

Story Excerpts

TO DO THE DEAL

A Novel in Stories



CATHY BAKER

Story Illustrations by GB Tran





Published by Demitasse Press
To Do the Deal, A Novel in Stories
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Epigraph, from *Little Man, What Now?* by Hans Fallada, translated from the German by Eric Sutton, is quoted here courtesy of Melville House Publishing, USA.

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“Christmas and the Car Salesman” was originally published as
“Like a Peddler Opening His Pack” in *Fluent* magazine.

Published in the United States by Demitasse Press
Bethesda, MD

ISBN: 9780991390427

Praise for *To Do the Deal, A Novel in Stories*

Baker is an observant and entertaining writer, even when the subdued plot unfurls without high drama or overt tension. Her clean, direct style refreshingly portrays the tender side of a relationship that could have ended badly. It also effectively underscores the awkward discussions that nearly every family endures.

Kirkus Reviews

To Do the Deal is a small wonder of a book—funny and poignant, with rich, true to life characters you can cheer for and worry about. With a keen observational eye, Cathy Baker brings the Bodines to life. This deal is done—consider me sold.

Zach Davis
Fiction Editor
Fluent
Magazine

Excerpt from

Take that Pull / 1991



If Kenneth had been the type of man who applied his sense for numbers to anniversaries, he might have realized: the yard sale was exactly two years and six months from the day he'd given Watermelon the boot. That whole scene had gone down at the Montgomery County Fair tractor pull, Labor Day 1988. They had been sitting on the last row of the grandstand's planked aluminum seating, not quite hip-to-hip as they might have been even a month earlier. They were watching a John Deere tractor painted an incongruous fire engine red make its attempt to pull 2,000 pounds. The horn sounded and the machine bolted down the track hauling its sled. Halfway across the field, it rose up and bucked like a bronco, belched a cloud of black smoke, and heaved down onto the track in a full stop. As the rescue tractor came out to hook up the John Deere and haul it away, Kenneth thought to himself, "I'm done."

Kenneth was not one to make a conscious connection between his own foundering relationship and a tractor that failed at the full pull. Jodi, however, whom he had not yet met but who was sitting three seats to his right, was more given to metaphorical thinking. She took the failed pull as a big slap on the forehead.

Here's what happened after the John Deere bounced to its humiliating end: Kenneth looked at Watermelon flirting with the stranger on her other side, a pasty-faced man who was politely accepting her attentions. He looked at the man's companion, a sweet- and unhappy-looking woman. She was wearing a ponytail much like his own, but hitched up higher on the head. He and the woman locked gazes for the briefest of moments. Then he stood up and turned to his girlfriend. "Make your own way home, Watermelon."

"Huh?" Her mouth was open in a circle, a trace of cotton candy on her lips and pink ear plugs poking through her hair. Kenneth wondered why he had allowed himself to be so fixated on this woman's melon-sized breasts that he had failed to notice her total lack of softness anywhere else. She stopped licking her cotton candy long enough to deliberately turn away.

But Kenneth was wise to this battle tactic. And one thing about him: when he was done, he was done. He was three strides down the aluminum staircase when he felt a hand on his arm. He turned around with irritation, but it was not Watermelon. It was the unhappy-looking woman. "I'm leaving, too." Kenneth gave this remark silent acknowledgement. The two of them loped down the grandstand steps before they could lose their collective nerve.

She was right beside him as he exited the stadium. But as they merged into the passing crowd of fairgoers, she moved off in a different direction—like the stranger that she was. Some unknown force of the universe compelled Kenneth to stride after her bobbing ponytail. He touched her on the arm, as she had touched his just moments before. She turned around. "Hey," he said. "I'm going on the Tilt-a-Whirl. Want to come?"

Excerpt from

Sell Me / 1992



While he waited, Kenneth ran over the sales pitch. This was practiced at weekly meetings at company headquarters in Springfield, Virginia, just off Interstate 95. It was the only time in the week when Kenneth met with any of his colleagues. The eight of them sat in two rows of folding chairs in a windowless office that offered nothing but poorly laid carpeting to distract the mind from the lesson at hand. Fortunately, the sales manager, Monica, was a marketing genius whose malaprop tendencies helped Kenneth pay attention. She stood in front of her team in pointy high-heeled shoes and a stark, closely fitted suit that shouted no nonsense, and she pulled her dark-rimmed glasses off and on her nose with a vehemence that matched her rhetorical style. Indeed, she taught as if she had a half hour to save the earth. “Opening move—banter! Comment on the photos on the fridge.

