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breaks the same time as Buddy Tucker. But Mr. Jennings, who always had his eye on the little guy, saw how Anthony always stuck close to Buddy and sat right next to him whenever they had their breaks together, so he let it be known that it'd be OK if they sort of coordinated their break schedules. That was fine with Anthony, of course, and appeared to be fine with Buddy, too because he'd sit next to Anthony with his hand on his shoulder, and, except for the fact that they were about the same age and Buddy was blond and blue-eyed whereas Anthony was black as the ace of spades, they could have been mistaken for father and son.

All in all it was a good time for everyone involved, so much so that Norbert Jones said, "This is the Golden Age of the Shop-Wise chain." Of course Norbert was a Church of Christ and a pot-head, one strange combination, but, still and all, still and all . . .

**Well**, you know what's coming next. If a bubble gets that big and bright, somebody just has to come along and stick a pin in it. It's like we have a failure chromosome that kicks in whenever things start going too well. Does it have to be that way? Pardon me for being the one to say it, but that's a damn good question. Maybe that's the way it is just because we think that's the way it is, because we can't see it any other way. A failure of imagination, in other words. If we could even imagine it another way . . . Well, I don't know, I just don't know . . .

Here's what happened. Jack Smith hired on as a stocker on the day shift. Word was he'd been a head stocker on the night shift at the Industrial Boulevard Shop-Wise. Why he would take a pay cut to be just a run-of-the mill stocker at the Meadow Park Shop-Wise is a mystery. Maybe he got fired at the other place, maybe he got tired of working nights, maybe he just liked the scenery better over here, easy to buy because the Industrial Boulevard area was one bad part of town. Not much good came out of there. Including Jack Smith.

Oh, he wasn't the worst person ever, I guess. He never flat-out killed anybody unless you count . . . Well, we'll get back to that. He never took a piece of rebar to anybody or slashed anybody's tires. As far as I know, he never stole anything, although you'd just naturally clamp your hand over your billfold pocket when he walked behind you and would check your lunch bag to see if everything was still in there or, more important, if anything got stuck in there that didn't belong like a razor blade in your potted meat sandwich or some rat poison in the salt for your hard-boiled eggs. Not that anybody ever found anything like that, but it didn't stop you from looking.

Maybe it was like this: where Buddy had the sort of seriousness that calmed you down and gave you confidence about things, for Jack nothing was serious, it was all a big joke, everything, the whole shebang, and not the kind of joke that when you laughed you felt your shoulders and the muscles at the back of your neck relax but the kind that you knew if you went on laughing that way you were going to get a headache, laughter that hurt coming out of your throat and made you feel bad about yourself when you laughed.

Like Jack's first day in the break room at lunch. There were only about four other guys there, including Anthony but not Buddy right then because an Anheuser-Busch truck had just come in and Buddy always kept an eye out when that stuff was unloaded. Jack didn't even sit down but just stood there in the middle of the break room like he was doing a nightclub routine and started right in on the bastards he used to work with over on Industrial Boulevard, on his old lady who'd run out on him a year or so ago, good damn riddance, on the President of the United States, on the goddamn Yankees and the goddamn Cardinals, on and on, all of it jokes that you laughed at but looked down at your shoes while you laughed.

The whole time he was talking, his eyes moved left and right like he was making eye contact with his audience even though he never quite did it, his eyes never quite lighting on anyone before moving on. He'd pass over Anthony a little more quickly than the rest, just a little more

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answer to something, and when he got the answer, that's when the next thing would come.

It came, or it began to come, on the day Jack walked into the break room and stood there for a minute scratching his forehead like he was lost in thought. Then he looked up and asked of no one in particular (Buddy and Anthony happened not to be there at the time), "Now, why does Anthony sit on that concrete bench down on the avenue every afternoon after work?"

Mr. Jennings walked in right at that moment. He'd visit the break room a couple of times a week just to show he wasn't too high and mighty for it. Most likely Jack had seen Mr. Jennings on the way to the break room and timed his question so the assistant manager could hear it.

