

Axes

By Mary Gillis

The store had been open for about an hour on Monday morning when Travis Dance, Lacy's first customer of the day, came in. The slowness wasn't unusual. Most days were slow in the off-seasons before the masses of summer people descended on the area, exclaiming in their too-loud voices how "quaint" and "charming" the general store was and taking endless photos of themselves with the old-fashioned candy jars.

Lacy recognized Dance, of course, virtually everyone in the town knew about the millionaire... or was he a billionaire? The amount of money he had was so vast it was a distinction without a difference. Two years ago he'd bought the old Crale acreage along with a few other smaller plots and now owned most of the western edge of the forested lakefront. He'd torn down the modest Crale house and had just finished erecting a modern monstrosity made of steel and wood and glass in its place.

"How can I help you?" Lacy said, with the fake smile she gave all the summer people. Dance wasn't a summer person, technically, since he'd moved in to his lakeside abomination a week earlier and told the mail carrier he planned to live there all year round. But he was near enough. She knew his kind.

"What a charming store," Dance said. "So wee."

"Uh-huh," she said. "Wee."

He leaned casually on the counter and gave her what she was sure he thought was a winsome grin. She could smell his cologne, some delicate fragrance that probably cost more than her car.

"Do you have any axes, my good lady?"

"We sure do," she said. She turned around and scanned the wall behind her where she kept the more dangerous or expensive items. "Hmm. I know I have some, they must be in the back. You said axes, how many do you need?"

"Oh, just the one," he laughed. "For chopping wood." He mimed chopping wood, as though she might not be familiar with the term.

"You know there are services that deliver chopped wood, I can give you a recommendation," she said, coming around the counter and walking towards the back.

"Oh, I know, but there are some things a man wants to do for himself," he said.

"Who doesn't love autonomy?" Lacy said, stepping into the storeroom. She rummaged around, found what she was looking for, and a minute later came back out holding a brand new axe with a shiny steel head.

"Sorry about the wait, I had to move some things around. I don't sell many of these this time of year," she said, carefully handing him the axe. She stepped behind the counter and started to ring him up.

"Yeah, well, I've got this big beautiful fireplace and I want to get some use out of it before the weather gets too hot," Dance said. He swung the axe around, barely missing a display of flashlights and other impulse buys near the register.

"Please don't swing that in here," she said.

"Right," he said. "Just wanted to check the balance."

She successfully fought the urge to roll her eyes and told him the price. He paid with his phone ("you take digital payments here?" he said incredulously, as though the idea was both adorable and hilarious) and shook his head when she asked if he wanted a bag. She assumed he wanted to walk the few miles back to his place with his shiny new axe in full view. In his pristine thousand-dollar flannel shirt and tastefully distressed jeans, it was the perfect prop to complete his woodsman cosplay.

He left, whistling, with a wink and a jaunty tip of an imaginary cap to her.

The store wasn't empty when Dance came in on Tuesday morning. Mavis Klepp was carefully picking out candy and other snacks for her grandchildren who'd be visiting that afternoon.

"Hello Mr. Dance, so happy to see you again today," Lacy said. His flannel shirt, which appeared to be the same one he'd worn yesterday, wasn't as pristine and his jeans seemed slightly more distressed.

"I need another axe," he said. The bags under his eyes were noticeable, despite what she was sure was a skincare routine that would put that of most models to shame.

"No problem," she said. She came out from behind the counter. "I hope there wasn't a problem with the last one, if it was defective I'll of course exchange it." She couldn't smell his expensive cologne anymore, just sweat and the faint hint of pine sap. Up close, she could see small smears of sticky sap on his sleeves.

"No, it wasn't defective. I just... I lost it," he said. "In the woods. I put it down, and just lost track of it."

"That'll happen," Lacy said. "It can be so hard to keep a hold of things in those woods." She went to the storeroom and immediately came out with another shiny new axe. She handed it to him.

"How are you liking the lake, Mr. Dance?" Mavis asked him from the snack aisle where she was filling her basket with bags of potato chips.

