

The White Cardigan
by Paul Silverman

THE WHITE CARDIGAN

Judy and Hal Toll lived in a town blessed with a storm-proof harbor and an abundance of fishing and pleasure boats, but the town had a different name than you'd expect.

Forestville.

On three sides the town – and their house as well - had a deep forest, unusually deep for so coastal a location. Even the early road-builders had lost heart at the foot of the forest, choosing instead to make their main connector a span across a cove and marshland. In Judy and Hal's time, it seemed plausible that the forest's most remote parts had begun to attract new denizens at about the time the squirrel man came.

To this day, what anyone sees peering inland from the Forestville Lighthouse is a gargantuan necklace of twisted trees. Their very leaves, although individually green, exude a blackness as off-putting as a cave's mouth. Early on, it wasn't just the road-builders who took the hint. The rest of the population also turned its eyes to the happier tones of the sea, to the turquoise and azure lapping at their white hulls. So the forest was left to fend for itself, out of mind if not out of sight for decades at a time – its growth unchecked and its density all but impenetrable.

During pre-settler times the forest was prowled by, some would say infested with, mountain lions. One of them, fangs bared, was still on display in a glass box at the Forestville Historical Society. The work was the collaboration of a taxidermist and an early animal rights activist, whose caption on the plaque said the lions “were relentlessly persecuted, until they were driven to the brink of extinction.”

Although the caption failed to say who the so-called persecutors were, it was the word “brink” that kept peoples’ imaginations alive. It got them talking every time a family pet died strangely, with marks that couldn’t be readily explained.

The squirrel man emerged from his unmarked white truck, somehow managing to get the vehicle all the way down the driveway before Judy and Hal noticed it. They caught the sun-flash off the white panel mid-way through their salmon salad. “They always do that,” muttered Hal, looking up from his half-eaten lunch at the clean sun glinting off the white sheet metal. “They ought to call.”

He put down his fork with an edge to his gesture, so it made a harsh sound against the plate.

“We’re out here,” cried Judy from her screen-shrouded wicker chair. She stood up and started waving.

The squirrel man heard them before he saw them. From his sunny spot by the truck he squinted like a mole at the shadowy screens.

“At last,” said Judy, throwing open the screen door.

“Right during lunch,” said Hal, stuffing in a final forkful of greens. “Why do they always do that?” It was one of Hal’s rare lunches at home. His preferred table was the lid of a boat hatch or a gull-stained piling on the pier. The closer to the water the better. And he couldn’t wait to go back to it.

Judy towered over the squirrel man, her arms flapping and fluttering, as she pointed out the eaves, gables and gutters over the parts of the house where the invasion might have occurred, the source of all the rat-a-tatting, as she put it. Even though she was

in broad daylight, with no screen to shroud her, the squirrel man kept on squinting. He peered up at Judy as though she were a tunnel in a mountain. And when he wasn't peering at her he scribbled notes on his clipboard.

Hal hung back on the screen porch, bending his head, then looming and munching like a man who had been cross-bred with a giraffe. He brusquely excused himself and escaped back to the harbor just as Judy noticed the business card pinned beneath the clip of the clipboard.

"Your name's Kirk," she beamed. "That name always makes me think of a church organ."

The squirrel man spent a good five minute's going over his company's history, mission and process. His neck was jacked up the entire time, which visibly hurt him. Standing together, Hal and Judy looked like a couple who had met at a tall people's convention. But Kirk was accustomed to looking down and in, peering into warrens and crevices. Although he was shorter than either of the Tolls, he was thicker too. His shoulders looked one size too large for the black polo he had on, its pocket stitched with the words Security Pest. Underneath the polo he wore a high white tee shirt. Its exposed collar gave him the air of a young priest, or an older theology student.

When he had duly finished the warm-up speech, the squirrel man put his ladder against the house, climbed up and had a look all around the shingled peaks and slopes. After this he reviewed his notes and pressed on with the investigation. "The devil is in the details. I want you to go back over what you told me and really think about it. What exactly did you hear and when did you hear it?"

Judy pondered so hard she bit her lip. “The sound I heard was in the ceiling and behind the walls. It was like two twigs rubbing against each other. It was definitely in the dead of night.”

“So no rat-a-tatting, correct?”

“I have to say so. Yes. I’m sorry if I misled you.”

Because he had a new speech to give, the squirrel man stepped back, slightly easing the angle on his neck.

“Basically, there are three kinds of squirrels. The first two are red and gray, and they’re prevalent around here. You sit under a roof where there are trees and you hear them scampering all day long. But that’s it – all day, not all night. The third kind are flying squirrels. Now they are nocturnal, but they aren’t prevalent.”

“I’ve only seen flying squirrels in books,” Judy said. “When I was a girl.”

The squirrel man drew a sharp line on his clipboard, obviously crossing something out. His neck went up like a periscope.

