

EXPRESS CARE

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Cindy is numb as she glides her new Camaro into a reserved spot across from her quick lube and repair garage. Leave it to Arlie to ruin the best part of her day: the simple solitude of waking alone, pulling on soft-worn jeans, feeling the throb of the Camaro's eight cylinders, the firm grip of new rubber as she accelerates the twilight-blue SS coupe toward the store. That car had been a reward, one she couldn't resist, all angles and horsepower, six on the floor—bought from profits, cash flow, the stuff Arlie seemed to think just took care of itself. But today it was just transportation, her route blurred by the distraction of the Post-it note he'd left stuck to the side of her purse on the kitchen counter: *Deposit Cleared—Closing in 1 Month! What's your plan?*

Theirs was a marriage-in-name only. Oh, sure, months earlier, they'd made the occasional appearance together at the club, Arlie disguised in a navy blazer, Cindy with her Louis Vuitton bag; appearances planned mostly to fit in, and maybe hear that another member knew someone who wanted—no,

needed, a sinkhole-costly fairway-view vacation home (along with the golf membership—and dues—of course). But those expeditions had ended, the effort both worthless, often irksome, and now, with Arlie sequestered in the guest master on the clear opposite side of their sprawling, unsold spec-house from her room; avoiding each other had become such normal routine that sometimes Cindy forgot they even shared the same house. Lately, he'd be off to some work site early, well before she gathered herself, leaving only an unrinsed juice glass in the kitchen sink as evidence he even existed. She'd become used to missing Arlie in the mornings (evenings too, for that matter), which contributed to why his note came as such a shock.

So now Cindy sits lost in the deep idle vibration, fingering the small square of pale yellow paper.

What's your plan? Right, good question, another consideration she'd avoided as easily as the reality they might actually sell the house.

A sharp rap on her side window and she sees David, her shop chief, standing short and stout and smiling. He's here early, as always (often on his day off, no less), just to make sure the shop opens smoothly, he would say. David is polite and respectful, but with a tinge of uncertainty that sometimes makes Cindy suspect his fawning assistance might just be mere patronizing. *Of*

course, that's ridiculous, she thinks, just her own insecurity trying to protect, maybe cushion, against doubts that are never too far away. And she's managed well enough on her own, thank you very much. What was it, almost two years now she's owned Express Care?

"Buenos días, señora..." David says as Cindy lowers her window, "This car, señora..." He points to a late-model, clean gray Durango, regular Colorado plates—the green mountain background, not the "Respect Life," "Columbine," or "Broncos" vanity plates favored on locals' vehicles. "Oil change only?" he asks. The Durango blocks the garage's eastern bay, the doors still closed.

"Oil change...*sí*," Cindy answers. For simple service, regular customers, the early birds, often drop off their cars or trucks before she opens, the keys hidden under the floor mat, wedged behind the gas cap cover, or maybe sitting out of sight on top of a rear tire. David has them in hand, but this Durango doesn't look like a local's, no scratches, no dings, too much polish and care, popular model though. "Let me check inside...for a note," she tells him and hits the Camaro's on-off button. Its soothing rumble drains quickly away, and in the sudden cool silence she is hit with a gnawing, inexplicable sense of forgetfulness. "*Gracias*, David," she shouts after him as he trots back to the shop.

As Cindy settles behind her store counter, the normal noises erupt: Garage bay doors clank and grind upward; a compressor pounds to life—vibrating garage, store, and waiting area alike—and outside, a Jake Brake hammers like a big-bore machine gun out of an 18-wheeler slowing on the interstate exit ramp. The racket settles into a steady din, and through the window between office and garage, Cindy watches David ease the Durango into the nearest bay before hopping down to disappear into the work pit below. The big rig quiets on its way to town, the distant shifting gears sounding like a snore exhorted into a pillow, and overhead fluorescent bulbs hum gently, reminding Cindy that, without a little attention, she'll look pallid from now until close.

