

# FOREWORD

LEE ANDERSON

Palm Circle Press was born on October 22nd, 2019, named after the street I grew up on. My goal in starting this publishing house was to release literature too harsh or edgy for the mainstream. My books will be nothing if not daring.

That's why I'm so incredibly proud of this anthology. I'm proudest of how the diversity in these stories abstractly synchs with their similarities. There's an odd alchemy at work. There's a touching love poem written by a 105-year-old woman. There's a story about a woman murdering her husband to escape his abuse. There's even a story about alien abduction.

Every written work in here is exceptionally powerful. They serve as perfect examples for how language can so heavily impact the human soul. We should even cringe to think what this says about the current state of mankind when a literary submission call brings forth such works of pain and loss. Good writing doesn't blink though, not at Palm Circle Press anyway.

Nothing in this anthology blinks either. Enjoy.

SEDAN DE VILLE

# SEDAN DE VILLE

LEONARD NASH

Three weeks after I posted my Craigslist and Autotrader ads, lowered the price four times, re-edited my photos, fielded dozens of horseshit texts, emails, and voice messages, and gotten two *Notice of Violation* letters from the property manager about the car leaking fluids onto their precious new asphalt downstairs from my rented condo, a guy calls me, Vladimir something-or-other, a czarist-sounding last name I couldn't make out. Said he'd recently arrived in South Florida from some little town in Russia, a *shtetl*, or something like that. Apparently his crack at the American Dream required a Sedan de Ville with a V-8 engine, rear-wheel drive, and a trunk the size of a shipping container.

"Does your car have a vinyl top?" he said.

"Padded vinyl top, AM/FM stereo, cornering lamps, cruise control, the whole shebang. Everything it came with."

"Leather seats?"

"White leather all the way around. It's like going to the dentist. You can tilt the front seats up, down, back and forth—any direction you like. You could get a root canal on the way home from work."

"My teeth are very good," he said. "When can I see the automobile? I am taking an Uber from where I am staying in Tamarac."

"I'm showing houses all day tomorrow," I said. "How about Friday morning, early? I've got business after lunch." I offered him instructions for using the new virtual security kiosk, but he said if the driver took any pride in his profession, he'd figure it out. Fact is, taking an Uber from Tamarac to Hollywood seemed like an expensive ordeal just to test drive an old Cadillac, and good luck trying to parallel park the monstrosity, but he sounded like a serious buyer. If we didn't make a deal, and so long as he wasn't an asshole, I'd offer him a lift to a bus stop, or even the Tri-Rail station near the water tower on Sheridan Street, maybe try sizing him up as a homebuyer, but no way in hell was I schlepping his ass back to Tamarac.

"I'll need cash, by the way, twenty-dollar bills." I didn't need him showing up with rubles or euros or a fold of American hundreds he'd crafted on some fancy color printer so as to rip off my car.

We agreed to meet at nine-fifteen on Friday. He showed up at eight-forty-five while I was fixing my morning oatmeal. I recognized his voice through the kiosk thing. Must have had the driver drop him off outside the complex. When I fly out of Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International, I roll my luggage out there, if it's not raining or ninety-five degrees, and wait for my cab by the street, figure I'd save a few bucks. I pressed the entry code, told Vladimir my unit number.

I glanced out the kitchen window over the sink to watch for a fat Russian hoofing it through the parking lot. But he bypassed the elevator, took the stairs to the second floor, and arrived at my door. Turns out he wasn't fat, and he looked younger than he'd sounded on the phone. He was five, maybe six years older than me, with hooded eyes, a flared nose, and a few days' worth of beard and mustache. On my father's side, I'm Russian and Eastern European, not that I've ever been over there or speak a lick of the language, but I'm familiar with the hairy thing, probably go through four or five razor blades a month.

"You want coffee or toast or anything?" I said.

"Some coffee is good." He knelt down to pet my cat. She hissed at him and darted into the living room. "Where is the Cadillac? I did not see it in the parking lot."

"Around the corner, in front of another building." Truth is, I got up early and moved the car to a different guest spot rather than let him see puddled antifreeze and engine oil where I usually parked it. I'm a Realtor, so I'm held to all sorts of ethics and standards and codes of conduct and blah, blah, blah, but I'm not a car dealer. If he wanted to scoot under the Cadillac and sniff around, or take the thing to a mechanic, fine, but I wasn't going to draw him a picture.

