

Sidney Allen

The Shell Station

I turned off the ignition, reached under my seat to get my leather gloves. I must have known before I went into the trunk. I had to open the trunk because the owner of the station insisted I leave my spare tire there on account of being four cents short on the gas. He took my tire, I took a crowbar out of the trunk then closed it. I walked to the corner of the building and began hitting it as hard as I could with the crowbar. It bounced right off. That old building was tougher than it looked.

I guess I felt betrayed. It looked so very much like the old service stations of my youth. It was, after all, a Shell station, not a cut rate, convenience store, or mom and pop. His statement that he had done nothing to provoke me was partially correct. He had done nothing but demand my tire over four cents, and it provoked me. He sat in front of that station wearing a uniform, disguised as an attendant. He wasn't fit to tie an attendant's shoes. It was a beautiful station, three separate garage doors, the roll top kind, with glass in them. I went for them right away. He got off his fat ass when they started popping. For a moment he came after me, however, seeing the vigor of my swings or the crowbar, he turned and ran for the pay phone.

The service stations of my youth were the guardians of the roads. The attendants wore bow ties, trousers with tuxedo stripes, and hats, the kind that soldiers wear. A grease rag in one pocket would be used to check vital fluids. They checked your tires, hoses,

belts, even if you didn't buy anything. Anytime, anywhere, you just drove in and said, "Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to, wherever?" They knew where every street in their city was. It was a point of pride with them, the way construction workers feel about their suntans. If you did stump one, he would look it up for you, show you the proper route on a map, then give you the map. Those days were never viewed through a crappy windshield. When you entered a station, the attendant would spray real window cleaner on your windows, then polish them with soft blue paper towels which would be thrown away after each car. Nothing like the slop they slosh across now, if you can even get them to do that. Oh god, we took them for granted.

I kept swinging the crowbar, first like a baseball bat, then like a golf club a few strokes, then overhead. A huge crowd formed almost immediately. Every time the crowbar hit, a yell would go up, like "Yeah" in addition to clapping, stomping, and whistling.

When the owner got to the phone, there were several people bunched around it. Standing directly in front of the phone was a woman holding an iron skillet in one hand and a really long nasty-looking bar-b-que fork in the other. "Wait a minute, don't you remember me?"

"Let me by," he said.

"Not so fast." She lowered the fork menacingly. "I'm hurt you don't remember me. It was about seven months ago. I had just moved here, I didn't know anybody. My phone hadn't been installed yet, my baby was sick, you don't remember?"

The owner tried to step around her. The crowd moved closer and blocked him.

She was making small circles in the air with the fork. "I could never forget you. I was standing out here waiting for the doctor to call me back. You told me to go away. I tried to explain, you were really rude, remember now? The cops came. While we were talking to the cops the doctor called. The cops didn't like that I

answered the phone. They made me lay down on the asphalt. Face down on the asphalt. What did you tell them? That I was a whore? That I got tricks here every night or something? I'm sure you remember."

He was backing off a bit.

"Well anyway, my point is, what we learned that night was, nobody uses the phone, this phone unless they buy gas. I didn't see you buy any gas."

"Yeah," some others in the group chimed in. "This is your rule man. Yeah customers only, remember?"

He really backed away then, kind of ran away.

I was worn down rather quickly. I stopped to catch my breath and admire my work. Another woman stepped out of the crowd and asked for a turn. I gave her the crowbar and turned around; that's when I saw the crowd. The TV news was there, a safe distance back. I smiled into the camera. Later I was surprised to see how good I looked in the footage. The sweat was running down my face, into my eyes, sticking my hair to my head, but I was positively glowing.

A tremendous cheer went up from the crowd, the TV camera swiveled to the driveway, where the forklift from the market across the street was slowly pushing a part through the crowd. Two or three of the market employees were hanging off of the lift, cheering. My sister was driving. She had it in for that guy ever since the time her car conked out in front of his station. It was during rush hour, two guys pulled over, jumped out of their car, and pushed her car into the station. That was another time the owner jumped out of his chair, to run between the car and the garage doors, which were open, yelling, "No more cars today, come back in the morning!" My sister was pretty good on the lift. On her first charge, she skewered two of the pumps. She raised them high over head, then backed off a bit, scraping them off with the overhead lights. She went for the remaining pumps.

The police arrived, perhaps they were flabbergasted, or were in sympathy with the crowd; they really hung back. Maybe they were waiting for assistance. The station was half gone, and people were still pulling over and joining in. There were people pounding on or tearing up that station with every kind of tool. Axes, hammers,

crowbars, chains, broom handles, bats. Fan belts and hoses were passed along the crowd like beachballs at a "Dead" concert. Containers of coolant and oil were stomped on the ground. One huge guy took a pump hose that still had a nozzle attached, swung it round and around, like a hammer thrower. When he let it go, it crashed through the thick glass of the cashier window. He got a rousing cheer from the crowd.

Helicopters were hovering low, the police, a large number of them by then were using bull horns to try to keep traffic flowing. Someone ran over the fire hydrant with a four-by-four, causing a geyser of white water and a fine mist. The mist was very refreshing. The Fire Dept. had the water under control in about five minutes. By that time, the station was as flat as a can run over by a bus.

The crowd slipped away as quickly as it had formed. Every one was in terrific spirit. Smiling, giving high and low five signs, even hugging. The police left, little by little. The News were about the last to go. They interviewed my sister on the forklift across the street. At first it was rumored that the owner had suffered a heart attack. As it turned out, he had just fainted when he saw the forklift coming.