

Also by JOE KLINGLER

Mash Up
RATS

Please don't let impersonal corporate-driven social
networks come between us...

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Missing Mona

A Tommy Cuda **MYSTERY**

Joe Klingler

CARTOSI LLC

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Dedicated to

Joseph William Klingler

...and the mechanic's magic in his hands.

One

“I really like a lot of other kinds of music, but the blues just does something to my insides.”

—*Johnny Winter (1944-2014)*

THE MORNING AFTER MY twenty-ninth birthday I began to realize privacy in the 21st century was the melting wax of Icarus. This thought intruded as molecules of tequila conducting chemical experiments in my head painted the walls around me a Matisse of browns—the walls of my parents’ house left to us by my grandmother on my mother’s side in the tiny burg of Gates Mills, Ohio. I lay curled around a pillow with one eye studying orange light penetrating a drawn shade. Like many of my generation I had spent beautiful years testing the efficacy of medical marijuana while downloading the latest app for my mobile gadget; majoring in Math, English Lit, Sociology, and Philosophy (none for long); finally managing to matriculate a Poli-Sci degree before boomeranging back to a no-upward-mobility job as car mechanic at the two-year old Walmart just across the county line.

I didn’t yet understand my circumstances as my open eye roved the room amid recollections of Betty going on last night in the back seat of my car about age and clocks and waiting.

Girls liked to go slow—until they were in a hurry.

Shifting shadows on that orange shade told me wind was lifting the branches of the big elm in the backyard. But I didn’t quite know then.

Not yet.

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Of all the people and objects inhabiting my life, the situation was finally fully illuminated by my gadget: a golden iPhone with a gazillion bytes of storage. Enough, the genius at the bar told me, to hold every movie, song, game, and message I would see or hear in my lifetime. It shuddered against the hard oak of a nightstand I had been looking at each morning for over twenty years.

A voice some marketing department had named Siri, which made me think of women's clothing, serenaded my contemplative state with information the moment it arrived from the big computing cloud in the sky:

Message from Betty. Where are you? Take me to breakfast. You know back-seat boogaloo makes me hungry.

Message from Willy. Race day, Thomas. You're getting old and slow. I'm coming for you today.

Willy was on a futile quest to shave tenths off his Pontiac GTO's quarter-mile time and keep my Chrysler in sight at the finish.

Then:

Message from Betty. I know where you are. You left auto check-in on in Foursquare. Call or I'm coming over.

That moment I knew.

Knew for sure.

Knew like I knew I had been named after a missing disciple in the Bible.

My friends knew where I was; expected an instant response to inane messages; texted within moments to ask if I had seen the latest selfie posted to the Land of Instatwits—billions of pixels that I just had to see *right this very second*.

I knew...

I didn't have those seconds anymore.

My life was filled communicating vapor to and fro. Hours consumed building mountains of digital clouds that dissipated instantly in the scorching sun of continuous updates.

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As I entered my thirtieth year on the planet, this was...like...um...having a fast car but no gas.

I heard the atomic clock in bad sci-fi flicks:

Tick.

Tock.

Time waits for no man.

My life should be...evolving.

Something should be *happening*.

My open eye settled on the shiny gold phone.

The problem crystalized like supercooled water becoming ice in the split of a second—technology isn't invented to help me live a long and happy life. It's purpose is to make the geek kids in Silicon Valley wealthy. Such is the nature of capitalism: growth, IPO, valuation, capital gain. I was an afterthought. Maybe even collateral damage.

I sat up.

My privacy. Freedom from observation. Freedom from *disturbance*. That was the price of admission.

I immediately fell back to the pillow at the insistence of the naked screaming midgets dancing in my head.

Siri said, "Message from Betty."

I shouted at the midgets.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand. Would you like me to search the Internet for 'Goat Thockaway?'"

I struggled to recall how had I ended up here; I wouldn't drive my Barracuda blind-eyed on blue agave. My eye saw the keys on the nightstand beside my gold gadget. I never put keys on the nightstand; I left them in my pocket right where I would want them.

Someone had driven me home.

I rolled over. Where could I find a life as exciting as a detective novel? Or at least a pop song?

I stretched my back, which brought sensation to my feet.

"New message from Willy," Siri said.

"Tell him you will never beat me."

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"Tell Willy 'You will never beat me.' Send message?"

"Yes, Siri."

"Message sent to Willy."

I groaned

Mistake. Now Willy knew I was awake; he would be in my driveway in half an hour.

I had made impulsive decisions in my life: buying a mahogany guitar, changing my major, approaching that curly-haired brunette in the S-aisle of the library and asking if she was looking for books on Sewing or Sex. Those had worked out okay.

So I made another one.

The midgets applauded.

"Siri, turn off location services."

"Maps will no longer be available."

"OK."

"Location services off."

"Message to all contacts: I, Tommy, am going off the grid. So long, and thanks for all the fish." One of my friends would figure out *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* reference. They could Tweedledee the dolphin story to everyone else.

"Sending message to two hundred and fourteen contacts."

Staring at the ceiling I had painted Taffy Egg Shell Surprise after finishing college, I said: "Post message to all social networks."

"Posting."

"Thank you, Siri."

"I am here to help."

"Siri, turn off power."

"All services will be unavailable. Are you sure?"

