

Thirty Seconds

We have coffee on the patio and talk about walking over to the Oriental Gardens two blocks away. Twenty miles away a young man is boarding the bay area transit train with a sawed-off shotgun under his trench coat. In my friend's condo, I take cream with my coffee. On the train, the young man goes to the back of the car and takes a seat.

Keith and I move into the living room where the sun catches the color of the flowers I brought him on the table. I say I miss California but am glad I moved back to Minnesota just the same with kids and grandkids calling me home. Keith says that's where you should be just about the time the train pulls into Hayward and the young man steps off the car onto the platform below.

I put on my tennis shoes, tie the laces. Thirty seconds. We should take BART into the city later, Keith says, catch dinner and a movie. I ask him if they've finished the town houses down by the train station they were working on when I left. Keith says I wouldn't recognize the area. There's a new city center, a different grocery store, and a large place for taxis to wait for trains.

The young man walks over to a taxi at the station. It is not the driver's lucky day. He is slightly taken aback by the surliness of the passenger, the tightly drawn trench coat but the young man is waving money in front of him and it's only a five block ride to the apartment complex near the Oriental Gardens. It's bright and sunny out. The taxi pulls away.

We stand up and leave about the time the taxi pulls in front of the garden two blocks away. I search for my car keys, thirty seconds. I say I have to go to the bathroom, thirty seconds. About the same time the young man opens his coat and takes out the sawed-off shotgun. He swings it at the driver's head. I am washing my hands, thirty seconds, while the taxi driver fights for his life. It's broad daylight. Sunday afternoon. Cars drive by, pull into the garden's parking lot, unaware. Couples stroll down the street, unaware.

I am leaving the bathroom when the young man exits the cab and the driver frantically drives away with a gash in his head and blood in his mouth. We are walking down the stairs of the condo as the young man walks across the bridge to the gardens.

It's a beautiful place, Keith says of the gardens. My parents loved it there when they were here in April. He tells me of the adjoining Community Theater that's often used

for senior citizen gatherings. We can play Bingo, he says. I laugh. Sure, I say, but I need my sunglasses that I left in the car. We stop at the garage. Half a minute goes by.

As we leave the complex, the young man walks into the theater. The sun is still bright, no clouds. People are on decks or watering lawns. A cat stretches above us on the narrow wall of a patio. The young man robs the theater director of his car keys, shoots him in the back when he tries to flee.

We should have brought a picnic lunch, I say. We're a block away from the garden. If we were looking we might have seen the young man exit the theater door and race through the parking lot looking for the director's car. But it's spring. We haven't seen each other for a couple of months. We are talking idle chitchat, absolutely nothing when the young man approaches a woman and her elderly mother who have just come out of a gathering at the community center. The woman has gotten her mother from the wheelchair into the passenger seat. Later I imagine the small talk: wasn't the lunch good, too bad you didn't win at cards. What are you going to do with the rest of the day, the daughter asks as she takes her keys from her purse. Seconds late the man grabs her, throws her to the ground as he grabs the keys. There are no words between the two of them, he is a silent fleeting figure with a plan.

We are a half a block away. We've stopped on the bridge to admire the beautiful hibiscus off to the side. There is one that is intensely apricot. I say if I was a flower, I'd want to be apricot. What am I? Keith asks. A nosegay, I say and we both laugh at that small understated comment about him coming out of the closet recently, a mighty act, I say, of man at thirty-nine. Later, in the safety we will talk about mighty acts like the last breath we take when we die, and small acts like taking a life while wielding a gun.

We start walking again as the young man walks to driver's side of the car and gets inside. With his feet, he pushes the older woman out of the passenger door. Nothing matters—that she had children, taught school for forty years, had been to Paris, was writing a book. He backs over her as he leaves the parking space, the car lifting slightly and then back down.

We hear the screech of brakes. We hear a woman screaming. We get to the far side of the bridge by the parking lot. We watch the car move away, watch the boy in the frame of the open car window, sawed-off shotgun resting across his arm. He turns his head to the left and looks at us as he drives away. It reminds me of an owl once flying out of my father's old barn. It was mighty and powerful and as it flew over us, it turned its head and looked down at us with cold glint steel eyes.

Someone comes running. Someone is yelling. A woman on the patio above us. Something about the police, something about being a nurse, something about getting help. The daughter is leaning down towards her mother, holding her up, saying words, looking at us, looking back down. There is violent shudder from the older woman and then she is gone.

Omigod, someone says from behind us. Did she just die?

There are sirens in the distance getting closer, the daughter breathing frantically into her mother's mouth, cars driving into the parking lot, children laughing, a couple strolling, a couple stopping, a couple lucky. Thirty seconds, thirty seconds.