

The background is a solid bright yellow. Scattered across the top and sides are several light-colored wooden blocks and sticks. Two rectangular blocks are stacked vertically on the left. Several long, thin sticks are arranged to form the outline of a house, with some sticks crossing to create a roof. The author's name is written in a large, blue, serif font, arching over the top of the house shape.

Andrew J. Patrick

The Little
Guerrilla
Platoons

A LONG
SHORT STORY

The Little Guerrilla Platoons

Andrew J. Patrick

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ISBN: 9781521438282

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To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections.

-Edmund Burke

The Flagpole

Hank Fredericks fumed at the sour sonofabitch who lived on the other side of the cul-de-sac, in the house that sat above the rest of the neighborhood on a low hillock like a watchtower. There he was, picking his goddamn toes as he sat on his stoop, glowering at the cracks in his sidewalk like an irrationally grouchy three-toed sloth. All the while, not trimming his Japanese maple. Not spraying any weed-killer to keep the creeping jenny out of other people's lawns. For that matter, not even mowing his lawn but once a month.

"The sour sonofabitch..." Hank said aloud.

His oldest daughter, home from college, came in from helping her mother in the Garden. Ellie was always good about that. Hank never cared for gardening, but he assisted when it needed doing. But Ellie had the knack for it, the true green thumb. So she came home once a month in the spring to help her mother.

"What is it now, Dad?" Ellie said, in a tone that was amused without being patronizing.

"I don't wanna talk about it," Hank said. Ellie accepted that and poured herself a glass of lemonade from the fridge.

"Okay, Dad." This time her tone did cross over into patronizing. Perhaps it was the extra "Dad." It reminded one of talking to young children, so that they'd remember their names. But he didn't want to lose his tempter at her. She hadn't done anything wrong, and besides, young women enjoyed being patronized with their fathers. It was

a reminder of their new adulthood, and Hank didn't feel like being reminded of that again. They grow up so fast, and when they're done, you look at yourself, and realize you're old.

He turned to face her. She was tall and skinny, an athlete like her mother. Scholarships and everything. Smart as a whip, and smart enough to know what she didn't know, which was damn rare in the young. She stood a chance of actually getting educated at college instead of indoctrinated. It made him feel almost ashamed of the petty nonsense that had him so steamed.

"Is it the flagpole?" she asked.

"Your mother told you."

"She did."

"Sonofabitch..."

Hank had been trying to put a flagpole on his property for sometime. Nothing massive or tasteless, just a metal pole to fly the flag on Flag Day, the Fourth, etc. Hank had been among the first to carry the flag into Kuwait back in the day, when he was still in the Army. He'd done color guard. He wasn't one of these creepy fetishists who collected militaria and Nazi memorables, but he had the flag he carried into Kuwait, tastefully displayed in a shadow box. He wanted to fly it on the days you flew the flag. And he wanted a pole in his backyard to do it on.

No, said the Homeowners Association. Hank had appealed. He had cajoled, he had met individually with board members. He had pled his case with diplomacy and politic ease. But the sour sonofabitch who picked his toes and presided over the board didn't like large flags. He thought them tasteless. "It's not a military base," he said, as if bases were bad things. And the rest of them didn't

care to cross the sour sonofabitch enough to vote the other way. He was a rich sour sonofabitch. Owned a liquor store, a pizzeria, and the trucking contractors who plowed the street in winter.

His notice had arrived this morning. It was terse and final, without even the “please contact us if you have any questions” boilerplate. It was a polite paper middle finger to Hank.

“Tell me, college-girl,” said Hank. “Why do Homeowners Associations even exist?”

“To ensure that necessary services are provided, and that owners maintain their properties.”

“On the nose. What it doesn’t say anything about is fucking dictating our entire goddamn properties. As in the aesthetic choices thereunto pertaining. Who do these people think they are?”

Ellie listened to the acid that Hank continued in this light, making comparisons, not to communist or fascist bogeys of common rhetoric, but of the oligarchies that Aristotle wrote of in his Politics. She smiled, for she had been made to read the Politics, and knew that her GI-Bill father wasn’t reaching for his analogy. Who called down such displays of classicism over a suburban flag pole? Her Dad.

