SNAPSHOTS

A Quartet of Short Stories

by

Jim Freund

PERSEVERANCE

It all started two years ago, at the annual photo exhibit sponsored by our local association of dentists. I'm an unmarried orthodontist in my late 30's, living and practicing in a mid-sized town in New Jersey. I had recently developed an interest in photography – after years of limiting my involvement to taking x-rays of crooked teeth -- and decided to submit an entry.

I rummaged through my photos and selected the one I liked best. I'd shot it on a rocky section of the Massachusetts coastline. Hundreds of jagged boulders, all shapes and sizes, were strewn upon each other, filling the entire frame. But what made the picture special was a little white flower I had spotted, sprouting upward in a small crack between several huge rocks. How it was able to take root and survive in that forbidding terrain I couldn't imagine, but I marveled at the sight.

The entry form I had to complete for the dental association required a title for the picture submitted. I thought about this for a while and, honing in on what impressed me about the flower in the image, named it "Persistence." I placed the enlargement in a simple black frame, attached a stick-on label containing my name and the title, and delivered it to the association's office.

The photo exhibit – which raised funds to promote oral hygiene in sub-Saharan Africa – was held at a local art gallery. There were cocktails and hors-d'oeuvres in abundance. Most of those attending were dentists, their spouses, family and friends. I was alone – my girlfriend that year being out-of-town for a few days.

On the evening of the exhibit, I positioned myself, drink in hand, near where my picture was hanging, to check out the reactions of viewers. For the first half-hour, from what I was able to discern, the reviews ranged from non-committal to generally favorable.

At that point, two women approached my picture. One of them – middle-aged and attractive in a matronly way (more likely a dentist's wife than a dentist) – spent a little longer than usual perusing it closely. She then turned to her companion and said, "I like it – I like this one a lot. But I *hate* the fact that the photographer told me what to think about it."

"How so?" asked her companion.

"The title, of course," she replied. "Here's this little white flower, struggling to get some breathing room among the big boulders – *I* can see that! – and he has to *tell* me it signifies 'persistence.' It's insulting."

That (pardon the expression) touched a nerve, so I ambled over to the picture and said to the opinionated woman, "Excuse me, I'm the guy who took this picture – and I couldn't help overhearing your comment. Can you – "

"You should be ashamed of yourself," she interrupted me. "What do you take your viewers for – a bunch of dummies?"

"I understand your point," I replied, "and I certainly didn't intend to offend anyone. But I was concerned that people who gave the picture a quick glance on their tour of the gallery might think it was just about some big rocks – not even noticing the little flower sticking through. So I figured the title might suggest there was something more in the image, making them take a closer look – at which point they would come upon the flower."

She brushed aside my explanation with an impatient shrug. "You don't see it, do you? Art – and photography like this certainly qualifies as a form of art – isn't about 'getting it.' Viewers bring their own feelings and intellect to an image like this. It's much more satisfying when there's a little mystery involved, so people can react in different ways. You have talent – but if you want your pictures to be appreciated, you have to forget you're a dentist and loosen up artistically."

I would have liked to continue the conversation, but her companion seemed anxious to move on, so we parted. But her reaction and her "loosen up" admonition stuck in my mind through the months ahead.

I realized she had hit upon something basic in my approach – and not just in terms of providing a title. All my photos were very precise – the horizon exactly horizontal, everything in focus, no ambiguities creeping into the frame. They were the kind of pictures an orthodontist might be expected to take. I had to loosen up – break some new ground.

And so, at the next dental association exhibit – which took place a year ago – I submitted a very different picture. The subject matter was the front stoop of a New York brownstone. But I took the photo at a rather severe angle, and half the steps were distinctly out of focus. In addition, I had strewn a number of objects around the steps: a teddy bear, a dog-eared copy of *Das Kapital*, a pair of snowshoes, an early model Walkman cassette player, and an abacus.

You may wonder what I was trying to say in this photo. The truth was, I had nothing specific in mind. In fact, I was tempted to title it "Melange Without Meaning" – that is, until I realized that the opinionated woman would be equally put off at being told there was *no* deep message

intended (as she had been by being told how to interpret my rocks and flower). So I opted for a more neutral title – "Cityscape #2."

The exhibit was held in the same gallery as before. I was alone again – no girlfriend last year. My photo was hung near a large, floor-to-ceiling beam. Before the viewing began that evening, I placed a tiny wireless microphone behind the beam. This transmitted to the almost invisible earpiece I wore – standing unobtrusively 30 feet away – so I could hear the comments people were making about Cityscape #2. And the reactions were quite varied.

– "I'd hate to have that guy do my root canal. . . ."

– "I think he wants us to feel [followed by a credible assertion], but I see it as [followed by an incredible one]."

– I think he wants us to feel [followed by an incredible assertion], but I see it as [followed by a credible one]."

– "I'm getting dizzy looking at this thing."

– "Doesn't he know about that gizmo in Photoshop to straighten tilts like this?"

After a half hour, the opinionated lady from the prior year showed up at the picture with the same companion. She looked first at the label with my name and the title. Then she carefully appraised my photo. I was beginning to feel some tension.

