

Better Days

by Mark Reep

The painters had taken off the switchcovers. I looked in the silverware drawer. No knives. A big kid in coveralls stood in the doorway unscrewing a long handle from a roller. Guessin' you ain't the electrician, he said. I said I used to live here, it was my stuff in the dumpster. He shook his head, sorry. Not on you, I said. You got a screwdriver? What for, he said. I flipped the dead porchlight switch, said I had a key stashed. He thought about it, left with the roller handle. In the front room tools clattered. He came back with a flatblade. The roller handle laid across his shoulder. I said you hit a mule with a stick, you just break the stick and piss off the mule. He grinned, stepped back. Just bein' careful. I said yeah, me too.

The false back I'd made for the box was a tight fit and I bent his screwdriver prying it out. The key was there, a small fold of bills. I peeled off a hundred. For the screwdriver, I said. The kid shook his head, made a pushing-away gesture. You need it worse'n I do right now, he said. Better days, you can buy me a beer. I shook my head. Won't be around. He shrugged. Thanks, I said. He nodded. I left.

Out front a beat pickup said Sullivan Constuction. The driver's visor was down and I put it up and tucked the hundred there. Down the block a cab stopped. An old man got out and the cab came on. I waved and it slowed but the driver changed his mind and didn't stop.

