

The Unknowable

by vic fortezza

Several plastic shopping bags entwined in each hand, Sal waited at an intersection as a car turned past him. It was one of those truncated vehicles he referred to as a death trap. The safest driver in the world was vulnerable to the loonies of the road, more so in something like that. And for what — to save a few dollars on gas? To show one was environmentally conscious?

Crazy, he said to himself.

He noted a decal on the rear bumper: Jesus Saves. Perhaps that explained the driver's self confidence. He wished he believed.

The four bags in his left hand were filled with empty plastic bottles, the three in his right with aluminum cans. He returned them every Friday. He avoided eye contact with passersby and admonished himself for being self conscious about the activity. Each morning during his hour walk, he collected containers eligible for deposit. Although it amounted to only a few bucks a week, it made a nice discount on Saturday's groceries. And it was tax-free, out of the reach of the grubby hands of government and its special interest groups, as was what he earned at various websites and selling his self-published books on the street. He was now part of the infamous underground economy. The latest wrinkle he'd seen was Latinas wheeling shopping carts or baby carriages that held a large vat, from which they dished home-cooked meals at five dollars a pop to compatriots who worked in stores along busy thoroughfares. He loved the way people found ways to make money.

He'd been out of work 14 months now and was still holding his own. He'd always been a saver, to the amusement of friends. In less than a year he would be eligible to withdraw funds from his retirement accounts. He was confident it wouldn't be necessary. And

he was less than four years from Social Security and Medicare, unless the politicians pulled a fast one to cover their sins. Fortunately, he was in good health and had no bad habits. He didn't mind paying for health insurance, although it was costly and daunting. He was disappointed he lacked the courage to eschew it. He'd been yelled at for 25 years. He no longer wanted to work for anyone but himself.

He was passed by a teenager, adorable despite being bundled from head to foot to ward off the bitter cold. She lived in the apartment complex, her parents Russian immigrants. He flushed hotly, certain she'd noted the bags.

Appearances, he thought, miffed he was influenced by them at this stage of his life. He feared people would pity him, although he was probably more secure financially than most. He had to stifle the urge to verbalize rationalizations, certain they would sound pathetic. He had to remind himself he wasn't doing anything wrong.

He spotted an adolescent Asian boy sporting a backpack, standing between parked cars, shouting to his brother across the three-laned street, which broke into a fork here. The older boy displayed the listless indifference of a teenager and obviously didn't want to be bothered. The younger moved a foot back as if bracing for a sprint, and glanced each way, rocking to generate momentum.

“Hey!” Sal cried, a ripping in his gut. “Hey!”

The boy froze. A van sped by in the middle lane. Sal rolled his eyes heavenward, relieved. His mind flashed back to the time he was struck by a car as a ten-year-old. Had he been a step faster, he would have been wiped from the face of the earth, no novels or short stories to show for his existence.

And the world wouldn't have missed a beat, he told himself. “Easy,

big guy," he said softly.

"Thank you," said the boy, smiling, embarrassed.

Sal was surprised by the thanks. He wasn't sure the boy even realized he may have been killed.

The thin line, he thought, shaking his head, wondering if indeed he had saved a life. The incident was now amongst the unknowable, and he experienced a sense of having been cheated, one that gave him the creeps. Of what had he been deprived — recognition as a hero?

You want credit? he thought; geez, grow up.

He suspected it also had to do with the mystery of life, the longing to know, to understand what it was all about. And the troubling thoughts robbed any of the satisfaction he might have derived from the deed. Was any act pure?

That doesn't mean you shouldn't do them, he told himself.

He hung his head as he recalled the plight of a woman he'd been crazy about for years, of which he'd learned yesterday. Only 42, she was fighting cancer, head shorn of the auburn hair that had hung to the small of her back. It was so unfair. She'd lived cleanly, exercised regularly. And she'd constantly scolded her older sister, a heavy smoker. He remembered seeing the woman throw her head back and inhale with gusto, filling her lungs, and he was fascinated that she relished something he found disgusting.

But she's not the one who got cancer, he thought, beside himself, angry. What had caused it? Had he read once that childless women, especially those who'd had an abortion, were more susceptible to the disease? Were birth control devices at fault? Perhaps there was

no understanding it, just a matter of not having the genes that combated the disease. Some people did all the right things and dropped dead young; some partied hard and lived to a ripe old age. That was life.