A minute later, she exclaimed loudly to her companion, "I love it! It's so imaginative, so creative, so free-form, so ambiguous."

As she began to walk away, passing by the big beam, the microphone caught her whispering to her companion, “Actually, I hate it! But it’s by that same photographer from last year – remember the one I made a little fuss over, taking him to task for making me think a certain way about his picture, advising him to loosen up. Well, he certainly followed my advice this year; and just in case he’s eavesdropping – as he did back then – I don’t want him to think I’m inconsistent.”

That’s all I needed to hear. I stepped out of the shadows and confronted her before she could leave the vicinity. “How’d you like it?” I asked.

“It’s great,” she replied.

I smiled knowingly and said, “That’s not what you whispered to your friend.”

She lifted her arms in mock surrender. “Oops, caught in the act.”

“But why –” I asked her, “why didn’t you like it? I followed your instructions – loosened up, opened it to various interpretations and didn’t tell you what to think. I’ll make a confession – I was going to call it ‘Melange Without Meaning,’ but I resisted the temptation, just to satisfy you.”

The opinionated woman smiled. “I’m glad you didn’t use that title – I would have had an even more negative reaction. In fact, your title is the best thing about it.”

I persisted. “So tell me – what’s wrong with the photo.”

Her smile faded. "I'll tell you what's wrong. There's no form to the composition, the acute angle disturbs me, a lot of it is out of focus – and what's the story with those crazy unrelated objects on the stairs?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "I thought you were an advocate of free-form pictures, so people could draw their own conclusions about them."

"Not at all," she says. "It should be formful – and *then* let us draw our own conclusions. Here, everything's all over the place – no conclusions are possible."

Well, I could see what she was talking about. Maybe I did go too far last year. I decided that what I needed to do was submit a more traditional photo, but with a properly ambiguous title.

And that's what I've done for this year's exhibit. My picture has the feel of a landscape. Its focal point is the entrance to a winery – you can tell that because a sign contains the name of the winery and underneath it the word "Vintners." On the road outside the entrance there's a man with a reddish nose who looks a little worse for wear. There's also a truck which has on its side a large ad for the History Channel with a depiction of George Washington and the cherry tree. You can't tell whether the man or the truck are entering the winery, or departing it, or just happen to be on the main road. Everything's on one level – there are no angles – and it's all in focus. I've titled it, "Coming and Going."

Now I'm at the exhibit, positioned strategically to observe the reactions. (My girlfriend of two years ago and I are back together, but not tonight – she has a migraine and passed up the exhibit.) I don't have to wait long. Early in the evening, the opinionated woman and her companion show up.

She checks the label, then takes a long look at the photo. After a minute, the companion asks her, “Well, what you do you think?”

The opinionated woman reflects momentarily and then says, “I like it, but it’s missing something.”

The companion persists, “What does it say to you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that’s what is missing.”

“Use your imagination.”

“That’s the trouble,” replies the opinionated woman, “I don’t have any imagination.”

The companion frowns and asks, “Then why, two years ago, didn’t you want to be told what to think about the picture?”

“Because with that one, I could see clearly what he meant to portray – but I would have preferred to come to the conclusion myself without any help from him.”

“And now?”

“Now I *don’t* know what the hell he means – and frankly, I’d like a little help.”

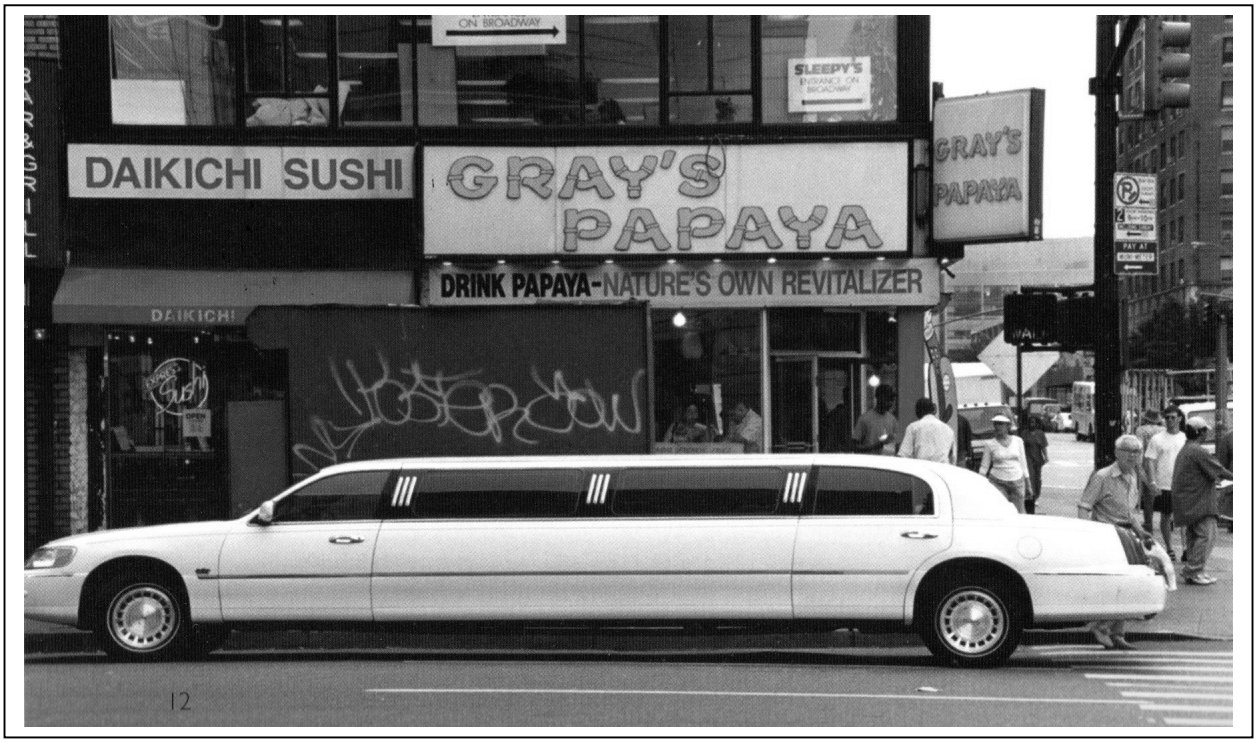
That’s it for me. I spring out from the shadows, confront the opinionated woman, and say, “The real title I wanted to use was ‘In Vino Veritas.’ ”