Almost by reflex she fishes a compact out of her purse. She is a woman, by God, even if surrounded by grease monkeys. And there she sees it again, Arlie's note. Two years, she thinks, two years since Arlie learned that cheap money wasn't so cheap when rich vacation homebuyers vanished like moisture in windblown dirt. He did not take it well. Easy to say now, but that's what happens when you win "Best House" in the Boulder County Cavalcade of Homes, and figure, why not start building homes in the mountains, up near some fancy-ass resort where folks might gladly pay seven figures (maybe eight?). All goes well for a few years: You build one house at a time, good crew, always

busy; you set up a college fund for the girls; you even find a day or two to take your wife fishing on Sylvan Lake, where you tell her the sapphire blue water is like the color of her eyes... And from there things get stupid: Golf club spec-homes—that's the future, sure; you build one and it sells, so you build two—and they sell! Next thing you know you're living in a giant one, the one that *won't* sell, paying club dues and interest you can hardly afford, and after the bank takes back the others, you-know-who is back hammering nails on a down-valley duplex.

They'd pretty well drifted into their own corners by then, she and Arlie, unable to afford the inevitable, a shared silence preferable to understanding, let alone acceptance. But Arlie lost it when Cindy told him she'd went out behind his back and bought Nick Edwards' *Quik-Lube* store. It wasn't so much that she'd decided to try her hand in business, and a typical man's one at that (after all, when her father sold the family farm he became a John Deere salesman, suggesting, perhaps, a blood affinity for machines); no, Arlie went ballistic when she admitted to syphoning off cash from his hidden, "rainy day" stash to help make the deposit. He hauled off and decked her, only time—ever—but damn near broke her jaw. The side of her face looked like a sunset for nearly two weeks and she had to apply cover-up real thick and told anyone nosy

enough to notice that she'd stepped on a pissed-off rake (Cindy took an iPhone photo of the damage, might come in handy someday, she thought). Arlie settled down a bit when she let him know that her father had loaned her some of the money for the store and that Nick Edwards financed most of the price. Still, he said, "You'll blow it... You're good at *that*...likely lose the business as fast as you lost your looks." He was father of their girls, sure, (both now either in college, or working, down along the Front Range, thank god), but an asshole just the same, good enough contractor—so long as he worked cost-plus—otherwise just all dreams and bad judgment in a pair of tight dungarees (and even those were tight in the wrong places nowadays).

What's your plan?

An impact wrench rips and echoes out of the work pit. First oil pan of the day—and the store isn't officially open yet. The compressor kicks in again, recharges, shuts down. Cars and trucks will soon line up; with two bays, she can handle six, maybe eight an hour Cindy pads a little cover-up, gently from cheek to chin, just enough to make her feel complete, protected, before tapping the keyboard space key. Her new flat-screen monitor lights up with a screen saver maze of golden oil rushing through clear pipes growing inches

ahead of the flow—Thank you, Valvoline—and then it clears to her logo: *Express Care*. The name, the italics, all her idea, and way better than *Nick's Quik Lube*—more of a feminine touch too. It just felt right.

A few days of bills sit in her inbox organizer, rubber-banded and unopened. Probably a good time to sort through them, prioritize for payment, check her bank balance; there won't be time once it's busy. Arlie would give her such shit if he saw those unopened stacks, not like he was ever any good at keeping current. Coffee first though, black today, just a touch of sugar. She heads toward the shop to the coffee maker; oil fumes and Yuban make a nice combo, and for a second Cindy wonders if she can actually feel new wrinkles creasing out from her eyes.

"Señora—" David shouts up at her from the work pit underneath the Durango. "Anything more?"

"Oh, David...*lo siento*," she says, "One moment." And she rushes back into the office.

A man is waiting beside the counter. "Any idea how long will it take for an oil change?"

"I'm sorry," Cindy tells him, "I didn't see you waiting." He has spindly pale legs dropping down from baggy shorts, a navy sweater vest filled-out by too

many beers, and smudges of sunscreen tracing across his loose red neck, a few ear hairs trapped in stray globs. A golfer, obviously, staring at her gruffly with arms crossed.

“Got a tee time in forty-five minutes; I hope I don’t have to wait.”

Big surprise. Cindy pretends to study her computer screen. “You’re in luck,” she notes brightly, but is actually pissed. No pleasantries, no *Good Morning* even. Granted, a service business is about, well—service, but still, how about some common courtesy, for Christ’s sake. She smiles, snatches up her clipboard, and then sees the golf hat, the familiar yellow-stitched trees, *Golden Ridge*... Fuck, same club where she and Arlie have been stuck. Never noticed this guy there before—maybe a guest, or new member. He doesn’t seem to recognize her, which is good, she thinks and chuckles to herself, although part of her wonders if he, or anyone he knows, might be the person about to close on their house. Introducing herself though, as someone who happens to be selling a house she never intended to live in (or afford), might just seem, well, weird. And, of course, how could this guy not babble to his golfing buddies, and then they to their wives, about their fellow member working oil changes near the interstate. She’s tried not to talk about her work, or marriage, to anyone at the club. Better to just keep her self-esteem held

tightly inside, but she knows those Pilates thin, fake blond bitches, with their Birkin bags slung on their arms, all think of her as a “merchant,” someone barely a step above chambermaid. *Guess I won't have to endure that crap much longer*, she thinks. “Keys?” Cindy asks, holding out her hand. “I’ll be right back.”

