

NOELLE SULLIVAN

## Mohs Scale of Hardness

“Denise’s favorite tenant hasn’t paid in four months,” I told Kelly as he flipped the faded stripes of his hose across the weedy lawn. He stood with one rubber sole on bunchgrass, and the other beneath the blue spruce that spreads its arms over both our houses. The faucet creaked under his red palm, and a sheet of water fed all the living wires that shot up from scarce footing. Weeds were his best crop.

Kelly’s a good listener, no matter what he’s doing. “In the apartments on Galena?” he asked.

“You know it,” I said. Denise is my wife’s daughter, of that there’s no doubt. She inherited her brains and her sweetness. She manages several buildings uptown, but the Galena Block is her most notorious property. It’s old but not charming, downhill from Walkerville, where we live. Like so many of Butte’s places, standing rubble of the Anaconda Company, it’s been remodeled. New, in the sense that it’s been repainted and carpeted regularly, but it’s already decrepit. Its brick husk cups a sad interior, doomed by Harvest Gold appliances and six decades of abuse. If it weren’t owned by the power company, the whole shooting match would have been burned accidentally, for the insurance, long ago.

“What’s she get for rooms these days?”

“Four twenty-five with Section 8,” I said. “How much should she let pass? He’s a crotchety old cuss, not right in the head. He’s been in the apartment six months and paid for two. Won’t even talk to her, except through the door.”

“Down on his luck?”

“Maybe. Perpetual losses, more likely.”

Kelly pulled at his waistband, straightening his pants. He’d bent to crush the stem of a waxy toadflax and twist it up by its roots. “If it were me deciding, I’d let him ride a while.”

“You’re a good man, Kelly. That’s what I said. That’s exactly what I said. But there’s a complication. Denise thinks he knows what he’s doing. The manager where he used to live, down on Mercury, told her he’s pulled the same thing before. He moves from place to place, you see. It’s his game.”

“Mercury, eh? He’s moved up then.”

Mercury’s another code word, another dismal spot. It’s an avenue lined with bars and keno lounges east of the gulch. Just last month, the Finlandia Bar was condemned and closed there. It had begun to sink into the hollow spaces underneath the hill. Just like a Finn, I said, morosely heading back to the mines. The deeds on those street lots have never come beyond the 1930s.

Mary and I are glad to live high up the hill, with views, close to Tech, though I’ve often thought it would be nicely symbolic to live on a street named for a mineral or metal. I teach at the School of Mines, after all. I live in a geologist’s dream, all scrap ore and light.

Mercury’s a parade of dumps.

Not that our places are so much better, though we’d like to think they are by virtue of effort. Our relics are better than what you’d get for new these days. The walls and floors are solid. We keep them up, wanting our yards to look spry for when the real estate market comes back and we can move to a

bigger place on the Flats. Uptown is neighborly, too. We share more than folks in the newer subdivisions do.

Kelly's easy to find for advice. He's always working on his lawn, wet or dry. He does battle with the drying breeze up here, fighting old smelter dust for the cause of green. There's a ten-foot radius of growth in the middle of his patch, but the edges always turn brown. I've got more sense; I planted a rock garden to show off my finds. It's a bit easier to tend than lush pretensions.

"So what do you think?" I prodded him. "If he's dishonest?"

"If he's toying with her, who needs games? Throw him out."

"That's a bit harsh, don't you think? I was thinking maybe a warning. She could lean on him, maybe I could."

"Is he a prick? She's got to use good judgment." Kelly walked back to his concrete stoop as I grasped the cast iron rail that angled toward his front door.

"It's damn near impossible to judge another human," I said. Hard to know the impact a man can make.

"Father Daley does it every Sunday," Kelly said.

Ah, religion. It's so certain, so self-assured. That's why I stick to science. There's always a mystery left. I became a geologist because rocks are easier to handle than people. The earth shows us history in layers and its pieces come together in the end. They can be analyzed and argued with, without any ruffled feathers. They can be poked and scraped and still shine, unlike the strange organic things among us.

Maybe Kelly wasn't the best man to ask about push and shove. He's smart, chair of his department, a typical Tech engineer with skinny arms and white socks. Wise as he is, he's not the one who makes decisions in his house. He's henpecked in matters of life. His wife's in charge, and that's putting it mildly.

The woman is a fire-breathing bitch dog from hell.

I, too, would run from her bark and bite, as Kelly does in his yard. It is why he steps outside so often. This afternoon he's fled a scene in progress, which I can hear in the background as we keep our own conversation. Mrs. Kelly is screaming the starring role. She tosses insults and curses at their daughter, Aimee. Her words come as a muffled roar from their daylight basement, permeating window glass. I can tell my neighbor hopes to stay apart from the conflict by the way he stealthily turns off the water—not that such a move has prevented involvement before. Mrs. Kelly always tracks him. It's better if she finds him doing something productive, though. Infinitely better.

Truth be told, he's a man ground down. "It's amazing how a woman will wear on you," he told me in one desperate moment. "I'm exhausted, Dennis. Why so much emotional upheaval? Is it necessary?"