“Dad,” she said at last.

“Ellie,” said Hank.

“Do you want a drink?”

“Is that your clever way of asking permission to drink in my house, college-girl?”

“I have to ask permission?”

“Yes.”

"In that case, then yes, it is."

"In that case, then yes, I want one."

"Rum?"

"Rocks."

Ellie came back in with two thin elegant tumblers filled with spiced rum. Hank's had only ice, but Ellie had added coke for the go-to college cocktail. They sat on the porch, Hank in his easy chair, Ellie with her legs curled up underneath her on the couch.

They sat for a while, drinking their drinks as the friendly heat of May ebbed and flowed in the afternoon breeze. They drank the rum that was black as pitch and quietly savored each other's company.

After she'd gotten her cocktail halfway down, she tilted her head another way and said "I get why you're mad, you know..."

Hank had let that go for the moment. The sour sonofabitch had gone back inside.

But the quiet conviction in her voice -whether borne of rum or mere pondering it both - intrigued him. "Yeah," he said, "Why's that?"

"Because of the inversion of standards," she replied. "They're very strictly imposing their aesthetic on you, while allowing someone powerful to ignore the basic fucking rules of the organization."

She paused to see if he would chide her expletive.

"And I got no fucking recourse," he said instead. She grinned.

"You don't. Their failure to enforce standards may not

even be actionable in a court of law."

"Did you switch to pre-law?"

"My roommate did. Everything's 'actionable' or 'non-actionable' with her. She thinks it's cute."

"Roommates," said Hank. "Just luck of the draw, I guess. Like neighbors."

"Yeah. Like Neighbors."

They continued to drink. The heat of the afternoon peaked and the rum caused a flush of warmth in kind.

"So what we have here is a non-accountable authority," Hank said at last.

"Exactly," said Ellie.

"And what does non-accountable authority eventually invite?"

"Rebellion," she said. "But how you do that ..."

"That's the thing. I can't march on his house with a pitchfork and a torch."

"Well, you could..."

They both smiled.

"But you wouldn't get anything that way. You wouldn't be a rebel against authority, you'd be a nut bag who gets arrested."

"Yep."

"You could build the pole anyway and fight then in the courts," she offered.

"I could," Hank said, "But I don't know if I've got a legal leg to stand on. Covenants are contracts, and they're specific. I might hold them off for a little while, and end

up taking the pole down, paying their fucking fine, plus legal fees."

Ellie nodded in allowance that such was probably true. "You could run for HOA leadership. President, even."

"And lose. The same thing that allows that sonofabitch to get away with not mowing his lawn is what keeps him in power. Everyone's afraid of offending him. They like having their streets plowed early and often."

Ellie shrugged and took a strong pull of her rum. Hank did the same.

"Ew, Are you drinking?" came a voice dripping with disdain. The younger daughter, home from ballet, mother in tow.

Lydia did not approve of her sister doing grown-up things. Everything the nineteen-year-old did struck the thirteen-year-old as putting on airs.

"Lydia, don't be a pest. You need to shower," said her mother. The girls contented themselves with sticking tongues out at each other and Lydia retreated upstairs.

Liz Fredericks picked up the letter from the HOA and read it. She looked her husband in the eyes.

"Are you drinking?" she asked.

"No..." said Ellie.

"We're plotting treason," said Hank.

Looting

Saturday morning found Hank out after breakfast to pick up his son from staying over at a friend's house. Steven was 15 and had a new set of friends that were different from his old set of junior high friends, but they were basically the same kids. They played D&D and Warhammer 40,000 and other type stuff deep into the night. Hank would have worried about the boy ever seeing sunshine if he wasn't on the cross-country team.

The plan was to get the truck washed, pick up Steven and then find the estate sale Liz had dragged the girls to. Her instructions had been verbal and Hank wasn't entirely sure he remembered it, and Steven was sleep-deprived and non-communicative as only 15-year-old boys can be - deconstructing language to a Neanderthalic series of grunts. Hank didn't mind. Yesterday's conversation with Ellie had focused his mind in a way that ranting and grumbling and writing letters to HOA board members had not. He was no longer lamenting his issue but considering what could be done about it. There was a solution, Hank was certain. He just was not seeing it.