Compliment the kitchen curtains. Three minutes! That’s all you have to make yourself a friend of the customer. Three minutes!”

With a black marker, Monica drew a triangle on easel paper. “Study this. The Freeze-Easy Trisosceles of Sales. The angles at the base: Convenience, Value. The pinnacle of the sales triangle: Quality. Shift from one angle to the next, until you close the sale. Questions?”

Kenneth was doodling dinosaurs on his notepad and so was caught off guard when Monica called on him to role-play. “You. Bodine. I’m Mrs. Smith. Sell me.” She sat herself down at a folding table next to the easel. She slouched. In a complete transformation, she was suddenly the tired mother of four, just come home from a long day in front of the word processor.

Fortunately Kenneth had studied the sales manual, and as he moved to the front of the classroom, he stepped into his part from memory. “Mrs. Smith, you live a busy life. Why should you waste time each week making the same route through the same supermarket aisles, picking out the same food?”

Monica sat up like a shot and rapped the table with her glasses. “Don’t pose anything as a question unless it can be answered by a YES. Try again!” She slouched back into the tired mother.

“Mrs. Smith, you live a busy life. You deserve better than to waste time each week schlepping around a grocery store, tossing the same foods into your cart.”

“Good enough. Next!” Monica pointed to a woman, new to the team, with unconvincing orange hair growing out from gray roots and who wore a long plaid kilt and a red cowl-necked sweater. She would have looked just right sitting by the fire at Christmas, cracking nuts with her grandchildren. Unfortunately, that was not where she was; she was in an office park in Northern Virginia. She lifted her body out of her chair, with motions that creaked resistance, and plopped herself heavily down opposite Monica, who immediately barked, “Sell me!”

The neophyte saleswoman looked around helplessly. Kenneth had talked to her before the sales meeting. She was a real-life mother of two grown children, recently separated, long out of the workforce, desperate for income.

Monica rapped again on the table. “Where are we on the triangle?” Her voice had the baying quality of a bloodhound.

A young man named Victor pointed at the easel. “He did Convenience. She should pitch Value.”

The kilted grandmother fidgeted in her chair. “But this isn’t how I would want to be sold something. I would want . . . ”

Monica interrupted with an admonishing snort. “It’s not about you! It’s about the empirically tested and proven Freeze-Easy method!” The sales manager dismissed the errant student and replaced her with Victor. Slender and serious, he was a handsome man of the greased-hair variety. Victor leaned, back straight, across the table toward Monica. “Mrs. Smith.” His voice had a spookily velveteen quality about it; Kenneth sensed that he intended to sell by seduction. “May I call you Gladys? Gladys—let’s talk about you, shall we? Right now, when you buy meat, how do you pay for it?”

Monica’s Gladys responded by leaning, mirror-like, toward her salesman. “How do I pay for it? You mean, by the pound?”

“Exactly! And how is grocery store meat packaged?”

“On a styrofoam tray. Wrapped in plastic.”

“Right again, Gladys. Excellent! But think about it—what’s between the tray and the meat?”

“You mean that little piece of cotton?”

“Yes again! The absorbent diaper.” Victor’s long fingers were splayed on the table in front of Gladys; Kenneth noted their calculated metaphorical entrapment of the customer. “Think about it. You’re paying by the pound for the moisture that’s been absorbed out of the meat, for the piece of paper that you’ll throw away with the tray.” The young man’s hands crept even closer so that they were on either side of the hands of Gladys. “Freeze-Easy Foods are shrink-wrapped and frozen. No diaper. You pay only for what you will eat. That’s value, Gladys, that’s value.”

There was silence as the protégé held his sales manager in a trance for a long, breath-held moment. Then Monica leaped out of the body of Gladys. “Sold!” She slammed both fists on the table. Victor’s classmates began clapping, but Monica immediately cut them off. She pointed to a middle-aged man sitting in the back row. He had a sullen expression on his face as he shuffled toward the hot seat. Kenneth knew a little of his back story. He had done a stint in car sales and for an unrevealed reason had fallen down the ladder into frozen foods. “Quality!” Monica barked at the poor wretch. “Sell me!”

Excerpt from

Owen the Impervious / 1993



Owen finally did have a complete meal with them, that Saturday evening. They dined out. It was Owen's idea: any young couple with a child needed a treat once in a while to keep things from going stale. Didn't they ever use a babysitter? They were heading in the Bodine car toward the Rio Grande, a relatively inexpensive Mexican restaurant in downtown Bethesda, but as they crossed Old Georgetown Road Owen spotted a place that brought back old memories: La Vieux Logis. Jodi and Kenneth had never eaten there, as French was above their pay scale. Jodi was sure that reservations would be necessary, but she was wrong. Just as Kenneth was about to open the door to the restaurant, Owen asked to borrow a ten. "For the maître d'—I didn't find a cash machine today." But he pocketed the bill, because no tip for a table was necessary: the restaurant was three-quarters empty.