"It would be easy to turn to stone," I said. I'm in geology for that reason, too: stone is immovable. Rocks don't change. The only way that stones can be cut, for instance, is by rubbing a harder stone against a softer one. There are ten types of hardness, from talc up to diamond, and a soft rock can't cut a harder one even with time. Glass and metal are nothing compared to corundum, and we value the hardest, sparkling stones the most. We treasure what withstands all else. "Be hard," I told him. "Be the harder one. That's the only way to protect yourself."

Kelly nodded but forgot my advice. He stayed human. "Tell Denise to approach it kindly," he said, "but to protect herself at the same time. I hate to be like that, defensive, but that's the way it is.

"I know," I said. "It's the world that's gone hard and we follow."

In truth, the world's the same as it's always been. It holds the same amount of matter, the same

underground structures. What a better world it would be if we learned from the inert; even complicated geologic problems can be broken down into parts. We're learning to predict earthquakes, global warming. Science solves the great dilemmas. The EPA pays me to research what to do with our giant open pit mine, a hole in our lives from the copper mining days. The Pit is filling with toxic water as we speak, with antifreeze and road salt. The mines, a hollow maze of tunnels below us, are filling, too.

The factors merely have to be calculated. I consider runoff, porosity, mineshaft effluvium, lost tunnels, watersheds. Once I figure out the input, we can calculate the output. I figure there's about two more years on the grant, two years to trust in the miracles of science and the funding of the Feds. Nature isn't all that pristine to begin with. The earth has good and bad deposits, ordered strata. All we have to do is move the good stuff to the surface.

The Superfund site I can figure. People, no way. They're unpredictable. They demand happiness, and what's that? Do you know anyone who has it? Kelly's wife for instance, Vera, known to me as the Vile Old Bat, could do some damage. I feel most sorry for Aimee, who can't ever get it right.

She tries, though. She announced just last week that she was moving away to escape this effing town. Vile O.B. was all for it, hitching a ride on her daughter's ambitions. She and Kelly paid off her debts, gave her a stake, waved her goodbye. Now the girl is back. She was gone a full total of seven days. Her return, for whatever reason, is what's caused the fireworks over there. Mrs. Kelly, pissed off at her daughter's failures, scours the walls with rage. Her accusations bounce off Aimee's high-pitched excuses, inside. There's a fearsome echo.

Rage equals danger. With each bitter word we feel the earth shaking. The mere possibility of rage changed the whole course of my wife's life. Mary thought I'd rage if I knew the truth. She had a secret, a past. She believed I'd blow glowing lava from my lips, leaving her in a great hot blast of recrimination. She feared a volcanic temper. She pictured latent heat underneath my cool Pintler Range of calm. It's why she didn't tell me about Denise until last year, when she found her through an adoption agency.

The big secret was this: Before we were married, my wife had a daughter and gave her up, anonymously.

The amazing thing is that she kept the secret for twenty-nine summers. We've been married thirty years and in all that time she never alluded to a daughter, flesh of her flesh. I think it would be hard to keep something like that inside, harder than to just confess, get it out in the open. But it's the thought of my anger that kept her silent. She was afraid of me, needlessly. There's the rub of human volatility.

Mary was a high school senior when she found out she was pregnant. Catholic, so no thought of abortion. She didn't drown the baby in a restroom stall at prom, didn't try to deliver on her own and forget to clear a caul from the newborn's mouth. Instead, she went to the nuns. If you haven't seen a nun's rage, you don't know what courage that took. The sisters sent her to Billings where she studied in a group home until her time came. She pushed the baby out and they took it away, urging her to pray for forgiveness.

She's been cut fine by pain over time, by the agony of not knowing and not telling. She was not even able to admit it to me, that's how deep her guilt was. It probably didn't help that, as a young man, I was staunchly moral and not shy with my opinions. She thought I'd judge her. I do tend to be dogmatic when it's others I'm talking about.

Each year the lie grew harder.

It's only my reliability, my steadfast nature, that let her admit her past at last. And who would turn such truth away? Having a daughter after all this time is a joy I can't contain. She's the same age as

Aimee Kelly, a girl my wife must have watched through the years for hints of what Denise had turned out to be. She has Mary's long bones and toothy smile. When we welcomed her, she moved to Butte to be near us. Right away she found the job as property manager. It was all turning out the way it was supposed to.

Next door, V. O. B. stopped berating her prodigal daughter and moved outside, washing her copper brown Oldsmobile. She splashed her forearm into the soapy bucket and scrubbed at the metallic paint, ferociously. Inside, the girl had begun to break down, I could hear it. If anyone tells you women are more compassionate, call them on that. You've never seen grit that scrapes like an angry mother.

I wasn't about to stay outside in the line of fire. I went in and was watching television when the telephone rang. It was Denise, calling back for my advice. "He could be mentally disturbed," I said. "Can't you get a social worker in, let him stay meanwhile?"

