

SUBURBANVILLE – Living the Dream

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LIFE IN THE BURBS

The alarm clock went off in that annoying way it had, every single morning at 6am. Why was it always 6 am?

I stumbled out of bed to turn it off; I had long since learned that I could not trust myself to have it next to the bed. I careened back to the bed and fell in a lump on my pillow. The drool woke me up again and I faced the inevitable and ambled into the bathroom, then the kitchen. Mercifully, the master of the house had at last figured out the automatic coffee maker. If I could just keep it together long enough in the evening to pour in the water, measure out the beans, grind them and dump; not forgetting to hit the 'on' button, I was assured of lifesaving caffeine in the am.

I clutched the first cup to my chest like a baby and opened the door to the back yard. It was summer and the yard was still cool and invitingly green. The lawn chairs beckoned to me. Chubby, the dog, had gotten up with a big yawn and was taking his morning pee in the bushes. The cats were prowling around looking for big game; Paws, the big cat, sniffing the dog's pee like it might be interesting. Early summer, the intense Southern California heat had not yet begun so we still had a few coolish days left. The birds were flitting about and all seemed right with the world.

Taking another sip, I wandered back to refill my cup and start my rounds of waking and reawaking the Master and child of the good ship lollipop.

The Master was pretty good, once his feet were actually on the floor; it was but a few moments before the big red bathrobe I got him one Christmas was tied around his skinny waist and he was slouching into the shower. It took a good deal of hot water to get his eyes opened, but it seemed to do the trick. By the time he was on his second cup of coffee, he was almost speaking.

Getting the princess up and moving out of lavender kingdom was another matter. It could easily take five trips to wake and then reawake her highness and position her into an upright state. She had to be tempted with food to actually get moving. It might have been a Coco Puffs morning or perhaps a cinnamon oatmeal day; these things run together.

Whichever, I had learned to do breakfast first and dressing second so that we didn't have to dress two times in one morning on account of spills.

The Master and commander was showered and dressed and sitting down to eat and shooting an impatient look at the princess.

"If I have to drive her to school, why can't she get her clothes on first?"

Actually; a logical question.

"Lee, I think we have discussed this before," I said in my smiley voice, "too many spills cause us to have to dress all over again. Remember?"

The princess was busy intently studying the back of the cereal box, trying to figure out how to get the prize, so not paying too much attention to us.

"Mommy, I don't see how you can get the parrot from this game. Do they just send you the parrot in a box by mail? How do they breath?" the princess wanted to know

"Darling, I am not sure that it is a real parrot. Maybe a toy one is what you win."

"Oh, that's no good," Princess Scooter answered, "I only want it if it's a real one"

"Ah," I answered sagely.

"It could keep Chubby company," she told me brightly.

"I think Chubby has lots of company with the two cats," I replied.

"Yeah, but cats can't fly," she told me wisely.

The Master muttered something about how he could certainly make a cat fly and would too if that cat brought one more GD bird into this house.

“Ok,” I said hurriedly, “it’s about time to go Scooter, let’s go get your clothes on.”

Of course, ‘getting your clothes on’ was a process much easier said than done.

The teachers at Scooter’s school had told me to have her pick out the maximum of three outfits the night before to reduce the amount of fashion crisis we had to go through each morning.

This worked, sort of, if I locked and bolted the closet door so that she couldn’t get ‘one more thing’ out of there that had to be added to the ensemble. My current ploy was to quickly make her bed and plop the outfits in a row there and block eye contact to the closet.

Making a choice between the three could sometimes be a grinding chore and some days easy. Usually those days were the ones where she wore the same outfit over and over again. Not so great for total cleanliness, but it did cut down the decision making time.

Years later I worked with a guy who, I realized with some surprise, wore exactly the same pair of pants and the same shirt to work every day. The next week, he changed the shirt and pants, wore those all week; then repeated the process the next week. At first I was prompted to say something to him and stopped myself. “He has a system,” I told myself and in fact he had.

Anyway, garments on the body, books in the backpack; lunch in the lunch pail, wagon train ho! The Master and princess were off to another full-filled day and I was left to run around like a crazy person, stuffing dishes into the dishwasher and getting my clothes on.

Since a lot of attorney offices didn’t get going until 10 am, I usually had enough time to pull it together with some reasonable organization and hit the freeway crawl with all the other commuters. I worked for the Big Bad Insurance Company

and my job was to meet and greet the clients in the flashy, expensive offices of their flashy, expensive attorneys who all had perfectly tailored suits and perfect orthodontia work.

