

# The Locksmith's Daughters

By Jerry Mikorenda



Sitting at the bar in my favorite spot halfway between the beer taps and ice trough, life couldn't be better. I came in with only a ten spot and plopped down next to Googy Nunez burning her unemployment check on Jack n' Cokes before passing out. The bartender lets her money ride because he knows we have this kind of on again off again thing that might be on again.

She looks all-pretty and peaceful resting on my shoulder. The girl's, in all their ripe fullness seem ready to burst forth from her red halter. Two races at Hialeah and five tequila shots later, in walks this guy wearing a black turtleneck with a money clip as thick as my thumb. He peels off a couple of sawbucks in slow motion while asking if anyone wants to make some easy cash over the next three days. Me, Nuggs and Ape raise our

glasses. He slaps a double on the bar waking up Googy and tells us to meet him here tomorrow morning at seven. Googy adjusts her top during a tiptoe swagger to the Ladies Room.

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The morning fog laps at the bare stucco of the coffee shop. With all its neon veins drained, the ash-colored bar looks as powerless as a Christmas tree waiting for garbage pickup. The pulsing orange sun rises like a stale Ritz cracker to consecrate the day. Ape hands me a Styrofoam coffee before sliding down the wall onto his haunches. We sip out of those little tabs in the lids watching what's left of the day laborers mill about looking for jobs that aren't there anymore.

The veins in Ape's neck pull taut and bulge like ship rigging underneath a sail. Some guttural half words echo from his peanut shaped head. He stares at me for approval with a broken piano key smile spreading across his face. "Jotos go home!" he's trying to say. Ape don't hear well and sort of can't speak much, but he's a good drinking buddy. Always has your back and never lets you leave money on the table. For a little runt, he ain't afraid to mix it up either.

About a quarter after, turtleneck shows up with Nuggs in tow. The neck tells us to jump in the back of his pickup like a couple of wetbacks. Nuggs tries to keep his ponytail from flying all over while I explain what we're doing to Ape the same way I did last night. He rocks back and forth laughing at everything I say meaning he's heard nothing I've said.

We zip into an eight-family cul-de-sac and pull up to a white van with the doors open. The locksmith is in charge we're told. Any furniture or personal belongings get left at the curb. Neck hands Nuggs a metal clipboard with forms in triplicate. Tells him to

check off missing appliances in one column and note where damage is in another. Nuggs paws at the ground wondering aloud if he can handle the pressure, but nods OK. The three of us read a Xerox copy of the training brochure and sign the release forms. Neck leaves for a site across town.

“Door’s open,” says smithy, “Trust me, this one’s a piece o’ cake.”

Ape checks all the closets; I look for water damage and Nuggs finds the carpeting in the small bedroom is missing.

“Damn, not bad for rooks,” says the smith, rolling the van door closed.

The situation is pretty much the same at the next four houses – mocha colored siding, hunter green shutters. Hunter green siding, mocha shutters. On Lot 857, the garage door opener is missing along with the glass shower doors. Neck calls smithy at lunch and gives us a blackberry back pat over the speakerphone. Nuggs is feeling so good he pulls a joint out of his army jacket that he was saving for the bar tonight. Hiding behind a row of flowering forsythias, the joint quickly passes between us. Ape starts singing “Smoke on the Water,” or maybe it was an ABBA tune. Didn’t matter. He Bogart’s most of it before the twisted sinews’ of his face inflates into a serene altar boy grin.

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The lunchtime buzz serves us well on the long drive north to the shore. Smithy tells us this is all he does now. Used to be his business was mostly new construction and flustered housewives locking themselves out of their houses. Now, he might as well work for the bank. Does ten, sometimes fifteen of these a day. Says he really needs to add an assistant, maybe an office manager too, just to keep up. He has daughters too. Four, five

maybe six, it's hard to tell just yet. He talks about them all the time. They are perfect beauties. Hard workers, loves of his life.

We drive down a side street or what appears to be one out the back windows of the van until smithy yells, "Some driveway huh? Wouldn't want to reseal this baby." He parks in the open area away from the house where you'd expect the hired help to hide. I'm still too high to ask why he didn't pull up on the lawn by the main door and save us all a lot of shit.

The front of the house is castled with two super-sized coned turrets that sit there like sumo's covered in Hamilton blue pre-pressed shingles. Smithy's metal toolbox snaps open into an ascending stairway of tiny plastic boxes filled with rubber O-rings, tension wrenches, extractors and picks. Nuggs leans over the back of smithy like an umpire squeezing the strike zone. Without saying so, we marvel at how wires thinner than paper clips jiggled and twisted can open a thick steel gauge tumbler that wouldn't budge if you pumped a .22 into it.

"It's all a matter of touch, says the smith, to no one in particular. "After awhile you feel the sequence before it happens, push one above the sheer line... and before you know it... you're there."

"That's so awesome," adds Nuggs, as the pins snap into place and the door pops open. Smithy starts rekeying by pulling the old lock cylinder and replacing it with a new one. Just that easy, something someone owned for ten maybe twenty years was no longer theirs. Nuggs gazes at the empty key hole with the fascination of a med student at his first autopsy. While he probes smithy about technique, me and Ape step around them to start our routine.

