

Steve

It was a slow day at the coffee shop. Steve sat in a chair by the window, ignoring the withering looks of his manager and studying the plants growing in cracks in the pavement. The crabgrass was as robust as ever, but it appeared one of the dandelions had seen its best days.

Steve glanced at the clock. 3:14 pm. At 5 pm *sharp* he had to take a picture of the plants for the next installment of his photo series. It was a striking narrative – the daily struggle of the tenacious plants fighting their way through an unforgiving environment, until they were inevitably murdered by local cleaning crews.

He wanted to show the photo series at the Gallery Communauté up the street. *He* thought it would resonate with the people, show them they could rely on him to understand their struggle. But Mr. Pemberton, that great whale of a gallerist, disagreed. He claimed Steve's photos "lacked vibrancy."

Lacked vibrancy. Steve wanted to spit just thinking about it. The mark of a great photographer wasn't *vibrancy*, but *composition*, the higher level of thought that went into designing the shot. It was a talent Steve had in abundance. But, alas, Mr. Pemberton was a giant in the art community while Steve was a mere starving artist, forced to smother himself in the terrible smell of coffee just to make a living. He would have to succumb to the wishes of the gallerist - at least until he was recognized by someone with more sense.

The *lack of vibrancy* Mr. Pemberton claimed was in his photos was due to his atrocious camera – there was no other explanation. His Canon EOS Rebel T3, out of date when he bought it, sported a broken screen and shut down whenever it wanted. The key to the recognition he deserved – indeed, the only way forward – was a new camera.

Of course, with his pitiful salary he could hardly afford to purchase one. But Steve wasn't worried. Since the autumn, the office space above the coffee shop was occupied by Pacar for Governor, which supported the favorite to clinch the GOP nomination. The farther the election cycle advanced, the more journalists Steve saw traipse up and down the stairs to the candidate's office. Most of them carried cameras. Some even carried good ones. Steve only needed to bide his time until the right camera arrived, then he would strike.

At 3:43 pm that same day, a lone journalist carrying none other than the Nikon D800E appeared. The camera bounced against his belly as he climbed the stairs – with one shoe untied! Such a lack of care for such a wonderful machine! The time had come. He gave the journalist a few minutes to get settled in, then followed him up the stairs with a medium latte.

The rented space was as uninspiring as could be expected, and the receptionist's attempts to cover the blandness with cheeriness were unsuccessful. "Welcome to Pacar for Governor!" she greeted brightly. Steve pitied the poor woman – imagine being so upbeat about *Alfred Pacar*. "Do you have an appointment?"

Steve held up the coffee. "The man with the camera that just came up here wanted me to bring him a latte."

"Oh, of course! He's in a meeting with Mr. Pacar right now, but he left his things on the table. You can put his coffee there."

Steve strode to the empty back room where, lo and behold, there sat the camera! He couldn't believe someone would be so irresponsible with what ought to be a prized possession. There it rested beneath a draped coat sleeve, as if the fool believed that would protect it!

There was no one in sight. The starving artist set down the coffee and *ever so gently* picked up the Nikon D800E. Sleek, compact, a matte finish, every button and dial in order – oh, it was marvelous! He draped the neoprene strap around his neck and settled the camera gently against his chest. It looked a bit bulky under his coat, but the receptionist didn't seem to notice as he glided past her and out the door.

An hour later, Steve was lying on the pavement with the plants, waiting for his watch to strike 5 o'clock. The Nikon's grip fit his hand perfectly. He had never experienced such smooth lens adjustment! When he pressed the button to take the first of his greatest photographs, the *click* trickled up his arm and down his spine until his entire body was wrapped in a blanket of ecstasy. He knew it. The Nikon knew it. Even the plants knew it – Steve's days as a starving artist were over.

It was the golden hour of the evening when Steve sat in front of his computer to upload his photos. His studio was small, but he had transformed it into a luxurious garden. Potted flowers caught the Sun's rays at the windowsill and dappled the wooden floor with bright colors. Ivy climbed the wall by his computer and planters hung from the ceiling, forming the favorite haunt of his cat, Ficus.