Jodi wasn't sure that Owen's use of the word "treat" had been literal. She hedged her bets by splurging on a kir but ordering from the bottom of the menu. Kenneth had a beer while Owen sipped on a highball, which had the effect of loosening his tongue. Between bites he talked about running for the citizens' assembly and his platform positions, his constituents, his adversaries in the legislature, his reelection, and the problematic challenge to his incumbency. He talked about his sideline in real estate and his former career in mainframe computer sales and his early retirement to make spiritual journeys to India, Machu Pichu, and a very special Trappist monastery in Willamette Valley where he had his own cell and was essentially an honorary brother.

Kenneth said hardly a thing, and Jodi, despite trying, was not able to insert much besides "Oh, really?" and "That must've been nice." She didn't mind at first, because she was sinking into a delicious inebrium, given that she had grown unused to alcohol since becoming pregnant and then a nursing mother. Besides, Owen's voice was both sonorous and soft: pleasing to listen to even as background noise. But by the time the main course was over, she was getting annoyed. Her father-in-law had told them everything about himself as a man in the world without revealing a thing about himself as a man in a family. His dinnertime prattle confirmed what Jodi had already grasped: that Owen had no ability whatsoever to verbally express interest in his son. After the waiter interrupted to describe desserts, Jodi decided to commandeer the conversation. She prodded her husband. "Tell him about your new job, honey."

"It's just a job." Kenneth had consumed his plate plus what Jodi hadn't eaten, and he was leaning back comfortably. His answer seemed to come not from modesty or shame, but from a state of happy relaxation: it was too much bother to talk about work. So Jodi told Owen about Kenneth's job. He was employed by Contract Sourcing Corporation, in a very nice building in McLean, that had a marble lobby, and his title was Contract Sourcer. After those few facts, saddled on a second kir and a full meal, Jodi found the rest of the telling a little more difficult. It was hard to describe in a sentence what Kenneth did; it was not the kind of job that any vocational test would

declare one's aptitude for. The entire quasi-industry he worked within was a late twentieth-century invention, a creation of capitalists capitalizing on capitalism—an enterprise to sluice another company's profits over to one's own. It was hard to glorify, really. It was work that anyone who was not stoned could do. And, although Jodi did not know this yet, it was not a position with growth potential. In fact, Kenneth and his cubicle mates would all lose their jobs within the year when Contract Sourcing Corporation chose to outsource first to Arkansas and then to India. So if Jodi had spoken bluntly, she would have said that Kenneth was a call center operator who wore a tie to work. Instead, she sat upright to pull her thoughts together. Then she nestled her chair closer to Kenneth's, put her arm through his, and explained to his father that he served a large portfolio of clients who were apartment and building-complex managers, and the services he provided were supplier evaluation, competitive bid acquisition, price negotiation, and contract management for quantity purchasing of products and services, all by telephone and Internet, so that managers would not have to do that laborious work themselves and could instead turn it over to specialists like Kenneth. Such as, for example, finding painters and carpenters, parking-lot blacktopping, insect extermination, and—

Owen interrupted. "You know where the real future is. Jet sales. I'm thinking about going into jet sales myself."

Excerpt from

To Do the Deal at Bed & Bunk / 1994



At five o'clock Kenneth's up entered the store. He was a middle-aged man with a briefcase in one hand and a plastic bag from the video store in the other.

Kenneth allowed the customer a few minutes to look around unmolested. Then he approached. He put on his melodic greeting voice, the one Jodi said reminded her of the trash can their daughter Bonnie liked so much, the trash receptacle at Cabin John Park that was decorated with a pig's head and that, when you opened its door to insert garbage, would sing through some hidden speaker, *thank you! thank you! oink oink oink!*

In this voice Kenneth said, "Hello! What great things are happening to you today?"

Kenneth immediately thought: What a stupid thing to say. Yet this was how Bed & Bunk trained its salespeople to greet customers. These were "winning words," the trainer had said. Even so, it was a stupid sentence.

Yet the winning words evoked a response, an opening. "Nothing," the customer said. "Nothing great's happened to me today."

"Here comes the good news, then! We have several mattresses on special discount."

"I'm just browsing."

Kenneth knew that people tended not to enter mattress stores to browse. Such showrooms did not have browsable wares compared to, say, consignment stores or housewares departments. Out loud he said—again in the amiable pig voice—"I'm here to help you, sir, when you're ready."

