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| **Copyright © 1998 Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture  All rights reserved. ISSN 1070-8286**  *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 6(1) (1998) 27-32  **AN AMBIGUOUS PEACE: THE LIFE OF A RETIRED CORRECTIONAL OFFICER**  J Forbes Farmer, Ph.D. Franklin Pierce College  There is an unmarked gravel road on Route 55 in South Tamworth, New Hampshire, near the Route 113 intersection. It's a spruce-hidden right, just beyond a cute post office that I first mistook as a farm stand. If you've been in the area, perhaps venturing for Mt. Chocorua or Mt. Washington and wanted to avoid the slow traffic or the icy switchbacks on the Kancamagus Highway, then maybe the tiny white post office caught your eye. Anyway, about three bumpy miles out the gravel road, in one of those one- bedroom-trailers - the kind that gets demolished in tornadoes - lives Karl Ebert, a kind, courageous and unpretentious guy I met some time back.  Five years ago, when Karl was fifty-seven and combed considerably more blond hair, he retired from the Moultonboro State Prison, where he'd been a correctional officer for thirty years. His rookie years were during what he calls the "notorious and tyrannical reign of the Order of the Golden Eagles." Supposedly, the "Golden Eagles" were veteran officers who beat up cons for no apparent reason other than to be mean. The way Karl tells it, his surviving those years was almost as difficult as being the disinherited grandson of the Ebert Aluminum Eberts. As far as I know, no one ever bothered to verify Karl's claim about the "Golden Eagles," but the South Tamworth postmaster swears that disability checks come to Karl G. Ebert, III, so being as IIIs are usually only used by families looking to be fancy, there's probably something to that claim. Most folks just think of him as a mysterious recluse because Karl only leaves his trailer once a week, and then only for an hour or so with Caroline Fiche.  Caroline, Karl's widowed neighbor, herself suffering sixty-seven and slowed down from arthritis in her hands and knees, has been driving him to do his errands since he retired. Karl wasn't supposed to retire until he was sixty-two, but he lost most of his eyesight breaking up a fight between two methadone cons who were arguing over the "formula" they were going to use to concoct explosive pipe-bomb powder out of fertilizer they had stolen from the prison green house. So every Monday for the last five years Caroline has driven Karl to the town recycling center, the State Liquor Store, the village market and the post office. Karl prefers to do the errands in this exact order, so they do. It's not that Caroline obliges out of sympathy for Karl's poor vision or deference to his years of structured prison work, she actually rather likes it. She does almost the same errands Karl does, and she admits that the order makes sense.  Both of them hate driving around with smelly trash, so at their first stop they dump the green plastic bags and their empty glass bottles, jars and jugs at the recycling center. Long ago, Karl gave up needing Caroline to tell him which bottle was what color and what color bottle went where. It is not that his vision improved, the doctors are convinced **[End page 27]** his problem will never self-correct, the only hope for improved eyesight is a terribly expensive and generally unaffordable operation. His vision is frustratingly limited to slightly out of focus objects in blue-gray tones. He knows where the bottles go now because he always buys the same brands and has learned the colors by shape. The only question he asks now is, "Any Victoria's Secrete catalogs in the magazine bin?" To which Caroline always scolds, "no" and then adds "and you couldn't focus those blues on the girls anyway."  Then they go across town and buy a half-gallon of Bacardi rum for Karl's rum and cokes and a fifth of Gordon's gin for Caroline's extra dry martinis, straight up. She prefers Beefeater's, but she can't afford it on her meager social security. Then they walk next door to Cresenti's Market, where four paper bags of groceries and two ten-pound bags of black oil sunflower seeds have already been prepared for them from a standing list. Before leaving, they always make sure to buy their "winning" Tri State Megabucks tickets, and they usually add some "impulsive stuff." Karl likes chopped clams and sour cream for clam dip, and Caroline loves oysters, if they're fresh, for chowder she makes from her grandmother's "secrete recipe." Every week they buy the clams and oysters, but they're not on the list. Every week Karl asks, "Know what I'd like?" "What's that?" Caroline responds. "Some clam dip." And Caroline says, "Sounds good to me. And I'm going to splurge for some oysters for stew." Then they check for mail at the little white post office, and she drives Karl back to his trailer.  "Thanks, Chanel," says Karl. "See you next week. I'll be listening for the Titmice. Hope they can fix your washing machine."  Caroline laughs and says, "Hope so, too, Dobbs. And maybe I'll invite the Sears man for dinner. Enjoy your dip and be good."  Even though Caroline is Karl's closest neighbor, she lives another mile down the gravel road in a small modular house on which she and her husband took out a medically motivated and barely affordable second mortgage before he died. When Karl retired and moved into the trailer a year later, she used to mosey up the gravel road to visit him. First just to say "hello," and then to listen to his prison stories and to help him adjust to retirement and to being so "visually impaired." When they first met he referred to himself as "poor, blind and visually helpless." Caroline worked on him for months before he was willing to accept "poor, visually impaired and helpful." Now they're buddies. He calls her Chanel because of her perfume. She calls him Dobbs because his favorite movie is "Treasure of the Sierra Madre" with Humphrey Bogart playing the crusty Fred C. Dobbs. She says Karl doesn't look or act like Bogie though, more like the strong jawed, gaunt, sensitive and melancholy Mikhail Baryshnikov she saw and read about in Time magazine. He wishes he could see the movie one last time. **[End page 28]**  The Titmouse thing relates to bird watching, one of Karl's favorite and most contemplative pastimes. He and Caroline nailed an open birdhouse to his back deck railing, about three feet from a big picture window that radiates the warm morning sun. Relaxed in his worn comfortable chair, Karl sips the richest and darkest Colombian coffee that Cresenti's Market carries and, squinting, studies the birds, chipmunks and squirrels as they feed and interact in front of him. For a long time the only birds he could attract were chickadees and blue jays, but recently a new variety appeared. They were about the same size as chickadees, but the gray shading and song were different. And he thought there was a tuft of feathers on their heads. Caroline identified them as Titmice and helped him differentiate the songs.  Karl sits in his "bird chair" for hours, marveling at how the birds, even within the same species, differ in their eating habits. Some prefer eating alone and, unwilling to share, frighten off the others. Some don't mind eating with others, even birds of different species. Some are sneaky. If a larger blue jay eats alone, a chickadee waits until the blue jay's back is turned, and then hops in, picks up a sunflower seed, and races off. The squirrels and the chipmunks behave much the same. Some squirrels don't mind sharing with the birds, but attack other squirrels that come near. It is funny how the chipmunks are the most accommodating of them all. Of course they are so busy stuffing their cheeks that intruders don't bother them.  Karl sees many similarities between the bird and squirrel behavior and that of people, especially cons he remembers. There was "One-Ear Billy" who strong- armed canteen food from weaker cons. There was "Gypsy Steve," who traded fortune telling for desserts. There were two Black Muslims, Jamale and Moses, who cooked gourmet meals on their hot plate with supplies that were mysteriously delivered to their cell. There was Raoule, a Latin Kings gang leader, who controlled the seating arrangement in the west side chow hall. And there was Penny, the lipsticked prison prostitute who hoarded the cookies and candy bars he received for his favors.  Karl suspects that he is probably anthropomorphizing his sunflower feeding friends, but that is what makes this pastime so contemplative. He sits there wondering if chickadees can tell each other apart. Except for size, Karl can't tell them apart. Do they have friends to hang with? Do they always eat with the same buddies? Do their parents keep in touch with them? Are they mad at their parents for kicking them out and abandoning them? Do they feel abandoned? Do they have a word for that? If they get angry, how do they communicate their anger? Do they talk or fight? Do sisters get along with brothers? Can they see the sunflower seeds from their tree perch? Do they smell them? Are they gourmet? How do squirrels see under the snow? What do blue jays think of the chickadees? Do they have laws, outcasts or codes of conduct? Do they think or feel?" **[End page 29]**  "I'm depressed," Karl told me a month ago when I called him to arrange my recent visit. "And I'm mad. Since my mom died last year, my family won't talk to me. As you know, they never could stand that I was a CO. They think I blew my Andover education, and that I wasted my life working with cons, the 'useless trash,' as my dad used to say."  "I didn't know he was still alive," I said.  "He'd be about eighty-nine. Surely someone, my brother or sister, would have called me. Dad certainly had the old social Darwinism down cold. Just like Cornelius Vanderbilt. Just like a squirrel at my birdhouse that's looking out for itself. He was even worried that the cons could get to the family through me. He thought I was stupid, but I only shared private stuff with cons I really trusted."  "You miss your family?" I asked.  "Kind of. Chanel is all I've got now, and I really don't have her."  "Meaning?"  "Maybe I should ask her to marry me."  "Wow!"  "Would my eyes matter?"  "Shouldn't."  "I could never ask my family for eye operation money. Damn those two inmates."  "Intentional?"  "I was just breaking up their fight and keeping them from killing each other. Then they threw that fertilizer into my eyes. What makes men so violent, the same thing that makes some squirrels so mean?"  I didn't have any answers for him, and told him so. He talked. I listened. I hadn't seen him in several years, but I'd kept in touch by phone.  The visit I arranged was a week ago. I was sipping black Colombian with Karl and Caroline in front of the "bird window." His trailer was cramped with a low ceiling and we sat knee-to-knee in stuffed chairs. The two of them had returned from their weekly errands, and Caroline, who Karl had been raving about for years, came in to meet me. We chatted for awhile about prison life, about struggling on welfare, in my case, and disability or social security for Karl and Caroline. Karl bitched about not being able to afford an eye operation.  "Damn the state and damn the Department of Corrections. Bunch of cheap good-for-nothings. I can't see crap, but they won't let me take full retirement. And the disability pay sucks." **[End page 30]**  There was an uneasy tenderness in his voice, however, when he spoke of how happy he was having his friend, Chanel.  "God, I wish I could see her soft face," he said to me as he looked at Caroline.  "Shit," she said, "my face is vulture ugly."  I looked at her hazel eyes and high cheekbones, accented by the bright sunlight, and said, "You're crazy."  "Thanks, but your eyes are worse than Dobbs's."  After a while, a peaceful quiet overcame us. Karl and I were absorbed by the flurry of bird and squirrel activity. The ruffling of a newspaper broke the stillness on our side of the window.  "I wonder if either of us won the lottery," said Caroline, searching in the paper for the winning number.  Karl didn't respond. The blue jays were controlling the birdhouse.  "Chanel, did I ever tell you about the time I was almost killed in the prison yard?"  "No, dear...no, you sure didn't. Tell me," she said, without looking up.  "Well, another CO and I were escorting a shackled con across the recreation yard. We were taking him to a higher security cellblock. He'd been remanded there for brewing homemade hooch under his cell. The con, a tall, intelligent, and good-natured fellow who I'd befriended over the years, tripped on the leg irons. The other officer and I bent down to help him. On the opposite side of the yard, a hundred weight lifting cons watched us. They thought we were beating the guy up. They started running towards us. We were helpless. There were two other COs in the yard, but they were on their break, having smokes in the far corner. I looked up behind me to see if the tower officer was watching. He was a sharp shooter with a high-powered rifle. But the tower officer was turned away and, with his window closed, couldn't hear us. We froze. What could we do? Then the wall of cons was about thirty feet from contact, and we were ten seconds from being goners; I stood up, raised my arms in the air and yelled. I just yelled 'STOP, don't come any closer!' And I don't know why, but they all stopped. They froze right there and let us walk away with the con."  "Wow!" said Caroline who, when I looked at her, seemed only half listening and preoccupied with the paper. She looked up at me and asked, "Did you know about that?"  "Felt it, close up," I said. "I'm that intelligent guy who tripped." **[End page 31]**  "Wow!" Caroline said again. But even though she seemed surprised, her reaction was more skeptical or disinterested, or something.  "Dobbs?" she asked in a tone that led me to believe she was looking for confirmation or some acknowledgement of the truth. Then I noticed her engrossment in the paper.  "What?"  "Your number. Your lottery number. Isn't it..."  "1-3-6-11-22-33," Karl interrupted.  Caroline smiled a broad smile and showed Karl the number in the paper. They looked at each other and Karl checked the number again. Then he jumped up. She jumped up. They screamed, danced around, and flailed their arms, so much so that they scared off all the birds and squirrels. As for me? I sat there watching. It was so sudden, so unexpected, and so emotional. Was this a joke? No, it was true. When I came to realize it, I cried in joy. In retrospect, I am quite amazed at myself. Crying is normally no easy feat for a recently paroled con, but Karl had.well, he touched my life.  **[End page 32]** |