She thinks for a moment, and then her face lights up. "That's it!" she exclaims. "That's exactly what it is. I love it. You're my hero."

I've brought along a stick-on label containing the revised title, which I now proceed to place over the old one.

"Let me buy you a free drink," I offer, heading in the direction of the bar.

But I don't get too far away when I hear another female voice say to her boyfriend, "I like this winery scene – and the title tells me much. But I do wish, in keeping with the theme, he'd done the whole thing on a dizzying diagonal . . . ."


ON BROADWAY
SLEEPY'S
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DAIKICHI SUSHI
GRAY'S PAPAYA
GRAY'S PAPAYA
DRINK PAPAYA-NATURE'S OWN REVITALIZER
DAIKICHI
12

GOTCHA!

It's a scene much like the opening shot in Woody Allen's *Broadway Danny Rose*. Remember Woody's film? – half a dozen comedians seated around a table at the Carnegie Deli in New York City, reminiscing about oddball situations. Today, it's four photographers, in a booth at a Manhattan coffee shop, discussing their craft over dessert while sprinkling in a few personal anecdotes.

The subject matter moves from f-stops to digital-vs.-print, from wide angle to macro, and then Arnold steers the conversation onto a new track.

"When I'm shooting in New York, my favorite pictures to take are juxtapositions. I try to squeeze two contradictory, or at least contrasting, images into a single frame. It makes for great irony."

"I know what you mean," says Blair. "I once got a great shot of a guy collecting garbage in the foreground, with the façade of Tiffany's as a backdrop."

"That's just what I have in mind," Arnold replies. "A shot like that symbolizes the highs and lows you see all around town."

Carter chimes in. "I'm with you both. One of my favorites was the snap I got of chalked stick-figures on the pavement in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art."

"That reminds me," says Dodge, "of the day I walked by Gray's Papaya stand, and there was this huge white stretch limo parked in front. It's moments like that when it really pays to have a camera with you."

Arnold regains the floor. "Sometimes, like with the stretch limo, the shot just jumps out at you – all you have to do is point the camera. But more often, you need to do something to set it up."

"You mean change the angle or the perspective?" asks Dodge.

"I'm talking about more than that," says Arnold. You're walking around, you see something that's symbolic, and you think – 'Oh, boy, would I like to find something else here that's incongruous, and then squeeze it into the frame to make a striking contrast.' So you look around, but if nothing pops up right away, you wait there a while and hope for the best."

"Yeah, a little patience can really pay off – not that I always have it," says Carter. "At least not like those wildlife photographers, who sit all night in the woods, waiting for a spotted grey wolf to show up. . . ."

Blair nods. "The thing is, you don't always know exactly what you want to enter into the frame to furnish the contrast – you just hope that when it does, you'll make the connection and grab a good image."

"But sometimes," says Arnold, "you do know exactly what you want" – and here he pauses for dramatic impact before finishing the sentence – "and that reminds me of my strangest day on the trail of a juxtaposition."

"Uh, oh," says Carter, "here comes another of Arnold's wild and woolly tales. . . ."

"Hey, fellows," says Arnold, surveying his buddies, "I guarantee you'll like this one. Just give me the floor for a few minutes."

The other three men nod dutifully, take bites of pie and swigs of coffee, and settle back to hear Arnold's adventure.

"Okay, here goes. A few years ago, I found myself in midtown, camera in hand, approaching a theatre marquee where *Beauty and the Beast* was playing. Click! The light bulb went on in my brain. Wait right here, I thought, until a really mismatched couple stroll by, and snap them just passing below the marquee."

Dodge interrupts. "Wait a second. When you use the word 'mismatched,' do you mean with each other – like in the title? Or are you talking about mismatched with the title itself – in which case, the couple would have to be either two beauties or two beasts?"

"Hmm, I never thought of it that way," answers Arnold. "I guess I was looking for a direct match for the title, not a mismatch – in which case, the juxtaposition wouldn't be ironic but complementary . . . ."