She scribbles down the basics (license plate number and model), checks the driver doorjamb sticker for specs she already knows by heart, and waves to Jorge in the garage—he: a wiry, balding, Fu Manchu mustached friend of David’s from the trailer park, a great hire, works his tail off, and has hands so muscled and tough, it looks like he could loosen lug nuts with his bare fingers. She’s glad the county keeps the INS away.

Another car, an Audi Allroad this time, slows toward the other bay entrance as Cindy hurries back inside. The phone starts to ring. The golfer stares impatiently up at news on the waiting area television. She can’t hear what it says, doesn’t want to, and hurries behind the counter to reach for the phone, but too late and the answering message clicks on. David hustles in and drops off paperwork and keys. Cindy glances out the window into the shop and sees the gray Durango is gone. David rushes back out with another clipboard as she inputs the golfer’s info into the computer...just as she thought: new to the

area, no customer record, probably a vacation homeowner who'll probably change oil twice a year, take his tire business and big money service jobs elsewhere.

Through the front door window, she sees a truck angle in, Ford F-150 pickup—she can name a vehicle just by the grill, sees them flash in her dreams. The Allroad creeps into the garage, and a phone rings, again, her cell phone this time; Her stomach twisting and growling, she remembers she never ate anything, ; but that's okay, she thinks, wouldn't hurt to shed a few. She picks up the phone receiver, dial tone, drops it, and grabs her cell, "Express Care, how can we—?"

"Mom?" It takes Cindy a second to register her daughter Lori's chirpy voice, its absence of disappointment, the fresh enthusiasm of someone who sees only art in the dark swirls of a thunderhead; still, she watches the Allroad customer exit her car, head toward the entrance.

"Mom?"

"Oh, Lori, I'm sorry..." Cindy says as the customer enters the store and waves, bright smile.

"Is this a bad time?" her daughter asks, a touch annoyed.

“So, how are you doing, honey?” Cindy says before mouthing, “*Just a minute,*” to the waiting customer.

“Gosh, it sounds busy there...*ka-ching,*” Lori jokes, highlighting for a second the steady din of air tools and motors echoing in the background.

“Everything good in Boulder?”

“Crowded, too many tourists,” her daughter says, “Twenty-Ninth Street’s a zoo...”

The Allroad customer (that’s what it’s become, tagging together vehicle model and owner like they were symbiotic life forms) saunters over to the display of tires hung on the wall, feels the jagged tread on the most expensive Goodyears.

“Mom?”

Her daughter’s impatient voice sparks a draining gray return of doubt. Cindy feels suddenly tired, light-headed, the smell of new-tire rubber and oil tightening her stomach, her skin prickling as if scraped by nettles. None of this is Lori’s fault, or her sister Jenny’s. Rather they’ve been great and not stupid: During visits, they saw the separate living arrangements, asked questions, accepted the bland generalities proffered, never took sides. Of course, there was

never any yelling or screaming, just the years-long build of frustration, detachment, emotions that could snap like fishing line and leaving a small wound (mostly internal) before being cast out again as if nothing had happened. In a flash Cindy fills with fuzzy, distant memories: her two years at Colorado State, the reckless nonchalance, the ignorance of past *and* future, how each current moment seemed like the world—all of it over too soon. She protected the girls' rights to their own full, random experience: No cloying parental judgment on grades high or low, nor on love interests thought perfect (until they weren't), and certainly not on the occasional retch session outside some amped-up fraternity. Lori still had another year left; Jenny made it through—just barely—waitressing in Highland now, says she's saving to go back to graduate school... We'll see. Part of her wants to forward that still-saved iPhone photo, tell the girls everything, but knows she won't; even now her fingers can't feel the phone.

“Honey, I'm so sorry, but I've got a customer waiting.”