The man wandered in a disorganized pattern among the mattresses. Kenneth retreated to a desk in the rear. He pretended to do paperwork. Actually he worked on the math puzzle from the preceding day's newspaper while keeping a furtive eye on his up.

The man stopped before the Z-Z Dream. He pushed down on the mattress with his hand, sat on it, twisted around to look at it, checked the price tag hanging off the side.

Kenneth sauntered casually over toward the Z-Z Dream. He straightened a signboard along the way as though that were his purpose.

"I see you have good taste—or should I say, a good sense of touch." He chuckled, to indicate that this was a joke. "Isn't that mattress extremely comfortable?"

The customer frowned. “Mattresses are so high off the ground nowadays.”

“How old is the mattress you have?”

“Don’t know. Sixteen, seventeen years? It sags in the middle. My wife and I roll into each other.”

“A bed is more than a comfortable night’s sleep. It’s an investment in your daytime productivity.” Kenneth had such lines memorized.

“It’s a lot of money.”

“Hardly more than a quarter a day, amortized over its lifetime.”

The customer asked Kenneth the typical questions about warranties, free delivery, removal of the despised old mattress. Kenneth answered the questions and then walked back to his desk. Customers need space to think.

After a few moments, the man approached the rear. Kenneth pretended to be too engrossed in paperwork to notice.

“Excuse me.”

“Oh! Yes, sir?”

“How do I know if I want a hard or a soft mattress?”

“Good question, sir. Intelligent question. Come over here.”

Jodi, who liked to hear the play-by-plays when Kenneth came home from work, had nicknamed this stage of the game “the Goldilocks test.” Along the side wall of the floor stood three mattresses in a row: one soft, one hard, one medium. Customers would be instructed to lie down fully on each one. According to Bed & Bunk sales training, the primary purpose of this procedure was to give customers a sense of various mattress densities. It was Jodi’s opinion that this also served to make customers feel foolish and vulnerable, as if they have made use of property that wasn’t theirs and owed the store something.

Kenneth’s customer decided he preferred the medium-density mattress. “More or less. I think.” Kenneth led him over to a model in the middle of the Bed & Bunk price range. He would move the customer up or down from there, depending on which way he looked. As the man sat on the medium-density, middle-model mattress, he looked toward the front of the store. This meant he was willing to spend more, according to Kenneth’s compass.

With one or two stops along the way, Kenneth was able to maneuver the man all the way back to the Z-Z Dream. “You can really feel the difference, can’t you?” The man sat on the Z-Z Dream,

then tried other beds, sitting down on them, bouncing his backside on them, patting them, looking hard at them, frowning. It was always the same.

They began to discuss price.

“Today you save \$200 off the Z-Z Dream. That’s a handsome deal. This particular manufacturer rarely reduces its prices.”

The man had moved of his own accord back to the Z-Z Dream. In a capricious and unexpected motion, he lay back on it. He sighed, deeply. Kenneth sensed that he was almost ready to close. But instead the customer sat up suddenly, very straight.

“I can’t make this purchase without checking with my wife.”

“What’s to check about? You need a mattress, I have a mattress. She’ll be delighted that you made this decision.”

“I dunno, she loves to shop. Maybe I should bring her in.”

“If we write up the sale now, you can be getting a good night’s sleep as soon as tomorrow night. It’ll be a second honeymoon. Your wife would like that, wouldn’t she?”

The man started to walk toward the door. “Thanks all the same. I have to think about it.”

“Tell you what. You say yes right now and I can ask my manager to knock another hundred dollars off the price.” There was no manager in the store. There was a district manager, available by telephone, but Kenneth would not be calling him. Kenneth was free to take a hundred dollars off—free to reduce his own commission.

The man hesitated.

Kenneth continued. “It’s a tedious thing, sir, to buy a mattress. It’s not like buying a yacht. There’s no sense in drawing this out. How about we make a deal?”

Excerpt from

A Short Career at the Cathedral Arms / 1995



By seven the next morning, fourteen inches of snow were on the ground, and it was still snowing thickly. Kenneth hooked a lift to work from a neighbor who had a sports utility vehicle and was heading out for the fun of it. When he arrived at the Cathedral Arms, Fred was already shoveling outside Building E, but Hector and Jackson had not yet made it in. Kenneth went to the basement to grab another shovel.

Two hours later he was in his office, trying to warm his fingers over the radiator, when the phone rang. It was Gutermann calling from his truck phone out front, and he was furious. “What have you been doing all morning, playing checkers? The sidewalks are a mess.” He commanded Kenneth to come outside.