Inside there is no mildew or backed up septic smells, just that stuffy lack of airflow you feel after being away on a long vacation. Unlike the other places we've been, this one still has power. Ape plays with the switch to a ceiling fan hovering over a marble rotunda leading to the spiral staircase. It's windmill flaps swoop effortlessly through the dank air with lights flashing electronic melodies of the 1812 Overture, the Godfather theme and The Sting.

I open the French doors to the backyard and walk out onto a slate patio. Overgrown bushes block my view of the pool until I open the gate. It's a hollow socket vacant of water, but filled with broken lawn chairs, a gas grill and mattresses. My head skips along the treetops pulling me onto the diving board. Bouncing blissfully, I begin taking a leak. Soon I'm filling the cup holder on the side of the grill. Damn, I'm good.

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Buzz deflated, we pile dressers, an armoire, a hutch and an ancient phonograph console about as long as a canoe at the curb. It looked like a barricade from the French Revolution the way we stacked that shit. I tell smithy this stuff is too good to leave here someone ought to sell it, but he says we got to leave it for the owners. "Figures," I mumble trudging up the staircase with a roll of black plastic bags, Ape is already ascending. He stops every two steps, slides down the banister, then runs up two more steps and slides down again until I throw the roll of bags knocking him off the railing. He lands flat on his face on the rotunda floor. Ape likes it when I pay attention to him. Our laughter echoes through the house causing Nuggs to come bounding into the room flaying his clipboard.

"Who died and left you in charge!" I shout, after the door slams.

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The upstairs rooms are mostly empty except for a few boxes and photos hanging on the walls. Told to smash the frames to fit more into the bags, we start smashing the frames. It's fun bustin' up shit an getting paid for it. I toss my bags out a window near Nuggs making him do a little scarecrow dance. Smithy's done recalibrating the security system and is anxious to move on. There is one last room to check so I jimmy open the door with my shoulder only to find Ape watching TV.

He's too worked up to say anything so he just points at the screen taking tiny half jumps off the couch. A slender woman in a t-shirt walks into the blurry night-vision view of the camera. Ape howls and as quick as that she's standing there in the all-together, tying her hair in a bun.

"Jesus flipping Christ!" I shout, slapping Ape on the shoulder. Then she pulls some guy by the hand over to the bed and they go at it back-to-back like a couple of squirrels in heat.

I call to Nuggs and smithy. The four of us watch the scene over and over again as though it's the final lap of the Derby our money horse won.

"That's the master bedroom," says smithy, pointing with his baseball cap. "I'd know those window locks anywhere."

"The shit people leave behind," shrugs Nuggs.

Ape points downward and mumbles "nort imm." I lean over reaching into the last bag of crap from the hall and find the fractured wedding photo.

"That's her..." I say, going for the laugh, "but it ain't him!"

Ape fast-forwards over a blank section of tape. He stops just as she drops her robe and lays on the bed. This time she goes old school throwing her knees up high and wide.

As he lowers himself, she looks straight into the camera mouthing something. For a moment, her eyes stab me and I'm as paralyzed as a flounder caught on a gig pole until Nuggs elbows me in the ribs.

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Meeting neck across town adds twenty minutes to our ride, but leaves us closer to the bar with a day's pay. I stick my face between smithy and Nuggs in the bucket seats.

"What did she sa...?"

"Christ, who cares?" says Nuggs, finishing my sentence.

"Tu tears?" smiles Ape.

"She wanted your number two pencil, that's what," adds smithy, making a turn.

"Looked to me like she said, 'I'm doing your...'" I say, jumping in.

"She did look angry," nods the smith.

"Hot, nasty and mad at...," I chime.

"The world fucked her so she fucked the world," mumbles Nuggs, pushing his elbow into my face.

"Eat me!" I shout, sliding backwards on the metal ribbed floor.

"Tu tears!" laughs Ape, closing his eyes. "Tu tears."

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Neck flips down his tailgate handing sealed pay envelopes from a briefcase to each of us. He's now wearing a blue suit and yellow tie, but he is still the neck because that wide stem of beef is what will always define him, his neckness. I pocket the two crisp twenty's and a ten unable to remember the last time I walked into the bar that flush.

Nuggs has a training manual and clear plastic model of a cylinder lock that he wants to drop off before doing anything. We scuttle through town for take out and beers

eating and drinking along the way to the home. It's a nice room Nuggs has. Small with a large crank window that opens to a meadow filled with rabbits and a family of composite plastic deer anchored in place with quickcrete. I've slipped out that window under duress into the predawn fog many times. It's always an invigorating run past the deer frozen in blissful placidity, a recurring moment I'll always cherish.

