

# The Xmas Revenge of Eliza Hackle

by

Len Cassamas

The first time I met Eben Dixon, he didn't even live here. He was still living in Atlanta, in one of them suburbs down there. I was standing in front of the café working the last bits of fried chicken out of my teeth when this reedy little character comes sa-shaying up the sidewalk towards me. He had this dull,

wavy brown hair, and these hard, little wire-rimmed glasses. And his complexion was pasty, and he had a chin you could spear a pickle with. He wore these sharp, sharp chinos and a short-sleeve button-down shirt, and he looked like the kind of person who would send his jock strap out to get it cleaned and pressed. He looked around at the buildings downtown and peered in the shop windows and looked at everything as though he'd be willing to buy

it as long as you were willing to take a loss. And he came up to me, and he said, "You live around here?"

And I nodded and said, "Sure. I

lived here all my life."

And he said, "How'd you like to make some money?"

He wanted me to drive him around so he could look at some things, property and such, and he showed me a roll of bills you could put your feet up on and offered me a reasonable portion thereof.

Needless to say, I drove him around all he wanted.

Now, one of the places I took him was up along Stickfoot Road up off 41, and it was all wooded and kudzued. It was too craggy and wrinkled to farm and never seemed like

much good for anything to anybody around here. But Eben looked at those trees and saw money. He never got out of the car. Just looked and nodded his head. And a couple of months later, the trees started

coming down and houses started going up. Big houses. And he called the whole thing Bissonette Landing, and I can't possibly tell you why. And the biggest, grandest house of them all was set up to be the model for the whole bunch. They moved in furniture, they moved in rugs, they moved in everything from knickknacks to the art on the wall. And about a month after that, they moved in Eben.



*Photo courtesy Stephanie Cassamas*

As I said before, he had been living down in Atlanta. He and his wife had a big house out in one of those suburbs. Apparently, he bought the house when they were engaged. Didn't even tell her. Just bought this house and started living there. So, they got married, and she moved in. And he didn't want her working. "No wife of mine is going to work." That kind of thing. But no kids, see? He didn't like children, so they weren't doing that.

I guess about ten years go by, and she does the normal things for a woman in that situation. She volunteers. She takes up tennis. She learns to drink and how to buy drugs. They start spending more time in very different parts of that great, big house. He's always down in the office on the computer lookin' at Lord-knows-what while she sits in their bedroom upstairs and watches some *Cyrano de Bergerac* movie over and over again and cries. She says she's only drinking wine or tea or something, but empty bottles of vodka appear under the bed and in hampers.

So, in that year before he moved up here, he surprised her for her birthday. He gives her a big trip to Europe. Pays for her, her sister. The whole works. First class the whole way. Must've cost one hell of a lot of money because they went everywhere. London, Paris, Berlin, Rome. Must've taken them three months to see it all.

She gets back the day before Christmas, and instead of tak-

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ing her back to that enormous house in the suburbs, he drives her to an apartment complex called The Rising at Briarvista on a street called Peachtree Mill Ferry Parkway just north of the city.

"Why are you pulling in here?" she said.

He just shrugged at her. "We live here now."

"What happened to the house?" She looked at him like he had stuck her with a pin.

"It's been sold."

A second pin went in. "Sold?" she said. "Why?"

He pressed the remote control and the gates to the apartment complex started to swing open. "I want something better," he said.

She folded her arms across her chest and burrowed and slumped down into her seat. "This is 'something better'?" she asked.

He shook his head as the car glided inside the compound. "Not at all," he said. "I just got this month-to-month. It's not forever."

"Maybe I'll get a say in where I live this time," she said as she squashed herself down further into her seat.

"Sure," he said. "That's the whole idea."

The next morning, everything seemed smoothed over, and it

came time to exchange Christmas presents. He didn't bother getting a Christmas tree while she was gone and there were no decorations or anything, but she wanted to exchange gifts anyway. She gave him some things she had bought over in Europe for him: a watch, some 80-year-old cognac, and a key chain in the shape of the Eiffel Tower.

He gave her an envelope with a divorce petition in it.

"I-I don't understand." She was just holding that petition in front of her and staring at it. Her eyes were big as pocket watches, and her mouth just drooped open like she had lost all muscle control.

"This isn't working," he said. He turned from her and walked away like she had just said, "toodleloo" or something and went to the bedroom. She stood in the same spot, just numbly looking through the papers in her hands, looking at each sheet, front-and-back. He came back out of the bedroom and set a suitcase next to the front door, then he walked over to her and guided her to the dining table, which was just off in an area to the side, and not in a separate room. He sat her down, and he slid a final sheet of paper in front of her and handed her a pen.

"I need you to sign this," he said. "It's just a receipt that shows that I've given you the papers." She looked at it and did nothing. Just blinked. He pointed down at the signature line and said, "Just there. Just

sign it there. It's not a big deal."