The truck was idling in front of Building E. Kenneth stepped in to the heat of the cab and the noise of talk radio. Gutermann picked up a thermos off the floor, poured hot chocolate into the cap, took a sip, and handed it to Kenneth to hold for him while he drove. He cruised slowly alongside the apartments and hectored Kenneth, who quickly realized that his boss was more offended by the smirch marks of pets, starkly visible against the white snow, than he was by the condition of the sidewalks, which were actually in pretty decent shape. “It’s your job to be out there, Kenny boy. Make sure it’s done right and looks right. You can’t let Fred shoulder it alone.”

Gutermann turned the corner and drove into the alley, riding into foot-high snow. “Where are those idiots?” He shifted into park and picked up his truck phone. “I pay a season contract for plowing, and this is what I get?” It was at that moment, framed by the noise of the idling motor and the agitated talk radio host, that Kenneth saw the footprints. They were deep in the snow and half-refilled, extending outward in a curved line from the recently revealed metal door in Building C to the far end of the alley. He looked over at Gutermann, and saw that his boss was looking at the footprints too, growling, “What the goddamn daylight.” He turned off the engine and jumped out of the truck. Kenneth did likewise. They tramped over to the door, and Gutermann tugged it open against a bank of snow. A spray of white skated across the floor as they stepped inside. Gutermann took a long glance at the blanket neatly folded on its pile of newspapers. He opened the garbage bag and kicked at it to spill out the contents. “Goddamn.” His breath was visible. “You’ve got a tenant who’s not paying rent.”

“I don’t believe anybody could live in here, Mr. Gutermann.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

Gutermann trudged back to the truck and Kenneth followed. They drove around to the front. “Okay, get out. Fix the snow. And get a lock for that door. It’s a liability.”

Excerpt from

One Sunday / 1996



"I'm driving," said Kenneth. Jodi sighed. Kenneth did not like to talk while driving. She did not understand why. She could acknowledge that he was a good driver and that he rarely swerved or made a wrong exit. But still. Wasn't he good enough to drive and talk? Why be in a car with someone and not talk? Perhaps this was her cross in life to bear—a husband who did not much care to talk. Well, as crosses go, it wasn't much—yet still, sometimes it was.

Jodi inserted a tolerable children's tape—a folk singer doing old standards, *she swallowed a fly, I don't know why she swallowed a fly, perhaps she'll die*—and pulled a notepad out of the diaper bag to make lists. It made her feel like she was getting somewhere, to make lists of what she had to do.

She was on item twelve by the time Kenneth had driven through the neighborhood to River Road and the entrance to the Beltway. She felt the car accelerate and suddenly slow down again. She looked up to see that they were tangled in a Sunday traffic jam. Minutes passed. Jodi could feel the tension emanating from the surrounding vehicles and piercing through the windshield of their car. She could tell that Kenneth also was affected. He said nothing, but he had taken his right hand off the steering wheel to shove the knuckles into the dent above his chin.

When they finally inched forward and reached the fulcrum of the delay, the cause turned out to be what it so often was: rubberneckers. There were no obstructions on the Bodines' side of the highway—no overturned tractor-trailer, no debris spill, no fender-bendered car that needed hauling away. But past her husband's profile, on the other side of the divider, in the closest lane, Jodi saw something she had never seen before, something so unexpected, so implausible, that she was not surprised that drivers in both directions had slowed down to stare.

It was a tableau vivant: live actors in a not-quite-frozen moment. The stage was an empty span of ground-level concrete bracketed by two commercial vehicles, and the cars traveling south were backdrop to the stage as viewed by the audience in cars slowly moving north. The scene itself was from an unscripted play that would be presented only once. The cast was small: two men and a deer.

Time unfolded in silence as the Bodine minivan passed by, stage right to stage left. Jodi saw first the commercial truck with its flashers blinking, abandoned by its driver as though the sixty-five-mile-an-hour lane were a parking lot. Then she saw, on the pavement, the deer, a doe, legs folded underneath as they might have been in a bed of grass. The deer was alive—she could tell by its very large, wide-open eyes. There was no sign of injury or blood. Around the deer's neck were the arms of a man sitting on the ground and leaning against the animal. One of the man's legs was out in front of him, his knee bent and his booted foot firmly on the ground in a braced position. Jodi saw that the man wore the shorts of a dark-colored uniform and that the outstretched leg was very tan. About five feet away, near a white van that, like the commercial truck, was parked with flashers blinking, stood a second man. He was holding a mobile phone to

his ear. That was what Jodi saw. Then the Bodine minivan moved past, the logjam opened up, and Kenneth accelerated to seventy miles per hour.