Besides, one didn't take a boy's silence personally. A daughter might be communicating a thousand things by not talking to you, if chiefly that she wanted you to notice she wasn't. But a son only continued the laconic friendliness common to males -- we might talk, if there was anything to talk of, but otherwise, why?

"You eat anything?" said Hank.

Steven yawned and blinked as though he was trying to remember. "No," he said at last.

"You know where we're supposed to be going?" The boy shook his head.

"Your mother's got your sisters at an estate sale up on Oakcrest."

Steven rolled his eyes. "Mom's such a grave-robber."

"So she'd be good at D&D, then." Hank had played the game a little in his day, too. A big part of it was looting the corpses of vanquished enemies for weapons, coin, and magic items. "You should have her over to play with your pals."

This amused the boy, and he did his impression of his mother: "Steven, there's some perfectly good leather armor on these trolls! You'll grow into it!" They laughed at that, and then Hank said, "You wanna get some donuts before we help your mother pillage somebody's house?"

"Yeah," said Steven.

They went to Dunkin Donuts and drank coffee and dared each other to eat jelly-filled donuts in a continuation of a game that had been evolving since Steven was a toddler. Whoever ate a jelly-filled in the fewest number of bites while getting the least amount of jelly out of the donut was the King according to current rules. Hank was winning until the last round, when Steven guessed which end of the donut had bulk of the jelly in it and swallowed it down in a bite. He raised his fists over his head in triumph and Hank wondered what a karate-chop to the boy's abdomen would do to his victory. His own father might have done that. But it wasn't Hank's style. So small and precarious a victory should be enjoyed. They came so seldomly.

"Let's roll," Hank said, and they topped off their coffee and grabbed the donuts for the girls and got back into the

car.

As they drove away from the center of town along elm-lined roads Hank alerted his son to the HOA's latest tyranny. Steven mowed the sour sonofabitch's lawn once, but got bilked on the agreed-upon price and Hank ordered him never to do it again. The boy shook his head in disdain as Hank relayed the story and the gist of his conversation with Ellie the previous evening. Steven felt no rivalry with his sister's intellect and simply concurred with the wisdom of her conclusions.

"You want me to put some flaming dog shit on his stoop?" Steven asked.

"I'll get back to you," Hank said. "And, language."

They followed the professionally-crafted signs to the estate sale at Old Mrs. Edison's house. She had been a woman of some means, but her children no longer were local and decided liquidating the estate would be the most efficient way of processing their grief. The traffic -- vehicle and foot -- on the street in front of the house was just heavy enough to impede Hank's normal speed. He and Steven scowled at it together. Gradually they found a spot a few houses down and pulled into it.

"Once more unto the breach..." said Hank.

"Or close up the walls with our dead," said Steven.

"That's not the quote."

"Close enough, Dad."

They got out.

The sale was humming along. People has arrived early and we're staying, picking through the handcrafted detritus of a life with silent joy. Hank looked for a sign of Liz and the

girls, but was not surprised when he didn't see any. They would be deep inside, if Liz found something she liked. Which she probably would.

As they walked up the driveway Hank noticed that the garage was opened. He put a hand on Steven's shoulder and pointed at the tools, neatly organized by size. Size rather than function might mean whoever was running the estate sale was fuzzy on the actual value of tools. Bargains could be in the offing.

Steven shrugged. It was all the same to him.

They didn't find many bargains, but they did find an old-fashioned push-mower, slightly rusted but still functional, with fading yellow paint and a general must that came of sitting unused. Hank had owned such a mower when he and Liz were first married. His father-in-law had unloaded it on him, and he had been between mowers at the time, so he used it for a season. He knew how well they worked for quick jobs.

"We'd better find your mother," Hank said.

They found the girls on the second floor, admiring a vanity. Ellie still had hers in her room, but was planning on taking it to her off-campus apartment next year. Liz had one, but it was an heirloom from her own mother and she wasn't planning on parting with it. But Lydia needed one. It was oak, with a rich creamy varnish on it. Lydia was sitting at it, happy, as she and Ellie went through the doors and decided what would go where.

