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BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON

by

Ryan Stembridge

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

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Blind Willie Johnson is a second-person novella that combines literary elements with a choose-your-own-adventure format. As the story progresses, the reader makes character and authorial choices which branch the narrative out into alternative paths. While the each branch remains similar, at first, events and attitudes are affected by each choice, creating increasingly divergent paths. The paths are link by a moment of inevitability in the middle before they separate again and move toward alternative endings. With this format, I sought to investigate the roles choice and inevitability play in a person's life.

This novella, both in concept and execution, was primarily influenced by George Saunders and Jennifer Egan. Inspired by their mix of heavy and light elements, as well as their willingness to experiment, I dove into *Blind Willie Johnson* seeking both depth and entertainment. It was directed by Tim Johnston.

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BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON

The song starts with a static hum. The twang of an old guitar warbles on top, but the static keeps drifting in the background—quiet but equal to the song itself. A partner to it. The guitar tumbles and wanders until a deep voice joins in—undulating between humming and moaning. There's a hollow thumping—a knuckle on a guitar—that could almost be a knock on a long forgotten door. You're not sure which sounds more sorrowful, the voice or the guitar.

A few more precise picks on guitar strings almost gives the song a bounce, but the voice comes back and mellows the song out to a long, gently-flowing wave. The man's deep voice becomes patterned, drifting close to words. It sounds like 'how long' for moment, but elongates back to moaning a moment later.

Jake, your neighbor's thirteen-year-old kid, sits on his bike and holds his iPod a little farther out toward you as the song continues. He's grown a foot or so the last couple years, and is all arms and legs. More preteen than teen. His clothes make him look like a wire hanger, his sleeves bunch up at his elbows, and his bright orange socks are stretched out near to his knee. Tall socks are popular again, you guess, from what you've seen on the neighborhood kids—your subdivision has a middle school in the middle of it, so you see plenty of them. Neon orange socks, you'd also guess, likely remain unpopular. Maybe he'd have fit in at your elementary school, back in the mid-nineties, or on *Saved by the Bell*, but you doubt he's fitting in anywhere, now. His too-large thrift store cloths likely don't help his case. The iPod, too, he found at a

Goodwill—he'd been so excited he'd told you all about it. Perhaps the other kids assume it's an iPhone—they probably don't know iPods exist, so maybe they don't tease him for that, at least. Perhaps that's why he's taken to bothering you so much?

Your wife, Sharon, who leaves every morning with her carpool a few minutes before you do, seems to escape scot-free. Jake-free. Whenever you step out the door, however, nine times out of ten, he's there—sandy, bowl-cut hair flopping over his eyes and teeth growing every which way.

He leans forward when he speaks, almost unbalancing himself. He hasn't quite mastered breathing and talking at the same time. "Can you hear it? His callouses picking away? He used a bottleneck slide—can you tell?"

"I hear it, Jake, he sounds real sad," you say. You step around him toward your red Nissan in the driveway. Sharon named it Raspberry and it stuck. Jake and his dad, Henry, sulk alone in the other half of the duplex. Jake's mom ran off right before you became their neighbors two years before. You've heard varying rumors from the other neighbors: it was drugs, or another man, or she got sick of the both of them. You're not really sure how Henry affords the rent, since he only takes small painting or construction jobs every now and then as far as you can tell. Less than every now and then, recently. Your driveways are separated by a yellowed patch of grass, which you always end up mowing, even though the two of you share it. Henry's truck, a couple decades old with faded grey paint and paint cans that roll around loose in the back, seems to be sinking into the pavement. Either it's a slow leak in the tires or it's been there too long and is melting. It's been a hot summer.

Jake walks the bike backwards on his toes while steering with one hand. He's not quite in control and veers the back wheel into your bumper with a hollow thump. "Sorry," he says without looking back. "Sad? This isn't just sad. There's terror in his voice, Mr. Stanley. The blood-curdling kind that makes you want to curl up in a dark closet and cry. Don't you hear it? And loneliness, of course. Like he's been alone for ten years and isn't sure he'll ever talk to anybody again."

The moan-singing from Jake's phone keeps going, up and down. You listen for a moment and feel, not terror, but a tightness that pulls at your lungs. "Blood-curdling, eh? You read that part somewhere."

"Yeah, a YouTube comment. Seemed right, though. They also say he had great dexterity. A strong thumb and that he somehow made simple notes sound busy. Busy meaning good, of course, like he puts more emotion in each strum than anyone else could. I can't hear the thumb yet, but it sure sounds busy."

"Real busy, like me," you say. You're a dispatcher for the Marietta Fire & Rescue and on your way to being late again. "Night shift gets pissy if I make 'em wait."

"All right," Jake says as he kicks out his kickstand and rests back on his seat. His shoulders round as he holds his iPod closer to his ear. "I can't hear the thumb, yet. Do you know what a thumb sounds like?"

*

1ST CHOICE

- *Who does this kid think he is, pestering you like that? If you find him a bit annoying and want to get going, turn to A on page 4.*

- *Hey, he's excited about something, that's not so bad. If you want to ask him more about the song, turn to B on page 6.*

*

A "Sorry, Jake, I gotta go," you say as you swing open your door.

Jake's nods. Maybe he heard you, maybe he's bobbing with the song. "It's so chilling. Listen."

"Later, Jake."

"It's Blind Willie Johnson singing. I think it fits into gossip blues. Have you heard of him?"

"I haven't, but I've got to go." You take a seat and start pulling the door closed.

"He taught himself to play, can you believe it?"

"Real impressive." You shut the door.

Jake waves for a moment before looking back at his iPod. He pulls in his cheek and chews on it.

As you back out, Jake speeds off in the other direction and grows small in the rearview mirror. Right in the middle of the road, as usual. Apparently his dad tells him it's fine to ride anywhere, even out onto the shoulder of Jimmy Carter, the six-lane byway your street runs into. His dad tells him that he used to bike wherever he damn well pleased and he came out fine. Henry came out fine that is. Jake was already weird when you moved in and it's only gotten worse as his independence has grown. As you wait for an opening to turn, Jake disappears around a now distant curve.

Fall's already started, but summer's heat and humidity isn't giving up any time soon it seems. Your AC's been blowing out hot air for a couple of weeks, so you roll down the window and hope to at least get some circulation. Your neighborhood, north of Atlanta proper, is heavily wooded and hilly. A few leaves have started to fall and clumps of trees have turned orange and brown. Mostly brown. You roll out and the crispy sound of leaves being crushed to dry dust beneath your tires drifts along with you.

You stomp the gas to attempt merging, but a car changes lanes and blocks you. The mass of traffic is spaced out perfectly to prevent an opening. You hear a dog barking from the house on the corner. It's the same damn dog that barks at you every morning or every time you and Sharon try to go on a walk. Every living thing that drives or walks by that tall, pine-wood fence has to hear from this dog. Despite the heavy traffic of the byway, this dog never gives up barking. You've never seen the thing, since the fence's boards are all flush against each other, but you know it's bark as well as your own voice.

Turn to the 2nd Choice on Page 6.

*

2ND CHOICE

- *If the dog is a metaphor, turn to C on page 9.*
- *If the dog is just a dog, turn to A2 on page 9.*

B: You pull open the car door, but hesitate. "What's that song called?"

"Dark was the Night, Cold was the Ground. He was blind and lived in a burnt up house, so I think it's a good title."

You think it sounds a little melodramatic, but say, "Yeah, I guess he'd know. Listen, why don't you play it again for me when I get home. We can try to hear that thumb."

Jake smiles. It's a little crooked. "Ok, I'm gonna do some more research about him. Blind Willie Johnson, I mean. He sings it."

"Sounds good." You start sitting down.

"Do you know how the blues started?"

"A little, I guess, but you can tell me more later."

Jake nods, but continues. "I suppose everyone knows it draws from slavery and all that, but some people argue it goes back even further than that."

"Sure," you say while slowly pulling your door inward, not yet closing it. "I'm gonna be late, okay?"

"All the way back to Africa and all that. So much so they call Africa the 'cradle of the blues.' Drums and—"

"Gonna be late," you repeat and close the door before he can say more. You really are going to be late. It's not only an excuse. Not only.

He glances up when the door shuts, surprised. His smile falters before returning with strength as he waves while you back down the driveway.

As soon as you've backed out, Jake hops the curb out into the street and pedals away out in front of you. You've told him to use the sidewalks a hundred times before, but his dad tells him to ride wherever he pleases, so it doesn't stick.

Your duplex is a decent way down the row off Jimmy Carter Blvd, which is nearly a highway. Past you, your street leads directly to the elementary school down the way, so people seem not to notice they're in a subdivision when they turn off. It's not like they drag race down your street or anything, but you've nearly been hit pulling out more than once.

It's futile, but you roll down your window and shout as you pass Jake on his meandering bike, again telling him to use the sidewalks. He waves with a grin as if you were wishing him a fond farewell.

Before you get to the end of your street, Jake falls behind and curves around to head back in the other direction. A few crispy, brown leaves flutter behind him. It's newly into fall, but a blanket of heat rests heavily over the city. You roll down your window anyway. Your AC's been out for a couple of weeks, so moving air is the best you can hope for. You keep putting off fixing it, knowing fall will bring cooler temperatures soon enough anyway. You can get it fixed next spring, when money's better. Maybe the car will be paid off at least by then, that should help.

Without really thinking about it, you shift up onto your other hip to free up space and snake your phone out of your pocket. You tap in your code by habit, then slide to your second screen of icons to tap on Pandora.

At the stop sign, while waiting for an opening, you type 'Blues,' and make a new station. The usual dog barks insistently from the fence of the corner house. That fellow never gives up—every drive, walk, or ride by his fence gets an earful.

Turn to C2 on page 27.

C: It's not a bark, but a desperate call—fast and anxious. You used to assume the dog's marking his territory—ready to fight those unseen footsteps and voices on the other side of the fence. But, after time and time again of hearing it, you began to wonder what it would be like, stuck in a twenty by twenty patch of grass, only experiencing the larger world by sounds drifting through your fence. Day or night, the dog is always behind that fence, ready to bark. It seems his owner never lets the thing out.

It's fast, high-pitched, and almost a yip. Insistent. As if the dog's afraid each person is the last one who will ever stop by outside that fence. As if he needs someone to talk to, anyone, even for a moment, so he latches onto any chance at communication.

Which reminds you of. . .Blind Willie something. Jake's bluesman. You can't quite remember the title of it, but it was something long and sad. You pull out your phone and slide over to Pandora. Maybe he'll come up on a blues station, you think.

Continue to C2 on page 27.

A2: You press firmly on the gas and speed out into a smaller gap than you should have. The minivan behind you barely has to brake, but squashes down their horn, long and steady. A balding—you can tell this even through the rear-view mirror because his head's so shiny—man has his hands up. "What the hell?" his motions ask. "Are you crazy?" "Are you insane?" his shaking hands add. You wave one hand, an intentionally half-hearted apology. You hope he picks up your two messages: a sarcastic sorry and a not-so-subtle buzz off. He's not worth your time—one of the many suburban rageaholics on the road. You see them every day and sit with them an hour on the best days.

Every weekday, anyway. Saturdays feel all the more magical because you get to skip the drive. Most Sundays are the same, except when you and Sharon go to church. Her parents give her grief for only going on holidays, so Sharon picks a random Sunday every so often to prove them wrong. You get pulled along.

But, if you're honest with yourself, which is sometimes a big if, you don't really mind church. It can be dry, certainly, and you're not sure about a lot of the things they push at you, but there's something to be said for traditions. You don't so much like the greeters, with their too-wide smiles, but it's a big enough crowd that you can mostly blend in. It's the drive that you dread. Another drive full of two faced crazies, shaking their fists with one hand and lecturing their kids with the other. Jesus fish stuck on their back window while they cut or flip you off. Classy folks. Southern hospitality takes a pause on the highway, you suppose.

Today's traffic is only your average mess. There's likely plenty of church goers, but you can't tie them as easily to a church to prove their hypocrisy like you can on Sundays. Atlanta's big enough to have two peaks for both the morning and evening jams, but your's is the worst, of course. You saved a thousand bucks or so picking the manual model for Raspberry, but every early morning's stop-and-start pattern makes that seem like less and less of a deal. The hills help a little, letting you drift down in neutral, but both hands are too often occupied by first into second into first and second into first. It's a long commute from your northeast suburb, Norcross, to the northwest suburb, Marietta, but Sharon's school is in the other direction, down in Rockbridge, so you compromised on the affordable middle.

She didn't appreciate it when you mentioned the irony of moving into a neighborhood with a school in the middle so she could be closer to her far-away school. She teaches at the fancy school, so the surrounding neighborhoods were out of your budget. Sharon's student loans stacking against her teaching salary and your measly dispatching doesn't leave much left over for housing. Hence, the duplex. At least you didn't bring student loans to the table. Your Associate's degree, in general studies, was cheap enough at Chattanooga's community college that you didn't need loans. You're debating if you're going to go back for the Bachelor's. You and Sharon agreed you should work for a while first. Figure out where your interests lie. Turns out your interests are hard to find. Sneaky little buggers. Good at hiding. The worthwhile interests, anyway. The lucrative ones. Nobody gets paid for hunting, fishing, or a

passing interest in fantasy football. You did win a hundred bucks for placing second in your work league last year, but that was mostly luck.

You're not even a particularly knowledgeable huntsman, even if the new wader's your father-in-law got you last Christmas make you look the part. He told you they'd help you get back to your roots, to nature. You list hunting as your primary hobby when asked. You've been planning on getting in some fly fishing this coming season, but again, no money in that. The opposite in fact. You've had to give up duck hunting if you're dad hadn't left you his shotgun in the will. One of his shotguns, anyway.

There wasn't much to be had in inheritance, but the other two shotguns, the rifle, and the pistols went to your younger brother, Huck. He was the better hunter anyway. How could he not be with a name like Huck? Your dad didn't much trust you to even clean his guns, much less use any of them. Except the 20 gauge, but didn't care about the 20 gauge. It had been on sale at Walmart and he called it the pea shooter. That was the one you got, of course, but it was good enough for ducks. All for the best though, since Sharon doesn't much like guns. You keep the shotgun out of sight in the attic. It's always a pain to sneak up there on early morning hunting trips, but she wouldn't have it in the bedroom closet and you don't have a gun safe.

Tail lights flash red and you pump the breaks in tune with the radio. It's a new song that's playing every twenty minutes or so on the top 40 station hits station. Pretty catchy song. You do find Mike Posner a little douchey for lamenting fame and success, but hey, it's a catchy song. This is the first play of the trip. You imagine you'll like it less by the third or fourth time you hear it before you get to work. You may even hear it a

fifth time given the amount of traffic backed up ahead of you. The dull, red brake lights trail down highway 85 as it rolls over the next hill toward Atlanta.

Your phone vibrates against your leg, and you try to slide it out of your pocket, but the protective rubber case makes it a slow process. Sharon made you go all out for the case, an extra eighty bucks, claiming it would be less expensive in the long run. Her own phone's fully caseless, and that's fine, but you, like a child, can't be trusted. You only broke your last iPhone a little. More iPhones are cracked than aren't, you're sure. You finally get the phone out. It's Sharon calling. You breathe in deeply. Hot air rushes through your nose, having the opposite of the intended effect. That's probably why road rage is so bad around this town, you decide. Everyone's mad about the heat and exhaust fumes.

It took a while to get your phone out so you answer right before it would have gone to voicemail. "I thought you told me not to use my phone while driving." You regret saying it before you finish. Most of you regrets it. She did give you a lecture all the way home from Popeyes the other day about using your phone while driving. You'd checked one player report—an injury for one of your fantasy players. While at a red light. That's it. And she acts like you're either a child or are too incompetent to drive safely. You sometimes do text, but not while she's around to tell you not to. You do it slowly with lots of gaps to watch the road. You know it's not the safest thing, but you only do it every so often. You're careful. She should trust you.

"That's how you're going answer the phone?" she asks.

"I shouldn't have answered it at all, according to you." You can't stop. Your temper has the bit in its mouth and is off to the races.

"You know what, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wanted to share some good news with you. I won't call you next time."

She hangs up. You release the bit with a deep sigh. The tension, which seemed so thick a moment before, mostly releases and you relax your left shoulder. You hadn't noticed before, but it's stiff and sore right behind the blade. You must be holding it tight again without noticing. With the base of your palm you push your chin up and to each side, producing a few satisfying pops. Not that popping does anything, you know that from the general disdain for chiropractors held throughout the medical field, but at least it feels effective. You also know that the placebo effect is real, so, you might as well help yourself, even if it's a trick.

You don't know why you pick fights with her. It's not all the time, but more and more often lately you find yourself jabbing her, poking at the right spots. Years together has made you both experts at upsetting each other. Not that you guys are one of those couples, one that needs the cops called on them or something. You don't even fight all that often. But when you do, you both go on offense. Whatever started the fight usually falls by the wayside quickly, leaving personal attacks and the fertile soil left over from past fights.

You try to paint her as a nagger. As if you'd remember to do anything around the house if she wasn't keeping you on top of it. As if you wouldn't let the house look like your studio apartment had during your short stint in college, with its trash corner

piled high with takeout boxes and cups and old papers. The only reason dishes hadn't piled up is that you'd only had one bowl, one cup, and a spork for dishware, and they'd lived permanently in the sink where'd you'd wash them pre-meal as needed. Which wasn't too often with all the take out.

Other times you go after teaching, throwing tired old stereotypes at her: those who can't, and all that. You never make much headway there, because she knows she's excellent and her school constantly pumps out eventual Ivy leaguers. It's a middle school, but they claim it's the early start that leads to Ivy and beyond. Hell, they're probably right. They get robotic, hardworking geniuses to start out with, but they also have pretty intense standards. You're happy you got to float by as an average B/C student instead of pushed to the extreme like they are. Probably better for your mental health in the long run. But then again, you're making fourteen-an-hour answering phones, so who knows.

She tries not to engage most of the time. She'll storm out and see a friend or lock the bathroom door and take a bath. But when you provoke her enough, she hits on target. Mostly she'll start with the always painful, 'maybe my dad is right' or the even worse, 'maybe your dad was right' before hitting me with one of their many common critiques: manliness, success, prowess, direction. Both dads gave her plenty of preloaded ammunition. Other times she'll go deeper. Hit you with your own insecurities—things you've shared for support in intimate moments. It's never been easy for you to open up, emotions the currency of pussydom according to your dad, but hearing your vulnerabilities thrown back at you makes it harder every time. Hard to

hear, for sure, but also harder to open up again in the future. You guys make up and forgive each other later. Or act like it never happened—which has been more popular lately. But, when you have to decide whether to share a fear or worry or to be silent, the memory of the fights returns.

She doesn't share with you as often anymore, either. For a while you assumed she had a handle on things, that everything was going smoothly, but before long you started noticing her pour herself a glass of wine more and more often, or make long calls to friends. She somehow keeps all her friends—from high school, from college, from work. She has so many. Even one from middle school who's been in California for ten years. They reconnected as if no time had passed when they saw each other last Christmas. You can't even keep a few friends for any decent period. But she must be opening up to all of them. Not to you. You don't think you go as deep as she does with the insults, so you don't know why she'd feel hesitant to share with you.

An SUV flies by you on the shoulder. The car in front of you takes that as an invitation and jumps out to follow. A few seconds later a yellow Corvette, as bright as Heinz mustard, joins the shoulder crew. Your middle finger isn't quite fast enough—there's no way the assholes saw it in time before they passed. Too bad. You pull out a little onto the shoulder, mostly trying to see if more assholes think they're too important to wait in traffic, but also to discourage more from trying. Maybe they'll think there's not enough room with you sticking out. It's not a huge shoulder, but big enough that you're not quite blocking it yet.

Another car pulls out, a Lexus or some other fancy-looking sedan, and you pull out a little more onto the shoulder but he keeps coming. You're about to pull out even farther, to truly block him off, but the car behind you, a white stalker van, starts inching forward into your space and you pull back into the lane to keep your spot. It is a Lexus after all—a mid-range luxury type with a professional-looking woman behind the wheel. Your finger is up as she passes, you're not going to miss again, but she doesn't even glance over. Not even an ounce of shame with these people.

The line ahead sure looks long. You wait every single day. Weekday anyway. And several Sundays. That's enough. You glance at the clock, it's already 7:27. You've only got another thirty-three minutes and aren't quite at the halfway point. You're not late often, but your manager isn't too understanding. It's Jake's fault anyway. He wouldn't stop talking—slowed you down. It's not too hard to replace you, or even if dispatchers tend to stay a little longer than the revolving door of EMTs that come in and out every few months. The good ones last a few years, but no one stays too long. You're not sure you're all that great at dispatching, not that it's all that hard. And it's a job, so you don't want to push your luck. A truck flies past, following the others up and over the hill. They must be saving so much time. You're looking at being two to five minutes late, so it could easily make the difference for you.

Continue to the 3rd Choice on page 17.

*

3RD CHOICE

- *It's the principle of the thing. If every asshole jumps onto the shoulder the whole highway system breaks down. Besides, do you want to be that much of a hypocrite after flipping off everyone else? Continue to D1 on page 18.*
- *Come on, everybody's doing it. You don't want to be late. It's not a big deal. Pull out. Do it. Be a rebel. Make choices. Continue to D2 on page 22.*

*

D1 You let the truck sail past with resignation. You notice it's got a Jesus Fish on the tailgate. Perfect. It's too late to pull out now. You know everyone's a hypocrite, especially Mr. Jesus Fish up there. Yourself included you're sure, but you don't want to show it so obviously. Maybe tomorrow you'll stay chill when the assholes skip past you, then you can join them without feeling so bad about it.

Once again, you regret penny pinching. Sharon's penny pinching. It was her great idea to save money by going with the manual. You went along with it, but it was her idea. You were an innocent bystander stuck at the dealership during the three-hour negotiation as Sharon slowly, slowly brought down the price dollar by dollar. She kept congratulating you whenever the salesman went to check with his manager, or whatever it is they do when they leave for a bit. Probably consult their *How to Screw People and Make More Money: Car Salesman Edition* books before they come back with another strategy or bogus charge to tack on. You honestly just wanted to get out of there. You were pissed the advertised sale was bogus and wanted to leave—" . . .the listed price is with all available discounts, unfortunately you only apply for some of those," the salesman had said. Apparently, they advertise only for dean's list, first-

generation students from a single-parent household—with that single parent being an employee of Delta Airlines, and it's a Wednesday and the third Wednesday of the Month and you're wearing a coconut for a hat.

And now you're stuck in this awful, bumpy and grinding moment between first and second gear as you lurch up the hill. You should be the one riding comfortably in the carpool, with AC. Let her drive her money-saver. If anyone you worked with lived near you, maybe you could. If you knew where anyone you worked with lived.

You finally reach the crest of the hill and feel a bead of sweat sneak down your back and past your belt to break for your crack. It tickles and you try to wiggle it away, which only makes it drip a little further down. It's hot out. Way too hot to be fall already no matter what the calendar says.

Over the top of the hill, you realize it really is an accident this time. Most likely some asshole tried to merge after using the shoulder to pass and hit someone. Whatever the reason, two cars are pulled over on the shoulder with two women and a man walking around aimlessly. It seems recent, as a cop or ambulance hasn't showed yet. Not even the highway safety people. You'd probably be getting the call right now if it wasn't for Jake and this accident slowing you down. Well, your shift's not for another twenty minutes or so, so not quite, but you might have been hanging out early, relaxing before your shift when it was called in. Maybe you could be early for once if you didn't have weird kids harassing you every morning. Jake's not really a kid anymore, you guess, and he isn't all bad, but you wouldn't mind getting off to work without the pestering. At least to get a head start on the eventual traffic jam.

The shoulder jumpers are all gone, of course, having re-emerged miles ahead by now, you're sure. The clock accuses you of cowardice. You're going to be late for sure now, and you missed your chance to get ahead. Sweaty and late. Sitting in traffic ruins your only hope at relief as your AC unit is now an open window. In the middle of a jam, an open window only makes things hotter. And more poisonous as more and more exhaust billows into your car. You roll up the window.

As the accident comes and goes, you notice the small group from the accident looks as sweaty and frustrated as you feel, but you have no sympathy for them. They made this mess in the first place.

As the traffic lets up, you press a heavy, hot foot hard on the gas and speed away with the rest of the escapees. You roll down your window quickly and your knuckles scrape the plastic siding uncomfortably as you work the hand crank. Automatic windows are for people without student loans, you guess. People without wives who have student loans, anyway.

You pull into the parking lot three minutes late and somehow know that Charlie's going to care about tardiness today. You always forget what exactly his title is, but Charlie's essentially the boss. The company's owner is mostly retired, so you've only seen him once. There's a picture in the lobby of him—you pass it every morning but stopped looking at it long ago. But you do know Charlie handles personnel, including final say for hiring, and more often, or at least it seems that way, firing. He handles paychecks and training seminars and contracts with hospitals and nursing homes and whoever else. Even promotions. He jumps in to help dispatch whenever it gets to busy

and he thinks we're being inefficient—even though he's the one that dictates how we dispatch—often making things worse, and then yells at us about it. He's pretty much never in as early as you, boss hours being flexible and all, but with your luck he will be today.

