

## Roger

“Can you believe that?”

“N—”

“yeah, I know kid would show up any-flippin” time my car broke down.”

“Oh? Don’t you work in an auto-body store?”

“Yeah, but I mean, I know cars, but this kid, he *breathes* cars”

Quizzical look.

“I know what you’re thinking, ole’ Roger, there, he is losing it. Northerner getting muddy in the damn southern heat- I am telling you, the kid *breathes* cars I don’t even know if he likes it. Got to the point, if my ole-beater-truck, broke down, I would be looking for him.”

“Can I just buy my pa—”

“You know, I am telling you, first time, he just was sitting in his car with his girl, side-o-the-road, some small dirt-pull off by a corn field and telephone pole, telling you, she had her head on his shoulder like its a pillow, and the stereo was on, listening to some early 2000’s garbage my ex-neighbor’s son used to play too-loud. “I know the pieces fit” is the chorus, damn trailer park, too small y’know what I mean?”

“Was the band to—”

“Yeah I learned later it was Tool. But I didn’t *know* that then. Anyway, kid and girl sitting in the car, day-light, like a gal-darn Tuesday 2016, *before* Trump, I know cause it was like fall, but not-November, some time after school when the sun is still out, I get out around three, maybe four, so anyway, he hops out of the car holding some yellow-pad he always carries, you know, he

hops out when he hears scratch, pop, scripper, scrap, pip, and pop on the opposite side of the road from *my* car, down by that brewery in an old-barn-shit-dark in there y'know, hops out all smooth, crossing the road looking both ways holding yellow-pad and what looks like a fine-point sharpie, in one hand”

“What is scratch, pop, scrip—”

“I told you. That is the noise my engine makes right before it *dies*.”

A lot of air quotes with too-clean fingers for an auto-body shop. Roger, in the south, thriving.

“And so there I am, guy from auto body shop and some skinny-ass teenager comes towards me, not smiling, but like not mean either, ah!, y'know, I ain't great with the youths, so my sphincter, FWOOOOOP, tightens right up, me thinkin', woo-buddy, this is it, he gonna take me out, or maybe my wallet—”

“If I could just please pay—”

“Look, I was born before your daddy-so don't blame me for being nervous- I ain't never seen these kids looking all-moody-listening to this dark-music, with this extremely obvious hint of future tattoos, but he walks over, and says, not playing, this *kid*, maybe your age, just-kidding, haha c'mon, I 'm old, over sixty okay-and he just says “Pop the hood, Sir, I can get you running.” And I shrug cause I just want to get home to my trailer, it's like wicked hot for that time, of year and if I am honest, I am worried about the cats, didn't have reliable AC like my unit down-here-no-sir”

“What are the cat's na—”

“I have two cats, y’know, Buttercup and Ginger. Never outside. The trailer I keep it cold for them. I worry about thunder when I am gone. What if the power goes out—”

“Well I mus—”

“Oh, yeah, for sure, I was worried myself, that day, about the cats back home, I am serious, so that’s why, I shrug and I pop the hood, and this boy, seriously, a *boy* walking out of some not-nice car on some school-day, fixes, or get’s me runnin’ a’least and ya know what I mean, kid didn’t even use tools, just one hand and a *pen*”

“I mean, yeah that’s pretty wi—”

“And I say too him, right, just like that, how the fuck did you do that?! And the kid, his names Richie, I mean, I learned that later, at maybe the second time-yah know, or third? Yah know what I mean? He just goes, “I don’t know, I just know what it needs” and he shrugs and walks back to his lady, or girl, in the car and she is just smiling the widest smile at him as he crosses the road and the sunlight, I swear to god- it just beams into the car lighting it up to a soft glow all throughout.”

“Crazy. Really wild.”

By now the customer has dropped the item, whatever it is, some piece of a car or truck on the counter and stands with their arm’s crossed. Resigned, interested even. It is hot outside, the summer is muggy in Florida.

“What happened next?”

“Okay see, good, good, good question, right? So see, this *kept* happening, every time my truck dies, boom, kid’s there, like some sort of mechanical-angel, his lady in the car, and she

sometimes has a soccer jersey-on, I am telling you every-damn-time-my-engine-stops, he is there.”

“How is that even poss—”

“That’s the thing, it’s not the possible that matters, it’s that it goes on so long and he never asks for *anything*, it’s the light beams into their car or maybe just that fucking smile this girl gives him, look, I ain’t ashamed, I used to be a bit of a ladies man, ain’t much to look at now, but then, shit, I was a *linebaker*, big beefy dude, women, you know liked me-but they ain’t never looked at me like that. These two, were in *love*. I mean that in the sense of some ancient spiritual sense, I don’t know, Brady and what’s her name? Not like Melanie and Trump, no sir, look, I ain’t being political, shit, I voted for the guy, I’m just sayin’, humans, we know love when we see it. And like-get this, in that yellow pad, I ain’t lying, this kid, he is always writing *poetry*.”