Steve had taken multiple photos, and each and every one was *marvelous*. Righteousness suffused his heart as he compared the photos from that day to those taken just 24 hours earlier. The difference in color was spectacular! Let Mr. Pemberton spout his mouth about vibrancy *now!*

“Oh, Ficus!” Steve exclaimed. The cat looked down from the violet planter. “Ficus, my friend! I’ve done it!”

Then he clicked to the next picture.

It was not of his plants. Instead, it was a picture of Alfred Pacar, taken at an odd angle, like the photographer was hiding behind something. But what he wanted to record was clear enough – the candidate’s arm was around the shoulders of a man Steve had seen in the paper. He quickly googled his suspicions and – Yes!

“*Ficus!* That’s Luis Hernández! *Luis Hernández, Ficus, HERNÁNDEZ!*”

Yes, Luis Hernández, drug kingpin, leader of the Chiapas Cartel. Alfred Pacar, pro-border-wall gubernatorial candidate *Alfred Pacar*, was *fraternizing* with Luis Hernández! As Steve clicked further, he saw them grinning, shaking hands, gesturing to their staff members – why, that was Pacar’s campaign manager! The journalist must have been at Pacar for Governor to *blackmail* the candidate! Had he been able to show Pacar the photos? Did the candidate know the camera was gone, that the photos were out in the world, in the hands of a rising photographer?

“This is a new and exciting development, Ficus,” the photographer whispered dramatically. “With these photos... Think of the recognition! This is a real breakthrough.”

The path forward was clear. The plant photo series could wait. *This* photoset, though it lacked the precision and design he demanded of himself, was much better suited for launching his career. He would be heralded as a photographer with an eye for corruption, an artist that exposed the dirty underside of their political leaders. Plants could hardly achieve that!

Steve dialed the number of Mr. Pemberton, who picked up on the third ring.

“Yes, Steven? What is it?” the gallerist sighed.

“I have a new photoset, Mr. Pemberton! I already shot all the pictures, now I just need you to display them.”

“A new photoset? I thought you were tracking those weeds?”

Steve bit his tongue. There would be time enough to enlighten his would-be superior. “Yes! It’s nothing like you’ve ever seen before. An exposure of a gubernatorial candidate’s hypocrisy and – dare I say it! – criminality, using photos shot at the *actual* event!”

“Steven, what are you talking about?”

“I have photos of Alfred Pacar, Republican candidate for the governorship of Pennsylvania, shaking hands and *fraternizing* with Luis Hernández!”

There was a brief silence. Then, nervously, Mr. Pemberton asked, “Is this true?”

At Steve’s indignation, the gallerist continued, “Steven... If that’s *really* what you have... Don’t you think you ought to go to the press?”

“*No*,” Steve sighed, completely unsurprised at the man’s failure to see the light. “Think about it – we display my photos in your gallery, call it “A Treatise on Corruption.” Visibility will start off slow with just the regulars, but! They will tell their friends, and more people will visit, *then* the press will catch wind of it and come to see what all the fuss is about! *Think about it*, Mr. Pemberton!”

Mr. Pemberton was silent for a few moments as his ignorant mind traced the pathways Steve had mapped in front of him. “You make... an interesting case, Mr. Holcomb,” the gallerist said slowly. “Perhaps I’ll come by and see these photos, hmm? At 7:15, after dinner?”

With the time set, the photographer could hardly contain himself. He tried to make dinner but was too excited to eat. An article on the hypocrisy of Ansel Adams couldn’t keep his

attention for more than a few seconds at a time. Ficus looked on with drowsy complacency, having grown quite used to his roommate over the years.

The doorbell rang early but not a moment too soon. Steve floated to the door and swept it open, only to find that his visitor was not Mr. Pemberton, but a stranger.

“Mr. Holcomb,” murmured the stranger. He was dressed casually in faded blue jeans and an Eagles sweatshirt. “May I come in?”

