

## Jesus of America

There it is, nearly hidden by overgrown buckthorn in the driveway of this tumble-down two-story. Last week, like an idiot, he left the car running at Speedway. Two minutes and it was gone. But no doubt about it, the old Civic is his, same bulldog bobblehead in the rear, same NPR sticker. He's parked a few houses over, watching as this scrawny dude in a backward cap and tattoo sleeves removes parts from his car and puts them onto another Civic. He called 911, gave them the guy's description, but they told him he had to wait for the next available officer. He waited and waited, and now it's been over an hour, and the guy is still plundering parts from his car.

"You called the police, right?" First thing Samantha says when he calls her at work.

"Of course I did." He pictures her behind her desk, a distracted silhouette against ceiling-high windows. "But they're not coming. It's our car, Sam. I gotta do something."

"Where's Ellie?"

"At daycare. What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think, Matt. What are you doing in that neighborhood anyway?"

"Sam, he's literally dismantling it in front of me." The scrawny dude disappears into the house. "He's just a little guy. I feel like I should just, you know, go over there."

"What? That's just ..." She cuts herself off.

"Sam, it's right there."

“Listen, Matt. He’s a criminal. Just go home. Call the insurance.”

For some reason, this pisses him off. “That feels so ... so passive. I gotta do something.”

“Passive? It’s what you do. You call the cops. You call the insurance. You don’t mess with criminals.”

“Sam, don’t worry.”

“Don’t worry? What are you going to do?”

The guy reappears from the front door, gulping what looks like a Dr. Pepper. His Adam’s apple bobs like a cork in a bottle. “Look, Sam. He’s back. I gotta go.”

“Jesus, Matt, don’t do anything stupid.”

He hits the hang-up button. He’s stopped listening anyway. The tattooed guy wriggles up to his Nikes beneath the Civic. What the hell’s he doing?

It’s no coincidence he finds himself in his old neighborhood. He’s supposed to be home grading papers, but lately, chewing through the freshmen scrawling has become mind-numbing tedium. Instead, he procrastinates by cruising through the dumpy rentals of his college dropout days. Memories of past possibility a brief reprieve from an unfulfilling daily grind.

Go home. Do nothing. Of course, this is Sam’s advice. The guy she married doesn’t mess with criminals. The thing is, in another life, the one before Sam, that’s just what he did, or at least what his friend Rob did, back when they were dealing. They were strictly small-time, mainly weed to college kids, but they still had to put the occasional scumbag in his place. That was Rob’s department. Come to think of it, Rob would be perfect now. Teach this guy a lesson. Man, and he doesn’t live far from here. Or at least he didn’t eight, nine years ago.

Matt scrolls through his phone. There he is, Rob. His thumb hesitates. Probably long out of service. He watches his thumb squeeze the number, expects a recording, but the call goes

through. After five or six rings, he's about to hang up when someone answers. "Rob," he says. Nothing but silence. "Rob Carlson." Still nothing. But it's the kind of open silence where you know someone is on the other end. "It's me, Matt. Matt Evans."

"I know."

"How you doing? Long time."

More silence. Stupid. He should have thought this through. Even years ago, Rob would never suffer a basic hello. His stock greeting was an ironic handclasp, a too-sincere look in the eye. You were either in on the joke or you weren't. After all these years, small talk would be absurd.

"Listen. Got a bit of a situation. You still in that place on Fifteenth? I'm around the corner, across from the laundromat." He waits a beat. Still nothing. "So, I'm looking at this guy who stole my car, dismantling it in front of me, and I thought, man, this calls for you." An appeal to his ego should have gotten his attention. Instead, the phone goes dead.

Shit. Rob would have been ideal. It was the way he carried himself, as though he welcomed any aggression that would permit a release of anger. Rob's fury was apocalyptic, an air raid siren in a small room. It overtook the place and inspired even the hardest asshole to back off.

The dude worms his way from under the car, dragging with him a cylindrical metal tube. *Jesus, poor fucking car.* Matt taps his phone to film the guy as he pops the trunk and tosses the part in. He's busy messing with the zoom when his passenger door opens.