“Poetry?”

“Yeah like flowery stuff, about love, maybe loss, he read me a few, while he was fixing the car, telling you, I didn’t get it, but like, it felt *real*.”

“I read a bit of poetr—”

“Yeah, I bet and anyway, this kid, finally one time he doesn’t show up right away, and I’ve gotten used to it, right? so, like I start to get worried, this is now like spring 2018, and finally, after forty-five minutes, boom, he shows up-and he’s looking a little rough around the edges, still no-trouble with my engine, I am up and running within five- and I don’t want to ask shit, cause I don’t want to ruin this thing I’m in, and, like it’s not about the truck, right? Something about seeing two kids, who always stop to help, and love each other, now that, *that*, is worth your time—”

“Yeah no-one helps their neigh—”

“Right, so instead, I say to him, listen, Rich, I don’t know jack-junk and by now, it is like 2018, we’ve been doing this truck-fixing dancing, for *years*, and, like, I know I am leaning towards leaving the area soon, and I got a trailer paid through the end of 2018, so I say, son, if you are ever, and I mean ever, in trouble and need a place to stay, I got a trailer, up the road a bit, you can stay in, least I can do, and like, I *fucking* meant it, like not in some gloating about generosity, no I meant it...I meant Richie, you deserve safety if you need it.”

The customer, is now very invested. Roger, when he tells this story to anyone who listens, he begins to look very emotional, like a father talking about their kid.

“Did you get his cell-phone all kid’s have em’ nowad—”

“I didn’t even ask, and now, I swear it, after that time, my truck it runs, perfectly, no issues for two months, and all I am doing is thinking about Rich and then, look, then I was working in a discount bulk store selling goods. It’s like a goddamn, retirement home. The young, like grandkids. The daily’s, the regulars, all, shit, you know, they are old. It is always just the smell of old people Beep, Beep, Beep and Richie...

An inflatable pool, a pair of shorts, mismatched socks, overstock chips, overly seasoned croutons, misshapen lucky charms, sandals with inappropriate seasonal designs, the bathing suits, so dumb-thin your dick might pop-out, gross-hats smelling of plastic, chocolate bars kinda melted, packages of gloves, weird-ass-drinks from companies worst ideas, so many lumpy stacks of things, you know what I mean? You been to a store like that?”

The customer is getting lost again, but still nods, and carefully picks up the wrapped item of metal, or hardened plastic and looks at the back.

“So beep, beep, beep, in this discount-bizarre, some sort of loser-I musta been to work there, having not seen this kid for *months* and it was two-twenty-eight on some random day in early early fall, and I *know* I was at turnstile four and the sky, from his view-point looks gorgeous- and I am scanning some woman, who looks like all my exes- and the item goes-Bip, BipB-BipBipBeepBeepBee—”

“Look, I really must g—”

Roger finally notices the item on the counter and scans it into the computer.

“Whoops sorry about that, I get lost sometimes. Do you remember what it cost?...no? Okay, hold on, gotta get a manager.”

Roger presses the button on his register which lights up the number above it. The customer, they are going to be a bit late to their happy-hour plans.

“Anyway while we wait, where was I, okay, Right....so I got something scanning and its just going....BeepBeepBip-making some weird noise, and I am just looking out the door, seriously cause I aint paying attention, really to the noise—”

Roger is now looking out the door, thinking, elsewhere.

“Not surprising”

“What’s that?...Oh, so it is now two-thirty, like two months since I seen the kid and boom, I see him and his girl walk past, just outside the window at turnstile four, looking like way to pale, and way to boney, and the sky is yellowing, and the item is still scanning, but like I said, I don’t even notice, no-way, and then I am thinkin’ bout how life, it isn’t this, no, not scanning items in some discount-bulk-store-counting hours- it’s the moment’s like this, the between’s, the how’s the weathers, the thankyou’s, the love you’s, the yesses, the nos, the way you take your

coffee, the lunch break, the kisses on the neck, the flowers by your house, the dogs wagging tail and the way they ritually lick the bowl in a counter-clockwise direction, like, this kid, right, he got me thinkin' like a poet, like how, stopping on the side of the road, and helping, just some old-guy- that stuff...that stuff is real life.”

Customer is looking hopefully for a manager, but this is Florida in July, and things are moving slowly.