"I am totally sure."

"I'm sorry. Would you like me to search the Internet for 'I.M.T. leisure?'"

"Siri, shut down now."

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“Goodbye, Thomas.”

My iPhone became an inert block of black glass and aluminum.

I breathed easier. That could be Apple’s new mantra: not *Think Different*, but *Breathe Easy*.

I rolled my head in circles; my neck crackled along like a drunk drummer. When my friends received that message they would immediately attempt contact to find out why I had gone mad. When I didn’t respond Willy, Betty, or someone would coordinate a siege on my house. Eventually Mom would let them in because she’s polite that way. Which meant...

I sat up fast. My head did barrel rolls, but landed upright.

I blinked to clear my eyes.

What did I need?

The ’59 gold-top guitar (reissue) I used in college bands. Vinyl record collection—the way it was when Eddie Cochran sang about blues in the summertime. Six shelves of mystery novels; I would have to be selective.

And superman-in-a-phone-booth quick.

I tossed back the blanket and saw that I still had pants on. I stripped, jumped in the shower, stepped out, and ran a towel through the hair my mother insisted made me look as handsome as the blond guy on reruns of Route 66 that she had the hots for as a teenager growing up in Kansas. I tossed on blue jeans, a black T-shirt with *Mopar* emblazoned across the chest touting Chrysler’s original equipment motor parts (the only kind I ever used), and gray tennis shoes.

Raiding my Hemi-under-glass funny car piggy bank yielded \$437. The rest of my personal wealth sat earning too little interest in a bank whose logo made me think I was the stagecoach and the bank was Jesse James.

I stuffed the records, books, turntable, speakers and a scratched black suitcase made of recycled cardboard filled with one sport coat and handfuls of clothes under the curved rear window of my Chrysler. On the way back to my room to search

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for more stashed cash I passed mom coming down the stairway wearing a Saturday tennis outfit she'd probably call Perfect Peach. She was relaxed and smiling and not in any kind of hurry because she allowed for travel time as reliably as a Buddhist monk meditated.

"Uh, Mom, could I borrow a couple hundred?"

She stopped three steps from the bottom and redid the elastic ring holding her blonde hair behind her head. Buying time.

"Not if you're going to spend it on Betty. You throw too much of your money at her already."

"I'm taking a solo vacation. See the USA in my Chrysler. Try to figure out how to break out of the Walmart rut."

Her hands stopped moving. "Really?"

"Yeah. But, I have to leave fast before the tribe shows up and talks me out of it."

She crossed her arms. "Well, Thomas Benjamin, it's about time. When you graduated I told you to travel, clear your head. Don't fall back into the same rut with the same crowd or you'll never find your element."

I tried to remember what she meant by *element*, but all I could think of was the periodic table on the wall in General Chemistry, and a girl named Georgette whose skirts seemed to shrink during class.

"You were right, Mom."

She smiled and hugged me with both arms. Then pushed me away.

"A few hundred isn't enough. Let me loan you a thousand."

"Thanks, Mom. You're the best."

"Where are you going first?" she said as she turned to go back to the second floor of our four-bedroom on two acres that had been built before I came along. Halfway up I glanced out at grass I had cut countless times — not something I would miss. I spoke to the bobbing blonde tail on the back of her head. "I was thinking Detroit, the soul of Motown. But then I thought maybe

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Memphis to find out what's happening in rockabilly these days. I want to see the building where the famous Sun Records were made."

"They haven't done that music right since the Stray Cats broke up. You know that's when I met your father."

This story I had definitely heard before. "I'm in a hurry, Mom."

"You wait years and now your pants are on fire." She sighed. "At least you're getting out of the house."

She strolled toward the master bedroom. I blasted to my room, looked under the bed at dustballs, wished I could take my too-tall Fender amp, and said goodbye to the dresser where I had hid all the things boys need to hide (including my first picture of a topless girl) by taping them to the underside of its drawers. The iPhone lying on the nightstand beckoned me.

To take or not to take?

My skin felt electrified. Maybe I would need a phone. And music files. But not more text messages. Or Twitter temptation. I weakened, shoved it into the front pocket of my jeans and took mental inventory. Jacket, three shirts, underwear. Shaver. Blue brothel creepers. Sunglasses. Where were my sunglasses?

I pulled open drawers. Flipped through shirts, socks. Scanned the room. Found them hanging by one temple over the back of the lampshade. I grabbed the Ray-Ban Aviators (timeless style since 1936), slipped them over my shirt collar, and turned to leave.

Mom was standing in the doorway with cash in her hand.

I stepped forward, hugged her hard until she whispered, "Oh, Tommy," stepped back, smiled, and slipped the money gently from her palm.

"Bye, Mom...yes, I promise I will call."

She wasn't smiling any more; she had already started the worry-mobile. "If you don't, I'm sending a private eye to find you."

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“Please don’t worry, Mom. I just...um, I can’t really explain it.”

She held my shoulder with her right hand. “You just celebrated your last twenty-something birthday. You see the big three-oh coming at you down the long highway of life, so you want to run away to find something before old age pins you to the mat.” She smiled and let go. “And makes you cry uncle.”

Mom was okay. I didn’t think so back in high school, but she seemed smarter now.

“Mom.” I could see she might cry like the day I left for college. “I’ll be back, but please, I gotta go...”

