

DETOURS

Moments before the accident, Clay waited at the intersection for the crosswalk light to change, a cake box in his arms. It was his daughter's eighth birthday. His wife had ordered the cake—a two-tier castle with pink spires and a blue moat full of Swedish fish—from what she called the best bakery in Tallahassee. Two hundred dollars of sugar, flour, and god-knows-what-else, far more than Clay would have chosen to spend on something to be cut apart and eaten.

When someone elbowed by, Clay staggered off the curb and somehow kept the box from flopping onto the ground. The stranger, a man in a wife-beater and studded fedora, hurried across the street without so much as an apologetic glance until a pickup screeched into view and a *whump* sent him sprawling through the air.

Clay blinked a few times. In the truck was a girl no older than sixteen who stared ahead as blankly as a mannequin. Fifteen feet away, the man lay prone in the intersection, unmoving, an arm wrenched behind his back. His hat was gone.

Amid the clamor of bystanders gathering in the street, Clay heard something else, a tinny voice. A cell phone on the asphalt in front of him. He picked it up, looked around as if someone might tell him what to do with it. Finally he raised it to his ear.

“You hear me?” a woman was saying. “Hello?”

The call disconnected.

By now the girl had stepped out of the truck. A thin blonde in a white soccer jersey who looked older, frailer than before. A gust of wind tousled her hair. Clay thought she was searching for somewhere to run, but he followed her gaze and found she was watching the man's fedora tumble across the sidewalk.

For the next ten minutes, while police officers dispersed the crowd and sent traffic on a detour, Clay sat on a bus bench in the hot sun, the cake box at his side. He felt a nagging obligation to stay. For the man's sake, for the girl's.

She squatted on the curb in front of him. A policeman in a motorcycle helmet loomed above her, asking questions. And with each reply, the girl's voice grew shakier until Clay had to strain to listen.

"The light was green," she groaned. "It had to be."

"It *was*," Clay said.

The officer cut eyes at him.

"It was green. I saw it."

He told the officer he'd walked from Ultimate Autos, where he worked as a sales consultant, down to Sweet-Tooth Heaven to pick up his daughter's birthday cake. "And I'm waiting to cross when the guy about knocks me down. It's like somebody was chasing him."

The officer straightened up. "Was someone chasing him?"

Clay noticed the girl staring back at him as if her conscience might have conjured him up. "I don't know," he said. "It happened so fast."

After the officer jotted down Clay's contact information, he told the girl to sit tight and went toward the paramedics who were zipping a body bag over the dead man. Clay knew he should have given the phone to the officer, but now it seemed too late, like he'd incriminate himself somehow.

"It's your daughter's birthday?" the girl asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Megan. She just turned eight."

The girl looked at the cake box and smiled wistfully. Then she turned to watch the paramedics load the gurney into the ambulance. Clay wiped the sweat from beneath his eyes. He wanted to tell her he was sorry, admit that in the instant before her truck hit the man he'd wished for such a twist of karma. But nothing so violent, so final. *Let's make a deal*, he wanted to say. *I'll forgive you if you forgive me*. But what difference would it make? He knew firsthand that you often carry the shame of what you've done long after you've been forgiven.

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At the security gate that led into Hickory Hills, Clay rolled down his window and stared at the keypad, unable to recall which numbers to press. He dug in his wallet for the realtor's card. At the closing a month earlier, she'd written the four-digit code on the back.

He was rounding the last curve before home when he came upon cars lining the grass up to his mailbox, and he felt a pang of dread. He parked in the driveway behind his wife's car, picturing his neighbors crowded on the back deck, all their discordant voices. He glanced over at the passenger seat, at the dead man's phone.

On any other day when he opened the front door, his daughter would shout *Daddy!* and swarm his legs. He'd hoist her overhead, fly her around the room. But not today. Today the house was quiet and still. The parted curtains let in early evening light, a golden glow which slanted toward the wrapped gifts on the couch.

"Hello?" He set the cake box on the dining room table.