"Who wants donuts?" said Hank. Everyone answered in the affirmative. Steven brought some to his sisters, and smirked benignly when Lydia told him not to sit on her new vanity. Hank brought Liz a Cruller, her favorite.

"Nice," said Hank, indicating the vanity.

"And a steal," said Liz. "You could drop twice what we'd pay for it at retail and not get something as nice. You can get it into the truck, right?"

"I think so. But see if you can get some blankets to cover it up."

"Did you not get the truck washed?"

"No, I did. But I don't want the new lawn mower to roll onto it."

Liz blinked. "What new Lawn mower?"

Conversations

"So let me get this straight," said Steven, watching with bemusement as his father dismantled the parts of his new push mower, "You're planning on exacting your revenge on the guy who runs the homeowner's association...by mowing his lawn?"

"Not me," said Hank, "We".

* * *

"Daddy?"

"Lydia?"

"Mom wants you to know when you're done screwing around with that damn thing, you can come eat dinner."

"Is that what she said?"

"Word for word."

* * *

"Hi, Hank."

"Lou."

"What ya got there?"

"Old push mower."

"Refurbishing it?"

"An old army buddy has a sideline in it. Sells them to collectors."

"Shouldn't he be the one refurbishing it, then?"

"I'm thinking of partnering up."

* * *

So it went for a few weeks. The school year wound down, and the heat wound up, and the sour sonofabitch's lawn got longer and longer. Every morning Hank looked to make sure that he hadn't mowed it. Every morning he was not disappointed.

The mower got a fresh coat of paint, oil on all its necessary parts, and its blades sharpened to a razor point. It ran silent as an assassin. Once Hank was satisfied with it, he waited for the new moon.

* * *

"So how is this not illegal?" asked Liz.

"It's not breaking and entering, because I'm not entering the house, nor am I damaging anything. It's not vandalism, because I'm not causing harm to the property. Worse it is is trespassing. I might get a warning from the cops not to do it again. Which I won't."

"And what about the HOA?"

"I'm paid up on all my dues. I haven't put the flagpole up. There's nothing in the covenants about mowing someone else's lawn. The HOA has no power here."

"So you're going to admit it."

"I'm going to admit nothing. I'm going to prank him and leave it be."

They sat together for a long time in bed after that, tension held in place by the wise forbearance that long marriage cultivates. They pretended to read.

"It's just..." Liz said, putting her book down.

Hank put his book down.

"No one understands more than me how angry you are. I've had to deal with your anger for a long time. And I feel your anger. But is this the example you want to set?"

"There are many kinds of examples. There's setting the example of not knuckling under to assholes."

"Ellie is young enough to think that striking blows against power structures are fun and cost-free. You are old enough to know better."

"Yeah, I am. I'm also old enough to know how a life spent following orders and being responsible makes being under the thumb of irresponsible people sting. I'm old enough to know that sometimes bad persists because you let it."

"Hank, it's just a flagpole."

"It's not the flagpole! It's the rules!"

He took a breath, composed himself.

"Do the rules apply to everyone, or do they just apply to those who can't escape them? Because if it's the first, then I got no cause for complaint. But it's the second. And that gives me the right, the duty even, to make the rules apply. Even symbolically."

"Even if everything goes just the way you want, what difference will it make?"

"Probably none. But who knows? Maybe it'll remind people that we don't have to have the same President every time. Or maybe the asshole will start mowing his lawn. Either way, I'll have made my point."

She sighed. Hank knew that sigh.

"If you get caught," Liz said, "Don't call me."

"That's fair," Hank replied. "But what if Steven gets caught?"

"What?"

Mowing the Lawn

They went out the slider in the deep of the night, the night of the full moon. They wore black work pants and dark long-sleeve tees and balaclavas despite the sticky June heat. They carried the shiny new yellow push-mower together, Hank in front with the weighty cylinder of blades, Steven behind at the handle. They went around the court behind the houses, just skirting the treeline. It was 2:30 in the morning.

Occasionally Hank would flick a small LED flashlight at his immediate path, to make sure he did not trip on a root or slip on a slope, but otherwise they walked in the dark, in perfect silence.

