

Dave, Howard, John

Cold spring wind howled down the mountain, over forested ridges, across Whitney Valley and hammered our house. We didn't hear the pickup pull into the driveway. Knocking at the front door startled us.

Laura walked to the door and opened it. The guy stepped into the doorway. He said, "Is there someplace around here we can get this baby in out of the cold?"

I said, "What baby?"

He said, "He's in the pickup with my wife. I can't bring him out in this cold wind just to show him to you, can I?"

I immediately disliked the guy and his verbally aggressive response, but when he asked again, "Is there someplace we can get our baby in out of the cold?" I said, "Go get the baby and your wife and bring them in."

He walked out to the pickup and got them, and they all came in. The woman carried the baby wrapped in blankets. He said, "This is my wife, Diana. This baby is Robert. Call me Dave."

I said, "Sit down." Diana did, but Dave ignored the chair I offered and stepped close to the heater, between me and Diana and the baby. I said, "Don't you have a heater in your pickup?"

"Sure we have a heater in the pickup, but we can't just drive around twenty-four hours a day with the heater going, can we? A tank of gas only lasts so long, you know."

"Where've you been staying?"

"We've been sleeping in the back of the truck, but it's too cold to keep that up. This baby is gonna get sick if we can't get him in someplace warm."

"Why are you up in the coldest part of the country? Spring is a cold time of year up here."

"I know that. How could I not know that? We've been sleeping in the pickup for several nights now. We came up here because we know the country. I used to work up here. We were in the tri-cities, and I had a good

job in construction, but Diana's old man got really weird, so I either had to kick the shit out of him or leave. I don't think violence does any good, do you? Do you think it does any good? So we pulled out. Isn't that right, hon? I wanted to go where I know the country."

Laura asked, "Have you had breakfast?"

"No. No breakfast. We got up early and started driving. It was too cold to stay in bed. I saw smoke coming out of your chimney, so I stopped to see if I could rent a cabin around here, see if there's any work a guy can do."

"None of the other cabins around here are livable, except the hunting cabins, and the people who own them won't rent them out."

"What about those cabins up the road about two miles?"

"That's Rico's cow camp. He won't let anybody live there."

"How do you know that without even asking? A guy could ask, couldn't he?"

"Sure. Ask. Plenty of people before you have asked. Most of them were better known than you are, and the answer has always been no."

Laura cooked breakfast for them. Dave asked me, "You know Jack Sargent, lives down by Unity?"

"I've heard of him, but I've never met him."

"He's a deputy sheriff down there. He's got a ranch down there. Two years ago, we worked for him, fixing fence. He gave us a trailer to stay in, out where we worked. We worked for him most of the summer. That's why I was up in this country, fixing fence. Don't tell him I'm up here, though. We had a blow-up at the end. He's probably still mad at me."

Laura put breakfast on the kitchen table, and Dave and Diana sat down and ate. Diana held the baby close against her. We had eaten, but I sat down at the table with a cup of coffee. Diana turned her face away from me. Dave sat down between us. "How do you make a living up here?" he asked me.

"I'm the caretaker of this ranch. I cut and sell firewood, when I have time."

"I know how to fix fence. Put me to work fixing fence on this ranch. I need some work. I got a wife and baby to feed. I need to make some

money.”

“I don’t do any hiring. I just take care of the place. You’d have to go talk to the boss. We don’t need any more help on this ranch, but he does own other ranches. He might need some help.”

“Where does he live?”

“Unity.”

“Naw. I’m not going down around Unity. What about cutting wood? Who runs that? Does he run that, too?”

“No. I run that. I cut beetle-killed lodgepole on his place, but it’s my own business.”

“Put me to work cutting firewood. I’ve cut firewood before. I got to make some money. You can’t take care of a wife and baby if you’re not making money, can you? We got money coming, but we’re not going to get it for a while, so I need to make some money.”

I would have liked to know more about him before I made a deal, but he was in a rush to get right to work. I could understand his rush, with a wife and baby to think of and another cold night coming.

I said he could use the fact that he was going to work for me as a recommendation. I went with him to the phone cabin, and he called Russell Rico and got his permission to move into one of the cabins on his ranch. Dave knew how to talk people into what he wanted.