Her mother, the woman who was afraid to her core that I'd leave her, urged a sudden break. "Push him out. This afternoon. Get an eviction notice and post it on his door. He'll have three days, right? The law's on your side."

She said this convincingly, as if rational law were scientific. As if the same rules applied to all mankind.

An hour later I heard the rush of commotion next door. The usual slammings and stompings at the Kellys' were accompanied by decidedly loud weeping and gnashing of teeth. The wind of their conflict spilled into the public realm. Vera Kelly, red-faced and swollen, bustled out her front door and left it swinging. Sniffling, she climbed into Aimee's silver Subaru at the curb. She revved the engine three times, then rumbled away. The street grew oddly quiet as her exhaust haze settled. Coast clear, I went over to see what happened.

Out the front door came Kelly, scratching his forehead with one hand and carrying a bucket of sponges and rags in the other. "Ah, Dennis, it never fails to amaze," he said. "Once a head's on backwards, you can't put it right. Come take a look at this."

We walked over to his driveway, where Mrs. Kelly had so diligently scrubbed her precious vehicle in the afternoon sun. The sedan's shiny surface bore marks of her effort. The metallic coating had turned baroque, with rococo swirls and white scratches decorating the bronze paint.

"What on earth did she wash it with?" I asked.

"A dishpad. Green sponge on one side, coiled wire on the other. A scouring pad."

"What was she thinking?"

"Who knows? She said the car had sap on it, from that spruce. Tree sap, so what? She was trying to get the stickiness off."

I bent over to gauge the depth of the scratches. They'd been born of the fierce knots in a madwoman's arms. They were deep and gray-white, cutting to symbolic bone. "I've got some buffing compound that might help." I said this unbelieving.

Aimee had joined us, and had dug out all the car wax she could find in her parents' garage. "She should have used her fingernail and an ice cube. You can scrape anything with a fingernail and do no damage. She might have frozen the sap and flicked it off."

"Hindsight," said Kelly.

I smiled at his daughter. "You're right. A fingernail has a hardness of 2. It can't hurt anything. We're soft as talc at the end of our hands."

As they reached for squat green cans of wax and began to spread the pale cream over the damaged surface, I went inside with the idea of getting them a few cold bottles of beer. They'd need it. The four o'clock sun was still hot, the scratches immutable. Kelly could use something to cool his brain,

his overheated core. He doesn't yell, doesn't rebut his wife's arguments, but I'm always afraid he'll stroke out. The Bat yells and escapes. Her husband implodes.

I had two chilled brown bottles in hand and was ready to join the repair squad when my own wife came after me. "Come with me. Hurry!" she pulled at my shoulder. "Denise is at St. James' emergency room. That crazy tenant knifed her."

Hot, horrible August that breeds desperation. Turns out the guy was pathological and completely busted, a fine combination. What the manager on Mercury Street didn't say is that the crazy man had threatened his life when he forced him off the premises. Nice of him to leave that part out.

Denise is just barely past thirty. She doesn't have a lifetime of experience to go on, and those of us who advise her would do better with full information. I'd like to think someone might have stopped her from taking the wrong step. I'd like to think I might have done better. The whole damn situation was predictable. I'd leap off a cliff backward in time, if I could, to stop him.

The guy was still ranting when they picked him up, five blocks away from the apartment house. "He's a tough case," the officer told us. "Seems there's no one for him in the world." He told us we were lucky the guy didn't use any one of the six guns he'd stashed inside his room. They found two Ruger pistols beneath his bed, and four shotguns leaning in a corner, but no ammo. He'd probably pawned the bullets. If he weren't so paranoid, he might have sold a gun. It would have brought him more cash. He might even have been able to pay the rent.

Instead, he saw predators on all sides. His enemy wore the face of a young woman.

The police sketched the scenario: When Denise handed him the notice, he slammed the door in her face. Then, as he read it, something in him snapped. She would have heard rustling as he tore open drawers, searched for something to fire her way. Nothing. He'd have to do it by hand. A neighbor called when she heard the scream, and they found my daughter on the stairs, slumped and turned as though he'd called her back then struck in surprise. As she made her way up the stairwell he must have come running down on top of her. She twisted as he thrust his blade. The knife went between her ribs, ticked a lung. Its silver tip slid through pale tissue. It's a bad place to be hit.

She won't be stable until they can stop the bleeding. Mary came out of Emergency to tell me, "She's holding up but it's still touch and go." She sat, wet-eyed, on the hard waiting room chair. The nurses glanced our way at times but otherwise ignored us.

"She's strong," I said. "Enduring, like her mother."

"I missed all the childhood traumas, scraped knees and broken arms. I don't know how to do this."

"You're doing fine," I said. "You've always mothered me."

They let her stand near Denise in surgery, to hold her hand. There's no anticipating the outcome. All we can do is trust the doctors, who'd like to see biology as science. They speak of drugs and heart rates and the body as mechanism. They focus on charts and pretend there are no living cells at work, no pulsing streams to heal and congeal in odd ways.

For all their expertise, they don't know that human life's a mystery. It's fragile. It's the softest thing on earth.