

The Law of Unintended Consequences

By

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There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen, "Anthem"

Chapter 1

No Rent, No Roof, No Refuge

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Scratching his stubbled chin, Davie Woodward pulled back the curtain. The Mexican at the door was wearing a bulletproof vest stamped front and back with the word "constable" in big block letters. He pounded on the door again.

"You have 30 minutes to vacate the premises, Mr. Woodward," the constable said, then stepped back from the door.

Davie patted the Colt 45 snugged in the holster at his hip. "Another goddamn Mexican." The landlady of the sagging adobe that had been made into a duplex was a Mexican. She barely spoke English, for Christ's sake. Because of the goddamn Mexicans, landscaping jobs were so scarce that at the end of each month there was nothing left to put aside. He was waiting for call backs on five job applications he'd filled out last week and four from the week before. And now this guy, this constable... What the hell was a constable anyway and what right did he have to tell him to fucking vacate the premises? Heart racing, he washed his hands over his face. Vacate to where?

His wife, Garnet, sat on the couch, caressing the swollen belly, which contrasted sharply with her otherwise gaunt appearance. When she started to get big, the manager at Pizza Shack began cutting back her hours until her job was hardly worth the bus fare. Now there was nothing for her to do but wait for the baby.

Rising from the couch with a grunt, she went to the window and put her hand on his shoulder. "Davie, let's just pack up and go."

Fists balled, he roughly shrugged off her hand and immediately regretted it. He would never do to Garnet what his father had done to his mother and to him. Never. They'd been together for three years, married less than one, and now the baby. Seemed he'd been working his ass off but could never get ahead. He rubbed his chest. It felt like he couldn't get enough air.

A police car pulled into the parking lot and Davie glared as a big, fat black cop climbed out. Backup, Davie assumed, as he watched the two men conferring. He pulled his baseball cap off and ran his fingers through his shaggy, brown hair.

“Not right, Garnet. Not right,” he said, but she’d already gone into the bedroom to pack up their belongings. There wasn’t that much. The duplex was furnished, if you could call the old sprung couch, chipped dinette set and a recliner that no longer reclined, furniture. Even the mattress on the bedroom floor wasn’t theirs.

The trouble had started when they came home after celebrating Garnet’s birthday at the Chinese buffet down the road to find that the water heater had sprung a leak. Soon after, they noticed black mold creeping up along the floorboards. Felicia Ramirez, the landlady, kept putting them off, even when Garnet, with her asthma, started to have trouble breathing. Davie reported the mold to the health department, but still nothing. Finally, he told Ramirez that he wouldn’t pay the rent until she did something to solve the problem.

Then came the eviction notice. Davie had the money, tried to give it to her, but Ramirez refused to take it; said they had trashed the place and had to be out in 10 days.

When he went to court to fight the eviction, Davie thought it was obvious that the whole thing was retaliation because he’d reported the mold. But the judge asked only one question: “Did you pay the rent?”

That was it. Didn’t matter about the mold, didn’t matter that he’d tried to pay up but the landlady wouldn’t accept it, didn’t matter that they had seven months left on their lease. It was the law, the judge said. In less than five minutes it was over.

Shaking his head, Davie closed the curtain. He just didn’t get it. It was okay that the shyster of a slum landlord, who was probably not even a U.S. citizen, was charging big bucks for roach-infested substandard housing, but it was not okay for a U.S. citizen to hold out on the rent until something was done to fix a known health hazard. And mold wasn’t the only thing wrong, not by a long shot. There were cockroaches in the kitchen and bathroom, and when you flushed the toilet, a black sludge gurgled up from the shower drain. Ramirez never even replaced the water heater. Davie was already out hundreds of dollars, and it was not his fault. He felt like his head was about to explode.

And where were they going to get the money for a new place? Not only did they still have to pay the rent owed, Ramirez blamed them for the broken water heater and water damage to the drywall. She refused to return their security deposit, and they were stuck with the court costs. Right now, there was no money for a new security deposit and the first month’s rent on another shit-hole. He punched the wall leaving a satisfying dent in the drywall. They could try pulling that money out of his ass.

Garnet emerged from the bedroom toting a garbage bag of clothing.

He reached for her arm as she walked by and gave it a gentle tug. “Sorry about all this, babe.”