Dave and Diana and Robert borrowed stuff for cleaning and drove up to get the cabin ready. We loaned them what pots and pans and dishes we could spare. The cabin they were moving into had a stove, but it lacked pipe. I drove to town and bought another chain saw. When I got back, I found what pipe I had, loaded firewood into my pickup, and drove up and helped Dave run pipe from the stove out. By evening, they were settled in the cabin, and I gave them enough firewood to last a few days.

The next morning, Dave drove down early. “Let’s take my pickup over to work,” he said.

I had most of the tools loaded in my pickup. I said, “It’s easier to take mine.”

“Come on. If I’m going to be a partner, we’ve got to use my stuff too. Otherwise, I’m not even a partner.” He grabbed tools and loaded them into

his pickup.

We drove across the meadow, where spring grasses grew toward the sun, to the timber, where blown-down dead lodgepole lay on the ground or jackstrawed together through green timber. I said, "Start in this area. Good cutting here. Cut eighteen-inch lengths." He started his saw and limbed and cut up dead trees that had blown down. I watched him.

He worked for a few minutes. Then he shut his saw off and said, "What are you standing there watching me for? You're not going to get any wood cut watching me. Start your saw and cut some wood."

"Just relax and keep working. I'll watch until I know you're safe with a saw."

"I told you, I've cut wood before. I know how to use a saw. Start your saw and start cutting wood."

"This is my operation. My tools, my customers, my contract. Don't give me orders. I'll check your work. I'll check how you take care of tools, and how safe you are. If you cut yourself, I'm the one who has to try to stop the bleeding and get you out of here or carry out your dead body, so I'll be satisfied that you know how to handle the saw, or you won't run it. If you don't like my approach, get in your pickup and get out of here. If you're going to keep giving me orders, get in your pickup and get out of here, now."

"Cool down, now. Just cool down. I'm not trying to give you orders. I just didn't want you to waste time when you could be earning money. I didn't want you watching me when I know I can take care of myself, that's all. If you're not going to be happy until you watch me for a while, that's fine with me. Watch."

He started his saw and went back to work. After he cut up several trees that were already down, I walked into his work area and waited until he shut his saw off. I pointed and said, "I want to see you fall those three dead trees."

"Sure. Where do you want 'em?"

"Put them where it works out best for you."

"Okay. I'll do that right now." He looked the trees over, told me where he'd drop them, started his saw, dropped them, limbed them, and started

cutting them into firewood. I was satisfied with the way he worked, so I went to my own area and cut wood.

When I ran out my second tank of gas, he brought his saw over and gassed it up. He said, "We're going to be getting a big chunk of money, but it's going to take a while. We had another baby, before this baby. It died. It was the doctor's fault. The lawyer says we'll collect, but it takes time to finish up all the details. The lawyer gets a big chunk of it. Too big. How much is a life worth? What do you think? How much is a baby's life worth?"

"I don't know."

"That's what the lawyer said in court, how much is a life worth? All the money in the world won't buy our baby's life back. I used to believe in God, but I don't anymore. A real God wouldn't let that kind of thing happen. Would he? What do you think? If there was a God, would he let a baby die like that?"

He wanted a yes or no answer, but I couldn't see any answer taking less than a half-hour discussion, so I said, "I can't answer that one." I finished servicing my saw and cut more wood.

I shut down my saw about 11:30, got my lunch out of the truck, and sat on a log in the shade. He got his lunch out of the truck and joined me. He asked, "How soon can we sell some of this wood? Do you have any customers lined up? I need some money. How soon can you sell some of it?"

"We talked about that yesterday. Don't you remember talking about it before we made a deal to work together?"

"Sure I remember talking about it. That doesn't answer the question I just asked you. How soon can you sell some of it?"

I put down my sandwich and said, "Yesterday, when we talked about it, before I agreed to let you work with me, I said you'd have to be willing to wait a while before we sold any wood. You said okay. Remember that, Dave? I said it would be at least a week, maybe two."

"I can't wait two weeks. I got a wife and baby to take care of. I need some money."

"Then why did you agree to start work and wait for the money when we

talked about it yesterday?”

