



FIRST AMENDMENT ART FARM

Tor pinched his eyes shut against the explosion of sunlight and toed his way down the short flight of stairs. When he reached the ground he leaned back to close the trailer's door. It got hung on the edge of the frame, so he pushed until it seated with a snap.

The stairs ended an inch beyond the shade provided by the awning that ran the length of the trailer. Tor shuffled sideways and eased his eyes open as he stepped in out of the sun. One of his flip-flops picked up a pebble from the dirt. He kicked it free and scratched his head. Just ten seconds away from the air conditioning and sweat was already beading up on his scalp. Soon it would start to move along the waves of his hair, turning it from blonde to the copper color it took on when it got wet. In ten minutes he'd be a redhead; in twenty his Pink Floyd T-shirt would be soaked through.

He felt the bundle of hypos shift in a pocket of his cargo shorts, and he pulled them out to count again. There were five, thin and orange-plungered. He put them away and took out his sunglasses. One of the lenses was smudged so he gave it a quick wipe on his shirt before he slipped them on.

He saw a black sedan nosed up to the chain around the front yard. The chain ran waist-high between metal posts and kept people from driving into the dead dirt display area. Beyond the car was the almost featureless plain of the Texas panhandle. The flat land stretched to a flat horizon that quivered in the July heat. He'd read that the month was on track to become the hottest ever

recorded in Texas, and one of the driest. A drought sucked moisture from every pore and breath. Dogs fed it with their panting and the locals fed it with an ocean of sweet iced tea swilled in and sweated out in a clammy ebb and flow.

Sweat began to creep down through Tor's pubes. He scratched and thought of Alisha. It would be two hours earlier in California, about eight o'clock, and she'd be in bed. He pictured her supple little body and the way her back arched when he woke her with his touch. That never failed to arouse him, and he felt himself stiffening as he scratched his pubes. The scratch turned into a stroke and. . .

"I'm gonna kill you."

Tor looked at Bonzo, one of the two bums standing in the shade with him. Bonzo had threatened to kill Scrimp. The men seemed to have moved a couple inches closer in their faceoff during the night. Both were still bent forward at the waist but had straightened up a bit. Their morning dose of fentanyl would knock them down again. The saline bags clipped to the backs of their collars were empty, but there was no rush to replace them. The job could wait until they got their drugs.

A murmur of voices came from the car. Dust was still settling around it, so Tor figured it must have arrived just before he came out. Two people sat in the front seat. The one on the passenger side was a woman, with long hair that swung when she spoke. The driver was a man. His voice was deep and he wore a baseball cap.

Tor shifted his attention to the three bums standing bent forward in the yard. He'd set their big umbrellas the night before to block the morning sun, and now they would need to be readjusted. But first a more important matter.

The inside of the little portapotty behind the trailer was already hot. Tor offloaded the last of

the tofu pizza and then propped the door open with a brick, to keep the pod from turning into an oven later on. He lowered the windows of his old SUV for the same reason.

His folding chaise was where he'd left it after his sunset tanning session the day before. He grabbed the chair and then paused at one of the SUV's side mirrors. He'd done stomach crunches before leaving the cool of the trailer, and he lifted his shirt to check his reflected abs. Washboard. He made an attack face and flexed into a pose that would've looked great on an action movie poster. The attack face gave way to a smile.

He took the chaise back around to the front of the trailer and set it in its usual place between Bonzo and Scrimp. "Would either of you care for a Mocha Herba Vitabuzz?" he asked them quite formally, then without waiting for an answer he snickered and went in to get one of the drinks for himself.

When he returned he dropped onto the lounge. It was still warm from the sun. He angled the chair's back to about thirty degrees, popped the top on his can and put his feet up. The cold Vitabuzz felt good fizzing down his throat.

"You're a dead man," Scrimp whispered. Tor belched and looked up at him. He wondered how many times he'd heard Bonzo and Scrimp trade threats since arriving at the art farm. They were a matched pair, so instead of posing them awkwardly under two umbrellas in the yard, he'd placed them in the shade of the awning.

Scrimp held an icepick down low and Bonzo an open straight razor. Tor had found them that way, charging each other in an alley in El Paso. Or rather, they were showing an intent to charge. Both were frozen in what the media had come to call the "fentanyl fold," the stooped position that heavy users of the drug often adopted.