The neighborhood stayed silent with them, greeting them with the faint buzz of a late movie or the ignored bark of a dog. There hadn't been a break-in around these parts in so long that no one ever thought of it except in that vague, typical way that people usually did. Hank figured that wouldn't change much after tonight. People might double check their locks before retiring for a month or so, but that was it.

After a short ten minutes of brisk, careful walking, they made it all the way around the neighborhood to the rear of the SSOB's split-level. They peered through the woods at the windows, and checked that each one was dark. Not a creature was stirring. Hank nodded to Steven, who moved to take up position along the side of the house, just inside the treeline. Meanwhile, Hank moved through the woods all the way around to the front of the house.

It was necessary to do it this way, Hank had explained to

Steven, because anyone could have looked out their window and seen them taking the obvious route to the end of the street where the SSOB's house stood above the court on a hillock. If anyone happened to be up, they would see. If they took the long way around the back of the houses on the court, however, they were unlikely to be seen, and the act would have no witnesses.

The act, of course, was mowing the words "MOW ME" into the unkempt grass of the sloped yard, where anyone in the neighborhood might see it. The push mower was quiet, but not silent, so Hank needed Steven as a lookout. If anyone in the house should discover them, Steven would signal Hank by flashlight and flee through the woods, and Hank would beat feet down the street away from the court and double back later.

It would be an overstatement to suggest that Hank had never tested the edge of the rules in this manner before. Army life, even in Desert Storm, had been replete with steam-blowing prankery. An incident involving golf balls, condoms, and some poor Bedouin's goat was a staple of the Fredericks clan. But that was the army. This was the most illegal thing Hank could recall doing in a long time, and he set to his task with the grim delight of a vendetta. Softly, the freshly oiled push-mower began to cut the M.

"You know, Dad," Steven had said, a week ago, "it would be a lot easier if we could just catch him on camera doing something weird. More, effective, too." Hank smirked at the memory as he put his shoulder to the task.

As he cut the first shank of the first letter, Hank stopped to survey his work. It needed to be compact enough so that the words wouldn't be lost over the curve of the slope, but large enough that everyone in the cul-de-sac would see it. After assessing, Hank decided that two cut-

widths would be sufficient for his purposes. He cut the first M and looked up at Steven, who was still just barely visible amid the trees. If Hank hadn't known he was there, he would not have known to see him. That was as it should be. Keeping the boy out of trouble was a requirement for Liz letting him back in the house.

As he carved the O, Hank became more aware of the illumination from the street light across from the opening of the court. It wasn't a large light, but Hank felt it on his back nonetheless. At this hour, no one should be up, except for the sort of person up at this hour. Was that the kind of person who'd report him to the police, or just goggle and laugh? After all, he was quite clearly mowing a lawn. Who in their right mind mowed a lawn at this hour?

Clearly no one.

His O was coming out rickety, like an oval with a stupid bend in it on the second shank. Hank stepped back and frowned. This wouldn't work if no one could read it. Why had he assumed that it would be easy to mow letters into a lawn? It wasn't like tracing your finger through dirt.

"Fuck it," he said, to no one in particular, and then wondered just how loud he had been. He hunkered down for a long minute and listened to the night. He heard a screech owl and a light breeze filtering through the trees where Steven was hiding. But the rest of the neighborhood was silent as a graveyard.

He started the W, which he tried to make wider than the M, so it wouldn't just be an upside-down M, which was a stylistic choice he began to reconsider halfway through. Damn it all, he thought. This is going to look goofy as fuck. I'll be lucky if anyone can read it. I'll be lucky if the

sour son of...

Hank suddenly became aware of a flashlight blinking off to his right.

Blinking off. As in, it had previously been on.

Hank looked up and saw his neighbor standing, ten feet off.

Looking at Hank.

With no pants on.

They stared at each other for an eternal space of seconds, two men who had no reason to be there at three o'clock in the morning. Hank saw that his neighbor, this sour so-and-so, seemed both older and younger than his years would have dictated (how old was he? Sixty? Sixty-Five? Hank did not know). He was holding a bottle of rum in his hand (why? Who checks for a prowler with liquor? If he was partying, why were the lights out?), and his disheveled bathrobe hung open. His belly was sallow and wrinkled, with odd folds and a curious gash of a belly button. But his arms and shoulders still had muscles, evidence of a life spent in some sort of a gym. And his thin white briefs were full of erection. He looked at Hank with the expression of a man staring at a griffin or a cyclops - he knew what he was seeing, but could not understand how he was seeing it.