Rob Carlson gets in, eases the door shut, and quietly latches it.

"Jesus!" The word erupts from Matt's throat like the cluck of a chicken. "Jesus fucking Christ. You scared the shit out of me!"

Rob glares through the windshield. “That the guy?”

Same Rob but different. Same dark curly hair, though shorter. Same hawkish nose. Could even be the same shirt he last saw him in, but it fits him better. He’s lost weight or something.

“Hey, man. Wow! Didn’t expect you to, you know, just show up.” Like always when his heart skyrockets, he’s a babbling dumbass. “Seven, eight years?” Matt shifts sideways to look at him straight on. “Man, you look great. Younger. Some kind of diet?”

Rob turns to look at him, and Matt feels the weight of his appraising eyes. He never noticed before, but his eyes are long-lashed, almost pretty, but the unnerving intensity is still there.

“This is a social visit, is it?” Rob says.

Matt raises open palms. “What? You’re mad at me? We did hang out a lot of years.” He reaches over to pat Rob’s gut. “Wow. No more spare tire.” He grabs his own gut. “Must have all gone to me.”

“Just get to it, Matt,” he says. “You called for a reason.”

Matt searches his face. Despite the changes, it’s the same old Rob. From the instant he first met him in the student union handing out *Elect Rob for Jesus of America* flyers, he sensed a man at odds with the world. This would be just another day in a life of perpetual conflict.

“Okay fine. No casual reacquaintance chit-chat. I can take a hint.”

They stare for a while at the thief’s boney ass and sagging jeans. The guy’s upper torso is obscured by the open hood of the other Civic. He can feel Rob’s ambivalence. He’s staring not at the guy, but into him, as if gauging whether he’s worth the trouble, whether Matt’s worth the trouble. Maybe this is not the same old Rob.

Finally, the guy straightens, stretches, and looks at his phone. Then he's in the Honda, backing into the street, heading their way. Matt slumps low in his seat as the guy roars past. His car is obviously drivable, but it sounds now more like a NASCAR racer than his modest little Civic.

Matt waits for him to go a half block before he puts it in gear, does a U-turn. Rob's eyes widen, glance out the passenger window, then out the rear before he presses himself deep into the passenger seat, covers his face with his hands. "My fucking god," he exhales through his palms. "What am I doing here?"

"Hey, I can let you out, but I'm following."

Rob studies Matt for a minute, says wearily, "No, look at you. You'll just get yourself in trouble." Then as if some inner scale has tipped, Rob straightens, puts a hand on the dash. "Just follow him. We'll figure something out."

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So now they're behind the guy on the freeway. He's doing eighty. All Matt can think is he's removed some vital part that'll wreck the car. Any minute it'll disintegrate into a thousand pieces that scatter across the concrete, but no such excitement. After a couple of exits, he gets off at Lake Street. They roll past Ace Hardware, Hymie's Records, Daisy Nails, a half-dozen storefronts boarded and abandoned. Finally, the guy turns into the parking lot of Advantage Auto Parts. They pull to the curb a half block down.

"Advantage Auto," Matt says. "Middle man for stolen parts? Or maybe they fix cars with those parts. Why else would he be here?"

"Know all about these things, do you?" Rob says. For the first time, some of the old humor is in his voice. No surprise it's at Matt's expense. "We just sold weed, if you remember."

Matt keeps his eyes on the door of the parts place. “So you still doing that?”

Rob considers this. “Kind of hard once they legalized it.”

“If I remember right, it was more than just the money anyway—live on your own terms, no limits, rise above the crowd—all that condescending crap.”

“Do what’s right, follow through.”

“Ah, there he is, Rob the righteous. So this is the right thing?” He sweeps a hand toward the storefront.

