

from Juked #4  
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## *Other Habits*

"YOUR WINDOWS ARE open."

I recognized the man but couldn't place him. When I answered the door, there he was.

"In the alley, I saw these windows, one-two-three, just wide open."

I knew him. I knew that I knew him. The slurred speech was part of it.

"You should be more careful, fine woman like you. I have a key somewhere . . ." and he patted his pockets like the discovery of a key would be important to me. Which it would, of course.

Of course. He worked for the landlady. We'd seen him painting the storage loft in back, but that was months ago. Hadn't she fired him? I'd heard that somewhere. We'd heard stories about this man from the other tenants.

"Damn it! Excuse me, my language. Look at these windows, no screens, but that's her fault, not mine, heh. You can see right in there, even," and here he lowered his voice to a wet whisper, "even in the bathroom."

Lou Diamond Phillips, without the diamond. He reminded me of La Bamba, that bronze baby face, only more down-and-out, less fresh. An older La Bamba, greasy and gaunt, as La Bamba might look after chasing a habit for some desperate

span of time. La Bamba smelled, sweat mixed with gin, and tottered in place. There was spittle stuck to his lower lip.

"Because you never know who's looking in there. Bam! Heh, it's just right there when you look."

I thanked him for his concern, to end the conversation. He twisted his neck to look inside the apartment, a clear expression of his desire to be asked in, maybe for a refreshing lemonade or a tall glass of ice water, but I shut the door and locked it in his face.

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I was on the phone with Gabe's parents three days later when he came back. This phone call was a weekly tradition that none of us could stand to break. Gabe's mother did most of the talking, but his father always chimed in near the end of the conversation with a piece of advice: the basics of retirement planning, the necessity of frequent oil changes, how to fix a toilet, how to play husband and do the things that his son should be doing. Gabe's father was a godsend.

I put them on hold and shut the windows, closed the blinds. The trash cans for our apartment, plus the other three apartments, plus the two recycling bins, stood in the alley, all in a row beneath our bedroom window. When I parted the blinds, there he was, same baseball cap, same windbreaker and frayed jeans. I watched La Bamba cross the alley toward the neighbor's row of trash cans, watched him rifle through the contents, moving them from one bin to another to get at the stuff on bottom. He found three beer cans but only managed to crush two before tripping over his own feet.

Gabe hated our trash cans. Not the actual cans, but their location. I remember the first time he woke up, jumped out of bed and stood there naked, his body stippled with light from the alley. Sound rang through the middle of the night, like someone was in the room. It sounded like tin cans, plucked singly, thrown to the

pavement and crushed under the heel of some rude scavenger. We started wearing earplugs the next night.

I told Gabe's parents that I'd call them back and went into the kitchen to fix myself a drink. La Bamba was still there, passed out in a heap against the alley wall, and I watched him breathe for a while. Before the ice cubes could melt, he'd picked himself up and moved on to someone else's trash.

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Gabe was a bourbon drinker. I'd always stuck to wine, but now he was gone and there seemed no point to propriety. When I told Gabe's parents about the drunk in our alley, they said, "Take care of yourself. It's just you now so you'll need to be stronger than before." Bourbon's a stronger drink. I certainly feel stronger drinking it.

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The pastor came to visit after the accident. I tried to be nice but Gabe was the churchgoer, not me. Gabe was always the one to participate in things, to build friendly communities and get deeply involved in them. I made some coffee and offered the pastor a cup. We sat together in the living room for the better part of an hour while she offered condolences, her personal condolences and the condolences of her entire congregation and the condolences that Jesus might offer to someone in my situation. Most of the time, I thought about our new apartment. I thought about ways to make the rent until the insurance money cleared. I wondered what I should do with his clothes. I tried to remember how to program the air-conditioning. But I must have seemed appreciative, or at least attentive, because the pastor eventually left. She said, "There's a family waiting for you every Sunday," and handed me a book, a small leather book full of proverbs. Surely she meant it to lift my spirits, but it just made me feel

heavy, too heavy to lift something as solid as the emptiness where Gabe used to be.

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The old storage loft wanted to be a luxury duplex but was slow to convert. The landlady lacked construction experience and she tended to hire incompetent people. We'd hear them fiddling with loud tools in the breezeway off the alley. Their radio carried on the breeze through our bathroom window, along with their sawing or nailing or whatever that day's project might be. I was sitting on the toilet, listening to salsa music, when La Bamba's mesh cap passed by the window. This was maybe ten days after the knock at our door.