“Okay, right... *Car Care Cindy* to the rescue,” her daughter says, too pepily to hide the sarcasm. That was the name Arlie had conjured for the store, after it was all a *fait accompli*, when he'd say anything to sound cute while attempting to hide his self-righteous bullshit. “Lori, I've got to go—”

“Wait... Mom?” Lori blurts out, “Dad called; he told me you’ve sold the house.”

“Oh...he did?” she says, her mind racing to catch up.

“Yeah, and he said he’d drive down this afternoon, to—you know, celebrate; Jenny’s coming too; he told me to invite Peter—”

“Lori...” she interrupts, but then suddenly doesn’t know what to say and holds the phone in silence.

“Mom...” Her daughter’s voice wavers, suspicious of a boundary crossed, but then hurtles ahead, “It’s just that Dad said that once you close, he’d move back down here, and, well, I thought that...maybe you and Dad would...” She trails off.

“Honey, please, it’s OK...” An impact wrench screams from within the shop, then quiets. *What’s your plan?*

“Oh, shit... Mom? I’m sorry—”

“Lori, honey...I’ve got to call you back,” Cindy says and hits the *End* button.

She places her iPhone gently on the counter, wipes the tears from her eyes and cheeks, and turns toward the Allroad customer with the broadest smile she can force. “I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” she says. “How can I help you?”

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“You’re all set,” Cindy tells yet another customer and hands over credit card, invoice, keys, in that order, sort of by habit; what’s it been, twenty-five...maybe twenty-eight customers so far? Cindy’s lost count but it’s a decent Monday, always a busy day—along with Friday, people either getting ahead of the week or ready for the weekend. Mornings are busiest, crazy sometimes; customers don’t mind waiting forty-five minutes, hour tops, but they start to consider giving Walmart or, God forbid, the Big O Tires & Service up valley a shot if it’s much longer. There’d have to be a profit today, but it nags her that she really isn’t sure. Two vehicles lined up outside each service bay, and David and Jorge are cranking, lunchtime’s come and gone, and Cindy knows they can smell the burger aroma wafting over from Wendy’s just as well as she can. The pace should slow soon, usually does in the afternoon, which is good, given the heat: dry and breezy, but hot, hot, hot. Cindy’s bra strap is digging in and her Ban roll-on’s already overpowered, a sweat scallop under each armpit; good thing she wore the loose navy tank top. Still, whenever she stands, a sweat drop, or two, tickles down to her hips. The office and waiting room AC can’t keep up with doors opening seemingly every two seconds. She stands, stretches backward, and exhales fully; weariness wants to break through, but, no, she

won't let it. She'd once thought about opening another Express Care, maybe down valley, not too far away, and then a third; set prices even with the chains, offer better service and Wi-Fi, pay off the loans, Arlie too, balance the ledgers, and end her marriage, finally.

Through the store's front window, Cindy sees the gray Durango still parked, baking in the sunshine in a space next to her Camaro, heat waves bending and hovering over each roofline. *Christ, where's that paperwork?* She asks herself and fumbles through the invoice receipts she'll need to file later, the Durango seems mockingly content, shiny yet opaque. Jorge glides another car into the far bay, only two cars lined up for service now—check that, here comes another, a white Impala, obvious rental car, one that nobody would buy unless forced at gunpoint though this one parks alongside the store, not in line for a service,. The driver's yet another vaguely familiar-looking man, he peeks into the office and pushes open the door halfway. Short pants, too short, she thinks, only mid-thigh length, good tan though, but that hideous green and blue, fern and palm Hawaiian shirt—Tommy Bahama tourist fare—definitely a foreigner. When he sees Cindy his entire face seems to widen around his smile.

“Hope it's not a bother...” he says, British maybe but somehow different,

“the cook and me—oh, I’m sorry, my *wife* and me wanted to pass along a right, proper thanks for all your help—”

David darts into the office, drops off more keys and paperwork.

“Well, hello there, mate,” the visitor says to him as friendly as if they’d been downing pints the night before. “There’s a grouse fellow,” he adds, “a right real nail finder, this bloke.”

David smiles. “Hello, señor,” he says and shakes the visitor’s hand. “Thank you.” David nods and backs out the door into the garage.

“Well, good on ya—”

“I’m sorry,” Cindy interrupts, distracted, she sees a Subaru Outback slide into line. “How can I help you?”