“What else can I do? I got to have some money. Can you feed your family without any money coming in? Can you do that?”

“If you want to do it that way, I’ll buy the wood from you as we go, but you’ll have to stack it so we can measure it, so we’ll know how much you have.”

“I’m not going to stack it. That takes a lot of time when I’m not making any money. I make money when I cut wood, but I don’t make a dime stacking it, do I? Do I make any money stacking wood? Come on, man. Answer my question.”

I picked up my saw and the gas can and put them into the back of his truck. I started gathering the rest of my tools and loading them. He said, “What are you doing now? I thought we came out here to work. What are you loading tools for?”

“You’re through, Dave. We’re loading tools and going to my place. Then we’re unloading my stuff, and you’re getting off my place and taking care of your own problems.”

“Why? What’d I do wrong? We just barely got started. I’m doing good work. What’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter is, you’re on the attack just about every minute. Yesterday, you agreed to cut wood with me, wait until I get somebody up here to buy it, then get the money for what you’ve cut. I explained to you a loaded truck would probably sink going across the meadow, and we’d have a stuck, loaded truck. The meadow has to dry a while before we can sell any wood. Today, you’re acting like we never talked about that, coming at me with aggressive questions we’ve already answered.

“I enjoy my work. I enjoy ranch work, and I enjoy cutting wood. But you’re making it an unpleasant operation. You don’t want to stick to the agreement, and you don’t want the work to be enjoyable, and I don’t need that, and I don’t want it. So load tools. You cut maybe a cord of wood. I’ll pay you for that, and we’ll call it finished.”

“Ah, come on, Jon. I can’t take care of my wife and baby on the money from one cord of wood, can I? What’s that? Twenty-five dollars? I can put that much money in gas in my pickup and still have nothing for food. You

ever been down to zero dollars with a baby to take care of?"

"Yes, I have. It didn't make me start trying to push people around."

"Hey, I wasn't pushing you around. Just asking some questions, that's all. I didn't know you were so sensitive about questions. I'll stop asking questions. I'll shut up and just work. Come on. Unload your tools. No use coming out here for about two hours work and then quitting, is there? Come on. Sit down and eat lunch. I won't ask questions. Here. Have one of these sandwiches. They're meat sandwiches."

"No thanks. I have plenty of lunch."

"They're good sandwiches. Come on. Try one. Diana made one just for you. You want me to have to tell her you didn't want the sandwich she made for you, and I had to feed it to the dog?"

If it had been just him, I would have sent him down the road, meat sandwich or no, but that thing he held up in front of him like a beggar's sign, take care of a wife and baby, was real, even if he misused it aggressively. He did stop asking questions while we ate lunch, so I let go of it.

We worked until about four o'clock. He stayed quiet all the way back across the meadow. When we got to my place and started unloading the tools, he said, "Leave that new saw in there. I'll take it home and service it and sharpen the chain."

I took the saw out of his pickup and put it with the rest of my tools. He asked me, "Don't you want it to be ready to go first thing in the morning?"

"It will be."

Halfway through the next morning, when I shut my saw down to sharpen the chain, Dave came over and said, "I should be getting a bigger cut of the money than you are. I'm cutting more wood than you are."

"I'll bet you a hundred and fifty dollars."

"What?"

"I'll bet you a hundred and fifty dollars I've cut more wood than you have."

"How would we know?"

"Stack the wood and measure it."

"I already told you, stacking wood is a waste of time, when we could be

cutting.”

“You’re sure you’ve cut more than I have. Take us a couple of hours at the most to stack it. You win a hundred and fifty dollars. Seventy-five dollars an hour is pretty good pay.”

“If I lost, I wouldn’t, but just say I did, I don’t have the money to pay.”

“You might have 150 dollars worth of wood. I’ll take the wood.”

“Yeah. I don’t know. I don’t really believe in betting. Do you think gambling is right? I thought you said you were a Christian.”

“What difference does it make what I believe? You already said you don’t believe in God, so you’re in the clear. Put up or shut up.”

He turned and started to walk away.

“Dave.”

He stopped. “What?”

“Did you take a lot of drugs some time?”

“I never took drugs at all. Why would you ask me that?”

