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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

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David Crier was doubtless flouting the spirit, if not the letter, of United Airlines' carry-on-bag regulations when he boarded Flight 1403 out of New Orleans one day in mid-October. Crier is a stolid, businesslike gentleman of sixty-six, with the stony expression and rumbling voice of one of those tough inner-city high-school principals who show up in Disney movies. Shortly before the jet's door closed, he came huffing up the aisle under the weight of two enormous satchels; one he barely squeezed into an overhead bin, and the other, once he sat down, left little room for his legs. It wasn't only the size of the satchels that attracted notice; it was their smell.

"What I got in here is my seasoning meat—some ham hocks and some smoked pig tails," he said, patting the case between his knees. Although Crier was dressed in a conservative suit, he had carefully manicured fingernails that were half an inch long. "And I got me some red beans, because you can't use just any kind of kidney beans; a slab of ribs; some Tony Chachere's Creole seasoning; and a few other things." The entire front of the plane was starting to smell like a barbecue. "I don't know when I'll be back," Crier said matter-of-factly. "I got to make sure I can eat."

Before Hurricane Katrina, Crier sold cars at the Rimrock Chrysler dealership, on Canal Street. He knew that the dealership's owners were from out of town, but he had never focussed on exactly where, until, after the storm, they offered him a job at the home office. So, after a lifetime in torpid New Orleans, he was on his way to his first real winter, in Billings, Montana, where, if the 2000 census is still accurate, he would be the two-thousand-six-hundred-and-ninety-third African-American in the state. "I imagine this will be something of an experience," he said.

One brisk day a few weeks after arriving, Crier was pacing the showroom at his new job. Most of the other salesmen wore golf shirts with the company logo on the breast, but Crier had on a green suit and a crisp white shirt, with a yellow necktie and matching pocket handkerchief. A jewelled Shriner pin adorned his lapel. His fingernails had been worn down to cracked nubs. "It's the cold and the dryness here," he said, rubbing his hands. When a visitor invited him to lunch and asked whether he knew a good place, he thought for a moment and said no.

The past weeks have been harder than Crier expected. He earns minimum wage—five dollars and fifteen cents an hour—and is expected to make his real money from commissions. Chrysler had a big sale during the summer, he says, and everybody who wanted a new car probably bought one then. It's also taking him time to learn the nuances of the Montana market. "I'm starting to recognize the license plates from the Indian reservations, and they don't have the best credit," he said. "Also, in New Orleans we had a rotation, so that a customer who came on the lot went to the next salesman in line. Here the young guys run out to be first when someone shows up, and I'm too old to race them."

At the Old Country Buffet, near the dealership, Crier lined up for meat loaf, corn, and salad, and slid into a booth. He used to run a restaurant near the Tulane University campus, and at charity events he has cooked alongside the legendary New Orleans chef and fellow-Shriner Buster Holmes. He sighed and picked up his fork. Everybody in Billings has been very nice, he said. "I went into an outdoor store for long johns and winter clothes, and when I said I was from New Orleans the whole store gathered round me to help." Rocky Mountain College gave him and another refugee a free dormitory room to share, which he appreciates, but he says that his roommate's snoring is becoming tedious. As are his days off. "You go home and play with those two channels on the TV set," he said. "You can't go to the bars, because you'll run out of the no-money you're making." He was looking forward to Sunday, when he would sit at a local sports bar and watch the Saints play the Bears.

After lunch, Crier headed off to tangle with a landlord who had an apartment to rent but was insisting on a six-month lease. "I don't know that I'll make it that long if I'm not making any money," Crier said. He'd like to return to New Orleans to fix his house, which had its roof blown open. His wife, who evacuated to Houston before the storm, would like him to join her there. But, as a man of retirement age who doesn't have much saved for retirement, he said he may have to tough it out in Billings. He was looking forward to the prospect of a proper kitchen. "There's a little fridge and hot plate in the dorm room, but they don't want us cooking there," he said. So where has he stowed his smoked pig tails, hocks, and ribs? "They're in the freezer," Crier said, buttoning his coat tightly. "Like me."