"Well," says Blair, with just a whiff of sarcasm, "I'm glad we got that straightened out. . . ."

Arnold, imperturbable, resumes his narrative. "Anyway, after about thirty minutes of waiting time, when I was just about to give up, a couple suddenly hove into view that fit my specs precisely. The woman was tall, blonde and blowsy-looking. The guy was short, dark and really ugly. I hoisted the camera – it was all set for lighting and dimension – and click! I got the perfect shot."

Arnold pauses to take a spoonful of his rice pudding.

Carter says, "That's it – that's the whole story?"

Arnold swallows hastily and replies, "No, no, of course not. That's just chapter one."

"I should hope so," says Dodge.

"So, after getting my great image, I felt entitled to a reward – and I stopped by a nearby tavern, sat down at the bar, and ordered a martini."

"One of those would be nice now." says Dodge.

"That's not exactly a specialty of this diner," Blair responds.

"Anyway, I'm enjoying my solitary cocktail, when a short little guy hoists himself up on the next barstool. I turn sideways to look at him, and whaddya know – it's the ugly bozo I just shot walking under the marquee."

"Okay," says Carter, "now the story is getting better."

"It's about time," says Blair.

"Ugly orders a beer and then turns in my direction. 'I've gotta ask you a question,' he says. 'You're a photographer – so am I. I saw you take a picture of Maisie and me earlier today.' "

"Gotcha!" says Carter.

"I don't reply, so Ugly goes on. 'At first, it puzzled me why you were taking the shot. So, after I dropped Maisie off at her manicure shop, I walked back to where you snapped the photo. I looked up and saw the marquee. And then it hit me.' "

"This lensman was no dope," says Dodge.

"The little man took a sip of his beer and continued. 'I'm a small ugly guy, Maisie's big and gorgeous, the marquee reads *Beauty and the Beast* – you were juxtaposing, weren't you?' "

"Caught in the act," says Carter.

"Well, he had me. What could I do? I put on my most apologetic face and confessed to what I'd been up to."

"That was the right thing to do," agrees Dodge. "When they catch you, 'fess up."

"I disagree," says Blair. "I would have told him I was shooting the marquee as part of a series on theatre marquees, and he and his Maisie just happened to pop into the shot."

"Okay, guys," says Carter, "cool it and let's hear the rest of Arnold's adventure – assuming there's more."

"There is," says Arnold, warming to his tale. "Ugly heard me out, took another sip of his beer, and then said to me, 'Well, I could get mad and belt you around. I might even sue you, if you try to print the shot. But that's not my nature – I'd much rather get even. You took an embarrassing picture of me – I want to take one of you. That's fair, isn't it?' "

"Sounds fair to me – and better than getting belted," says Dodge.

"That's what I thought, too – assuming it didn't get out of hand. Ugly assured me he wouldn't publish it anywhere – 'It's not for publication,' he said, 'just for satisfaction.' So I agreed to let him do it."

"You'll be sorry . . ." says Blair.

"Now Ugly downs the rest of his beer, gets off the stool, and says, 'Meet me tomorrow afternoon at exactly 4:55 on the northwest corner of 37th and Broadway – and bring your camera along.' "

"This guy sounds like he means business," says Dodge.

"Yeah," Carter says, "he's already figured out what he's gonna do to you."

"So, the next day at 4:55, I show up on the northwest corner of 37th and Broadway with my camera. Ugly is already there, with a digital Nikon around his neck. He's all business – no small talk. Ugly positions me and then tells me, to put the camera up to my eye – as if I'm taking a picture – and to point it at the street corner. Ugly then moves to a spot about ten feet away, facing me and the corner."

"The corner, the corner," says Blair – "I get it. Something you can't see now is about to materialize, coming from the far side of the corner. . . ."

"You got it. After less than a minute, a guy comes into view from around the corner. He's middle-aged, dressed in tatters, disheveled, with long hair and a scraggly beard. He's hobbling on a crutch because he only has one leg – the other is just a stump. The guy is holding a tin cup, and on his chest, hanging from a cord around his neck, is a hand-lettered sign that says, 'Please help a Vet – a Vietnam War amputee.' "

"A sad sight," says Carter.

"The Vet, who hasn't seen me or Ugly yet, spies an older man coming his way – so he stops on the corner and holds out the cup. I'm pointing my camera at the scene. The older man goes right up to the Vet and puts a dollar bill into his cup. As he does, I hear a click from Ugly's camera."

"Wait, lemme visualize this," says Dodge. "The older man is putting money in the Vet's cup, and you're pretending to photograph the scene. . . ."

"Exactly. A few seconds later, as the older man passes by Ugly, I see Ugly hand him a ten dollar bill. Ugly then comes over and, holding out his camera's digital screen, shows me the shot he got."

"I have to admit it's a beaut – one person (the older man) is supporting the amputee Vet with badly needed funds, while the other person (me) is exploiting the amputee Vet by photographing him begging for money. 'And there,' says Ugly to me with a flourish, *'there's* your juxtaposition!' "

"Oh, yes," says Carter, "that's a shot I wish I'd taken."

"Good story," says Dodge.

The waiter approaches the table. "Any of you guys want anything else?"

