Being John Wayne

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I got a call from my friend from Pittsburgh who wasn’t calling from Pittsburgh because she’s in Cleveland because that’s where the guy she’s dating lives. He runs a club in the Flats, well he doesn’t really run the club; he books the bands, which is like running a club. He drinks Jack on the rocks and they always have a good time. She usually calls and says we saw the Skinny J’s or Wilco or...Only now when she calls which was last night, which is really today because it’s five-thirty in the morning, her voice sounds jumpy like she’s been popping reds only I know she doesn’t pop reds or anything because that’s kids’ stuff and she’s twenty-seven and not a kid.

It’s not time telling me something weird happened because something really weird always happens and she calls relaying it all like I’m her damn tape recorder.

Hell, I’ve gotten calls from jail where they took her belt like she was going to hang herself for drinking a little too much tequila. Where she was holding up too-big, borrowed jeans with one hand, phone with the other, pretending not to stare at the butch decked out black leather who she said told her she was just about the hottest thing this side of the jail cell. Where she said you’re my one phone call and talked about the butch, about everything ‘til time was up. I listened going wow, really, ok, because what’d you do when you’re the one phone call? Can’t talk about the shrimp scampi you had at dinner. How the shrimp were raw and the garlic made your tongue want a mint, but you weren’t going to eat their mints, not the ones in the open dish because you’ve watched 20/20, heard those stories, “Feces and urine found on restaurant mints.” No, can’t talk the movie you saw which is what I wanted to talk about because the guy I was dating didn’t get like I got it and not many people do you know, get it like I do. She does.
So I get calls. From the hospital where she said real quick the number is—and I called back and she said they took my clothing said IV, terrified of needles, broken ribs, ass hanging out of a paper gown.

I understand the calls from highways, byways, sidewalks and clubs where I can't hear her so she screams. Where one time, a techno mix thumping in the background, I made out something like heard Dock of the Bay and thought about the acid when we lived at the shore, fog rising and the bird, remember the—the heron I said. Yeah she said. Or she won't remember by the time she gets to the phone why she called, but hey, how was I?

I know it's her before I pick up the receiver.

I always pick it up.

I can't believe what the hell just happened she says and I say what and she says, have I got a story for you. Hold on, I say because it's five-thirty in the morning and if I'm going to hear a story I need some coffee. I fling the phone across my bed. I don't own a cordless. I never wanted the option of taking the damn thing in the bathroom with me. You have to wonder, don't you? When someone says they're on a cordless. I mean for all you know they're taking a dump and you're on the other end eating a big old salad.

I go into the kitchen and warm up a cup of coffee in the microwave because I'm twelve hours away and she's paying for the call and she's a bartender so her cash goes and goes without seeing a paycheck and I don't want to make her wait for the slow drip, drip, drip of my coffee maker because the thing is ancient. You could get a caffeine high from cleaning it out. I burn my tongue and spill half of it on and my almond-colored linoleum. That's what my landlord called it when he showed me the place. He said, "And the kitchen's got brand new linoleum, a nice almond don't you think?" I thought, it's not almond, it's beige, only now I'm calling it almond and it's got black, greasy coffee on it and I don't have time to clean it up.

She can't afford to call but I don't say it because I'm thinking she did she just buy a four hundred, yeah, a four fucking hundred dollar Ann Klein coat, which she let me borrow when I crashed at her place before heading back somewhere, some home. I spilled a nice Pinot Noir on the crushed velvet because that's what happens when I see her—I ruin crushed velvet. I twisted off
a button too. But plastic can be replaced, crushed velvet?