Tor couldn't decide whether Bonzo or Scrimp was dirtier. Both were filthy and wrapped in tattered clothes. He hadn't done anything to clean them up because he wanted authenticity in his project. The only change he made to them was to add some headgear. He put a red Coke cap on Bonzo and a blue Pepsi cap on Scrimp. In one of his vlog videos he said the caps represented the corporate power struggles that were playing out above the heads of the masses.

He sipped his drink and thought about the art geeks who followed his vlog. They were always encouraging him to try new things. They'd loved it when he placed his lounge between Bonzo and Scrimp. For the first couple of days after he opened the display he sat on the other side of the stairs from them, but then he announced that he wanted to become "a more active part of the inaction." He made a video of himself setting his chair between the fighters, and when he uploaded it to his vlog he wrote that artists in America (thumbs-up emoji) must take a stand against the tragedy of the nation's drug crisis (thumbs-down emoji). That entry resulted in more than a hundred likes and upvotes and earned him a dozen new followers.

Tor sipped his drink and studied the three bums in the yard. The way they stood hunched forward made them look like question marks, or flowers curled in on themselves for the night. The streets and alleys of cities all over America were thick with the folded people.

Suddenly Tor missed Los Angeles. He'd moved there from Minnesota the year before, hoping to start an acting career. He was tall and blonde and his chiseled Nordic face seemed tailor-made for the movies. So he traveled west in his SUV, and on the drive he pictured people stopping someday to admire his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

But his career hadn't sparked to life yet. He took an acting class, but so far he'd landed only one part. A nonspeaking one. Someday though a casting agent would ask to see the hunky shelf stocker from the Vons supermarket commercial.

He worked as a waiter when he wasn't going to auditions, and he dated some wannabe actresses, and then he moved in with Alisha. She was a yoga therapist who did visual arts in her free time. Her current project was tied to the fruit smoothies she practically lived on. She would put a blender on a table in front of a big canvas, fill the jar with layers of different colored fruits, then adopt a nude yoga position against the canvas and have Tor hit the puree button. With no lid on the jar a rainbow storm would spin out and onto the canvas but leave her silhouette blank. Tor loved helping her paint, especially the part where he got to lick her clean as the canvas dried.

He decided to become a painter himself after living with Alisha for a while, but when he asked her where he should begin she pointed to her latest smoothie canvas and said it would take him years to produce anything as good. She was supportive though and suggested they look into other types of art that he could pursue. With luck they would find something that suited him, and he might even get some state funding.

They settled on performance art as his most promising option, since he was an actor, but coming up with an interesting project proved to be difficult. They kicked around lots of ideas but they were all pretty lame. Then one night they drove past a bunch of the bent fentanyl addicts and thought of grouping some together as "posed art." Tor searched online and couldn't find any other artists doing anything similar, so he worked up a proposal that included photos and a video. And sure enough he got a grant from the state. It was a

generous one too. The only problem was that he had to leave California to do the project.

Tor killed his drink, pushed up from his chair and went out to adjust umbrellas. He went to Eloy first. The little man's scaly skin had made Tor think of a fish when he first saw him in the alley in El Paso, so he named him Eloy, after a goldfish he used to keep in a bowl back in Minnesota. All of the bums in the project were named after pets from his childhood.

Bonzo and Scrimp were already posed in their fighting tableaux when Tor found them, but he had to give each of the others some kind of business to do. He gave Eloy a dog leash. One end was looped around a wrist and the other was hooked to an old Tonka Toy truck, a big yellow one. Half of the truck's metal had gone to rust and a couple of wheels were missing.

Tor bent down to reposition the truck, and a Texas flag decal on its windshield made him think of his sole official interaction with the state. The county sheriff and a DPS trooper had shown up together about a week after he arrived at the art farm. They said they were responding to a report of fentanyl on the premises. He produced an affidavit that had come just that morning with a batch of hypos from California. The men both pushed their Stetsons back on their heads and studied the paperwork. Texas law was hard on fentanyl, but that's not what Tor used for his project. Not technically. As his affidavit attested, the drug in his hypos was a variation of fentanyl. Chemists had changed one molecule to turn it into something that wasn't outlawed yet. The trooper explained to the sheriff that by tweaking designer drugs the bad guys were able to stay one step ahead of prosecution. The sheriff called the county attorney, who confirmed what the trooper said about the molecule. Tor couldn't be charged with

anything. The cops gave him hard looks as they left, but they hadn't bothered him since.

