out from his practiced friendly brow, confidently waiting for my reply. Loretta's slumped shoulders gave way to pale arms hidden in the purple ruffled blouse and hands now resting in the lap braced by tightly pressed knees and feet. Her continued downward glance projected a state of shame that suddenly flowed over me, enveloped

my very being. I felt so totally diminished that I did not have the courage, at that moment, to look into Susan's eyes.

"I guess for thirty-nine ninety-nine I could give it a try," I mumbled, gazing at the floor.

"Good, George. We're making progress." Bill spoke as softly and compassionately as a preacher would to a remorseful sinner. "The thirty-nine ninety-nine is the monthly charge once you get set up. There are some modest one time fees to get you started in your own business."

With the licensing fee, starter sales kit and personal video phone the bill came to eight hundred and forty-nine dollars and ninety-seven cents, plus tax. It didn't matter: I was backed in a corner and the only way out was to pay up. I made the check out to Bill. He said it made his bookkeeping easier that way.

Susan said she felt like celebrating. She poured Bill a Scotch on the rocks and pulled a couple of steaks out of the fridge. We moved out to the patio where the three of them visited while I barbequed the steaks, Loretta even smiling occasionally, apparently lifted by the one glass of wine she allowed herself.

By the time the steaks were ready Bill was on his third Scotch. With the effort of the sales presentation successfully behind him his bearing became more relaxed. His fair complexion became flushed with the alcohol and his speech was less controlled, more spontaneous. When he spilled some barbeque sauce on his carefully pressed shirt Loretta jumped up, dipping a napkin in her water glass and smudged at the stain while he continued rambling on. The entire evening became a diatribe of Bill's view of the world.

“It’s the Mexicans who are ruining this nation, taking our jobs, clogging our schools and hospitals without paying a cent into the system. We need to fence the border. Shoot any intruders and deport all the illegals. We do that and just watch this economy take off,” he said. I turned the steaks, feeling Susan’s hot gaze on my shoulders, kicking me from ten feet away. But he wasn’t getting to me. “Let him rant,” I said to myself. “I’d be angry, too.”

By the time he had finished his fourth Scotch we had learned that they moved back into the big house in the foothills because they had been evicted from their tract home, which they had purchased because the mortgage company had foreclosed on their big house. But when the government shut the bank down and sold its assets, somehow their mortgage must have been lost in the shuffle. They’d been squatting in the big house on the hill for almost a year.

“Imagine that,” he said, “living in a four thousand square foot home rent free. America really is a great nation!”

As for the Mercedes, it had a rebuilt title and only cost him twelve thousand dollars, he said, and he was doing some electrical work in trade for it.

“Even in bad times there is opportunity,” he said, “if you just know how to find it.”

“So how’s the phone thing going for you?” I asked, thinking that the four glasses of Scotch might produce an unguarded response. Instantly he straightened back into the commanding figure (as Loretta’s hands returned to their clinched position) and he expounded on the wonders of the Patriots’ Communication Network and the fortunes we were all soon to make.

Each evening Susan would ask how the phone business was going. It did give me something to do and I found myself showering and shaving before Susan each morning and fixing coffee and eggs. After she'd kiss me goodbye and head to the call center I'd go into my office and fiddle with the video phone. I got it set up following all the instructions Bill had left with me but after several days of trying I still couldn't get it to work. I called the Patriots' Network licensee assistance line for instruction and after forty-five minutes a man with a thick East Indian accent came on the line. "This is Bob," he said, "How may I help you?" Bob informed me that PCN had no record of my license agreement and in order to connect to their Network I would have to contact my local PCN representative. He directed me to the PCN website where I found that my local representative was none other than Bill Strong. Bill wasn't returning my calls.

"You've got to put more effort into it, George," Susan would say. "Bill's making piles of money selling PCN. You just have to apply yourself, get out of your comfort zone."

"Piles of money, huh? I think he kept my check. I think maybe I made his car payment last month."

"Bill wouldn't do that! Give him a call. I'm sure he can straighten everything out."

There was no persuading her. It seemed that Bill had come to represent everything I was not. Where I pretended to try to fight my way out of difficulty, in her eyes he was actually doing it. I decided to avoid all mention of the Patriots' Communication Network. The video phone remained on my desk, a reminder of my growing futility.

Occasionally Susan would stand at my door, silently surveying the increasing disorder in my room: the video phone caked in dust, half read

newspapers spread about the floor, dirty plates perched on top of piles of unopened mail. She'd just stand there, sometimes for minutes, without comment, taking it all in. I got so that I didn't even turn to acknowledge her; I kept my focus on the computer screen, playing Sudoku. There were days when that's all I did, only breaking the trance for quick trips to the toilet or the fridge.