“Where are we gonna to go?”

“I’ll take you to your sister’s.”

“But she—”

“Won’t have me. I know. I’ll camp out in the truck. When I find us a place, I’ll come get you. It won’t be long, I promise,” he said, though he didn’t believe it.

Eyes brimming, Garnet headed outside to put her things in their truck, an old faded green Dodge Ram already loaded with assorted landscaping equipment. “You better get your things together,” she said over her shoulder. “I’ll do the kitchen.”

He nodded, but didn't move.

"This job sucks, man," Constable Frank Nuñez was saying to Officer Torrance Stedman. "His wife's as big as a house. Did you see her?"

"Yeah."

"I mean, it's the law, it's my job, but sometimes..." He tipped his hat back and rubbed his buzzed head with his knuckles. "My wife's due next month. I really feel for the guy."

"Yeah." Fact was, Stedman knew very well what it was like to be a paycheck away from disaster.

"It's hard to believe." Nuñez pointed his chin at the faded duplex. "The Westside is now prime real estate. With all the white folks moving into the neighborhood, Ramirez could sell this property as is for a chunk of cash. Could be why she's in such a rush to get them out. Sucks, man, but what can you do about it?"

Stedman nodded. "Heads up," he whispered. "Here he comes and he's carrying." He eyed the man's days-old beard, the straggly hair, noted the hunting knife in a scabbard strapped to his leg, the Colt 45 on his hip and tried to assess the danger. "Let me handle this one, Frank," he said, stepping forward.

"Afternoon, Mr. Woodward. I'm real sorry for your troubles." Stedman had learned that a simple apology can save time, effort and sometimes lives.

"I've got the rent money." He reached in his pocket and pulled out his wallet. "Take it. We need more time to find another place."

"Sorry man, I can't accept your rent money. We've got court orders, and, right or wrong, you've got 30 minutes."

The hot afternoon sun was making Stedman's skin itch. He scratched the back of his neck. "I know it's too late for advice, but the same thing happened to my daughter not so long ago. She withheld the rent because of a gas leak, then got an eviction notice. I was pretty damn mad, went with her to court to fight it. But it seems the law requires that the renter give written notice before withholding rent. She was SOL as they say." He shook his head. "Doesn't seem right, but it's the law."

The man looked at him as if he were speaking a foreign language.

"Just thought you might want to know in case this ever happens to you again." Stedman paused to scratch his ear. "Oh, yeah, one other thing, man. Never tell the judge you didn't pay the rent. Tell him anything but that. Once you say those words, he stops listening 'cause nothing else matters before the law."

"Then the law is fucked."

"In this case, I have to agree." Stedman studied the ground for a moment. "Hey, I noticed your wife's gonna have a baby soon. Can I help you load up your belongings?"

After dropping his wife off at her sister's, Davie had picked up a six-pack of Bud and a Whopper and fries at Burger King, then headed to a spot out in the desert where he used to take Garnet before they moved in together.

Though it was not yet solid dark, the sun and the fast food were gone, and the doves and quail were settling in for the night. He'd just opened his last beer, thinking he'd be needing another six-pack, when a flashy red Camaro came bumping down the dirt road. The driver, a Mexican kid, his girl snuggled next to him, carefully skirted the deep ruts to avoid bottoming out. Davie sipped his beer as he watched them pull onto the narrow track that led to the wash.

He'd been down that track, been down there with Garnet, her and a few others, and knew just what they'd be up to.

Nice car, that Camaro, vintage. Davie wondered what the little wetback did to get the money to buy it. Suddenly furious, he chugged the last of his beer and crushed the can in his fist.

Three women, Pappy, Elaine, and Brittany, were sitting in the shadows beneath the giant bronze statue of Pancho Villa on his rearing stallion. The only thing they had in common was poor prospects, but last summer they'd banded together for safety after the murders of two homeless women.

Pappy and Elaine were seasoned survivors of addiction and abuse. At least for now, Brittany had survived a voice that sometimes urged her to step in front of a SunTran bus. Before she'd been consumed by her singular affliction, Brittany had been an English major at the University of Arizona. It was she who once dubbed them the Weird Sisters, after the three hags in Macbeth. The name had an odd appeal and stuck.