You don't see his car as you scamper across the parking lot, but imagine he'll be here any moment and decide to care about time cards today. He always cares about something and throws a fit, but it's hard to guess what it'll be from one day to the next. It's a big lot, hidden behind a long row of warehouses and a massive restaurant supply store. It's mostly surrounded by partially yellowing trees. They look more like they're dying of heat stroke than getting ready for fall to truly arrive. If trees can get heat stroke. Maybe they get something like heat stroke. Maybe they're being slowly cooked.

You race through the large empty lobby to a rolling cart against the wall that holds a computer used as a time card system. The lobby is pretentious and empty as usual, a fitting image of the company's management style. The walls yell about accomplishments with bullshit local awards no one's ever heard of and pictures of employees looking way to happy about doing their jobs. The desk is a long snake of wasted space—all black, shiny countertop. You clock in four minutes late and scurry back to the dispatch room, bracing for a lecture.

Continue to A3 on page 39.

D2 With a sigh you give in. Another car is coming up the shoulder, so you wait for them to pass, then jump out and follow. You're one of many, nobody's gonna hate on

you too much. Plus, your job's at stake. They can't hold such a little thing against you if it's your job.

It feels good. It's a small and silly thing, but you have to admit, it feels good. Getting back up to a real speed. Getting into third then fourth gear. Watching car after car fall behind you as you sped on by, rumbling occasionally on the strip as you avoid fat fragments of semi tires and other debris along the shoulder. A man sings about his broken heart from the radio. You bob your head to the dulcet tones—it becomes a mantra to your newfound rebellion. You did it your way. You wonder if it counts as blues, like Jake had been listening to. Probably not.

As you crest the hill, you see there's a reason for the traffic jam for once. Two cars are pulled over slightly on the shoulder ahead. The other renegades in front of you sit in a line ahead, trying to merge back in—the bright as hell Corvette sneaks into a tiny crack, probably relying on the often-uninsured drivers of Atlanta to avoid hitting him. No one wants to deal with that bill, especially out of pocket. Even if you had your old insurance, your limit would have run out long before a bill like that would. The Lexus behind him seems more nervous. Maybe she stretched for the car and skipped the insurance herself. You never know around here.

But you've already broken etiquette jumping onto the shoulder anyway, so there's no reason to be hesitant about jumping back in. Driving a little hatchback has its advantages, and this is one. Before you catch up to the other shoulder rebels ahead, you pass a semi rolling along and jump in front of him. They generally have to give up more space, given they can't see little cars like yours too well. Easy merging

opportunities. Anyway, these are professional drivers. They're getting paid up there. They can wait a bit for others to go around. They might even thank you for extending their shift a bit. Getting them a few extra cents for the delay. Or do they go by mileage?

Your foot's back on the brakes and not likely to move off it again for a while. It seems like a poor joke now, the couple-hundred yards you skipped only to be back in the line again. What did you save, maybe a minute? Great. Now everyone back there thinks you're an ass for nothing. If it'd saved you from being late, that would be one thing, but now. . . You took one Japanese class at the community college before switching back to Spanish. You needed the language credits and you'd heard Japanese speakers are sought after, but it ended up being much too hard. Spanish was more your style. The one thing you remember from the class was an idiom your teacher shared. Americans talk about squeaky wheels getting the grease, but in Japan they say the nail that sticks out gets hammered. You didn't exactly get hammered this time, but you certainly didn't get the grease. It was even worse being stuck in line now that you had a taste of freedom.

The Lexus is the only one left on the shoulder. It must have been recent, you notice. No ambulance yet. Hopefully you can pass before it gets even more backed up. Maybe they won't send anyone, they all seem fine. But you know someone will show up. You may have been the one who got the call if you'd had the earlier shift. You got off the night shift a year ago, and don't want to go back to that. It's not as busy, but when you're stuck in a room with nothing but computers, phones, and tracking maps,

that's usually not a good thing. Slow days feel even slower. At least when you're busy you lose track of how much time you're wasting. Maybe not wasting. You get paid at least. It's not much, but it's something. It pays some bills. Sharon makes more. A good bit more.

You'd be fine with that except your father mocks you about it. So does her's, but at least she defends you then. But that backfired too, when he made a big deal about you not being able to stand up for yourself. "Hiding behind the Mrs.," he said. You were attempting to be respectful and not get into a fight with your father-in-law. What an ass. Not that you said that. Her dad's always been a little too intimidating to say much to. The same as your dad. The both of them are a little too alike. They're even Bears fans. You're not sure why, neither of them ever lived in Chicago. Your dad's not a diehard like hers, but he goes on about the '85 Bears. Ditka and McMahon. The Fridge. Singletary and that aggressive defensive. He told you all about them, saying they played like men. That seemed like the only standard for him. You haven't asked Sharon's dad why he's a fan, too. Probably the same reason. Psychical football and all that.

You played safety for six years through middle and high school. They were small schools, so it wasn't hard to get on the field. Your team never won much, but you enjoyed it. You won a few games. Belonging to a larger something was nice. Your dad always critiqued your tackles, when you made them. Her dad would probably have demonstrated how it was really done. He'd been a defensive tackle after all. On a team

that should have won state to hear him tell it. They didn't. Not even close, but he tries to avoid that part.

You catch up to the woman driving the Lexus who hasn't made it back in. She seems frantic now, tossing her head back and forth, waving at everyone who passes—desperate and quick. She keeps angling like she's going to go for it, but then second-guesses. She's not getting anywhere. She waves at you too as you pass, but you look to the front and stay that way until you're past. Someone will let her in. Someone in less of a rush. The traffic starts pulling away and you sigh with relief as your speed gets the air moving again. You've been sweating down your back without realizing it. You're getting used to it. It'll dry out at work; the dispatch room is a fridge.

You pull into the parking lot only a minute late. It's a big lot, and a big building, despite its light use. They occasionally hold continuing education classes or staff meetings for large groups, but most days, the space goes wasted. Until about a year ago, it was the only office and had always been crowded. Then they bought a second building and moved most of the day to day operations there. There's more than enough room now. Charlie says both offices will fill up soon enough; he's always talking about upcoming growth.

You walk briskly through the open lot. Your manager, Charlie, likely isn't in yet, but the night shift enjoys lecturing you for lateness at least as much. Charlie likes to care about things randomly. He sometimes checks the clock-ins, sometimes doesn't. Not that you're late all the time, but sometimes they seem to care about a single minute while other times, once or twice, you've gotten in five or even fifteen minutes—

only once—late and no one says a word. Charlie goes through moods: he’s everybody’s buddy, he rants for a week about efficiencies, he’s a mountain of sass. But even when he’s buddy-buddy you’re not sure if he’s joking or not. Every once in a while, he goes on a firing streak, but then, a day later, forgives almost anything. It’s hard to tell which Charlie’s going to show up, so it’s best to play it safe.

You pull your ID badge, attached, along with a door card, to a pull string clipped onto your collar, to swipe over the door lock and open it when the light blinks green. The lobby’s large and welcoming, with a long, wide desk, two couches, a coffee table, and numerous awards and pictures on the wall. The desk looks even larger because it’s empty. It’s mostly only employees coming through, but they keep it nice for the occasional client. A computer station is set up against the left wall on a rolling cart—it’s wheels locked. It runs a fairly simple log-in program in place of time cards. You clock in two minutes late.

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C2: B.B. King quickly drowns the dog’s barks out. You’re not sure if King used a bottleneck slide, or what bottleneck slides really are, but something about the sad, rhythmic music makes you feel a little better about things.

You and Sharon have been distant lately—and fighting a decent amount. Maybe more than a decent amount. More than you used to. Not as often as other people, you’re sure. And you don’t fight about truly stupid stuff like some people do. Kate, one of your co-workers, was telling you her boyfriend and she had a huge blowout about

where to keep the kitchen sponge. You and Sharon have never fought about kitchen sponges. Maybe about dishes, but not sponges. You guys did fight about McDonald's the other day, which was pretty dumb, you have to admit. But really, it's not supposed to be some gastronomic miracle. It's decent food, and cheap. As advertised. They're not out to woo a bunch of foodies, and it's not like you want to go all the time. The occasional fry fix, what's the big deal? It's not like Wendy's is the Mecca of health, like she seems to think. You're pretty sure you used that Mecca reference right, but make a mental note to look it up during down-time at work.

But compared to Jake's song, even to the more upbeat King, your problems seem. . .insignificant. It's nice, in a way.

There haven't yet been any real gaps in the traffic so you start to worry the song will end before you even get to turn. It's never easy to take a left here, but this is ridiculous. You almost take a tiny one, but press back on the brakes as a minivan jumps lanes and closes the gap. Another narrow opening follows. You gun the engine with a high-pitched, electronic-sounding squeal and slip into the gap between a pick-up and an old Corolla.

A new song comes on: a piano number. It's much more upbeat than Jake's or B.B. King's. You feel a little guilty acting like you'd have known the song was B.B. King's if you hadn't been looking at the phone when it popped up. B.B. King is a southern icon you know, even if he's a Memphis guy. You're pretty sure it's Memphis. Maybe Nashville—you get their claims to fame mixed up a bit. As a southern guy, yourself, and

a native Tennessean—Chattanooga, but whatever—you feel like you should recognize his songs. Or at least recognize his voice. Something.

The next song reminds you of a traveling choir that came to your dad's church when you were teenager—an all-black gospel group. You didn't think much about it being weird so much as new until your dad leaned over and said, "You know, they sure can sing when they're not rapping. Why don't more of them belt it like this." Afterwards he kept talking about how enthusiastic they were—"hooting and hollering for Jesus," he said a few times. After his comment, you'd started thinking it through and realized you'd never seen a black person in your church before. Your neighborhood seemed to be about half and half, you guessed, but none in church.

There were a lot of churches in your neighborhood, little ones with their own little steeples and signs. The one nearest you would always have crowds out in front dressed to the nines. Lots of bright colors and giant hats. They dressed nice at your families, too, but in a much more subdued way. Especially in color.

You and Sharon are technically members of a Church called Redeemer, even if you miss more Sunday's than not. It doesn't have its own building but meets in a high school gym with a bunch of chairs set up and has both a white pastor and a black pastor. That was very important to Sharon. You were fine with whatever as long as it wasn't some stuffy hundred-year-old building and membership base like you'd grown up in.

Your father's church liked to show off a tiny little building behind the parking lot—the original Baptist Church of Chattanooga they claimed. You always doubted

them, since the big brick one downtown looked older by far, but they seemed to take great pride in it. Even as their membership waned over the years, and grew older and older on average, they kept pointing to the past, as if they'd mattered back there and back then. It wasn't only the falling numbers that always made that church feel so empty. Something about the attitude, that all their pride was behind them, made you feel alone there, even on the few crowded mornings like Easter Sunday.

Except when Sharon asks you about the occasional sermon, you never talk about church or God or any of it. You usually put up a fuss when Sharon does, occasionally, want to go, but you have to admit you don't mind being there. The sermons are often boring and sometimes uncomfortably judgmental, and it makes you uncomfortable when people start to dance or sway too much during the music, but it never feels empty. The two of you go enough that the creepy, overly enthusiastic greeting is kept to a minimum—only new guests need overzealous friendliness after all—but not so often that people know you well enough to stop and talk. Even without too much interaction, the crowd there has a warmth, a sense of belonging to a shared goal, or at least a shared focus. It's like being at a really good concert where everyone's a little high or tipsy and enjoying some good music. Communal and all that.

You haven't been to a concert in a good while. Maybe Sharon would be up for another. You guys saw Paul Simon in an outdoor theater a month or two after getting married. Sharon hadn't agreed to the weed you wanted to find—it was an outdoor concert after all—but it had been nice anyway. You remember the cool spring breeze cutting the early summer heat and how it caught Sharon's loose hair and tickled your

cheek with it. Sharon's hair had been sun-bleached then and you'd been much tanner. Her current deep walnut richness gives her a look of maturity and professionalism, but sometimes you miss those youthful, blonde tips. You miss enjoying a summer in the sun rather than dreading the heat.

A jacked-up Ram 2500, with massive chrome springs visible underneath the carriage and two-inch-deep treads on its oversized tires, rumbles its way into your lane, and you quickly glance over your other shoulder and swerve away into the next lane at the same time. Luckily there was a gap, since you were coming over either way. The truck, with its five-inch-wide vertical exhaust pipes that stick up, chrome and proud, is lifted so high the asshole probably can't see smaller cars in his passenger side lanes, so guesses and goes. You'd think he'd throw on the blinker before rolling over, but no. Atlanta drivers are bad enough. Atlanta truck drivers, even some of the professional big riggers instead of the wannabees like this guy, wouldn't be out of place in Mad Max.

You grip tightly to the steering wheel and twist your palms over the sticky plastic. It always gets a little sticky when it's hot out. You try to focus on the newest song, another bluesman with a guitar, and take deep breathes until you're willing to forget the asshole trucker. It's not the first or last time some road hog's going to make you do some quick dodging. It's part of the commute.

The music cuts off and turns into the dull, rhythmic buzzing of a phone call. It's your wife. You feel the steam rising again. As hot as it is outside, the back of your neck feels hotter.

She has to know you're driving. A couple of days ago, when the two of you went out for dinner—picked up fast food from Popeyes, if that counts as going out—she gave you a lecture all the way home after you looked, glanced really, at your phone at a red light. Right after a red light, but everyone was going straight. It wasn't like you were typing, you just read one little text. She went on about irresponsibility and immaturity and all that. And now she's calling you. She'll probably be mad if you don't answer, too, despite her speech.

You grab your phone off the dash and hover your thumb over the green button. The response, ready on your tongue, is sarcastic. Inflammatory. You've been married for three years—you know how to jab her vulnerabilities. It's an unintentionally well-practiced art that each of you has perfected through many fights and squabbles. You guys aren't one of *those* couples—the ones that get so loud neighbors debate calling the police, but you can both get in some quick, damaging pokes when you want to. It's not that either of you is cruel, but in the moment, when your brain feels hot and clouded, sometimes you lash out.

You answer. "I thought," you start before thinking better of it. "Hey," you say instead.

"Are you driving?"

"Yes, but you called."

"I know, I know, sorry, I'll be quick. I wanted to catch you before classes start, you won't believe it."

She pauses as if you're supposed to guess. You won't believe it, but you can guess it. Makes sense. "The president called. You're the new Secretary of Education?"

"Hah. Hah," she says, "No, but Jerry told me, you know how Jerry always knows the rumors, he told me I'm a finalist for an AFAEE. Can you believe it?"

"For an A-F-what?"

"I told you about them, it's an excellence in teaching award. I'm the youngest nominee."

"Wow, crazy." You hope you sound excited, but it's not very surprising. She's already been teacher of the month twice, even in her elite school.

"I know, right. They do the big check deal and take your picture and there's a website. I'm really excited."

"Big check?"

"Yeah, it's a cash prize. Seven-thousand, five-hundred. Impressive, right?"

"Seven-thousand?"

"But more than that, it's a huge honor. They only pick eight teachers and two principals from the whole area. Atlanta and the metro. Apparently Mr. Hollings nominated me. I thought he hated me."

"Don't you mean seven-hundred?" you ask. Even your wrists feel like they're sweating. You're A/C broke two months ago, but Sharon says repairs aren't in the budget yet.

“No, no, it’s thousand. It’s a big deal, not to mention a great resume-line. But, I’m only a finalist. They’ll narrow us down to eight today. I’m not even sure how many finalist there are.”

“I’m sure you’ll get it.” And you are sure. Pride should go with that certainty, but instead you feel a little queasy. Seven-thousand, five-hundred dollars. It takes you, what, three or four months to make that much money? And your company pays above average at fourteen an hour. She already makes more than you, which, by itself, you’re okay with. A bruised ego compared to paying rent, an easy choice there. In a vacuum, you’re okay with it. If her, and your, father would stop making a big deal of it, you’d be okay with it.

But now, on top of the prestige, she’s going to drop a fourth of a year’s salary on the table, just like that. Big check and everything. And, of course, she’ll get it. Other than you, everything seems to work out perfectly for her. She’s one of those people. Her dad’s right, you have to admit: her taste in men must be questionable to settle for you. He told her that once when you and Sharon were dating, only he called her taste shitty instead of questionable. He said it again, straight out, when you asked for his blessing. “It’s her biggest fault, you know: she has shitty taste in men.” But he gave you his blessing—he was nice enough not to add ‘reluctantly’ even if his tone said it. You got the distinct impression she’d already done some major work convincing him. He may make more than his fair share of sexist comments, but he seems to listen to his daughter, at least, and respected her enough to go along with the wedding.

That respect stops short for you. Whenever he barrels through the door at holidays or dinners—he always seems to be bursting into rooms like a SWAT team—he gives you a cold stare. Then he turns deliberately and asks her, “So, how are things, Noodle?” A part of you always expects to hear, “So, when are you dropping this Nancy and finding a real man.”

Your wife is talking. You’d zoned out. She still sounds overjoyed, so she probably didn’t notice, but then she stops and remembers that you’re driving.

After you hang up, you tell yourself that you need to do better when you see her tonight. This is a real win for her, but also for the upcoming budget. Seven-thousand will pay a lot of rent. Maybe you guys could even take a real vacation for fall break. Maybe that cruise you’ve both been talking about ever since it didn’t happen for your honeymoon.

You’d both been so happy then, even with the backup option. You’d rented a little cabin in the mountains up near Asheville for a long weekend. It was a simple little place, but there’d been snow-covered hills and crisp mornings. You’d walked, arm in arm, on the pristine, unblemished fluff. You don’t regret it at all, even if you picked it for the cost. Not having money didn’t seem to bother either of you as much back then, but now. . . Sharon says that mature tastes require a mature budget. As far as you can tell, that means avoiding spending, except for things people might see.

A new song comes on and has you tapping your fingers on the wheel. It’s another blues number, but it’s bubblier than the others. You’re not sure how to describe it better than that. Bouncy? Jake would probably go on a rant about youthful springtime

blooming eternal or hope in the face of the overwhelming abyss or something dramatic like that, something fancy he read in some corner of the internet where they like the old and obscure.

As you crest the next hill, you see taillights flash red ahead of you. Not a good sign. You've made good time so far, but a big clog now will definitely make you late. Sure enough, you don't quite make it to the apex of the next hill before hitting the growing traffic. As you inch forward and make it over the hill, all your fears are confirmed: it's a solid wall of dusty tail lights.

Not only does a traffic jam mean delays, it means the wind, your A/C, dies with it. Even more than being late, you dread being stuck in the blanket-like heat while fumes flow into your window. You're going to get cancer one day, from all these fumes, and it'll be Sharon's fault. When she does win, part of that prize will have to go to your car.

A semi blocks most of your view, so you swerve out into the shoulder to see the line a little better, then swerve back into your lane even faster as a minivan comes tumbling down the shoulder and past you in a violent blur. You try to breathe deeply until the spike of adrenaline passes. It's not your life you're worried about—the jackass would've hit the tail of your car, and only glancingly, so you'd have been fine. Your pocketbook, however, is much more fragile than that. The Raspberry's so old and shitty that you couldn't bear to keep paying insurance premiums on it, so you dropped them. Sharon disagreed, to put it nicely. After the fight, you'd agreed to get at least liability insurance—legality and all that.

But then you'd taken up delay tactics. You were going to get insurance soon. Every month you delay it's a lot of money saved. You haven't lied to her about it yet, although she may, conveniently, think you already got it. But that potentially leaves you on the hook for even a minor accident, as you won't only be paying damages for the car. Insurance is another area for her new big check, you realize.

A truck rumbles by, also on the shoulder. You grip the steering wheel a little tighter. It's a common frustration. It's been building day after day as you sit in line and watch assholes be rewarded as they jump around the traffic jams. A flush of heat runs up your spine while a bead of sweat runs down it. You're not entirely sure if it's from the sun pushing you past the breaking point, or sweating point, you suppose, or if it's anger. Another car flies past and you decide on anger.

The new song plays, the first that you've recognized, by Otis Redding. The guitar is light and bouncy, the melody relaxed. Redding's deep voice brings depth, but it's not sorrowful like the songs that have played so far, and you picture him there, on a dock, singing into the sunset. There's struggle in it, even resignation, but there's hope, too. Not from the lyrics, particularly, but from the song as a whole. You can see the bay, it's rolling waves lapping at his heels as he sings. You can hear the seagulls and the steady churn of a gentle surf. You can smell the salt. You take a deep breath and release it with deliberate slowness.

You and Sharon spent a near-perfect day, years ago, on a porch overlooking the Gulf. You'd been dating then, though there'd been loose talk of marriage. Nothing official, yet. Her family had invited you along on a summer trip to get to know you. To

interrogate you, more accurately. For most of the trip, you'd been a sweaty mess as her father pestered you with questions. That was the first time you'd realized her father was as big a blowhard as your own. Only one day from that trip really stood out for you. On the fourth day, her family had gone to tour an aquarium and a nature sanctuary. Sharon faked a stomach bug that morning, so they left you to take care of her—at her request and over her father's protest. Sharon's mother seemed to like you okay, or at least hide her disdain better, so she helped push him out the door. After a slow, calm morning, you two shared a lounge chair in the late afternoon and watched the waves crash along the beach while children played in the sand and seagulls sailed above them.

The two of you talked and shared and imagined the future. You came up with a short list of potential baby names, even though you both agreed that would be a ways off. You talked about places you could move or travel to. You hoped and dreamed. As the sun began to set, the two of you took a slow walk down the beach and around a boardwalk that circled a small bay. You proposed to her there, on that beach at sunset. Not the official proposal, that came later with a ring and flowers and candles and an overpriced dinner. You'd both been full of joy and certainty as the sun flashed gold on each cresting wave and a gentle breeze tugged lightly at her hair.

You take in another breath. It's been a long time since you thought about that day, that moment on the beach. You'd hadn't had cameras with you, not even a cell phone, so there were no pictures or snaps or tweets or posts to capture the moment—no throw-back Thursday to remind you of it. But Otis Redding had brought it all

flooding back. You were a different person then. Young and stupid, for sure, but maybe all the better for it.

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A3 You step lightly past the desk and to the left. The right hallway leads to the bathroom and accounting closets. They actually have nicely sized offices from the few times you've walked past while their doors were open, but the dispatchers and PR people you work with don't often interact with the paper pushers, or even see them much, so you tend to think of them as closet dwellers. Unseen shufflers of paperwork. Even after management switched over to laptops and digital reports for all the ambulances instead of clipboards, there always seems to be more and more paper coming in and out of those back rooms.

Down the left hallway, you pass the first conference room. It's rarely used, with its fine oak table and ten expensive looking chairs. Next you pass the tiny, often-used break room with two scratched up plastic chairs and the management offices. Charlie, the two assistant managers—promoted from the rank and field, like Charlie before them, with no management skills to speak of—the head mechanic, the scheduler, and the public relations all have offices along the row. Several of them share an office, while Charlie's is as large as two or three of the others. None of them are in yet.

The dispatch office is at the end of the hallway. Beyond it is the storage room and repair garage for the fleet. You have three in-house mechanics who end up working on three or four units at any given time. Since you were hired, two years ago,

the fleet has more than doubled in size. They've added on two more mechanics as well. You don't really know the two new guys, but get along with Grant, the EMT turned lead mechanic. He held the job alone and overworked for a few years before they gave him some help. He's somehow both always cheerful and always grumbling about having too much work. Maybe he likes having too much work. He's a goofy country boy, even in his fifties. He's dating a younger EMT who's cute and every bit as country. They both commute even farther than you do from a place they bought together—way out somewhere toward Chattanooga, up near Johns' Mountain Wildlife reserve they said. In the sticks is where it is. Probably better than a duplex in the suburbs, even with the extra half hour drive. But, it'd be forever from Sharon's school, and who knows how far they have to go for a grocery store out there.

You open the door to the dispatch office slowly. Carefully. It squeaks a bit, as always. Grant keeps saying he's gonna fix that. He does odd jobs around the office, even while overworked. He hasn't gotten to the squeak yet, unfortunately. Terence, Kate, Marissa, and Richard all turn as you walk in. Kate and Richard always beat you in. They live close, so it's not fair, really. Terence works nights, but is waiting on you again. The other two night-shifters are already gone—you're not sure why he's always the one who stays until you get in. Not that it happens that often.

"Great job again, buddy," Terence says. "Fucking punctual as shit, man."

He always talks like he's joking—like he's riffing on an old pal, even though you only see each other a few minutes a day at shift change. He ends every sentence with this dumbass little laugh, too. Every single sentence. But he rarely sounds like he's

joking, despite the tone. He'll say any asine thing he feels like, then laugh it off with his irritating little nervous chuckle. You say, "Sorry, eighty-five was brutal. Another accident."