"Ramon, you there? Ramon!"

I didn't flush. I wanted to keep quiet and watch them through the blinds.

La Bamba had a paper bag and they took turns drinking from it. Or I imagined them drinking in turns, after they turned the corner in the alley and all I could see of them were flashes: a sweaty back, a paint-splattered boot, a reaching hand. It was a good guess because five minutes later, La Bamba pulled an oversize can from the bag, crushed it underfoot and placed the collapsed metal in his pocket.

They walked farther down the alley, out of sight, no doubt toward a liquor store. When they were gone, I followed out the back door, down the steps, through the breezeway, down the alley and picked up the discarded bag. I dug my face in it and drew a deep breath. It smelled clean. It smelled like pressed paper and cold beer. A rough smell, but somehow familiar and masculine. I took the bag inside with me and placed it on the table next to the front door, the table where Gabe used to sort the mail. He'd go through and throw out the junk, make a pile for bills and another for everything else worth saving. This was one of his jobs, something he liked to do for us. The table had been empty for ten

months before I put the paper bag there. It sat there, creased and crinkled but still upright.

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I'm not sure what the pastor would say about forming habits, coming to rely on them, but that's how I got by. I suppose she'd have to support certain habits, like prayer or Bible study, but not others. I continued to call Gabe's parents every week. Each night, I set our alarm clock, put in earplugs and tried to fall asleep without thinking too many empty thoughts. After work, I fixed myself a drink, at first white wine and later bourbon. And I made new habits when the old ones lost their hold. I started reading the book of proverbs again. The heaviness set in, but I found a way to lighten it. On my way out the door in the morning, I'd rip out a page and read its proverb – *For my husband is not home; he has gone on a long journey* – and I'd use this to jog a memory – Gabe packing the trunk for a camping trip, trying to fit a long tent in a short space. I'd write the memory down. I'd fold the page in half, then in quarters, then in eighths and toss it in the paper bag. *Blows that wound cleanse away evil*; Gabe with his thumb under cold water, angry after cutting himself with a kitchen knife. *Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off*; Gabe behind me, rubbing my neck and kissing the top of my head as I watched TV from the couch. This became one of my jobs, to fill up the paper bag with little scraps of memory, one little memory at a time.

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About a month after that first knock, on a beautiful fall day with crisp breezes and all of the windows open, I heard a crash inside the apartment. More like a heavy thud. I grabbed the axe handle beside my bed, a gift from Gabe's father, and found La Bamba face down on my bathroom floor.

He was pretty beat up. The exertion of pulling himself to the window ledge, a full five-foot pull-up, and the subsequent challenge of squeezing himself through the narrow wooden frame, these were part of it, but something else had gotten to him. La Bamba latched onto the toilet and looked up at me with a face full of cuts and bruises.

"Wide open . . . fine lady . . . careful."

Absolutely trashed. Wasted. I knew this man. I was beginning to know him too well.

"Gimme a hand here."

And I did. I held the axe handle high in my right hand and pulled him with my left. I asked him what he was doing in my apartment. I asked him what he wanted, but his eyes went wet and blank.

"Your windows are open."

We got him to his feet and I pushed him out of the bathroom, toward the front door.

"Hold on now, just hold it. One drink, gimme one damn drink."

I told him to get out and never come back, to stop with the trash and the windows, to go away, somewhere far away. I told him that he didn't work here anymore. La Bamba propped himself against the refrigerator and took off his baseball cap, scratched his greasy hair.

I could have beaten him over the head with the axe handle, and I thought about that, how good that might feel. Or the police. I thought about calling them and having him arrested. Or a hug, I could have given him a big hug and told him that everything would be okay. We stood there in the kitchen and these many options crossed my mind before I made a decision. I got a bottle of bourbon from the liquor cabinet, pressed it into the small of his back and started pushing.

At the front door, he stopped. I told him to open it. You can have this bottle, I said, if you open that door and walk away. La Bamba looked confused, but he saw the paper bag on Gabe's

table and this seemed to make some sense to him. He grabbed the bag, then the bottle, and put the one in the other. While I stood there breathing, shaking my head but not saying anything, he opened the door and stepped out to the street. He headed for the alley and I wondered if he would ever come back, and if not, would I grow to miss him too.