Tor adjusted Eloy's umbrella so it would block the sun until about three p.m., when another adjustment would be necessary. The saline bag clipped to one of the umbrella's ribs was empty but like the others could be replaced later.

Next up was Mrs. Gawkins. She was an old woman Tor had named after a cat his family owned when he was in elementary school. He'd picked white bums exclusively for his project, so he wouldn't be accused of racial discrimination, but it was hard to tell that Mrs. G was white. She looked like she was covered in dirty motor oil. "Who loves me?" Tor asked her. She spoke sometimes, in whispers like Bonzo and Scrimp. She'd say, "Mommy loves you," and then whimper a little. "Come on," Tor said, "tell me who loves me." But Mrs. G was silent. Tor snickered and straightened her apron. Her jeans and T-shirt were filthy, but on top of them he'd tied a clean white apron that was embroidered with daisies. He'd stuck a spatula in her hand too, and in her bent stance it looked like she was tending to the rusted skillet on the ground in front of her.

Tor retied Mrs. G's apron in back, then as he adjusted her umbrella he sneaked a glance at the black sedan. The people were still murmuring away inside and he wondered who they were. He hoped they weren't religious fanatics. A couple of church groups had already stopped by to tell him he was going to hell. He didn't think his project was an abomination, but Christians did, and he suspected they were the reason that California told him to look for an out-of-state venue.

He'd gone online when he learned he would have to relocate. He checked Nevada first but couldn't find anything to meet his needs, so he looked at Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico. Then

finally he came across The First Amendment Art Farm in Texas. The website said the owner was a libertarian and a believer in free will. Tor called him and they talked. The owner's name was Sheedy and he said that the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution mentions several things that basically add up to freedom of thought and the free expression thereof. And the art farm provided a place where artists could express themselves in word and deed. "As long as they don't harm children," he added in a menacing tone. "So you wouldn't object to my project?" Tor asked. He'd already described it. "Look," Sheedy said, "life is short and you should live it the way you want. And if it's important to you to do this project of yours, then hell yeah you're welcome here. But don't come whining to me about the consequences of your work when you're done. If you roll the dice, you have to accept whatever number comes up." Tor asked if he could get a contract faxed to him and Sheedy said he'd get right on it. A week later a box smelling of smoke and onions came in the mail. Inside were a bottle of triple-x hot sauce and a contract scrawled on the back of a tea-sticky menu from a barbecue place. So Tor was surprised by the way that the contract was handled, and he was surprised again when he arrived at the farm. The "Artist's Quarters" page on the website showed a new single-wide trailer, but the picture had been taken in the nineteen sixties. Time and rot had broken the trailer's back. It sagged across flat tires in an inverted U shape that made walking inside feel like mountain climbing. But the air conditioner worked and that was the important thing.

Tor prompted Mrs. G to say "Mommy loves you" one more time, but she wasn't in a talkative mood so he moved on.

Slomo was the last of the yard bums. He was cadaverously thin, and Tor had tied a piece of

twine around the nub of his missing thumb. The string ran to a pink box kite in the middle of the yard. On his vlog Tor claimed that the kite symbolized “a veracity of art in defiance of those who would deny the right to soar.” He didn’t have a clue what the statement meant, but it had sounded good when he said it and it earned him lots of upvotes.

He adjusted Slomo’s umbrella and wondered what he’d vlog about later. The best time for making the videos was magic hour, when he was lounging in the long golden rays of the setting sun. The light made him glow like an Oscar.

When he was finished with Slomo he went back to the shade of the awning. His shirt was heavy with sweat, so he took it off and hung it on a nail on the side of the trailer. He was preparing to sit again when he heard a double thump of car doors closing.

He looked to the sedan and saw that the man and woman had gotten out. The woman was tall and young and her hair fell in a ripply blonde cascade over her shoulders. She was wearing a green blouse and black slacks. The outfit showed off a trim body that was plump in all the right places.