"When I get a house," he said, "I will have a Doberman Pinscher."

"Here we can't have dogs over twenty pounds."

"It is like the Soviet Union in these Florida condos," Vladimir said. "I am renting a room from a friend in Tamarac. I met him on the

airplane coming over here. I cannot barbecue a steak on the balcony or use the swimming pool after nine o'clock. But fuck them. Sometimes I go downstairs after midnight and swim naked."

I didn't need his life story. I just wanted to unload my old car, then go out and sell some real estate. The Mazda dealership had offered me seven hundred in trade, which was bullshit, even with the various fluid leaks, but I would have saved myself some time and aggravation. Vladimir took his coffee black. I served it to him in a *Café Du Monde* mug, that famous place in New Orleans with the square doughnuts, "beignets" I think they're called. I went there once, but I bought the mug years later at the Salvation Army while shopping for a tuxedo to wear to some fancy banquet thing my girlfriend Monica had dragged me to. I don't know...maybe ex-girlfriend. It's complicated.

So after some chitchat over coffee, I dropped our empty mugs into the sink, grabbed the car keys, the manila envelope with the title from the Florida Division of Motor Vehicles, my Miami Marlins baseball cap, also from the Salvation Army, or maybe Goodwill, and we went downstairs to see the car, two tons of American sheet metal and glorious chrome bumpers basking in the mid-December sunlight.

"Your advertisement said nineteen hundred dollars, yes? That is a lot."

"It has just thirty-seven thousand miles." It sounded like bullshit, but it was true. "I bought the car from an old lady named Esther in Hallandale Beach. Couldn't have been more than four-foot-ten. Said after her husband died, she only took the car to the doctor, the supermarket, CVS, and to the condo across the street to play mahjong. She'd kept it parked under her oceanfront high-rise.

"Automobiles should be driven," Vladimir said. He ran his finger along the gap between the hood and fender. "It is the original paint," he said, a statement not a question. "What is this color?"

The car was a vague metallic-tan, but General Motors called it "taupe." It's like when I needed to fix a lamp, so I took the broken screw-down part to Bed Bath & Beyond. The clerk said it was called a "finial." Monica once told me the wedge in our upper lip is called a

“philtrum.” All these people with their fancy words...it’s not like I’m going on *Jeopardy!*

“Taupe,” I said.

“Top?” he said.

“Taupe. Look, just call it ‘brown.’”

“No, no,” Vladimir said. “I will be an American citizen one day. I want to learn everything.”

I was trying to sell my car and this guy wanted a civics lesson.

Leaving for the test drive, he nearly hit the outbound security gate. We drove through the neighborhood south of my condo, past the high school on Harding Street, then north on Federal Highway. He gunned the engine through the yellow light at Sheridan Street. On Dania Beach Boulevard, we went by the jai-alai fronton, turned right on Fifth Avenue, past the abandoned King’s Head Pub, and south again toward my place. He observed how there were two Publix supermarkets, two Walgreens, and three Dollar Trees within a mile radius of my condo. “You are a very rich country,” he said.

“It’s convenient,” I said, “but their stuff isn’t free.”

Back in the parking lot, Vladimir tested the cigarette lighters, all four of them.

“Do you smoke?” I said.

“Cigarettes are not healthy,” Vladimir said. He checked under the hood, pulled the dipstick, wiped it with a paper napkin he pulled from his pocket. He measured the tread of each tire with a penny. “I can pay you one thousand dollars. It is leaking antifreeze and oil and perhaps power steering fluid. Also, I wanted a white Cadillac. That has always been part of my dream.”

If my car had been white, he would have said he dreamed of owning a red Cadillac. Or *taupe*, for that matter. I should have suggested he go out there and keep looking, because for every old lady pushing a walker with a pair of tennis balls on the legs—to keep them from scraping the linoleum in her kitchen—there’s a low-mileage Cadillac or Lincoln Continental or Lexus or Buick being driven by a live-in nurse’s aide from Haiti or Nicaragua or Guatemala. Week after week, these cars are offered for sale by family members who spent a week in Florida disposing of Grandma’s old lady furniture and dusty *tzotchkes* from a curio cabinet illuminated

by a fish tank light bulb. And they hire a Realtor to sell the apartment or musty old house with the leaking roof. Like I said, that was what I did—lease and sell real estate—hence my purchase of the Cadillac in the first place. Monica was never impressed with the humongous car, she with the fancy Mercedes C-Class convertible she'd just paid cash for. Of course, a Miata might've seemed like an odd choice for a Realtor, but frankly, I was done toting people around. I'm a salesman. My job is to show up.