Rob’s face is unreadable. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

Mr. Tattoo emerges from the Advantage front door. He’s with a paunchy, balding guy in a Timberwolves jersey and shorts halfway down his calves. The fat guy waddles around the car, rocks the fenders, cups his eyes to the window, inspects the open trunk, then steps back frowning, arms folded in solemn appraisal. Meanwhile, their guy directs, points, nods, and finally trails him back to the store, head swiveling, arms thrashing the air in obvious grievance.

“The question is,” Rob says, “What are you doing—chasing after low-lives. You’re the one who was so determined to move on. I was holding you back, remember?”

“It wasn’t you. It was the whole, I don’t know, the whole aimlessness of everything.”

Rob holds up his hand, counts on his fingers. “You mean it wasn’t a wife. It wasn’t a kid. Wasn’t a Master’s degree. Wasn’t fucking department chair?”

“So, you’re stalking me.”

“LinkedIn. Facebook. Your life’s a digital ad for middle America.”

There it is. Rob’s default: the reduction of life to sketchy caricature. During their entire friendship, Rob was at war with the status quo. Anyone bordering on the conventional was a hopeless simpleton. *Simps*, he called them. It was all fun for a while, pulling acts of freewheeling

agitation—selling weed to fraternities, stuffing Catholic hymnals with *A Priest in Every Boy* fliers, distributing *War Keeps Unemployment Low* leaflets at political events. But war takes its toll, even peevish, pointless ones, and it didn't take long for Matt to grow tired of the chaos. Now, though, as the stack of papers, the accreditation report due next week, the inbox of emails buzz in his head like flies, he's somehow drawn back to the reckless rush of it all.

Their guy emerges from the parts place, laces his fingers together on the top of his head, seems to survey the street. For a minute Matt has the illusion he and Rob make eye contact, but the distance and the glare make it impossible. It's not long before the guy's cruising back down Lake. He takes a right on Cedar. They follow him past The American Indian Center, the Little Earth housing projects. Matt catches a hint of charcoal from someone's grill.

"You Googled me," Matt says. "I admit, I did a search on you, but not a trace."

"I tend bar. Garden. I pick up trash from the street. My neighbor knocks, I let him in. Not exactly the right glaze for Facebook."

"Garden. You."

No response.

Matt considers this for a minute. "And Claire? Did you two ever get together?"

"For a few years ... but she wanted ...." He lets his words drift, seems to watch them gather in the air before flipping his hand to disperse them like smoke.

"She wanted ... what?"

He turns to watch a kid on a scooter in the bike lane. "I don't know," he says.

"Everything. Just not me."

Matt's Civic is idling at a red light in the right lane a few cars ahead. Matt's in the left lane, so when the Civic takes a right, he has to cut a guy off to get over in time to take the corner. Of course, a chorus of car horns erupts in protest.

The guy leads them to the West Bank, an area that used to have a weird, cool vitality, a mix of students, old hippies, Somali immigrants, but now the sidewalks are almost deserted. A couple of kids sit on bikes in front of Halal Market, a man in a tunic comes from the bank, but otherwise no one. When the guy stops in front of Palmer's Bar, Matt has no problem parking. Of course, Palmer's is open. It's the kind of place that'll die only when they find a cure for alcoholism. The door is open. An old Labrador sprawls in a band of light penetrating the gloom. The scrawny dude hesitates before easing himself past the dog, who doesn't bother to look up.

Matt looks at Rob. "That can't be Homer. He'd have to be going on twenty." He and Rob spent many afternoons in Palmer's and fed their share of pizza to the bar mascot.

Rob's been staring in the opposite direction, but now he turns his gaze to the bar. He shrugs, "Homer's progeny, no doubt." But the old dog seems to trigger something. He stares at Matt with those dark eyes, lets them close as if the lids have grown heavy. "Man," he sighs. "Aren't you tired?" He opens his arms as if to take in the world around them. "Don't you get tired of the constant shit?" He leans over the center console, wraps his arms around Matt, trapping his arms by his side. Rob's chin rests on his shoulder, and Matt feels the full weight of him, a kind of collapse. Deodorant, shampoo, the scent of unwashed shirt rise from him, but beneath, something else, the old rage aged to sadness, a loneliness filling the years since their friendship. Matt is astonished he doesn't tense and pull away. Instead, he surrenders to the embrace. When Rob releases and leans back, Matt searches his face for irony, signs of a gag, but his face is



opaque. Rob slumps in his seat, closes his eyes again, presses his sneakers to the dash. One untied shoelace droops across a sockless ankle.