“Look, they pass my window at turnstile four and I am thinking, holy-moly, right, the truth, is all the rest of us we count our days by the minutes, by the mundane, by the minutiae of life. Yet, if you are paying attention, like Richie does, or was, or I hope right now is doing, single moments, become revelatory—BeepBeepBeepBeep, right? That’s beeping and I am thinking and finally, the red line reading some un-entered barcode on some plastic thing, this woman, who of course, looks like my ex, god-rest her soul—”

“Did you ahmm ki—”

“NO! Course not-cancer, smoker...BeepBeepBeepBipBeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep on an infinite loop, right? And I think now it’s two-thirty-five, and get this, I ain’t lying, I’m looking out the window my-brindle-cat walks up to the door, lifts its small black-an-orange-paw, as if waving or *something* and slides the automatic door closest to my till open. Can’t make this shit up, the door stands open for longer than normal, I am serious, this really happened, cat-door and the door starts bouncing several inches closed, before sliding back to fully-open thudding, and were all staring and the machine, my scanner, right, its like BeBeepBeBeBeBeBeepBeepBeepBeBeBeepBeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep”

“You don’t have to keep doing the noi—”

“And the doors, like the door my cat just walked up to, right after Richie passes is like doing some rhythmic bouncing and some electrical malfunction of the scanner turns into a single screeching entity at my register, and I drop that dumb item, maybe a tooth brush and run past-this woman who looks, I am serious, just like my ex, and it is now two-thirty-eight and the lights in the store start flickering, I am serious, all this, after this kid, who always fixed my truck-passed, and I am outside trying to find him or my cat, and all I see is my cat curled in the sun and she wanders over to me, and I pick her up and the wind outside picks up- and all I can smell, standing outside in the sun is the summer before eighth grade and I knew it, so specific, right, like from fifty-years ago, like, tellin’ you, the wind smells of rain, storms, mud, mowed grass, gravel and a lake where my father to me fishing, the smell of that lake in North Carolina and I am standing there in the sunlight, squinting, remembering, trying to see Richie so I can say, hey buddy, can I HELP, and all I can see, cause I am to busy, getting blasted by this breeze that smells like Carolina and hot-dogs with the vinegary slaw, and all I see, I am telling you-“

The manager stands next to the customer, and watches, he has seen this before, sometimes, it is better to let a story play out.

“-all I can see are fireflies, the very ones that lit up the canopy of trees at night around the lake by my dad’s hunting cabin, that summer before eighth grade and the *damn* wind, it smells of the past, before conveyor belts and elongated beeps. The wind smells of a time, when moments stretched further, infinity in a small boat on a lake, measuring afternoons only by the suns arc across the sky, I can smell his, I mean my Dad’s aftershave on the breeze, and I’m in this angular light of late autumn, and I am holding my soft cat who is purring, feeling the lines on my ass- from aluminum seats on a goddamn fishing boat and I lean my head back, letting the sun hit my



face, the door thudding behind me still and I smell, I ain't kidding, I smell, on this breeze, the guts of filleted trout, smell the sear of their skin on cast iron. I can smell the mud of the lake-shore. I can hear my dad tellin' me, mom, mom she is leaving and there is the orange glow of the bonfire we stand by getting caught on my Dad's wet-cheeks, I swear it, I am *fully* there and were around the fire, marshmallow in hand, I'm like only twelve maybe thirteen, and I can't bear-it right, so I begin to talk over him, gabbing about the marshmallows, the trout, the fire, the boat, the anything, just nothing, crap that don't matter."

The three men, in an auto-body shop, employee, customer, and manager, they all wait for what feels like hours in an impenetrable silence.

"—And, finally, fifty-years later, no, more, fifty-two-years, on this dumb breeze, outside my discount store job, on some random Wednesday, I finally hear Dad, for real, sayin' "She's gone bud, she left us, you gotta live without her.""

"Wait, but what happened to Rich—"

"—And when I finally come to reality, back to holding my cat on the sidewalk outside the discount store looking over a sunny parking lot, there I am, squinting into the sun and I don't know, I just took off my apron threw it into the store, quit my job that day—started driving south that evening, not-looking for answers, no, I have what I need, but maybe, hoping, if I leave that trailer behind, I don't know, it makes no sense, I knew Richie would eventually find-it, maybe, I don't know, maybe then he would find it safe enough to *fix-himself*. They were just so skinny and they gripped each other, like they were the only thing holding each other from floating away... *Shit.*"

The three men, including the store manager, stand staring out into the blinding Floridian summer, their three cars reflecting beams of sunlight back into the store and collectively, though they picture their physical appearance differently, all the men, envision a light filled car, a teenager on the cusp of womanhood, leaning against a thin-boy-heading toward adulthood, the car, driving fifty, heading north, always north, too the warmth of an empty trailer.