

The Automatic Third Party Verification System

Bridget had called on behalf of Richard's attorney, a Mr. Heath Upton, from his office late on the afternoon before. Her message was crisp and to the point. After eighteen months of talking to her on the phone, Richard could read her pretty well. He knew from her tone, not anything she said, that Upton had secured a settlement in his favor. How much in his favor was really immaterial.

He had argued with the police at the scene. Even while disoriented and hurting from the thrust of the steering wheel into his sternum, he insisted to everybody there that the crash had not been his fault. He tried to tell his wife after she was called to the hospital from her work. She was August-hot-and irritated as she stood over him. He lay on his back on a gurney, wearing a neck brace, explaining that he was on his way to the hardware store, driving in heavy traffic, when somebody cut across his lane.

"Where are you hurt?" she said.

"My chest," he said. "They want to x-ray everything."

"Were you speeding?"

He wondered if she had heard a single detail of his explanation. He had not been speeding. He was in heavy traffic moving slowly. Someone, who knows, had bolted in front of him from a driveway to his right and misjudged the space they had for turning.

"You'd had a beer or two, right? I can't imagine you didn't try to cool yourself down while you worked."

He didn't feel like talking anymore. He shivered in the air-conditioned hospital room and his chest ached.

She took his hand, looked down into his eyes and shook her head. She wasn't about to believe that he hadn't been spacing out when he collided with the white Corolla. Now, eight months later, any validation of his position seemed pointless. He'd get a little bit of money to spend. And she was gone.

He would square things away with Upton anyway. Something else to cross off the list, but his phone burped once when he hit the keypad on the receiver and went silent. Rain, like the kind that had been blowing through Rhode Island for the last three days, was not unusual for early April, nor was his rattled phone line. He tried again, this time, to call the phone company. Not even a dial tone. He'd have to try from the cafe in the city.

He stood at the windows on the east side of his house. He threw the shutters back, for the sun had finally reappeared and things were warming up. Painting the shutters was the last job Carly did in the new house before she left him. She didn't want to do it, and she dropped the left panel on the floor when she was priming it. The panel was old and flimsy and it splintered in several places when it hit the hardwood. After it was pieced together again, it didn't exactly fit on its hinges and to get it over the top of the radiator, Richard had to lift the shutter from the bottom, use a "little English," as his father liked to say. He thought of her every time he did that, and with her on his mind, he began his Tuesday morning business, which came down to watching and waiting. Unlike his phone, his routine was fixed.

Driving by the river to the west, he followed the progress of a tugboat pushing an obstinate barge. The current worked hard against the tug, and the wind, which still whistled out of the northeast, tossed scoops of foam against the tugboat's shaggy bow.

Inside the Coffee Spoon, he made his calls and bought himself a large dark roast with cream and one sugar. He found a table near a window, and as he sat, he coughed and felt little spikes of pain spread across his chest, the muscles around his sternum still tender from the accident. After Carly left, his blood pressure soared and now he dropped a capsule of Lotrel into his coffee. He made a wish. He wished that she would see him in her dreams.

Since he didn't have to be to work until mid-afternoon, Richard could afford to sit back and nurse coffee after coffee until either a small miracle happened or he became discouraged. Odds were against the miracle, but not absolutely, he thought. Tuesday was not one of Carly's usual days in town, but she would take a day off occasionally or change shifts with somebody else. He sneezed and cried. A young woman sitting nearby said, "Bless you."

A book lay open in front of him while the wind blew trash, dust, and to Richard's delight, a bunch of playing cards up the street. The cards looked like kites loosed from their strings. An errant queen flattened herself against the windowpane to his left and lifted off again, before he could make out whether it was hearts or diamonds. He noticed only the red.

As interesting as all that was, he tried to talk himself out of himself and staying. Get up, man! Go!"

Where would he go if he could lift his ass off the chair and walk out the door? Home? Home was a lot of bother, an infinite chore list. He had too much to do there. For instance, he

had the cat to feed and the dog to walk. Maybe he'd just feed the cat to the dog and set fire to the garage.

A year earlier Richard and Carly would have been sitting in the place together. Then she was fussy about what she drank, switching from coffee to spiced chai to herbal teas and back to coffee. He had a feeling he made her itchy. She was fussy about what she ate too. The scones, she told him, were better when her friend Olga made them. Once upon a time, everything with her had been better.