"Blame it on the drivers again," he says. "Classic shit. Atlanta drivers, Atlanta drivers. You should see D.C. man. That's some traffic."

He lived in D.C. for one summer with an uncle or something he told you once. When you worked nights with him a while back, you tried to avoid conversation, but he likes telling people his stories. His laughy little stories. Must be the only time he's ever left Atlanta, the way he talks about it. Must be a magic promised land of milk and honey, the way he talks about it. Except the traffic, you suppose.

"I got here as fast as I could, believe me."

He laughs before speaking this time— "That's why you gotta leave earlier. It's called thinking ahead, buddy. Adults do that sometimes."—and after.

"I'll try that." You walk past him and to your desk. Unfortunately, he uses the same desk he does during his shift, and then Jimmy takes over for you for the next. And Terence again and then you. A big loop that continues five days a week. Which means you spend eight hours a day taking care of it, only to have the other two spend sixteen messing it up again. A few chips and more than a few crumbs are grouped on one side, as if he tried to brush them onto the floor before giving up. "Sorry to keep you waiting," you say.

"No, thank you," he says, setting up the punchline he uses almost every day, even when you're not late. "I get an extra few cents a day waiting on you. You're gonna buy me a new bike one of these days."

He switches up what he's saving up for often, but he's mentioned the bike before. Maybe he's actually saving for that one, though you're not sure if he's talking about a bicycle or a motorcycle. You doubt he bought the bouncy castle he kept talking about. He said he wanted to start a rental deal on the side.

"Maybe you can afford the helmet too, now." That's your attempt at banter. You're not proud of it, but it's probably not the dumbest thing you've said to him. Mostly you try to be so dull that he has to stop talking to you. You try a forced laugh on the end. Maybe he'll assume it's funny.

"Will do. Carry on then, mates." He salutes as he backs out the door.

He's full-on insufferable. You hope he never switches to day shift. At least the other three on day crew aren't so bad. Charlie upped the shift sizes a while back, two instead of one for nights, and four instead of three for the days, so the room is full. Your company handles 911 calls for Marietta only, but has other contracts for a much larger area, including most of Atlanta and out into the countryside. Nursing homes, rehabs, dialysis, and psychiatrics. With the emergencies mixed in, the phones don't often stop ringing, even if most of it is appointment set ups and updates.

"He leave me any active runs?" you ask the others.

Kate occupies the desk next to yours and is less awful than the rest—not that Marissa or Richard are really awful, but you never really know how to talk to them

either. You'd go so far as to say Kate isn't even awful at all, so she stands out. "Nah," she says, "we took the few they had. Slow morning so far. As we like."

You both act like you want slow days. As if sitting in a small, windowless room is somehow better if you're bored rather than busy. Maybe she really does like it slow and boring. Either way, it's something to talk about.

You try to settle down into your chair more comfortably—an effort in futility. The conference rooms get used maybe once a month, and any one of those chairs would cost more than all five of the plastic pieces of shit they give you to use. They're technically desk chairs, they can go up and down and roll around and everything, but the seats are simple slabs of formed plastic that curved into an S.

Richard, on the large side, is the only one who seems suited to them. He's a loose, liquid kind of large, but tall enough to carry the weight well. He even looks light on his feet. Maybe these chairs are meant for people with more heft. You have more fluff than when you started—answering phones and snacking most of the day does that. You're comfortable enough, for now. You're free to move around, stand, or even take a few short breaks, but the chair takes its toll in the long run. By the end of your shift, in eight hours, comfort will be a distant memory. The dull ache to the left of your spine at around your L5—or is it your T5?—will be back. Whatever vertebrae. Your lower back.

Several of the other dispatchers are also EMTs, Terence for one. Kate and Richard too. You're not sure about Marissa, but you think she is. They laughed at you for a good while the first time you read 'dementia' wrong. "Dem-in-tee-a" isn't so

ridiculous a reading, you don't think. You've picked up a enough medical knowledge and jargon now to pronounce most everything and to know what's serious and what's not, but you'd only gotten the job because Sharon's father knew a guy. You were raised to not approve of handouts but a job's a job.

Richard's been on a call since you walked in, but you've all developed selective hearing. With so many calls overlapping, not to mention alerts, rings, and radio updates from the units, it's a necessary skill. Where it gets you in trouble is outside work, when you've found yourself tuning out Sharon on several occasions. She doesn't often call you out on it when you respond with a guess, but she gives you a look that suggests she knows you don't have clue.

"So, did that kid bother you again?" Kate asks. She likes to back off her desk a bit and spin slowly when things are slow. It makes you dizzy watching her spin, but she says it's relaxing.

"Yeah, Jake. He accosted me again." You think accosted is a funny word.

"What was it this time? More asteroids?"

You're a bit surprised she remembers that. You were complaining about it last week, but only casually. You don't bring him up all that often, surely. "No, music this time. He'd found some old blues song."

She snorts. She does that fairly often when laughing. You're used to it. "What a weird kid. Shouldn't he be telling you about Pokémon or something?"

"A normal kid would, but he likes old stuff. This one sounded real old. All scratchy-record sounding, even on his iPod."

"He's got an iPod?"

"Yeah, an old one. He bought it from a thrift store. His father won't let him have a phone, so he can't store music that way. He'll have to buy himself one eventually, I imagine. His dad's cheap."

She shrugs. "Sounds like mine."

"Mine too, now that I think of it." It's not your dad you think back to, it's the song. To the sorrowful moaning and the bleak static in the background. "It was a cool song. Sounded deep."

"Deep? How?"

"He was saying, this morning—he read it somewhere—that you could hear the loneliness. . . How'd he put it? Blood-curdling longing? Something like that."

Kate raises a pencil thin brow. She must pluck religiously to get eyebrows that thin and tidy. "Blood-curdling? Creepy kid."

"No, it wasn't like that. It was. . ." You wave your hand in a circular motion—a gesture of searching and Kate's eyebrow raises somehow a little higher, pulling up one side of her nose and mouth with it. She tilts her head slightly and looks at you, imploring: a request to not break expectations. That's how you interpret it anyway. "Come now," her doubtful expression says, "you know the drill. We complain, we mock, we share conspiratorial laughter. Don't mess it up."

"Yeah, pretty creepy, I guess," you say at last.

"I bet. Following you around like some morbid shadow."

"Every step I take, every move I make," you add.

“Don’t make it worse. You’re own little, weird, singing stalker. That’s like some Chucky shit.”

“Chucky?”

“Yeah—seems like this kinda-weird but overall harmless doll, but then, all the sudden, he’s slicing your neck with a straight razor and laughing like an old asthmatic truck driver.”

You glance over, trying to judge how serious she’s being, but she keeps a straight face until you look away. “I dunno about all that. He really is harmless. Just doesn’t get social cues, I think. He might be a little spectrum.”

She pulls in the left corner of her mouth, making her cheek puff up. “Oh, please, she says, “that’s what they all want you to think.”

“They? There’s a whole group of murderous dolls masquerading as socially awkward neighbors out there? It’s not just Jake?”

She laughs—no snort this time, so maybe a pity laugh. “Yeah, there’re a bunch. Chucky always got stopped as a lone doll, so they’re trying something new: masquerading as kids all over the place, even controlling kids like freaky little puppets.” She’s laughing hard now.

Maybe Kate’s a little awful too. Or has an awful sense of humor at any rate. “Now that’s creepy,” you say.

Kate slaps your arm. “Cheer up, buddy. I’m sure he’s not really a homicidal doll trying to get your guard down. I’m sure he’s your run-of-the-mill creepy stalker kid who tortures squirrels and shit.”

"Squirrels?"

"You know, one of the classic signs of a psychopath? Torturing animals for fun? She watches you, then swats your arm and says, "I'm only messing."

You try to straighten out your face. Bring it back to neutral. You fake a chuckle. "Yeah, he probably makes rabbits or something listen to his music and shit."

"And then listen to his deep analysis. That's his brand of torture. He must think you're a little bunny then. Torturing you too."

"Or he's finally moving on to tougher game."

She pokes you in the belly. "Maybe not so much tougher, Mr. Squishy."

You try to suck in, to flex your abs, but it's too late. She's pulled back her hand. It's about two years too late, anyway. What little abs you had in high school, even during your few semesters attempting college, have long since vanished. You squirmed at her poke, so now try to readjust again. Your thighs are hot against your seat. "Hey now, I'm no piece of meat to be poked and prodded," you say. To play it cool, you add, "I'm to be admired from afar."

She smirks. Her eyes, a deep brown, squint slightly. "So, you think you're worth admiring then. We'll have to see."

"I. . ." you try to scratch your suddenly itchy spine against the back of your chair but it's too slick to get any real traction. Her chair is awfully close to yours. You didn't notice her rolling so close. It must have been during all the spinning. Probably accidental. She's still spinning, but very, very slowly. She's too close and her knee won't

have room to pass yours this time. Inch by inch she rotates until her knee rests against yours. You look up. She's looking straight at you.

Continue to the 4th Choice (from A3) on page 46.

*

4TH CHOICE

- *Man, you're married, what are you doing? Your chair spins too, so, if it's time to spin away, turn to E1 on page 49.*
- *It's just your knees, that's innocent enough. And, somehow, exciting. You're not doing anything wrong—she's initiating it. Plus, it's nice to be appreciated. If you want to see where things go from here, turn to E2 on page 50.*

*

E1: She's very cute and her eyes look deep. They threaten to pull you in. But this isn't you. Even if you were inclined to this kind of. . .behavior, you're not nearly smooth enough to pull it off. You're lucky to have gotten one beautiful woman to think you're all right. There's no way you could manage to convince two. You'd screw it up for sure, and that'd leave you screwed with one or both. And not in the good way.

Plus, you love Sharon. Things aren't always easy, and she's not always the easiest woman to be around, but you really do love her.

You shift away, only a little and your knees part again. They weren't really touching anyway—divided by two layers of the thick khaki's you all have to wear to work. You're careful to move away slowly. Casually. You don't want to embarrass her. With deliberate effort, you look away.

It was probably an accident anyway. There's no way she'd be hitting on you. She knows you're married. She probably spun too much and drifted over next to you. You look back, to check, and she's not looking anymore. She's not smiling, but she doesn't look sad. She's reading something on her screen. Normal. You should apologize, you think. But for what? She wasn't trying to do anything.

If you came from A3, turn to A4 on page 51. If you came from C3, turn to C4 on page 72.

E2 Her eyes look like deep, youthful pools. They remind you of a river—a stream really—you and your friends found on a camping trip years ago when you were in Boy Scouts. Your dad had made you go until high school, then given up on you. Huck went on past Eagle, of course. You enjoyed some of it. Like the stream. It came down off a small mountain outside Chat. One section of it was particularly rocky and you all followed it down over little waterfalls and ripples. One section flattened out, catching about a hot-tub sized pool of fresh, clear water. Rocks formed benches and stools as the water rushed, cool and free, around your legs. Pure relaxation. You wish you could dive in.

You can't look away. Her lips curl, only slightly, into the hint of a smile. You feel yourself respond: a nervous twitch of your own lips and a shake in your shoulders. You try to do as little as possible. You haven't felt this nervous, for. . . a long time. You've been shocked for years that Sharon was interested in you, and now someone as cute as

Kate is showing interest too? Best to do nothing. You'll mess things up if you try anything.

Are you ready to act anyway? Could you even pull something like that off? Probably not. Either way, it's nice to be appreciated. Kate takes in a breath, preparing to speak. She leans forward as if she's about to whisper.

If you came from A3, continue on A4 on page 51. If you came from C3, turn to C4 on page 72.

*

A4 Your phone rings. They must have pushed you to the top of the queue. For being late, probably. You answer it before the second ring.

It came in as an emergency call—they dialed 911 instead of your company's number that frequent flyers or facilities would use—so you answer accordingly. You turn forward to your computer and quickly begin logging in, in case you need to forward some information quickly.

Someone on the other line answers you, "Hello?" The voice is scratchy, wet, and sounds like it's echoing through a tunnel, like the caller is an old man who's been stuck too long at the bottom of a well with nothing but alcohol and cigarettes. Now that call would be interesting to dispatch. You'd have to get a full technical rescue team out there and everything. Pulleys and ropes and shit. This will, almost certainly, not be as fun as that. You ask, "Sir, can you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you," the caller says. The voice gets louder as it goes, "I went and dropped the phone on you."

"It's fine, ma'am," you say. By the end of her sentence, you noticed that, while deep voiced, the caller must be an elderly woman. The cigarettes and alcohol guess is spot on, you're sure. And probably some COPD, too. "Thank you for calling Atlanta Rescue, what's your emergency?"

"I was in the kitchen before and I was going to make a pecan pie for. . ."

She says pecan pie exactly like your grandmother used to—with extra emphasis on the 'p.' Lots of people say 'pee-can,' but she puts an extra pop into the 'p' sound that brings back a flood of memories. Your grandmother was an exceedingly kind woman who made your grandfather, and father too, seem even more boorish and out of place by comparison. She treated them both like petulant children and you loved her for it. And for the never-ending stream of pies too. Mostly pecan, but yam and apple and even the rarer chocolate pie. Her house, a little shotgun type on concrete blocks next to the trailer park in their tiny country town that hadn't grown or shrunk in fifty years or more, smelled most often of corned beef and cigarette smoke, but on Saturdays and holidays it smelled of pies. You'd lay on your stomach on the rough, orange carpet, watching old cartoons—your grandmother couldn't stand the new ones—and breathe in the flaky warmth and golden brown smell of a baking pie. Cinnamon meant apple, brown sugar meant yams, and pecan had it's own woody flavor.

The woman on the phone said something meaningful finally. You're not sure what, you zoned out when she started explaining all about why she'd gone to the kitchen, but something shook you out of it. You cut her off. "I'm sorry, ma'am, bad connection, what's the emergency?"

"I found him on the floor. He's not breathing great."

"Ok, we can help you. Who did you find?"

"Gary. He's shaking real bad. He won't eat. He seemed happy enough this morning, but now he's in a real state."

"Is he conscious?"

"Not really. He's got his eyes closed. He's panting real heavy."

"Ok, ma'am, we'll get an ambulance out to help you. Can you tell me his age and medical history?"

"Of course. He's only eight, but he's never had great health. Breathing problems all his life, but that's normal for his breed. He's a real fighter—"

You stop typing. You'd started a run sheet. You were a moment away from keying up the mike and sending the unit. "Ma'am, is Gary a dog?"

"Yes, my little precious Gary. I said that. He got some dental work a couple months back and had his appendix—"

"I'm sorry Gary's not doing well, but we're not a veterinary service. You'll have to call one."

Her voice gets hard and even scratchier. "My vet won't come out. I already called them. You've got to help me, he's real sick."

"I'm sorry, but we can't help. This is an emergency line, ma'am, I'm going to have to hang up."

"Now you listen here, I pay your goddamn salary, so you're going to get someone over—"

“Good bye. I’m sorry.” You have to talk over her when it’s clear she’s not stopping to listen. As you go to hang up the phone—a physical action since they have old corded phones in the dispatch office—you can hear her shouting on the way down. The click is especially satisfying. For moments like this, you do appreciate a real hang up.

“Another dog?” Kate asks.

You bob your head and sigh. “And telling me all about paying my salary. As if she’s paying any taxes. Probably living off some bullshit disability claim. Her and her seventeen dogs.”

“I got my first dog call a couple weeks ago, but it was for a bite.”

“I think this was my third? Maybe second. Last time the woman seemed honestly confused about who to call. We were the back-up plan for this lady. I guess her vet’s not the visiting sort. I know some vets do visits, right? For horses and stuff.”

“A little hard to stick a horse in a pet carrier, I imagine,” says Kate.

Not all calls are like that, but plenty of them are. Too many. Stomach aches. Broken toes. Misbehaving toddlers. That last one had only happened once. You were doubly confused by that one, since, even if she thought calling 9-1-1 on her kid was okay, why’d she pick the medical option instead of police?

The calls are split by an automated voice deal. Dial one for fire and medical emergencies, dial two for police. Even filtered, you get a steady stream of ridiculousness. Anything, really, might come out of that phone. It happens frequently enough that it almost becomes the expectation for every call. Lately, callers have had to

convince you they're serious, unlike when you first started, when every ring got your heart racing when the 9-1-1 line blinked red. It's not that there aren't any emergencies—there are many, of course—it's that the dumb calls stick out.

What you remember, more often than not, is the moment when your intense focus is betrayed by stupidity and monotony. On top of that, even the actual medical calls are rarely true emergencies. You've heard chest pain so often, and been griped at for sending units hot—with lights and sirens blasting—for heartburn too many times. It's not your fault, you're only repeating the information you were given. Lots of things can sound like heart attacks on a panicked phone call. So what if the EMT or paramedic had to drive fast—they seem like they enjoy driving fast from what you can tell. Better safe than sorry, you'd think.

But you can't dismiss them. Or hang up until you're sure. One call six months ago, for example, you'd have sworn was a prank. You almost hung up before realizing. It sounded exactly like a bad impression of a kid's voice—too earnest to be real. Too precious. After several hellos, he'd said his daddy wouldn't move. Then he started telling you about his daddy and his house. At some point sincerity rang through. Some terror in his tiny, high pitched voice you couldn't ignore. You'd redirected a unit there—it arrived in six minutes and fifty-three seconds. An impressive time, but it had felt like an hour. You'd tried talking this little boy through it. To keep him calm. He'd been too young to talk him through CPR, but he stayed by his father's side until the ambulance came. You'd stayed on the phone. That dad hadn't made it. You never heard about the

boy. You weren't even sure he'd had a mom around. Probably did. . .there's no way to know for sure. Patient confidentiality and all that.

Despite the real calls, the occasional life and death moments, it's hard to take every ring seriously. The reality is, most will be routine. Take some info. Send a lay-down taxi. Clear the unit. Send them somewhere else. Today isn't much different. You dispatch two accidents—one with minor injuries. Most likely faked injuries for future lawsuits. It's hard to tell for sure over the phone, but you imagine you're right. Some people sound a little too calm about being in pain. Some people sound a little too happy to be in pain. You take a few medical calls: chest pain, vomiting that won't stop, a possible stroke, and an hour-long nose bleed. You've heard of longer. Much longer. You get a few injuries: a ladder fall that sounds pretty bad, bones out and all, a simple broken arm at the skating rink, and a fall down a long flight of stairs—not even one break on that one, so it sounds precautionary.

For the first month or so, several of those would have had you sweating. Would have had you asking Kate or Richard for help. Marissa doesn't help people. She gets in and out without much talk. Somehow, despite being a dispatcher, you barely hear her throughout the day. Now, however, it's all routine, so you mostly goof off. Richard seems off today with his jokes. He's usually funnier.

Kate is her usual sarcastic brand of comedian—making equal fun out of the EMS workers and the patients. She targets nurses for their paranoia or incompetence, sending out nursing home patients with sprained ankles, as if the nurses there couldn't fix that. You both know they're governed by contracts and send people to avoid

lawsuits, but they're fair game to mock. She goes after the drivers for accents or slowness or when they clear after extended delays that you both know mean they're getting food or taking a break while they claim to be cleaning up. One unit keeps clearing late, and you suspect they're making out, or more, in the back. It's a new girl you haven't met who's riding with one of the firefighters who part-times with the company. Rumors about that sort of thing sail through the office every so often. Each unit has a bed back there after all, even if it's a tiny cot.

You clock out at one minute past three with a mild headache hiding behind your left eye. It mostly doesn't bother you, but whenever you face the sun, high in the western sky, the ache pops out again to grab you. The ache is dull and steady, so you can try to ignore it. You're fairly used to that spot now. It shows up frequently, always the same ache in the same spot. It could be worse. You call it your migraine-lite, since it's light-sensitive, but isn't debilitating. Sharon's migraines are a whole different thing. Or at least you assume they are, the way she becomes a vampire—using curtains and couch cushions as a coffin substitute.

You text her on your way to your car:

Leaving now. Food later?

You know she won't be home for a good while after you—her whole car pool stays late for grading, or clubs, or basketball games. It's always something for them. Because of all that, dinner most often falls to you. You're no chef, but you've been trying hard with it lately. Your baked chicken came out dry and bland, but your breaded

chicken, cooked right in a frying pan with popping oil, surprised you. Sharon was surprised too. A little too much so.

You phone vibrates and you check her response

*Will be off early today. Meet
somewhere?*

It seems she's forgiven you. Or is acting like she's forgiven you. Sometimes she does. Sometimes it waits until a new fight starts and then it all comes out. Either way, you'll go along with it. If she wants to ignore it, then you're fine with that. If you bring it up, you'd end up apologizing anyway. You apologize too often as it is, without going out of your way.

You imagine early is relative term. You text:

Sure. Chicken? Burgers?

You pull out of the parking lot and down the service road until it runs into a real one.

How about something nice.

Her response pops up while you wait for a gap to turn left. It generally takes a little while. This time there's a bit of a gap coming a little way down—looks big enough to sneak into. You quickly type before hitting send and dropping your phone into the seat next to you.

K let me know

The gap shrinks as you turn—the leading car from the next group is racing to close it. You speed up and make it in, but get a long, enthusiastic honk for your trouble from the speedster. You wave vaguely behind you. You'd flip him off, but in some cases

nonchalance in the face of rage is even more fun. And more effective in encouraging them to freak out more, you've found. You see shaking fists and waving arms from them in your rear view—it seems it wasn't only the driver, but a whole little car full of assholes. You can see of big arms and heads, there are four of them and together they may outweigh the little Dodge Dart they're riding in.

Crazies will be crazy, you think, as you speed up and set in for the long drive. Your phone interrupts again. Sharon must be in a planning period to be responding so quickly.

*I'd say Shoya's, but we always go
there. Know anything nicer?*

There's a decent bit of traffic and the little Dart behind you seems to be trying to pull up alongside, but has so far been unable to. You drive with one hand and a knee and type a response.

*Shoya's is already pretty pricy,
you want fancier than that?*

You push the bottom corner of your phone under your leg so you'll be able to feel and see her next text come in. You notice a hole opening on your right and try to fade into the slower lane. Your drive's so far, you're more often passing people in the right than cruising in the left, but these guys behind you are chomping at the bit, so you'll let them pass. Before you can get over, the Dart slips into the gap and speeds up beside you, making its four cylinders squeal. They pull up beside you—now with their windows down and arms hanging out of them. A forest of middle fingers jump out the

windows and point to the afternoon sky—even the front passenger adds to the thicket by leaning half over the driver.

You wave at them, acting calm. You're less calm now. A little less calm, that's all. They'll get it out of their systems you're sure. You stop waving and don't make eye contact. Your phone vibrates again and you glance down.

*Let's splurge a bit. A night out. It'll be
good ;)*

She must have had a good day—she's not really one to use emojis often—despite the little tiff between the two of you. But you agree. It's been a while, with how busy she keeps herself, since the two of you did much together. The occasional TV show before she passes out. Some nice times in the bed a time or two a week. You've both gotten pretty efficient in that area lately, so it doesn't take too long. Some time together sounds nice. Not to mention some good food.

You steal a glance sideways at the maniacs. They're still yelling and flipping you off. You go back to not looking. They'll give up.

With one hand and occasional glances down, you text:

Sounds great

!

You hope that's enthusiastic enough. You send the exclamation point along after in case she thinks you're not excited about it.

The next light turns red. You debate running it, but decide against it. There may be a camera. You press and hold hard on your brakes and come to a headache-

inducing stop. The ache behind your eye never left, but it reasserts itself at the jerky stop. The Dart jerks to a stop beside you and the two in the back swing their doors open. They're big fellows, maybe around thirty, but dress like teenagers sneaking into an 18-and-up rock concert. One wears a Slayer shirt and a metal spiked necklace.

You step back on the gas. The light is green, and has been for a second, but the other directions of traffic haven't gotten far into the intersection yet. You speed out and through, making one quick-starter brake and honk at you. You check in the rear-view mirror and see them jumping back into the Dart to try and follow, but they get blocked by the tide of crossing traffic. Thank god for that. You breathe in and out a few times, slowly. Surely, they wouldn't have done anything for real. You only cut them off. You get cut off three times a day and don't freak out. But you can't afford to buy a new back window right now. Or side window. Or hospital bills depending on how far they took it. "Crazy fucks," you say to the car. You breathe in deeply again and try to let it go.

You mull over the near incident over and over while stuck, again, in traffic. Luckily you get out earlier than the average work shift, so the way back isn't quite as bad as the way out, but it's still Atlanta. Still Atlanta drivers. Who today, once again, show how nuts they really are. It's not like you did anything anyway, you keep telling yourself. If they'd been going a normal speed, you'd have had all the room in the world to get in there. And where are they rushing off to, anyway? It's not like there weren't going to be any red lights or even a clear lane if they could have gone a bit faster. Crazy fucks, the lot of them. Hillbilly, backwater, mouth-breathing redneck assholes.