She stepped backward into the hallway and shooed me with one hand. “You drive safe, Tommy. No beer and car keys.”

The keys!

I pressed my hand against my front pocket where the keys should be; turned toward the nightstand, found them right where I hadn’t put them, and squeezed a key older than me in my left hand.

I should take the spare. Where was it?

I dropped to one knee in front of the nightstand while Mom watched. At the very bottom I found the wooden box I got as a kid at a Mackinac Bridge souvenir shop. Man, the view from that bridge was vast: water for miles in both directions; I wanted to build one so much I started off majoring in Math in college.

I flicked it open.

The key was at the bottom under a high-school class ring and assorted ancient coins I had traded for slingshots and knives. I slipped it into my pocket and made a mental note to hide it someplace I could access in an emergency.

Mom was still there as I raced for the door, but she stepped back. As I reached her she said: “Goodbye, Tommy. I love you.”

I hugged her again, “I love you too, Mom. Thanks for the loan.”

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Then I was down the stairs and outside.

Sunny. Saturday. High noon.

I stopped to admire the chocolate-brown metallic Plymouth Barracuda with a 426 Hemi V8 my Granddad had generously left to me in his will. Only a few Barracudas with the 426 were ever manufactured; all specifically for Super Stock drag racing. He had arranged for one to become street-legal; though he never explained why it had a 1965 title.

Restored it myself after college with parts from scrap yards.

I hopped in, fired that big motor into a gentle rumble, and waved to Mom, who stood motionless in the window of the living room where a teenage Betty had offered me my first glimpse of a real girl.

Two

TEN MINUTES OF WINDING through side streets so I wouldn't be spotted by Betty or Willy carried me to the monster: Interstate-80, a ribbon of concrete that could take me all the way to the Pacific Ocean without a single red light. What amazing technology made a road: pulverized stone and water poured into flat, smooth rock wherever you wanted it.

Engineering was an unseen art.

I listened to the Hemi barely idling as we cruised along at the speed limit. I patted the pack of money in the breast pocket of my black leather jacket made by the same company that had sewn them for Steve McQueen: the *master of cool* according to the former owner of my car. With each passing mile the gas gauge leaned further left, the throbbing in my head faded, and my grasp of what the hell I was doing and why slipped a notch.

As I rolled past a bright orange semi, the bearded driver gave me a thumbs up. I waved. That happened a lot. Guys love cars, especially cars for the drag strip. Rocketing in a straight line. Hundreds of horsepower fighting to thrust tons of steel forward across 1,320 feet of asphalt. Reaction time, torque, traction. Big $F=ma$ forces Newton would love. I could almost smell burning rubber.

I eased the accelerator toward the floor, cranked down the window, and rested my elbow on the sill. Wind roared in my ear. The exhaust sounded beautiful, angry, sweet, steady.

I daydreamed.

Music, work, cars, girls, computers, life, liberty. Computers. Computers created their own brand of problems. I could reach out and almost-but-not-quite touch anyone anywhere on the planet. Like eating a famous Big Boy burger without the patties,

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computers created an unsatisfying virtual life funneled through snippets of text and selfies. That character in Woody Allen's Paris movie, who wished he could return to an earlier era when things were more vivid and exciting, came to mind.

I felt a magnetic pull on my brain.

Like the past where my Granddad drag raced on country roads using telephone poles for the start and finish lines.

And rockabilly music.

I flicked on the AM radio and pressed the leftmost button. I kept that one set to AM 800, CKLW The Big 8 out of Windsor, in honor of Granddad who had lived through the glory days when their Big 30 songs mattered to almost the entire country. Lots of people thought it originated in Detroit. The station wanted you to think it came from Motown. But it didn't.

The broadcast towers were in Canada.

It was now a pale shadow of its former 50,000 watt rock-and-roll self; an automated shadow programmed by a media conglomerate that had moved to talk/news format years ago; calling itself *The Information Station*. I listened to a woman describe the clear weather I was driving through as 'sprightly,' then pushed the second button on my old radio to flip to AM 580, CKWW: the frequency where the old CKLW format had been moved after a buyout. 580 was now essentially just an oldies format so thousands of people could go about their day listening to *(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction* by The Rolling Stones. I thought of music passing invisibly through the air to all those people—more unseen engineering. We were brothers and sisters. A community listening together.

I grinned and flicked on my cell phone. It would be nice to hear Eddie C sing *Twenty Flight Rock*. The phone beeped and blipped.

Siri said: "You have three urgent messages from Betty."

I drove with my left hand at nine o'clock, holding the phone in my right. A thought crystallized: I didn't need a magic car to go back into the past; I just needed to make clear-cut decisions

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about what I wanted in my life — and what I didn't. That yoga instructor, what was her name? She sat next to me in Theology. Name sounded like a fruity drink. Brendina. She advised me to choose my own path.

Do not enslave yourself to the wishes of others.

Especially not college-dropout entrepreneurs in California who tried to make everyone feel like they were behind in life if they didn't use the last thing invented. As if *new* was somehow better than *proven*.

I tossed the cell phone out the window.

And immediately wondered how I'd call Mom.

Then shrugged. I didn't need a digital tether. Mankind had lived for millions of years without a chunk of silicon in his pocket bugging him.

I just needed something to do.