Once she was delighted with the thick raisin toast and Toby, the young server who was their daughter Marjorie's friend from Rumford. When Richard discovered that Toby was also the kid brother of Nate Henry, his film critic friend at the newspaper, the world seemed like a cozier place, for a while.

Toby though, was gone now, off to college, to study filmmaking. Other people, people they had known there mostly, had sailed away with the mid-spring breezes or poured themselves into other places looking for adventure.

Just the summer before, actually just weeks before the car accident, she and he had sat outside under a green canvas awning, sipping cold beverages, reading the paper. Maybe a coffee friend had seen a show at a club, or just returned from a life-altering journey to some exotic place that Richard and she could never afford, and Carly would get irritated and announce that they had to leave___ just like that.

In the car, one of them would tug at the other. Maybe they would disagree about whether or not to stop at the grocery store, or see a movie, or drive up to Cape Breton and camp for a

week. Maybe they would hike, listen to Canadians on the radio, eat French meat pies in someone's homely kitchen near Cap le Moine, or yell at each other and break things.

What would he say if she appeared now and plopped herself down next to him? Would he say he was right about her car? It wasn't his fault. That was no victory, and he knew it. Would she give him the time to spill his guts? There wasn't enough time. There was no way to imagine how it might go, or if it might go at all. But there he sat, waiting.

A young couple got up from a window table nearby. The guy held the girl's drink while she gathered her stuff together. With his free hand he struggled to help her gather her newspaper. The gesture made Richard's face color. He felt an impulse to pitch in. He could hear himself saying, "Oh, let me help."

But the lean boy with the greenish hair had the situation in hand. In fact, the couple was giddy with all their paper rustling and clutter. Richard caught a scent of what they had been drinking. Chamomile, lemon, hints of the way his own home used to smell.

He nestled deeper into his corner spot. Maybe one of his friends from the newspaper would come in, maybe Nate, and they'd drop the nothing they were doing and catch a movie. Today was like a French film, Richard thought. Black and white. Hyper-real. Opening shot: the wind blows the playing cards up the street and out of sight. He looked through the window to the water side. He watched the power boats rocking at the docks of the city yacht club. There was a fish house and a bar with a long, open-air deck adjacent to the docks.

One damp, August night a few years before, Richard recalled, he and she went there for drinks. They waited to get into the bar on the long, breezy deck because they were a big group.

Carly's sister Deedee was up from Raleigh with her friend Martha, and silent Gretta, Carly's friend from college, had come along too.

Richard had left the house wearing a pocket t-shirt and a pair of light flannel boxer shorts and sandals. He wore briefs under the shorts, and in the dark of the night, he thought, nobody would be able to tell the difference between Bermudas and boxers.

He was wrong. The crowd at the Hot Club was a city mix, some professionals, some boaters, some nine to fivers, people out for a Saturday night, and they did not dress down. Most of the men looked crisp and beige in short sleeve jerseys and khaki shorts, like they'd just come from a day of golfing or sailing. Richard was the only one out in public in his underwear.

On the deck, following the waitress to their table, he could hear the remarks churning up in his wake. "I've got some of those, same color and everythin'," said one young woman. Carly looked over her shoulder at her, stared her down. Richard did not look back. Then Carly jabbed him in his ribs with a pointy elbow and said, "You're embarrassing us."

Richard felt the deck slipping out of sight. He didn't like the scene or being put on the spot. What he wanted was something to jump into. And the thing that appealed to him most that night was Mr. Dempsey's Water Taxi. He leaned over and whispered into her ear, "Let's take your sister on Dempsey's tour."

Because the ride would take him and his underwear away from the crowded deck, Richard wasn't surprised when Carly agreed. He looked around and felt giddy. The night sky was clear and starry, and looking north from the deck, he could see the river lit up with a Water Fire, a hundred floating braziers burning cedar, maple, and oak, filling the air with dopey aroma.

“Good,” he said, “my treat. I think Dempsey’s boat fits six, three on each side.”

Carly asked the others and they said why not.

Only Deedee seemed really excited.

They sipped beers as they waited for Dempsey to dock his Bristol skiff at the short pier, just below the deck. They watched a full complement of passengers debark, some with wine glasses in hand, all laughing and thanking Dempsey for the tour.