"What the fuck?" he said, all incredulity rather than anger.

"It's okay," Hank said, "I got the W done."

"The W?" said Hank's neighbor.

"Yeah" said Hank. "Come see."

And the sour-sonofabitch toddled over, robe open, rum bottle dangling like a hangnail from his white fingers. And

he stared at the letters Hank had mowed into his grass under dim glow of the streetlight. And he seemed not to react for enough time for Hank to make a few furtive steps, and then a few more, away. Just at the moment when he thought he might start running, Hank saw that Steven had stepped out of the woods to observe the madness before him.

Hank waved him off, and when he did so, he heard behind him a much more explosive "WHAT THE FUCK" so Hank started running in the direction of his son. He saw Steven start to run, too, but then stop, transfixed by some unnamed horror, as though a lich from one of his D&D games had risen from the grave. Hank did not look back, but grabbed Steven as he fled into the woods.

"You sons of bitches! I'll get your asses!" the SSOB yelled. Once inside the treeline, Hank could see his neighbor stomping around in his yard, peering into the darkness. He lost his robe and his rum and was now *au naturelle* except for his briefs. The sight fascinated in its pure repellency.

The plan had been to abort and scatter. That was good outlaw/guerrilla tactics. But now he didn't want to. The SSOB was drunk, but he might catch Steven if he heard them moving. And Hank could not abide the thought of that fat wasted half-naked fuck getting his crypt-keeper hands on his son. The risk was small but not small enough. He was going to have to take all the risk on himself.

"Where are you, you cocksuckers?" The SSOB yelled.

Hank leaned into Steven. "Run," he whispered. "I'll handle this." Steven looked at him with all the incredulity

that Hank felt about his own ability to do that, but he did not argue, but scampered off into the brush behind him.

That was all the SSOB needed. He came running in the direction of the sound of leaves on feet, charging like a bull at red, anything red. Hank stood up and flashed the LED light in the bastard's face. That stunned him, slowed him, but did not stop him. Which was fine. Good even. Because it gave Hank just the right time to discover what he'd really been wanting to for months, and to decide that now was the time to do it. He dropped the light, planted his feet, and timed a haymaker to land at the SSOB's jaw right at the moment it came within Hank's reach.

And he missed. He hit the bastard's ear, knocking him sideways into a tree. Hank himself lost his footing and fell over a root onto a stump. His back cracked in pain and his face twisted to avoid crying out and as the sound of his blood in his ears dropped, Hank could hear Steven's footfalls on the street far away.

Then he heard groaning. It might have been his or it might have been his neighbor's. After a minute, he decided it wasn't his. He also decided that he was probably okay. His fingers and toes wiggled on command. His back was sore, but he could sit up. He did so, and looked at his neighbor.

"Gene," said Hank.

Gene groaned.

"Gene, you all right?"

Gene groaned again, this time almost sounding like words.

"All right," Hank said, and got up. He still felt a little stiff in his back but was otherwise more or less functional. He

could move. He could get away.

As he was moving through the hill, the backyard lights to Gene's house came on, and very quickly thereafter a woman in a soft pink robe came out. She was a bottle-blond and Hank had no idea who the hell she was. He hid behind a tree.

"GEEeeeeEENE!" said the woman.

Gene made a low moaning sound. The woman approached with the careful precision of one absolutely ripped out of her mind, steps light and furtive and processed fully by the diminished brain before the next one came. When she got to Gene, she kneeled next to him and looked at him for a few minutes.

"Are you asleep?" said the woman. Gene responded with another slurred moan.

"Where's your robe, you fucking idiot?" said the woman. Another moan. Hank breathed softly and tried very hard to be an unmoving hole in reality, even as his instincts were telling him to bail when he had the chance.