All night the women had been waiting: waiting for the temperature to drop below 90 degrees, waiting for the stores, then the restaurants, then the bars to close, waiting for a bit of quiet and dark to rest in.

When it was as quiet and dark as it was going to get, they ambled, no reason to hurry, to the corner of Pennington and Stone to the public library. They passed a big red metal sculpture – part jungle gym, part Chinese pagoda. Brittany used to think it awkward and out of character for Tucson, but more recently, she had come to appreciate its splash of color. They passed the library itself. To the west of the building was a park-like setting with actual green grass and an assortment of thirsty-looking trees.

Their destination was a pepper tree with a wide canopy that grew in a strip of decomposed granite between two low block walls. It was darker under there and quieter. A sign read "Hummingbird Hollow." Brittany thought it too quaint for the ultramodern building with its concrete planters filled with aloes and cacti – plants one would certainly not find in a cozy hollow – but the sign would capture the imagination of a child. She liked to think that during the day, some mom and her kid might sit on the wall and read in the shade.

Beneath the tree it was darker, cooler, quieter and the ground more forgiving. Pappy, calves bulging below her baggy basketball shorts, began to unload her backpack, Elaine her roller bag. Brittany hesitated a moment to make sure they were not under surveillance, then slipped off her pack. In an orderly fashion they spread their gear next to the wall where it was darkest.

First, they laid out the blankets. Pappy's, a rough wool army surplus, always went on the bottom as insulation. Next was Elaine's worn cotton quilt for a bit of padding. Last was the maroon fleece. According to Brittany, it was a gift from the government for allowing them to implant a computer chip into her brain so that they could monitor her creativity. Just before the first delivery trucks started to clatter down the street, the temperature would fall below eighty. With the humidity at three percent and a bit of breeze, the women would want to pull the soft fleece over their legs.

Pappy, a solidly built woman of middle age, reached into the side pocket of her pack and pulled out a knee sock full of rocks. She could whirl it above her head with force and menace while spewing invectives of such vehemence and originality that she'd never had to hit anyone with it. Even though Elaine wasn't that much younger than her and Brittany not much younger

than Elaine, Pappy thought of them as *her girls* and felt as protective of them as a mama bobcat of her kits. Pappy put the sock on the ground next to her pack.

Brittany produced a sharp No. 2 pencil with a makeshift hilt of duct tape. Before the voices had begun to compete for her attention, every spring break, while her more stable peers got drunk on the beaches along the Sea of Cortez, she had re-read *The Lord of the Rings* and so dubbed her little weapon Sting. Once Brittany had used it on a would-be rapist. Although she had been aiming for his eye, she was pretty certain that she'd merely provided her attacker with a third nostril – all the better to smell his own shit with, she would sometimes boast. She put the pencil in her pants pocket for easy access, then sat her narrow butt on the wall and listened for approaching footsteps or the crackle of an agent's radio.

Elaine began to braid her hair. Thick and near auburn, it was the last of her beauty. She secured it with a rubber band, then pulled out a single, stiletto-heeled red patent leather shoe. A relic of better times, she figured the heel could be an effective deterrent. She waved the shoe about now. "To keep away the cockroaches," she said, referring to the men who prey upon the homeless. Men who raped them, or bludgeoned them with a baseball bat just to see what was inside their backpacks or perhaps just to see how it felt to bludgeon someone with a baseball bat.

Despite the heat, the women didn't remove a single layer of clothing, not even their shoes. Fight or flight, they needed to be prepared for both. Could be there was someone out there right now, watching and waiting for one of them to go off by herself to pee. Well, they knew better.

When everything was just right, they snugged their packs against the wall and settled down for what was left of the night, each trying to maintain a slice of space between their bodies; it was still so hot. Exhausted, they stared into the branches of the pepper tree, a black filigree against an opaque sky, and waited for sleep to come.

Brittany, who became Brittany the day she ran away from home, some ten years ago, suddenly sat up. "Let he who is without sin, cast the first stone."

"What?" Pappy was clearly annoyed.

"What, what?" asked Brittany.

"You just said something about sin."

Brittany shrugged. "Not me."