In contrast, her middle-aged companion’s tank top showed a big gut lapped over the front of his blue jeans. He adjusted his cap and drank from a huge white cup marked “Sweet” on the side in cursive felt-tip. Tor watched him upend the cup, guzzle, then dump its ice and lemon rind as he went to the rear of the car.

He opened the trunk and swapped the cup for a camera. Tor recognized it as a professional video rig, with a shoulder support and top-mounted lighting array. There were no logos on the car but Tor knew the people must be with the news media. He wondered if they were local or network. Net-

work exposure would be a real boon.

While the man worked on removing the lights from the camera, the woman walked to the yard's boundary chain. She rested a hand on it and stood looking at the bums. Even from a distance Tor could see that she was a beauty. She had full lips, a thin nose and high cheekbones.

The cameraman finished with the lights and joined the woman at the chain. He dabbed at the camera's lens with a brush. "Showtime," Tor said to himself.

He went out to the yard again, to Eloy, and extended an arm toward him. Artists in movies always did that. They held out an arm with a raised thumb to look at their models. Tor raised his thumb and pretended to consider Eloy from various angles, then he nodded approval and ambled over to meet his guests.

The man was still brushing at the camera's lens when Tor reached the chain. The woman was flicking dust from her blouse. Tor slid his sunglasses down on his nose and saw that the eyes behind her squint matched the green of her blouse. She was lightly tanned and had a faint scattering of freckles on her cheekbones.

Tor introduced himself and learned that the woman's name was Wendy Vaunt. She said she was a reporter and asked if she could interview him about his art project. "You wouldn't mind some free publicity, would you?" Tor liked her drawl.

"No, I wouldn't mind. The more publicity the better."

She went to the car and returned with a microphone. The cameraman settled his rig on his shoulder and stepped back to compose his shot.

Tor was glad he'd removed his shirt, so he could show off his bronzed torso. He put his shades away in his shorts and turned so the camera would pick up his face from the angle he used for his 8x10

glossies.

The reporter, Wendy, nodded to the cameraman and lost her squint. She leaned forward to speak into her mike. "As an artist," she said to Tor, "or more to the point as a human being, don't you consider what you're doing here to be abusive?"

She thrust the mike like a dagger at Tor and held it close to his chin.

"Abusive?" He hadn't expected such a forceful opening to the interview. "Uh, no, it's not abusive."

"Why won't you answer?" she asked.

Tor knew what she was doing. She was making sure they'd have footage later that could be edited to make him sound evasive.

The cameraman inched closer and Wendy said, "California believes that this so-called art project may be a human rights violation. That's why you came to Texas, isn't it? To avoid prosecution?"

A shadow flitted past on the ground. Tor didn't need to look up to know it was from a buzzard. Sometimes the birds were as thick as gnats high overhead.

"Am I right?" Wendy pressed. "Are you running from the law?"

Tor didn't like the way the interview was going. Even in the record heat Wendy seemed cool and collected. She wasn't perspiring at all, but Tor glistened with sweat and knew that the two of them appearing onscreen together would give the home audience the wrong impression. He'd look like he was nervous and trying to squirm out of answers. It was time to put his acting skills to work.

He flashed his most dazzling smile and said, "I'm not running from the law. And I didn't come here to violate anyone's rights. I came because I heard that Texas is a place where people can pursue their dreams with minimal government

interference. Where experimentation and growth are encouraged, and freedom is valued. That's why I came here, to be free to pursue my art. And if you'll let me explain, you'll understand that I'm not violating anybody's human. . . ."

"Battery's dead," the cameraman interrupted. "I got another one in the car."

He walked off and Wendy squinted at Tor. "Sorry to cut you off. You don't believe that individualist stuff you were spouting anyway. You're just taking advantage of loopholes and soaking up grant money. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that, if it's legal, but what about them?" She gestured to the yard.

"You mean my. . ." Tor almost called the people in the yard his bums but caught himself. "You mean my models? They signed on for this."

Tor remembered the alley in El Paso and putting a pen in the bums' hands so he could wave release forms underneath. The squiggles on the paper might or might not stand up in court, but at least he had them.