Save her, God, said Sal to himself; she's a great girl.

He hadn't heard from her since he got the boot. He'd had a friend deliver a note to her, afraid he would lose control of his emotions face to face. She emailed him, and it was as he was replying, hitting "Send," that he broke down, bawling, certain he'd lost her forever, realizing he might never see her again. She did not take his invitation to email him "any time." He assumed she had a man in her life or, perhaps, was simply exercising the common sense she'd always practiced toward him. One of the great mysteries of his life was not knowing whether they would have been happy together. Would she have become ill had she been with him? His ego wanted him to believe not. Had she become ill, would he have resented it, abandoned her, as some men were wont to do? His eyes were forced shut by the pain of such thoughts.

He'd tossed and turned all night, pondering what to do, afraid she was living alone. He'd decided to email her two words: "Love you" and signed it "Scary Sal," as she'd always seemed so afraid of him. He wondered if he would be man enough to fly to her, upset his ridiculously comfortable life, should she summon him. He hoped he wouldn't obsess about it, as was his wont, especially as it was virtually assured there would be silence on her end. She might even scoff after all this time. He'd beaten himself up over her every day for so long. Not having to go through that had been the best thing about losing his job.

Suddenly the sun peeked through the clouds. No, he thought. The ground hog would see its shadow, heralding six more weeks of winter, which he hated. The sidewalks were filthy with refuse

trapped in blackened ice. January had been so cold he'd been able to set up shop only once a week. He longed for the warming environmentalists wished to halt. He did not understand how they could be cock sure about what seemed unknowable. They seemed messianic megalomaniacs bent on saving the planet, deaf to those who argued against them, indifferent to what their standards would do to the world economy, which might be more threatening than higher temperatures. Still, he hoped the green movement would come to the economy's rescue, although he doubted it would ever be cost-effective enough to do so. Unfortunately, it was the only business, besides the arts, that many in power respected.

Another day closer to spring, he told himself, trying to remain upbeat.

His spirits were lifted by the excited chatter in the schoolyard of an elementary school. A group of Arabic boys was playing soccer. The goalie laughed and did a silly dance as he kicked aside a hard shot, infuriating his mates. Sal chuckled. He wondered how many boys had been saved by sports. He was one of them.

He fondly recalled the mad scramble, the buzzing in the minutes before the bell rang at St. Mary's. He grimaced and clutched at the area between his dark eyes, giggling as he envisioned Nicholas Gervasi running head long into him. And Nicky was the one who'd ended up on his back! Sal's head hurt that entire day. Thinking back, he wondered if he'd suffered a concussion. He hadn't even considered mentioning it to Sister Grace Alfreda.

Different times, he said to himself wistfully, imagining he would have been rushed to the hospital had it happened today.

The recycling room was alive with activity and chatter. Most of the occupants were Asian, emptying, one by one, the contents of huge garbage bags into the voracious machines, which flattened metal,

crushed glass and ground plastic to mulch. He smiled as he recalled a friend questioning why Asians spoke so loud. He'd never noticed it. The supermarket staff hated being assigned to the room and bristled with the frustration of trying to communicate above the din. Sal found it amusing. As a child he'd had to interpret for his parents, who spoke very little English.

He stood behind a woman who was only half way through her stock of bottles. She noticed him, pressed a button, retrieved her voucher ticket, and nodded to Sal to go ahead.

"Thank you, mama san," he said, bowing slightly. He hoped she wasn't insulted by the term, which he wasn't even sure was Chinese. He called the males "boss," as his parents had called each other. When he was finished he touched the woman's shoulder delicately and again thanked her. She seemed wary.

Don't touch people, he reminded himself. It was a habit from his days as an assistant high school football coach and later as a data entry supervisor that he found hard to break. Many had grown sensitive toward such things. It was wise to forego them.

As he exited and stepped into the sunlight, he held the tickets at arm's length, squinting to read the tally. It was almost four dollars. Ahead, an Asian male was smiling as he made a fan of his bounty.

Penny saved is a penny earned, said Sal to himself.

He wondered how many people this great nation had saved. It had to be billions here and abroad.

His gut contracted violently. He prayed the world's best medical system would save one person in particular.