Richard followed the four women down the short ramp to the boat. At the bottom, he and Dempsey helped them aboard, Deedee first. Martha got in second and once she did, she told Deedee to sit down because she was rocking the boat. Gretta spread her drink napkin out on the salt-spotted deck before she sat down, while Carly hopped into the boat like she was born to it. Richard followed her and Dempsey took his position behind the wheel. Then he hit a button on a boombox and Roy Orbison poured out.

He reversed the boat away from the pier and swiftly executed a 180 degree turn, heading south toward the Hurricane Barrier and the harbor. Quarters were close on the benches and Carly nestled against Richard, putting her arm around his shoulder. They were both surprised that Dempsey took them away from the Water Fire and out toward Fox Point. He went far enough in that direction to show them the tugboats bumping against the pylons at Field's Point, and for Richard to contemplate the sweet simplicity of boats that worked for a living.

“You want to be a tugboat captain,” she said.

“I’d settle for deckhand,” he said.

“Do they have those?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

Going upriver, they passed under the Hurricane Barrier again, then the Point Street Bridge. On the Water Street side of the bridge, they entered the Water Fire and Dempsey turned off the nostalgic rock n’ roll. The chanting voices of some vaguely eastern chorus wafted out of speaker stations dotting the sidewalks on both sides of the river, and the silhouettes of the black painted skiffs carrying the fire tenders passed by them like water bugs, licking up the sparks thrown off by the burning wood.

Deedee sighed. Martha said, “This is incredible, y’all.”

The shadows of more flames flickered against the tall buildings of the city’s financial district on the west side. The East side, along Water Street, looked like a caterpillar made of human beings, each end wriggling in an opposite direction along the river. The music changed to something bouncy and African. Gretta said, “This is my favorite song,” and everybody, including Dempsey, laughed.

“You’ve heard this before?” Deedee asked, and Gretta said, “Never,” and everybody laughed again.

Richard caught Dempsey’s eye and found the captain staring at him. Dempsey looked to be a man in his mid-to-late fifties. Skin browned by the sun, crow’s feet stretching their talons from the corners of his eyes. He had a bush of white hair and a beard to match, and in his white pants, t-shirt and blue jacket, he looked very much the commodore.

“Sorry, man,” he said. “But did anybody ever tell you, you look like Burt Lancaster?”

“The actor?”

“Yeah, the actor,” Dempsey said. “You know, the birdman of Alcatraz, that guy.”

“Nobody ever told me that before.”

“He’s very good-looking,” said Gretta.

“Y’all think so?” asked Martha.

Richard blushed and Carly noticed. She nestled closer to him and brushed his cheek with her hand. “Burt Lancaster is a very handsome man,” she said, “even if he does run around in his underwear.”

“There you go,” said Richard.

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It never occurred to him until now, sitting in the familiar cafe and waiting for the wind to blow his estranged wife through the door that those were his salad days with her, the middle years. Did they mean anywhere near as much to her? Foolish question, he thought, but he was stuck on it. He thought about walking over to the lawyer’s office. It was three blocks north from the bottom of the street. I should go, he thought, get at least one thing done today.

He looked down at his open book, a collection of Ernest Hemingway stories. He’d just finished reading one called, “The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” and felt glad to think of it as just a story. Thank God his marriage hadn’t ended like the Macomers’, with a shooting,

he thought, and then felt foolish for thinking it because the end of his marriage was nothing he could take any pleasure from. Without making the slightest effort to ask why, he had watched his and Carly's life together shrink to a tiny black dot on a blank screen and disappear.

He closed the book and was just about to leave for the lawyer's when the door opened and the wind blew in Mickey Dupont, Carly's lifelong pal and the owner of the Coffee Spoon . When Richard and Mickey made eye contact, he knew there would be no easy escape. He sat down again.

"Don't stay on my account, man. I only got a minute before I got to work," Mickey announced as he grabbed a chair, deftly spun it around so that its back faced front and plopped himself down. "You do what you gotta do."

They both knew Richard had nothing to do and why he was doing it there, and to pretend otherwise would contravene the trust they had established after years of crossing each other's paths just as they had this morning.

Mickey was from Riverside, Carly's hometown. In seventh grade, he had been the first guy she'd ever kissed. His parents were friends of her parents. They had attended the same parish church, and Carly tried to help Mickey after his father became sick with lung cancer and killed himself. Her friendship was no match for Mickey's despair or his appetite for drugs, and she couldn't prevent him from becoming a junkie by the age of fifteen or getting six years for possession and assaulting a police officer when he was nineteen.