"I'm sure they did sign on," Wendy said, "but even if they remember doing it, it's not right. This whole show isn't right. That's why California wouldn't allow it."

Tor pushed some sweat from his forehead up into his hair, and he wondered how Wendy knew so much about his project.

"It sounds like you did some homework," he said.

"I always research what I'm reporting on. That's how I learned that California wouldn't let you stage this event there. They said it would be demeaning to your victims. Pardon me, your 'models.' But I guess y'all think people in Texas don't have any dignity, huh." She went back to flicking dust from her blouse and said, "California's been exporting their BS forever. Look at

the movies they put out, always 'pushing the envelope' when it comes to sex and violence. And the phony actors. I hate the ones who say they're against guns but make millions from films that glorify them. Like Sylvester Stallone. He says he's anti-gun but he's made a half-dozen Rambo movies. Gimme a break. And it's the same with sex. The movies get more perverse every year. They're targeting children now, sexually degrading them. And we're supposed to think that those foul California values are normal." She shook her head without looking up from her blouse. "I feel sorry for young families nowadays, like the ones in Llano County, a couple hundred miles to the south. Some parents there objected to pornographic books that were in the local library, and a bunch of lawyers from California showed up to file lawsuits. Lawyers from California made it legal for people to crap on the sidewalks of San Francisco, and now they want to make it legal for children in Texas to be mentally molested by sexual deviants. So of course California would pay to send you here to normalize the use of fentanyl. It's part of their war against decency."

Tor didn't know what to say. Wendy had criticized California, and Hollywood. It was as if she'd crapped on the Walk of Fame.

"I, uh, I don't agree. California's great. They're years ahead of the rest of the nation."

"Yeah, well, I wish they'd get wherever they're going and lock the gate behind them."

"I guess we'll have to agree to disagree on California, but you're wrong about me coming here to help normalize the use of fentanyl. And even if that was the case, drug use is a personal choice. Nobody makes you take drugs."

Wendy looked up from her flicking. "Why that's downright libertarian of you," she smirked, "but you and I both know that drug use is a choice

only up to a point, until the drug takes over. And fentanyl is a really, really bad drug. It killed more than a hundred thousand Americans last year. A couple days ago some border agents found enough, in just one bust, to kill a million people. It was in a truck at the Mexican border. The Chinese communists ship the chemicals needed to make it to Mexico, where the drug cartels manufacture it and then move it north. It comes across the border in trucks and in packages carried by illegal aliens. Border guards have to be really careful now when they do searches. You can absorb a lethal dose of fentanyl just from touching it.”

Tor reached to adjust the hypos in his pocket. They’d shifted and the orange plungers were sticking out. Wendy saw. “Be careful with those things, or someday I’ll be back here to do a follow-up story. Somebody’ll find your bloated corpse and I’ll stand behind the police tape and ask the audience, ‘Did he die for art, or did art die for him?’”

Tor started to ask what the hell that meant, but before he could speak Wendy yelled at the cameraman to hurry up. Then she began an examination of her fingernails. Tor noticed that they were cut short, the way lesbians wore them. He wondered if she was a dyke. She was as aggressive as one, and she hadn’t responded to his washboard abs, so maybe she was. He would have thought that kind of thing wouldn’t be popular with Texans, but maybe they liked getting their news from butch women. He wondered again who she worked for.

“I forgot to ask who you’re with. Are you local news or network?”

“Neither. I’m freelance. After we edit this piece together I’ll see if anyone’s interested.”

“If anyone’s interested,” Tor repeated. He felt himself swell with indignation. Was she trying to insult him? Someday he’d be a star. Someday

she'd kick herself for not making better use of her time with him.

Wendy looked at the yard and said, "I don't know. I might be able to cut this into a larger piece I'm doing about the influence of the Mexican drug cartels on American politics. You know, one of the reasons the Democrats stole the last election was because the cartels threatened them. Trump was hurting their revenue stream with his immigration restrictions, so they told the Democrats to remove him from office, or else." She drew a finger across her throat in a cutting gesture. "So the Democrats stole the election in plain sight. It was a victory for narco-politics and a loss for the thousands of American families whose loved ones die from fentanyl each year."

