

Christopher S. Bell

High Speed Junk

Tuesday and it's rain again. They say it'll clear up by tomorrow, but it never does. Folks don't lug their electronics out in a downpour or at the least the sane ones don't. First sap of the day looks like he spent the night pulling his hair out, 'cept there ain't much left to begin with. Zipping up my slicker, I follow to his minivan; forcing a giggle when he says his convertible's in the shop.

We carry the television wrapped in garbage bags inside, nearly dropping it twice before the big reveal: an old box cabinet. "So do you think you'll be able to fix it?" he asks. "Because if it's busted, we might just get one of those big screens for the den."

"I'll give it a look. Maybe it's just a loose tube."

He tries to hide a sense of relief, before I jot down his info. Dragging the cabinet to the back, I check my progress. One done with three moving right along. Sometimes they sound like a symphony, but usually I get a headache trying to remember where all the pieces fit. The morning passes with some old biddy's clock radio and a screw driver. Frank picks up his VCR and doesn't even notice the white spot where I accidentally banged the drywall. He asks if there's anything new in the back. I scribble down a few titles that didn't sell so well and slide it across the counter like we're spies.

The same ploy works for Billy an hour later while I'm chewing chicken fat. He says *Bloodsport's* tracking went after the first half. I say it's probably the machine, before giving him half off on *Round and Raw*. He's always liked the bigger ones, and hell I can't blame him. I'll just have to re-dupe a few action flicks when there's time. Wendy shoots over on her lunch break reeking of cigarettes and pastries. "Vick, I need something for the kids and something for me, but nothing like that last one."

I may have crossed a line with her, but had to see if she was a freak like they all say. The thought of her alone with one of my tapes does it for me sometimes, except I'm afraid of knowing who she really is, whether it's all some game to sling a man, or better yet a father for her two girls. We're always civil with one another, and sometimes I do offer her more deals than the rest, but at the end of the day, I'm only providing a service. Wendy doesn't owe me anything, not now or ever.

I don't see another soul until three. One chain ends before a quick switch in titles so nothing gets too worn. I play the radio and start yesterday's crossword when this weirdo walks in. He could use a shave and some new shoes, browsing my racks like I need his business. Eventually I break the silence. "Hey buddy, can I help ya?"

He approaches slowly, like a kid who shit his pants on the bus. "I heard from a reliable source that this is the place to go for certain things?"

"What are you looking for?"

"My buddy, Kenny, said you got the box here?"

"And what box would that be?" I let him sweat a moment, before smiling. "Nah, I know what you're talking about, although I didn't expect Kenny to tell my secret."

"I got it out of him after a few beers. The name's Marv," he says.

We shake hands before I dip into the back and throw one into a plastic bag. “It’s a hundred.”

“Really? I heard fifty.”

“Kenny still gives me a lot of business. I can’t say the same for you, Marv.”

“So this’ll give me everything?”

“One through ninety-nine on your basic set.”

“And there’s no way the cable company can track it?”

“Just don’t call if they offer you a free T-shirt.”

“What does that mean?” he asks.

“You look like a smart one. You’ll figure it out.”

“I’ll just ask Kenny.”

I roll my eyes and ring him up. It’s maybe ten minutes then before they all start coming in, one right after another. Something’s broken, but they don’t want to hear the reasons why. I just have to fix it, make it all better so they can continue their stupid, little lives. Their friends recommended me. I’m their guy, because I work cheap, and actually know what the hell I’m talking about. Just so long as it doesn’t break again, although these parts are built replaceable.

When I get a breath, it’s another round. Change all the tapes, label the dupes and start new ones. A certain level of anticipation comes with every new release, whether some asshole will ask me and avoid the lines at Blue Video or Dill’s Market. I’ll make it worth their while, but so many folks don’t want to be enlightened. They never understood why Beta was better, or why I’m not just another poor schmuck trying to make some extra scratch. I was put on this earth to help, except most don’t know how to accept it.

I reheat the deer stew a little after six; needs more salt, but I'm out of packets. A bite here while I'm unscrewing a panel, then another changing screwdrivers and wires; antennas, tubes, and batteries. The black under my fingernails never goes away, no matter how often I rinse it down the drain. Dad used to say men learn to live with their dirty hands. He was better at hiding it, always keeping one under the table cloth while the other shoveled her cooking without so much as a thank you.

At eight, my best customers enter five minutes apart. They know the routine, orders already lined up and labeled. Black plastic bags and a few bucks later, we're all smiles. I don't ask, and they rarely tell. Most are men, unafraid of where their paychecks eventually end up. Some smell like the fried chicken buckets waiting passenger's side for their return. I never feel bad taking their money, if only because we're from similar stock. They see in me the same flaws I can't shake, but eventually everyone gets past the point of appeasement.

Kenny's last tonight, a little before ten. All the tapes have finished when he moseys in with a six pack of pounders under his arm. "You wanna drink one of these with me?" he asks.

"Yeah sure. Just flip the sign. We're close enough." I used to argue with Kenny about us drinking in the back room, but now I just accept it. He cracks one and hands it to me, before scanning another day of blanks.

"So you know what all of these are?" he asks.

"Yeah, it's mostly Disney crap. A few trashier things."

"Well what's new on the trashier side?" Kenny suppresses a toothy grin.

"I don't know man."

“Actually, hold on. I forgot the goods in my car.” He rushes out as I collapse into the green and blue folding chair, swigging some beer. Kenny then returns with a clear cassette case, setting it on the closest VCR. “Surprise me with this one, if you could. Show me something my wife would never do.”

“Yeah, I’ll have to see what I’ve got.”

“She still wants me to pay for her credit cards. Can you believe that bitch?”

“They’re put on this earth to suck you dry.”

“Amen.”

He finishes his can, then drinks another, blabbing about all the assholes we know and can’t seem to forget. I humor Kenny best I can, every day except Sunday when there’s peace, quiet and nothing on TV. That’s the problem with the box; once you’ve seen it, there ain’t much point watching all over again. They all end the same way. Guy saves the day, get the girls, or maybe she dies after running off with another piece of shit. Either way, everyone learns a valuable lesson. Nothing changes anywhere.

When Kenny finally leaves, I glance at the tape he left, white sticker spots in the center where a label once slept. I pop it in and wait past the static. Sure enough, it’s his wedding video, the bride smiling with her mother moments from walking down the aisle. I’m not sure how to feel, uncertain if their expressions are genuine or merely forced for the camera. All of these people got to know them as a couple from that day on, except now I’m the one dealing with it, and I wasn’t even invited. I watch the whole tape, before hitting the lights and driving home; my wife sprawled out on our couch in her pink robe and panties. We don’t even have to speak. She already knows why I work so hard.