She's got cash. I know cash goes because you're always thinking of the next night. The Friday when executives with hairpieces lather on their wives' Maybelline to cover the spot where the wedding band they keep checking didn't fall out of their Dockers belongs. Where they slap fifties on the bar for their mistresses who drape Chanel evening bags stuffed with a thousand nothings over diamond tennis bracelets. Where silk and cashmere dine and you smile and they're drunk on Bellividare martinis so you slip them a free one, to compensate for crushed velvet, food, phone bill from a guy's apartment. Why doesn't he pay it? I never met him, maybe he'd offer but she'd never let him. Pride, fuck, the girl's got pride.

I'm back I say and she says what took so long and her voice sounds like an electrical line buzzing in a forest. Better light a cigarette she says because she knows everything will go down a lot easier if there's something in my mouth.

I bend down over my vanilla candle I never let burn out unless it burns out and light my smoke, phone stuck in the space between my shoulder and ear, listening.

"I don't know where to start, it's crazy."

Usually she starts with guess where I am and usually I guess, like I said it's not like Trivial Pursuit, getting a golf question and Arnold Palmer's already come up seven times. It's more like which hand is the quarter in only you got three hands and there's no quarter. But I know she's at Nate's. The ritual is gone, displaced. She starts at the beginning.

"I got here, met Nate, we went out, then back to his place to watch a video. I'm buzzed and we rented Slingshot and I didn't want to miss the capitalism of this kid, this kid making money out of rubbers so I go into the kitchen, make a pot of coffee. I'm grinding beans, thinking about the night, about everything you think about in a guy's apartment when you're in their kitchen and they're not. I'm thinking, humming, grinding, when I hear a scream in the upstairs apartment. I don't think about it for one, maybe six seconds, because it's a scream and they always stop, right? Only it doesn't. I think I hear another voice, a man's. I ignore it, but the whole time it's getting worse. It's a high-pitched scream, a series of them, and all I can think is a woman is being beaten and no one's going to do
a damn thing. I want to make sure it's real because reality..."

I’m not listening. Sometimes she has these moments, you know, where she begins to question her existence. Cranks out this new age shit she’s got herself wrapped into. Reincarnation, my life as a bug, and works her way into the meaning of reality, which is where she’s at now. Reality a fucking chess game in her mind until it’s not. Then it’s connect four, the pieces fire, earth, water—and she’s spitting out air so damn fast, I want to interject, to scream get on with the story so I can get some sleep when I realize she already has.

“...In the living room and before I can say anything Adam looks up from the game of solitaire he’s got spread out on the coffee table says, ‘Mind your own business.’ Now I know it’s real and I can’t stop thinking about fists. I’m sitting on the sofa between Nate and Adam trying hard to pretend nothing is going on upstairs, that it is nothing. But I can’t. I looked at Nate, at Adam—they weren’t moving a muscle. It wasn’t their business. And before I know it I’m standing up, hands on hips, like I’m some feminine version of John Wayne saying ‘I’m going up there and if you guys want to follow me...’

Now I’m thinking about fists. My own raw from cracking the windshield of Tony’s Trans Am, about spackle, masking tape, the time it took to plaster the hole in an apartment. About the days she wore sunglasses. The days she didn’t. Turtlenecks in June, diamond rings pitched in cornfields, bruised laughter.

“...A woman answers. She’s got a cordless phone up to her ear her long spiky fingernails clicking against the plastic like she’s just gulped down five expressos. ‘Bobby, Bobby Oh God Bobby.’ It’s all she says. I don’t know if anyone’s on the other end and there’s no marks on her face but something’s really wrong. I breeze past her on a mission like walking through a stranger’s apartment at two in the morning is natural, normal. I go into this skinny kitchen and there’s Bobby a gun in his left hand, the left side of his head blown off. There’s not much blood and I’m thinking this guy just killed himself and I’m calm. I’m cool as a cucumber. I’m staring at a dead man, a dead handsome man with a goatee and the prettiest brown eyes staring back at me and they’re not even glazed over. Simone, I find out that’s her name, is still screaming and I ask if anyone else is here. She points down the hallway says my son. Ah shit was all I was thinking
walking calm, cool down the hallway into a dark room. There’s Bobby Jr. cowering in the top bunk, his NFL blanket tented around his body like we used to do over kitchen chairs, remember?"