Like eat.

A road sign promised a Frisch's Big Boy up ahead, a restaurant chain that began in Ohio back in 1905. I eased into the right lane and took the exit. That date was stuck in my head because Willy and I had stopped for lunch at a Cleveland Frisch's on a trip to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. We argued about who was the best guitar player of all time; reached no conclusions. Hovering over our booth hung a framed vintage black and white poster of a shapely girl sipping Coca-Cola through a striped straw. She wore a long skirt and a sweater emblazoned with 1905.

Some things don't change — not even in a hundred years.

I idled into the Frisch's lot wondering how many burgers they had served in a century, and parked under a corrugated roof suspended on angled steel poles painted white. A concrete sidewalk separated two rows of cars facing each other, like boxers about to start a match.

I couldn't stop a grin. Curb service.

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I ordered from a waitress with long curls and a short skirt and imagined my grandfather sitting here ordering a burger when the Barracuda was new and not carrying a historic license plate.

Maybe not so different.

“Gramps would like her curls,” I said to the dash that was playing The Chantays version of *Pipeline* from a single speaker embedded inside: a speaker I found on eBay because the owner was parting out his car after a bad crash.

I missed Gramps; he had style. And I admired his work ethic: making a living fixing cars after serving in Vietnam; then having my Dad when everyone else was tuning in, tuning out, or rolling in the mud in a farmer’s field listening to Hendrix play *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

All we did was add new words to the dictionary like *selfie* and *clickbait* and *social network*.

The curly-haired girl came and took away my tray. I considered trying to find a pay phone inside and calling Mom, but I’d only been gone an hour and a half.

I started the Barracuda and rolled through the parking lot slowly.

A woman was standing beside the driveway leading to the frontage road.

Holding her thumb out.

I pushed in the clutch and coasted toward the exit. Red, wavy hair, black jean jacket, black and white leopard print pants. Black boots to her knees suggested motorcycle more than horse. A black backpack with silver sections that probably reflected light sat at her feet.

I touched the brake pedal with my toe.

Curved, rectangular sunglass lenses fully covered her eyes. Laser-cut black aluminum temples disappeared into red hair.

Under thirty. Out of high school.

I reached over and cranked down the window on the passenger side. It moved smooth as the day Chrysler built it.

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Gramps never let me forget: if you're going to have it, take care of it.

She stepped close. A shiny silver belt holding up the leopard print pants caught my eye. She leaned in. Red bangs played against the top of her sunglass frames. One hand came up and lowered the glasses, revealing silver makeup surrounding green eyes that were fixed on my face.

"Hi," she said.

I tipped my head toward the diner. "Just get off work?"

Her face moved toward the restaurant and back. "Wouldn't work there." She pushed the dark glasses back up. "Where you going?"

The first words into my head were *wherever you are*. I almost said Detroit, but intuition pushed me toward vague.

"West." I had to go west before I could turn north for The Motor City.

She moved her jaw, lips pressed together.

"How far?"

Good question. The ink wasn't dry on my getaway plan. I improvised.

"Maybe Chicago."

She pulled the glasses down again. Studied me. A green pickup pulled around from behind and into the street. The driver glanced my way. Surprising me, he gave a thumbs up with his free hand. I couldn't tell if he liked the car, or was encouraging me in my quest.

She stepped back and moved her head right and left, scanning the side of the car. Finally she said: "Looks like a turd."

Some people didn't initially appreciate the rich beauty of Turbine Bronze, first used on a production Barracuda in '67. They had to be educated.

"Think of it as a giant sixty-five percent fair-trade chocolate bar. Good enough to lick."

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She stared at me. A smile crawled into her cheeks. She bent, disappearing from view, popped up with the pack on her arm, opened the door, slid a slender rear end across black vinyl, and held the pack on her lap.

“Let’s go,” she said.

I couldn’t remember asking if she wanted a ride as I eased the clutch out, maneuvered back to the Interstate, and made a show of going through the four-speed Hurst shifter to about 90 up the entrance ramp. She didn’t seem to notice, so I slowed.

Her face was tilted out the passenger window, red hair streaming toward the back seat, eyes hidden behind dark glass. Wind roared inside the cabin, but Gramps had finagled A/C—available all the way back in 1965—so we had an option.

“Air conditioning?” I asked.

“Mona, what’s yours?” she shouted.

I concluded she enjoyed open windows, and I’d have to speak louder.

“Tommy. Tommy—” I stopped. I should be careful with information. I was trying to leave a world where everyone knew where I was and what I was doing; where privacy was only something you asked for when you were going to kiss a girl. Then I realized I wanted to impress her, and Thomas Benjamin Kelsey lacked charisma.

“What?” she called out over the rush of the wind.

My eyes caught the silver letters on the dash above the glovebox.

I leaned toward her. “Cuda. Tommy Cuda.”

Three

MONA SMILED, POINTED AT the front of her jacket, and said, “Meyers.” Her right hand reached across the gap between the bucket seats. I lifted mine from the steel grip of the Hurst to shake hers, and instantly didn’t want to let go of its soft warmth. She took her hand away and leaned her head back into the wind.

I drove with my elbow on the doorsill and left fingers on the wheel. My right hand fiddled with the radio, touched the shifter now and then (though I didn’t need to do anything), and laid limp on the seat the rest of the time. She wasn’t talking, so I had time to fabricate a reason I was going to Chicago, and what I planned to do when I got there.