“You came over here ready to argue about getting more money than I am. We agreed in the beginning we’d keep what we cut separate. What you cut, you get all the money for. What I cut, I get all the money for. Repeat that to yourself several times while you’re working. Maybe if you keep at it, it will stick in your mind for a while.”

Later in the day, we worked on saws together. He started to use a screwdriver to pry the cover off the air filter on the saw he was using. I said, “Don’t pry that apart. Just pull on the cover. It’ll come off. That’s pretty thin plastic. You might break it.”

“I know how to work on this saw.” But he did it the way I said.

A long time later, after Dave was out of my life, I noticed there’s a little slot in the air cleaner, made to put a screwdriver blade into to pry the two halves apart, just like he’d started to do. I think that was a significant moment for Dave, that helped him make a decision, that I would be so stupid, I’d tell him to do something the wrong way. He didn’t say anything further about it.

A few days later, I had to drive down to Unity and pick up my check for ranch work. Dave said, “Don’t tell Jack Sargent I’m in this part of the country. He probably wouldn’t know who you were talking about anyway.

He thinks my name is Howard.”

“I don’t even know Jack Sargent. I told you, I know who he is, but I’ve never met him.”

“I took off with some of his tools. We had a big blow up where I was working, and he left. I couldn’t drive 30 miles out of my way just to take his tools back, could I?”

“You could have left them where you were working. He would have found them.”

“I had them in the trunk of my car. I forgot they were there until I was a hundred miles down the road. They weren’t worth much. Just some fence tools is all.”

“You didn’t see them there in your trunk when you started packing your gear, I guess. They got more or less invisible.”

“Diana put a box of groceries on the shelf in the trailer by the window. They fell and broke the window. He got mad about it and said it was our fault and we had to pay for the window. What do you think, could it be our fault the window broke when we weren’t even near it? Was that our fault? The guy was trying to take advantage of us, wasn’t he?”

“With practice, you’ve gotten a little better at not asking me questions I couldn’t possibly know the answer to. There’s still room for improvement, though. Keep practicing.”

Both saws developed carburetor problems. I couldn’t get them running right. I said, “I’m going to have to take them to town.”

Dave said, “Can you advance me fifty dollars on the wood I’ve cut? I’ve cut way more than fifty dollars worth. I need to get some groceries.”

“You have cut more than that. Sure. I’ll advance you fifty dollars.”

“I’ll take the saws down for you. I have to go down for groceries anyway.”

“No. I’ll take them down.”

“No use paying for gas for two pickups. That’s ten gallons for each pickup. I have to take my pickup down, because I have to get that window for the canopy.”

“Okay. I’ll ride with you.”

On the way down the mountain, Diana wouldn’t look at me or even in

my direction. She held the baby and looked at Dave or beyond him, out his window, all the way down and all the way back. I thought that would make her neck sore, to have her head always turned to one side like that.

We passed the “Huckleberry Summit” sign and started down the winding highway, forest and mountain both sides of the road, ridges, grey rock bluffs. Dave said, “People will screw you over if you give them the chance.”

I said, “Some will. A lot won’t. There’s still honest people in the world.”

“No there aren’t. All of them will screw you over if they get the chance. I don’t know anybody that won’t. Isn’t that right, hon?” He used that “Isn’t that right, hon?” a lot with Diana, and she always agreed immediately. He used her affirmation as proof of victory, as if a vote of two always overruled one, regardless of truth or reason. Anger boiled up in me. I almost said, “Stop the truck and let me out,” but I had two saws in the back, over twelve hundred dollars worth of machines I didn’t want to carry on foot, and I wouldn’t leave them in his pickup.

He said, “You don’t have anything to say, now, Jon? Is that something you still have to learn in this world? How’d you live this long without seeing that right in front of your nose?”

I said, “Get off the subject and get off my back, or the whole wood-cutting venture is over.”

“Over something I said? Over me telling you the truth?”

“You know what I mean. You’re pushing, and I don’t like it. Either you get off it, or you’re out. No more. Not even another sentence.”

“Okay. I didn’t mean to make you mad. Just trying to tell you to take care of yourself.”

I let those sentences go by, and he didn’t say anything else. I watched the day, the highway, the trees, the river, grey rock bluffs, the mountain we drove down, and I let most of everything we’d been talking about wash out of me. They dropped me off at the saw shop in town, and I got the saws fixed.

