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Shopping Cart

Story by Tom Bentley

It was two in the morning and a beautiful night in San Francisco - the concrete rooftop a checker board of symmetrical parking spaces - the only vehicle on the horizon his friend's sky blue Caravan, clean and American in its loneliness.

William stood on the upper level of the parkade leaning on a shopping cart. He was waiting for his friend to pick up a jug of organic milk. He knew he'd be forever and probably come up the elevator loaded with two-for-one's and any specials he could find on pasta, ice cream and pineapple juice - not to mention a couple of the latest car magazines.

The metal rails of the shopping cart caught the reflection of the nighttime sky. William loved shopping carts. He loved the clarity of their intention - the sleekness of design. Occasionally he went into a Supermarket just so he could push them, but always left wanting something more. Parading up and down the aisles traveling a single direction of space seemed an entrapment of spirit - a kind of censorship. Tonight he had the cart in the firm grip of his hands without an aisle in sight. He was satisfied, alone in the process of reinventing himself.

William had been in San Francisco for six months. When he arrived he had a car, but one night he left it on Twin Peaks. He was looking down at the city and it made him want to walk. So he left the keys in the ignition and started to walk. It needed an oil change anyway, he'd thought. Besides, it reminded him too much of his dead wife.

He'd driven down from Canada after his wife drowned in a boating accident on a northern lake. He hadn't stayed for the funeral. He just got in the car and drove south. His friend let him sleep in his living room. Even when he

ran out of money, his friend told him not to worry. "Take the time to grieve," he said. But William wasn't interested in grieving. He wanted to walk.

San Francisco was not a large city and William was soon familiar with the winding streets that pulled him through the hills and valleys. Usually he walked at night, guiding his silent body into the Tenderloin, the Mission, across Noe Valley through Diamond Heights to the Haight. Then over to Upper Richmond, the Presidio, past the great mansions of Pacific Heights and down to the Marina, where he'd walk the docks along the Embarcadero, the shadow of North Beach and Chinatown hanging across his shoulders.

He began to recognize the faces of the homeless, holding fort under cardboard structures in dim doorways or pushing their only possessions along deserted streets, firm in their belief that private property is a right shared by all in the United States of America. Sometimes he'd come across a shopping cart abandoned in a hidden corner of the city - the remnants of a past life caught within the metal bars. He'd search though the belongings looking for clues. The meaning of the broken wheel - the torn catcher's mitt - the dead fern? Secrets trapped in a cage. Waiting to be buried. Longing to be free.

He'd look up narrow paths and dark roads ready to slip away as the street people returned to their mysteries. Often he'd want to take a shopping cart with him. But he didn't. When the sun began to come up, he'd find his way home and let himself in with the key his friend left under the mat.

He was on his way out the door that evening when his friend slipped up behind him and took him by the

elbow. He led him into the Caravan and they drove to the store. William expected his friend to say something. He expected him to tell him that it was time he packed his bags and went back to Canada. But he said nothing. They just drove to the store.

As they turned up Lincoln to head toward Safeway's, William looked into the park. He remembered when he'd been walking the same route late one night and a great ship sailed across his path. It was only a glimpse, but William saw him clearly - a gnarled old Viking pushing a shopping cart through the foggy drizzle, steering it like a longboat into the shadows of Golden Gate. William was transfixed by the majesty of the old man's bearing, his matted beard clinging to his chest like decaying seaweed, antlers rising from the top of his football helmet, protective plates curving across his mouth like armor.

The cart was full of weapons - hub-caps, twisted steel, broken windows - and pierced between its front rungs was a long pole, angled steeply toward the tops of the trees. Attached to the end of the pole was a canvas tarp, a magnificent flag soaring over the Viking's head, trailing like a net on the wet cement behind. It dragged with the weight of the rain like a great robe. The warrior was undaunted by the burden of his load. He pressed further into the park, the tight pull of history tugging at his back, his long pole penetrating the dark sky as if to ward off the Albatrosses of the night.

William wanted to follow him into the deep-set trees. He wanted to drag in the weight of the Viking's robe - he wanted to live in his certainty of his courage.

The thin spokes running down the sides of William's cart began to vibrate as a smoky gray car drove up the ramp, its headlights sparkling like a glittering wave along the shopping carts chained to the sides of the parkade walls. The music of Miles Davis beat from the car's frame as it pulled a wide U-turn and descended back into the streets.

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William looked over to the elevator. Still no sign of his friend. Probably deciding which of the car magazines are the sexiest, he thought. Good. Take your time.

He looked across the parkade at the ramp descending onto the city. The light glowed a faint yellow from the road below. Misty - evocative - it made him feel like walking.

He thought about all the young men filling their carts with bottles and cans, getting ready for their early morning battle with the traffic along Market Street. He thought about the woman in front of Starbucks, her cart full of old shoes. He remembered thinking that the woman could have been his mother but she wasn't.

Then he thought about the happy Catholic in the Hawaiian shirt. He'd seen her the night before waiting in a courtyard outside a church, worry beads dangling all over her shopping cart, three-dimensional images of Jesus and Mary pinned to her headscarf. She was a squat jolly woman with an enormous smile and at first William was amused, thinking she might have escaped out of one of those strobe-light discos from the seventies. But as she pushed her cart toward him, her smile turned into a provocative little grin and he started to panic. She was flirting with him. There was no doubt about it. The happy Hawaiian was flirting.

William backed up against the church wall as she inched her intention toward him. Then she stopped in the middle of the courtyard as if waiting for him to make the next move. He just stood still. So she teased him a bit, poking her cart provocatively in his direction.