Mr. Jennings did and answered brightly, "Oh, that's where Anthony catches the bus home."

Jack shook his head and smiled that little smile of his that could mean a lot of things, none of them good. "No he don't," he said.

"Sure he does."

"No he don't. I saw Buddy Tucker pick him up in that Ford Escort with my own eyes."

"Oh," Mr. Jennings said. You could see him thinking. "Oh, sure, I'll bet Anthony missed his bus and Buddy just give him a lift home. That was it."

Jack shook his head. "Every day for a week. Every day this week I seen Buddy pick Anthony up with my own eyes. Four straight days. You mean to tell me that boy missed his bus four straight days?"

You could see Mr. Jennings thinking again, his eyes snapping open and shut real fast like a man's who's thinking hard but it's not getting him anywhere.

Jack didn't wait for whatever story Mr. Jennings was trying to come up with. "Mr. Jennings," he said, "is Anthony living with Buddy Tucker now?"

Mr. Jennings was flustered, but he managed to get out, "Anthony had this apartment he lived in, some sort of government-subsidized thing where he got help with stuff when he needed it."

Jack cocked an ear toward Mr. Jennings. "Had? You mean had or has?" Again he didn't wait for an answer but held his hands up like somebody surrendering and said, "Hey, whatever you want to allow on your watch is your business. Probably it's all perfectly innocent."

"Of course it's perfectly innocent!" Mr. Jennings exclaimed like a man who's just realized he's walked into a trap and still isn't sure quite how it happened.

"That's just what I said."

"Why don't you mind your GOL DANG BUSINESS!" Mr. Jennings shouted. He was a family man, a good Baptist, and "gol dang" was strong language for him.

Jack laughed. He smiled that smile of his a lot, but it was the first time anyone had heard him laugh. They didn't want to hear it again.

**Here's** almost certainly what had happened. Probably Anthony did miss his bus one day. The baggers and the stockers didn't work the same hours. Day-shift for the stockers was 7:00-3:30,

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for the baggers 8:00-4:30. Buddy, being head stocker, might stay a little longer doing paper work. If Anthony missed his bus, Buddy probably would have seen him on that bench. Being the kind of guy he is, he would have stopped and offered Anthony a ride home. Would have found out that Anthony lived by himself except for the state-hired help looking in once in awhile. Would have felt sorry for the little guy being alone, maybe just tried to be a friend at first, maybe invited him over for supper, probably at a certain point said, Hey, I've got an extra room right here.

Nobody in the world except Jack would have thought of a bad thing to think or say about it, but Jack thought it and said it or at least hinted around about it, and once a hint like that fouls the air, everything is fouled. Nobody said they believed anything was wrong. Probably nobody did believe anything was wrong. But now they were just a tad uncomfortable with Anthony and Buddy, uncomfortable with Jack, too, of course, but that was just like throwing a rabbit into the briar patch for Jack.

This state of affairs--everybody being just a tad uncomfortable with everybody else except for Jack, who was happy as a pig in shit--went on for awhile. Then Jack dropped the other shoe--or at least the other shoe got dropped, and while there's no proof Jack was responsible, if anybody was to blame, other than God, the smart money was on Jack.

One day neither Anthony nor Buddy showed up for work. Buddy had never missed a day since he hired on, and Anthony never missed except the once every six months he had to go see the doc because of complications from being so small and slow, and it wasn't time for that yet. Everybody was a little uneasy about them being gone, except for Jack Smith, who looked like the cat that ate the canary.

It wasn't until lunch time that Mr. Jennings walked into the break room to tell them what had happened. His eyes were red. They got redder. Here it was. Anthony was dead. He'd gotten run over yesterday afternoon up on Poplar Avenue. He was apparently trying to walk home--to Buddy's house--when it happened.

"Why the hell was he up on Poplar? Buddy Tucker don't live in that direction."

"I guess he got lost. I guess he hadn't ever walked it before."

"Why the hell was he walking it? Buddy always gives him a ride home."