The work was not super hard but with the freeway grind from here to there; a girl could get pretty tired at the end of the day. You can swear at just so many people behind the wheel of the car before it stops being fun.

This day was particularly long and dusty and I had to drive from Redondo Beach back to the San Fernando Valley and was bushed.

Carmen, the Hispanic housekeeper, was responsible for picking up the princess from school each day and driving her home and then, hopefully, getting her started on homework. How much homework ever happened versus how much TV watching was being done, was the ongoing question.

This particular summer day, Carmen was in the process of starting dinner and the princess was looking like she was looking at her homework. I decided a nice long hot bath would be just the ticket.

I stripped down and got into my big tan tub with the Jacuzzi jets in the 'bamboo' bathroom. The previous owners must have been trying for some sort of Asian theme as the gold and rust wallpaper was a bamboo print and the curtain, a rolled up 'bamboo' affair. Once you got the jets going in the bath, it was a pretty relaxing.

It just so happened that I was doing a lazy scrub of my armpits when I discovered a lump in one armpit. I instantly panicked and the huge 'C' word loomed large in my mind. I was devastated. I began to plan my own funeral and then get very weepy that Scooter was going to lose her mother so young.

It was while contemplating my own death that over the sound of the bathroom fan, I could make out a faint 'wop, wop, wop' noise. It kept going on and finally I thought "What the hell?" and got myself out of the big tub, did a half-dry and put on my bathrobe.

I ventured carefully into the family room where the sound was coming from. At first, I couldn't even tell what I was looking at, with all the confusion.

Scooter was screaming and jumping around, Paws was leaping repeatedly into the air, and there was something grey and white fluttering around and around the dining room table. Carmen had the broom out and was waving it up and down and whacking the floor with it creating the 'wop' sound I had been hearing.

My benumbed brain finally kicked into gear and I realized what I was seeing. Paws had captured yet another bird from the backyard and had brought his prize into the house to show it off. As luck would have it, the unfortunate creature was still alive and trying desperately to get away from the cat who was trying equally hard to recapture him.

Carmen was ineffectually trying to 'shoo' them both out of the house and Scooter was helping by screaming and jumping up and down. I clamped my teeth together, opened the slider door, grabbed the broom and with one mighty 'whack' sent Paws out into the yard.

"Scooter, stop screaming!" I ordered. She gulped and shut up. I found the dust pan and Carmen and I managed to capture the almost dead bird and take him to the garbage can on the side of the house where he could rest in peace.

That done, I finally made it back to the bathroom, where the water was now lukewarm. I had forgotten all about my cancer when suddenly a thought came to me. I lifted my arm in front of the bathroom mirror and examined my lump. It was a very large, subcutaneous pimple, the kind I always got at a certain time of the month. I got some mud masque and plastered my armpit with it and put on some clothes so Carmen could go home.

Forty-five minutes later, dinner was done and on the table and the Master of the house had returned.

"So," he queried, "anything interesting go on today?" He was looking down, slicing his chicken.

Scooter opened her mouth to tell the cat and bird story when I gave her the 'look' and cast a meaningful glance at Paws; lying casually on the rug, licking his fur.

Scooter looked at me, looked at Paws and a momentary look of panic flashed across her face as she began shoveling down mashed potatoes.

"Na," I said, "just another day, how 'bout you?"

TRACKER

Buzz, buzz.

Denise stirred. Buzz, buzz, the sound continued. A soft, vibrating movement on her side.

She rolled back and forth a couple of times and finally opened her eyes. The buzzing sound continued. She focused for a moment then hit the little tracker resting in her pajama pocket and sat up. Denise wiped the sleep out of her eyes and pulled the tracker out of her pocket. 7 hours and 42 minutes it read.

Hum, she thought to herself. "Well, it is not exactly eight hours of sleep but it's probably okay," she mused. After using the bathroom she stepped on the scales; 146 pounds. She frowned. Damn vacation! She was up two pounds. Damn it and she had been working so hard too.

Stepping off the scale she sighed, "Guess that's the price for fun, huh?" she thought to herself. Going over to her desk, she pulled out the sugar monitor and pricking her finger, put in a little sample of blood. After several seconds it read '94'. She smiled. Her blood sugar was doing great! And the new diet plan emphasized low sugar levels to get the weight off. She felt like she was working toward her goal nicely.