That was twenty years ago. Now he was an entrepreneur and a skilled roaster of exotic coffee beans. He wore his hair to his shoulders, and his arms were decorated with tattoos from

wrist to bicep. Even in the briskness of early April, he wore a black pocket t-shirt, his elaborately inked arms bare to the world. Now he sat facing Richard, his arms slung over the back of a chair, and his eyes taking in the entire room through amber tinted glasses, “You want a refill?”

“Sure, Mickey,” Richard said.

“I’m glad I saw you, man.”

“Likewise, Mickey, you know that.”

“You’ve always been good to me, Richard. Always straight up.”

Richard paused before he said, “Any friend of Carly’s.”

“Right,” Mickey said. “Any friend of Carly’s. But we’re friends, right?”

Richard sensed that the man had something on his mind.

“You think about it, Richard, I’ll get you some coffee. Alright? Cream? One sugar?”

“Rightio,” said Richard.

Mickey returned with two regular sized coffee cups and kept the one with the crest of foam on top for himself.

“Thank you, sir,” said Richard.

“As a friend, I gotta tell you. I know why you’re here every Tuesday and every Thursday. I know what you’re doing.”

“Besides drinking your coffee, Mickey, what am I doing?”

“Hold your horses, man. I’m gonna tell you the thing you already know, but first I wanna tell you a story about my telephone.”

Richard smiled. His day was starting to take shape now. A motif was emerging and planets were aligning. He tingled. Any minute the wind would blow her right through that door.

“What about your phone?”

“It’s dead.”

Better and better, thought Richard.

“So I came here, like nine o’clock, and called the friggin’ company, right?”

“Funny I didn’t see you.”

“What?”

“Nothing, Mickey. What did they say?”

“They say they can’t get a man out to Riverside until next week.”

“That’s what I heard.”

“Well, that’s not good enough. How is my girl gonna call me? I don’t gotta cell phone. I always lose those suckers. So I called the competition. And they’re very sympathetic, very nice.”

“They want you, man.”

“I’m just exploring my options. But it sounds good, so I sign up. And then the customer service chick says, “Hold sir, for third party verification.”

“What?”

“Automatic third party verification, it’s something the utility does. You change companies, see, and they have the transaction verified by a company they hire to do that. It’s a way of double-checking that they got all your shit right.”

“I get it,” said Richard, “But this is apropos of what?”

“It is apropos of you, man. And me. See, I’m your automatic third party verification system.”

“You are? How?”

“Look, I’m just gonna lay it on the line. Carly won’t be walking through that door anytime soon.”

“That’s what you have to tell me? I already know that. I’m at the paper on the days she comes here, and she's working on the days I'm not. It's one sweet arrangement we have. But Mickey, you have to understand, I live in hope.”

“I never understood why you just didn’t go to her apartment. She was like two miles from here. Knock on the door. Have a sitdown with her.”

“Simple, she never asked me to.”

Mickey frowned at that. “That’s weak, man. That’s like, what do you call that? You know, that’s like the thing my father used to say.”

Richard shook his head.

Mickey scratched his face, "I know you know, man. It's something like 'standing on ceremony.' That's what you're doing. Like she's got to send you an invitation."

"No, Mickey, that's not it at all. She's got to want to see me."

"That's gonna be harder now. That's the thing I have to tell you. Carly split."

Richard felt a twinge in his sternum. "Where to?"

"Up north, Vermont, but I don't remember the exact town."

"You don't?"

"Sorry, man. I'm not bullshitting you. I don't remember if she told me. She'll let you know when she wants, I guess."

Mickey lifted himself from the chair, put a hand on Richard's shoulder and said, "I have to work now. Don't be a stranger, okay?"

Richard nodded and turned his attention back to the window. Through it he could see another window. It was a shuttered window, but the shutter had been pushed aside to let the morning sun in. The scene was animated by a steady breeze that blew through the window screen. As he watched, a gust caught the shutter slightly, slapping one hinged panel against another. Upon contact, the vertical spine, onto which numerous slats hooked at an angle, dropped like an arrow that had arced and was headed back to earth. Spread out on the floor, the fallen slats resembled a pile of bones. Richard wondered what the bones would have to say.