She stared at it for a moment more, and then signed it quickly. The letters in her name were large and loose and the end of the signature slanted down and below the printed line. He slid it away from her gently and evenly. "It's just a formality," he said.

She turned her head up and toward him slowly and her eyes just drifted over his shirtfront. "Can't we talk about this?" she asked. "Does it have to be so final?"

He turned toward the door. "I've paid the rent for another month," he said without looking back. "If you want this place after that, it'll be up to you."

"So that's all?" she said, still seated and hardly able to move her head. "You just leave?"

He lifted the suitcase by its handle and looked back at her. "You'll probably want to have an attorney," he said. And with that he walked right out of her life.

What he did was he drove up here and moved into the house they were using for the model. He just lived there, and he paid rent back into his company so that it was like he was a tenant and not the owner. And as the divorce went on, nobody could find any money. It looked like he's almost broke and like his company was just about bust. It was all still floating, but just barely. And here's the funny

thing. There came a week when his company couldn't make payroll. He had 30 or 40 guys working on the site, and the payroll company called and said that there was almost no money in the payroll account. Word about this got around right quick, and before you knew it, there were small bundles of men and worrying and talking instead of working.

After a couple of hours of almost nothing getting done, Eben showed up looking crisp and clean and as pressed as a flower in a spinster's bible in an open-necked white shirt and chinos, and he had a handful of yellowish-brown envelopes. He started passing them out and each one had a stack of cash in it. Everybody got paid, down to the penny. And he said something about a wire transfer that didn't get made, and everybody calmed down and went back to work. It never happened again, and the business seemed to get back on its feet once the divorce was final. That was just a lot of cash to have around. Maybe it was all just fine. Maybe there was some kind of coincidence. All I know is that one time when I was down in Atlanta, I was on that subway train, and there was a fella who was hiding a pea under three walnut shells. He had a little TV tray set up and three or four nice-dressed people were watching him. Another fella was urging them on. I think some money exchanged hands. Now, maybe he had control over where that pea was going or maybe he didn't. It just seemed like a time when a person might

want to squint a little more and maybe just position himself at the back of the crowd.

Most people don't like to question these things. Most people like to believe. Love to believe. Believing is a way of belonging, and there is nothing more basic to the human creature than the desire to belong. It's just comforting, and so is belief. Belief is a blanket on a cold night, and the trick is that they're all cold nights.

So nobody asked where Eben got all that cash.

He started changing things out in that model home, too, almost as soon as he moved in. Fancier furniture, nicer things. He had his company hire Eliza Hackle to do the cleaning, and she would come in a couple of days a week and clean up the model. And then he had her filing and running errands and doing this and that for him.

Now, you remember Eliza Hackle, don't you? Her daddy ran for mayor back in that year when it rained so much. Came in fourth in a field of three. He moved the whole family here so he could teach math back when we had the junior high school instead of the middle school. They had been here for a couple of years, and then he thought he saw an opportunity and started in with the real estate. He did pretty good for a couple of years, but then the mill shut down, and he had an awful rough time. He tried hard, but he just couldn't make it work. And he sold cars and

sold insurance and sold just about anything you can think of at one time or another. Now, he had always been a drinking man, but not bad. He had his cocktails in the evening, but he always woke up fresh. Not a problem drinker at all. Social, you know. Just social. But after that real estate business went under, things started to change. Now, he wouldn't get big drunk. Most of the time, you wouldn't even know. He just kept himself a little drunk, just on the edge of drunk, all the time, day and night. And, eventually, he just started to fail. Just fade away. Bit-by-bit. He had a couple of times in the hospital, and then one time, he went in, and he never came out. Just stopped living. Just stopped wanting to be. He was one of the hurt people, and you know how they are. Some people jump off a bridge or step in front of a car. Some people aren't in that much of a rush.

Well, Eliza was about sixteen then, and she started working after school to pitch in. There was a bunch of kids in that family, and she fit in somewhere in the middle. She started cleaning houses and making some extra money for the family that way. She got out of high school and didn't bother with college. She just kept making money. Cleaning houses. Running errands. Doing laundry. If it was menial, there was a pretty good chance that she'd do it. And that always struck me as odd because she was a bright girl. Maybe not a lot in the looks department, but bright for somebody who never finished

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school.

And maybe her looks weren't all that bad, but she never did anything with them. Just let them lay there. And after a while, she got a makeover by gravity. Everything just drooped and dragged on her. Her hair was long and dark and straight, and it never looked quite washed even though you knew it was clean. Her face was shaped like a flatiron, and her hair just fell to either side of the point. Her nose was small and round like a kumquat, and her eyes were a lifeless and dull shade of brown. She dressed with the flair of an inmate, but, to be fair, I don't think she had a lot of money for clothes. She was still helping to support that family of hers and her mother, who didn't do so well after the father passed. When I stop to think about it, almost all of her clothes stretched to fit. That was how they were designed. These stretchy knit tops and stretchy knit pants. They always managed to emphasize what most people would have wanted to be hid and hid what might have been useful for her to emphasize. I don't think she ever thought about it, though. She couldn't've. Not going around looking like that.