You tell yourself it's not a big deal, but find yourself arguing it out again. As if they'd apologize if they could hear impeccable logic. Who cares? You'll never see them again.

You're now more annoyed at yourself for obsessing over it than you were at them in the first place. They're ignorant assholes who missed some life lessons at some point. Nothing you can do. You're a mature and educated man. Somewhat educated, at least. You got pretty good general knowledge from all those Gen-Ed courses after all. Plus, your wife's an educator and a genius—that must rub off on you at least a little. You thought you'd left the high school bullshit behind long ago. Not that you were bullied, particularly. Maybe a little in ninth and tenth. Nothing too bad. Either way, you're a self-confident, working adult now, so why do a few crazy people bother you so much? Get so far under your skin and make you go over and over your defenses? You develop several logical arguments for your own innocence and their ridiculousness.

Jake's in the driveway, his iPod out, his feet out wide on either side of his bike to balance it with his tiptoes. You remember seeing him wheel away at the same time you did this morning, but you begin to doubt the memory. It seems somehow more plausible, instead, that he never moved from that spot all day—that he stood and waited and listened to that one song for hours and hours. But he couldn't have. He must have gone to school. That's where he must have been riding off to this morning. You have to wonder how long he's been waiting. Kate might have been right: it is a little creepy.

He's holding a shoebox in his hands.

Continue to I1 (from A5) on page 102.

C3 The traffic jam isn't as large as you feared and you pass the accident before too long. It looks like a minor fender bender and they pull onto the shoulder as much as they could. This time, at least, the shoulder skippers didn't get much out of it. One of them, in fact, is stuck out on the shoulder as you pass. You chuckle—half about how mad you got and half in satisfaction. Maybe it may be petty, but you're not going to let that stop you.

You pull into the parking lot four minutes late. Great. It's not the first time, but it's not common, either. Not really.

Despite the office's light use, it's a big building. It houses two conference rooms and a big training room along with several offices and a break room, not to mention the massive bay. When it was the company's only office, the halls were often full and you could find someone to talk to in the break room. Now the bay looks empty and looming with only three or four ambulances in at a time for repairs. Supposedly, they're keeping both offices with the expectation of further growth, but today, there's only a few cars in the parking lot.

The lobby is all show with awards, plaques, newspaper articles plastering the walls and a long counter like a shiny black caterpillar. There's a computer station there, as if it should have a receptionist behind it, but they only bring someone up if a big client is coming by with a new potential contract. On the left-hand wall, and out of place in its practicality, a computer sits on a small, wheeled cart. Its screen, as always, displays a time-clock program. You try to type as quickly as you can, hoping to avoid

having one more minute roll over mid-type, but that only makes you miss a character. You try again and successfully log in four minutes late. The computer clock blinks to five a moment later.

The clock is the first hurdle, the night shift is the second, so you don't slow down. One of them will have had to stay over his shift a bit—it's only five minutes, but they act like it's the end of the world. You and the other dispatchers hold ambulance crews on mandatory overtime more often than not, but a couple minutes over for a dispatcher and they flip their shit.

You hope it's not Terrence that waited, but it probably will be. He volunteers for everything he can and then moans about it, as if God himself reached down from his heavenly throne and appointed Terrence, among all men, to toil and suffer. He's a pissy version of Job, but without the disaster.

That thought surprises you. You're familiar with the basic stories and references, like David and Goliath, or the fish and bread deal, but Job isn't a story you often think about. But now you remember that the last sermon you heard, a few months back, was about Job. You remember thinking that it seemed like a ridiculously cruel test—losing all twelve of his children, or however many it was, on top of his wealth. He was rewarded and rich again at the end of the story, but the pastor hadn't mentioned all his dead kids again. Was Job cool with that? Like, "God took all my kids, but at least I've got a bunch of sheep?"

But you guess that's the point—that Job was cool with God after all that. Giveth and taketh away or however it goes. But his kids? Seems pretty cruel.

You pass the conference rooms, the offices, the break room, the training room, all empty. The halls are beige and decorated with even more awards and framed newspaper stories. For all your personal beefs with Charlie as a boss, you have to admit this place must be making bank. They keep buying more ambulances and, as you heard a week ago, a plane. You're not sure why they want or need a plane, but they're getting one. Unless Kate was messing with you.

You turn deeper into the building and, before you can open the dispatch dungeon's door, it swings open toward you. Terrence sticks his head out around the side. Of course. His face goes from brick-flat and curious to positively gleeful.

"Punctual as shit, my man. Fucking solid," he says, his zit-riddled face breaking into a smile. He's got more acne than skin, even though he can't be a teen anymore. He begins every sentence with a nervous little chuckle.

"Sorry, traffic was brutal," you say.

"Classic shit, Atlanta drives, Atlanta drivers," he says while waving his hands over his head, "You should see D.C. That was some warzone shit, but I got to work on time."

He lived in D.C. for maybe a single summer as far as you can tell, but never stops bringing it up. Like living in D.C. is some kind of fucking exotic locale to brag about. The way he tells it, it seems to shift between a cultural utopia and a crime-soaked hellscape from one moment to the next. You're not sure how it can be both so fancy and so downtrodden at the same time, but you don't ask questions. A question would be a sign of interest and he doesn't need any extra motivation to talk.

"An accident's an accident," you say, hoping that's bland enough to kill the conversation.

It isn't. "That's why you leave early. I leave forty-five minutes early for every shift in case there's a backup."

You cock your head and lift an eyebrow. "But why? Don't you live like five minutes away?"

"Hey, you never know. Plus, I've got time to get ready and shit. It's a win-win."

You wonder what could possibly be involved in getting ready when all he has to do is log in to a computer and answer phones, but you don't ask. Instead, you try to squeeze past him into the door. He doesn't move out of the way very much, so you scoot past him sideways. Inside the room are Richard, Marissa, and Kate—all sitting at computer desks in a dim room. An empty desk sits next to Kate on the left, while the back wall is covered in flat screens that permanently display local area maps. Small red markers indicate active ambulances. Kate, pushed back from her desk in her rolling chair and waves. You wave back.

Looking back at Terrence, you say, "Sorry to keep you."

"Ah, forget it," he says and almost sounds like he means it. He salutes you all as he leaves and says, "Have fun in the dungeon, it's off to the titty bars for me."

He says that fairly often, like it's a joke worth repeating. Maybe it's not a joke and he goes to titty bars a lot. At eight in the morning. You're not sure with him. You weren't on the night shift with him long, thankfully, but he'd been nearly unbearable the whole time. It's been months since you moved to days, but you won't soon forget

how frustrating seeing him daily was. Maybe that's why even pettiness from him, even short during interactions, bother you so quickly. You try shrugging it off, but there's heat in your cheeks as you head for your desk.

Kate's your favorite of the three you work with now and doesn't have much competition. Richard's kind of goofy and you don't really know Marissa, who somehow manages to never talk to you. You tried a few times, but she didn't respond. At all. You didn't know people did that. Kate, on the other hand, says plenty.

All three are EMTs. You think Marissa's even a paramedic or nurse or something. Medical training isn't required for dispatching, but helps. Almost every other dispatcher you've met has field experience or at least has been through, or is in, school for it. You only got the job because Sharon's dad knows Charlie.

You plop into your chair—yours for eight hours of the day, anyway. For the eight hours after that, it's Gene's and the eight hours after that it's Terrence's, and then yours again and around in an unbroken circle except the weekends when the part-timers come in. There's no real reason that any of you need to have set chairs, the computers work through a log-in and the phones are all the same, but you do. Marissa's by the wall, Richard's next to her, and you and Kate are on the other wall. Maybe it's distance that makes Marissa ignore you.

Kate spins in her chair next to you, batting at the flexible mic sticking out from her headset with a finger. She bought the headset herself. You ask her if it's been busy.

She says, "Marissa's had one. Richard's got the next. Slow start."

"Any holdovers?"

"Nope. Seems they cleared everything an hour ago." Kate, spinning, examines the ceiling tiles. She's going to have a rough day if she's already as bored as she looks.

"A morning crew jumped in early to take the one we've gotten."

"So," says Kate, "what held you up this time? Traffic?"

"Yeah. Some accident," you say, "and Jake, a bit."

She laughs. She's quick to laugh. You found it obnoxious at first, since some things just aren't that funny and it's a little annoying when someone acts like they are. Eventually, you stopped minding it. Her laughter sounds genuine, at least, unlike Terrence's nervous tic. If you're going to be stuck in a tiny, sealed room all day, there may as well be laughter. "That weirdo again?" she asks.

"He was waiting on me, as per uzh," you say. You heard 'per uzh' on some show. You're not sure why you said it; you feel a little silly.

"Did he tell you more space stuff? Asteroids and shit?"

"It was music today."

"Music?"

"Yeah, some blues song. It was pretty haunting."

"Haunting? Why's a kid into creepy blues?"

"Not haunting like that, I meant. . . deep, you know? Jake was saying it was lonely. What was his phrase. . . 'Blood-curdling terror' or something?"

"Damn. And that's not creepy."

"He was talking about the guy singing, or humming really. He said you could hear his loneliness."

“But that’s weird, right? For a kid?” She’s laughing a good bit. Ever since the first time you complained about Jake making you late, she asks after him every so often. She seems to think he’s even younger and weirder than he is.

“He’s a teen, really. But he’s, what do you call it? Pretentious? No. Precocious. Yeah, precocious, for sure. He read the blood-curdling thing somewhere—he does his research. Better he’s learning than not, right?”

“Learning about death and shit,” she says, “He’s probably dissecting squirrels under his porch—does he have a porch?”

“Come on, he’s harmless. He just likes random stuff.”

“Yeah, and when you’re being interviewed for some documentary about the next great American serial killer you’ll be that dumb neighbor who goes on about how he never saw it coming.”

“At least I’ll get on TV,” you say with a shrug. You’d like to defend Jake a bit more, but Kate seems locked in.

“They’d probably blur out your face. You know how they do that when they don’t have permission or whatever? For you, it would be to spare the audience.”

You look over, surprised. Kate messes with you some, but that one seemed out of place. She’s grinning wide. You didn’t realize she had that many teeth. They’re white and straight, but when she smiles fully it seems like she has too many.

You shake off the surprise and say, “Please, they’d be paying me for repeat performances.”

“Paid appearances as a dumb neighbor? You think there’s a market for that?”

"I wouldn't only play neighbors. I could be a professional news interviewee. Local concerned citizen. Innocent bystander at the bar fight. Wronged consumer."

"Now, that they need, have you seen those yahoos they get?" she says. Her brows crinkle and she asks, "But wouldn't people start wondering why the same dude was in every story."

"I'd have to move around, of course. It could be a travelling gig: local station after local station to reduce overlap."

"Now you're talking." She swats your shoulder as she spins again. "I'll need royalties, of course."

"For what?"

"Um, basically the whole idea."

"You just made a joke, I came up with the gig."

"Was it a joke?" She has a challenge in her face, as if she's daring you to disagree. She smirks and then winks at you.

"I. . ." You feel itchy. Her chair is awfully close to yours and she's slowly spinning in it. Inch by inch she rotates until her knee rests against yours. You look up. She's looking straight at you.

Turn to the 4th choice (from C3) on page 49.

C4 Her phone rings. They're on a set circuit to cycle around the room. You look over to Richard, who was supposed to have the next call, but he's already on the phone. You must not have heard. Kate spins away and answers hers.

The phones ring so often that they've been etched into your audial memory. Sometimes you hear the ringing late at night when you can't sleep and you're never quite sure if you can't sleep because of the phantom rings or if you hear the rings because you can't sleep. You worry that it's permanent, that you'll be seventy or eighty and jolt out of sleep to the same incessant ringing year after year.

Your phone rings. The light indicates it came through on the emergency line, not the business number that facilities or frequent fliers would use, so you answer quickly.

There's a deep, scratchy voice on the other end. It's someone loud and scared, but unintelligible.

You say, "Sir? Hello? Please take a breath, sir, and speak clearly."

You mostly hear hacking and coughing. It's wet and productive; you're glad you can't see the results.

"This 9-1-1?" she says. Now that her throat's clearer, you can tell it's a deep-voiced woman, with more than a few years of smoking on her lungs. She sounds elderly, but not frail.

"Yes, thank you for calling Atlanta Rescue, what's your emergency?"

"It's Gary. You see, I was in the kitchen before 'cause I was making some pecan pie for my Church sale, so I didn't see him for a while. He was fine—"

It doesn't seem urgent. If Gary was in real trouble, you'd assume she'd get to the point. She sounds like your grandmother used to: the same hard and popping 'p' in 'pee-can.' Pies always remind you of your grandmother, even in passing. It's been three

years since she passed, but you can feel the warm smell of baking and butter and sugar in your nose.

“—so anyway, Gary was laying there. He can’t get up.”

“Is he responsive, ma’am?”

“He’ll look at me, but he hasn’t even lifted his head in a while. I’m worried.”

“It’s okay, ma’am, we can help you out. How long ago did you find him? Has he spoken? Called out?”

“I guess it was an hour ago, now. I thought he’d snap out of it, but he isn’t.”

“Could he speak, ma’am. Can he respond?”

“He’s never been much of a barker, but I’ll try to get him to.”

You feel the intensity leave the room and imagine the slow hiss of a deflating air mattress. “Ma’am, is Gary your dog?”

“He’s my baby and he’s sick.”

“I’m sorry about that ma’am, but there’s really nothing I can do.”

“What do you mean nothing you can do?”

“This is an emergency line.”

“This is an emergency.”

“Okay, but I’m sorry. I meant, you know, people emergencies.”

“So, Gary’s not worth nothing to you then, is that it?”

“No, it’s not that, it’s. . . We don’t have any vets here. I’m sorry, but you need to call a vet.”

“I already called the vet.”

"Okay, then, isn't it settled then?"

"No, it's not fucking settled, he wouldn't come out and see him."

"The vet wouldn't see him?"

"He said he's not a traveling doctor, so I called the doctors. You guys travel. I seen the ambulances."

"We do have ambulances, but not with doctors on them. We take people to the hospital, not dogs."

"I need help. Gary needs help." She's talking fast now. Breathing hard.

"I understand that, but you'll have to take him to the vet."

"I can't drive anymore. I'm stuck in a chair."

"In a chair, ma'am?"

"I don't stand good anymore. I've got a rover. I can't drive him on my rover."

"I see, but I don't know how I can help you."

"I called 9-1-1. You have to help me."

"Ma'am, I'm really sorry, but there's really nothing I can do. I'm going to have to go."

"Don't you fucking hang up on me too. He don't need no hospital, you can take him to the vet," she says. You can picture her now with a poufy little grandma hat, a rolling pin in one hand, and her other in a fist shaking in your face. She takes a deep breath and then adds, desperately, "Please. He's all I've got."

"I don't think I can—isn't there anyone you can call? A neighbor? A daughter? Son?"

"No, no, I got no one. The neighbors want me dead, I know it. So, does my own damn daughter."

"I'm sure that isn't true. Why don't you try to call your daughter?"

"She's in Reno. She up and left me. Come on now, he's looking real sick."

"I. . ." You search around the room. As if there's an answer lying about.

Kate's on a call but watching you. She mouths, "dog?" and you nod.

She rolls her eyes and mouths, "Typical," exaggerating it enough that you can understand.

You know Charlie's answer would be to apologize and hang up. He's a big fan of apologies. Or at least of having others apologize.

The old woman's breathing fast, now. She might be hyperventilating. In between gasps, she's saying something, but you can't quite make it out. It might be, "Please, Lord Jesus."

"Okay, okay, I'm going to try something."

"Thank the lord."

She might have thanked you instead, but whatever. You've committed now. "I'm placing you on hold, okay?"

You click the hold button and press nine for a new line. Kate turns to you, now off the phone, and asks, "What are you doing?"

"It's this lady. She's going nuts about her dog. She might need help."

"Help? It's a dog, dude. You can't send a unit to pick up a dog."

"I'm not, I'm not, but she might need help too, now." You turn back and open a browser. You search for animal control. Atlanta has a big department—the city is a massive mess of urban sprawl after all, and large portions are in wooded areas. They stay busy with racoons and opossums and shit, you'd bet. Stray dogs, too. You find their closest office and call them up. Kate taps you on the shoulder while it rings.

"Animal control?" she asks, pointing to your screen, "What are you doing?"

"Maybe they can drive the damn dog to the vet. It's worth trying."

"They have jobs to do, man."

"So do I."

On the other line, a young-sounding guy says, "Thanks for calling Animal Control. This is Steve, how may I help you."

"Hello, yes, I'm from 9-1-1, I'm a dispatcher."

"Really? Did somebody get bit?" He sounds excited. "Did some stray bite somebody?"

"No, nothing like that. I got a call. This really sick dog. Do you think you guys could transfer him to a vet?"

"A dog called you?"

"What?"

"You said you got a call from a sick dog."

You pinch the bridge of your nose. "The dog didn't call, it's about a sick dog. This old lady called and she's freaking out about it. I think she may actually need an ambulance soon if we don't help her."

"Why don't she take it to the vet, then?"

"She can't. She's not ambulatory."

"Amba-what?"

"She can't walk, she can't drive, and she doesn't have anyone to call. You guys pick up animals all the time, don't you think you could pick up this dog and take it to the vet?"

"We don't really do that."

"She's about to hyperventilate over there, she's really freaking out."

Steve hesitates on the other side. You can almost hear him thinking. "Yeah, but, I don't know. We've got policies."

"Yeah, so do I." You tap your forehead quickly with your middle finger, trying to shake loose the best way to—"Look, I wasn't supposed to call you. I should have hung up on her—not an emergency and all that—but, honestly, I think she's gonna have a nutty if someone doesn't help."

"But we grab strays, not pets."

"But you're also there to help people, right?" You're onto something, here. "You're a government employee and the Gov is all about helping people, right? Or should be?"

"Helping people? Seems more like it's about spending money."

You shake your head. That was your bad. "Okay, but you guys are good. You're all about helping people, right?"

"Well, yeah," he says.

"And you're supposed to keep people safe?"

"Yeah."

"This woman needs you to help her out. She's not going to be safe until that dog is safe."

"I'm not sure, let me talk to Fred."

"No, no, we got this, man. If it was a stray, you'd pick it up, right?"

"Of course."

"Even if it somehow managed to break into some old lady's house?"

"Sure. We grab raccoons and shit out of houses all the time."

"Then let's pretend there's this sick dog that broke into a woman's house, okay?"

"Pretend?"

"Yeah, let's go back a bit. I called you about this stray dog that broke into a woman's house, see."

"Ahh, okay, I'm with you."

"And this dog's sick, too. Who knows what it has? Maybe rabies?"

"Shit, maybe it does." You're not sure if he's going along enthusiastically or really thinks it may have rabies.

"We can't leave some rabid dog in this poor lady's house, can we? It would need to get checked out at a vet, right?"

"We have a vet that comes by the shelter, so, we'd bring it back here."

Damn, so close. "What if the vet was closer? If this woman got bit, you'd need to know about the potential rabies asap, right?"

"Did she get bit?" There's that excitement again.

You almost say yes, but stop. They'd probably take the dog for real if they thought it bit someone. Probably even put him down, which is not exactly the outcome you're going for. "No. . ." you say.

"We could pick it up, but if she can't drive, how would she pick up the thing after?"

Shit. You got out-thought by Steve the animal control guy. But really, how would she get the dog back? You couldn't exactly call animal control for a stray who'd broken into a vet and needed to be dropped off at some lady's home. "But you have a vet that comes by the shelter?"

"Yeah. Once a week."

"What day?"

"Every Thursday."

"So today, then?"

"It's Thursday, enit?"

"Okay then, maybe you pick up the dog and take it to the shelter. At least it would get a vet at that point, right."

"That's not really what we do."

"Potential stray, remember? Hyperventilating lady?"

"Yeah, I know, but it's not a free clinic or something. Vet shit costs money."

"For sure, no question. But so do hospital bills. And ambulance rides. And that's what this lady's gonna need if she has a full-on conniption."

"She's really that bad off?"

"She is. She's breathing fast and shallow. The whole deal. I'm sure she can get somebody to pick the dog back up if she has some time."

"You think so?"

"I do. Come on, let's help this lady out. She's old and alone."

"I guess."

Even if he's not enthusiastic, you've got him. "Great, let me get you the address then I'll tell her."

"We've only got one truck, it might be a bit."

"A bit? She's in trouble."

"Well. I guess we could—"

"Great." Her call came from a landline, so the address is listed and you give it to Steve. "I'm gonna tell her you're coming. Thanks." You hang before he can object.

Kate's staring at you. Her eyebrow is climbing so high it looks like it's trying to escape its boundaries, perhaps to join her sleek hair above. Her mouth is open. Somewhere between bewilderment and a smile. "The fuck was that about?" she says.

"I was trying to . . ." you begin before remembering the lady is on the other line. You click the other line to switch back to her call. "Ma'am, are you there?"

"Hello, you back?"

"Yes, I'm here. I've got some help coming, okay?"

She breaths out heavy. It sounds like relief for a moment before it turns into a coughing fit. After she hacks up some septum, she says, "You sending an ambulance for him?"

"No, but—"

"What? No ambulance?"

"Ma'am, I—"

"I been paying taxes for fifty goddamn years and you goddamn kids sit there and preach policy at me. Who do you think pays your salaries, you lay-about commie fucks?" You can hear spittle pelting her receiver as she rages.

In person, this tirade might have pushed your buttons. You'd have likely responded in kind. You'd felt that heat start rising when she started—when she wouldn't let you talk, but the longer she went, the more ridiculous it got. The more humorous. 'Commie fucks' tipped you over the edge. You hold back a chuckle.

"I got you some help, but it's not an ambulance," you say, speaking loudly now to cut into her indignation. Kate tries to catch your eye again.

The old lady's grumbling fades. "You did? You get a vet to come?"

"No, I couldn't do that, but some people are going to come pick him up and he'll see a vet. They'll help him out."

"Who will."

"Animal Control is sending—"

She gasps. It sounds like a soundboard version—too perfect to be accidental.
“You called animal control? What the hell were you thinking? They’ll kill poor Gary.
They’ll put him to sleep in a heartbeat.”

“No, they’re going to—”

“They’ll see a sick dog and kill him. They’re not going to take any time, that’s not
what they do. They run a doggie death house over there.”

“I really don’t think—”

“You call them back and tell them not to come. They’re not stepping a fucking
foot into my house, you better believe it.”

“Really, they’re going to—”

“You better call them, boy. I swear, they try to come into this house and I’ll blow
their fucking brains out, you hear? I’ve got my Jim’s shotgun all loaded.”

“If you’ll just—” But she won’t. She hangs up. She must have a corded phone.
You forgot how loud that can be.

“What the hell was that?” Kate asks.

“Nothing. I was trying to . . .” You trail off.

“I could hear her from here. What’s she so mad about?”

“She’s a fucking nut job. Paranoid.” You went out of your way—against protocol.
You’d convinced Steve from the shelter to go for it in the first place. Calling you a
commie is one thing, but cussing you out for going out of your way. . .

“What was with all the dog talk? Somebody get bit?”

"No, it was some old lady. Don't worry about it," you say. You don't want to explain the whole ordeal.

Kate leans toward you. Her eyes are remarkably blue. She's a curious one. "But what was that all about. You were talking about vets?"

"I've got to make another call," you say and turn away from her. You key up another outside line and wait for the ring. Steve picks up on the fifth. What could he possibly be doing that made him wait until the fifth ring?

"Thank you for calling animal control, how may I help you." He sounds even more disengaged than you'd expect from a repeated greeting like that. You have your own. They get old, you know, but he sounds disembodied. Maybe he's stoned.

"Hey, Steve. It's me from 9-1-1 again," you say. You don't think you ever gave a name the first time. *Good*. If this shit somehow gets back to you it's hard to guess how Charlie might react. Anything from embarrassment to termination would be on the table.

"Yeah, the dog guy?"

Of course it's the dog guy. How many calls from 9-1-1 dispatchers does this guy get? "Yeah. The dog guy. Listen, don't send that truck, okay. Don't pick up the dog."

"What do you mean. They're heading out now."

"Yeah, well, thanks, but the lady freaked out about animal control. She doesn't want you guys to come."

"They'll be all right. We're good with people. Deal with some real weirdos, but we get the job done."

"You don't get it. Look, she's flipped out. She said she wouldn't let anyone in. Said she has a shotgun."

"A shotgun? What the hell?"

"Yeah, she flipped."

"No kidding."

"Yeah, sorry to bother you about all this."

Steve hesitates on the other side. A dog barks in the background. "Is this some kinda prank or something?"

"A prank? No.."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Sorry to bother you."

"You're not doing a radio deal? One of those 103X candid deals?"

"No, sir. I was only trying to help." You go to hang up.