Blair replies for the group. "No, we've just finished listening to one of Arnold's tales. You can bring the check."

"But wait," says Arnold, "that's not the end of the story. All of a sudden, the Vet turns toward Ugly and me and calls out, 'Hey, you guys, come on over here. I see you each have a camera – what's going on?' "

"Uh, oh, that's not a good development," says Carter.

"Ugly and I confer quickly. We decide not to lie, but instead tell the Vet the whole story – which we proceed to do. And then each of us drops a five dollar bill into his cup."

"An inexpensive modeling fee," says Blair.

"The Vet listens to our explanation, looks scornfully at our money offering, and says, 'Do you think a couple of bucks pays for my mortification?' His voice is cracked, the eyes a little wild, and I'm beginning to worry he may get violent – go after us with the crutch."

"Not only the crutch," says Dodge. "He may have a spare grenade or bayonet tucked in his rags."

"Yeah, anything was possible. But then the Vet says, 'You're lucky I'm not vengeful. I just want some satisfaction. You guys are fixated on getting a really ironic photo – forget it. In fact, I want you to put your cameras down on the pavement for a minute, while I tell you what I have in mind.' "

"Ugly and I look at each other, decide that the Vet wants us to give our full attention to the stern lecture he intends to deliver, and place our cameras down on the pavement."

"Don't tell me the Vet is going to smash your cameras to smithereens with his crutch," says Blair.

"I guess that thought did cross my mind – especially when the Vet says, 'Now, what's the worst thing that can happen to you photographic guys?' "

"There go your cameras," says Dodge.

"We don't reply, so the Vet gives us a crooked smile and supplies his own answer. 'I'll tell you what the worst thing is – it's missing out on the best picture of the year. . . . And fellows –' he says, as he undoes the folds of his short pants leg, pops out his hidden limb, slides the crutch under his arm, empties the cup into a coat pocket, rips the sign from around his neck, and strides off around the corner – 'you just did!' "

JUST TINKERING

"And now," said one of the photo judges, "let's uncover the three photographs that you in the audience, after viewing fifty entries, have selected as the finalists for our competition."

There was a stirring in the mid-size auditorium as a pretty young woman emerged from the wings and strode across the stage. She removed the drape cloths covering the easels that faced the audience, revealing three large framed photographs.

"Hey!" exclaimed Steven Sanders in the tenth row to no one in particular. "I'm a finalist!"

The same judge – the one seated in the middle of the three-judge panel – continued. "I'll now ask the photographers who took these pictures – Beth Randolph, Steven Sanders, and Victor Thorne – to please come up on stage and stand by your photo. We want to ask you a few questions before we make our final decision on awarding the first place prize of $5,000."

Steven rose from his seat with a grin on his face, and amid a smattering of applause, headed toward the stage. As he walked, his mind returned to that Sunday in his apartment six months ago, when it all started . . . .

Earlier that weekend, Steven had taken a series of photographs in a lovely rural area less than an hour from town. The vista was of a picturesque undulating field framed by shapely trees, with some verdant

hills as a backdrop. Steven liked this placid scene so much that he decided to enlarge, print, frame, and hang on his wall the best of the pictures.

He studied the choices carefully. One particular shot was clearly the finest in terms of overall composition. Unfortunately, however, the sun had retreated at that point, turning the sky to an uninteresting gray tone. In a good photo taken earlier, the sky was a crisp blue, interspersed with puffy white clouds.

There was also one shot in which a cow and its new-born calf had strolled into the foreground of the picture – *quite a nice touch*, he thought. But otherwise that photo wasn't the equal of the first two.

Then the idea hit him. The shots had all been taken at roughly the same time from a common vantage point. He realized that, by using the Photoshop program on his computer, he could start with that fine first composition, then import the blue sky from the good second shot, and finally bring the animals over from the third. *The result would be*, he thought, *a terrific composite picture*.

And so Steven did just that and was pleased with how well it worked out. *It's very satisfying*, he reflected, approaching the stage, *to know that all those people in the audience who voted for my picture agree with me on its merit.*

Steven's mind then went back to another day two months ago, when he received an entry form for the annual photo contest sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce. He had submitted several entries in past years, but none had ever achieved finalist status. For this year's contest, Steven had decided to submit the composite picture of the undulating field, which he titled "Country Vista."

In completing the entry form, Steven noted the following printed language:

"In making your entry, you are deemed to represent that
-- You took the photograph.
-- It was taken within the last year.
-- The scene depicted is within 100 miles of town.
-- You didn't use a computer to enhance the photo,
other than to crop or straighten it, brighten
or illuminate shaded areas, etc."

Steven had been uncertain how to handle this. He realized that what he'd done was more than just cropping and brightening the photo. But was it enough to disqualify "Country Vista"?

Back then, Steven's rationalizing mind immediately went to work on the problem. He decided that what really worried the contest sponsor was a guy who changed the whole shot – imported some stock footage, or, like the Russians used to do, eliminated a later disgraced comrade from the group surrounding Stalin. *But,* he persuaded himself, *I actually photographed everything in my picture, at the same place and on the same day. That blue sky existed, the calf and cow were there – they just weren't in the same shot. And after all, they're only fringe elements – it's the overall composition that counts.*

The next day, Steven had submitted "Country Vista" into the Chamber of Commerce contest without calling attention to its composite make-up.