"I don't understand what you're saying. I don't... I.. I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE SAYING. Why're you out here? WHAT'S GOING ON? What? Your lawn? Who gives a shit about your lawn? WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?" With the last, she swatted him hard on his hairy naked back.

Hank felt pity. He suppressed it.

"Fine, asshole. When you're done FUCKING AROUND, you can come back inside." Then she stood, wobbled, and sauntered, less carefully and with a near-fall when she got close to the door, back into the house.

Hank waited a while after the door closed. He heard

again the breeze in the treetops and again the screech-owl. Soon after, he heard Gene snoring.

It was a warm night. He'd be fine. Still, the thought of his pasty bulk being spotted by the neighbors in the morning...

Hank smiled. He stepped out from behind his tree, stepped over Gene, and walked into the yard. He shined his LED light for a few minutes in front of him and spotted the dark shape of Gene's tattered robe. He picked it up and carried it, one-handed, behind him back to where his disliked neighbor lay.

Before he covered Gene with the robe, Hank took out a phone and activated the camera.

"Smile, asshole," he said.

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Disposal

Ellie Fredericks left for her third year of college on the last day of August. Hank, her father, carefully and thoroughly packed her things into his truck. She was moving into an off-campus apartment this year, which would both free her from faux-parental university regulations and save her actual parents money. She was adding a minor to her academic plan this year and had a busy time in front of her. She thought of the next two years with a very satisfactory excitement.

Ellie got a hug from her mom and a dull "bye" from her sister and a stupid giggly expression - one they had shared since as long as either of them could remember, and which never stopped cracking both of them up - from her brother. Then she climbed into her father's truck and they pulled away from the house. As they left the cul-de-sac, her father very gingerly drove around the massive moving truck in Mr. Gleason's driveway.

Her father's expression betrayed no emotion at this sight, nor had he said a word about it, which struck Ellie as very unconvincing.

They stopped and got coffee, and sipped it as the local tree-lined roads gave way to concrete tunnels of the interstate. They talked of the future.

"I like the fact that you're adding a Statistics concentration," her father said.

"Got to study what's in demand," she said, smiling.

"Exactly," he said, "I don't see how people go \$50 grand in the hole on a liberal arts degree. It doesn't get you

anything except social pride."

"They're not thinking about it," Ellie said "College can be kind of a bubble sometimes."

"Yeah," said her father. "Army can be that, too. In a different way."

About halfway to university, they pulled into a gas station. Ellie stopped to go to the bathroom and her father gassed up the truck. When she came out, the truck wasn't there any more. She looked around the parking lot but did not see it. Alarmed, she reached her back pocket for her phone but it wasn't there - she had left it in the truck.

"What in the..." she said, before spotting the truck behind the gas station, by the dumpster. Her dad was out of the truck. She peered ahead, confused, and saw him take a phone out of his pocket, drop it onto the ground, and smash it with his foot several times, before gathering the mess and tossing it into the dumpster.

"Dad?" she called.

Her dad saw her and waved her over before getting in his truck. She got in and looked at him.

"Buckle up," he said.

"Dad, did you just throw out your phone?"

Her father looked into the rear view mirror. "I threw out a phone. Not my phone."

"You have more than one phone?"

"Not anymore."

"Okay..."

Her father looked at her. "It's nothing you need to worry about. I needed an extra phone for a specific task. The

task is over, and so is the need for the phone."

"But you destroyed it."

"Yeah, well, your mother insisted."

"Mom knows?"

"Of course. I was going to keep it, but..." he trailed off.

Ellie kept thinking there was something she was missing. Then she asked, "Dad, why did Mr. Gleason move out so suddenly?"

"You'll have to ask him."

"So you're saying that him resigning from the HOA board and then selling the house he's lived in for what, twenty years is a complete mystery to you?"

"Is that what I'm saying?"

"Dad."

Her father sighed. "Do you know how to keep a secret, Ellie?"

"Yes."

Her father smiled. "So do I. Now buckle up."

The truck carefully left the gas station.

THE END

About the Author

Andrew J. Patrick applies chemical compounds to sheets of compressed erstwhile plant life in patterns that create semiotic structure of meaning that others derive meaning from, even though they bear no resemblance to true events. I'm not an alien. What are you talking about? *You're* weird.