"Cause it sounds an awful lot—"

"Sorry again," you say and hang up before he can stop you.

"A shotgun?" Kate asks. Pure glee stretches across her face with her too-wide smile. She loves the strange. The primo gossip.

"Don't worry about it."

Kate smirks. "Are you kidding me?"

"No, seriously, it's embarrassing."

"Exactly. Come on, tell me." She elongates the "me," almost begging.

You try to turn away, but she grabs your wrist and pulls you back. Your chair swivels under you, betraying you. Normally, it's the two of you sharing gossip and mocking others, but you know this time you'll be on the receiving end. Her eyes look frankly predatory. They're icy blue. Her white canines are bared in a grin. Your chest tightens and jitters run along your shoulders.

"Okay, fine, but don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" Her mouth is large, but not too large. Like a young Julia Roberts. Your grandmother plays the actor's early work on a continuous loop, so, to you, Julia Roberts is still young.

"Not so eager, okay?"

You share the story, trying to make it sound more reasonable as you do. Playing up the potential danger the woman might have been in. Anxiety attacks can be pretty serious at that age or you imagine they can. Kate or Richard must know better about anxiety attacks, but you don't want to bring anyone else into this. . . Buffoonery, Sharon's father would say. You've always thought it was a strange choice of word for such a man's man, but he never misses a chance to use it when applied to you. Luckily, he can't hear you now, since, as you try to make the story sound better, it comes out worse.

Kate doesn't hold back the laughter, but doesn't really mock you either. "No, you didn't," is mostly all she says. She let go of your wrist early on, but touches it a couple of times when she laughs. You glance down at her hand as she reaches out the second time. She's about the same height as Sharon, but her fingers are longer. They're almost

too thin, but so dainty it works. You want to pull your hand back. You really should pull your hand back. You're not the one doing the touching. You're just sitting, sharing a laugh. You start joining in. Trying to get animal control! Buffoonery for sure!

Continue to C5 on page 87.

*

C5 The day goes quickly from there. You don't get another confused pet owner, but there's always some bullshit to deal with. They have PSAs for this shit, but people don't listen. After all these years, however long they've had 9-1-1, people don't seem to understand that a stomach ache isn't an emergency. Or a migraine. Or a sick dog. Not all the time, not even all that often, if you're honest, but often enough to make you expect nonsense, at least a little, whenever the phone rings. You make them prove it to you each time that it's serious. It's a habit. Ridiculous until proven serious. Not the best policy, you suppose, but there it is. The alternative would be to go back to your first week on the job, when every call stressed you out. You'd get a mental status change called in, assume it was a stroke, since the boss had said that that was a possible sign of one, and flip out. You'd breathlessly send a unit and they'd respond with nonchalance if not outright boredom.

Kate filled you in with a laugh when you asked her why they never seemed to care. She told you that mental status change is most often code for a nursing home nurse who's sick of dealing with a dementia patient. They get you to send their patient off on a little trip, sometimes with a stay in a geriatric psych ward for a bit, and the

nurse gets a few night's break. Kate rode for two years as an EMT before going to dispatch—burnt out she said.

She described what the geri-psych wards were like, making them sound like a wasteland of scattered old people: some hunched in wheelchairs sleeping, some shuffling about and grabbing onto random items to carry around, and others yelling out random shrieks or fragments of old conversations. They get stuck, she told you, at some moment of their former lives. Some are traveling and everyone around them becomes other travelers, stewards, or ticket sellers. A few are stuck in an old war—and those around them become fellow soldiers or officers. They obey or not depending on what rank you can convince them you have. One old lady Kate told you about was stuck at a fast food restaurant, forever ordering four hamburgers and a banana pudding and wondering why they weren't coming.

So, you stopped getting worked up about mental status changes, but chest pain still got you going. And then you slowly realized that chest pain meant heartburn more often than not. Seizures were exciting until Kate told you there generally isn't anything EMTs can do. The parametric units go on those, since they have more drugs, but seizures generally run their course and are over and done with before a unit can show. Car accidents, surely, had to be exciting, but even those are generally fender benders or the future clients of ambulance chasers. The commercials run constantly and half the billboards seem to be for one lawyer group or another, so it's not too surprising that people take them up on it. Hurt? Call ShitHead and Delgatti at 1-800-277-4653. That

spells out 1-800-Asshole. Sharon used to give her number out as 277-4653 in bars, that's how you know.

She gave it to you, too, the first time you asked for it. Luckily, you ran into her again that night and somehow managed to make a better second impression to get her real number. She explained she gave that fake number out in case any of them spelled it out. You doubted any of them ever knew what it spelled, but it was funny. Sharon's always been clever. More so than you, certainly, and more intelligent in general. You married her knowing that, but lately you're not sure that that's a good thing. It should be a good thing. You brag to people about how smart she is. It's in fights, when the barbs start flying, that you begin to question. Cleverness isn't as fun when it's dedicated to making you feel like shit.

You decide to try breaking the habit of assuming every call will be nonsense. The dog lady, turning on you like that, didn't help, but you try to find a middle ground. You don't have to get worked up, expecting every call to end in disaster, but you can work efficiently. You can, at least, work a little harder.

You check in on units when they stall too long at destinations. You know they often don't clear as quickly as they could to give themselves a little break. They grab food or finish their paperwork or grab a break. That's all well and good—it's not like they get lunch breaks, but they're there to do a job, so you might as well ask them to do it. They get huffy when you check their status too often—annoyed that you're calling them out for it, but mostly they'll admit they're clear. Sometimes you check the map, see them moving a bit, or already stopped at the gas station or McDonald's down the

road a little from their destination. Those will generally always clear once you call them. They're not supposed to do that, so they don't want to call attention to themselves. Charlie, in a black mood one day, fired two EMTs on the spot when he saw they'd moved five blocks down from the hospital to a Chick-fil-a. Some costly chicken. People didn't push that rule for a while after, but that was a year ago, so they're back to being laxer about it.

Even if it's nonsense, getting them there a bit sooner won't hurt. You very, very rarely dispatch them to run hot anyway. They get mad when you tell them that. They'll call back for specifics. They like to be the ones to decide if it's worth running hot for or not. You don't blame them. People drive crazy when the lights and sirens come on. You had to watch a video during orientation—a twelve-hour marathon of safety videos that barely applied to you—about the dangers of using the lights and sirens. Drivers have a little protection from liability even while responding to emergencies, but they have to be careful with it. Even running a light, for instance, will shift the liability to the driver. You always thought they could blow through red lights, but they can't. They can run them, but only after stopping and checking. Too many T-bones solidified that.

By three o'clock you've probably upset five or so units, calling them out and checking on their status, but your response times are a bit better than usual. The system tracks that for each of you—even though most of that is on the unit you're sending. If they lollygag after you send a prompt call, it's still on you. The system averages them out and compares them to the other dispatchers. If, on average, response times—from the time you get the call—are slower for you than for the rest,

it's on you. That happens two months in a row, and you'll have a talk with Charlie. He doesn't fire as many dispatchers as techs—a new tech only slows down one unit, while a new dispatcher slows them all down—but he did fire one about six months ago. He'd been a country guy, nice as can be, with a habit of talking far too much and far too slowly. He'd over-explain things or repeat them two or three times. Gummed up the works.

Today, you made Charlie happy. If he bothers to care about response times right now, anyway. Sometimes he's on it, checking all the time. Sometimes he isn't. No telling. Better to be safe than fired, you suppose.

You stay a few minutes after your shift ends to finish up a call you'd started. It came in through the 9-1-1 line instead of the company line, and had even sounded real. It was a husband whose wife was having some kind of allergic reaction. You were happy to be able to diagnose it at least—you'd been trying to learn a bit more, working in health care and all. Not that you knew what kind of allergy it was, the husband didn't seem to know what it could be, but she was on antibiotics, so probably penicillin or something. You know not all antibiotics are penicillin, of course, but you're not sure what the other ones are called.

Either way, you'd gone against protocol a bit: a unit had cleared across town, and, despite the drive, they should have gotten the call immediately. That's Charlie's system. Instead, you'd pestered another, much closer unit to clear a little early. Saved at least twenty minutes you'd guess, even if you weren't supposed to. Ridiculous rule—the dispatchers all hate it, and hate it even more when the EMTs complain. “You know

I'm across town, right?" they ask, occasionally, annoyance clear even through the crackly static of the radio, and you guess they don't know the policies you have to work with.

This time they got there quick, then called transporting way faster than usual. ER calls tend to take longer on scene, as counterintuitive as that seems. Kate explained that one, too. With transports, you get them on the stretcher, take basic vitals, and drive. With an ER call they need more vitals, a glucose check, and time to start an IV. They must have really been going quick to get it all done and call transporting that fast. You could hear the sirens going off when they did, so it must have been serious. Most likely. You know a few techs, adrenalin junkies, who run hot for all sorts of calls.

This crew made it to the hospital and called in again, "At destina—" The driver yelled it quick and released the button early. Sounded out of breath. As you waited for them to clear, and it got closer and closer to the end of your shift, you began to worry. Destination times are always long—checking in, waiting for a bed, cleaning up, doing the paperwork—but in a real emergency, things move quickly. Beds are found. Sometimes units get stuck for hours in ERs when they get a bullshit call—it's based on need for getting beds, not first-come first-serve. But for something real, they get a bed in no time.

Did the long wait this time mean it hadn't been as real as you thought? They'd been running hot for fun? Or was it something more serious? Were they having to help in the ER room? Or had she died and they were taking a second to recover. It happens. Not as often for your company as those working in downtown Atlanta—your company

does more routine calls than emergency—but it happens. Most techs keep working. Occasionally, one will ask for some time. One tech, who'd happened to be a new mother, had asked for some time several weeks ago. Right before you got off night shift. She'd gotten a call for an infant. SIDS. You'd heard the baby's mom wouldn't let go of it. Anyway, that tech had asked for time, and then Charlie had given her a lot of sass about it. Like she should suck it up.

The unit finally cleared at three-o-five. The driver sounded completely normal when he called in. You supposed that was a good sign. You couldn't exactly ask, over the radio, "Hey, how'd it go." Either way, good or bad, you'll likely not find out unless you run into the driver later. Maybe you'll see him at one of the infrequent staff meetings and ask. You log off and head back to the lobby to clock out.

The parking lot is nearly empty. Your car sits separated from the three dispatcher's cars for the new shift. A couple more for the accountants—they park together as well. Marketing and the boss must be out. You never even saw Charlie today. He might have been in, but never stuck his head into the dispatch dungeon if he was. It's not actually in a basement but you all call it the dispatch dungeon. It has a distinct lack of windows and moving air.

You buckle your seat belt and start your car. Before moving, you text Sharon:

Want to celebrate tonight? Dinner?

She gets out a bit later than you do anyway, but on top of that, her whole carpool is full of overachievers. Like her. They all stay for extra this and extra that: grading, basketball games, clubs, or whatever else they can find to pour their time into.

They drop her off between six-thirty and eight. Part of that's the drive—not as long as yours, but decent—but most of it is them being busybodies.

She won't be home for who knows how long, but that's no reason not to start planning early. You also want to try to at least show enthusiasm. Seven-thousand, five-hundred-dollar prize. You try to think about what that might be spent on. Fixing the A/C for sure, but after that? New computers? A trip? Hard to say. She'll probably come home with some massive and ancient Persian rug or some shit. Five-thousand dollars on old carpet. Not that she's done that before. Her mom has. You guys have never had the money for things like that, so now that you do. . . You don't think she'll be like that, she's always so thrifty, but who knows. You wonder if she'll call it her money if there's a discussion on how to spend it. You never do that with your money. You've never gotten a check for seven-thousand-plus, but you share your money without complaining. And you'd share it if you got some big check, like from the lottery or sweepstakes or something.

You won the lottery one time. The Powerball. Not the jackpot of course. You won seven dollars by matching a few of the numbers. It was enough to buy a few tickets. You only play when a huge jackpot builds. Only a couple bucks for a little fun and some pleasant day dreaming. You're don't know what you'd do with all the money, but you'd come up with something. A nice car or two, sure. You're not exactly a car guy, but it'd be fun to drive one up to your father-in-law's place.

He's a car guy. You wouldn't get some ultra-fancy, but fragile Italian thing—he'd make fun of that. You'd go for a classy muscle car. An antique, but meaty. Something

he'd have wished he could have gotten when he was a young twenty-something. Something that roared. Sharon would hate it. She hated her dad's projects. He wouldn't buy any expensive cars to work on, preferring old junkers that might have been nice long ago. By the time he was done with them, they'd have a good bit of money into them. More than that, they'd have hours and hours of his time. She never has articulated that, but the venom you can hear when she talks about his cars, or garage, or projects made it pretty clear. Your dad had his road trips. He drove a semi, so he was gone most of every week. Sharon's dad was in town and home for plenty of time, but from the way she talks about it, it sounds like you saw your dad as much as she saw hers.

You're about to turn out of the parking lot when she texts you back.

Great! Pick a place. Something fancy.

I'll head home early.

Quick response. She usually takes a while—teaching and all that. Maybe she's on a planning period. She tells you when they are, asks you to call during them if you need to. You always forget exactly when they are. They're always different. They don't change or anything, but they're different on different days. It's too hard to keep track of, so you call or text whenever and then say something like, "I thought that was on Wednesday." She always sighs and tell you the times again.

You assume she means relatively early. Even if she doesn't have anything personally to stay later for, it's not like the rest of the nerds she works with won't. But maybe they'll rush a bit and she'll be ready for dinner before too late.

You text back:

Awesome. Got a place in mind?

You turn out and swerve back on the shoulder as some jackass changes lanes into the one you were attempting to turn onto. You press hard on your horn—it's high pitched and a little reedy—and let off as you angle back into the lane.

Sharon texts you back. You glance down to read it. You don't want to be one of the assholes. It reads:

Let's go all out. Wine it up.

That didn't really answer the question. You text with one hand—only glancing at your phone, of course. Your other hand and your eyes remain locked forward. You move your phone up so you can see it and the road at the same time.

Shoyas?

It's your go to nice place: not crazy expensive, and with a wide drink selection. They even have sake. You're sure they have some nice wines.

She texts back:

Let's branch out. Fancier.

You don't really know any fancy places. Your dad raves about the porterhouse at Bone's. He eats there every time he happens to be in Atlanta. But that's like expensive. That's the kind of place that a twenty-buck tip is a stiff. Surely she doesn't mean that fancy. Maybe you could get away with a Longhorn's. No, she'd shut that down. Maybe a Houston's. Surely that's fancy enough.

Houstons?

Try again.

So you mean like fancy, fancy?

*I got that dress for Jess's wedding
and didn't get to wear it. I want to
go all out.*

I'll look something up.

What Am I going to wear?

Your blazer.

We need to get you a suit.

Like you can afford a suit. Or need to. You've only been a groomsman once, and that was for Sharon's brother. You barely knew him, but Sharon wanted you to be a part of it, so you were. She gets her way with anyone except her dad. Often enough even with him. You're not likely to be a groomsman again. You've mostly fallen out of touch with your high school friends. You're hunting buddies with Jeremy, but you guys don't talk much. It's not an uncomfortable silence during those hours in the blind or standing in your waders waiting for some ducks to land, but you're not too sure how close that makes you. Even if he would pick you for a wedding party, he'd have to be getting married first, and with his early balding and bad teeth that's probably not too likely. Really bad teeth. Anyway, you're already going to spend enough on dinner. You're not getting a suit.

Unless she buys one for you with her cash prize. You picture yourself as the Pretty Woman—unsure why Julia Roberts is popping into your head so much today—trying on suits, spinning around to show off, walking out with bag after bag. Saying something snotty to the hoity-toity salesperson who thought you couldn't afford

anything. You change the image from you to Kate—that fits better. She really does look like a young Julia Roberts. You picture her in a sleek black dress before realizing you're picturing the same dress Sharon wants to wear.

You couldn't believe how expensive the bridesmaid dresses Sharon's old friend Jess wanted them to buy were. But, at least Sharon looked great in hers, with the sleek, black lines framing her runner's legs. Somehow, despite being so busy, she always finds time to run.

And that only reminds you how far out of your league she really is. You've never been sure why she picked you. You've seen her old boyfriends: the frat guy who went on to Princeton for law school and the one who dropped out to tour Europe but still made some ridiculous amount of money off an app you've never heard of. Genius millionaire, that's her type. She read you the article about him off her facebook feed. You loved that.

Sometimes people ask, after they meet Sharon, "So, what do you do?" and you can hear the expectation. They assume it's something impressive for the two of you to make sense. They picture you as a young doctor or star-lawyer, or that you have a trust fund, at least. You wish they'd assume you were awesome in bed or something, but that doesn't seem likely.

You're not bad in bed. Pretty good even. You try hard. The magazines say that's important.

But you're supposed to be finding a restaurant, so you slowly type in "Atlanta fancy restaurants" and search. Sharon would get onto you for sure for this, but, oh

well. You click on one article listing the eight most romantic restaurants in Atlanta and glance down when you can. The first several look too intimidating, but one, Seed, catches your eye. It looks more straightforward than the others, even if the name's a little douchey. You'd rather have honest fine dining than the weird stuff they get up to on the cooking channel. Who wants their food flash frozen or foamed?

You check the menu. No listed prices. Not a good sign. Four dollar signs up top. She does want it fancy.

There's a place called Seed. Looks nice.

You finally start moving again. You ease forward, then brake immediately.

*Ooo, Jessica was telling me
about that place. They went
and loved it.*

I'll make a reservation.

I hope we can get one.

We will.

You have no idea if you will, but sounding confident never hurt anyone, right? Plus, it's a Thursday night. If it's booked on a Thursday, that's probably a good sign that it's too fancy for you, even on your fancy night. There's an online reservation system but it doesn't pull up well on your phone. You'll call when you get home. You could, of course, call while you're driving, but you don't love calling places. Online pizza delivery systems are great. You usually work out casual ways to get Sharon to call places when someone needs to. Doctors and dentists and what not. Chinese food. Your methods might not be all that subtle—Sharon always gives you this look—but she

makes the call, so they work well enough. The traffic fades quickly and you get back up to speed.

You were in a better mood this morning. You turn Pandora to Temptations radio, and whistle along to 'My Girl.' You imagine Jake wouldn't find as much depth in the upbeat rhythm and lyrics, but you don't feel like searching for lonely terror. You'd heard enough of that at work.

You turn off Jimmy Carter and into your neighborhood. You check the trees, hoping to see them turning soon as a sign of cooler days to come, but they aren't. One, on your left, looks a little brownish, but you think it's dying, not changing.

Down the long row of duplexes, you can make out your own mailbox and driveway. There's a bike in your drive. Jake sits on it, keeping balance with his toes stretched out to either side. With his blonde hair, oversized jeans and loose shirt, he reminds you of a mix between Dennis the Menace and Huck Finn. He told you once his dad insists on buying him clothes too big so he won't grow out of them so fast. His baggy jeans hang past his heels so far that his Chucks barely poke out. They're so big, he may never fill them out.

It doesn't seem like a terribly comfortable way to wait, perched on the tall seat like that, and you have to wonder how long he's been waiting there. He rode away this morning, surely for school, but you'd never know it from the way he waits. When you came out this morning, he sat the same way in the same place. School couldn't have let out for all that long ago, so he likely pedaled down only a few minutes before. You have to agree with Kate, it's a little creepy.

As you pull in the driveway, he looks up and smiles wide. Maybe it is a little creepy, like Kate assumes. Maybe it's sad. Even a little desperate. He's holding a shoebox with the lid on.

Continue to I1 (from C5) on page 102.

*

I1 Last Thursday was the first time he'd given you something. Unlike the whole shoebox he has now, it was only one sheet of paper: a print off showing Voyager 1's current location on a chart of the solar system. He'd pointed at it and almost jumped with excitement. "It's left the system, Mr. Stanley, it's left! Out of the solar system! Can you believe it's gone so far?" he'd said.

He'd been telling you all about the space station and comets and even about some massive asteroid which, if it didn't miss, might obliterate life as we know it. He said that wasn't too uncommon and that NASA often tracked potentially dangerous asteroids barreling down on the planet. You weren't exactly sure why that being a frequent occurrence was a good thing, but you tried to forget it. On that particular day, a week ago, he'd told you about Voyager 1. It was now flying into something he'd called the "helio" something, you quite remember. You'd learned about Voyager in school, but it was shocking to hear it had been flying for 35 years, alone, out into space. He'd told you it was carrying a golden record in case it ever encountered aliens. He was going to look more into it, but it was supposed to be an introduction to humanity.

He told you more about the Voyager missions, but you were too distracted to catch the rest. An image latched onto your imagination: you, in the satellite, floating out in space. As if it had been a manned craft and you were the only crew member. Thirty-five years of inky blackness all around with tiny, pinprick stars twinkling in the distance. Nothing to be reached or touched for thousands of years or more. You'd gone to bed that night picturing the emptiness. It made you feel cold and lonely, but also, somehow, free.

If you came from C5, turn to C6 on page 106. If you came from A4, turn to A5 on page 104.

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A5: Jake's wearing a ridiculously over-sized White Stripes shirt. You have to wonder if he knows the band or just likes the logo. It's an old band, for him, but maybe it's part of this new music kick.

Jake's clothes, typically loose jeans and ratty old t-shirts, fit about as well as a scarecrow's. He likes the ones with big, bold designs: wrestling shirts, bright animals, or even beer logos. A while back he told you his dad takes him to pick out a new bundle of clothes once a year from Goodwill. Jake says he gets them extra-large incase he grows too much before the next trip. You don't think he'll ever fill out his baggy jeans that hang past his heels so far his shoes almost disappear. He also wears a tiny belt—likely from last year's batch—on its last notch. He tucks in his t-shirts for some reason.

As you pull into your driveway, he rolls up behind you and swings one leg over the bar to glide on one pedal until he hops off in front of you.

The ache behind your eye turns into a trob. You flip off the ignition and swing the door open. He's already talking. He waves a shoebox at you. It looks older and too large for the the Chucks that poke out from under his jeans.

"Hey, Mr. Stanley, I've got something for you," Jake says while waving the shoebox.

"You shouldn't have, Jake." It's a phrase heard so often it's meaningless, but you mean it.

"It's my Blind Willie box. You know, the song I played you? It's all I could find about him. And some of my own commentary about his songs. I think you'll like them. I burned a CD of them at the library. Want to see?" He tries to take off the lid but fumbles the box between his hands and flips it onto the ground by your feet.

You reach down, pick it up, and flip it right-side up. The lid stayed on, but you hear loose paper shifting inside it and a clunk. It's light, so you guess there's only one CD among the papers. "Here." You hold the box out for him to take back, but Jake takes the box and runs over to your doorstep and sits. "Come on, let me show you. It's really cool stuff—even some space stuff. You'll like him."

Your entryway is narrow, an inset barely larger than the single door, so the step will barely hold both of you. You briefly wonder how his space obsession could relate to blues music, but you shake it off and walk toward him to offer the box again. "Here, show your dad."

"He doesn't like music."

"Everyone likes music."

“He’s not everyone.”

You don’t know his dad well, but aren’t surprised. The two of them live alone next door, and the walls are thin enough for you to know they don’t do so well talking. Lots of yelling. Stomps are common. A few times you’ve jumped off your couch when something smashes into the opposite side of the wall behind you. It’s not too loud, but surprising. You guess it’s a remote he’s throwing. He accompanies it with yells, too muddled to tell what he’s mad at. Probably sports or politics, nothing else gets people so mad sitting in front of a tv. Sometimes you catch words when he yells at Jake: ungrateful, freak, urchin. You don’t think you’ve heard it go past yelling, but it’s hard to say sometimes.

You try to step around him toward the door while your headache continues beating rhythmically. “Look, Jake, you can show me later, I had a long shift. Why don’t you ride your bike for a bit?”

Jake nods, then jumps up. You try to hand the box back, but he slides around you and grabs his bike. You wave as he rides off and jumps the curb again.

Continue to A6 on page 115.

C6 You pull up beside him—at least he gave you room to get in this time—and open your door. “What’ve you got there, Jake?” you ask while you gather your things. You don’t have many things, you realize, and get out of the car.

Jake holds out the box toward you, angling it as if you could see inside, but the lid’s on it. The box must not be from a pair of his shoes, it’s too large, and it doesn’t

look like it ever held children's shoes with its sandy tan coloring and simply designed logo. A single word runs down the top middle followed by a small logo. You can't quite read the brand name in its stylized font, but it starts with an L and looks expensive—like the men's equivalent of Sharon's brands. Jake says, "It's my Blind Willie box. I made it for you."

"A Blind Willie box?" you ask. You walk past him, before stopping and turn back to face him. You'd like to at least have your back to your door if you need to attempt a quick exit.

"Yeah, it's everything I have on him," Jake says. "I burned a CD for you with a bunch of his songs. There's also clippings from some old newspapers I printed off and some of my own commentary. A few reviews too."