In the kitchen, Denise hit the button to start the coffee maker. Regular black, no 'special' coffees with sugar additives. She opened a new box of Special K cereal

and retrieved the low-fat milk from the frig and added ½ of a green banana to the cereal and started to eat.

Back at her desk she opened her mail and started to check her bank balances. Hum, the one checking had a \$5,000 balance and the other one was really low at \$1,000. That vacation again. Whew! Just wiped her out! Her savings had a nice \$25,000 balance and her 401k was rocking along very smoothly. Denise felt very proud of herself. As the daughter of an almost welfare mother and humble beginnings, she was doing pretty well for herself.

She had had to fight and fight with the travel agent to get her to take a cash payment for the vacation.

“But, everyone pays by card,” the woman had said, almost pleading.

Denise had had to ‘counsel’ the woman and coax her into taking the cash and telling her it would be okay. That she was just very uncomfortable using ‘cards’ and this was how she did business. The woman shook her head, mumbling and very reluctantly took the cash over to her boss’s desk and handed it off to him. There was some soft mumbling that went on. The travel agency manager was a chubby little guy, who didn’t do much, as far as Denise could tell, except eat and play computer games all day.

She had been to this same agency before. They had gone through the same song and dance last time. The little fat guy stole a glance her way. She smiled beatifically back at him. She knew what was coming. He heaved himself up from his desk, reluctantly and cautiously approached her.

He smiled first. She smiled back. “Miss Smith,” he ventured, looking down at the agency document in his hand. She nodded helpfully. “Miss Smith,” he repeated, “we don’t usually work with cash transactions. They can be.....” he searched manfully for the proper words. “they can be difficult to....trace.” He smiled again hoping to hell that she would understand without causing some fuss.

Denise was ready, they had in fact had the same conversation over a year ago; maybe he didn’t remember. She explained, slowly and very carefully how much

she understood his position but that she didn't 'like' to use credit cards because of all the interest and banking fees. She understood very well that was how most people did it, but couldn't they make an exception this time? Besides, they had sold her another ticket just this way over a year ago.

The little fat man looked surprised. "He's probably surprised he let a woman get the drop on him once before," she thought with a smirk. The man stared at her almost a full minute then shook his head and waved for the girl to continue the transaction and took the wad of cash back to his desk. With a look of almost disgust, he pulled out what looked to be a metal box and stuck the cash in there. This was no doubt going to necessitate an extra trip to the bank. He wasn't pleased.

Denise, smiling, completed her trip arrangements to Belize with the girl and got her confirmation paper. She left the agency smiling. She was always happy when she got people to see things her way. She had learned long ago that the banks were the biggest rip off artists in the business with their interest rates and fees on top of fees. "Better in my pocket than in theirs," she thought to herself.

She got into her little economy car and started the engine. The car was a very uninspiring grey green color that she hated; but what the heck, she had gotten a super discount deal through her brother, the used car salesman, so there were no complaints.

"Hum," she thought to herself musing. She rummaged through her purse, ah, there they were. She had some coupons in her envelope that were about to expire, she needed to get over to the store pick up those items while they were still good. She sped off full of her next mission.

The trip to Belize had gone as planned. It was an AAA group tour and they stayed at a little discount hotel that was not as close to the beach as she would have liked, but oh well. She spent a lot of time by the pool there and sipped exactly one Mai-Tai each evening watching the sun go down. She had time to catch up on her reading and actually had some fun eating dinner with other Americans. Of course,

many of them were definitely approaching their golden years at a running gallop, but she didn't mind, made her feel younger.

There had just been one problem on her trip. Denise was in the habit of carrying her id and money in a little over-the-shoulder bag. One evening toward the end of her trip, she had draped it over the back of her chair and forgot it. She had gotten involved speaking to an interesting older married couple and had left with them. No more than a half hour later, she realized what she had done and rushed back to the table, too late. The bag was gone. She raised hell with the kitchen staff and the manager and although they assured her they would do a 'complete investigation' nothing ever came of it and the bag disappeared.

Fortunately for Denise, ever mindful, she had another expired passport with her in her luggage. She was able to get back into the states with that and a photocopy of the lost passport. She had to answer a lot of questions and then immediately apply for another once she was home; but she was home safe and sound in her little condo.