Jodi was breathless. She was gripped by the idea that the deer had looked into her own eyes. She knew it was an illusion. A deer's large brown eyes can seem to be all focused iris, but they are not. Nonetheless she had felt, for an instant, completely inside the animal.

Jodi turned to look out the back window. She saw Bonnie twisting in her booster seat. But the younger child, Betty, was undisturbed and eating cereal pieces out of a yellow container. Jodi turned and looked at Kenneth. He was staring straight ahead. She asked, "Did you see that?"

"It was stupid. Drivers are stupid."

Jodi realized that of course Kenneth had barely glanced over. It was not his business, and so he was not curious. He had kept his eyes on his own side of the highway, as, from his point of view, every driver always should.

It outraged her that he had not been moved—that he had not even turned to look in order to be moved. On the other hand, as she often had to remind herself, in a crisis Kenneth was the kind of man to have around. He would neither panic nor pity. He would simply stay focused. If the world ever came to an end, he would lead his family to safety by the fastest route, and he would not be waylaid by the plight of others.

Excerpt from

Humble Farmer / 1997



On the following Wednesday, Kenneth's day off was interrupted again by the return visit of the certified career management coach. Dexter DeWinter handed Kenneth his analysis, prettily prepared in a navy blue folder. There were bar charts and percentages and a succinct summary of Kenneth's multiple propensities. Kenneth scanned it and laughed out loud. "I have an aptitude for farming?"

"You need to interpret that broadly, Mr. Bodine. May I call you Ken? We'll get to what that means in a minute. There's, uh, a procedure for interpreting this material."

"But really. Farming?"

"We can simply take it to mean that you have an inclination for the outdoors or that you like to make things grow."

"This is like Tarot?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. The first step is to discuss goals. What are your goals, Ken?"

"What do you mean by goals?"

The career management coach pondered the question. "Uh. What you want out of life. What you hope to accomplish."

"Give me some examples." Kenneth was playing with Dexter DeWinter, trying to knock him off script.

"Well, uh — my goals, for example. Short term, I'd like to drive a Ferrari. Long term, I'd like to retire at fifty."

Suddenly Kenneth was interested. "I saw you drive up in an '86 Chevy Cavalier. A station wagon."

For a moment Dexter looked embarrassed. Kenneth didn't press the point, and to further make up for his unfair advantage, he said, "I guess I'll start with your three-session package."

"But I haven't walked you through the program yet!"

"Do you want it or not?"

"No. Yes. Of course. Let me pull out a contract."

Even after signing on the dotted line, Kenneth was unable to avoid being walked through the program, although he was able to speed Dexter through the process without the young man realizing it. After Kenneth learned that he also showed an aptitude for engineering, for veterinary science, and for computer programming—in short, for just about anything except working with people—he escorted Dexter to the door. They shook hands, and the car salesman handed the career coach his business card. “I don’t sell Ferraris, but maybe I can move you a little closer to your goalposts.”

Excerpt from

Christmas and the Car Salesman / 1998



As a distracted Kenneth walked away from the wash bay, he heard his name being paged. He entered the showroom and approached the manager's counter.

"This price for the SUV you sold customer Hovey, it's not what I approved." The manager was looking at paperwork and sweating.

"The SUV for Santa? I had to close the deal, Mickey. Like you say: 'Every deal's a deal.'"

"You should get my approval."

"Look, Mickey, Santa's financing with us."

"He is? Never mind. Go away."

Kenneth turned back to the hallway and walked toward Aftermarket. Felsenstadt of the QZ4 purchase was now hemming and hawing over undercoating and an alarm system with a weary Vivienne. Kenneth continued down and turned right, where Finance had its cubicles. The first was empty, but in the second sat Nestor with Santa and the elf. Nestor looked up at Kenneth with relief.

"Temporary tags, title, lease papers, we're finished!" he exclaimed. "Kenny will take care of you now, happy holidays, it's been a pleasure!"

The two men in costume looked up at Kenneth. He bared his teeth in a smile. "So. I'll take you to my office, where you can wait while I bring your car around. Okay. Just a few more minutes and you'll be on your way."

"Ho ho ho!" said Santa.

"What a rigmarole," said the elf.

Kenneth's heart sank as he realized that finishing with this pair would not be just another few minutes: every exchange would take twice as long as with normal people.

"What kind of vehicle are you looking for?" Kenneth had asked when, two hours earlier, he had first tried to qualify his red-clad customer.

"Ho ho ho!"