You suppose it makes sense that that's what would be in a Blind Willie Box, but you're surprised. First off, you're not sure when he found the time to get all that stuff together—he must have been working on it awhile, and only started telling you about it today. Second, it seems foreign to you that a middle-schooler would go out of his way to do what looks like a research project on his own time. You never did that much research for your research papers in college, much less as a middle-schooler.

Jake holds out the box expectantly.

You don't take it. It hangs there between you. You say, "Uh, do you want me to take a look?" If it gets into your hands you might have to keep it.

"I made it for you, you'll really like the CD. It's real sad, but in a good way. Like we were talking about this morning."

“For me?” Really? “Jake, you shouldn’t have.” He really shouldn’t have. You have no idea what you’ll do with with a boxful of crap about some old blues guy.

“It’s no trouble. I printed out a copy of it all for myself too, this is your box.”

Oh, good, he made two. “I don’t know. . .”

Jake scrambles off the bike. The kickstand is out, but he nearly knocks the bike over anyway as he trips over the top of the frame. He recovers and catches the bike, but drops the box while he’s at it. It lands upside-down but the lid stays on.

You attempted to catch it, but weren’t even close. You continue the motion and pick up the box. Jake holds both his hands out dramatically as he straightens out. He looks like a cross between a tightrope artist balancing and a gymnast sticking his landing. It’s a careful, but proud stance. Embarrassment being held off by showmanship. You may not be able to connect with his interests or effort or nervous energy, but that stance—you know it well. You don’t usually express it the same way, with the goofy gestures, but half your adult life has been blustering covers for your own inadequacies and potential embarrassments. You open the box.

The newspaper clippings look like he printed off more than he needed so that he could cut it out—as if he actually had the old newspapers. Either way, you have to wonder how he found these old articles—even online. You can’t quite read the dates in the tiny print, but the papers look old. History class old. Like the ‘30s or ‘40s. There are several other folded pieces of white paper and a plain white CD with the name “Blind Willie Johnson” scrawled in chaotic handwriting. It’s perfectly legible, but large and unique. Underneath, you can see what looks like a screen-captured and printed website

article. It looks like some radio station's website and the article is titled, in big, bold letters, "**Reviews of God Don't Change: The Songs of Blind Willie Johnson.**" The rest of it is covered by more folded papers.

Jake leans over the top of the box and points down into it. "See, all you need to know about it," he says with deep pride. Sharon's brother had a baby recently—leap-frogging you and Sharon. You're happy to let them. But when he walked out into the waiting room to show off their new baby, Cash Junior of all things, he had this same look on his face: wonder, pride, and achievement. But Jake's is for a box of scraps. Weird kid.

You hold the box out for Jake. He doesn't take it. "You worked so hard on it, Jake, I couldn't take it."

"I made it for you," he says. He grabs one of the folded pieces of paper. It has more of his large handwriting covering the top half of the single fold. The other half is empty. He points to it. "Look, I've left you room after my own commentary. I thought you could listen and write your own thoughts. Maybe we agree. Maybe we don't. Cool, right?"

Like you'd know what to write about a song. That reminds you of the one art class you took in college. You only signed up because you figured a lot of girls would be taking art. You weren't wrong, but it didn't help you. None of those girls liked you—they were a unique sort of stuck up without being traditionally popular. Artsy, you suppose. Either way, class-wide critiques were part of that class and the art dude, barely older than you and most likely unstable—the girls liked him plenty—lectured over and over

about how to properly critique art. You can't say it's good or bad or that you like it; you have to be respectful but constructive. Specific.

With your art, he was plenty specific, but not very respectful. All the students had to speak, too. As bad as your 'art' being torn apart in front of you was—you didn't work too hard in the class, but they didn't have to be cruel. He'd call you out on it too, when you tried to say you liked a piece with more words. You never did say much of merit. You picture Jake returning your notes with red ink marked through your comments: "More specific," "Be constructive," "It looks like you threw these comments together last minute," "What are you, some redneck?" They didn't actually call you a redneck in that art class, but they pretty much did every time your work came up. They did it in all sorts of fancy ways. "I feel like this piece is too trapped within its own worldview," and shit like that.

"I dunno, Jake, why don't you do this with your dad?" you ask.

"He doesn't like music," Jake says. He doesn't sound upset about it, but says it as if it's irrefutable.

"Everybody likes music."

"Not him."

"Come on, I've heard him playing the radio when he drives in and out." He's an old man—too old to have a kid Jake's age by all appearances. Maybe he greyed early, but he's near-white already—and without a Steve Martin-style youthful face and energy to combat it. He talks like an old man. Walks like an old man. His face has deep wrinkles that trace across his forehead and around his mouth. His music matches his

look: country, but either too old or obscure for you be familiar with. Old and obscure seems like it would match Jake's interests well enough.

"Okay, I guess he likes his music okay," Jake says, "but he doesn't seem to care about it or like talking about it. And he doesn't like Blind Willie."

"Did you play it for him."

"Yeah. He called him a bad name. Said he doesn't listen to them."

He talks exactly like an old man. That kind of old man, anyway. "I see."

"Come on, give it a listen."

"All right, I'll tell you what. Let me go eat and get my work clothes off. I'm busy later, but I've got a bit of a window. We can listen to the CD together, okay?"

"Great," Jake says, "you'll love it."

"Okay, I'll be back out in a half-hour or so."

"I'll be around."

You're sure he will. "Fine. Why don't you go run and get a cd player. I don't have one anymore."

"I've got it on my iPod, don't worry. I put it on there at school today."

At school? You had two computers in your classroom in the fifth grade and in homeroom during middle school. You didn't do much with them other than play Pong and Oregon Trail, but he's up there doing research and printing off notes. Weird kid.

"I'll see you in a bit."

Jake nods and gives you a thumbs up. He jumps back on his bike before you can hand him his box.

"Stay off the streets," you yell as he heads toward the curb again, angling slightly to avoid the service van parked with its tail almost in your drive.

Continue to the 5th Choice on page 112.

*

5TH CHOICE

- *What the hell, kid? Maybe his father lets him ride wherever, but someone needs to teach him to be safer. Seems like that comes down to you. If you chase after him, continue to F1 on page 113.*
- *Man, his dad already taught him all wrong, so there's not much you can do about it. Kids will be kids, right? If you shake your head in frustration but head inside, then continue to C7 on page 114.*

*

F1: You take off after him, determined to teach him road awareness once and for all. He can't be riding out from behind vehicles like that. He's on a bike, but you move quickly and you're right behind him as he edges around the front of the van. A rumble to your left. You twitch your neck to stare, mid-stride. Jake is out of the way, but you're now looking an F-250 in the face and the chrome *Ford* in the blue oval is legible for a long, suspended moment.

Tires screech. You feel the impact deep, as if the truck bypassed your body and hit directly on the base of your spine. Colors flash as your body ragdolls out of control. You tumble, vaguely aware of numerous small impacts and scrapes as you skid across the pavement.

Darkness smashes down and the spiral colors of the neighborhood disappear. Your head hits something solid and your body seems to crumple then recoil away from it like a spring before sagging against the pavement like so much roadkill.

You try to orientate yourself. The pain is gone, and that seems, for a moment, to be a good sign. Then you realize it's not a lack of pain exactly, but numbness. That seems an important distinction, but you're not sure why. You do have sensation in your hands and your cheek, at least, and they rest on some hot surface—sun-heated pavement you assume.

You start leaning into it, sinking down somewhere. You move your finger over a chunk of loose gravel in the pavement. It's small and coarse and sharp. You can't hear it move, even though it's inches from your ear. You can't move anything else besides the finger.

You hear some sound returning, but can't make it out—it's a kind of static hiss. A gentle breeze licks past your calves as feeling returns to your legs. You focus harder on the sound and hear the steady crash of a gentle surf. And now a chorus of laughing of gulls. It's pleasant, lying on the sand, but a little cold. You hold a little tighter to the warm body lying next to yours.

But it keeps getting colder. The laughing gulls and surf and the warm body all drift away. You finally work your eyes open and see. . . night sky. All around you is empty space and stars upon stars and you hurdle through it.

THE END (Go back the 5th Choice on 112)

C7: You shake your head in frustration as he jumps the curb—and try to yell out as you notice a rumbling F-250 pass the van at the same time. A wordless cry half-way between “Jake” and “hey” escapes your mouth, but he’s already out of the way—his back wheel missing the truck’s grill by a foot or so at most.

Jake looks back, oblivious.

You yell, “You could have died, man, watch out.”

He waves back at you and keeps pedaling.

Continue to A6 on page 115.

*

A6: You and Sharon’s—really Sharon’s as far as design goes—half of the duplex looks perfect. Too perfect. It’s so clean and precise you feel like there’s nowhere for you to exist. Shoes get taken off by the door, then carried to a closet down the hall where they go in their very own cubbies. The carpet is freshly vacuumed and the couch in the den of the tiny foyer has its four pillows all arranged so they spell L-O-V-E. It’s not a place that screams wealth, but between the spotlessness and heavily designed features, it could be in a magazine. One of those decorating on a budget deals. Or on Pinterest, more likely. Guests always compliment the place, but maybe perfection is best left to the magazines. For day to day living, it’s not particularly comfortable. Or even practical. The pillows get to rest on the couch while you perch on the edge. All the furniture seems to judge you if you think about sitting on it, especially if you think about putting your feet up.

Plates don't stay out for even a few minutes after you're done with them. When you were in the dorms, at college, you didn't even have a plate. Only a bowl, a spork, and a hot plate: the only essential dishware, your dad taught you. A bowl can do anything a plate can do and more, he'd said. A spoon or spork can cut most anything and scoop as well. If it's a hunk of meat, pick it up and bite off a chunk, he'd say. You didn't use even your meager dishware often—preferring the ease of take out. You circulated between a calzone place, only seven bucks for a head-size cheese-filled treat, a Chinese place, a chicken joint, and all the fast food chains nearby mixed in. You had a pile of takeout boxes and bags in one corner of your dorm room—your roommate moved in with a friend of his and they didn't replace him, so you always had plenty of room, unlike most dorm dwellers.

You certainly don't want to go back to the pile of trash in the corner. You don't mind clean dishes and not finding moldy old Styrofoam, but there has to be a middle ground. Being able to leave a pizza box for leftovers the next morning wouldn't be so bad. Neither would being able to finish even one show without getting sharp glances and loud sighs until you take care of your dishes.

Like your home, you can't get comfortable around Sharon lately. It's not that she's stiff, per say. She has her goofy side—the side that lets her relate to kids so well. But she's impressive and sometimes that's not the easiest thing to stand next to.

It's no surprise to you that she'd win some big award. You see how much time and energy she puts into it. You see her ridiculously elaborate lesson plans. You never had a teacher like her. While she technically teaches tenth grade history, she runs it like

a group therapy mixed with tutoring. Most students enter as another little, lazy asshole, but most leave as polite overachievers. Sharon clones. Every student gets personalized approaches and attention. On top of that that, her cross-country girls have a shot at State this year. You didn't even know they had cross country for middle-schoolers. They don't run marathons or anything yet, but she trains them as if they did. Even with all that, she does most of the chores around the house before you have a chance to.

You head upstairs and into your bathroom. You pull out your phone, intending to check for texts or emails, but your grip slips and you accidentally fling it across the room. It lands in the trashcan. Of course. Inside are a mix of Kleenexes, Q-tips, and floss, but you brave it with a grimace and push some used tissues aside to see how deep the phone went. There's a thin piece of pink plastic sitting next to your phone. Looks like a woman's razor blade handle, but Sharon always insists on buying the men's brands. She says they're better and cheaper. You think they're all too expensive and buy the giant bags of cheap ones from Walmart for yourself. But it's not a handle. It's a pregnancy test wrapped in a wad of toilet paper.

You look at it for five full seconds before realizing the significance of it being out of the box. With the toilet paper wrapped over the pee stick. A few more to realize it's got lines in the indicator window. Two lines.

You've been married for two years and aren't close enough to thirty to find what you found. You both agreed. When you're thirty. She's on the pill. She's definitely on the pill—right?

A high-pitched squeal pushes through the small bathroom window. Bad brakes. The pads must be paper thin because it sounds like metal on metal. Skidding. You look up and can see one patch of the road through the window. It looks like two cars tried to pass by the white van on the curb too quickly. One, the loud one, brakes and slides, burning black trails into the street. The other jumps to the side, onto the curb. It dodges the other car, but then swerves back onto the road to avoid a telephone pole, out of control and careening back across the street, at an angle to hit the far curb. Jake's there. Riding his bike, looking at his iPod. The scene unfolds in slow motion. You stand and watch and it doesn't feel real. It plays out like a movie projected from your tiny bathroom window:

FADE IN:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD STREET

JAKE, 13, has outgrown his own body. His limbs are long and spidery and he moves with a nervous energy. He stoops a bit at the shoulder--unable to accept his new height.

Jake rides on his bike. His knobby knees stick out as he steps onto each pedal and heads for the curb. A white cable van is parked by the curb.

INT. PRISTINE BATHROOM.

YOU, a 27-year-old male with thin skin and identity issues, hold a used pregnancy test. It's positive. Stunned, you look forward and out the window.

YOU

Sharon...but. Isn't she on the. . .

Jake, outside, wheels his bike down the street. He's riding back to see you, iPod in hand and giving it his attention.

You're looking forward, stunned, but not yet seeing.

Brakes screech and now you NOTICE. A red sedan, too fast, brakes engaged and tires painting streaks past the parked white cable van. Another car, a blue minivan swerves to avoid a head-on collision.

The minivan jumps a curve, dodges the red sedan, but then swerves again to miss a light pole. The van wobbles, out of control, and angles back out into the street.

CRASH! Jake gets broadsided.

His bike crumples and disappears underneath the car. Jake goes high, spinning sideways over the hood of the car. His head CRACKS against the windshield before he tumbles over the car to land, Raggedy-Andy-limp, on the pavement.

YOU
(mouth hanging)
Jesus.

FADE OUT:

Jake is sprawled on the sidewalk where he was thrown. His white t-shirt has splashes of red and his head rests on his shoulder in the grass. He's still. Everything out there has a bizarre stillness—as if it's not cinema, but a play. All the actors are frozen, ready to end the first act, but the curtains won't drop, so they keep waiting.

A car door opens and breaks the spell. The driver of the minivan jumps out, looking all around. Looking for Jake or to see if anyone saw, you're not sure yet. You bend down, drop the test back where you found it and pick up your phone.

You call 9-1-1.

It's busy.

Continue to A7 on page 120.

*

A7 9-1-1 answered on the third attempt. You're not sure which company has the contract for your area of Atlanta's suburbs, it changed recently and you don't remember which company won the bid. Either way, it could have been Richard or Terence or even you on the line for how familiar it sounded. This time you were the panicked voice, desperate for help you knew was too far away.

You ran downstairs as the phone rang and stepped outside as they answered. You saw the spider-web crack in the minivan's windshield—concentric circles from a focal point of crushed glass where his skull had hit. You saw the unnatural flatness of his big forehead, the loose limbs and fingers. The driver was already there, kneeling over Jake's loose body. He went to start CPR—inexpertly pumping his fists into Jake's chest. You jumped in to help, but then saw Jake's eyes wide open, staring up at you. His forehead was crushed right at the hairline. The skin was barely broken but a flow of blood streamed out. You pushed off the driver and felt for a pulse. Nothing.

The man had started CPR again—desperate to fix it, you assume. You stumbled back and fell in the grass a few feet away.

Another man pulled up, parked, and ran up to help. They stumbled through CPR together. You took a class for it a year ago—they wanted all employees to go through it, even the dispatchers. But these two didn't know what they were doing. The first man, the driver, might have taken a class at some point but had gotten rusty. Maybe he watched hospital dramas. Either way, he used the right grip, but didn't press hard enough. You have to push hard, they taught you. Harder than seems right. You might

even break a rib, they taught. The driver definitely didn't push hard enough to risk breaking ribs, but this time it was for the best. That would have been a morbid waste, anyway. The skull. The unfocused eyes. CPR wasn't going anywhere.

The second man did seem to have a clue. Maybe he'd seen fake CPR in some old movie. He puffed breathes into Jake's limp mouth intermittently—quickly getting out of breath and huffing loudly for more. Every once in a while, he glared at you and the others standing around. He wanted out—you could see it in his eyes. He wanted to stop, but no one else looked eager to take over. He knew, you were sure, that he was breathing air into a dead boy's lungs, but something made him keep going. He'd already started. Everyone watching. The driver never looked up. His eyes were locked on a patch of grass in front of Jake. He never wavered. He pressed and pressed, too lightly, until the ambulance got there.

The EMTs worked quickly. They took a report from the crowd—several voices answered them. A consensus. You kept watching and didn't speak up when a few people, who likely ran up after, started giving answers with the crowd. The story wasn't too complicated. He got hit. Yes, he hit his head. No, he wasn't conscious. The car was going fast. Maybe forty. Hard to guess.

Your street is technically residential, but, because it's a straight shot to the school, too well-used for people to think of it that way. Forty isn't uncommon. You usually go thirty-five and your duplex isn't even that far down the street. Some go forty-five, you'd guess. The speed limit is thirty, but the sign is tucked half behind a bush at the start of the block.

The EMTs pushed off the grudging Samaritan and the minivan driver. One EMT carried a red spine board only a little longer than Jake was tall and the other examined Jake. They strapped him on—well practiced—and took over CPR. They moved calmly, compared to the rest. Almost routinely, although they spoke a little too quickly for that. The one at Jake’s head used a bag-valve-mask breather and the mouth guard covered Jake’s mouth and nose completely. He squeezed slowly on the bag, pillowing Jake’s cheeks out, but held it firmly to his face to keep the seal. The other EMT gave quick, strong compressions.

They did a few cycles, then lifted Jake, on the board, and attached the bundle to the stretcher. More sirens and blue lights flashing from the byway announced a cop car. Jake was loaded up into the ambulance. You stopped watching. Instead you watched the driver who, now, like you, sat in the grass. He stared at the grass. The cops clicked off their sirens down the block and pulled up slowly. Their doors opened. The driver looked up and the two of you locked eyes. You were expecting to see more. Panic or shame or remorse. You don’t know exactly what any of that would look like, but it should look like something in a situation like this. For something so real. Exaggerated facial expressions popped into your head—wide eyes and shocked mouths, mostly. His face didn’t show much. Maybe he looked annoyed. Or resigned? It was the face of a man walking up to the DMV and seeing a long line, who considers skipping the line and trying again when it’s not so busy, but then realizing there’s no getting around it, he has to wait.

The driver stood up and walked over to the police. He spoke with them calmly. You couldn't hear what they said. They didn't cuff him or anything. Only took his statement. You wondered if he was confessing? Maybe he had a story ready?

You watched them talk, trying to guess what consequences he might face. The term vehicular manslaughter ran through your head more than once. You wonder if that applies for a case like this. He doesn't look drunk. He wasn't driving any faster than most. The other car was the one that swerved into his lane. He avoided one collision before losing control and hitting Jake. He probably hadn't even seen him until it'd been too late. He hadn't driven off, like you imagine some people would.

During the CPR class you took, one of the EMTs, told you a story about a call you'd given him. You'd remembered it because it was one of the longer calls you'd assigned. He'd driven three hours up into rural Tennessee to pick up some kid who'd been in an accident out in the middle of nowhere. No one was sure what had happened, but from the damage on the kid's car, they guessed someone had clipped the back corner of it before he'd careened off the road and into a tree. Someone, maybe the other driver from the accident, maybe someone later, had opened the kid's door and pulled him out—maybe to see if he was okay. He hadn't been okay, but still alive. Instead of helping, they'd taken his wallet and left. No 9-1-1 or anything. Left him lying in a muddy ditch and drove off. It'd been on a back street late at night, so it had taken four hours for another driver to happen on the accident and call in the ambulance. The kid had lived, barely, but was paralyzed from the neck down. That's why he was coming to Atlanta. The spine clinic.

But the guy who hit Jake didn't do any of that. Of course, he hadn't been on a back street. . . The thought had crossed your mind, when the cops talked to you a little later, that maybe he'd been so insistent on giving CPR on purpose. Maybe he wanted to look sympathetic. Or remorseful. The ambulance had already left, pulling a three-point turn to head back out of the neighborhood. They flipped on their lights and sirens at the end of your street and flashed red around the corner.

You didn't share those thoughts with the EMTs. You're not sure why. You told them what you saw. The first car swerved. The second avoided it. Jake got hit. You didn't say, "Nobody's fault," but your story suggested it. It's not that you wanted to protect the driver—he killed a kid. He killed Jake. It's not like you were related to Jake, but he was your neighbor. He was your friend in a weird way. He had his quirks, but you saw him almost every day. You'd spent a year and a half brushing him off. Limiting conversations to the bare minimum.

But it wasn't on you to make sure this random driver also suffered. You remember seeing his eyes—locking onto them across a few feet of yard. You didn't see it yet, but you imagined he'd suffer enough. He killed a kid. He'll likely suffer plenty of consequences without you pointing fingers.

Continue to A8 on page 125.

*

A8 After the cops finish with your statement, you walk away from the shuffling crowd around the accident. People talk in quiet tones and keep their eyes lowered a bit more than normal. They group in threes and fours and hush their voices. You recognize several of them. Neighbors from up and down the block. Some are stay-at-home moms

and dads. Some are rubberneckers, stopping to see the commotion. There they all are: acquaintances and strangers talking about what a shame it is. How people are too reckless—drive too fast in neighborhoods. How something needs to change. You walk back into your house.

You head back to your kitchen. Sharon's kitchen. She used to do all the cooking, was even getting pretty good at it, but lately has been too busy. Even after months of being the one most often using it, the kitchen is hers in your mind. Not because she's a woman and you're a man, but because the style in the kitchen, all sleek edges and bright whites, is so much more hers than yours.

In the pantry, you reach past the massive bag of rice and clumsily feel for the liquor. There's a few bottles back there: a tall Grey Goose, some Kahlua, three types of wine, and some Jim Beam bourbon for her dad. You grab that. It's the nice stuff. Aged some amount of time. You don't remember the details other than it cost twice as much as the regular type. You can't imagine it actually makes a difference, but her dad acts like he can tell. You pour a few fingers into the bottom of a Hard Rock Cafe cup you picked up years ago. The logo is large across the front. Sharon's tried to throw the cup away a few times, but, after seeing you fish it out of the garbage, let you keep it, with the caveat that she doesn't have to see it out. You don't get what's so terrible about it, but she says it doesn't fit the decor.

You scoop up a handful of ice and drop a few cubes in. A little of the amber liquor splashes onto your thumb. Your father-in-law takes it straight in a tumbler. He says ice only gets in the way. You take a sip. You need a bit more ice in the way, you

think, as your face tightens up at the bitterness and you swallow quickly. It's warm and rich, with a heavy dose of grease and oak, but burns more than you expected. You typically drink light beer or whatever wine Sharon picks out. You take another sip. It's a little easier to swallow this time. You don't let it sit long in your mouth.

Holding the tumbler carefully, you plop onto the couch and shove one of the stupid extra pillows away to wiggle your back between two more until you're comfortable. The remote is in reach on the armrest, and you flip on the TV and take another sip. You've only had a little, but already it feels like there's a bit too much air in your skull. You know it's too early for the bourbon to be kicking in, but you pretend that's why.

You settle in and surf. You don't stay anywhere long and mostly aim to avoid commercials more than search for anything in particular. You jump between a few of TLC's sad reality shows and another channel playing old black and white shows nearby. The reality shows aren't meant to be sad, you don't think, but they always make you feel it. Too many children. Way too many children. Too many wives. Too many fucks given about dresses. Too much money spent on dresses. One about people scamming people to get visa's, but it's set up like a romance. Your phone vibrates a few times. You ignore it. It's got to be Sharon, probably texting more about dinner. No one else texts you during the day. Jeremy might on hunting days or early in the morning—to lament hunting season ending on some crisp early morning. Your fantasy football group blows your phone up on Sundays and other game nights—meaningless shit talk and predictions. It's dead silent the rest of the week.

A car pulls into the driveway and you can hear the tires grind over the pavement clearly through the thin walls. She really is home early. She must have convinced her whole group to skip their usual extracurricular nonsense. This must be the earliest she's ever gotten home.

You jump off the couch and pick up your glass. You refilled it once already and it's almost empty again. There's an inch or so of water at the bottom, but it's probably melted ice. You stumble forward and bump the coffee table. You've only stood up the one time to refill and it's snuck up on you since then. You hadn't felt it much while lying on the couch, but it comes rushing up in a wave of flushed skin. You laugh at yourself and rush to the kitchen to wash the cup out and then rinse it. Your movements are only a little exaggerated. You'll be able to hide it. Most of it anyway. She'll understand taking the edge off. She doesn't like you getting drunk. Tipsy is fine, but drunkenness is some great irresponsibility. She gives you those looks when you do. Like she's your mother.