As Steven climbed the few stairs to the stage, he glanced over at the three judges seated at a long table placed on a diagonal, so they could simultaneously face the contestants and the audience. He recognized them

from prior competitions. The one in the center, a middle-aged man named Browning who owned a local art gallery, always took the lead. The one on Browning's left, a woman named Alcott, had been the photo editor of the town's glossy magazine for a number of years. The man to Browning's right, named Carson, was a local professional photographer.

Once on the stage, Steven walked over to his picture, which was placed on the center easel of the three and marked with a large "#2." On the way, he was able to get a quick look at the other two finalist photos. He recognized them from the viewing portion of the evening, which had taken place in the main hall.

Steven considered the one marked "#1" – a rooftop garden framed by some buildings reflecting the setting sun – to be very good, although not quite up to the level of his "Country Vista." But he deemed the one marked "#3," a rather complicated and fussy shot of a maze-like structure, as not being a serious contender for the award.

When the three contestants were in place, the judge named Browning introduced them to the audience and then said: "We're going to interview each of the finalists briefly, ask them a few questions about themselves and their photos, and then break for a minute or two to confer – we won't need that much time, since we've already had a chance to view these photos at length – before announcing the winner."

The judges started the process with the woman named Randolph and her rooftop shot marked "#1." She identified herself as an obstetrician who was an avid amateur photographer in her spare time. When the questioning turned to her photo, she interrupted the judges to make a personal statement.

"Look, I was chatting with someone earlier this evening, who happened to mention the thing in the entry form that says you haven't fooled around with the image. I'm embarrassed to admit that I didn't focus on that requirement at the time I submitted my entry. But now that I'm aware of what's called for, I have to admit that I did do something to my picture. There was a white paper napkin on the floor of the roof garden that detracted from the overall scene, which I erased in Photoshop. If the judges consider that inappropriate, I'll understand you eliminating my photo from your consideration."

The audience was hushed as Randolph completed her statement. The woman judge named Alcott leaned over and whispered something to judge Browning. The latter then looked over to judge Carson, who gave him a hand gesture that implied "it's up to you." Judge Browning cleared his throat before speaking.

"Well, Ms. Randolph, we certainly appreciate your honesty, but I'm afraid we're going to have to disqualify your photograph. Admittedly, what you did wasn't so terrible – and most of us have all done something similar from time to time ourselves – but if we allow this to pass muster, where do we draw the line?"

The judges then turned to question Steven. Judge Alcott asked some questions about Steven's personal life, finding out he was 32, unmarried, a college graduate working as a luxury car salesman. The third judge named Carson remained silent.

When the subject turned to "Country Vista," judge Browning picked up the questioning – asking where it had been taken, the season, the time of day – and then concluded by saying, "And now that Ms. Randolph has raised the issue, I take it that nothing you've done with this photo violates the representations made in the entry form you signed."

Here it is, thought Steven, *the crucial moment. It's one thing to misrepresent by silence; it's another to lie in response to a direct question. But now that #1 has been eliminated, my picture is a sure winner – and frankly I'm reluctant to blow the $5,000 by telling the truth . . . .*

In his line of work, Steven had learned how to duck having to respond to an uncomfortable query with a straight yes-or-no answer – to duck by making a sidestep, in hopes that the problem would just go away. He now decided to take that tack.

"In that regard, sir, I just want the judges to know that as far as I'm concerned, I'd like Ms. Randolph's fine picture to stay in the competition, notwithstanding the napkin removal. I think you should give her a waiver."

There was a round of applause from those in the audience who agreed with that sentiment, and Ms. Randolph gave Steven a warm smile. Without hesitation, however, judge Browning replied, "Well, Mr. Sanders, you're a good sport, but our decision to eliminate #1 from the competition is final."

Steven had fully expected that to be the judges' response – *otherwise I wouldn't have suggested it!* But sure enough, Steven's sidestep worked, and the judges then turned to photo #3 without pressing Steven for an answer to the question judge Browning had posed.

In response to questions, Mr. Thorne identified himself as an expert in fine photographic printing, who owned a local studio and maintained a website. As soon as the questioning turned to his maze-like photo, Thorne interrupted the judges to make his own statement.

"I didn't touch the original image. But having had the opportunity earlier this evening to examine 'Country Vista' closely, and as an expert in such matters, I'm sorry to have to inform you that photo #2 has been tinkered with. It's quite obvious to me that the blue sky and the animals in the foreground come from other images."

With the auditorium now abuzz, judge Browning turned to Steven and asked him: "How about that, Mr. Sanders?"

Steven was shaken by Thorne's accurate revelation. *Can I deny it?* he pondered briefly. *Maybe so, but the truth will ultimately come out – I can't produce an original image. Let's face it, the jig is up.*

Steven turned toward the judges and spoke slowly. "What Mr. Thorne says is true. I didn't think what I did was disqualifying, because I took all three shots in the same place at roughly the same time, and the language in the entry form – especially the use of the word 'etc.' – was ambiguous. If you consider what I did a violation of the representation, I can show you the first composition unretouched, and you can assess it on that basis . . . ."