"I talked to Buddy on the phone. He said Anthony wasn't at the bench when Buddy stopped to pick him up. For some reason he'd already took off on his own. . . . No, now don't bother asking me any more questions, fellas. I just don't know any more. Buddy's taking care of the funeral arrangements. Maybe we'll learn more when he gets back."

"Well, shit."

Everybody agreed that shit was indeed the word. Everybody except Jack Smith. Cat. Canary.

Suddenly, Norbert Jones, who'd been slouched over in his chair with his head in his hands, sprang straight up like somebody had goosed him with a cattle prod. "Hey, now I remember, I saw you--Jack Smith!--I saw you, you son of a bitch, I saw your car pulled over to the curb by the bench and you were saying something to Anthony!"

Jack smiled his smile. He only had one. "Oh, yeah, you're right. I did stop. I'd been admiring that haircut of his and I wanted to ask him who his barber was."

"You're a goddamn liar!" Smile.

Now Boyd Tinsley jumped up and pointed an accusing finger at Jack. "You said something bad

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to poor old Anthony. You probably said that Buddy wasn't going to stop for him and that he might as well start hoofing it."

Jack leaned back in his chair like someone who'd just got tuned in to his favorite television program. "Tell you what, Tinsley, if you can prove that I'll kiss your ass at high noon in Times Square. If you can't, probably you'd be better off shutting your mouth."

"Oh yeah? You going to make me shut my mouth?"

Boyd was a big fellow, good ol' boy redneck, and this was the point where Jack was about to get his ass severely kicked. Except that, without anybody seeing exactly when it had happened, Jack was now sitting there, no smile on his face but a knife in his hand, blade pointed generally in the direction of Boyd's liver.

Jack stood up. There was about six feet separating him and Boyd, and somehow you just knew that Jack could cover that six feet faster than Boyd could do whatever it was he was trying to decide he should do.

Somebody should have said something at this point--probably Mr. Jennings because he was the boss, but he'd sort of been in shock ever since the knife came out and seemed to have lost the power of speech. Then somebody did say something.

"The best thing to do now is to put the knife back in your pocket, Jack."

They all turned their heads like a Greek chorus when the king walks on stage. There standing in the door of the break room was Buddy Tucker.

"Well well well, Buddy Tucker," Jack said, subtly shifting the direction of the knife from Boyd's liver to Buddy's. "The big man hisself, well well well."

"That Jack said something bad to Anthony! I seen it with my own eyes!" Norbert Jones said.

Without taking his eyes from Jack, Buddy held up a hand toward Norbert. "That's all right, that's all right," he said. "Anthony's not the important one now. The one we need to think about now is Jack. Jack, why don't you just put that knife away now?"

Jack turned himself so that he was squarely facing Buddy. "Why should I?"

"Because we need to talk, and we can talk better after you put that knife away."

"You and me ain't got one goddamn thing to say to one another, Buddy Tucker."

Buddy covered the ten feet between them faster than you could bat an eye and had hold of Jack's wrist on his knife hand. They struggled for about a second, and then the knife went clattering across the floor. They wrestled around a little bit more, finally rolling around on the floor until Buddy had Jack all wrapped up, his arms around Jack's arms, legs around Jack's legs. They lay like that for the longest time, Jack squirming and cursing and struggling but barely able to more than twitch an eyebrow, Buddy just too strong, had him wrapped up too tight. Then Jack all at once wore out and gave up, you could see it on his face: no use, no use. You could almost feel sorry for him the way he lay there helpless, looking like he was about to cry.

Then Buddy began to whisper to him. You couldn't hear the words but, oh, the way he said them--not hard and hating and vengeful like you might expect but soft and gentle, calming.

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**Dennis Vannatta** has published stories in many magazines and anthologies, including *Boulevard*, *Antioch Review*, and *Pushcart XV*, and three collections: *This Time, This Place* and *Prayers for the Dead*, both by White Pine Press, and *Lives of the Artists* by Livingston Press. He teaches English at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.