“Oh, no worries, young lady... I see you’re full out...” For a second she thinks the guy is copping a look at her chest, but he turns and points out the window to a woman, his wife, sitting in the car. She waves back with a smile as broad as his. The Outback customer is heading for the office door; Cindy recognizes her but can’t place the name, a local, regular customer—she runs a shop or something. “We’re heading back to Brisbane, but couldn’t leave without a proper thank you; you’re all lifesavers, you are... If you’re ever Down

Under, please look us up for a visit,” he adds and flashes a set of giant, yellow-faded teeth.

Cindy shakes his hand and can feel her face redden. Now she remembers: Late last week a tow truck brought them in, flat tire; David found a screw stuck in the tread, plugged it easy enough, and they were on their way; a busy, busy, day.

As he leaves, the Aussie holds the door for the Outback customer. She’s wearing a washed-out orange—more like peach—peasant skirt, with white T-shirt, flip-flops and strides yoga tall, her full cheeks radiating a flush far younger than the gray streaks in her chestnut hair suggest. What’s her name?

“One of those days, right?” the customer says, pleasantly enough as Cindy struggles with her memory.

“A busy Monday,” she replies, exhaling dramatically, and then *Dawn* pops into her brain—Dawn, that’s her name; she knew it was something hippy, owns a high-end consignment store where the rich sell their unwanted stuff. She treats her Subaru like it’s a Jaguar. A flush of satisfaction rolls through Cindy with the recollection. “But there shouldn’t be much of a wait...Dawn.”

“Best service in town,” Dawn says, without any hint of irony.

Cindy grips a clipboard in hand and heads out to check the oil change

mileage reminder sticker inside the Subaru's windshield—Dawn's ahead of the recommended miles, as usual—she notes the license plate number, returns inside, and asks about any problems before printing out a work order. "You're next," she says, and as if perfectly timed, Jorge appears for the handoff of keys and paperwork. Nothing beats the salve of routine, she thinks, yet she still can't shake a sense of something forgotten.

"You know, Cindy..." Dawn says as she drifts toward the waiting area. "I'm not sure if you'd be interested, but a few of us gals have started a women's commerce club, our own little chamber of commerce, share ideas, promote our stores... Can't let the boys have all the fun."

For a moment Cindy doesn't answer; it's a great idea, no doubt, a potential for empowerment, to counter—however marginally—the way men still dominate even a high-country resort community, but she also imagines chairs, a couch, wine in plastic cups, women gabbing endlessly, a sort of commercial support group, and she thinks of Arlie, their soon-to-be-sold house, all those years he spent building homes from Ft. Collins to Boulder to, well, here. "Hi, my name is Cindy, and I'm a—" Arlie plans to move, she thinks, and damn it all to hell.

“Thank you, Dawn,” Cindy says, “I’d like that.” But, truthfully, she’s knows that’s a lie.

A stock market report cackles from the TV, and she feels the vibration, hears the soft hum of Dawn’s Subaru guiding into position in the shop. *Close your eyes; listen to each car’s exhaust tone:* That’s one skill she’s learned. Cindy bets she could guess each model just from the sound, the thrum, and be correct nine out of ten times—Jeep Cherokee, Explorer, the truck growl, the German purr, the Japanese whisper. She chuckles at the thought of skills she might’ve learned had she bought a liquor store instead.

A Suburban, with “Alpine Outfitters” logoed on the front door, pulls up outside; its rear doors open, then thump close, and it drives off just as a man shoulders through the office door. He’s followed by a young woman—she’s pretty; each are wearing long-sleeved fishing shirts, pockets galore, quick-dry pants; their hands hold sections of fishing rods; a wide-brimmed hat shades his face. A day on the water, trout fishing—*how nice*, Cindy thinks. He places the rod parts gently on the counter and removes the hat, revealing sweaty hair plastered to his forehead skin, his face now vaguely familiar.

“Hey, Cindy,” he says, smiling, all familiar and comfortable. “Is the Durango ready to roll?”

“Oh, right...” She blanks on the name, but should know it, he knows hers...dammit. Dawn looks over from waiting area, nosing out the new arrivals. “Let me get your paperwork,” Cindy says and turns away. The loose invoice and keys have sat near her computer most of the day. “Here you go...” She sets them next to the fishing rod and avoids eye contact while turning the paperwork around for him to read. The young woman stands wordlessly, and patient, leans into his side; she’s too young to be his wife, daughter, maybe... Girlfriend? That would be disturbing but not surprising. Cindy’s seen it before: Wall Street types from Fifth Avenue, jetting in to their ridge top mansions, three, four marriages—assholes.