"Course I remember, Holly Hobby, Strawberry Shortcake sleeping bags…I don’t remember. Astronauts weren’t we always…No, I was. You were…What were you?"

"Jeezus I don’t remember, but this kid reminded me…”

She was always the mommy, but I can’t say it. She’ll never say it again. Not after she had to wear pads in her bra to soak up the milk, the sour milk leaking through blue satin at the senior prom.

“You’d think I’d want to scream, cry at the sight of this kid. All I can see is his face. He’s about eight years old. He’s looking right at me without ever seeing me. I say, ‘Hiya Bobby, I’m Steph and I need you to do me a real big favor. I need you to climb down out of there and come with me.’ I’ve got to get this kid out of here right? He’s a big kid, he’s only eight years old, but he’s a big kid. I’m carrying him around my waist like a toddler and we’re walking down the back stairway of the apartment, back down these rickety narrow wooden steps that are more like a bunch of gangplanks…”

Whoa, stop the story I want to get off. Can’t believe she walked into another suicide, that she’s carrying a kid who’d be about the age of him or her if it didn’t all go sour, if the night in the park, the 22 and Jon’s head against the oak’s trunk even after and did she just say toddler? And she’s no clue how close to the edge she is, was, will be but I can’t say anything because she’s a damn Chatty Cathy doll, spitting out information so fast that to interrupt, stop the flow would be to impose a different—

“…Me wobbling because the kid is heavy and I never had my coffee. The whole time I’m saying to this kid, who is damn heavy, I’m saying ‘Hey big guy it’s gonna be okay, your mom’s okay. I’m gonna take you down to my friend’s place. Do you like Nintendo?’ He shakes his head and I’m smiling because I don’t want him to remember me without one. His daddy is dead and I’m talking about Batman and he’s laughing and we walk into the apartment…”

I’m lighting a smoke, soaking fingers in hot wax watching vanilla flakes mold onto my fingertips. Smoking, thinking about, but not mentioning Jon's
death, not believing she's ignoring these facts. Note addressed to her, hazards on my VW rabbit blinking the back-beat to the ambulances' red, AM radio bursting in between the static, the weather, hot. Yellow ribbons strangling car antennae.

Can't believe this death is existing separate from it all, from navy satin, blood stained T-shirt I soaked in bleach because it was a Christmas gift, not Jon's, Tony's and Jon wore it. He ruined a perfectly good Calvin Klein T-shirt and I watched his brains float to the top of my bucket, then dissolve.

“...Say my teeth locked so tight I can taste my gums, ‘This is Bobby, he came down to play a little Nintendo with you Adam.’ I widen my eyes. Now Adam smiles, takes Bobby's hand and the two are deep into the whole thing in seconds. Nate and I are out the door, back upstairs to get Simone, who is still on the phone screaming 'Oh God Bobby.' I ask her if she's called the cops. She nods. I hear sirens. She won't leave the doorway. She wants to go back to the body and now there's blood all over the linoleum and it's seeping into the living room carpet. It's funny. I now know how long it takes for a body to drain itself.”

“How long?”

“About fifteen minutes.”

I'm thinking about coffee, dropping the phone, brewing. How long would that take, for it all—

“Weren't you freaking out?”

“No, (pause, the sound of smoke through just moistened lips) I should've cried, or screamed or something. Even the second time, with all the blood and the cops banging up the stairs with Simone, Nate and me walking down, my—It's weird nobody heard the shot. I heard the screams but not the blast...”

“Maybe the screams covered...”

“No, can't...”

“Maybe it...”

“No. And no one heard it. Anyway, the cops are coming up the steps and...”