“Squirrels are not subtle. If they had chewed into your roof I’d know it. Let’s talk about your mouse problem.”

“He’s a squirrel man,” Judy explained on the phone to Hal. “But he says our problem is mice.”

“Go for it,” said Hal. He checked his watch and ended the call, hardly hearing his own words.

And while Hal took off on mooring patrol, just so the Harbor Master could drink beer in a boatyard shed, Judy Toll led Kirk around, room by room. She watched him

comb through her house, so respectful of its contents yet relentless in his quest for evidence. A dropping here, a seed there. He walked like a mouse himself, not making a sound. At the entrance to the music room he stopped. He had a sweet look on his face, the look of a young seminarian entering a shrine.

For the entire time he stood there, Judy wished she could shrink and become Kirk-sized. She was one of those super-tall women who yearned to be tiny and dainty, and acted it whenever she could. Every shelf she could get her hands on was filled with miniature collectibles. The cuter the better. As for Hal, he was one of those ultra-tall Yanks the little Viet Cong men used to make mincemeat out of in the jungle. He had a long, soft stomach, perfect for sticking. But in the service he'd been lucky.

Finally, Kirk moved in on the baby grand piano, inspecting it with such intricate care Judy wondered if he suspected a mouse family was living inside it. But his reverent glow hinted at something else. He turned to her, lifted his neck and asked, "which of you plays?"

Judy scrunched forward, making herself as dainty as her anatomy would allow.

"See that picture on the wall?"

"I noticed that right away," Kirk said. "It has a different flavor than anything else in the room. You have all the little thimbles and teacups and glass animals. Then you have that picture."

They stood before an enlarged, framed color photograph of nine young men at a picnic table, each one of them holding up an enormous lobster, red and ready to eat. Judy looked straight at the picture, and Kirk looked up at it.

“That’s the old starting lineup for the Albuquerque Isotopes. And that’s my Andy, second from the left. Would you look at that lobster he pulled out of the pot? The right claw could be a first baseman’s mitt.”

“Lobsters take seven years just to put on their first pound,” Kirk observed. His tone was professional, as though lobster behavior and control were among the specialties of Security Pest.

“The team was up to play Pawtucket. Andy took them all to the Cape for lobster. His music teacher said he had the most sensitive piano hands she had ever seen.”

With her long fingers, Judy wiped her eyes as daintily as she could, and went on. “But he chose to use those hands to throw forkballs and sliders. Isn’t that life?”

Kirk paused so long he seemed to be deciding something profound. “Well, we all need our day jobs. Does he get home often?”

This time the fingers couldn’t do the job. Judy loped out and came back clutching a tissue.

“When he played for the Isotopes he’d be up now and then. But then the Europeans got all hot on baseball. My Hal is one quarter Greek. That was all Andy needed to get a tryout with the top team in Athens . We don’t get to Greece much. No, we certainly don’t. Ogunquit is our speed, and we haven’t been there in ages. Hal spends so much time down at the pier he might as well be a barnacle.”

At the end of his interior tour, Kirk went out again and walked the perimeter of the property. He returned and gave Judy a full diagnosis and treatment plan, all summarized on a yellow form she could sign and keep, in return for a check that covered the first quarter year of the plan.

“Whoever constructed that screened porch for you ought to come back and seal the underjoints. Meanwhile, I’ll put in some feeding stations, and I’ll check it again in three months.”

“You will? Thank you. Thank you so very much.”

That night there were no pre-dawn updates, no reports of two twigs rubbing in the walls. Judy was as silent as the bathroom tiles. As far as Hal was concerned, the treatment plan had already succeeded.

The chill in the early September air sent Judy rushing to her closet for the white cardigan. She dressed on the move, limbs flailing. Then she undressed and dressed again, several times, finally ending where she started, with the white cardigan.

It was a day when she wanted everything to be right, and she spent all morning making it so, straightening every picture, chasing every mote of dust. Hal, as usual, was down with his boats, spying on every mooring like a human telescope, while the Harbor Master quaffed with the lobstermen, watching his beer belly grow.

Just as the late afternoon shadows gathered, Kirk arrived in his white van, discreetly unmarked. He was precisely on schedule and looked precisely as she remembered him – not a hair on his head seemed in a different place.

“Security Pest . Remember?” He pushed his clipboard towards her, contract side on top, for her inspection. But she looked beyond the paper that displayed her own signature and concentrated on what he was wearing: his neat black polo with the company insignia, its collar-line ringed by the higher arc of the tee shirt. Once again she felt as

though she were being called on by a young seminarian. No sooner had he crossed into the house, shutting the door gently, than she found herself offering a cup of chamomile.

He visibly fretted over what to say. By the end of the hallway, though, he turned her down. She watched his face register an earnest pink.

“I have a lot of feeding stations to check. It’s easier when there’s still some light.”

But this time she brought him to the music room first, and asked the question that had rolled around in her mind for three months.

“Do *you* play, Kirk?”