Fortunately, I had been there a couple of times on road trips. And had read about it in one of the two history classes I passed. The Windy City: named not for the weather but for the bluster of its politicians in the nineteenth century. Some of my favorite crime novels had taken place there: *Big City*, *Bad Blood*; *Deader by the Lake*; *The Litigators*.

Oh. And it sat smack on Lake Michigan. Maybe I could get a place by the water.

And do what?

Be unreachable for starters.

“Mona, where you headed?”

“Wherever you’re going.”

I tossed a sideways glance her way. She was facing the roof liner letting the wind take her. She appeared to be serious.

“I’m thinking a hotel near the beach in Chicago. Relax, listen to the waves. Find some of that famous Chicago blues music.”

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"I was going to South Bend to meet a friend at Notre Dame."

Past tense.

"It's on the way. I can drop you off if you like," I said, and held my breath. Chicago would be way more fun with a curvy redhead. Even one who didn't say much.

She leaned toward the window, the wind creating fluttering flames behind her.

"South Bend is boring," she said.

I accelerated to indicate that I would be happy to roll past this boring town where she had a friend who might be male who could put an end to our minutes-old adventure.

"We could liven it up," I offered, trying to be open-minded. Maybe her friend was a slender brunette who liked old cars.

She rolled her head across the back of the seat until dark lenses pointed at me.

"Sounds like more work than driving to Chicago." She smiled.

I shrugged. "OK. We drive to Chicago. What about your friend?"

Her left hand came up and dragged the glasses down her nose. Green rings glistened at me.

"What friend?" she said.

I fought a grin, not knowing what game she was playing, or what my score was.

We stopped for gas. She carried her backpack into the minimart. I pumped. She came back with three kinds of potato chips, a can of cheese and two bottles of water. We were back on the road in minutes.

As we approached Gary, Indiana, a sort of industrial back alley entrance to Chicago, I spun the radio dial and landed on the tail end of a news story about a cop being shot somewhere in Michigan. Then the DJ spun *Get a Job* by the Silhouettes. I tried to think how many years it had come out before my car rolled out of Detroit.

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Mona took off her sunglasses even though the setting sun was glaring through the windshield.

"What do you do, Mr. Tommy Cuda?"

I drove for a few seconds (corn field, elevated irrigation pipe, a distant silo) processing my new name, savoring the sound of it on her lips, and wondering what a good answer would be before coming up with a one-word response.

"Do?"

She rolled her head my way again. "You know. Work. Money. Get a job. It's an easy four-mile question."

"Four-mile?"

"On the Detroit City scale of one through eight." She apparently read my confusion. "Road names." She made little karate chops with her left hand. "The roads are a mile apart. Eight Mile is special. It divides the gritty city from the silly suburbs."

I had seen a movie named *8 Mile* about a white rapper working in a factory. I turned and noticed two things: she had barely perceptible freckles on her nose, and the mystery novels I had been reading since the fifth grade were stacked on the back seat. I made a quick decision and tried to sound as confident as the guys in those books.

"I'm a private investigator."

Her eyebrows shifted up...then down, as if they had answered a question. She laughed, slipped her glasses back on, and turned her face to the sun.

"What do you privately investigate?"

"Whatever the client wants; I'm not picky. Though I like to work regular hours when I can."

"Why's that?"

"More restaurants are open."

Get a Job faded and a weather lady told us it was going to be sunny in Chicago for the remainder of the weekend. I had been

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there to see museums and concerts, but it never struck me as sunny.

We curved through Gary on a raised slab of concrete watching smoke rise from blackened chimneys and spiral into Rorschach forms. I saw two faces, and maybe a basketball. Wind whooshed as I passed a Walmart semi towing a double trailer and realized I hadn't given notice to my boss.

"How much?" she asked.

Tire noise from the truck crushed her words.

"Sorry. How much what?"

"For private eyeing? What would you charge me?"

I mentally adjusted amounts I had read in novels for inflation.

"Five hundred dollar retainer up front, and two hundred a day plus expenses." She didn't react, so I added, "But it depends on the length of the job. I give discounts for long projects because it saves on paperwork."

She was quiet.

The weather lady was replaced by The Beatles singing *I'm Looking Through You*.

Maybe I had overpriced my nonexistent skills. I watched the sun hovering close to the horizon and hoped we weren't too late to score a decent hotel on a Saturday night. Then I wondered where she was really headed. And when. And why.

She rolled up her window.

I did the same, quieting the car.

She unzipped the backpack on the floor between her legs.

I tuned the radio to get static out of the AM station.

She placed a hundred dollar bill on the console between us. Then another. When she had placed five she started another stack until she had six bills on it.

"I want three days," she said. "Do you need expenses up front too?"

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I thought about the fourteen hundred and thirty-seven dollars I had started the day with. And the eleven hundred lying behind the Hurst shifter. And the fact that I had just told a complete stranger I was a private eye, and she was calling my bluff.

"Depends on what you need done. Will there be travel involved?"

Her forehead furrowed above the metal frame of her sunglasses. She shrugged and laid down three more hundreds. "Not sure. How's a hundred a day?"