When she realized he wasn't going to participate she gathered herself together with a certain South Pacific dignity and began to dance. William was entranced by the elegance of her shopping cart as she banked to the right and sashayed to the left - reeling back and forth across the pavement - a hula hula foxtrot - a waltz under the

stars - the twinkling eyes of Mary and her son flashing the strange couple toward the rising of the sun.

Then the woman sat on the steps and waited for early mass.

Yes, William decided. He had to walk. He didn't want to remove his hands from the handle of the cart so began pushing it to the center of the rooftop, drawn by the possibilities of what lay below.

He enjoyed the feeling of surrender - the shopping cart easing him forward as if they were an old couple out for a stroll - gliding with the hidden desires of their youth - the rattle of bones rising from the pavement.

As he reached the center, a cold wind blew a heavy sigh across his face. He began to think about his wife. The bird in his ribcage began to stir.

William tried to push the cart away but it held on and veered him into a slow circle. Round and round it went - a spherical ghost circumscribing his fear - haunting him with its longing for escape.

Again William looked toward the ramp descending into the street. He had to walk. He needed to walk. He tried to pull away from the cart but the cool metal kept the palms of his hands locked to the handle. He yanked on the bar and the skeletal frame reared itself like a horse ready for flight. To hell with this, he thought. So he lowered the wheels and aimed it toward the exit. He decided to steal the shopping cart.

They began. Slowly at first. Cautious. As they crept over the parkade, William began to hear the faint rattle of metal in the distance behind him. He looked over his shoulder to see thin outlines of shopping carts emerging from the shadows of his peripheral vision, slipping from the blackness and rolling onto the rooftop. He picked up his pace as more carts joined the procession, dark figures bearing down on trembling carriages, the clamor of thundering steel pounding forward in their escape to the street.

Old women, young boys, Vikings and

rogues - the bizarre and the brilliant - the wounded and bewildered. From out of the dark corners, they ran with their carts to join in the parade. Black kings and princesses - seekers and seers - the willow branch stick-people and the creaky old whores. Pirates, peasants, the wicked, the blind. Remote - forgotten - tattered and torn, they stormed the empty rooftop, roaring their insurrection at the sky.

William saw a man in khaki pushing a dead soldier. He saw a preacher pushing a stone. A girl with a sparrow on her head - tick-tock, tick-tock - her cart packed with alarm clocks - ringing, ringing.

He saw gaunt young men with their baskets full of pharmaceuticals. A ballerina pushing a giant tutu - a trunk crammed with point shoes. A showman and a chandelier. An ancient drag queen - her shopping cart gorged with garter belts, lace underwear, nylon stockings and a bag of withering oranges.

He saw a child wheeling his grandfather and a nun pushing a box of Black Magic Chocolates. A clown with a porcelain doll. A widow with a flag. A Rabbi with a cart full of ashes.

He saw shopping carts overflowing with sunflowers, kittens, teapots, and curtains. Wigs and crinolines - tuxedos and shoes. He saw a set of encyclopedias. Cameras. A violin. Letters bound with ribbon. Teddy bears, baseball cards, newspapers, lottery tickets, an armchair, grocery bills, Baptismal shawls, a wedding gown, an aquarium, and a seeing-eye dog.

William soared across the roof - the pavement flinging itself down like a magnet - pulling his cart faster and faster. He could see a yellow line running across the top of the ramp, marking the beginning of its descent. His chest opened like an angel - he was closer - he was there.

Suddenly a great wall bolted from the earth below. William hit the barrier with such violence the cart hurled away from him, flinging itself over its front wheels, crashing and bouncing

on the pavement beside. He scrambled to his feet, looking in all directions.

The parkade was empty, except for a blue Caravan and a teenager in a Safeway's uniform, leaning beside the elevator and smoking a cigarette. A ray of light from the lamp above illuminated the wise guy kind of smirk that was spreading over his acne-covered face. The boy was motionless, cruel and confident in his youthful arrogance.

William looked at the yellow line at the top of the ramp and could see another tracing the edge of the sidewalk below. He understood what had happened. When he hit the line, it triggered a lock on the cart. He looked at the round case-ment enclosing the top perimeter of the front wheels - a piece of steel protruding from its interior - gripping the rubber like claws of an eagle clenching its prey.

William couldn't understand why they went to so much trouble. Why not use land mines, he wondered? Or chemical warfare? Surely it would be easier just to shoot the homeless bastards. He glared at the Safeway boy as if it was all his fault.

The punk still didn't move. He just leaned; puffing away on his cigarette, smoke rings billowing out of his smug adolescent mouth like a series of smoldering little challenges. I dare you, they seemed to be saying. I dare you.

William pulled the cart back up on its wheels. He stood above the ramp frozen with fear as a cold wind blew across his face for a second time. He closed his eyes, hoping to hear

the comfort of metal rumbling in the distance. But all he could hear was the sound of a northern lake swelling back and forth against the rocks. He yanked the cart onto its hind wheels and tried to press it forward, but it wouldn't budge. Finally it grew so heavy he had to lower it to the ground. When he looked into the basket of the cart he could see it filling with water - green aglae floating slowly to the top of the rim.

William turned to say goodbye to the boy under the light and saw his friend. He was holding the boy by the elbow, guiding him in a slow circle to the stairs beside the elevator. The boy flicked his cigarette over the parkade wall.

William bent his knees and clamped his body around the sides of the basket. He lifted it into the air. Cold lake water poured through its rungs and down his legs, cascading the gentle slope of the ramp onto the street. He twisted his spine under the carriage, wrestling the cart onto his back. He felt the burden of its heavy load pressing him further and further into the ground. He crooked his neck to look at what was above. Falling between the bars of the shopping cart was his dead wife, her naked wet body imprinted with lines like the uniform of a prisoner.

William dug his foot into the pavement and set his body in motion. He crab-walked his way down the slippery slope and headed for the park. ▣

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