Now, on TV shows and entertainments, that's usually a sign that the person who doesn't dress so good is some kind of genius or is really deep or something. Of course, on TV, that person usually turns out to be secretly gorgeous anyway, but I've never actually known that to work in real life. People

tend to look like people, some prettier than others, but most all of us clumped together in that middle ground of not-too-great-not-too-bad. And the ugly ones aren't any deeper or smarter than the pretty ones, as far as I know. And the pretty ones weren't any better than the ugly ones, neither. Those are qualities that get mixed through the general population like the caramel swirl in the ice cream, and they have a way of popping up in places where you don't expect.

Anyway, Eliza eventually started working for Eben, and she was making fair money, but not great. After all, the harder you work, the less you get paid. Everybody knows that. She worked for him for almost the entire year, until a day just before Christmas, maybe a week or two preceding. He has one room there in that mini-mansion set up as an office, and one day he calls her in there. He was seated behind this huge cherry-stained desk wearing his freshly pressed clothes, and she comes in wearing sweats and carrying a sponge mop and a bucket. And she just stands by the door, and he says, "No. Come on in and sit down." And he gestures toward one of his fancy upholstered guest chairs. So, she sets the bucket by the door and sticks the mop in it and trundles over to the guest chair and plops herself down.

Now, he's pushed back in his chair, and he's got his wrists crossed back behind his head, and he looks for all the world like he's about three seconds

away from taking a nap. And he looks at her down the length of his nose and across the expanse of that desk, and he says, "Eliza, you've done good work here, but I'm going to have to let you go."

"You what?" she said.

"You cost too much," he said. "Your hourly rate, social security, the unemployment fund. It all adds up. Maybe if you'd take half as much per hour under the table I could keep you on, but otherwise it's just not worth it to me."

"But," she said, her face scrunched up like a paper towel wad, "it's almost Christmas."

He nodded. "I needed to do this before the new year. My fiscal year-end is on the 31st."

She unwadded her face and stood up. "You're a rotten son-of-a-bitch," she said.

He shrugged and shook his head. "You're taking this all wrong," he said. "This isn't personal. It's business. There's a difference."

"Not from my side," she said.

He said, "And that's why you do what you do and I do what I do. Maybe if you ever learn the difference, you might get somewhere in life."

Her impulse was to break something—over him if possible—but she didn't. She couldn't. Maybe the way things were, she could get unemployment. She

wouldn't if she killed him or put him in the hospital. And as she thought about that and the thought took hold of her, the anger ebbed inside her, and she walked away. The funny thing is that the anger didn't go away completely. It rose and ebbed inside her over the next few days far more frequently than the tide does with the movements of the moon. It filled her and drained away when she'd least expect it, at the most trivial times you can imagine, like when she rinsed a dish or watched TV. It was a ghost inside her, not made of—what do they call it?—ectoplasm, but shame and humiliation. There was nothing she could do. He held all the good cards. She was holding ten-high nothing.

Eben still needed someone to do chores for him, though. There are people who will do things for themselves and there are people who won't, and he was one who never did a thing for himself if he could make someone else do it for money. So, after a few days, he went up to where the old Home Depot used to be—you know, before they moved it over to that new one on Silvertown Road—and he got himself a Mexican to do some yard work for him. He pulled up in his fancy foreign SUV along there where those fellas stand all day, and he got out, and he started looking these gentlemen over like he's grading cattle at the county fair. And he picked out this one fella, a little taller than the rest and trim and strong. And Eben said to this fella, "Have you got a *mami*?"

Well, the Mexican half-smiled and shrugged at Eben. He had no idea what Eben was talking about. So Eben bent forward a little bit and talked a little louder. "Do you have a woman?" he half-shouted. "A—what's the word?—*madre*?"

The Mexican squints a little. "*Quien*?" he asks.

"You know," Eben said, "a woman. *La femme*. Somebody who can do cleaning." And he waved his hand around flat in front of him like he was dusting and hummed. "I pay money," he said and rubbed the tips of his fingers together. "For *senorita* who clean." And he made the dusting motion again. "*Senorita*?"

The Mexican relaxed and laughed. "Okay, okay," he said, and then he said a bunch of stuff in Mexican. Eben opened the passenger door and waved him into the car, and they drove off to get a woman for cleaning.