I had no idea what I needed to do, or possibly how to do it. So I said: "Perfect. Would you like a receipt, Miss Meyer?"

She shook her head, didn't correct the Miss, and seemed unfazed by the amount of money she had just spent.

It was getting warm in the car.

I scooped the hundreds together into a stack, and with some twisting pushed them into the left pocket of my pants. The thought that a pretty girl with so much cash on her shouldn't be hitchhiking drifted through my brain, but didn't park.

"How can I help you?"

She rolled her window halfway down while looking my way.

"I want you to find someone."

The only missing thing I had ever found was our terrier Smudge when he got lost chasing a particularly exuberant squirrel in the woods. And I essentially just wandered around with a flashlight most of the night until he came running to me near a creek.

"That can be tricky. Depends on what we know about this person. Who are you trying to find?"

A long windy silence. Then: "I'll tell you in the morning. Can we get some food on your expense account?"

"How about a place with live music?"

She studied the right side of my face. "Why do you listen to this old crap?"

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I eased the accelerator toward the floor to pass a truck lumbering up a long curved piece of expressway.

"Crap because it wasn't written by someone your age? Crap because it's old? Or crap because you don't understand it?" It was my car and my gas. I could be indignant if I wanted to—even if she was my client.

"Touchy."

I grinned. "Testing your sense of humor. I started listening to music outside the stuff chosen by marketing departments to optimize advertising revenue my second year of college. Got the radio DJ job on the night shift and began experimenting with the humongous library of vinyl the school had collected, mostly through donations from alumni. We called it the *College of Musical Knowledge*. My grandfather would dial in requests, and I'd dig records out of our archives."

"That's how you got old, huh?"

"No," I said. The Chrysler rumbled along just above the speed limit.

Finally she dipped her sunglasses and said, "No?"

"That's how I got educated. That's when I learned people of all eras and ages pour out their feelings in song not to communicate their world, but to survive it. In some cases, to discover it. That's when I learned people from the past had a lot to say about the present and how to live. That's when—"

She waved both arms. "OK, OK. I get it. College boy wakes up one day, takes his hand off his dick, and realizes that other people have feelings too." She laughed.

It was a nice laugh. The kind that didn't have any edges.

"Yeah, something like that. But the people around me weren't really hearing music. They were using it as an ear vibrator for stimulation between text messages."

She pushed her glasses up. I wondered if it was a habit just to keep her hands busy—like stroking a worry stone.

"They were doing something else too," she said.

JOE KLINGLER

I did a quick review of my philosophy and sociology experience. Came up empty. I watched the highway for signs to a blues bar that might have food. I waited as long as I could, hoping she would elaborate without making me ask. She didn't.

"What's that?"

"Pumping cultural myths into their brains that will pop up for years without the poor creatures knowing where the hell they came from."

This I remembered. "You mean repetitive media consumption creating a person's value system through subconscious imitation?"

She nodded. "That's how a college boy would say it."

I wasn't loving the word boy. "Hmm. How would a pretty hitchhiker say it?"

I watched her with one eye, the stripes zipping by on the road with the other. Her lips twitched.

"Brainwashing."

"Like everyone being in love with the music they listened to during puberty?"

She shook her head; her hair bounced like a shampoo commercial. "No, that's hormones and timing." She turned my way. "Better be careful what you put on the radio tonight." She laughed again.

I exited Highway 41, known locally as Lake Shore Drive, at Fullerton. We drove a switchback pattern until Mona saw a sign that read B.L.U.E.S. on Halsted only blocks from the exit. A window poster informed us a band named BLU44 wouldn't start for hours, so we cruised in expanding circles with her pointing at restaurants as we talked about the foods we were craving.

She wanted tuna.

I wanted a burger.

She wanted rare steak.

I thought fish and chips sounded great.

MISSING MONA

Most places were jammed with patrons, traffic was just shy of gridlock, and pedestrians strolled everywhere in the dusty golden richness of dusk. At a stoplight, a guy my dad's age wearing a Tommy Bahama shirt with sailboats on it pointed at the Barracuda while trying to direct the attention of the woman with him toward the car. I couldn't make out his words, but was confident he was telling his own Barracuda story. Minutes later, I made a left turn after sitting through three light changes burning prodigious amounts of fuel in the 426 cubic inches of fun under my hood.

We had come full circle and were back on Fullerton.

Mona gestured toward a brick Victorian house hiding behind a black iron fence.

I read the sign. "The Bourgeois Pig?"

"Sounds perfect for you."

I smiled. We had become so close she felt comfortable insulting me.

I parked on the street and we entered a converted house that had a library with shelves on two walls and a fireplace without a fire. Surrounded by books I felt sure were as old as my car I found a tasty sounding sandwich on the menu called the Muffaletta. Mona covered the last six letters with her thumb, licked her lips, and broke into her edgeless laugh.

The sandwiches arrived faster than I could heat up a can of soup.

"Why are you traveling?" Mona asked, her face suddenly serious.

I shrugged. "I was bored. I own a car. *See the USA in Your Chevrolet* seemed like an obvious choice for an all-American boy." There was that word again.

She chewed and studied me.

I said: "Yes, I know it's a Chrysler."

She didn't laugh. "Taking off alone? Bored doesn't seem like quite enough..." She chewed her lower lip. "Incentive."