At the bay window, he scanned the backyard until he found his daughter in her polka-dot swimsuit beside the Slip 'N Slide. She was laughing with some other kids. What would happen to her if he died in some horrific accident? He didn't have a will. Didn't even have life insurance.

By the pool, his wife stood in a circle of women who all wore pastel colors, big sunglasses, and glittering jewelry. If he had to guess, he'd say none had grown up in a singlewide, much less celebrated Father's Day in the visiting area of a state penitentiary, yet despite the gloomy circumstances of Jenni's upbringing, she was by far the most radiant. Toned and tan in a white bikini top and cutoffs, she made a toast he couldn't hear. She clinked glasses with the women on her left and right, women Clay recognized as charge nurses at the hospital where Jenni worked, her subordinates now that she'd been promoted to chief nursing officer.

At the table behind them, a redhead in a yellow sundress was pouring sangria into a line of glasses. Although her freckled back was turned, Clay had a sick feeling that he knew who it was, who it couldn't possibly be: Candace, the former C.N.O. at HealthFirst. *Candy*, whose relocation to Miami had ensured Jenni's promotion and raise.

Stale guilt rose like bile in Clay's throat. He stepped to the side of the window to peek out at the woman, at her wavy red hair, trying to decide whether it was the same woman who'd blown him in a bathroom stall during the hospital's Christmas party two years ago. A drunken mistake, which he'd confessed to Jenni a few months afterward. The problem was, he'd said it was a stripper at Roy's bachelor party, sworn he was too drunk to cum—one little lie after another to mitigate the fallout. And now here she was at Megan's birthday party.

The redhead turned with two glasses of sangria, handing one to Jenni. It wasn't Candy. Clay braced himself against the windowsill. It was someone who—at least from the front—looked nothing like Candy at all.

Clay went to the fridge and chugged a can of beer so quickly that foam sluiced down his chin. Then he downed another. He opened a third can and was halfway done with it when something vibrated in his pocket. The dead man's phone.

He let out a long belch and set the can on the counter. Two missed calls from someone named Laura, who'd also just sent a text message:

Today at 5:51 PM

WHERE R U ANTONIO??? Happy
times called n said u didn't pick
up Lizzy??

"Antonio," Clay said.

With a flick of his finger, he found that the phone was not password-protected. The screen lit up with a photo of a young woman in a striped tube top, a Latina with curly black hair, blood-red lipstick, and one dimpled cheek. *Laura?* The voice he'd heard might have been hers. It seemed no one had called her yet. In her mind, Antonio was still alive.

"Clay?" Behind him, Jenni leaned in the archway. "You remember the cake?"

"Of course." He tucked the phone into his pocket. "It's on the table."

Jenni started toward the dining room. "Go and get your swim trunks on."

"I'm not feeling good," he said, and finished off the can. "I think I'm gonna lay down."

Jenni gasped. "The cake. What happened to the cake?"

In the dining room she stood at the table with her hands on her hips. The box was open. The cake had sunk into itself, the pink spires cockeyed.

"A guy got ran over," Clay said, "near the bakery."

Jenni gave him a sidelong look.

“I’m serious. I had to talk to the police,” he said, “and the whole time, this guy, he’s laying there dead in the street. And it was so hot.”

She came over and hugged him. “That’s awful,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but the cake—”

“Don’t worry about the cake.” She leaned back and looked into his eyes. “I’ll fix it, okay? You just go out and see Megan.”

He nodded.

She raised up on her toes to kiss his cheek, but Clay turned and met her lips, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her hard against the wall.

“Okay.” She pushed away. “Let’s save that for later, huh?”

As she carried the cake box to the kitchen, he realized he felt a little better. But he couldn’t expect her to understand what it was like to be so close to a violent death, the way it awakens you.

“Go on,” she said. “There’s beer by the pool.”

Putting on his salesman’s smile, Clay went out to the deck and introduced himself to the women, avoiding eye contact with the redhead until he offered her his hand. She said her name was Bekah, and he saw that she had braces. She must have been twenty years younger than Candy. Perhaps thirty.