“Okay, so we changed the oil, topped off the fluids, air filters should be fine until the next service—”

“Wait,” he interrupts, “and the transmission?” Cindy stares back at him. “That was the main thing I needed serviced.”

“Umm...we hoped we weren’t missing anything...” Her stomach churns. David knew there was something else, and he’d asked her to check, but the day had gotten away from her. “We didn’t find any instructions—”

“You told me I didn’t need to leave any,” he interrupts, smiling but just barely. “I told you the transmission didn’t feel right; I stopped by here last week... Don’t you remember?”

She does not but knows something’s wrong; he looks familiar, but maybe it’s the fishing clothes, the hat—she’s drawing a blank. Dawn’s ears flit like a deer’s toward the exchange, even as she pretends to read a magazine.

“There was an Aussie guy in here, nail in his tire...” The husband and wife who just stopped by? She hardly remembered them either. “I saw you write down the information, you even went over the pricing—\$250 for a check-up, \$750 for a full servicing—sound familiar?” Now his voice is rising. “You said it’d take a couple hours...Christ, I planned our fishing trip around it.”

“I’m sorry,” Cindy tries to say calmly, but her voice cracks; the customer is always right, isn’t that what they always say? “We could do it first thing tomorrow—”

“Oh, that’s wonderful...” he says, shaking his head. The girl watches the exchange silently, expressionless. “Except *tomorrow* we’re leaving on a road trip—which is *why* I needed it serviced *today*.” He exhales, chuckles. “How about now?”

“We can’t,” she says. “We couldn’t complete the job before we close.”

Which is true enough, although she has extended hours on occasion under special conditions, for special customers. But now she's tired and hungry, annoyed with herself, and wants to crawl in the Camaro to go...to go where... She cannot complete the thought. There's no way to make this guy happy. Maybe she fucked up, probably, but the day seems lost, a swirl of useless in-voices and emotions, and just what is she supposed to do?

"Great," he says, "I'll have to hope the damn thing doesn't seize-up on the road."

More guilt, another layer to top off the blankets of disappointment already weighing her down. She reminds herself to breathe as the man hands over a credit card, signs the work invoice, charge slip, and grabs the fishing rod pieces off her counter. She should say something, she knows, apologize, offer a future discount, but then David rushes in.

"Hola, señor," he says brightly, seeming to recognize the man.

"Hola to you, David," the man replies, straightening as he reaches out his hand.

Cindy feels nauseous, but smiles at David as he delivers a set of Subaru keys and paperwork onto the counter before hurrying back into the shop.

"You ought to let him run this place more often..." the man says, juggling

fishing gear, his foot holding the door open. He smiles and laughs, before adding, “Because you’re losing it.” And then he and the girl are gone.

Dawn jumps to the counter before Cindy can tell her that her car’s ready. “It’s none of my business,” she says, “but you don’t have to take that.”

“It was nothing... We just got crossed up a bit—”

“Well, I’m telling you that was customer abuse...you don’t have to put up with it. Cindy, you should join our group, really; we discuss all this stuff: how to manage employees, your bank, even how to fire a customer.” Dawn smiles softly and then hunts in her handbag, finds and hands over a business card. “You should come... We don’t bite.”

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For the first time all day, the shop bays are empty, no cars lined up outside. Cindy counts invoices for thirty-eight oil changes, one full set of tires, parts delivered for a Dodge Ram complete tune-up scheduled for Tuesday. She needs to call Lori back; she’s been avoiding it, but still doesn’t really know what to say. She’s tired of feeling like everything’s her fault. Or is it that she still feels she’s a victim? It wouldn’t hurt to organize the bills finally, at least open them, prioritize, input into the computer, but she’s doesn’t really want to know what

the totals might suggest anyway. So she rifles through the day's invoices instead. The store copy of the Durango invoice is near the top. *Losing it*—that's what he'd said, "*You're losing it.*" Maybe Dawn was correct; she didn't need to put up with customer abuse, any abuse; and wasn't that why she'd bought the store in the first place, to stop depending on idiots, to earn respect?

Cindy turns to the computer and searches for the Durango license plate identifier; there's the name, vaguely familiar, address in a private club development (*what* a surprise), and no service note, no flag for a special request. Too bad she didn't check the computer when David had asked her to. She dials the phone number before actually having any idea what to say.