Dance jumped, and dropped the axe. It hit the floor with a clatter, but Lacy was relieved to see it didn't damage the hardwood.

"I didn't see you there," Dance said. He picked up the axe, and set it down carefully on the counter. "It's... um... an adjustment."

"I'll bet. Where were you living before? Silicon Valley? That's where all you billionaires are from, right?" Mavis said.

"What?"

"Where are you from?" she asked again.

"I'm sorry, I really have to go," he said, handing Lacy his phone to pay. When she handed it back, he picked up the axe and left, this time without looking back.

On Wednesday morning Mavis Klepp was back in the snack aisle, this time joined by her neighbour Hec Summers. When Dance came in, both Mavis and Hec were studiously examining different cracker packages.

Dance was wearing the same outfit as his last two visits. Sweat stains were visible under the arms of his flannel shirt and his work boots and the bottom cuffs of his jeans were crusted

with mud. The smell of sap was stronger, and there were pine needles and dirt stuck to the large sticky sap patches spreading up both sleeves.

"I need another axe," he said. Lacy bent down and pulled an axe out from under the counter.

"I figured I'd keep one out here, since there's been such demand for them lately," she said. When Dance handed her his phone, she could see angry blisters and chapped calluses on the palms of his formerly soft hands. After he took the phone back, he just stood there, staring at the axe.

"Have you lived here long?" he finally asked.

"Born and raised. And my family's been here forever. I did leave for a spell, but I had to come back to take care of my father and the store. You know. The horrors of dementia."

Dance looked up sharply at the word 'horrors'. He had two days of grizzled beard growth and looked ten years older than he had on Monday. "Um, in the woods, have you ever heard of... inside the woods, in the trees...?"

He trailed off and just looked at her, imploring her to understand what he was trying to say.

She met his gaze, held it, and smiled.

"I haven't heard of anything a good axe in the right hands won't take care of," she said. He nodded, dazed, and left with his new axe.

Hec and Mavis came up to the counter.

"Lacy-" Hec started. She put her hand up.

"This is none of your concern," Lacy said. "Either of you. I suggest you do your shopping in the evenings for the rest of the week."

The store was empty on Thursday morning when Dance came in. His flannel was covered in bits of leaves and small twigs, his jeans filthy with muck. His patchy beard was pure white and the scent of pine sap coming off of him was overwhelming.

She looked at his hands, where the calloused pads of his fingers and palms were oozing a small amount of blood. "Would you like some work gloves to go with your new axe?" Lacy said, setting the axe on the counter. "They're on special, two for one. Two pairs, that is, not two gloves," she said, chuckling. "Some things you always have to buy together."

He handed her a credit card. She wiped off the blood with a tissue, ran it, and handed it back.

"Lost your phone?" she said. "Those damned woods."

He looked like he wanted to say something back, then just shook his head and picked up the axe and gloves.

On Friday morning Dance came in and shambled to the counter. His gloved hands dripped red. He clumsily tried to reach into his pocket but Lacy shook her head. She placed an axe on the counter. "This one's on the house," she said. She was careful to breathe through her mouth, the miasma of pine was so thick around him now she knew she'd start retching otherwise.

Dance licked his dry lips with a tongue that seemed even drier and tried to speak. She looked at him sympathetically.

"It's hard, I know, that loss of control. I've seen it happen. My father was already pretty sick by the time I moved back. So sick he had no business making decisions like selling my mother's land, and for so little. So little anyone who bought it would've known they weren't dealing with a seller in their right mind. But the sale was long done by the time I realized what had happened. Our house was demolished, and there was no point contesting it anyway, it's not like any lawyer I could afford could do anything. And now here we are. But here I am going on and on, keeping you when you've so much work ahead of you this weekend."

Dance didn't say anything. A fly landed on one of the patches of sap on his shirt and struggled there for a few seconds, then stilled.

"But you should know, this axe, it's my last one in stock," she said. "Like I said, we don't get much call for them this late in the season."

Dance started to smile, hope blossoming in his watery and bloodshot eyes.

"So when you come in on Monday, I'll have to start selling you knives."