“Ladies,” he said. “I need to find my birthday girl. If you’ll excuse me.”

He went out to the grass. Megan was squirting the other kids with the hose, each of them squealing as the water arced their way. Then she noticed him, dropped the hose, and came running.

“Daddy,” she said. “Daddy! Daddy!”

Clay caught her and raised her up. She hooked her thumbs in his lips, stretched them into a grin. He flailed his tongue and she was giggling when the phone vibrated in his pocket. He froze. It vibrated again, and again. He curled his daughter onto his chest and clutched her there until the vibrations ceased.

“Daddy?” she said. “Wanna watch me slide?”

“Of course,” he said.

As soon as he put her down, she charged back to the Slip 'N Slide. She dove onto the plastic and was sliding away when the phone vibrated yet again. He turned away from the house, drew out the phone. Another missed call and another text from Laura:

Today at 6:13 PM

CALL ME!!!!

The kids started cheering. Clay looked up and watched them race toward the house. Jenni came down the stairs with the cake, which somehow looked like a castle again. Eight candles, lit and flickering. By the time she set the cake on the table, Megan was in the chair of honor. The women and children gathered around and sang “Happy Birthday to You.”

Clay slipped the phone into his pocket and sidled up to his wife, draped an arm over her shoulder and listened to her sing. She leaned her head against him and together they watched their daughter rear back and suck in a great breath. In the moment before the song ended and Megan lurched forward to blow out the candles, Clay could tell his daughter had come to some difficult decision, but he had no idea what an eight-year-old who wanted for nothing could possibly wish for now.

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Once the last guests had departed and Jenni had gone upstairs for a bath, Clay got his laptop from the office and carried it down the hall, pausing outside his daughter's bedroom door. She snored softly in the glow of her nightlight. It would not always be like this, and he wanted to commit to memory the image of her smiling in her untroubled dreams. Soon enough she would grow up, she would learn that you rarely get what you wish for, and when you do, more often than not, you discover that what you wished for was not what you needed at all.

On the living room recliner, he Googled "pedestrian," "killed," and "Tallahassee." The first article identified the dead man as thirty-two-year-old Antonio Luis Garcia, and a search for that name brought up a local Facebook page and a listing on the Leon County Property Appraiser's website. There it was, the dead man's address: 721 Georgia Street.

He plugged the address into Google Maps and used Street View to stand by the mailbox outside the brick duplex. A 1990s Honda Civic with a blurred license plate was parked out front. The time stamp in the photograph's upper left corner showed that this was September 2012. It was odd to think they might be in there washing dishes or watching TV, no clue what would happen four years later, how suddenly the life they'd built would crumble.

The upstairs bath began to drain. Clay took Antonio's cell phone from the desk drawer he'd stashed it in while Jenni cut the cake. He was relieved to find no missed calls or voicemails or text messages, but the feeling faded when he realized what the lack of communication meant. Laura knew what happened.

He stared at her background photo. This was what she looked like before the accident. Though she was not what Clay would have called beautiful, she had pretty hazel eyes and a genuine smile. Yet there was something he hadn't noticed earlier, a sort of melancholy, the look of someone who'd suffered.

He opened the photo gallery.

In the first image, a sunset that looked like wildfire in the woods. In the second, Laura was doing a mid-air split above a trampoline. In the third, a little girl—Lizzy?—posed in the grass, one hand on her canted hip. The girl had her mother's curly hair and an identical dimple on her left cheek.

He scrolled through their last days together: Laura stirring spaghetti sauce on the stove; Lizzy on a sofa, giggling as a brindle pit bull licked her ear; Laura painting Lizzy's toenails yellow; Antonio smiling while Laura pressed her puckered lips against his cheek.

Then, a photo he knew he shouldn't look at: Laura on a white bed, naked except for a studded fedora tilted to the side. It was the hat Antonio had been wearing, the one the wind had blown away. Laura did not have a body like Jenni's; she was younger and much plumper, with big breasts and dark areolas and a thatch of black hair between her legs. Clay felt a strange commingling of longing and shame. There was something mesmerizing about her lack of self-consciousness, her unwavering gaze.