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“Who the fuck are you. Why the fuck you following me.” The scrawny guy leans into Matt’s open window, his rawboned face a couple of feet away. The space in the car wavers, and he’s aware of his heart beating, his lungs breathing. He thinks, this is him. Here. Now. In this car, a guy with rotten teeth in his window. The guy’s hands grip the bottom frame of the window. Featherlike shapes ink a forearm. Three heavy rings adorn the fingers of each hand. Matt is fascinated by the word *Bane* set in relief on the middle finger. Wonder if it means something. His name, maybe.

“That’s my car,” he hears himself saying. A voice he doesn’t recognize. “You have my car. You stole my car.”

“What the fuck. I don’t see no car.” Then a burst of white. Nothing but white and Matt thinking, didn’t even see him. Just the solid hammer of metal. Then pain. A bolt of agony through his eyes. A span of blackness before an explosion of light through the windshield. His fingers go to the welt beginning to form above his ear. His head lolls back on the headrest.

“Jesus! What the fuck!” Rob is over him, leaning in, face a clinic of concern.

All he can think is Sam’s gonna be pissed. Supposed to be working. Papers due. Gotta pick up Ellie. He pushes Rob back to reach for a diaper wipe in the glove compartment. “Is he gone?” He dabs the wipe to his head, gauges the blood on the wipe. Not too bad. “That’s it then. We lost him.”

Rob leans back against the passenger door, fixes his eyes on him without blinking for a long minute. Matt is lolled back, his head sideways at Rob. “Ran back to the car,” Rob says. “Squealed off like a bat, but it’s pretty clear where he’s going.”

“How’s that?” He touches the tenderness above his ear.

Rob raises an open hand and sights down his arm through the windshield. “Look where we are. Just across the river from where you spotted him. Million dollars he’s headed back there.”

“Million dollars? From Mr. Middle-America?” This brings from Rob a faint wisp of a smile, but it’s quickly displaced by the anger Matt saw so often on his friend’s face years ago.

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Rob drives. Matt’s head is splitting. The street ahead is fractured into on-rushing shards. The sun strobes through the trees like lighting in a drug movie, and Matt has to close his eyes. “Look,” he says, eyes still closed. “I’ll drop you off. I gotta pick up my kid. Get some work done.” A full minute without a response. Sam’s voice in his head: “I’ll just get the insurance, okay?” Still nothing. He opens his eyes, straightens in his seat. “You hear me?” But Rob is hunched over the wheel, neck craned to the road, clearly not listening. Not sure when it happened, but Rob has shifted into the operational mode he recognizes from the past. They hit seventy over the Tenth Avenue Bridge, catch the tail end of a yellow light on University. He seizes the armrest to keep from toppling over as they round the corner on Eighth, but at least the speed pulses adrenaline to his brain. The world’s no longer a blur. “Jesus, slow down.” Again Sam’s voice: “We’re not gonna fuck with this guy. Hear me?”

They’re now a couple of blocks away from the tattooed guy’s house, and Rob slows to a crawl. “So,” he says. “We should have a plan.”

“Jesus. Are you not listening? My plan is to go home. Forget all about this. Jesus, no fucking plan!”

Rob glares at him, pupils huge, like glassy mirrors. “This is *your* fucking plan. You started this, Matt. For once don’t just follow. Follow through.”

They’re rolling by the guy’s trashed-out yard. His Civic’s right where it was before, forlorn and vulnerable. The guy’s nowhere to be seen. Matt’s car is ripe for the taking, and Rob has him cornered. Once again, roped into one of his nutty games. Trouble is, this is Matt’s game. He invited the players. It’s his house, and he’s the dealer. How did things get so twisted?