The cameraman walked up and said he was reloaded.

"Never mind," Wendy sighed. "This story sucks. And I don't want to give pretty boy here any airtime."

Once again Tor felt indignation, and he was trying to think of something to say, when Wendy spun on a heel and walked away. The cameraman followed. Tor choked down his anger and headed for the trailer.

He was almost there when he heard the car start. He looked over his shoulder and saw it speed off in a cloud of dust, and while his head was turned he bumped into something. It was Bonzo and he was falling face first toward the chaise lounge. Tor caught him and pulled him back to a standing position. The shoe he'd kicked had scooted forward, so he nudged the other to restore the earlier balance. When Bonzo was steady again he muttered, "I'm gonna kill you," and Tor thumped the bill of his Coke cap. "Stop that," he scolded. He was still fuming from the interview.

He thought about returning to the trailer, to the air conditioning, but he was overheated and needed to cool down first. He dropped onto the lounge and settled against the angled back. Looking up he saw that moving Bonzo forward had narrowed the gap between the two bums. He scooted the chaise to re-center it, then when he settled and looked up again he thought how the view would make a good shot for a movie—the two men leaning into the frame, Bonzo holding his razor on one side and Scrimp with his icpick on the other. He might try to get a shot of them from the chair later, for his vlog.

Thinking about upvotes lifted his spirits. He smiled at Scrimp and said, “Did you hear Bonzo? He just threatened you. He lunged at you too, but I stopped him. So tell him he’s a dead man.”

Scrimp didn’t respond, and Tor was about to egg him on again, when something moved in the yard. The kite jiggled in a little breeze that had sprung up. The wind reached Tor and felt good. He shut his eyes to enjoy it, but then he thought of Wendy and his mood soured again. He didn’t like the way she’d tried to make him look like a criminal for simply doing an art project. The drugs he used were perfectly legal. The drugs. He remembered that the bums still needed to be dosed. He’d take care of them after the breeze dropped off.

The day was quiet and peaceful. With his eyes still closed Tor took one of the relaxing yoga breaths that Alisha had taught him, and he imagined himself back in Los Angeles. Someday he’d go on one of the talk shows there and tell about the art project he did before he was a star. He’d say, “Sure the project was risky. It could have killed my acting career before it even got started, but you can’t make anything of yourself in life if you don’t take chances. We’re all responsible for

our actions, so I grabbed the bull by the horns and. . .” Bull by the horns. He seemed to feel a horn piercing his head and wondered why.

He opened his eyes and saw that Scrimp was leaning in closer than before. And the hand with the icepick was further forward. Tor felt a twinge of pain at his temple and realized the son of a bitch had stabbed him.

He yelped and jerked away. He lurched to the other side and felt something brush his throat. Then something hot was spreading down across his chest. He turned and saw that Bonzo was also leaned in closer than before, and his razor was dripping blood.

Tor touched his chest and saw red fingers when he pulled his hand away. He touched his throat and felt blood pulsing out. Bonzo had cut an artery. The jugular. Or was it the carotid? Tor’s temple throbbed and he grew confused. The caroti. . .caroti. . .carrot? Eat your carrots, Tor, so you’ll have good eyesight when you grow up.

He applied pressure to his throat with one hand, and with the other he reached up and felt his temple. The icepick was still there and sunk to the handle. He pulled it out and tossed it. The temple was where they cut you with a scalpel when they performed a loboto. . . A lobo. . . He couldn’t finish the thought. A lobo’s a wolf. He remembered howling like a wolf in acting class, and waddling like a penguin.

A cold wind came up and Tor settled back on the chaise to enjoy it. He closed his eyes and saw orange through the eyelids. Eat your carotids, Tor. The force of the wind, wend, wendy increased. “Somebody will find your bloated body,” she’d said. He tried to sit up but was pinned in place by the downdraft from the wings of a passing penguin. The orange dimmed but he couldn’t open his eyes. “Did he die for art, or did art die for him?” He still

didn't know what that meant, and puzzling over it made his temple throb from the . . . What was it, a dice pick? If you roll the dice you have to accept whatever number comes up. Dice, ice, roll the die. Somewhere in the distance a voice said, "I told you you're a dead man."