A noise in the hall made him jerk upright, clutching the phone to his chest. Jenni, in her silk nightgown, was leaning seductively in the archway behind him.

"Coming to bed?" she said.

"You keep sneaking up on me like that."

"And? So?"

As she came to the back of the recliner, Clay pressed the POWER button on the side of the phone. His wife leaned over him, her damp hair on his neck.

“What you gonna about it?” She blew softly past his ear, her breath as sweet and strong as the port she’d taken up to the bathtub, and he let himself sink into the chair, relaxing his arms.

Then she said, “Somebody forgot their phone?”

Clay leaned away and got up. “I’ll take care of it tomorrow.”

“Can I see it?”

He held it up. “The battery’s dead.”

She snatched it from his hand and hurried to the kitchen, laughing like it was all a game. He sighed and followed after her.

“Jenni,” he said. “I know who it belongs to.”

She stood by the junk drawer. Somehow, the phone had already booted up and the naked photograph was on the screen. She scrolled to the next photo.

“Handcuffs,” she said. “And a dog collar. Wow.”

“The guy that got ran over. It’s his phone.”

Glaring down at the screen, she flicked through the gallery and voiced her disgust at each photograph. He said her name and stepped toward her, but she opened the sliding glass door. As she stormed down the stairs, the floodlights flashed on. He called her name again and chased after her, catching her wrist at the edge of the pool.

“Let go,” she growled.

“Then listen.”

“You’re hurting me.” She tried to claw his fingers loose. “Let go of me *now*.”

As soon as he did, she flung the phone into the pool. It sank in the deep end, flashing blue-gray a moment before going dark.

Clay stepped to the pool's edge and was about to jump in when the sliding glass door scraped shut behind him. Jenni had gone inside. She laid the dowel rod in the track, then scowled out at him. She reached to the wall and turned off the kitchen lights.

"Jenni," he shouted. "You're being ridiculous."

A neighbor's dog began to bark.

Clay got the leaf net from the shed, climbed out onto the diving board, and scooped the phone from the bottom. He carried it to the side of the house, through the garage, and into the kitchen, where he set it in a Tupperware container and covered it with rice.

From the bottom of the stairs, he could see their bedroom light was on. She was up there opening and shutting drawers, muttering. He sat on the couch a while, listening. He wished he'd told her the truth from the get-go, wished he'd given the phone to the cop, wished he'd never picked it up to begin with.

With a pillow and blanket from the couch, he made a bed of the chaise lounge by the pool. It would be like camping, he told himself. And in the morning all would be forgiven.

After the floodlights shut off, the backyard was not quite dark. Beyond the fence, the glow of streetlamps and neighbors' security lights. All he could hear was the drone of the pool pump and, in the distance, a humming chorus of AC condensers. He missed the woods outside their old house, the throbbing static of insects, the darkness, the stars.

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At nine AM, in his car in the employee lot of Ultimate Autos, Clay called Jenni for the seventh time that morning. The note she'd left on the fridge said it was her weekend to take Megan and the other girls to dance camp. *We need to have a serious talk when I get home*, the note said.

"Come on," he said. "Pick up."

Instead, he got her voicemail again. He hung up and was redialing her number when it hit him: what it must have been like for Laura, the frustration mounting with each missed call, each unanswered text.

He took the Tupperware container off the dashboard and popped the lid. He dug the phone from the rice, wiped it with his tie, then held down the POWER button. Part of him wished it would not come on. But the phone vibrated, the Motorola logo lighting up the screen.

Through the windshield, he noticed a little white-haired woman in a navy blue dress loitering near the sedans. Regal posture, fancy purse. As she traced her hand down an Impala's front fender, sunlight winked from her diamond ring.

Forty feet away, the lobby doors burst open and out came Pete, tucking in his shirttail as he made his way toward her.

"Oh no you don't," Clay said, and opened his door. He hurried toward the old woman, shoving the phone into his pocket. "Morning," he called out. "My name's Clay. Can I help you, ma'am?"