By the time they circle the block, they’ve got it figured out. Hopefully, the guy hasn’t seen his face, so Rob will be a Jehovah’s Witness, distract him at the door while Matt checks the car for the keys. It must be the adrenaline because, despite the stabbing in his head, he’s clear and alert. Wary. Wavering. But alert. They park directly across the street. Rob gets out, tucks in his shirt, strides up the sidewalk with the breezy confidence of a man with God on his side. He skips up the concrete steps, raps on the door. A plump woman with a bright frizz of red hair appears behind the screen. Even from where he sits, he can see the splash of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Rob’s chatting her up, puts himself between Matt and the woman. One hand leans on the screen frame, the other motions to him behind his back. *My fucking God.*

He eases himself out the passenger door, crouches behind the rear fender. Rob now swats the air trying to get him to move, but he can barely straighten from his crouch. *Jesus.* Finally, he falls into a hunkered sprint and ducks behind the driver’s door of his Civic. He’s sure the woman saw him, so instead of peeking into the car window, he eases the door open, wriggles in on his belly until he finds himself looking up at the steering column. No key. Of course. What the fuck were they thinking?

Now the woman is screaming. “Benji! Benji! They’re in the car!” He pokes his head up enough to peer through the passenger window. The scrawny guy appears behind her shoving at the screen frame, but Rob presses back. The way he leans into it, Matt thinks absurdly, just hold. *Hold*. He’s willing him to hold. But the guy punches through the screen, grabs Rob’s wrist, twists it from the frame, so Rob has to leap back to the patch of dirt passing for the lawn. The guy inches down the steps, sizing Rob up and down. Behind him, the red-frizz woman screams, “Who the fuck are you? Get the fuck off my property!”

By now, Matt has crept around the car to the passenger side, and for a minute the four of them glare at each other, silently squaring off like some ridiculous WWE tag team.

“What the fuck, man,” the guy says.

“You’ve got his car,” Rob says, nodding toward Matt, who says nothing. He shakes his head at Rob. No key.

“He ain’t giving you shit,” the woman squawks, but you can see the guy’s resolve slipping. He peeks over his shoulder, about to say something, but he holds it in. Rob sees the hesitation, catches Matt’s eye, then lowers his head and charges. The two of them crash to the ground a few yards from Matt. Rob uses his weight to get on top, keep him pinned, but the guy has long arms, and he flails wildly. Matt is sickened by the sound of a ring-clad fist on skin, the crack of steel on teeth. Rob shifts and headlocks him from behind. He wraps his legs around the guy’s thrashing legs until he has him almost immobile.

“His pockets,” Rob grunts, the guy squirming, worming his way from Rob’s grip. “The keys! Get the keys!”

Without thinking, Matt is on his knees next to the writhing pair. Behind him, the woman descends, slapping at his head. He feels the rake of nails across his forehead. Instinctively, he

whirls his elbow around and catches her in the face. Something bony and fleshy gives way beneath the blow, and she topples to her ass a few feet away. He thrusts his hand into the guy's front pocket, surprisingly comes away with the familiar chunk of plastic and metal.

“Got it,” he shouts. “Let's go!”

On the street, he can barely hold the speed limit. He's a couple of car lengths in front of Rob. The sunlight glares off the windshield, so he can't see Rob in the rearview, but when they enter a canopy of shade, he catches a glimpse of his grim face hunched over the wheel. For the first time all morning, he can breathe. He didn't know it, but his lungs were squeezed tight as a fist, and his throat was like breathing through a straw. Now he feels like howling. If you jump from a plane or confront a thief, you deserve to howl. He lets loose a manic yowl out the window and glances behind to see if Rob shares his elation. Rob's face is a stony mask.

A few blocks away, Rob pulls to the curb behind him. They glance around to see if the guy followed, but he's nowhere to be seen. Toddlers splash in a pool in the park across the street. Moms dangle their feet in the cool water. He meets Rob at his car.