I began to sleep in, crawling grudgingly out of bed hours after Susan had left for work, too tired to shower or shave after sleepless nights lying in the dark next to Susan's contented purring, my mind caught in repeating cycles of squares and numbers patterned in unsolvable puzzles; George Dent Custom Home signs with slashes through them and the threatening red letters **F-O-R-E-C-L-O-S-E-D** ominously displayed in front of gathering crowds of reproachful neighbors; the obsessive review of numbers: estimated deficiencies plus interest and fees, inevitably calculated in excess of my suddenly puny net worth, no matter how many times I ran the figures silently in the dark, the bed sheets damp and twisted with my restless thrashing and turning, futilely attempting to find that sweet spot of refuge where my mind might find comfort, if just for a moment, dear God please, just one moment.

I'd wander into the kitchen and pour a cup of coffee, left in the pot by Susan, and add a shot of the single malt she had saved in the cupboard to help smooth over the jittery remnants of my night. My mind, locked into the pathological churning of deficiencies and net worth, was unable to focus on the morning paper, so I'd wander in to my office and soon the squares and numbers and patterns involuntarily imagined in the night were on my screen as I compulsively solved one puzzle after another, always, but never, the last

one of the day, a ceaseless race to best my previous times. I was breaking records.

The days and nights blended into a monolithic monotony of unwanted thoughts, impulses and perceptions barely delineated by the patterns of light and darkness, Susan's absence or presence, the sounds of traffic or the disturbing silence of the streets outside. The sunlight visible through the front window faded to rain and then snow. My cell phone, once a relentless connection to the greater world, sat mute on the dresser. I was locked in.

I barely noticed when Susan left. When I found her note, placed carefully on my desk, I tried to remember her presence the night before, in bed or at the table. I couldn't exactly think of the last time I had seen her.

My Dearest George,

I have decided that it would be best if we spent some time apart. I know how difficult things are for you right now, and I don't wish to increase your burden, but I need to take care of myself, too, and lately I have felt myself slipping into your darkness. Please don't worry about me, I am fine and have found friends with extra room to take me in during this time of transition. I made you a casserole which is in the fridge. I know that you are going to be O.K.

*Love Always,
Susan*

I dropped the note somewhere near the waste basket and headed to the kitchen. I spooned a large helping of casserole on my plate and retrieved the

bottle of Scotch I now kept hidden in the garage. I drank from the bottle while I ate. There was no one watching me.

It was the Christmas cactus that saved me. A small plant, it sat under the window by the kitchen sink. Each evening Susan would talk to it, stroking its bulbous leaves. Everything needs love, she'd say, even plants. After she left it sat unnoticed, dried up and, I thought, died. But one day, cleaning up the accumulated mess in the sink I remembered Susan's nightly ritual of love, and I reached out and stroked the plant. Looking at it, then, for the first time in months, I noticed the tiniest beginnings of a bud, bright and pink. I watered the plant and spoke lovingly to it, and each morning when I arose the first thing I did was check the small cactus plant. Within a week it had burst into color, and I realized that if the cactus could make a comeback, then perhaps I could, too.

I charged my cell phone. I listened to the messages left suspended for months. Most were from the bank, telling me of the dire consequences if I did not respond. I made a note to find a real estate attorney, as mean and dirty as possible. The last message was from a realtor; the bank's buyers were moving into the two story and they noticed some of my belongings in the garage. I could pick them up the next weekend, she said. There was even a message from Susan.

"Hi George. It's Friday, don't forget to take the garbage out. Are you O.K. George? Bye."

I dialed her up.

"Thanks for the reminder about the garbage," I said.

"That was six weeks ago, George," she said. "A lot has happened since then," she said. "I'm moving on with my life, George," she said.

“Did you hear about Bill?” I said, wanting to keep her on the line, show her that I was making a comeback.

“Hear what?” she said.

“He’s running for county commissioner; going to bring a sense of responsibility to government. ‘No more free lunches,’ he says. He’s the missing piece of the puzzle, Susan, the answer to our problems.” I thought she’d see the humor.

“Oh, that,” she said.

“Pontificate and prevaricate: he should be terrific!” I tried again.

“You’re too cynical, George. I think he really wants to do something meaningful.”

“Yeah, like line his pockets. Commissioners make eighty-two thousand a year.”

“It couldn’t be that much.”

“I looked it up, Susan. He’s found his niche in life.”

She didn’t say anything. There was a long, awkward silence, neither of us knowing where to go from there. And then an unwanted picture popped into my head.

“Susan,” I said, “in your note you said some friends had taken you in,” I said. “The friends, Susan. Are we talking about Bill here?”

“I have to go,” she said.

I was in front of the two story on Saturday morning at nine o’clock sharp. No one was home but the shovels and brooms were leaning against the garage wall. I put them in the back of the truck and started to leave when I thought of St. Joseph. I took the shovel and, finding the spot where Susan had buried him more than a year earlier, I loosened the sod and found him, a

four inch plastic figurine planted upside down. Kneeling on the grass, I carefully lifted him from the soil, brushing off the dirt.

“You did your job, I guess,” I said to him, “just not as soon as we had hoped.”

I took him home and placed him on the mantle, just as Susan had told me we would do when the house sold.

“That way,” she said, “he’ll keep working his miracles for us.”