But judge Browning was having none of that. "No, sir, Mr. Sanders, your picture is definitely disqualified. The people out there in the audience who voted you into the final three relied on the doctored photograph – there can't be any substitution here. And it's important that we're consistent with our decision on Ms. Randolph's entry."

Judge Alcott then chimed in. "And by the way, Mr. Sanders, visualizing your photo without the blue sky and the animals, I doubt very much it would have made it into the top three."

After concurring briefly with his colleagues, judge Browning then said, "And so, our winner is #3. Congratulations, Mr. Thorne, on your fine photo. And thanks to all of you out there for your participation We hope to see you next year."

The rest of the evening was no fun for Steven. He found himself shunned by the other attendees, even some whom he'd gotten to know over the years. After 20 minutes, he placed "Country Vista" in a cardboard box and left for home.

Once there, and still disturbed by the evening's events, Steven had trouble going to sleep. He got up from the bed and went to the computer, his mind awake and active. *Who is this guy Thorne, who so brutally wrecked my chances? I'd like to know more about him.*

Steven recalled Thorne mentioning to the judges that he had a website. Steven quickly found it and began poking around.

One of the website items was a listing of the well-known photographers for whom Thorne had furnished printing services. Looking down the list, Steven saw a name that looked familiar – Larry Carson. After a moment, Steven realized that Carson had been the third judge in the Chamber of Commerce competition – the one who never opened his mouth.

Now suspicious about a possible tie between Thorne and Carson, Steven then went to Carson's own website. It contained pictures of a number of Carson's photos that were hanging in museums or had appeared in his published books. Steven also came upon a shot of Carson himself, posing behind apparently scrutinizing a mélange of thumbnail prints of his unpublished photos.

Something in the mélange caught Steven's eye, but he couldn't be positive. So he made a print of the scene and then examined the results through a magnifying glass. Sure enough, one of the thumbnail shots in front of Carson was a maze-like structure – in fact, it was the precise photo that had just won the evening's competition.

My God! Steven exclaimed to himself. *This is much worse than what I did. Why, it's not even Thorne's own picture – plus which, the guy who actually took the photo was one of the judges. I bet they're probably splitting the $5,000 prize . . . .*

Steven silently debated the question of what to do with his new knowledge. *I could pass this on to the other two judges, but I have no credibility with them. They would probably just consider it a case of sour grapes.*

Besides, he reflected*, even if I revealed all and they disqualified Thorne, I wouldn't be declared the winner – they'd just pass up making any award this year.*

On the other hand, Steven thought, *I hate the idea of having caught these cheaters in the act and then doing nothing about it – that just goes against my grain.*

In his line of business, Steven knew all about the uses of leverage. After weighing the various possibilities, Steven decided how to put this knowledge to work.

He sent an email that night to Thorne, with a copy to Carson. It read as follows:

"Congratulations on winning the award. And kudos on your detective work in exposing how my photo violated one of the representations in the entry form.

“There was another representation in there, however, that interested me more. It’s the one that said: 'You took the photograph.’ I guess I missed the rest of the sentence, which must have read ‘except that it's all right for you to borrow a picture for the occasion from one of your customers, who also happens to be one of the judges of the competition.'

Very truly yours,
Steven (No Squealer) Sanders

P.S. Oh by the way, Mr. Carson, I'm attaching a copy of the unretouched photo I’ll be submitting in next year's contest, which I trust will receive appropriate consideration . . . ."

A PHOTOGRAPHIC EYE

I raise the digital camera to my eye. The image in the viewfinder is just what I've been hoping for all morning – an old woman in tattered cloth coat and galoshes, a brown shawl pulled tight over her head, pushing a grocery cart with difficulty through the slushy remains of the snow that pelted Manhattan last night and is still coming down.

I zoom the lens in close on her – visualizing how the poignant image will appear in print over my photo credit – and snap my first picture. The image is displayed across the small screen on the back of the camera. The concept is good, but I realize I need a better shot of the old lady fighting her way through the slush.

While changing the angle slightly for the next photo, I notice that she has turned toward me, a frown on her face. I immediately lower the camera to my chest in a motion I've perfected – intended to give the impression that I'm just making the necessary preparations but haven't taken a picture yet. I walk over to where the old woman is struggling with the cart.

"Hello, ma'am. My name is Ben Lawson, and I'm a professional photographer. Would you mind if I took a few pictures of you for a magazine layout I'm doing?"

For a few moments, the old woman continues her slow progress through the snow without responding to my question. Then she stops and straightens her body up to its full five foot-two inch height.

"I tell you what, mister photographer," she says. "I live over there across the street, a few doors down. As you can see, I'm having trouble getting there in this rotten slush. Help me push the cart home, and then we'll talk about the pictures."

I'm caught unaware by the old woman's proposal, but I realize it would be churlish to refuse assistance under the circumstances. "By all means," I say, letting the camera dangle around my neck and taking hold of the cart handle. As I begin to push, the old woman keeps one hand on the cart – more for balance, I think, than out of fear I might run off with her groceries.