"A big one, duh."

“Sport utility vehicle? If you order, we can get you anything you like. If you want to drive away today, we have several models to choose from on the lot.”

“Ho ho ho!”

“Look, bud, we wouldn’t be here Christmas Eve if we wanted to order a car that comes in six weeks.”

“Here’s one that’s nicely decked out”—Kenneth tapped on his keyboard and pulled up the inventory list—“Jet black with leather interior. We also have a black in stock with the premium bumper package. Which one interests you more?”

“Ho ho ho!”

“What are you thinking? Black is for morticians.”

The triangulated conversation took on even pointier edges when they started talking price.

“This one comes to thirty-eight-five.”

“Ho ho ho!”

“Don’t give him your retail price, Commission Boy. Give him the price you’d give your mother.”

“Well, I can’t reduce it by much. But if we close the deal right now, perhaps the manager will let me throw in some floor mats and . . .”

“Ho ho ho!”

“Hello, we’re talking dollars here. Santa doesn’t want trinkets. He wants the best price on that car.”

So it had gone, all the way to a below-dealer-invoice thirty-two-five, and so it was sure to go through the final steps.

Excerpt from

Three Days / 1999



She was in the spare bedroom where the computer was set up, putting paper in the printer, when the plumber reentered the house. She looked up to see him standing in the doorway of the bedroom, with a new disposal under one arm. “Your husband’s a good man. He sold me that truck out there.”

“Yes, he’s good.”

“Do you love him?”

Jodi felt slightly trapped, in a bedroom with a stranger in the doorway asking such a personal question, but she would have felt far more uneasy if the plumber had not looked so vulnerable. And so she allowed herself to consider. How does one answer such a question? To say to a stranger, “Yes, I love my husband,” seemed like a violation of her own privacy. To answer the question at all, without addressing the nuances of love after ten years of marriage, seemed dishonest. So all she said was, “Is that a typical plumbing question?”

But the man in the doorway did not seem to hear her; he seemed somewhere else. “My girlfriend walked out on me last night. God! That hit me like a two-by-four.”

He leaned against the doorframe with a defeated motion. Jodi could hear her little girls in the dining room, chattering as they made their flags. They were both prolific crayoners, and she estimated they would be occupied for the duration of at least a five-minute confession. So she sat down in the chair by her computer and forced herself to be, against her nature, silent.

The plumber’s head was hanging down like a little boy’s. “I’m so low the groundhog’s going to have to deliver my mail.”

I need to remember that line, Jodi thought.

“She says”—he imitated a woman’s voice—“there’s no passion. We’ve never had any passion.’ How does *she* know?”

“I suppose she’s speaking for herself.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. If you could see her when, when . . . you wouldn’t think there isn’t any *passion*.”

Jodi wanted to stop him, for his own sake. But, she told herself, he might have no one else to whom he could unburden himself. And his wound was fresh. So for his sake she let him continue. Plus, he was beginning to remind her more and more of what Kenneth might have

looked like, had he been blond and not cut his ponytail and kept a hard, tight body and gone to plumbing school instead of meandering through a variety of careers. She felt her own keen need to know this man's story.

The plumber must have read her silence as an invitation, because he came into the room and sat on the bed. Jodi was suddenly, keenly, aware that her husband was not at home. At the same time, she felt an electrical charge in her scalp. My day is not boring, she thought.

The plumber began talking into his lap, his head down, his ponytail hanging over his shoulder within arm's reach of Jodi. "We've been together five years. Five years!" He looked up at his customer with eyes so mournful she had to look away. "I've had clear intentions all along, but Lauren, she's always been evasive. She's never, ever told me she loves me. Every once in a while that gets to you, you know? So I made the mistake of pressing her. She didn't say yes and she didn't say no, but then she just jumped up and said—" he stopped himself. "Oh, I can't even say what she said next."

Jodi had the sense he was replaying the scene to himself as much as to her. She had begun to appreciate his voice. It was soft, and it glided up and down in its low register in a way that made her want to lean into it, like a boat leans into waves.

"She got up from the kitchen table," the plumber was saying, "and grabbed my keys and took my truck to her ma's. I don't think she was even thinking, or why would she take my new truck? I had to get a ride from my neighbor over to her ma's, because she had the keys to her own car in her pocket. I guess. I couldn't find them."

He let out his breath in a half sigh, half chuckle. "But that was just for starters. There's Lauren at the upstairs window of her ma's house, wailing. Her ma barricading the front door but crying all the same. Dogs baying. Me pleading from the street. Even the neighbor that brought me was bawling. There was more blubber being spilled than you can carve out of a walrus gut."