At the faucet you fill your glass again, this time with water, and take a long drink. You're deeply thirsty, you notice mid-swig. You hear her keys twist in the front door before it opens. You say, "Hello, darling," at a calm, reasonable volume.

"Darling?" she asks. She sounds amused. "Since when do you call me darling?"

You step to the doorway and lean against the frame. She closes the door and tosses her keys in the wooden bowl on the coffee table. She looks up at you and smiles. She looks beautiful in her practical but professional teaching clothes. She has plenty of outfits, and they're all a balancing act between professional tastes, flattering fits, and comfort. Today is black flats with a long straight skirt and a flowing blouse in

deep red. She cut her blonde hair short about a month ago, and it frames her face on both sides—sleek and even.

“I thought I’d try it out,” you say. “What do you think?”

She smirks with a flirty twist of her lips. “Not quite us, I don’t think.”

She never has liked pet names much. Or nicknames. You tried to call her ‘Shar’ pronounced like ‘Cher’ for a while, but she’d shake her head without the hint of a laugh. You gave up when she started glaring at you every time. “Honey” is the only one she’ll accept. She calls you “dear” occasionally, but mostly she avoids pronouns, you’ve noticed. She doesn’t say your name very often, either.

“How was your day?”

She had looked down into her purse, looking for something, but looks sharply up when you speak. She raises an eyebrow. “Great. Really great. The kids liked the new project and, well. I’m so excited.”

You walk forward, careful to be steady, and give her a hug. “I’m so proud of you, dear.” She reciprocates the hug and feels tiny in your arms. It feels nice. You release a deep breath you didn’t realize you were holding. Ease spreads across your back and shoulders as you relax into the embrace.

“What’s that smell?” she asks. “It smells like—have you been drinking?”

“A bit.”

She pushes back from the hug. Your arms stay draped around her. She sniffs and looks up at you. “Bourbon? You’re drinking my dad’s stuff?”

“It seemed appropriate.”

Her eyebrows are so thin and so well trimmed that you sometimes wonder if she draws them on every morning. Not the single black line of Sharpie style, but as an artist would for an ultra-realistic drawing. You know she has eyebrows, but sometimes they look too perfect to be real. Now, they're held down and tight—to signify oncoming anger. You're not yet sure what's the bigger transgression: day drinking or tapping into her dad's special stash.

She opens her mouth to speak, but closes it and adopts a look of disgust. She shakes off your embrace, turns away, and leans over the hallway cabinet like JFK during those Cuban Missile Crisis pictures. She looks back at you. A parent's look of deep disappointment. She turns back to the wall. "Go drink some water. You're drunk."

You're surprised she left it at that; she must be really holding herself back. You were expecting another thorough investigation of your faults. She's keeping a lot to herself lately.

You wonder if she took that test, that tiny piece of discarded plastic, this morning, or if it's been sitting down in that trash can for a while. She wouldn't need to worry about you finding the test, it's not like you would have changed the bin out and seen the test tumble out. There hadn't been very much trash on top, so it probably hadn't been down there very long. A day or two or maybe a week since she'd found out. Why had she not told you? Part of you wants to ask; part of you wants to assume she has some plan, some way of telling you that she's waiting for. Your arm twitches and you imagine throwing the heavy bourbon tumbler at wall—maybe just close enough that'd she'd spin away from it. She wouldn't see that coming, at least. And then you

feel ashamed and surprised—you're not a violent guy. And she may have only found out this morning. You tell yourself that you didn't really mean it and you shake off the internal conversation and take in a breath for a retort, but hold that back as well.

Better to not provoke. You feel wobbly, both in the knees and head—not a great time for a confrontation. Plus, everything's a little too . . .overwhelming right now to be adding heat to the brewing conflict. You take her advice and lean your way into the kitchen. Walking feels like a series of leans until you reach the sink and stick your face into the smooth, cool stream of water. It splashes over your lips and cheeks and you slurp. You picture yourself a child again—drinking from the hose with the taste of hot plastic in every lap. You hear Sharon's heels click into the kitchen behind you and then her sigh.

“What are you doing?”

Surely she can find some humor in the moment: you, a full grown man, noisily slurping from the faucet. Wry humor or exasperation with an edge, at least. Even a pity laugh. But she's too professional. She has managed fun with the kids—every mess scheduled and outlined for its maximum impact, every spontaneous moment of discovery part of the lesson plan and learning objective. You have to wonder if all her success is simply a facade. If it's an impressive display of learning where the children are slowly, subtly turned into simulation bots, ready to regurgitate how much they've learned and how independent they've become. All part of a stage-directed and well-managed play on learning.

You stop drinking and brush off the drips on your chin with the monogrammed towel held perfectly by a well-shined metal stand and ring by the sink. A few drops escape and run down your neck or land on your shirt. One trail threads past your collar and catches in your chest air. It sends tingling cold down to your toes. It's only tap water, and not especially cold, but it feels that way against the flushed heat of your bourbon-warm chest.

"Thirsty," you say. Not sure what else to say.

She shakes her head and turns away. "Why would you. . . What are you doing?"

Ah, she's aiming deeper. Now you see.

For some reason, you don't want to say it. It would help you out. She'd understand, more, why you're fairly well plastered when it's only a little into the late afternoon. Something holds you back. "Look, it was. . . I needed to."

"You needed to?" she says, her pitch elevating quickly. "Jesus, you sound like a drunk, too."

"No, I don't mean it like that. It's today."

"What, is it commuting again? Did someone cut you off and you lost it?"

"No, it was fine. I mean, it wasn't, but it's not a big deal."

"Your co-workers? Are they that awful? That Tyrone guy make fun of you or something?"

"Tyrone? Who? No, they're all fine. It's. . ."

"Terry, whatever it is. The jerk. I thought you were used to the calls. Did you get a bad one?" she says. She finally sounds a little less angry, right at the end.

"No, normal calls. Mostly. Nothing serious."

"What then?"

Maybe you're slurring a bit more than you think. She keeps leaning forward and cups her ear with slender fingers. You repeat, "No, routine shit all day."

"Then why?"

"It's Jake."

"The kid? What'd he do?"

"He's dead."

"Dead?" She squints like she doesn't understand your meaning.

"Yeah. Dead. Got run over."

She steps back. She raises her fingers and rests them over her lips. The picture of shock and beauty.

"What happened?" she asks.

"He got hit. Some car swerved. Another was there. The van was in the way. Jake was on the street again. He got hit. They took him off in the ambulance."

"But. . .are you sure he's dead? Did they say?"

"No, I mean, they didn't say anything, but I saw him. He's dead."

"But how do you know?"

"I just. I do."

"Did you see it? See him get hit?"

You pause.

Continue to the 6th choice on page 134.

*

6TH CHOICE

- *You already told the cop. He wrote shit down as you talked. That's all a head-shrink would do anyway. More talking won't help anything. You don't want her pity. Turn to G1 on page 135.*
- *Of course you saw it. You watched it happen, helplessly out the window. You need to tell someone else. The cop was all business. He didn't seem to care. Sharon will care. Maybe she'll even forgive you for all your shit lately. Turn to G2 on page 138.*

*

G1 "No, I only heard it. The crash. I was in the kitchen," you say.

She looks at you, considering. "So did you go check? Or see it once the sirens came by?"

Might as well bury the truth further, now. You've already got the shovel in hand. "Not until I heard the ambulance. They were doing CPR when I went out, then they stuck him in the ambulance pretty quick."

"Then, how do you know. . . I bet they were probably able to—"

"—No. I saw him before they left."

"But how do you know—"

"—I just do," you say again.

She looks at you as if you're one of her unruly students: firm but patient. She speaks so gently it pisses you off. "I understand you're upset, but let's not get carried away and jump to conclusions."

"I'm not jumping—he was way too still. He's gone, Sharon, okay?"

"Okay, but what if they had him tied down tight, right? And told him not to move. Isn't that possible?"

You're not sure why she's so insistent that he's fine. Is it optimism, is she waiting on proof, or does she just not trust you? It's probably the last option. You look her in the eye and say, "He's dead."

She reaches out with both hands and pats your shoulders like a standoffish dad greeting his teenage son, as if both of you are too mature or awkward for silly things like affection. "Okay, I see you think that," she says, "I'm sorry your little friend is hurt."

You look at each for a few seconds and her face really does look soft. Maybe a little vulnerable. You almost tell her the truth.

A memory holds you back: pink plastic, wrapped in toilet paper. The pregnancy test. With everything that's happened, you almost forgot. Why hadn't she told you? She'd seemed happy when she'd gotten home, for a moment, anyway, before you ruined that.

Maybe she would have told you if you hadn't been drinking or if you hadn't told her that your neighbor got run over. Or maybe she's known for a week and doesn't want to face it. Maybe she thinks you'll freak out—the last time the two of you talked about kids was maybe a year ago and you'd been pretty insistent that it should be well

down the road. So had she. She was too busy and you didn't make enough. You still have a job, not a career, and babies need parents with careers, don't they?

You say, "So, you're home early?" You're tired of thinking of things to say, so might as well let her go on about work.

"Yeah. I wanted to get home to. . .well. Here I am."

"Shocking you got the carpool to leave so early."

"I had to push. McKinley was a pain again, but what's new."

"Right." She's told you about McKinley countless times. He's the head of her department, even if she acts like she is. You've met him, and he's a grumpy old codger, but you don't envy his position, what with Sharon pushing and prodding and bothering like she does. It's no surprise that he lets her run the show—it's much too tiring not to.

"Yeah, took some work." She turns away and looks out the window and then back at you. She sighs. "I had hoped to get home with time to get ready."

"Get ready for what?"

Continue to the 7th Choice on page 141.

G2 "Yeah, I saw the whole thing. Before and after." It feels good to say it. To admit it. You look up.

Her face melts. Her whole face changes, as if she suddenly saw something tiny and cute. She drops her hand away. "Sweetie, that's awful."

She never calls you sweetie. She never calls anyone sweetie. She walks up slowly and pulls you in for a hug. You wrap your arms around her and hold her tight.

She snuggles in tighter and you lift your chin for her head to fit in close to your neck. She hasn't been this close in a long time. When you hug, lately, it's quick. A drive-by style hug as she heads to work or when she gets home. Often a side hug. When you kiss it's either quick pecks as greetings and farewells or hungry, lustful, and breathy preludes to more. She likes to be on top and makes love like she's on a mission. You don't really have complaints there, it's an exhilarating view, but sometimes you miss this simple closeness.

Her hair smells like pineapples, a change from her usual clean, scentless shampoo and nature oils. You run your hands up and down her firm back. Her fitness tends toward cardio, so she's sleek, like a rounded prototype of a futuristic car—what sports cars of the future supposedly will look like one day, but never do. You release a long breath and she leans back to look up at you. Her steady frame is nice to hold, especially since your balance is off right now.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, of course," you say quickly. "I wasn't, you know, right there. I saw it out the window. Upstairs." In the bathroom. The memory, almost lost in the chaos and bourbon, of the pregnancy test comes floating back up. Shit, you think. You look down at her. She's looking at you with open eyes. Eyes so dark-brown you can't quite make out her pupils. There's compassion there. Pity, maybe, as well. She doesn't look like she wants to tell you anything. She's ready to listen.

You take a deep breath and release it slowly, so that the air might have time to latch on to all the shit you're feeling and take it out on its way. "I heard the brakes.

Looked up. He got hit. Smacked the windshield. I ran downstairs, but they'd already started CPR by the time I got over there. They did it the whole time. Never gave up, but I could tell. . . He was too still. And his head. . . They probably could too."

She frowns and her eyes reflect light as they begin to dampen. "That's awful," she says softly.

"Yeah." You feel like an idiot. You don't know what else to say.

"Well. . .you got home early?" It's not really a question, but you say it as if it is, hoping to push the burden of leadership for this conversation onto her. You certainly don't want to do any more trailblazing; too many thorns and brambles to avoid and you're afraid you'll say something about babies. You want to ask about the test, but something stronger holds you back. Jake's dead. You don't want to have to act happy. You're not sure how you feel about it anyway. She'd seemed energetic and excited for the few moments after she walked in, before she noticed you, day drunk and sloth-like on the couch. Maybe she'd been about to tell you. You don't think so, but maybe.

"I did," she says, "It took some doing to get McKinley out the door. You know how he is."

You do. You've only meet him a couple of times since she started worked there, but most of her stories revolve around him. He's big, old, Irish, hairy, and teaches alongside Sharon in the History department. There are only four of them, but they work to coordinate lessons and eras covered between the grades and semesters. McKinley stories generally follow the same sequence: Sharon has a new idea to try, McKinley grumbles about the good ole days and kids these days and how they'll never get it,

Sharon uses a combination of persistence, buttering up, and strong-arming until, finally, McKinley admits her new idea is better and acts like he was a huge supporter of it all along. He's been there forever and is the head of the department, but the administration always comes to Sharon first. That may be why he's so grumpy with her all of the time. If he feels as obsolete as you do, at times, you're not sure you entirely blame him.

"I had to practically push him out the door," she says. "I couldn't figure out why he wanted to stay anyway, I rarely can, but I got him out. I wanted to have time. To get ready and all."

"Get ready for what?" you ask.

Continue to the 7th Choice on page 141.

*

7TH CHOICE

- *If you answered the phone and she told you about her teaching award while you were driving to work, turn to H1 on page 141.*
- *If you made her mad so she hung up and didn't tell you, turn to H2 on page 142.*

*

H1 You remember what she must mean and quickly add, "That's right, the award. The fancy dinner."

"Right, but it was just a plan," she says, looking down.

"Okay."

"I mean, if you're up for it. . ." She leaves that hanging out in the air.

"Maybe."

"It might help you take your mind off things."

"I guess."

"I don't want to push you. Let's do whatever you'd like."

That was nice of her to say at least, but you know she wants to go. You could say no, and she might even go along with it, maybe put it off until tomorrow, but she'd be sighing all evening and giving you sidelong glances. As much as you don't feel up to going out, you know it's easier in the long run to just agree.

"Yeah, let's go," you say.

"Are you sure?"

You feign some excitement, "It'll be nice to get my mind off. . .yeah, let's go."

She smiles at you, and it seems so genuine. So open. Why had she not shared the news lying in the wastebasket upstairs if she's so open? She says, "Good, it'll be nice to get out." She starts up the stairs and then turns and looks back. She almost looks nervous. "Oh, and. Well, I won."

"Yeah, didn't you tell me?"

"No, I told you I was a finalist, but I won. I really won it. The youngest winner this year." She sounds so young all of the sudden.

Well of course she won. You fake a smile and say, "That's incredible!" You hope you don't sound fake.

"I know, I know, I'm so excited," she says and flashes her gleaming white teeth before her smile falters and she frowns at the floor. "I'll go get ready," she says and she turns up the stairs.

Turn to A9 on page 146.

H2 She frowns and says, "Never mind, it seems dumb now."

"What does?"

"I was going to tell you before, but, yeah. And now. . ."

You're not used to her holding back. She normally says what she wants when she wants, or so you thought before you found that test. You try to hold your head still. It's wobbling against your will. "Come on, tell me."

"I got some good news today. I thought we could celebrate."

Guilt clamps around your chest, adding pressure to your lungs. "What's the news?"

"This isn't a great time, never mind." She looks away and shakes her head.

"No, no, I'm fine. Please, what is it."

"Are you sure? Right now?"

"Yeah. I need some good news." Now you feel stupid for freaking out. She must have taken the test this morning and was only waiting for tonight. Maybe for dinner.

She smiles. It breaks out of her like she was trying hard to hold it in. The somber, sad look was controlled, this is her real self. "I won."

Won? What does that have to do with pregnancy, you wonder.

"Won what?" you ask.

"Remember? They nominated me for an AFAEE? It was at the start of the year."

She looks at you expectantly.

"But that's. . ." you stop out of confusion. Your head feels fuzzy and your thinking is slow. The tightness in your chest, preemptive excitement mixed with shame mixed with worry mixed with a whole mess of other feelings sinks back into anger. You're not sure how to feel about a pregnancy, but you know how to feel about her keeping it from you at least.

"The admin," she goes on, "they choose me as the school's nominee. They sent a packet and I sent a packet. Lesson plans and observation scores and stuff. They interviewed me a few weeks ago. I knew I was in the running, but I didn't think I could win. I found out I was a finalist this morning, but I won. I'm the youngest winner this year, out of all eight teachers."

Seems about right. "Great," you say, "I'm not surprised."

She frowns as if you don't yet understand how impressive she is. "It's a great honor. I'm so excited about it. This will be great for everything down the road. The school loves me for getting one with their name on it."

"Yeah, that's really awesome. They're lucky to have you."

She winks at you. "So are you. It comes with a cash prize."

"Really?" you say. "Like a gift certificate?" You'd really rather this conversation be over. You glance back at the kitchen, but you already stuck the bourbon back in the pantry.

She looks positively gleeful in her smugness. "No. A check. Seven-thousand five-hundred."

You probably didn't hear that right. That'd be months' worth of your salary. In one check? For a teaching award? Surely not.

"How much?"

"Seven-thousand, five-hundred." She says it slowly. Deliberately. "It's a little token of the city's appreciation for teachers like me."

"Little?"

She smirks. "Anyway, I wanted to go out. Somewhere nice. I was going to tell you on the phone, but, you know."

Right. She'd been about to say something. You can't quite remember what she was saying before you'd had another argument. "When?"

"This morning, you may have been driving, it's fine."

"Oh, sorry," you say, "I guess I made it hard for you to share your big news."

"Forget it," she says. You had said it sarcastically, so that maybe she'd feel bad about skipping the pregnancy news, but she didn't seem to notice. "So, are you up for going?"

She's going to start guilt-tripping you now, you know it. You can already feel the weight, her persistent, polite insistence. It will inevitably win, in the end. "Yeah, fine," you say, and you take a moment to regain your balance after another unintentional sway. "Let me get some water in me first."

She sighs, but she's not as aggravated as she'd been before. It sounds more like the sigh a young child would prompt: frustration, resignation, and love all wrapped up together.

You turn your back to her and walk to the sink for some more water.

Continue to A9 on page 146.

*

A9 Sharon handled all the reservations and planning. After nearly three hours—waiting, dressing, driving—the two of you pull up in front of *Seed* looking like a Hollywood starlet on the arm of her frumpy manager-turned-husband.

Your blazer fits okay and it's deep blue has a certain air of formality to it, but that's where the classiness ends for you. You'd pulled out your dress pants only to find a massive marinara sauce stain on the thigh, so you'd gone with a pair of khaki work pants. They're not too bad, but your tennis shoes look ridiculous next to Sharon's strappy heels. Wherever your dress shoes managed to hide themselves, you wish you could join them. Instead, you finished off the ensemble with a wrinkled Old Navy button-up. Sharon had sighed at the look, but hadn't said anything.

You run your hand over your hair again, trying to reduce the puffiness as best you can. You tried slicking it down with some gel, but as you ran your comb over your skull your hand froze. You tried again, but kept picturing how the short comb could have sat flush against the new surface of Jake's skull.

Your drunk, wobbly thoughts have slowed over the last three hours and the fuzziness has sunken to a dull haze and a steady pounding. This is why you don't day

drink, you remember. You'd rather be asleep for this part—even with as much water as Sharon forced on you. Your balance is a little off, so you know you're still at least a little drunk, but the fun of it has past.

Seed stands in the last section of a newly constructed strip mall. It's a new, slick-looking building, and the mall directory out front is built into a miniature clock tower, but it's still a strip mall. Not exactly what you expected for the kind of farm-to-table style place *Seed* seemed to be. From the outside, it doesn't look much like a restaurant. If it wasn't for the outdoor porch with twinkling white Christmas lights hanging from lattice-work above simple white chairs and tables, it would look more like a pharmacy. The well-lit, tall false front and the large, backlit "Seed" reminds you of Walgreens more than fine dining.

The inside, however, makes up for all that. It's brighter than you're used to for restaurants, but it looks sleek and new and promising. Natural wood panels bracket artwork on the walls, and white squares of the geometric ceiling hold simple lighting above. Grey curtains hang, drawn back, between large, open rooms, ready to be pulled in for more intimate dining areas. You suspect the curtains aren't used much since open floor plans are in right now. HGTV tells you that all the time. You only watch it because Sharon likes it, of course. The chairs are clean and white with red legs and the tables are natural wood polished to a fine finish. You can see what looks like the kitchen through the open floorplan. It's as bright as the rest of the restaurant, but a little cloudy with steam. Three cooks move around each other in unison. In front of you, behind a wooden podium, is an exceedingly young but pretty hostess. With her slim,

girlish arms but full figure, she looks sixteen and twenty-two at the same time. You look away with the intention of being extra careful. You and Sharon have fought about lingering glances too many times to add this girl's age to the mix. Plus, you don't want to be a creep.

She greets the two of you with a practiced spiel, and you let Sharon do the talking. She usually does the talking away. You don't really enjoy talking to strangers, so it doesn't bother you.

You're seated soon enough in the largest room off the entryway. The room is dominated by a massive, wall-sized piece of art. The type with all the dots that makes an image when you're farther back. You can't quite remember what it's called, but they talked about it in that art class. Your random gen eds are good for a wide range of information you can't quite remember. Either way, your table, so close to the painting, renders the method ineffective; from as close as you are, it's a giant cluster of dots that create such a confusing mass that they pull your eyes constantly back to them. It makes you a little dizzy, but you can't look away.

Silverware wrapped in white linen and a slim flute for each of you are already at your table. As Sharon sits, prim and proper with her magnificently exposed back straighter than an arrow, her skin's every bit as tempting to touch as the too-young hostess's up front. Somehow, though, it seems even less accessible. That doesn't make sense and it's a dangerous, not to mention inappropriate, thought, but it runs through your head all the same. She unrolls the delicate set of silverware and lays the napkin in her lap. You leave yours in the bundle.

The chairs aren't especially comfortable; you imagine they were picked more for styling than comfort. You notice, across the room, that a few tables along the wall have taller, padded chairs covered with fine grey fabric. You look on with envy at what looks like a double date at one of the tables. The group looks young for a place like this. You and Sharon are already young for a place like this, but these four look like high-schoolers. They're all giggles and floppy hair and insecurities barely hidden under product placement and name-brand shopping. They can keep their momentary popularity and youth, but you wouldn't mind trading tables with them.

Your waiter, a tall ginger fellow with a crisp white shirt under a black vest, looks down his nose at you as he walks to your table. You don't really know what makes his look so distinctive, but you're sure he could be universally identified as a waiter, even if he wasn't in a restaurant. It must be the black bowtie. He greets you both like friends, his voice and manner only a little too formal to complete the act. He smiles widely for Sharon. His teeth are almost as annoyingly white as hers. He could be an "after" actor for toothpaste commercials. You see his glance, from you back to her and to you again, and know what he's thinking. He looks at your shirt and smiles wider. He somehow mixes polite subservience with superiority in every glance he give you as he tells you both about the restaurant: farm to table and fresh this and fresh that. His description of the specials might as well have been in another language. Sharon either follows or pretends to, you're really not sure which. She's smiling a lot for him, too.

Then he asks if you'd like a wine list or any cocktails. They have specials or a full bar, he tells you. You're about to pass on the offer, you figure you've had enough for

one day, when Sharon reaches out and he hands her the wine list. As he walks away, she traces one slender finger down the list, comparing her options.

"You're getting wine?"

"I'm just looking," she says, "I wonder how pricey the top shelf stuff is in a place like this.

"It doesn't seem. . .I'm sure it's way too much."

She frowns and tilts her head. Her finger stops on one listing. "Actually, they're not that bad." She tilts the menu to you. "Look, even this Chardonnay's only fifty-three. And this Rosé's less and it's from Aix-en Provence."

Her French pronunciation is so authentic that it annoys you. "But, that's still as much as an entrée," you say.

"We are celebrating, aren't we?"

How she expects you to celebrate tonight you don't know. She seems to have completely forgotten Jake.

"I guess." You pause. "Should you really be ordering wine?"

She looks at you side-eye. "Why not?"

"Um," you say, "well, I've already had my share, that makes you DD."

She nods and her quizzical expression smooths out. "Well, I could still have a glass and drive, but I told you, I'm only curious." She looks up at you and smiles wryly, as if you're a silly child she doesn't know what to do with.

You take a deep breath and try to let the tension out of your shoulders. Your left is sore again, you must be holding it tight without realizing. "Right, sorry," you say and reach out to pat her hand.

She leans toward you across the table. Her dress has a high neckline that turns into a silver collar but leaves her shoulders bare. You've never been sure what makes some shoulders so attractive, but hers are, especially. She says, in a conspiratorial whisper, "This place is so fancy." She sounds nervous, but thoroughly excited.

You lean forward as well. "Seriously. I feel like they're gonna throw me out." You pick at your wrinkled shirt with your other hand.

She laughs quietly. "You're fine, don't worry. I'm just over-dressed."