Dave and Diana bought groceries, got a window for the pickup canopy, and picked me up. We drove back up the mountain along the Powder river,

running full as snow in the high mountains melted and rushed down toward the ocean.

The next day, when we ate lunch, Dave said, "Is water all you got to drink? I brought orange juice. Have some orange juice. I brought plenty for both of us."

Halfway through lunch, Dave said, "I hit Diana in my sleep last night. I feel really bad about it. I had a bad dream, and I rolled over and swung my arm out hard and hit her right in the face."

The next morning, Dave brought Diana and the baby with him and got to our place early so he could tell me he wasn't going to work that day, because he had some other things to do. Laura invited them in for coffee, and they came in and sat down. Diana had a tremendous bruise over most of one side of her face. Dave said, "Show them your bruise, hon. That's where I hit her in my sleep. I sure feel bad about that. How can somebody help what they do in their sleep, though? I'm sleeping on the floor now. We sure don't want that to happen again, do we hon?"

Whenever I saw Diana, she wouldn't face me. Even if she handed me a cup of coffee, she kept her face turned away. I thought he was jealous, and she didn't even look toward other men. It could have been partly that, but now I thought she might have been in the habit of trying to conceal bruises. I had read, in books about abusive relationships, don't attempt to interfere, unless interference can bring about complete change. The abused woman has to want help, ask for help, and leave the man forever, or the abuse is almost sure to get much worse after interference.

The people who wrote those books had worked with people in abusive relationships. What they said made sense to me, so I had to accept it unless I could come up with something better. I came up with nothing. If I interfered, I had to stay with Dave and Diana to prevent him taking out on her his anger at my interference, but I couldn't stay with them. That wouldn't work.

Two customers drove up from Treasure Valley that afternoon and bought ten cords of wood. I sold them Dave's wood. I was getting ranch wages. I could sell my wood later.

Dave took the next day off and went to town. He brought back a small,

used saw. He said, "Not bad for \$35.00 is it?"

I thought it was a mistake. Buy a cheap saw, and you spend more time keeping it running than you spend cutting wood. The chain on it was about shot. I gave him two chains that were worn down half way. He took them to town and had them cut down and re-riveted to fit his saw. When he came back up the mountain, he had a big camper on his pickup. He said, "Two fifty. Not bad for two fifty, huh? It has a refrigerator, stove, heater, two propane tanks. Everything works."

"Where'd you find two hundred and fifty dollars?"

"I didn't. I paid him fifty on it. I'll pay the rest as I sell wood. I'm not going to cut with you anymore. I'm going to cut on my own in Forest Service land."

"Okay."

"We argue too much. It wastes too much time and energy. You're always getting mad at me and trying to fire me. I never know what you're going to do next."

"You don't have to explain why. I already said okay. I'm already talked into it."

"I was going to buy a carryall instead of the camper. A friend of mine, a guy I knew down there when I was up here before, has a really good, 56 G.M.C. carryall. Really good shape. Unbelievable price, two twenty-five, but he wanted cash, so I bought this instead. I wanted to keep my pickup, anyway. Maybe you should go down with me next time and look at that carryall. It would be a really good deal for you. You could use it for work or for camping, you and your family."

"I have all the vehicles I can afford. One pickup."

"You could sell your pickup if you had the carryall. It's really a good one."

I started irrigation work, and I started fixing fences. Dave came over several times, and he brought Diana and the baby with him. He borrowed an axe, falling wedges, a chain to move logs, a gas can, tools to work on his saw, a draw knife to peel wood for furniture. He didn't have a spare for his pickup, so I loaned him a wheel and tire. He said, "I'll get all the tools and this spare back to you as soon as I sell a few cords of wood. I'm in a

really good place to cut up there. Trees this big around. I'll be making good money."

I knew I might lose everything I loaned him. I was willing to risk it, up to a point. If people really need help, somebody has to help, even if I don't like the man much and even if I know he might take off with my tools. Sometimes trust engenders trustworthiness. I thought Dave was making an honest try.