Eben still wasn't too familiar with all the roads and ways in the county, and it didn't help much to have this Mexican jabbering at him from the passenger seat. They drove around and around for awhile, and finally ended up at this tiny little two-room place up on the mountain over town on Shiny Creek Road. There were four or five kids scrambling around, the boys all in those short pants they like so much and the girls in fluffy dresses and hard-soled shoes. The Mexican jumped out of the SUV and shambled his way up to the house, pat-

ting and poking kids as he went along. Eben blew the horn at him and motioned with his hand like it was caught in a fishing reel, you know, to signal him to speed up. The Mexican just looked back at Eben for a second and smiled, and then he disappeared into the house. After a minute or two, he came back out with a woman in tow. She was a light-skinned woman, looked more Spanish than Mexican, and her coarse black hair was pulled back and tied into a bun. She was one of those nervous people, the kind of person who spends half her life looking like she's about to be slapped even though she isn't. Well, she came out with the fella, and she called the kids up to the little 4x4 porch there and talked to them and shook a finger at each one, but not with much conviction. And the kids tugged on her and hung off her and talked when she talked. Eben beeped the horn again, and she herded those kids into the house and locked the door and checked the knob, and then she and the man walked over to the SUV and got in.

Eben took a few extra turns getting them to his house, but he got them there. And he set the fella to working on the lawn, and he took the woman inside and had her start mopping the floors and scrubbing the toilets and all that. After about an hour or so, a big truck showed up from Brand Depot,

and two young guys—I think one of them was Eunice Howard's boy, Bobby, and the other was young Jesse Kunkle—got out and wandered up to the door.

They rang the bell and waited. And then they rang it again and waited some more. And they



*Photo courtesy Stephanie Cassamas*

could see Eben's SUV in the garage and the Mexican riding on the riding lawn mower, and they heard some kind of commotion behind the door, but nothing happened. So, they rang the bell a third time. Well, this time, the door opened, and the senorita was standing there

looking all scared at them.

Bobby said, "We have a TV."

The senorita just looked at him. He could have said "Now is the winter of our discontent," and she wouldn't have understood any better.

Bobby continued. "We're from Brand Depot. We've got a TV."

Just then, Eben appeared from behind the door and said, "Never mind her. I'll show you what I want done."

He squeezed himself right between them—these two big, old boys—and skipped down the steps and marched out toward their truck. Bobby just looked over at Jesse and shrugged and Jesse snickered a bit, and they jangled their way down the steps and followed Eben. When they caught up with him, he was standing at the tail of the truck, just staring into the closed door. And he said, "All right. Let's see what you've got. I want to make sure you've got the right thing."

Bobby said, "Sure," and nodded. He threw the latches on the gate and pushed the door up and clambered up on the black metal edge and into the truck. Jesse pulled himself up as well, and they slid a tall, long, brown carton—it came up to their collarbones and was maybe twice as long as it was tall—away from one of the

walls of the truck and toward the gate.

Eben stood still behind that truck. He had himself all decked out in a heroic stance with his hands on his hips and arms akimbo and his left foot pointed forward and slightly ahead and his right foot behind and pointed off to the side. He cocked his head a bit to one side and read the printing on the carton and said, "That's it. You got the right one. That's good. Good. Now, let's slide that off and I'll show you where I want it inside. You do understand that one of you is going to have to come down out of there so that you don't drop my \$2000 TV and break it into a million pieces."

Bobby and Jesse, they stopped right where they were. "We've done this before," Bobby said.

"Huh," Eben said. "Well, then, let's see your technique. I'd just hate for you boys to have to buy me a new TV. Not one this expensive"

Bobby turned back toward Jesse and rolled his eyes and Jesse nodded slightly, and they glided the box to the lip of the truck's body. As Bobby jumped off the back of the truck, he mouthed "Let's drop it" toward Jesse, but Jesse shook his head just barely, like he had gotten a chill, and Bobby arched his eyebrows a bit. He cradled the bottom of the box with his left hand and steadied it with his right, and they slid it easily until just a sliver of it was propping up the back end. And Jesse jumped

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down and grabbed that back end, and they picked that thing up like it was made out of cotton and just followed Eben to the house, just strolling there behind him like they were taking their puff of air for a walk.

Like many short people, Eben was good at walking at the head of a line, had lots of practice at it. He paraded right back into the house and into the living room and he struck his hero's pose a second time while he waited for Bobby and Jesse to catch up with him. Now, he already had a pretty big TV in there, but it was one of the old ones, one of the first ones, and it was built on top of this huge pedestal. It was huge and heavy, unlike this thing Bobby and Jesse carried.

They set the box down in the middle of the living room, and Jesse went right back out to the truck for the tools. And Eben looked at Bobby and said, "Let's move the old one out of the way."

Bobby said, "Maybe we should wait for Jesse."

"Don't you worry about me," Eben said. "I work out."

"Me and Jesse can do it."

Eben looked at Bobby like he'd just cut him off in traffic, and then he dropped to the floor and started doing push-ups, quick ones. He kept that back straight, though. He looked like a tabletop on a hinge, his head and shoulders bobbing up and down four or five times.