As nice as the place is, she's right. The rest of the patrons are pushing formal, but still in the semi-casual range. Even for a more flattering bridesmaid dress than some, it was intended for a wedding. "You wanted fancy and you look bonkers right now. It's all good."

She raises an eyebrow. "Bonkers?"

Your face heats. You wanted that one back as soon as you'd said it. You shrug and say, "You look nice."

She nods her head toward you as if she's royalty and gives you a gracious smile. She's certainly feeling the fancy.

The ginger waiter appears out of nowhere and leans slightly forward, as if he's Sharon's manservant. He asks, "Have you had a chance to pick a wine?"

Sharon turns and flips open the list. She points at the bottom of the menu and says, "Yes, I'd like a glass of this Rosé, thank you."

"Excellent," he says. "And you sir?"

You pull your eyes away from staring at Sharon and meet his. He looks like a smug bastard, smirking at you like that. You say, "No, nothing."

He takes the list from Sharon, nods, and heads to the next table.

You lean forward and speak low. "I thought you said—what are you doing?"

She frowns at you and suspicion lights her eyes. She says, "What? I changed my mind."

You look at each other for a long moment.

Continue to the 8th Choice on page 153.

8TH CHOICE

- *The moment drags and you know it's time to either say something or play it off. Delay longer, and she might figure it out anyway. You want to say something, you really do, but you're not up for the whole ordeal right now, right here. You sure as hell don't want to give that damn smug ginger more to judge you for. If you want to avoid the talk for now, turn to A10 on page 153.*
- *You do need to say something, and it's time. It'll be a mess, but you need to know why she's not telling you. She could have said it already if that's what this dinner was actually about, but you know it's all about her celebrating her own award. If you want to call her out on it, turn to C8 on page 155.*

*

A10 "It's just the price," you say as you break off from the staring match, "we should be saving right now."

"Saving? For what?" she asks.

"I don't know, you're always saying I should cut out fast food and stuff, extra expenses."

She tilts her head, relaxing, but still studying you. She says, "That's mostly for your health. And why pay for junk."

"Oh," you say, "I thought things were tight right now."

"We're okay," she says. She's the one who pays the bills, so she'd know better than you. "Plus, remember the award?"

"Right. I guess we can celebrate a bit," you say. After a moment, you continue, "Maybe I can split that glass with you."

She smiles, but it doesn't touch her eyes. "Sure," she says in a single, staccato syllable.

And she goes along with your plan without further question. You end up drinking almost the whole glass, as, even when she takes a turn, she seems to barely sip it. You wonder how much she'd have left undrunk anyway, even if you weren't gulping it down every few minutes.

The food is delicious, you have to admit, but you're not engaged enough to really enjoy the experience. The waiter keeps pestering you both, as if good service means never letting your tables have a moment's peace. Sharon seems to have a

marvelous time, even as you continue to sour over the rest of the evening. Every so often she glances at you and gives the hint of a frown, as if she's about to ask what's wrong, but then thinks better of it and begins examining some new painting or starting yet another flirty little banter with the waiter.

Her act fades after you leave the restaurant and neither of you speaks much on the way home. You crash onto your mattress and try to ignore the slight spinning in your head and the dull ache at your temple.

Turn to A11 on page page 161.

C8 "Seriously, Sharon," you say, "what are you doing?"

She leans forward and speaks in a low, dangerous voice, "I am trying to have a good time, now if you will please just—"

"What about the baby, Sharon?" You throw it in her face. It feels good leaving your throat.

She stops and sits back. She opens her mouth, but then closes it again.

You say, "That's right, I found the test. I know. And now you're gonna knock a couple back?"

"For your information," she says, tapping her finger against the table, "it is perfectly safe to have a little bit of wine with dinner, I wasn't even going to finish it."

"Oh, I see, so you know best and—."

"Would you keep your voice *down*," she says in a hiss.

"I'll speak how I damn well please," you say at a lower volume.

Her eyes are shimmering with a half-moon of unfallen tears in each. "Why would you. How could you." She stops and stares at you with her lips tightly pressed together. Her cheeks are flushed and her neck muscles stand out, creating a deep pool in the pit of her throat.

"How could you not tell me?" you say, as if you were finishing her sentence.

"I was," she says and stops again. "You know what?" She points a sharp finger at your nose. "*You* do not deserve an explanation."

"Like hell I don't," you say, "I have to find out like that? Just out of the blue, there's a test in the trash?"

She shakes her head, "That is on you, okay? Why were you digging through the trash anyway?"

"It doesn't matter," you say, "look, I found out, okay, your plan didn't work."

"It wasn't—" she cuts off and lowers her own volume, "it wasn't some conniving plan to keep you out of the loop, you jackass, I was planning—you know what, you ruined it, so whatever."

You've got the bit in your teeth now, so, even though some small voice in the back of your mind suggests slowing down, you barrel forward. "Oh, I ruined your big plan, did I? Did you not have control over every single fucking thing I know or do for once? Is that it?"

The tears pool in her eyes escape and roll down her cheeks. The one of the left side loses momentum, caught on some patch of make-up and rests in the valley of her

nose. She slams her napkin on the table and stands. "You're such a jackass," she says, and stalks toward the back of the room where the bathrooms probably are.

You take in another hot breath through your nose and hold it for a long second then let it out through your nose. You relax your fists, but continue glaring down at the table.

"Hey, boss, everything kosher over here?" It's the waiter, back again.

You look up at him and say nothing. Instead, you wave a hand—a shooing motion.

"All good, man," he says and turns. He looks back and says, "You sure you don't want a cocktail?" with a wink.

"No. Thank you." You hope he takes that thank you the way you intended it, as a dismissal. As a request to stop showing up every few damn seconds.

Continue to the 9th Choice on page 157.

*

9TH CHOICE

- *Okay, so that might have been a little over the top, but really, she's been asking for it. If she admits her part in all this, you'll admit yours. Like she'd ever apologize, Mrs. Perfect. If you're going to stand your ground, turn to J1 on page 158.*
- *Yeah, that got out of hand. It even sounded like she'd had a plan to tell you there. If you want to apologize and give this another go, turn to C9 on page 158.*

*

J1 Sharon comes back from the restroom silent and you greet her with the same. You try a few more times to talk about this baby, but each time she just glares at you and says, "Not here" or "Not now." You give up and eat expensive, pretentious, tiny-portioned crap in silence and then leave. She almost starts to talk a few times during the ride home, but doesn't, and you don't add anything of your own. When you get home, she stomps upstairs and you watch garbage on TV for a few hours. Your head spins slightly, and you're more than a little thirsty, but you don't feel like getting up, so you stretch out on the couch and fall asleep to an infomercial.

Continue to A11 on page 161.

C9 Sharon returns from the restroom and sits silently. She intentionally avoids looking at you as you try to change her eye.

You clear your throat and say, "Look—"

"Just stop, okay," she says.

"I just want to—"

"Not here."

"But, I"

"Not," she says, as she looks you in the eyes, "here."

You swallow and look away. God damn that's a look. You feel like a student again, getting one of those disappointed speeches from one of the teachers you really respected. Like Mrs. Breen. After a few more moments, you reach across the table to take her hand, but she pulls it away before you get there.

"I'm sorry," you say.

She looks at you again and you almost lose your nerve.

"I'm sorry, I really am."

She continues to stare, her face flat and unimpressed.

"I don't know what got into me. It's, you know, everything. But that's no excuse.

I really fucked this up, you know."

"Yes," she says.

"It's. You know, I found the thing, the test, in the trash and was freaking out and then Jake and then we were here."

She tilts her head to one side.

"I'm not trying to excuse it, I'm not. I'm just explaining, you know."

When she doesn't respond, you say, "Look, I hope you didn't have a plan or something that I ruined, I'd feel really bad."

"I did," she says.

It feels like heavy fluid is leaking out of your lungs and compressing your intestines. "Shit."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry, it shouldn't be like this, you know?"

"I do."

"We should be happy, right?" That sounded more like a question than you meant it to.

Her lips tighten again. "I don't know, should we?"

Your eyes tighten and you squint at her. "You don't mean. . ." you say and trail off.

She raises an eyebrow and then get it. "No, Jesus, what's wrong with you."

"I didn't," you say, "I wasn't suggesting—"

"We're married, we don't need to. Jesus." She's shaking her head at you.

"I just misunderstood, okay."

The waiter comes by again and bothers you both for a minute or so. Sharon's face swaps to a new one when she speaks to him—a happy and unencumbered young woman instead of the stern teacher you've been facing. When he leaves, she's angry again from one moment to the next.

"So. It's real, then?"

She shakes her head at you, but her face softens a little. "I don't know yet. I only took it Tuesday. I have a doctor's appointment Saturday for the official test."

Since Tuesday, you think, only two days ago, and she had a plan. Maybe she was waiting for the official word, too. And you freaked out on her. You sigh and say, "I really am sorry. For all that." You gesture around you.

"We can talk about that later," she says.

Well, that sounds ominous, but you try to push it away. "Are you excited? I mean, this is big."

"It's big, all right," she says. You can't quite read her. She looks into the middle distance behind you and says, "I really don't know."

At least you're not the only one with mixed feelings. "Yeah," you say, "it's big."
You're glad you sound so smart.

"Look, can we not do this here?" she asks. "Can we have this conversation after we know for sure tomorrow?"

"Yeah, of course," you say.

Continue to C10 on page 162.

Branches to be added:

A11 Next day at work+Kate complications/potential affair

C10 Next day at work with a better attitude+Kate complications/potential affair

These branches lead to Friday evening when you get home.

A12 As you turn into your subdivision, you look down the long row of houses and see Jake standing in your driveway yet again. He's wearing another large white shirt with a colorful logo in the middle, probably another beer shirt. But, of course, it's not Jake. It's his father standing there, looking every bit the scarecrow that Jake ever did.

You don't want to drive up next to him, so you pull up to the curb, even if it's on the wrong side of the street for you to be parking that way. You stand out of the car and look over toward Jake's dad. "Henry? Can I help you with something?"

He was already shuffling toward you, walking without moving his feet as much as is usually necessary. He stops a few feet away and wrings his hands. He looks up at

you and you almost want to step back. His face looks as stiff and scruffy as ever and the stench of old whisky isn't abnormal for him, even for the afternoon, but his eyes are broken. They're no baggier than usual, and there's no puffiness around them, but the whites are barely white anymore with all the veins standing out. He can't seem to focus on you so he stares over your shoulder instead.

He speaks in his usual voice—his grief seems to be fully contained in his bloodshot eyes. "Stanley, look," he says and he pauses. He swallows and then continues, "I know Jake was fond of you. I know I was never—well, he was fond of you. We're having the funeral tomorrow morning, and I'd like you to be there for him."

Your throat suddenly feels tight looking into those eyes. He doesn't seem to like the offer he gave you, but there he stands, with one hand held out slightly as if he were offering you a physical invitation. You clear your throat of the tension and say, "Yes. Yes, of course. I'd be honored."

He looks at you, expressionless, for a long moment and you start wondering if you said something wrong. Is being honored what you say, you wonder. You realize you don't know the proper response to a funeral invitation, but you're fairly sure that, "I'd be happy to come," as you were about to say, would have been worse.

He coughs and you jump. He says, "Good then," and walks back to his half of the duplex. You watch him go and feel accused. Henry had been about to admit that he hadn't always been there for Jake, that he wasn't a great dad, maybe, and then almost suggested that you'd been filling in some of that roll.

But you were only a neighbor. You'd tolerated him, that's all. Which, now that you watch Henry, may be what that dysfunctional relationship was as well. Henry mostly tolerating his own son. In that case, did it make Jake think of you as another father? Did Jake misconstrue mild interest for some form of deeper affection than his own father gave?

You know you'll never know, but it strikes you that neither of you filled whatever roles you filled well. Jake was dead and you both let it happen.

Continue to the 10th Choice on page 163.

10TH CHOICE

- *You knew this street wasn't safe for bikes, you knew people drove too fast, and you didn't warn him. You didn't stop him. His dad should have, of course, but maybe you should have as well. If you blame yourself, continue to K1 on page 164.*
- *If you think that sometimes shit happens, continue to K2 on page 165.*

*

K1 The next morning, you and Sharon pull up to the funeral home. She seems to have decided to put things aside for now and you're more than happy to. At least for the funeral. She holds your arm and whispers things like, "He really appreciated you," and, "You were there for him."

You're not sure she's right. You were there, certainly, on your driveway. So was he. But you were there to leave. You were there to half-heartedly listen as you brushed

him off and walked from one door to the next and drove away to then watch him, over and over, bike off in the rearview. He rode his bike to school, it's not like you could tell him to stop riding. He was a kid and kids ride bikes.

Jake's dad sits stoic in the front row and smells like whiskey, even from a few feet away as you walk past. Jake's aunt runs the show. You'd never met her before, but she introduces herself during the circuit she takes around the room. She's as tall as you and wider—built like a bulldog but all smiles. Efficient smiles, each measured perfectly to the moment. She herds the crowd into pews and soon an old, dry minister begins speaking. The crowd is quiet except for coughs and clearing throats. An old lady on oxygen who sits in her wheelchair by the front row of black, plastic chairs does most of the coughing. It's shrill and insistent, as if she's warding off death one cough at a time. You stand when the pastor says stand and sit when he says sit. You leave when dismissed, even as small groups begin to form in the back of the room and in the visiting areas.

Continue to L1 on page 167.

K2 You attend the funeral with Sharon, who, thankfully seems to be on board with your desire to avoid your own problems for the time being. She acts like a different woman, a different wife, and passively holds your arm. It's strange, but, for now, you don't mind.

The crowd is mostly people you don't know, though you do see a few other neighbors and some other kids from the neighborhood. The children seem annoyed at

their clothes, and the few neighbors you know come by and speak briefly of tragedy and “gone too soon” and other clichés. You answer much the same: with vague platitudes that sound false even as you say them. No one mentions how often he biked in the streets.

You told him to use sidewalks. A few times at least. It was his dad who wouldn’t teach him, not you. It was his dad who sent him off to bother neighbors, not you. You were nice enough to listen to him, most of the time. He wasn’t your kid.

The sermon is short, perfunctory, and over. Small crowds gather and talk softly. You notice one group of men standing off to the side who seem to be talking about a game they’d all seen, football you assume from a hand motion like a pass. Whenever one gets too into describing a play or even smiles, they all glance at the floor and grow quiet before the process starts again.

Continue to K3 on page 166.

*

K3 Whoops, you still seemed guilty there, didn’t you? Well, I mean, a kid did die and you did, most often, ignore him, so you must feel at least a little guilty, even if it was just a freak accident. No? Okay, let’s try that again, sans guilt. Continue to K4 on page 166.

*

K4 You attend the funeral with Sharon, and use the somber mood of the crowd to avoid the tension between the two of you for at least a while. She comforts you at first,

but, after a glance at your face and a frown, her face darkens like a stormfront and she stands stiffly next to you until the sermon starts.

You listen, all the while thinking about how sugarcoated funerals really are. You wonder how nice people would be about you if you suddenly died. Would you be brave and thankless for your work saving lives? Would you be a steadfast and loving husband with great promise of things to come? You glance over at Sharon as she wipes a tear away. Would she stand up front and speak of her impressive husband as her dad tried to conceal smirks in the back of the crowd. Ok, maybe not that far, but you doubt that even your funeral could make her dad like you.

When the sermon ends you walk briskly with the other mourners and out into the bright sunlight.

Continue to L1 on page 167.

*

L1 Sharon's appointment was scheduled soon after the funeral, giving you the excuse you needed to escape quickly. Sharon drives and you watch the white noise of pavement speed past your window.

You're struck with a series of memories from road trips with your family, all blended together. Your dad never liked to drive when he had time off, so you didn't take too many trips, but every once in a while they'd pack you and your brother into the Tahoe and drive up to Gatlinburg or Asheville or Nashville, or once to Branson for a longer trip. Your dad would play Johnny Cash or Elvis and no one would talk much.

You'd read comic books and your brother would study sports statistics of one kind or another.

You'd lean against the hard surface of the window and imagine a small creature running over the pavement, chasing, leaping, and tumbling its way alongside your car. Sometimes it would be a furry little squirrel like creature, sometimes a reptile, but that's how you'd entertain yourself for the hours of driving.

You look down now and you can't see the creature; there's only pavement rushing by.

It's not a short drive—Sharon said she'd had a time finding an OB to see her on Saturday—but she eventually pulls into a massive parking lot off the back of a hospital and you follow her toward a smaller office building off to one side.

You both sit, silent, in the waiting room. Sharon avoids your gaze and you can't help watching the other couples around you, each happier than the last. You wish that you and Sharon were more like that, pulled toward each other's eyes and excited for the future to come, but, at this moment, it seems unrealistic. Not that a child isn't potentially exciting, or that you can't imagine a happy future somewhere down the road, but there's a disconnect between the two of you that makes it hard to see how to get to there. You can't think of what to say to her, or of what you could do to bridge the gap.

A nurse or assistant calls you back after a long wait and your knees feel old and stiff when you stand. You both follow the scrubs-wearing woman to an exam room, where you sit and wait in silence once more.

When the doctor, a woman not that much older than you with long, braided hair and a bright smile, finally enters, she says she's Dr. Malone but says to call her Trish. She starts some small talk, but after looking to each of you, adopts an air of efficient professionalism.

She spreads clear jelly onto Sharon's stomach and then aims a small wand on her stomach and, almost immediately, a fast *wub-wub-wub* plays to the room.

Sharon gasps and touches her belly. She asks Trish, "Is that the heartbeat? It is, right."

Trish laughs and says, "Yes, that's it. Nice and strong."

Sharon's face softens and a smile sneaks across her face. She looks at you and your eyes meet for the first time since you arrived at the office.

If you did not feel any guilt at Jake's funeral, turn to L2 on page 169.

If you did feel guilty, turn to L3 on page 171.

*

L2 You look away by reflex and take a deep breath. Well, it's real, you think. You guys are having a baby. You look back up, but Sharon's looking down at her belly now.

You reach out to hold her hand, but she moves it away right before you touch her. She's still looking down at her belly, so you're not sure if it was on purpose or not.

Trish takes the wand away from Sharon's belly and the heartbeats fade away, leaving the room quiet in their absence. She smiles at you both and says, "Now, let's see how the little he or she is doing in there."

Sharon asks if she'll be able to tell the sex yet, but Trish says it's probably too early. Trish adds more jelly and pulls up a standing ultrasound machine.

There's the whooshing sound you've heard from ultrasounds in movies and clicking noises and Trish angles the wand and searches in different directions. And then the white noise becomes patterned into a hollower version of the same rapid heartbeat, as if heard through a tunnel. On the screen, a void-filled circle appears, and then a little peanut shows up in the middle.

The doctor holds still, then points with her other hand. "There's your baby," she says.

You look a little closer and it doesn't look quite like a peanut, but certainly not like a baby, either. But you reach out again, and this time you find Sharon's hand. She looks over at you and you don't look away. She looks young and a little afraid. You look back at the screen, point at the little curled seed-looking baby and ask, "Can we see any closer?"

Trish shakes her head and says, "That's as close as we get for now, it's still very, very small—only about an inch long."

You look back at Sharon and she asks you, "Isn't it amazing?"

You look at the image. You say, "Yeah. It really is." You start to feel worried. This should be a bigger moment, shouldn't it?

Continue to M1 on page 172.

*

L3 You look away by reflex, but immediately look back again. Sharon's eyes look large and excited, but also, and maybe even more so, afraid. Her look says, "This is real. You and I have a baby. We're going to have a little life that relies only on us."

You swallow and look away, but you reach out a hand and hold hers. She squeezes tight as you both listen to the tiny drumbeat of your future child's heart.

Trish takes the wand off Sharon's stomach and pulls forward a portable ultrasound machine. She says, "All right, let's take a look," rubs on more jelly, and uses the large ultrasound wand on Sharon's belly.

On the screen, weird grey colors form shapes of light and dark that you can't decipher. You squint and wonder if the baby's in there somewhere and you can't tell, but Trish keeps moving her wand, apparently looking for a better view. It reminds you of a black and white collection of dots, as in pointillism, and, as in the restaurant, you don't yet have the right perspective to understand the image.

A darker circle appears, something that looks like a dark bag in a field of static. You can hear the static too, deep and hollow as if it's coming from a well. Something *click, click, clicks* as she moves the wand from side to side, almost like a knuckle tapping on a guitar. Then the static becomes a pattern and creates a quick, beating rhythm. For a brief moment you expect Blind Willie to start singing along, but it's not a beat, it's the heartbeat again. But now it sounds deep and hollower, as if heard while floating at the bottom of a deep lake, rather than listening at the surface.

A small white bean appears in the back sack and Trish slows her searching. With another adjustment, a tiny, curled up figure appears and you look at Sharon. She looks

back and gives you a shy smile as her eyes grow cloudy. Tears don't fall, but they must be shimmering her vision as she looks back and sees the tiny lima bean that is her baby.

Trish points to the spot and confirms that it is, indeed, your baby.

Continue to M2 on page 173.

M1 Back home, Sharon immediately goes upstairs. It's not until she reaches the top of the stairs that she looks back and says she's going to be working on lesson plans. That must mean she's feeling overwhelmed; she always looks for something to control whenever she's feeling lost. Often enough that something is you, so you're happy that the lesson plans will get the brunt of her dissatisfaction this time.

You continue to the kitchen and pour yourself another glass from her dad's stash. She certainly wouldn't approve of that, you're sure, but it's been a day, and you're looking for something strong. And for something you yourself can control, you realize, even if it's a small act of rebellion. You try not to think about that anymore.

You pull out your phone and see if Kate has texted you back yet, but she hasn't. Even if you don't yet understand what that's turning into, and you can't call it simple, somehow, when you're talking with her, things seem simpler. Easier to navigate, even. You could use some simplicity and ease right now.

You decide to text her again instead of waiting around, and begin daydreaming of ways you might get out of the house and look into her soft, dark eyes again soon.

Path toward an alternate ending, unfinished.

M2 Back at home, Sharon pours you a tall bourbon from her dad's stash, then goes to write lesson plans. She says that you'll need to have a conversation soon, but that she wants to take her mind off everything for a little while. You shake your head and wonder at her, your wife, who thinks writing long, complex lesson plans is a relaxing activity.

After she goes upstairs you walk slowly, holding your drink, to the front door and look out at your drive where Jake would probably be riding or waiting if he were still around.

You notice his shoebox, his Blind Willie box, by the umbrellas next to the door, where you dropped it after he gave it to you only two days ago. You bend down, grab it, and set it on the coffee table as you sit on the couch. You take another drink and, realizing the glass is almost empty, slosh the rest back and thunk the heavy tumbler onto the coffee table.

You open the box. Inside, there's a bird's nest of printings, hand-written notes, and a little chart of different kinds of guitars with their pros and cons listed beside them. The burned CD with "Blind Willie" written in Sharpie across its white front sits to one side.

Sharon's laptop is on the coffee table, asleep, so you wake it up and slide the CD into the drive. A media player jumps up and soon "Dark was the Night, Cold was the Ground" plays again, the same song Jake played on his iPhone. The static hiss paves the way for Willie's sorrow or terror or loneliness—whatever it was that made him sing

like he did. The deep, hollow buzzing of the old record reminds you of static, and you picture the grey and black dots that slowly transformed into a tiny image of your baby on the ultrasound screen. A chill splashes down your shoulders and spreads down your back, as if a cold wave submerged you, and for a few moments you float within the music. You hear the song like you couldn't the first time, and hear that sorrow, the loneliness, that Jake described.

You open your eyes and sit forward to look inside the box. One of the printouts has a small hand-drawn spaceship or satellite on top of it and you pull it out of the bunch. It looks like an old news story that Jake printed, highlighted, and annotated. Blind Willie hums and sings and moans as you read the article and Jake's notes in the margin.

The article outlines Johnson's life and blindness—not a condition since birth, you read, but the result of an incident. When he was a child his spiteful stepmother had thrown lye in his face as an act of misdirected anger toward his father. He's respected now as one of the great bluesmen of the '20s, but was unknown in his own lifetime. The last years of his life were spent penniless, sick, and alone, wrapped in wet newspapers in the burnt-out wreckage of his home.

You can see him now, rocking and humming in a shack—rain pouring over his shoulders. This must be what fascinated Jake. You're not sure why it you didn't see until know how interesting it all was.

The article continues and outlines Voyager 1, which, in case it ever encounters other life forms, carries a golden audio-visual disc meant as an introduction to mankind.

It carries photos, languages, Gregorian chants, whales singing, and babies crying. It has music from Mozart to Chuck Berry, and one song by Blind Willie Johnson, and it's the song that you're listening to. You pause and Blind Willie and his guitar rolls on.

Underneath the article, Jake, in his dark, angular handwriting, added, "He died cold, sick, and alone, but his music just left the solar system. It might outlast humanity."