The woman gave him an appraising look. Twenty feet behind her, Pete had stopped and crossed his arms, staring smugly in Clay's direction.

"Well," the woman said, "start by calling me Blanche. And then I'd like to test drive one of these automobiles."

“All right, Blanche.” Clay offered her his arm. “Let’s find the one for you. Shall we?”

As he led her down the row of sedans, he raised a hand as if to scratch the back of his head and wagged his middle finger at Pete.

The old woman explained that her daughter had commandeered her beloved Buick. And Morty, her husband of five decades, had recently passed on, leaving behind a sum of money that he’d squirreled away without her knowledge.

“And if I leave it to Brenda, she’ll blow it in a week.” Then she turned to Clay and whispered, “She’s on the drugs.”

Clay patted her arm. “Sorry to hear that, Blanche.”

“Oh, now there’s a good looking,” she said. She let go of his arm and marched toward the luxury cars at a pace that forced Clay to speed-walk after her. “It’s just like that song I always loved.”

She sidled up to a brand-new red Corvette and traced her hand over the hood, her diamond winking at Clay again.

He gave her a moment to daydream. Today was the twenty-ninth of September, which meant two days remained in the quarter. If he sold her a Corvette, he’d surge past Pete in quarterly sales and win the bonus, all six thousand dollars of it.

“Yep,” Blanche said. “It’s the one.”

“Perfect,” said Clay. “We’ll just need to fill out some paperwork.”

“Aw. Can’t we do it after?”

“Well,” Clay said. “It’s—”

“That way I can write the check and then drive off into the sunset.”

Clay smiled. “Okay. For you, Blanche, I’ll make an exception.”

Opening the lockbox beside the car, he explained that this particular model had 460 horsepower, so she'd need to drive carefully.

"Zero to sixty in three point five seconds," he said and handed her the key. He'd barely made it to the passenger side when she cranked the engine and rolled the windows down.

"Giddy-up," she said.

Through the parking lot, Blanche rode the brake. Clay hadn't noticed before, but she wore black-and-white Oxfords and the toe of her right shoe was duct-taped to the sole. He was so distracted by it that he forgot to tell her to turn left at the exit, and she rolled through the stop sign, turning right onto Tennessee Street.

"Oh," he said, and looked into the side mirror. His usual route went in the opposite direction, but he didn't say anything. He wanted Blanche to feel in control.

"I do something wrong?" she asked.

"You're doing fine," he said. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you'd driven one of these before."

She laughed.

As he explained the premium features of the car, Blanche drove on through one green light after another, not once asking him to clarify some bit of automotive jargon. Then she started turning at random streets, cruising through a neighborhood and on past a park, smiling out the window and waving at pedestrians.

When she stopped at a red light, she turned to Clay and said, "Morty would've hated this car, you know. Fifty years we were together, and I can count on my fingers how many times he took me to a fancy restaurant."

"Fifty years," Clay said. "That's quite an accomplishment."

“It sounds like you’re married.”

Clay showed her his ring. “Nine years.”

She nodded. “Then I’ll not flirt with you. But you are a good looker. Not as good as my Morty, you understand. But good enough.”

“Thank you,” he said.

She turned back to the road and whistled *The Andy Griffith Show* theme song. It was a happy-sounding tune, and yet Clay began to feel sorry for her. He couldn’t quite say why. Still, he couldn’t wait to wave the check in Pete’s face.

He glanced up at the street signs, trying to calculate the quickest route back to his desk. Only then did he realize how close he was to the dead man’s neighborhood. To Lizzy and Laura.

He settled his hand over the phone in his pocket. It hadn’t vibrated all morning. But when he drew it out, he found seven new voicemails, which must have been recorded during the night.

Blanche drove on through the intersection. He looked over at her.

“You mind,” he said, “making a left at the next light?”

Five minutes later, Blanche turned onto Georgia Street and crept along the row of duplexes until Clay pointed to a mailbox with 621 on the side. The same old Honda he’d seen on Google Maps sat in the driveway as if no time had passed, as if nothing at all had changed.