Bobby said, "We have insurance--"

Just then the Floyds--what were they?--the Pink Floyds? That "Money" song of theirs. That started playing. And Eben stopped doing his push-ups, slipped his cell phone out of his pants pocket. He hit the "Talk" button and the music stopped. That was his ringer. He used that song on his phone to tell him that it's ringing.

He sat up and said "Yeah?" into the phone. And then he listened a little, and then he glanced up at Bobby. Then he said, "Hold on. I can't talk where I am. Let me get to the office."

He got up and held the phone against his belly, and he pointed toward the wall. "That's where I want it," he said to Bobby. "Move the old one out of the way and put the new one on that wall behind where it is now."

Bobby just nodded and said, "Sure," and Eben hustled himself to another part of the house. He was half way down the hallway before he returned the phone to his ear. "I'm sorry about that," he said. "I've got some laborers doing some stuff for me, and you know how that can be."

The voice on the other end, a man's voice, said, "Sure." Eben's office had been the master bedroom originally, but he changed it the office because it was big and it had its own toilet. And he set his desk all the way on the far side of the room,

catty-corner to the door. He liked people to have a long way to go before they could speak to him. And the office itself was already all the way in the back of the house and off to the side, so that people would feel like they'd been following Moses by the time they got back there. He scuttled in there and closed the door as soon as he passed the threshold.

"You have to show them every little thing. Can't think for themselves," he said as the latch on the door clicked into place.

"Right," the voice said. "Uh, listen. We really need to talk."

Eben plopped down behind his desk and jiggled the mouse so that his computer could rise from the dead. "What's up?" he said. "Nothing terrible, I hope."

The voice on the other end of the phone coughed a little, and then said, "Well, you know, it's the end of the year."

Eben reached for this blue mechanical pencil he loved and pulled a yellow legal pad across his desk. "It is, it is," he said. "It gets hard to get anything done because everybody's thinking about the holiday."

"How about you?" the voice jumped in, suddenly cheery. "You got anything special planned?"

Eben almost winced. "What? For the holidays? I don't do that."

"Oh, come on," the voice said.  
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"You must do something." Eben shook his head. "Like what? Go to some party or some event? Spend time with a houseful of people who could all die—a boulder could smash through the house and crush them all—and I wouldn't care? Why would I want to do that?"

"Well," the voice said. "You know. 'Tis the season and all that stuff."

Eben said, "Hey, if you're into it, that's nothing to me. Knock yourself out. But I don't care."

"Really."

Eben nodded this time. "Not at all."

The voice said, "Not even presents?"

Eben shrugged a little. "Presents?" he said. "I do presents. But I only do them for one person."

The voice said, "Who?"

Eben smiled. "Me."

The voice said, "Uh-huh."

"Yep," he said. "They're all wrapped and ready to go. And on Christmas morning, I'll tip-toe downstairs and gleefully unwrap the great teetering wall of presents I've bought for myself."

"That's quite a ritual."

Eben's head bobbed like a toy on a spring. "I like it. So. What can I do for you today?"

The voice paused just a bit, and then said, "Here's the thing. We're going to have to back out on our offer."

Eben's head stopped in mid-bob. "What do you mean, you're backing out?"

He heard a gulp on the other end and then, "It's not that we don't like the house."

"I thought we had this worked out."

"It's really a matter of finances. The bank doesn't like it. They say the house is too far out and costs too much."

Eben rolled the mechanical pencil on the legal pad and slowly stood up. He was licking his lips and breathing slowly and deeply. And then he said, "They just don't have the vision. I have the vision. I can see these things. I can see the possibilities."

"I'm sure you can."

"I can see them a helluva lot better than some rusted turd in a gray suit."

"Listen," the voice said, "we tried. We even tried other lenders. It's no good."

"Try my guy," Eben said. "He can get it done. You won't believe what he can get done."

"Yeah," said the voice. "We even looked into a couple of lenders like that, and the terms just weren't what we—"

"WE HAD A DEAL!"

Eben suddenly noticed the sound of the air conditioning and the hollow sound made by his breath as it caromed off the transmitter.

The voice said, "It just stopped making sense for us." Pain seeped into Eben's hand from holding that phone so tight. He said, "Listen. There's got to be a way we can figure this out. We just need to be creative."

The voice said, "I'm sorry. But my bonus fell through and things aren't looking that good now. I'm in hock up to my ears, and the last thing I need is to take my biggest bill each month and make it even bigger. I've got two mortgages to pay off and almost no equity in either and the buyers aren't flocking to my door. I just can't do this now."

"Fine," Eben said. "Go to hell." And he mashed his thumb on the "End Call" button like he was trying to push it to another dimension. He said "Goddamn it!" and threw that cell phone across the room. It ricocheted off the door and bounced off a book in the bookshelf and fell on the floor with a flat, hard cracking sound. He turned to the computer and pulled up a spreadsheet. He used it to track houses and buyers and a lot of it was empty. He moved the cursor down to the row called "House 14" and highlighted all the cells that were in play, and he changed the background to red. There was another red line two above that one and a third one four rows below it. He

clicked on the "Save" icon and shook his head. "Bastards," he said softly.