"I cannot accept one thousand dollars for my vehicle." An hour with this guy, and already I felt my syntax changing, a subtle slip toward night school ESOL.

We went back and forth on the price and settled at twelve hundred. The rebuilt AC compressor last summer had cost me half of that.

I shook his rock-hard hand, probably calloused from some sort of construction work, and reached into my pants pocket for the title.

"We must go to the bank," Vladimir said.

"Fine," I said, "we'll find a nearby branch," and given some bad experiences I've had giving signed titles to buyers who never registered the cars in their own name, I decided I'd also accompany him to the tag agency on Park Road, but we'd need to make it quick. At three-thirty I had an appointment to show a couple from Connecticut a vacant townhouse in Emerald Hills, said they needed something they could close in thirty days. Got to love desperate home buyers.

Vladimir waited by the car while I went upstairs, grabbed my wallet, fed the cat, took a leak. I searched his bank on my GPS app. The only branch in Broward County was in Margate—not far from motherfucking Tamarac. But at least I was unloading the car.

\*

Heading up I-95—I was driving the two of us in the Cadillac—he asked me about insurance and whether it was required in Florida. "Of course," I said. "The DMV needs proof of coverage before they'll issue you a tag. You haven't arranged for that yet?"

"But there is a license plate already."

"That's mine," I said. "When we're done, I have to mail it to Tallahassee."

"Tallahassee is the capital of Florida," Vladimir said. "Do you recommend your insurance agent?"

I could have suggested my State Farm guy, whose building we'd passed during the test drive, but he was a putz, and besides, we were already several miles north of the airport. Vladimir mentioned an insurance agency he'd seen in Lauderhill next to a barber shop.

So that was our first stop, about four hundred bucks for some basic six-month policy. "This ain't even in English," the agent said, holding Vladimir's Russian driver's license. She was a twenty-something African American woman with long, fake purple fingernails embedded with funky little stars. I wondered how she managed her bathroom business.

Vladimir pulled out his Russian passport, but that didn't help.

"Don't strip mall insurance agencies have ways around Russian driver's licenses?" I said.

"Sorry, sir," the woman said to me, ignoring Vladimir like a doctor speaking to a family about a patient's devastating diagnosis, "but the man needs a Florida driver's license—or New Jersey, or Chicago, or wherever. Something in English."

She gave us directions to the DMV up in Margate, in yet another strip mall. We drove over there, and Vladimir parked himself on a bench out front to study the driver's handbook. By this time, I trusted the guy enough to leave him the keys so he could take the road test. Or maybe I just didn't care anymore. "Call me when you're done," I said.

I wandered the length of the strip mall—the DMV was all the way at the west corner. I went in and out of stores, looking for nothing in particular, and thinking how I absolutely should have dumped the car on the Mazda dealership. Or maybe not leased the Miata in the first place. The whole thing had been Monica's idea. She's a hedge fund portfolio manager down in Miami. What was I even doing with such a person?

In Winn-Dixie, I pushed around a cart, putting stuff in—Rice-A-Roni, sardines, Cremora, store-brand corn flakes, a grapefruit, two jars of pickles, a bag of kitty litter, then I backtracked through the

store, placing everything back exactly where I'd found it. I'd rather shop closer to home. I paid for a large banana and a cold twenty-ounce bottle of Diet Pepsi in the ten items or fewer lane. I ate the banana and drank my soda on a bench like Vladimir's. The ownership group of that strip mall knew their clientele. Another ex, the one before Monica, moved back to Denver last summer, said she didn't feel motivated in South Florida. Some places had hiking trails, jazz clubs, and world-class museums. Broward County has benches everywhere, and the supermarkets provide blood pressure machines and motorized grocery carts for zipping up and down the aisles with arthritic knees and bad hips.