I know where it's going now. It's the usual story now. The one you've heard so many times your head shuts down like your mom's vacuum cleaner on Sunday nights, right in time for the nine o'clock movie. Cops, interrogation, it's
Agatha Christie, Dan Rather and Lassie all—only now I’m looking at it through something. I blame dripping wax, stale coffee, histories? colliding. Unless it’s a pattern, some meaning, purpose. Now I’m the one: cracked, reds, eight legs spinning in the corner of some apartment, blood congealing into cracks of linoleum. I need more time, sleep, but something in her voice, a repeated word maybe, drags me out.

“...Rubbing Simone’s back and we’re all having coffee out of ceramic mugs like it’s some bizarre poetry reading because there’s still incense burning and were all huddled around telling tales. Two hours ago, I was staring down a dead man. How the hell do I—”

“I don’t know,” I say thinking about answers, coveting. Wishing I could tell her it’s over. It’s the last crazy, fucked up thing she’ll ever have to deal with, that for all the work, college, smile she wears every day with a can I help you? or what’d yea’ have sir speaking through it, are worth something. But, I can’t. Can’t tell her somewhere two old ladies are walking up and down a beach collecting bits of seashells not saying anything because it’s all been said. And music, the smooth chords of a guitar playing over and over in their minds are all they need. Maybe once or twice they strum the same chord, harmony in silence.

I pause. “I don’t know.”

She ignores me. Goes on.

“I’m done telling my story, now they want Simone’s only she’s not ready. She’s still clutching the phone mumbling, ‘Is he okay, is Bobby okay.’ I pull a cop aside, tell him she needs to hear he’s gone. He walks over, says, ‘I felt his pulse, he’s dead.’ Great, I’m thinking real smooth, sure know how to talk to a lady. Nate’s busy trying to calm down Simone by offering her his hand. She takes it. They’re sitting on the sofa. I move over to a policewoman’s ear, whisper, ‘Try to be sensitive.’ She puts her hands on her hips, her guns, says ‘I know how to do my job.’ Now she’s John Wayne. I’m angry, pissed off because of the kid. Can’t get the kid out of my mind, the image of him under those blankets. I swallow my cold coffee and go back to rubbing Simone’s back. She’s talking. Going on and it’s all over the fucking place. I look over at one of the cops, the quiet one. He winks.”

“Maybe she was trying to protect him,” I say.
“Protect him, from what? The guy is dead.”

“From a bad image. He’s got a son right? Maybe she doesn’t want the cops...”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t care. She didn’t even ask where the kid was the whole time. I’m worried so I tell her Bobby Jr. is upstairs at the landlord’s and she says thanks like I just saved her from having to break a twenty by tossing her penny in line at a convenience store.”

“Poor kid.”

“Damn right. And you know what he said to me when I was taking him down those back stairs? He said is my mommy going to be arrested?”

“Wow,” I say because I can’t say what I’m thinking which is what the hell is going on here, which is why is this happening again. Fate flipping quarters in the back room of a bar, betting head or tails. Don’t think she’s had enough with the black eyes, coke fiends, car wrecks, father wearing a coat of plastic he called skin, mother drowning it out until at sixteen and six months there was nothing to be said, only done. Not going to repeat history, not going—then there's the back room. Raise the odds. Once I’d like to see snake eyes.

“...Rubbing Simone's back only now my hand is on auto-pilot because I’m watching her tears thinking they’re not real only they are, too real. Cops ask her if Bobby was right or left handed, she tucks her right hand behind her back and forms a gun. I’m the only one who sees her do it. Left she says.”

(Sound of boot-steps, a door opening. Voices.)

“Up this way guys, second floor. Can’t thank you enough for coming on such short notice, but got to get this floor cleaned before it sets in. Don’t want to have to replace...”

(Sound of door shutting, of flint against metal, of a deep exhale.)

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just can’t seem to get the smell out of my mind.”

“Of blood?”

“No, burnt flesh. Hair.”

And all I can think to say is I know what you mean.