Then he stood up, nice and easy, and he slipped his hands under the front drawer, and he lifted and flipped the whole thing over on the floor. His laptop bumped and skidded on the parquet and the desk lamp shattered and pads and papers and that mechanical pencil of his went all over everywhere. And then he walked over to the nearest bookshelf, and he grabbed at random books and knickknacks and threw them. Things were bouncing off the walls and the furniture. One book went through a window, a big, expensive, double-paned window. It landed on the lawn about 15 feet behind the Mexican he had brought home. But that fellow didn't even notice. He was chugging along on that riding lawn mover, and he had those big plastic ear muffs on, and he had no idea. He just kept cutting the lawn.

Well, once that book went through that couple-of-hundred-dollar window, Eben managed to somehow stop himself and calm down. The room looked like it had been home to an orangutan convention, and he just smoothed himself out and walked to the door and opened it. The Mexican woman was standing just a few feet away at the edge of the kitchen pretending like she hadn't just been snooping at the door. Eben looked at her, jerked his thumb over his shoulder, and said, "Clean up in there."

Since, from her point of view, he was just speaking gibberish, she didn't do anything. Just kind of let her eyes get a little wider. So he pointed back in the room and said, "In here. You go. Clean, clean." And he made his dusting gesture again and pointed into the room some more, and she edged over to the doorway and finally got a glimmer of what he was talking about.

She looked in that room and her hand levitated to her cheek like it was being pulled on a thread. "*Por amor de Dios,*" she whispered to herself.

Eben just walked away.

He walked to the living room, and found that the delivery guys were gone and the TV was up on the wall. The box was gone, but remnants of drywall covered the carpet like powdered sugar on fried dough. Eben looked at it and muttered, "Son of a bitch," and then backed into a sharp corner of the old TV, which they had left almost right in the middle of the room.

He looked back down the hallway and called out, "Hey! Maria Conchita! *Aqui!*" and he whistled like he was hailing a cab.

The cleaning lady walked warily and softly along the hallway to the living room.

"Vroom-vroom. You vacuum," Eben said as he moved his hand back-and-forth quickly in a mimed gesture of running a vacuum cleaner.

The cleaning lady nodded rapidly, almost as if she were imitating an agreeable squirrel, but didn't move.

Eben tried again. "You understand? Vroom-vroom?"

The cleaning lady said, eyes wide, "*Dónde está el aspirador?*"

Eben said, "What?"

The woman used his vacuuming gesture and said, "Vroom-vroom. *Donde?*"

"Ohhhh," Eben said with his head drooped back and his eyes closed. "Where is the vacuum cleaner?"

"*Si,*" came the response.

He turned around and again almost impaled himself on the corner of the old TV. "God-damn thing," he said and moved around it. "It's over here," he said as he speed-walked across the room. "*Aqui! Aqui!*"

She scuttled after him as quick as she could and followed him over into the entryway. He swung the door of the coat closet open and jerked his head quickly toward the insides. "In there," he said.

He held the door open while she pulled the vacuum cleaner out and looked back into the living room where that big, old TV sat just off the side and not where he wanted it. She rolled the vacuum cleaner out of the closet, and he stared at the TV. She rolled it into the living

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room, and he stared at the TV. She unspooled the cord from its spindles, and he stared at the TV. And his lips just kept pressing against one another tighter and tighter until they just about disappeared.

The senorita started vacuuming up dust and the drywall, and Eben opened the front door and looked around outside. He could hear the riding lawn mower going around the corner and around the back. The sound of the vacuum cleaner stopped, and glanced back in the house. The senorita was wrapping the cord back around the spindles, and Eben said, "The hell with it," and went back inside and closed the door behind him. He walked over to the big screen TV just as she was about to roll the vacuum cleaner back to the closet.

"Forget about that," he said. "You stop. Help me. We move this." She was getting what he was saying, so he took her hands in his—she was moved by their softness—and he placed them flat on the side of the TV, and he placed his hands next to hers and he pushed. "*Empuje?*" she asked.

"Sure," he said. "Sure. *Si.* Whatever."

There was a door in the wall under the staircase that led to the basement. Eben used his shoulder, and he and the senorita moved this huge thing in that direction. When they were a couple of feet from it, he called out, "Stop! Stop! Stop!" And he danced around it and opened

the door. He grabbed a leg of the pedestal and started pulling. He shouted "Push! Push!" and she pushed as hard as she could.

He got his right foot down on the top step and then his left on the next. And then he tugged and she pushed and it slid a bit, and he repositioned himself, and they tugged and pushed again. And the TV reached what you might call the tipping point, and Eben girded himself, but it wasn't enough.