At Office Depot, I farted around in the computer aisle, spoke with a salesman about a laptop I had no intention of buying. At TJ Maxx, I tried on a polyester blend suit. It fit okay, but I didn't need it. Besides my thrift store tuxedo, I had a wool Saks Fifth Avenue suit with satin-lined trousers I'd found at a garage sale for twenty bucks, hanging from a guy's avocado tree. At Marshall's I bought some woven boxer shorts, factory seconds, but I couldn't tell the difference through the package. I was crossing the street toward another strip mall, in the direction of a Starbucks, when Vladimir called.

"Such an easy exam," he said outside the DMV. "I memorized that silly pamphlet in twenty minutes. In the United States, they give driver's licenses to retarded people, yes?"

"I don't know," I said.

He looked at his new license, held it in the sunlight. "The more I get older, I look like my father, he should rest in peace. He worked in an asbestos factory. It is time for lunch."

"I had something at the supermarket," I said.

"That is no good. I will buy you a fine lunch, and then we will see the insurance lady with the crazy fingernails. Let us go to Ikea," Vladimir said. "They have Swedish meatballs."

"There's a Chinese place across the street. I've got real estate clients later today, and we need to finish up with the car already."

"You have everything in America," Vladimir said, across from me in the red vinyl booth, before a steaming bowl of wonton soup and a plate piled with scoops from the buffet. "Every city is like Disneyland, and you do not appreciate it."

I was having soup too, a mix of egg-drop and wonton, and a plate of cashew chicken and beef chow mein. I thought of Warren Zevon's "Werewolves of London."

"Except for a few years I spent substitute teaching, I've never really been poor," I said, feeling a little guilty about it, "but I've seen poverty."

"You are a good man," Vladimir said. "You are educated, and you are wise, but many Americans are not too smart. That idiot president you elected the other time ... America cannot afford such foolishness."

"Which one?" I said.

"Your Cadillac is old," Vladimir continued, "but for me it represents new opportunities. One day soon, I will drive a fine luxury automobile, and my English will be good, and I will have a three-story house with my own swimming pool and grafted fruit trees and a pocket billiards table and a fireplace and a circular driveway and Thermador appliances."

"You get all this from *Architectural Digest*?"

"And I will have my Doberman Pinscher, and I will have a beautiful wife—maybe American, maybe Russian, maybe a black woman with long fingernails—it is all okay. Today I received my American driver's license, and soon I will be a successful building contractor. Perhaps I will stay in Florida, or maybe I will go to California. I could be the governor there, yes?"

"I suppose," I said, "if that's what you want."

At the register, Vladimir opened his wallet, pulled out some singles, said he'd spent the rest of his cash at the DMV. So far, I'd bought a banana, a Diet Pepsi, a package of underwear, and a lunch buffet for myself, and maybe the next governor of California, and I was still stuck with the goddamn Cadillac.

"Your food is very good," Vladimir said to the man at the cash register as he pawed the fake branches of the countertop Christmas tree beside a goldfish bowl stocked with after-dinner mints.

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Back at the insurance agency, Vladimir's new Florida driver's license was a big hit with the fingernail lady. "Very handsome," she said. "How do you pronounce your last name? It's like you ain't got enough vowels."

Vladimir smiled and filled out his check.

"My manager won't approve a temporary check," she said. "To issue a binder, we need a regular check with your permanent address printed on it."

"What about cash?" Vladimir said.

"Cash is cool," she said, tapping a purple fingernail on her desktop.

\*

If he'd signed up with Wells Fargo, we could have walked across the parking lot to the outparcel near Taco Bell. Instead we drove over to Vladimir's bank on Nob Hill Road. I stood beside him as he withdrew \$1,710 in cash. He asked for seventeen \$100 bills and five \$2 bills. I'd asked for twenties, but I could see the money coming straight from the teller's hands, and at this point, he could have paid me in nickels. Shekels for that matter. I just wanted to get this over with. "Here," he said, "a down payment," and handed me a two dollar bill.

"They still make these?" I said, looking at the image of Thomas Jefferson. It was printed in 1995, so maybe they didn't. The backside featured an engraving of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

"Americans have much to learn about America. This is valid U.S. currency, legal tender, and you forget it exists. I used some one dollar coins with your eighth president, Mr. Martin Van Buren, at a pharmacy where I'm buying a *New York Times*. The cashier says I should pay with regular money. This is why the driver's examination is designed for idiots."