JOE KLINGLER

“Ever see that movie *Groundhog Day* with Bill Murray? My mom loves it, bought the DVD. I woke up today feeling trapped like that weatherman. Life going in circles. Tick-tock, time passing me by. Stuck in a rut.” I grinned. “Pick your cliché of the day.”

She nodded, face calm, skin smooth as freshly whipped cream. “That I understand.”

“I also got really pissed off at my smart phone.”

Then she laughed.

Later, inside B.L.U.E.S., a singer named Demetria Taylor hit the *Wang Dang Doodle* with a voice that demanded attention. Behind the stage a sign read: *Over 150,000 songs played.* Being surrounded by dozens of music fans and pulsing music while sitting close to Mona made me think about space. I realized we were close to the lake.

I wanted to see it.

To my left posters three layers deep clung to the wall. Below them a wooden rack held a dozen brochures: Lincoln Park Zoo, Field Museum of Natural History, and a hotel with a big W overlooking blue water. It was on Lake Shore Drive and sounded expensive, but I had a client to impress, and an expense account.

I reached over and unfolded the brochure on our table. The band’s volume made talking an auditory challenge, but Mona nodded as my finger pointed back and forth between us and the W.

The drive was brief. Mona stared out the car window through glass twice her age, backpack between her knees. I self-parked in a concrete structure and she dragged me toward the beach where I got sand in both shoes while carrying my suitcase in one hand and my gold guitar in the other. We stomped the sand off in front of a glittering W on a blue background and entered the lobby.

I stopped on a hardwood floor, recently shined.

“I have a question for my client.”

MISSING MONA

“Shoot.”

“Since the client is paying expenses.” I caught her eye. “One room or two?”

She didn’t blink. “One. In your name.”

On the twelfth floor a few minutes later, I pushed the door to our room open for her with my shoulder.

“You’re sure you’re okay with one room?” I asked.

She stopped in the doorway, turned to face me. “So long as you keep your hands to yourself college boy.” Then she laughed and went in. She seemed to laugh a lot, then grow quiet as the nighttime after rain.

Two queen beds filled most of the room. I took the one by the window, spreading my suitcase on the floor. She dropped the backpack she hadn’t let out of her sight all night into a chair, slipped off her boots, surprised me with a hug and kiss goodnight, and crawled into bed wearing her leopard pants and jean jacket.

I fell asleep with my cash inside my pillowcase wondering if I was being careless sharing a room with a hitchhiker. I figured her as being okay, maybe even a little cautious herself. I also wanted her in that way my body can crave a woman after knowing her for three or four seconds. But what filled most of my head was that I had my first case as a private investigator — and no idea how to go about it.

Four

I WOKE LYING ON MY BACK with darkness on the other side of my eyelids and wind rushing into my right ear. I opened my eyes; a hotel ceiling, colorless in the dimness, slowly replaced my inner fog.

A heavy weight pressed my right arm into the mattress.

Fingernails scraped down the left side of my chest.

No, not wind. Breath.

"Mona?" I whispered.

Her head nodded against my shoulder. The breath came in short bursts. She slid her body up on top of me, pressing bare breasts against my chest.

The bursts continued in my ear.

Her fingernails reversed direction, moving slowly up my left side and across my neck until fingers slipped behind my neck and wrapped themselves into my hair.

The wind ceased.

A whispered, "Kiss me, Tommy," preceded soft lips against mine, rotating, opening. Her hand pulled me to her.

I moved my now free arm up and around her slender waist, along the smooth curve of her spine, her back expanding and contracting quickly against my palm. The hot pressure of her kiss held me suspended. Darkness and desire blended into a sense of moving fast through outer space in our own private starship.

I mumbled, "Should we slow down?" through the kiss. I doubt she understood the words, but her head shook no. I relaxed my shoulders and focused on the softness of her breasts, the intense pressure on my mouth, the grasp of her hand.

MISSING MONA

She inhaled sharply; froze; pulled my hair toward her. Her body shuddered. My body shuddered in response.

She slipped back to her original position along my right side, the dampness of our skin lubricating the motion. The soft breath in my right ear returned.

“Thank you for the ride, Tommy,” she whispered.

Then she was gone into the darkness.

I heard her scuffle into the sheets of the other bed as the words of a Catholic college girl who was saving herself for marriage came to me: *There's a lot you can do without having sex.* Then I skydived into deep sleep.

The whoosh of traffic woke me.

The other side of my eyelids was now orange.

I laid on my stomach wondering if what I thought had happened aligned with the reality of the cosmos. I rolled toward Mona's bed.

It was empty.

No backpack.

I sat up. Listened. Nothing but traffic.

I dropped back against the pillow. The first day of my thirtieth year had been a doozy. I reached to grab my cell phone from the nightstand to check the weather before remembering it was on an Ohio highway in a hundred pieces. I twisted back to count the money inside my pillowcase. My \$1437 was down to \$1050 and change. I hadn't touched the cash Mona had given me — all \$1100 plus \$300 was accounted for. I flipped off the covers and gazed at the sheets, wondering if Mona's visit had been a dream, then shuffled to the window and pushed the curtains open.

Morning light pierced both eyes.

Far below, the glittering blue of Lake Michigan invited me to dive in.

I took a shower. Still no Mona.