That TV slid right into his chest, and it pushed him off his feet, and he watched the doorway slip away and felt himself riding the prow of a vehicle he no longer controlled. He slammed into the poured concrete wall of the basement, but cushioned the blow somewhat for the TV. It bounced off him a bit, spun a quarter turn in mid air, and fell on him again before it toppled on the floor, picture tube side down. Broken glass and pieces of plastics flowed in a pattern around the body of it.

And the senorita looked down from the doorway.

She heard a sound that didn't sound quite human, except that it must have been because it came from him. It had a gurgle and a moan and whine all laced up together, and it came out of him slowly before it tailed off into quiet. She looked at him and didn't move, didn't think, didn't breathe. She didn't know what to think. And then she heard the riding lawn mower, the sound of it just dangling in

the background. The next thing she knew, she was outside, running toward the noise, her hands waving and her husband's name coming out of her mouth.

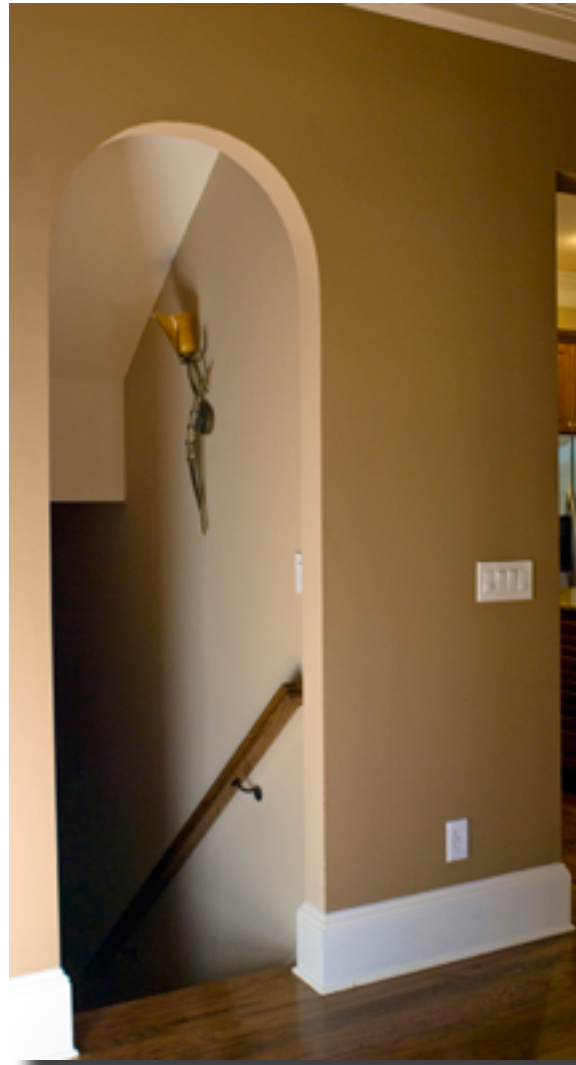
Now, the Mexican was riding around on that machine, and he was daydreaming. Not that he was doing a bad job. Every swing around he would line up the edge of the cut grass right in the middle of that mower and glide straight as a plumb line down the lawn. No. He was doing a fine job. It was just that driving a riding lawn mower didn't take up nearly all of the power of his conscious mind. His mind was just drifting along, thinking about a car he wanted to buy and maybe he could get a job on a construction crew if he got better tools and that girl he had known way back yonder and when. And then there was this shape, this thing next to him, and it was hopping and waving about. And he realized that it was her, the woman he called his wife even though they had never stood before a priest. And she was frantic and upset, so he took the lawn mower out of gear, and the roar of the engine quieted and deepened, and he said, "What? What is it?" Only he said it in Spanish.

And she said, "He's dead! It fell on him! I didn't want to push!"

And he grabbed her by the shoulders and said, "What fell

on him? Where? Show me!"

And she said, "Yes, yes!" and they were running, running into the house and to the doorway at top of the stairs to the basement. Eben was still where she had left him, slightly propped up against the cold concrete



*Photo courtesy Stephanie Cassamas*

wall. He wasn't moving and it was hard to tell whether he was breathing or not.

"What should we do?" the woman asked.

"Go," the Mexican said. "There will be police, and we don't need to be here for that."

"But what about him?" she asked. "He might be dying."

"He might be dead," the Mexican said. "He might already be dead, and they put people like us in jail for that. We'll get the blame no matter."

"It was an accident."

"It doesn't matter."

So, they left. They ran out the door and walked into town and found a friend who drove them home to their little house with the passel of children.

It couldn't have been more than a few minutes before Eliza Hackle happened by. She needed the work and needed the money, so she was on her way to ask for her job back. Maybe not at half, she hoped, maybe at three quarters of what she had been making. Maybe he'd take her back. Even if it was just to the end of the year. It was going to be a lean Christmas otherwise.

So, she parked the run-down remnants of her car in the driveway and got out.