Once again he struggled with his answer, checking his watch and the window, which framed a high wall of forest darkening to pitch as dusk set in, but still smoldering with a few veins of light that ranged from smoky pink to blood orange.

“Well, I do,” he said, finally. “But I have a job to do too. I need to see corners and cracks like a mouse sees them. Bet that sounds weird.”

“Please play, please.” She made a flowing gesture towards the piano bench. “It worked for the Pied Piper, didn’t it?”

At the words Pied Piper, Kirk gave her an odd look. It lasted the briefest instant, but it was so penetrating that in that instant she felt stripped of everything, not just the clothing she wore but the skin beneath it. Without sitting down, Kirk tested a sharp and a flat with his index finger. He looked perplexed as he struck the keys again, and another time as well.

“It’s out of tune, isn’t it? I was afraid of that. But so what? It’s only us.”

If the keys were out of tune, the music wasn’t. It rose up as a river does after a long thaw. Without moving a muscle, Judy jumped in and rode the swirls and splashes

wherever they flowed, grateful for every drop. When the last note sounded – too soon – she felt she had been on a sacred journey – away from the house, the screened porch – away from everything that had ever troubled her, the loneliness above all. A journey that was in some way a visit with her son, the Grecian ballplayer who should have been a Cliburn or even a Horowitz.

“I can’t tell you what that meant to me.” The river had left mist in her eyes. “But I think you know.”

The squirrel man reached for the clipboard as though it were a small life raft. He seized it and clambered to his feet. “No encores,” he said. “I don’t know any encores.”

“You have a gift, though, and you know that, Kirk.” As she said the name, she imagined stained glass and a nave. “What is it with you young men? Why not seize the day?”

He was out in front of her now, kneeling on the edge of the carpet, studying a floor board.

“Young men have to eat too.”

“Will you reconsider tea?”

For Judy tea was more ballet than beverage. While Kirk resumed his tracking, baiting and sleuthing, she became immersed in her china cabinet, so it was a world of time before she even approached the burner dial. As though she were trying on dresses, she started with Earl Grey, changed her mind to Lapsang, then took English Breakfast from the closet, then changed back to Lapsang again because it ended in “sang,” which

was musical. She also took care selecting napkins, choosing her finest set of tea-sized linens, snowy with a snowflake pattern.

By the time she finally waltzed down the aisle between her densely populated knick-knack shelves and aging appliances, she had lost all sense of where Kirk was in his search. To call out his name seemed inappropriate – the opposite of magical – and magic was what she felt in the steam rising from the French teapot. She made a sortie here and a sortie there – to no avail – and stood before the staircase with a choice: head up to the attic or down to the screened porch. She took a deep whiff of the spicy steam and let gravity make the decision for her. Led on by the weight of the tray, she put one long but delicate foot after the other and descended. And then she knew she had made the right decision because she began to hear faint strains of music, the piano again, only this time it was coming from the screened porch, or even beyond it. As she lowered herself it was as though each step was a note on a scale, and she was walking, not on wood but on the strains of an actual melody. The feel of it, from her toes to her temple, was exquisitely sweet.

When Judy failed to return at the dinner hour, Hal was irked but only mildly so. He assumed she was at one of her library or Historical Society meetings and ruefully turned to the pantry, where he found a can of hash to heat up. Afterwards he flipped through her little lavender datebook, which she kept by the phone, but found the date blank. When there was still no Judy after midnight he searched her closet and bureau, and that's when he came up with the main clue he passed on to the authorities in the morning:

Wherever Judy was she was wearing a white cardigan. She had several cardigans in an array of colors, and white was the only color missing from her neat stack.

By Day Five, even the Harbor Master roused himself and followed the prow of his beer belly towards the same place as everyone else – the forest. He was only acting out of a long local tradition – town instinct, as it were. When opportunity struck, it usually came from the ocean. Adversity, however, pulled all eyes towards the forest, and old rumors came to life again, setting imaginations aflame. The words “white cardigan” were soon on every pair of lips, and every set of eyes turned to the immense labyrinth of trunks, branches and bramble, hoping to spot a glimpse of sleeve, even a shred of white yarn. Parties of men shouldered rifles and threaded their way into the darkness, rekindling old stories of mountain lions preying on women and children. When days had passed and not one searcher had glimpsed the lion that had likely dragged Judy off, a small mob turned its rage on the only lion that could be found, the stuffed, snarling relic in the Historical Society. The caretaker opened the building one morning and found nothing but glass shards from the shattered case and a few tufts of ancient, embalmed fur on the floor. Days later, other parts of the lion cadaver washed up on the town beach, draped in ribbons of seaweed. The stuffed beast had been dismembered, virtually drawn and quartered.

Such was the way Hal, the Harbor Master and the whole town spent their every waking hour. So obsessed with the white cardigan the very thought of the white van was lost to them. As though it had never existed; or been swallowed up by the forest.