Though Pappy was used to Brittany's non sequiturs, pique always affected her like a double espresso. Now she was wide-awake. Her father had been a Bible thumper to the bone. He'd versed her well in sin, so she had an opinion. "My guess is that not even Christ himself could have thrown that stone," she observed. "The deadly sins – sloth, envy, pride, greed, gluttony, wrath and lust – who the hell hasn't sinned?"

"So, what about stealing?" Long ago Brittany had shoplifted a package of bikini panties in assorted florals. "And why should greed, gluttony, sloth, envy, pride, wrath and ... what's the last one?"

"Lust," Elaine offered.

"Why are those sins worse than committing murder or rape?"

Now propped on an elbow, Pappy warmed to the topic. "Just think about it." Her tone implied the additional word *stupid*. "The deadlies are at the root of all of other sins."

Brittany chewed that over for a moment. When she'd stolen those panties, she had committed the sin of envy for sure, and probably wrath as well. She'd been very angry at her mother that day.

“So, nobody’s innocent, then.” Elaine found a degree of comfort in the notion. In her day, she’d committed so many lustful, greedy, gluttonous acts she could not count them, and though she was the only one with a roller bag, secretly she coveted Brittany’s fleece blanket.

As for Pappy, once she lost her temper, good luck finding it again. Pappy was full of wrath and proud of it. Kind of a deadlies two-for-one.

“Is it a sin to make poor choices?” Brittany asked in a near whisper. “People – my mother, social workers, counselors, doctors, politicians and generals – even heads of states have told me I make poor choices.”

Pappy hooted. “Politicians and heads of state, no less. I guess they should know. But choice? More like a hand in the middle of your back shoving you towards the edge of a cliff.”

“More like a knife at your throat,” Brittany added.

“Excuses, excuses,” said Elaine. “If you don’t accept responsibility for your actions, you’ll never—”

“True, but fuck you anyway,” Pappy said, though she was no longer angry. It occurred to her that there was really only one sin at the root of every evil in their lives. It wasn’t sloth or envy or any of the others; it was poverty. She and Elaine were born and reared in it. Poor Brittany committed the sin of poverty in the midst of the voices, sincere and angry, wheedling, loving and seemingly wise voices that whispered in her ear.

After a few quiet moments, there was a dry fluttering, Brittany’s lips gently flapping in sleep. The woman was always the first to fall. Elaine was next. Pappy could tell by the faint whistle with her every exhale.

Pappy leaned back against her pack, counting backward from 100 until she could no longer keep her eyes open – then, coming from a planter, a dry, exhausted squeak. “What the hell?” Her voice was tight with exasperation.

Again, the faint mew. “Sounds like a kitten,” Elaine said. She produced a little flashlight from her roller bag and shined it toward the planter. Two eyes reflected the light. She struggled to her feet and peered into the concrete bowl filled with aloes. “Hey baby. Look at you.” She extracted a very small, very grimy kitten and held it aloft.

“Holy shit,” Pappy whispered. It was almost a prayer. “Is that the only one?”

Elaine scanned the planter with her flashlight. “Looks like it. Poor baby.” Elaine stroked the kitten with her index finger. “Where’s your mom?”

“It looks like it’s going to die,” said Pappy.

The women began to search through pockets, zippered compartments and various plastic bags.

Several minutes passed. Pappy threw down two packets of grape jelly and a tiny container of peanut butter squirreled away from this morning’s breakfast at the Las Hermanas Women’s Hostel. “That’s it for me.”

Elaine added three packets of non-dairy creamer, two packets of mayo and one of mustard, also compliments of Las Hermanas.

Brittany produced five packets of sugar, two of salt. In silence, they studied the small mound of condiments, absorbing the fact that between the three of them they didn’t have enough to keep a kitten alive.

“Well, we can mix the jam and the creamer and add water,” Brittany suggested. “Anybody got a little bowl or something?”

“Hang on.” Elaine searched through her roller bag once again. “It’s in here somewhere.” She continued her search, pulling out panties, tampons, toothbrush and paste and a small cake of unused hotel soap. “Aha!” Elaine set a plastic container next to the packets. “For my dentures.”

“What dentures?” Pappy snapped.

“I used to have dentures.”

“What happened to them?”

“They went with the grocery cart that went with the son of a bitch who stole it.”

“So how come the container didn’t go with the dentures?”

“Because it was in my pocket holding the joint I was going to share with my then-boyfriend.”