Two days later, Dave drove in and said, "If you want that carryall, you'd better grab it. He'll take a hundred and seventy-five dollars for it if you take it now."

"If it's as good as you say it is, how come nobody's bought it?"

"I don't know. They just haven't. The economy is pretty bad in Baker. You know that yourself. People aren't buying much."

"What are the tires like?"

"They're good. About half-tread."

"What about the engine?"

"He overhauled it himself, two years ago. He's only put about 6,000 miles on it since then."

I said, "I don't have that much money anyway."

"How much do you have?"

"A hundred and fifty."

"I can loan you the rest. I sold all the wood I cut up there. You loaned me money. I can pay back that favor. Pay me when you sell some wood. You'd better do it now if you want it, though. It won't last at that price, even if people aren't buying much."

"I thought you wanted it. If it's as good as you say it is, why don't you buy it?"

"I just bought that camper. I unloaded it in the yard so I can use the truck for work. I can't have two rigs. If I didn't have that camper, I would buy it, but the camper's all I need. It's better for me, cause it has the stove and refrigerator and heater. We could live in it if we had to."

"I can't get out of here to go get it. Laura and the kids have gone to town, and I have people showing up for wood. I have to be here."

"I have to go back to town to get my saw. I left it at the shop. He said it

would be ready right before closing. I stopped by to see Bill, and he told me he'd sell me the carryall for one seventy-five, so I drove up here to tell you about it. He probably won't sell it to you for that price, but he doesn't need to know I'm buying it for you. Diana can drive the pickup back, and I'll drive the carryall."

So I gave him a hundred and fifty dollars and waited with some excitement for him to bring the carryall up the hill. At that price, I figured I couldn't lose. If I couldn't afford to keep it, I could sell it for more than I paid.

By late afternoon, I figured he wasn't coming back. I couldn't figure him leaving his new camper he was so pleased about. I had thought that was my assurance he would come back.

As soon as Laura, Juniper, and Amanda got back from town, I drove up to the cabin Dave, Diana, and Robert had been using. Then I understood. He hadn't had jacks for the camper. He had to unload it to use the pickup for work, so he pried it out of the pickup bed, and the framework he built to support it didn't hold. The camper crashed to the ground and busted up. He left it.

I could see what had happened, almost as if I'd been there. The world was against Dave. Even when he was willing to work hard, everything fell apart on him. Look what happened here. It probably became Diana's fault the camper broke to pieces, and I'm sure she suffered actual physical pain for being to blame.

I walked into the cabin. The cradle Dave had built from lodgepole pine sat in the corner. He had built a chair, crude, but serviceable. They cleaned the place up. They took everything that would sell for a dollar or more.

He warned me. I stood in the doorway of the cabin. Ponderosa pine trees grew toward the mountain-blue sky behind me. The river ran at the foot of the hill, out of sight behind thickly-growing willows. I thought about some of what Dave had said, "If you see Jack Sargent, don't tell him you saw me. I took off with some of his tools. He thinks my name's Howard." "People will screw you over if they get the chance. I'm just trying to tell you to take care of yourself."

I would have said my family's existence was too close to the bone to

help anyone. Howard took off with about four hundred and twenty-five, goods and cash, and we kept on living. We didn't miss a meal.

Over the next few months, a little at a time, I replaced the material possessions we lost to Dave, Howard, John, or we lived a rewarding existence without the ones we couldn't replace.

My biggest regret is that I couldn't help Diana. Maybe I lack the heroism it takes to change the lives of people around me, but thinking about it leads me back to the beginning idea, and I think what I read, what I know about abusive relationships is right. I couldn't have helped her, if I was heroic or if I wasn't. The abused one in an abusive relationship has to want help and be willing to leave the abuser permanently, or intervention will add to danger for the one who is abused. Heroics of the moment won't help and will probably make things worse.

Trust sometimes does engender trustworthiness. I know that's right, too. I might take that kind of risk again, trust someone because trust might help lead to trustworthiness.

Sometimes I have to help people even if they don't have their existence worked out very well, even if they don't know how to ask politely, even if I think I don't have enough in my material existence to spare anything for anyone else.

I wonder if they've all survived. I wonder where they are and what they're doing, Diana, Robert, and Dave, Howard, John.