

**UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2014, Second-Place Non-Fiction Winner**

**By Amber Moore**

**He Lived Behind Our Dumpster**

He started coming around about five months ago, when we all tentatively sighed in collective relief after making it through the spring floodless.

I don't know his name even though we chatted nearly everyday. My assigned parking spot is right beside the garbage, the only one. He pulls the lids all the way back so they function as a makeshift roof on the other side. He's collected furniture from the curbs of the rich neighbourhoods to the west of us; matching patio chairs, a small wooden end table, a cracked widescreen TV likely dragged from one of the homes north of two million in Mount Royal. He leans the TV against the chain-linked fence that separates our condo parking lot from the Elbow Riverbank. He must just watch his own reflection. It's actually a pretty spot; aside from the occasional smell of wet organic waste, old newspapers, and everything my neighbours don't bother recycling.

He reminds me to "drive safe, now; there's alotta crazies out there!" and laughs, pleased with himself as I pour my bags of books and graded *Macbeth* papers into the backseat, trying to remember not to forget my lukewarm coffee on the roof. I yell back, "Not to worry! I'm always careful. Take care of yourself today, and have a good one!"

"You too, dear!"

I sometimes don't even see him, except for maybe one faded New Balance sneaker sticking out from behind the metal bin or a waving hand with blackened nails, a band-aid clinging on.

This September, we had an especially freakish blizzard that took down a good chunk of Calgary's trees, still in summer mode. A few pink bee balm flowers dotted the blanketed Earth in the front garden, like delicate drops of blood. Branches sagged with the weight of wet white. Trudging from my back door to my car, I heard a series of snaps coming from Lindsay Park, where across the water, wood surrendered to the heavy onslaught, falling to block the pathway, cover benches. Behind the fence in front of my spot is an especially large Elm, branches much lower than usual. Mayor Nenshi urged us to shake our trees off but this one was too tall, and the snow was already making me late. I grabbed my snowbrush and muttered profanity to myself as I started to clear off my Pontiac, and tip-toed around in ballet flats I had no business wearing.

I assumed that he wasn't there that morning. Maybe he went to a shelter last night when the snow started falling.

While unearthing a headlight, a cracking sound above me broke the quiet of the morning as the tree split. I jerked, looking up as one half fell away from me, down along the bank, its flash frozen leaves reaching to dip into the river. I remembered to breathe again when I heard, "Holy Moses girl, you'd betta hurry it up! 'Else you gonna die!"

I turned. He was bundled, laying in a makeshift bed made out of his two chairs. He had a beard now.

"Let me help you, honey," and he started to unwrap himself from his blankets, sitting up.

“No, no- please. Stay comfortable, but thank you. I’m almost done, and I’ll go faster.” I hurried back around my car to finish the other side, motioning at him to sit, ignoring the snow sneaking in the sides of my shoes. I didn’t deserve to be upset about the cold.

I threw the brush onto the floor of the front seat and climbed in, smiling quickly at him, practically sitting beside me.

“You be safe on those roads, now!” He waved. “Try to stay warm!” I weakly offered back.

He always wished me well at work, reminded me to take care of myself, and to please, drive safely. On Fridays, he’d ask if I was happy it was Friday or if I had special plans. On Mondays, he’d tell me to try to have a good Monday.

Last week, while pulling into my alleyway, I noticed him on the corner, looking bewildered. I waved and he forced a smile before charging off down the street. After parking and fussing with my bags, feeling a nag of worry, I heard a different voice from behind the dumpster- a slurred, deeper one.

“Hey there.” He was twenty years younger than my usual friend and much taller. He hopped out the chair that wasn’t his, and gripping the hood of my car, approached me.

“He’s bent,” he accused, pointing past me. “I’m in his spot and he’s all... bent out of shape. Come here.”

“Oh no thank you,” I offered, taking a step back, quickly turning to survey the lot. I was alone, and quickly enveloped in a one-way embrace. “Please let me go,” I think I whispered while debating whether or not to scream. Hugging me harder, he repeated, “He’s just all bent, just *bent*, I tell you...”

Relief washed over me when he finally let go, stumbled back to his stolen space.

I haven’t seen the other gentleman since. I still park out back, but my husband walks me to my car now to ensure I’m safe from unwanted hugs or worse. I shush him when he tells me to call the cops. I don’t want them to show up if my kind neighbor returns.