Nuggs shows Ape how the tumblers open and now he wants to try. They paw over the manual studying more and more complex combinations. The backs of my legs and shoulders ache from all the heavy lifting. Soon I'm drifting into a half sleep hearing the tumblers click yet seeing myself out on the predawn lawn. The locksmith's daughters are there too. They are tall and blonde Viking women with flame blue eyes, bright porcelain smiles and thick ropes of hair braided like Italian bread. They swoop by wearing see through white robes drawing me further and further into the fog. I pass the deer whose eyes are moist and teary from the mist. It evaporates leaving me standing before the armoire we left at the curb today. The daughters float to the cabinet their hair spraying into a burst of morning sunshine as they unlock the doors.

“Git’o,” demands Ape, grabbing my arm roughly, “tym git’o.”

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“Walter.” Lance Corporal Walter James Nugent – honorably discharged – wants to be Walter from now on. Nuggs was his battlefield name in Storm. Those days he reminds us are over, done. With deepest respect, the best Ape can muster is “Water,” but the point is made. I'm forlorn that one-hundred dollars is in my pocket untouched after I had every intention of spending it as stupidly as possible over the last two days. It's house money after all and that's what you're supposed do with it.

Today we are literally on the other side of the tracks skimming along the dilapidated discount stores and auto body shops of the Point then sucking down the narrow cobblestone alleys of Old Town. At property 6322A, the occupants refuse to vacate. Walter takes command talking each of them out of the house as the Sheriff's office waits with arms folded. Ape plays Santa's elf bagging the kid's favorite toys. The family doesn't own any of the furniture so instead they wait by the curb.

The next place everything is gone – kitchen cabinets, appliances even the downstairs' john is unbolted leaving a big hole in the floor. The only thing left hanging is a small corkboard with a note "How to Fix Things" pinned to the center. It's carefully handwritten trying to give it the weight of a typed message, but the letters are all slanted to the left about to fall off the page.

Quit Smoking

Lose 10 pnds (no snack!)

Save Can & botles

Get Job!!!!

Find new school

Seems like good advice no matter what. That's the thing about advice; you never seem to get it when you need it so I folded the note into my pocket figuring I'm already ahead of the game by not smoking or needing any more schooling.

Halfway up the indoor/outdoor carpeted stairs, I feel the wood sagging below me. It's happening so slowly that I swear I can hear the ten-penny nails painfully extracting from the boards making the same sound wisdom teeth do being sucked out of vacant gums. Wood splinters ascend around me in scattered firefly patterns. The stair carpet

engulfs me the way ribbon overtakes Kabuki dancers as I begin my descent. I am in a freefall – no longer part of the stairs and not yet part of whatever I will crash into.

I gaze at the cracked plaster ceiling and it all floods back to me. I see the eyes of the woman on the videotape straining upward in indifference and I know now in these few confused seconds that I've seen that expression many times before. It was the same look I saw on my mother's upturned face as I hid in the closet when my father came home long after supper on Friday nights. Her screams filling the kitchen as the flash of silver from the antenna of his El Camino cut through the steamy air. I saw it too in the way Googy's head tilted up toward me in the clinic recovery room, eyes dark as black bean soup her womb empty as that pool. As she gripped my hand, I thought of all the debris between us the junk our lives accumulated yet I couldn't bring myself to own any of it. I told her the shards of broken DNA still oozing from her weren't mine. The words landed harder than any blows my father ever dealt.

As my heel hits the edge of the first cardboard box, I hear the voice of the naked video woman come to me in a soft lullaby, "I will take all your sins," she says. And I think this is now the moment I will remember the rest of my life replacing all the other moments I remembered in the past. Then I slip through the arms of the locksmith's dancing daughters and kiss the hard unforgiving ass of gravity.

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Nuggs doesn't come to the bar anymore, but on those few occasions Walter does he's fond of telling anyone who will listen how Ape dove into the hole after the stairs collapsed. I don't remember Ape carrying me out of the basement or telling him to look after Googy, but I'll take his word for it. A foot to the left they say and I'm shish kabob on a fake Christmas tree trunk so I can't argue that a broken collarbone, forearm and a

busted ankle isn't getting off easy. Writing the check for my medical bills, neck says someone took a buzz saw and sister cut all the major joists in the house. It's only a matter of time before the whole damn thing implodes.

I was out my one-fifty on co-pays and cab rides so I'm back to where I was five weeks ago only now my plastered cast body is sandwiched between two unplugged video lottery terminals at the far end of the bar. I'm stored away from the beer taps, TV and where generally civilized types stop by for a pop. Walter spots me a few rounds before leaving.

He will go on to apprentice with the locksmith and inherit his splendid daughters who it turns out are not real at all. They're just an old expression bachelor smithy uses from his grandfather's time to describe his self-sculpted keys. It would've been nice if they were – real that is. I could imagine pulling myself up by my bootstraps, courting one while wooing the others from afar. Each of them would admire my guile and want me with a desire acknowledged only in half smiles and knowing glances.

Instead, I sit alone. Glass half-full, sure-fire advice from a collapsing house in my pocket. I watch Googy slow dance with Ape, his face buried below her ample bountiful bosom. I think back to that day at the clinic and wonder what might have happened if I just held her hand.

My glass drains with hollow regret. Googy flashes me her crooked Mona Lisa smile whispering something to Ape. He repeatedly nods like he understands everything she's saying.

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