So on the way back to the insurance office, after he'd prattled through the list of one dollar coins, which skipped the former presidents still living, we were waiting for a red light when the Cadillac overheated, steam billowing from under the hood like an angry pot of boiling spaghetti.

"This presents a problem," Vladimir said.

"No shit," I said as I pulled into a Shell station. After I called AAA, I texted my prospects for the townhouse. *Thanks anyway*, they responded, but they'd found a buy-owner deal, a FSBO as we say in the trade, and were presenting a cash offer with no appraisal or inspection contingencies.

"I've seen worse," the AAA driver said about forty-five minutes later. "Unless you want a tow down to Hollywood, I know a water pump and radiator guy over in Oakland Park."

\*

At six-thirty that evening, we stood at the customer service counter at J's Radiator and Air Conditioning with an invoice for \$955.37. I looked at it, then at Vladimir. "Holy shit," I said.

"At this moment, your license plate remains on the automobile."

I handed my credit card to the mechanic's wife, her rolls of fat bunched into her hot pink T-shirt with a silkscreen image of Floyd the Barber from the old Andy Griffith Show. Her basset hound slept on the floor beside a fire extinguisher, an oscillating fan, and stacks of Chilton's repair manuals.

"Nine hundred and fifty-five dollars!" I said in the dark gravel lot as we climbed back into the Cadillac.

Under the map light, I studied the itemized invoice, about three payments on the Miata, and hundreds more than my recent commission for leasing a shitty one-bedroom condo across the street from the Golden Isles Post Office. I should have traded the car to the Mazda dealer, or sold it to the scrap yard that had been texting me, or just pushed it into a canal.

"So are you still buying my car?"

"I do not understand that woman's blouse," Vladimir said.

"Pink Floyd," I said. "It's a joke."

"I will make you supper," Vladimir said. "And on Monday morning, you come back, and we will go see the fingernail lady. I like her."

"She's a peach," I said. I clicked off the map light, folded the yellow paper into my shirt pocket, against my two dollar bill, started

the car, and headed west into the crawl of going-home traffic on Commercial Boulevard, then north on Rock Island Road. Toward Vladimir's place. In Tamarac.

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**DARK LORDS OF  
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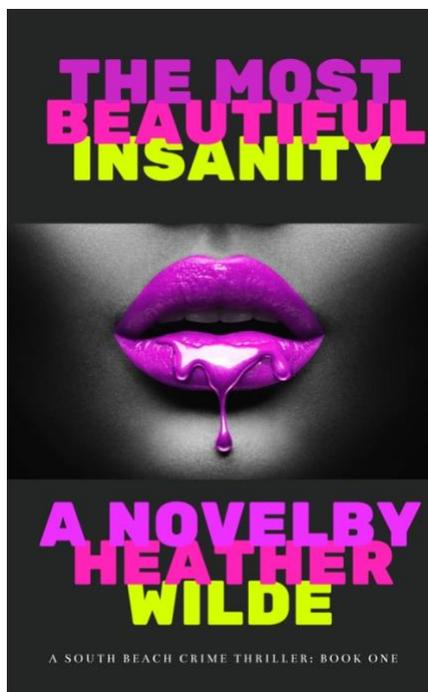
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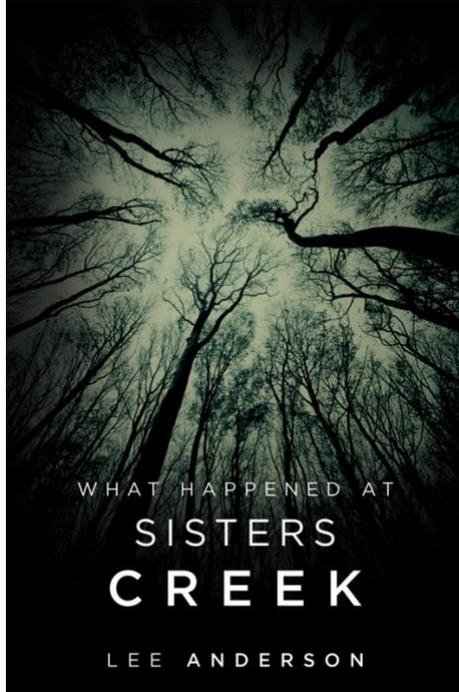
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*Lee Anderson*



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