After a few minutes, we reach the front door of a venerable tenement building she identifies as hers. The tiny elevator takes us to the third floor, where we exit to a narrow hall. A bright uncovered bulb exposes the peeling paint on the walls. The old woman's apartment is half-way down the hall.

Inside, the single room is dim, and the two lamps she turns on do little to brighten it. The air smells of disinfectant. The room contains a single bed, a threadbare couch with white crocheted doilies on its arms, and a small TV set topped by a rabbit-ears antenna. Next to the bed is a portable potty for night-time calls of nature.

I wheel the cart to the tiny kitchen area. The old woman motions me to sit on the couch. Looking up from there, I'm surprised to see a number of professional-looking black and white photos of city scenes on the walls around the room.

The old woman takes a chair and goes through a slow process of removing her coat, shawl and galoshes. When she finally speaks, her voice is weak but audible.

"Welcome to my little apartment, Mr. Lawson, and thank you for helping with the groceries. My name is Alice Brody. I used to be an elementary school teacher, but that was a long time ago."

I nod my head and murmur something but don't interrupt.

"Here's what I think, Mr. Lawson. I know why you want to photograph me pushing the grocery cart in the snow. I have a photographic eye, you know. Look at these fine pictures on my walls. For years they hung in my classroom. I used to say to the children, 'A good picture tells the truth better than a thousand words'." She closes her eyes, as if recalling school days of yore.

"So, Mr. Lawson, down there in the snow, you wanted to show a weak, pathetic figure being overcome by the elements. You're trying to play on the sympathy of the people who read the magazine. I'm right, aren't I?"

She is right, of course, and I know better than to argue the point. "Well I wouldn't put it in those exact words, but yes, I guess that was sort of my intention."

Alice Brody waggles a finger at me. "You should be ashamed of yourself." She pauses to take a breath. "But at least you're honest about it." Her gaze shifts down to her swollen feet. "Yes, I'm an old woman, and I have trouble getting around." She looks up. "But wouldn't it be nicer to take my picture doing something I can still do well, instead of mushing out there in the snow?"

Treating her question as rhetorical, she doesn't wait for a reply before continuing. "For instance, how about something like cooking. I

happen to still be a very good cook, when I put my mind to it. And my nephew is coming over for dinner tonight, which is why I was out shopping in this terrible weather." She takes another brief pause for breath. "How about it, Mr. Lawson – why don't you show me to the world *that* way – in command in my kitchen."

The old woman stands up with some difficulty. Pointing to my equipment on the couch, she says, "Get your camera and come with me."

Using a walker that stood by the couch, she leads the way to the little kitchen. I follow dutifully, attaching a flash to my camera. I don't know how this is going to pan out, but I'm taken with Alice Brody's spunk and decide to go along with her proposal.

She removes the brown paper bags from the grocery cart and empties their contents onto the small counter. Donning an apron, she begins to engage in a painfully slow motion series of activities – chopping radishes, scrubbing potatoes, turning on burners, poking around in the undersized oven.

I snap away as she works, getting several dozen pictures. I can't help thinking that the real photojournalism story here would be to *video* Alice Brody's sluggish movements, so viewers could see how long each simple chore takes her to accomplish.

"I don't do this so often now," she says, "only when I'm going to have company. And the arthritis in my hands slows me down. But I can still get around in the kitchen – don't you think?"

"I'm very impressed" – and indeed I am impressed by her determination, although saddened by the seeming enormity of the everyday task she has undertaken.

After some time, Alice Brody turns to me and asks, “Is that one of those digital cameras you’re using – where you can see the pictures you just took?” When I nod yes, she says, “Well, let’s see what they look like.”

The two of us stand side-by-side against the chopping counter, our faces close to the small screen on the camera, viewing the pictures in the reverse order they were taken. By touching a button, I’m able to enlarge portions of the images for closer scrutiny. It’s clear that I’ve captured the essence of the old woman in her kitchen, performing the various tasks she prides herself on.

Alice Brody takes a lively interest in the photos, peering at them closely through her thick glasses, requesting me to enlarge the picture from time to time, and seemingly pleased with the results.

I’m not aware when the earliest of the kitchen pictures has been displayed, so I touch the photo review button again. My snap of the old woman in the snow now fills the screen. I quickly try to reverse direction back to the kitchen shots, but she has seen the outdoor image and says, “Wait.”

The old woman takes off her glasses and reaches for a magnifying glass that she keeps near her recipe books. For a full minute, she closely examines the picture of herself struggling in the slush. Then, closing her eyes, she slowly nods her head several times, as if agreeing with some inner determination she has reached.

There’s something in her expression that makes me think she no longer views the scene as simply a pathetic figure on a bad day. Instead, what she sees is . . . Alice Brody. But the Alice Brody she has in mind –

viewed through the lens of her "photographic eye" – isn't impotent against the elements, but rather should be seen as struggling mightily against them.

The old woman puts down the magnifying glass and looks away from the picture. Without saying a word, she takes several of the brown paper grocery bags and places them back in the cart. Using the cart to steady her steps, she walks to where she left her outerwear. She sits down on the chair and begins to pull on her galoshes.

Then, turning to me, Alice Brody says in a matter-of-fact voice, "What do you say, Mr. Lawson, we go back down to the street. . . ."