She really hated when things didn't go according to plan, but some days.... When she went to pickup her new passport she asked the girl "What if my old one shows up?"

There was a pause; "Don't ever use your old passport again," the counter agent assured her. "Not unless you want to have Homeland Security officers all over you. The passport has been 'flagged.'"

Denise wasn't exactly sure what 'flagged' meant but she didn't feel like asking any more questions so she just took her new passport and left.

Life had pretty much returned to normal for Denise after this mad-cap week in Belize. She was back to work as a senior researcher at the lab and things were back to their usual routine. She still drove to the bank every Friday and cashed a check for her weekly spending amount. As she stood in line, the cashier who she knew told her, "You know Miss Smith; you are probably one of the only customers I have who still uses checks to get money out of the bank."

Denise laughed and replied, "If you think that is something, guess what else, I don't have a home computer, a TV or a landline telephone. I don't even have an email address!"

The clerk gasped, disbelieving, mouth open. "Nope," continued Denise, "don't believe in those things. Just more and more ways for people to get into your pocket!" She didn't add the part where she also really believed it was more ways for people to spy on you too. But, she didn't want to sound crazy so she shut up. She got her money and left; when she got home, she would carefully place the money in envelopes marked for their uses. She prided herself in going 'all cash.'

Denise's life continued on as normal and she was totally unaware of the van parked down the street from her condo that was tracking her movements. Denise, who had rarely had so much as a speeding ticket in her life had come to the attention of the 'authorities'. It had all started when her passport had been stolen and then 'marked'. While processing the new passport, the agent assigned to the replacement had noticed a distinct resemblance between Denise and an FBI most wanted poster of an international espionage agent, wanted and on the run for selling government secrets.

The agent marked the file and sent it to her boss who in turn, sent it on to the agency looking for the woman and they then, opened a file on Denise Smith.

The two agents reviewed the material they had on Smith. Agent Tim Curl reviewed it with his partner, "Denise Smith, age 42 years, not married, lives alone, long time researcher at a drug lab. No credit cards, no ATM cards, no TV, no land line, no computer, no email address, no internet banking. Uses a computer at work but only for company business and never takes any personal messages. Does all her correspondence by mail. Has one cheap cell phone that she rarely ever uses."

His partner looked at him thoughtfully. "Looks like she is hiding something to me." Curl shook his head in agreement and they decided to set up surveillance on Denise.

Denise continued her life, getting books and videos from the library and eating Top Ramen for lunch at work. She loved to read and watch old movies. She had decided that all cable company charges for channels were a scam and she thought modern TV programs were a joke anyway. "Give me an old black and white any day," she thought to herself as she checked out her latest selections.

The guys in the van followed her to work a couple of days but couldn't get very close so returned to her condo. They felt they would have better reception here if Denise made any phone calls or tried to contact someone. They waited for a number of days with little success.

"She's cagey, that one," opined Tim Curl. Sandy, his big burly partner nodded in agreement.

"How do you think she is transmitting the data?" asked Sandy.

Tim shook his head. "I just don't know. She's basically not making any calls on that dumb cell phone of hers, there's no phone in the condo, we checked. Any messages on the company computer are pretty regularly screened by their IT guys and we don't think she even sends that many at work because she tells everyone 'I don't like computers'." He made a little girly gesture with his hand.

Sandy laughed. However, in the end, they were back to staring at their monitors with not a lot to go on.

Denise looked at her package happily. She had spent \$39.99 to get the brand new tracking device that you could wear to track your heart rate, miles walked or run and a breakdown of the calories you had burned up exercising. She loved this! With this little baby in place she felt sure that those last five pounds would soon be a thing of the past. She couldn't wait to try it out.

The next day was a Saturday and it dawned bright and beautiful. Denise woke up and went through her usual routine, eager to try out her new tracker on a short morning run. She popped a multivitamin and mixed up the green energy drink. It was supposed to be really good for you, so she tried hard not to look at it too much while chugging it down. She had no overtime this weekend so she was foot-

loose and fancy free. She didn't want to run too far, hard on the knees. But she could drop down to a walk by the time she got to the park and cool down that way. She might even treat herself to a coffee on the way back.

That Friday Tim and Sandy had gotten reamed by their boss. "I thought you said this one looked good!" he shouted at them. "We have gotten Intel that another data transfer is about to happen, this weekend and on your watch!" he yelled some more.