That's when she noticed that the front door was open and the riding lawn mower was idling off to one side. And everything was quiet except for the chug-chug of that motor, so she started right out with a sense that something was wrong, that there was something not right. She walked toward the front door looking around slowly and wide-eyed

just like she'd seen people do in the movies. She didn't even know why. It just seemed like the thing to do.

She leaned her head and shoulders inside the front door and said, "Hello?" The vacuum cleaner was in the middle of the floor of the living room and the hall closet door was still open, but nobody answered. She took a step or two in and then a few more steps and around into the living room and noticed that the door to the basement was open. The house was quiet as a graveyard except for the hollow clomps of her shoes on the hardwood floor. And she heard every clomp on her way to that open door.

When she reached the doorway, Eben came into view, crushed and snapped at the foot of the steps, the TV broken on the floor beside him. Without a thought passing, she time-stepped her way down to where he lay and stood over him. His eyes opened and pivoted slowly up at her. He breathed in small, short huffs, and she just stood at his feet and looked back.

"Can you move?" she asked.

He just looked at her.

"Can you talk?"

His eyes didn't move.

"Well, I don't know what happened," she said, "but no one deserves it more than you."

He still stared up at her, and everything about him except  
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his eyes seemed broken and smashed.

"Have a Merry Christmas," she said and she started up the steps.

She was about halfway up when that last word struck her. Christmas. She wasn't from religious stock, but they always kept Christmas. She remembered her father years before, not long after the bad times started. He was sitting in the living room in his chair, the tattered, stuffed leather chair he had gotten from his father's house so long before. The tree was off to his left, over by the window, and he watched the lights flash and the ornaments glisten and ignored the TV, which glowed and barked in the corner ahead of him. He was rosy from a couple of highballs, and he wore a small, benign smile. "Peace on earth, good will toward men," he said. "Can't be too bad." Then he raised his highball glass a little and said, "Maybe if we had more of that, we'd need less of this." And he swallowed a big swallow and smiled the smile of defeat and looked back at the TV and quietly, slowly went away.

And thinking of her father, Eliza walked back down the basement steps, got out her cell phone, and said, "What I'm about to do is more than you would do for me."

She called 911. I was at the firehouse that day. I always volunteer on Saturday. That's my day and has been for years. And we

got right out. We were there, one, two, three.

We found her sitting on the bottom step with him laying right across from her, dead as could be. Internal bleeding. Drowned in the very thing that gave him life. Not the fate he expected, I'd guess.

The next thing was that the lawyers descended. His parents had died and there were no brothers or sisters, so a fight developed between his ex-wife and some distant relatives. It got fierce until his company was liquidated and it turned out that there wasn't anything left. The houses in the tract couldn't be touched because of creditors on every side, each trying to take his cut, and the ones that weren't finished never were, and the ones that were went to seed. Most of the furniture in the model turned out to be rented and the few things that weren't, like the big screen TV, were sold for whatever they'd bring. The buildings sat alone on empty streets and cul-de-sacs. And the grass grew tall around them.

Some lawyer representing some court was made administrator of the estate, and the first thing he thought of doing was trying to sell the development or at least the couple of houses that had actually been built. It took a couple of months, but he finally was able to get enough people to agree to it that he could proceed. The first thing he wanted to do was to make sure that those places were clean, so he asked around town

and got a recommendation on somebody to do the cleaning.

He got Eliza Hackle.

Eliza wanted to start with the other houses, but that administrator wanted the model home cleaned first. It was right up front and the easiest one to show. So, she parked her old, battered car in the same spot had parked it in that previous Christmas, and got out her cleaning supplies, and went to work.

It was simple enough. Everything inside had been taken out, first by the furniture rental company and then by a moving company that had been hired to load up Eben's remaining personal effects and stick them in storage somewhere. She swept and mopped and dusted where she could. At

first, a small arc of paranoia ran through her because she was alone and because every sound echoed and because she had sat at the bottom of a staircase and watched a man's life slip away the way a poorly tied balloon loses air. But, as time passed, she got more used to it and stopped being so aware of every footstep and slosh in her bucket. She concentrated on her work and the arc of paranoia faded until it was just a dull presence deep inside.

Eventually, she got to that bedroom Eben had used for an office, and cleaned the bathroom and then started on the room itself. And she was dusting the built-in bookshelves and about in the middle her hand knocked against the wall and a little door opened. A little hidden door popped open a good two or three inches, and she jumped

back a step. Then she pulled it open with one finger and reached in and grabbed.

When she pulled her hand out, she had a bundle of twenties. Now, she may have found one-and-a-half million dollars in cash back there, but that's only a rumor, and that's a rumor you didn't hear from me. She has eased up on working, though, ever since she finished up those houses, and she drives a nicer car and has fixed up the house where she lives with her mama. They got it looking right nice, in fact.

And that parcel of land I showed Eben has started reclaiming those building, and pretty soon you won't even know they're back there without making some effort. That's the kind of thing that'll happen with time.

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