“Who are you? I can’t say I’ve ever seen you before,” Steve said disdainfully. “Do you work for Mr. Pemberton? He *ought* to be here himself.”

The stranger chuckled in smooth, low tones. “No, Mr. Holcomb, I am not employed by Mr. Pemberton. But I *do* have an interest in your photography – may I come in?”

Steve felt a pang of suspicion, but he tamped it down and let the man enter. It would be a shame to turn away an admirer of his work!

“I will be clear with you, Mr. Holcomb, as I believe this is all a big misunderstanding. My name is Norman Hauer. I have worked for Mr. Pacar for many years...”

Steve’s face stiffened. Hauer chuckled. “I see you know what I’m here about. I’ve looked into your history, Mr. Holcomb, and believe me when I say I understand your plight. An unheralded artist, forced to do the low work of a barista. The pull of a brand-new camera must have been impossible to overcome.”

Steve nodded silently, keeping his agitated thoughts to himself.

“Unfortunately, that camera you took is worth a great deal to Mr. Pacar, far more than its retail price. It has a few photos of a personal nature that he would prefer didn’t circulate beyond his family. I’m sure you understand.”

The photographer nodded again, but he'd stopped paying attention. He was contemplating the different noises he could make to startle Ficus out of the hanging planter.

"Now. Mr. Pacar is prepared to be generous." Hauer pulled a wad of cash out of his pocket and held it under Steve's nose. "This is \$5000. More than enough to buy yourself a brand-new camera of your own, plus a little extra. Mr. Pacar would greatly appreciate it if you would accept this money in exchange for his personal property."

The wad of hundred-dollar bills had Steve's attention. It was a lot of money, probably more than Mr. Pemberton would give him to display his photos. But nobody would learn his name if he took it.

The clock said 7:13. Mr. Pemberton was always punctual. Steve just needed to stall. "Yes. Yes, well, I..." He picked up his old Canon and showed it to the candidate's man. "You have to understand, I mean, *look* at the state of this thing!"

Hauer nodded and smiled reassuringly. "Of course I understand, Mr. Holcomb. It's terrible to have such a thing get in the way of your potential."

There was a knock at the door. Now was his chance!

"COME IN, MR. PEMBERTON!" he screeched at the top of his voice. He kicked Hauer's legs as the door banged open, and a startled Ficus leaped out of his seat and into the ruckus. He landed claws-out on Hauer, who shrieked in dismay. Steve charged the fixer and bashed him over the head with the Canon. There was a dull *crack*, and the man hit the floor.

They stood there, the panting Steve and the aghast Mr. Pemberton, staring at the unconscious body leaking blood on the old wood floors.

The gallerist's wide face was white with dismay. "Steven... why... what on Earth..."

“Mr. Pemberton,” Steve announced, “This man was here to kill me!” He snaked the wad of cash from Hauer’s hand and held it on display. “He said if I didn’t take this money and destroy my cameras and computer, he would shoot me!”

“Oh! Oh, my Lord!” Mr. Pemberton gasped, clutching at his heart. “Well... well we ought-”

“I need to get to safety!” Steve interrupted, digging among the plants to find Ficus. “There could be more of them! If Pacar is *this* desperate to stop my photos getting out, then I’m sure this is hardly the last of it!” With the Nikon around his neck and Ficus under his arm, he stepped over the growing pool of blood and stared earnestly into Mr. Pemberton’s bloodless face. “Will you take me to your gallery, Mr. Pemberton? I need to get these on display *immediately*.”

Mr. Pemberton’s mouth hung open. He stared at Steve, patted at his pockets, and let out a gust of air when his hand landed on his phone.

“Of course, Steven,” he said, fighting to keep his voice even. “Of course, yes. The gallery. I’ll drive you, shall I?”

Before closing the door behind him, Steve was struck with an excellent artistic idea. Taking nearly a full minute to compose the shot, he photographed the bleeding, unconscious Norman Hauer. Mr. Pemberton stared at him, tears gathering in his eyes.

Steve grinned. “I think it will be a marvelous way to finish out the collection, don’t you?”