“Gimme a minute.” He got out and opened the mailbox and set the phone inside. As he shut the lid, he heard a screen door creak open.

“Hey,” a woman shouted. “Can I help you?”

It was Laura in the doorway.

“I have something,” he said. “It’s for you.”

She crossed her arms over her Ramones T-shirt and watched him. He took the phone from the mailbox and crossed the yard. She had no makeup on, all puffy-eyed from crying, her hair a mess of curls, and yet the beauty and truth of her grief was so disarming that he found himself unable to climb the stairs. He suddenly wanted to take her into his arms, kiss her brow and press her cheek against his chest, tell her he'd stayed there on the bus bench, stayed so that Antonio would not die alone.

Instead, he reached the phone to her. "Please," he said. "Take it. It's his phone. I—I found it in the street. He dropped it."

Laura's eyes widened with recognition. She came toward him and plucked the phone from his palm like an egg from a nest.

"You were there?" she whispered. "You saw?"

Clay nodded. He would have answered any question she asked, but all she did was stare at him with tearful eyes in a way that almost seemed resentful, perhaps even jealous, like he'd stolen something from her far more valuable than a phone.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry."

He hurried across the yard and as he reached the Corvette, the screen door slapped shut behind him. He turned to look at the duplex, wanting to go back and knock. Ask if she'd left the voicemails, and if so, why. What might you say to someone when it's already too late?

He climbed down into the Corvette, hands trembling as he put on his seat belt.

"Nice looking family," Blanche said. "You're a lucky man."

He looked out the window. "I know," he said. "I am."

For what could have been ten minutes, Clay rode along in a daze. At some point, a group of kids tossing a football in the street parted to let the Corvette pass, staring at it with open-

mouthed awe. In the side mirror, Clay watched them give chase until one boy after another stopped running and turned around.

Blanche was driving through the Tennessee Street intersection when Clay realized where they were. “Oh sorry,” he said. “The dealership’s back that way.”

“I know,” Blanche said. “I’m going to the highway.”

“What highway?”

“The interstate!” She raised her sunglasses and stared him down. “Before I sign the check, I wanna see these horses gallop. But don’t worry. I’m not crazy. Not really.”

The exit for I-10 was now a half-mile away, the overpass looming in the distance.

“Blanche,” he said. “Let’s be real, okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t want this car.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No,” he said, “you don’t.”

“I *do*.”

“For God’s sake, Blanche, your shoes are duct-taped together.”

“So what? They’re comfortable.”

“Look,” he said. “I’d love to rip you off. That’s what I do. That’s who I am.”

Blanche clicked on her turn signal, the interstate a hundred feet away. Clay said her name a few times, but she stared ahead and followed the on-ramp onto the interstate.

“All right,” she said finally. “Since you’re being honest, I’ll fess up, too.”

It was all a game, she said. The test drives. She did it at every dealership in town until the managers caught on. She liked pretending she was the sort of woman who could afford a Lexus or a Mercedes.

“Or a Corvette,” she said.

“Okay, Blanche.”

“Oh, and that’s not my name.” She grinned at him. “By the way, how fast you think this thing’ll go? You think two hundred really means two hundred?”

“Blanche.”

“I told you,” she said. “That’s not my name.”

She stomped the gas pedal so hard it thrust Clay back in his seat, and then she whipped the Corvette around a logging truck into the fast lane.

On any other day, Clay would have yelled at her. But the sudden jolt of speed had done something to jumpstart his heart. Ahead, as far as he could see, the fast lane was empty. He pictured the interstate stretching westward for two thousand miles, on through the bayou and into the desert, all the way to the Pacific Ocean, through country he’d never cared to explore until now. Then Blanche—or whoever she was—reached over and squeezed his hand. He smiled and leaned his head back, closing his eyes, imagining Megan on his lap and his wife behind the wheel, and he squeezed the old woman’s wrinkled hand and pretended it was Jenni’s, not wanting to tell her to turn around, not yet, not yet.