A young woman answers...the girl from the store? But the voice now sounds more youthful, more adolescent than she imagined an hour or so earlier; of course, then, the girl hadn't said a word. "Dad, it's for you," she shouts. Okay, she's his daughter; doesn't change anything, maybe it's worse that he'd try to impress her by embarrassing another. Cindy hears the shuffle of a phone handoff. Her heart accelerates, her chest pounding, and she breathes in short puffs. She hears the man's voice and introduces herself.

"Let me guess," he says, chuckling, "You found the note about my transmission."

She ignores his comment and starts in, “I won’t be insulted in my store—”

“Excuse me?”

“You said I was losing it—”

He doesn’t remember saying that, but tells her, “You screwed up.”

“Another customer heard the way you talked to me—”

“Is this how you treat all your loyal, best customers?”

“Oh, sure—” she says caustically, “like one oil change a year—”

“How about a new set of tires last year,” he says, “and full tune-up the year before, thousands of dollars spent at Express Care, and Nick’s Quik Lube before.”

But Cindy pushes off any doubt. “You cannot talk to me like that...” She’s rolling now, doesn’t hear any defense, and a surprising calm, soothing and unburdened, breezes through her. “I live in Arrowwood,” she nearly yells, “and we belong to Golden Ridge, and I’m probably richer than you—” No one ever stands up for her, understands her fears, frustrations, her insecurity; it feels good, almost empowering to say it. “I don’t need someone like you as a customer,” she tells the man, not believing she has actually said the words, and then clicks off.

After a full day in the sun, the leather in her Camaro is too hot to touch. Cindy stands by the car, its windows open. She'd hopped in quickly, just long enough to push the ignition button, pump the accelerator, to hear the deep throaty roar, feel the massaging, idling thrum. In just those few seconds, sweat starts to bead from neck to calves, but there's a decent breeze outside, along with that aroma of grilled burgers churning out of the Wendy's exhaust fan. She's well beyond hunger but can imagine passersby on the interstate picking up a quick whiff, their heads flitting toward the scent, searching for the sign they'd already passed. Cindy leans back against the Camaro, feels the heat and vibration on her butt, and starts to chuckle. She doesn't even own the damn thing, leased it, the payment invoice—of course, overdue—sits with the other bills near the shop computer. God, it had felt so good to fire the Durango customer, initially, at least, but then the surge of adrenaline inspired her to straighten out, to organize the mess of invoices, all those bills, lying unopened beside her computer. It had been a great day, lots of business; she must've made money, just ignore the forgetfulness—she'd do better tomorrow. In her mind the running total of sales seemed to dwarf the total of bills to be paid; the bank would be happy, she'd get current, and then, when they sold the house...

It was when she lifted the stack of Friday mail, had yanked the rubber

band off, that her handwritten Post-it note fluttered to the floor: *Full transmission check—Monday—Customer to drop off early!*

She called Lori, got voicemail, apologized, promised...a list of things, and then told David to finish closing up. He'd done it so many times before that Cindy realized she wouldn't know what to do without him. Even with the sun dropping toward the western ridgeline, she could still make it to Lori's—zip over the pass, through the tunnel, past Georgetown, Idaho Falls, maybe let cruise control manage her speed through the foothills—arrive well before dark. Arlie would be in shock; she'd love to see his expression, and having the family together might actually be fun.

Cars and trucks whir past on the interstate. You can always pick out the trucks, Cindy thinks as she settles into the warm bucket seat, the big ones certainly, with their sputtering exhaust and grinding gears; cars are harder, only a soft whoosh, the sound oscillating with speed. She closes her eyes and wonders whether, with time, she'd be able to recognize the signature for each slipstream as well as she can their idle when they enter her garage. But, of course,

she realizes you'd have to open your eyes and be able to identify each car before it passes out of sight, and, anyway, she had more important things to do...to plan.

Before rediscovering creative writing at Manhattanville College, **Dwight Hilson** spent 25 years in business, working on deals from railroads and restaurants to DVD publishing. Born in New York City, he has lived across America, but now resides with his wife, Mindy, as empty nesters in Greenwich, Connecticut. He holds degrees from Boston University, Northwestern University and is currently a MFA candidate at Vermont College of Fine Arts. His short fiction and poetry has been published in *The Alembic*, *MacGuffin*, *Sanskrit*, *Coe Review*, *Colere*, among others, and he is at work on a novel set around a small town New England railroad.