“Wow! Just fucking wow!”

Matt's voice echoes too loudly. His hands are foreign things shaking on the ends of his arms. Rob still clenches the wheel, eyes ahead. A red welt begins to swell beneath his left eye. Finally, he releases the wheel, pulls down the visor mirror to inspect himself, tugs his lip back to reveal bloody gums and a front tooth half chipped to a jagged spur. Matt peers into the side mirror where two crimson bands slash across his forehead.

“Look at us, man,” he grins. “No fucking limits.”

Rob's eyes narrow as if appraising something far off, says in a voice as lifeless as his expression. “I'll follow you to your place. You give me a ride back to my apartment.”

“What? Just like that? No enjoying the moment?”

Rob looks at Matt flatly. “That’s just it. There is no moment, if there ever was.”

After they deliver the Civic, it’s clear something has shifted, a reconfiguring of the space in the car around Rob. The air sucks inward toward him. It’s hard for Matt to bear such inwardness. Rob is rigid, alert, palms flat on his thighs, simmering the kind of implosive void that draws the worst kind of babble from Matt. He finds himself thanking Rob for the eighth time, prattling about his badass tackle, head-locking the guy, pinning him, the repulsive warmth of his pocket as he retrieved the key, the giving way of the woman’s face, like punching through a solid but soft thing underneath. But Rob is as removed as a grave. Matt finds himself pressing the gas.

They pull up in front of Rob’s place, the same fading fourplex with the rust-stained stucco as years ago. “Look, man,” Matt says. “I’m gonna call. Maybe a drink? We make a good team.”

Rob is half out the door, so Matt can’t see his face above the roofline of his car. His belly is visible where a couple of buttons are gone, a smear of grass and dirt cuts down his shirt and pants. He imagines Rob sorting through expressions before selecting the one to show him. Rob lowers into the car, his long-lashed eyes are now less unsparing, less implacably black, as though some private acquiescence has softened them. Flecks of amber shade his eyes more brown than black.

“No, Matt. I don’t think so. We’re not friends. We’re not a good team. We were never a good team.” And when he turns up the walk, something in his stride hits Matt in a way he can’t pin down. Hurt? Relief? A forbearance rides his friend’s shoulders as he disappears through the paint-cracked doors.

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The clock on the dash says nearly noon. A little over three hours since he dropped off Ellie. Three hours and a lifetime ago. On the bridge over the river, the sky is so cloudless it seems pretend, a kind of porcelain blue where the sun's aura sprays like mist and casts a light that makes you think of childhood summer. In this light, even the slimy river foam shimmers like festive bubbles. He thinks of the tattooed guy they left on all fours, his teeth bared like the skull on one of his rings. How can such a guy be a part of a day so clear? How can Rob?

He punches in Samantha's number at work and gets her voicemail. "Listen, Sam, you won't believe it. You were right. The cops finally came. They roar up from both sides, like in the movies, no sirens, just lights flashing." The scene plays out before him as vividly as a page of a novel. "Guy doesn't even try to run. Too fat. Throws his hands in the air so his belly shows." The roar and whoosh of a semi in the next lane sweep over his words and threaten to destroy the lie. He rolls up the window. "The guy gives me one of those bad-ass glares meant to be threatening, but it's so fake, it's funny. All the cops need is my license to prove ownership, but listen to this: they ask me to identify missing parts. What do I know about parts?" It hits him he's got tracks to cover, details to account for. "I have to crawl under the car to see what's missing, but all I do is scratch the hell out of my head." He pauses. What else? The images come harder, the scene before his eyes fading. Words form less easily. "One of the cops, a woman, you know, less officious, actually kind of nice, follows me home in the other car, the Subaru." The images are gone now, nothing but concrete and steel through his windshield. He speaks more quickly, needs to finish. "Fell behind with work, so I'm gonna call daycare and have them keep Ellie a little longer." The voicemail beeps. The recording tells him time's up. "Been a hell of a morning," he says, "but I'm home now," not sure if his words go through or are lost in the silence.