Jodi was buffeted by conflicting desires to run, to wrap her arms around this sadness, and to listen for more metaphors, but she felt certain that the plumber was submerging into a flood of indiscriminate disclosure. She did not know how to stop him, but she did not want to make herself stop him, either.

Excerpt from

What Now, Kenny Boy? / 2000

To Do the Deal by Cathy Baker

Story illustrations by GB Tran



Kenneth's vision of a nightclub bouncer career gave way quickly enough after he had a chat Thursday afternoon with Samir, his best friend at Nicholson Motors. Samir was working mortgage deals on the side. By his report it was the green grass on the other side of the straight-commission fence. "I closed six this month," Samir reported nonchalantly. "I flipped two houses. I am on track to make a million dollars."

"How much really?"

Samir was coy. He would not say how much he was making, but he implied that he had two girlfriends now and that clients were beating down his doors.

"Can you get me a spot with whoever you're working for?"

Samir was coy again, so Kenneth went looking for his own perch in mortgage sales. He scanned his rolodex of customers and came across the name of Vicki Redlin. He remembered her: artificially friendly, confident in a titanic sort of way, executive officer of Vicki Redlin Mortgage Brokers. He hadn't so much sold her a car as gotten out of her way while she sashayed into a five-under-invoice deal of the century. After sorting through the random bits of career advice his wife had been tossing across the bed pillows, Kenneth gave Vicki a call. He asked if he could come by for an informational interview.

"You want me to hire you?" Vicki said this by way of hello when Kenneth arrived at her office late Friday afternoon.

"I'm merely looking for guidance. Though I know I could be an asset to your team."

Vicki's response was a hot rasp of laughter. She was a smoker. This had been made clear by the odor that greeted Kenneth when he stepped into her office. Also, the ashtray on her desk was a giveaway. Who has ashtrays anymore, Kenneth wondered, and then answered his own question: smokers who own their own companies.

The office was in a nondescript building in a bland section of downtown Bethesda, next door to a public parking garage. It was sparsely decorated. Nothing about it shouted wealth. Kenneth inferred that since Vicki did her business by phone and in the field, she had made the ruthless decision not to waste a penny on gilded wallpaper. The woman herself, though, was heavily appointed. Her appearance began and ended with her fingernails, which were long and pointed and shellacked a dark red. They, and the several gold rings that adorned her fingers, gave her

hands a dangerous glamour. Kenneth could easily picture them alternately petting a Persian cat and gouging out a lover's eyes. Vicki's figure, too, was imposing. She had a large frame, solid with curves. At the moment it was strapped into a navy suit that rustled with the sound of quality fabric when she moved. Beneath the suit jacket, Vicki wore a red silk camisole that served as backdrop for a triple-stranded gold necklace. She wore her mouth thickly painted red to match the nails and outlined in a nearly black color, to jarring effect. Her eyelashes were false, her eyebrows were exaggerated by heavy application of pencil, her hair was extended by what had to be a three-quarters wig, and her earring loops were large enough to jump through. It was overdone but it worked. The overall impression was of an exceedingly well-put-together steamroller of mature but uncertain age. Kenneth had been fascinated by her appearance when he had sold her a car, and he was fascinated again. It was hard not to stare.

"I'm not interested in taking on any slackers." Vicki said this with a vehement exhale. A cigarette had materialized in her hand, and the smoke came out through both mouth and nose. "Are you a slacker?"

"I sold 212 cars last year."

"I remember you." Vicki looked at Kenneth with a shrewd narrowing of her fantastic eyebrows. "I came in for anything serviceable so long as it was new and shiny and had custom wheel rims. Next thing I know, I'm driving out of the lot with some big SUV under my ass. Very impressive."

"Thank you."

"It's not bad, sitting up high like a tow-truck driver."

"I knew you would like it. That's my job."

"Smooth." Vicki stubbed out her cigarette—that is to say, she flogged it to death against the ashtray. She pulled a lipstick out of her desk and reapplied it. Kenneth struggled to find the right place to focus his eyes. He decided to simply keep looking across the desk.

Vicki tossed the lipstick inside the drawer and slammed it shut. She leaned forward. "All right. We've got a rare chance to make some pocket change in mortgage sales, but it won't last forever. If you come to work for Vicki Redlin, I make money, you make money, we all make money. But you've got to work your tail off. Like I said, I don't want any slackers. You work for me, you can't sit around picking your teeth. Tell me, can you do a yeoman's labor?"

Kenneth didn't know what a yeoman was. Jodi would know, but he didn't. "Yes. Sign me up."

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