"Boss, boss," Tim had his hands up pleadingly. "We are watching her, we have the stolen passport, and we know she was in Belize at exactly the same time and same place as when the last data was delivered. She is the right age, right height, right color, she fits all the profiles. We think she is the one, we just haven't been able to get her doing anything yet," he pleaded.

"Great, great," said the big guy. "But, by the way, you are both on duty this weekend, got that!" and he stormed off. They both nodded their heads glumly.

Saturday morning, bright and early, Tim and Sandy were parked inside the van drinking strong coffee and eating Dunkin doughnuts. They had moved the van closer to Denise's condo.

"I just can't help thinking that she is going to do it this weekend. We have just got to keep her close," said Tim. Sandy nodded.

Inside, Denise had suited up in T-shirt, spandex $\frac{3}{4}$ length pants with the little zipper in the back for keys, and running shoes. The new ones that she had completely splurged on, Nikes. "With complete arch support," she reminded herself. She proudly clipped the little tracker device on her T-shirt so that it could get an accurate reading of her exercise. She went out the door and carefully locked the lock and zipped the keys into her pocket. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and hit the button on the tracker to start it. She stretched a couple of times and then started a slow jog to the park.

Tim hit Sandy in the arm, "That's it!" he said excitedly.

"What's it?" Sandy queried through half chewed doughnut.

“It’s that gadget on her shirt. It must be very low frequency so we are not picking anything up. Get your gun,” he said to Sandy quietly getting out of the van to follow Denise.

Denise jogged while checking her watch occasionally to see if she was making good time. She tried reading the tracker upside down but decided it couldn’t be done and satisfied herself that she was just going to have to wait for the results when she stopped. She jogged about twenty minutes and started her slow down walk as she entered the park. She checked her pulse a couple of times to see if she was getting it high enough to do some good. After walking a bit she decided to get that coffee at the vendor stall in the park, cheaper than Starbucks. She was getting her Americano, hot to go, when she stopped. There was that older gentleman who she had met on her trip to Belize.

“Mr. Marshall, Mr. Marshall, hey is that you?” she held out her hand for a shake with the older guy when she got tackled and knocked to the ground. Sandy had done his job with a nice flying tackle and had grabbed her just before she had a chance to hand off the data stick attached to her shirt to her contact person. Mr. Marshall, the contact person, took off running in a surprisingly fast fashion for such an old guy.

Back at their headquarters, Denise was explaining over and over again that she was not who they thought she was. Tim and Sandy had by this time confiscated the tracker device and had given it to one of their own IT guys who confirmed that there was nothing else in the design except a heart rate and calorie counting device as stated. They at long last had come to the realization that Denise was not, in fact, ‘their girl’ but they began to have a lot of questions about the man she had met at the coffee carrel and why he had run off.

Denise gave them as much information as she could and by data tracking through the AAA club records and the airline records they were able to confirm that Daniel Marshall and his wife Helene had been on the trip to Belize and both had a

questionable past. Denise was able to identify them both and the agency confirmed that Daniel and Helene were actually professional 'transporters' of information.

A couple of hours later Denise was released. They had fed her with high calorie doughnuts and terrible coffee. She was sure her diet was ruined for a week.

"But, why were they interested in me?" she had asked them.

"It was your passport they were after," Tim replied. "You may not have noticed it but you are the same age, height, and weight and hair color as Mrs. Marshall."

"But she is so much older than me," Denise said.

"Play acting and makeup," said Tim "mostly to get your confidence."

"Didn't you have a drink with them of some kind the evening you lost your passport?" asked Sandy.

Denise thought, "Yes, I did. I was going to order my regular Mai Tai but Mr. Marshall insisted that I try some kind of local drink, forget what he called it. Too strong."

"Right," said Tim. "They either put something in your drink or just got you to talking so much that you forgot your bag on the chair. 'Marshall' escorted you to dinner and she went to powder her nose and circled back and snatched up your bag with the passport before you knew what had happened."

"But why did she want it?" queried Denise.

"She needed a new name to get through customs. The customs officials have been alerted to both of them and are on the lookout for any of their aliases. Also, stolen passports are very, very expensive to buy so this was quick and cheap."

Denise shook her head, she couldn't believe it. Nothing like this ever happened to her. The agents had been very solicitous of her and were literally trying to brush her off when their boss came in and stopped them.

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