“Why weren’t you wearing the dentures?”

“They hurt like hell.”

“Oh,” Pappy said. “Well, just pour a little water in it, why don’t you?” She watched as this was accomplished. “Now add the creamer.”

“I know. I know,” said Elaine. “Don’t be so bossy.” She added the creamer, then the sugar and a bit of grape jelly, mixed it with her finger, added a little more water then set it before the kitten. For a moment the kitten wobbled forward, then collapsed.

“Put a little on your finger to get it started,” Brittany suggested.

Elaine dipped her finger into the mix and offered it to the kitten. No luck.

“Let me try.” With her pinky, Elaine scooped up a little jam and held it under the kitten’s nose. “Come on, baby. Try this.” The kitten didn’t even lift its head. “Oh, God. It’s going to die.”

“Here, give it to me.” Pappy reached out for the kitten. “Come to Pappy.” Sitting cross-legged she took charge of the kitten, dipping a corner of her tee shirt into the mixture then stuffing it into the kitten’s mouth.

“You’re going to choke it,” Brittany cried.

“Oh, hold your water.” Pappy pressed the tee shirt corner a little deeper into the kitten’s mouth, and it began to suck.

A man in worn, laceless running shoes, tongues lapping, sat on a concrete bench. His back was resting against the concrete table, arms spread, feet propped on a big roller bag. The bill of his cap was pulled low over his brow. He might have been sleeping. It was late. Most of the homeless men and women camping in Santa Rita Park had already settled into their nests of accumulated debris.

A small figure slipping by not thirty feet from where he sat, drew the man’s attention. Last night, and the night before that, he’d watched the boy crawl beneath an oleander hedge like some little animal. He could easily imagine the boy’s terror as he hid there in the dirt. Yes, he knew exactly what it was like to hide, fear banging around his ribcage like a trapped squirrel. Used to be that the fear got so bad sometimes he thought he might die from it. Eventually, he’d found ways to manage it.

Tonight, the man had brought a Coke, an orange and little bag of cookies – things that wouldn’t spoil in the heat. Later, he would set them down by the hedge, not too close to the boy. He didn’t want to scare him.

Gripping the cool dirt that surrounded him in his small brown fists, the boy awoke with a start. So, this is what it is to be dead, he thought and closed his eyes again. His stomach rumbled. All his life he’d heard tales of hungry ghosts. Was he one of those now? Moments later the boy was

roused by rain sifting through his hiding place beneath a hedge covered in white blossoms. If he could feel rain, he must not be dead yet.

After several minutes, the rain that he remembered was not rain, ceased. It struck him as strange to water dead grass, but there were so many strange things in this country. Inhaling the fragrance of the dampened blossoms, he peered out from beneath the hedge. The people gathered in their makeshift shelters were no more than humps in the grass. Some were harmless, some not.

It must have been well after midnight, though it was hard to tell. It was never totally dark, not like it was in his town, where at night you could not see the path to the latrine, but had to feel its worn surface with the soles of your feet. No, he knew how to move in the dark; it was in the light of day that he had trouble navigating.

During the day, he always kept a close eye on the comings and goings of those around him, appraising. An opportunity to perform some heroic deed would be best. He'd heard that if you saved a life, the authorities might show mercy. Every day he looked for such a chance; pulling a mother and child from a burning car would be good, but so far, no such opportunity had presented itself.

Walking toward his hiding place was a familiar figure, nothing more than a tall silhouette against the opaque sky. The only one still about, he pulled a large suitcase on wheels. It must hold many possessions, the boy supposed, because the man struggled to maneuver it across the uneven ground. When he passed the hedge, he placed a paper bag on the ground.

The boy did not move. He had learned not to trust men who gave him gifts. Nothing was free. The boy waited until the man was out of sight to retrieve the bag. Inside was an orange, a Coke and a packet of cookies. He ate the orange and the cookies immediately. The Coke he'd save for later.

It wasn't long before the man returned, now pushing the cart easily across the grass. When he was gone, the boy crawled out from beneath the hedge. Despite the water, the grass was brittle beneath his feet as he tightly laced the shoes that were two sizes too big. The sky was beginning to lighten, and he needed to hurry to find his next meal, the one he would eat while drinking the Coke.