JOE KLINGLER

I dressed in my jeans from the day before, put on a charcoal sport coat over a black and white polo shirt, and packed my leather jacket into my black suitcase.

No Mona.

I looked for a note, used towel, lipstick smudge on a pillow. Nothing. I hefted my suitcase, said, "Goodbye, Mona" to the empty room, and headed for checkout. When I reached the street in front of the W, a dozen people dressed more for dancing than church were waiting for valets to bring their cars around.

I turned right for the garage.

Inside the gray shadows of the parking structure I passed status logos: BMW, Lexus, Mercedes. A low car I thought might be a Ferrari from a distance turned out to be an Aston-Martin fifty steps later.

I found my Barracuda and peeked through the window; my records and books were where I had left them. I loaded my suitcase and guitar. Slipped behind the wheel. Now what? The expense money would cover the hotel, but I still had eleven hundred dollars.

And no client.

I studied the car key, marveled at the crudeness of a thing etched from steel, pushed it into the ignition, and turned.

Silence filled the space where a Hemi should have been.

I tried to recall when I had replaced the battery. Last summer. Plenty new. Besides, it should have been charging all day yesterday while Mona and I were rolling down the highway.

Charging system failure? No idiot light had warned me.

I got out, slipped my fingers through the grill, raised the hood. Someone had disconnected the negative terminal of the battery. The wrench they had done it with was lying on the battery case: Sears Craftsman—like I used. Maybe they had been interrupted while stealing the battery.

MISSING MONA

I reconnected the battery and leaned over to check the V-belts as I had seen my grandfather do a hundred times. *Always check the belts: they crack, loosen. A weak link in an otherwise strong machine.* But I couldn't see them because a backpack had been stuffed between the radiator and the fan.

A black backpack.

With silver accents.

I worked the pack free, careful not to rip the material on the fan blades. The front and back were streaked with the black grease engines attract, but it was otherwise unharmed.

"Mona, you're one crazy cat."

I started to unzip the main compartment before remembering she had pulled hundred dollar bills from inside. I surveyed the parking garage. A white sedan was backing out to my left. A family with two little girls dressed in matching yellow shorts walked toward me from the far end. I slammed the hood down, moved to the driver's door, tossed the pack over the seat, dropped the wrench on the floor, and got in.

The Barracuda roared to life.

I needed privacy to find out what was in that pack—and what she wanted me to do with it. Had to be important, or she wouldn't have hidden it.

Assuming Mona hid it.

I drove downtown streets gray-dirt-bland in shadows cast by Sunday morning light. Traffic inched along, as if Chicago were yawning after a tough night on the town. Not knowing many restaurants, I stashed the car at the top of a parking garage near the Pig where it wasn't visible from the street, and took the backpack with me. I found the Pig open for breakfast, ordered an egg panini, and headed to the restroom. It only had one stall, but that stall had a door.

And a lock.

I sat down and put the pack on my lap. In the main section I found packets wrapped in brown paper. One was torn open. A peek inside revealed hundred dollar bills.

JOE KLINGLER

My mouth was suddenly dry.

A quick count indicated a hundred bills per pack: ten thousand dollars wrapped up no bigger than a good hot dog. I rummaged around: ten, twenty, maybe fifty packs. I did the math. Blood swished in my ears in rhythmic pulses.

A half-million dollars.

I forced myself not to whistle.

The outer door to the restroom opened. I counted to ten, then reached behind me and flushed.

I checked the small pockets of the backpack. Found a phone. It asked for a security code; I put it away. Another held a wallet-sized photo of Mona that could have been taken in an amusement park photo booth. I flipped it over.

Find me, Tommy – M.

I stared at the picture. Red hair flowed to her shoulders. Recent. Bright painted lips reminded me of a chewing gum commercial. Or maybe all-natural mango hair conditioner.

I'll tell you in the morning.

I jumped when the outside door slammed. I flushed again, and on my way out passed a guy in his dark blue Sunday best looking uncomfortable.

The panini was on my table when I reached it, the coffee still steaming. I sat down and put the pack between my feet the way Mona had done in my car. Now I knew why private eyes in novels were always smoking a cigarette: it was nerve-wracking having no idea what was going on.

Five

I BIT INTO THE PANINI and watched a young couple near the window hold hands under the table while I dug out Mona's cell phone. I tried to sort the items bouncing around in my head into some semblance of order: the phone, the money, where Mona had gone, why I claimed to be a private eye when I hadn't investigated anything since trying to score a phone number by texting a coed's friends. The guy behind me bumped my chair hard as he stood up to clear his gut past the edge of his table. I turned. He didn't even look my way, let alone apologize. I let it go and focused on practical issues: where was I going to sleep tonight? How long did I want to stay in Chicago now that I had missed Detroit? And since it was my only real source of funds, what about Walmart? I hadn't told them anything. And...was I going to try to find Mona?

Of course. I had to. I had taken her deposit. That seemed like a sort of contract.

Or bond.

Her thin smartphone wanted a four-digit number to let me inside. She couldn't be silly enough to use her name, but Mona *was* four-letters. The phone showed a row of circled numbers, not an old-school dialing pad. I couldn't remember which letters corresponded to which numbers. I scanned the room.

A waitress with short brown hair noticed me rubbernecking and came over. Bright red crinkled cloth clung tight to her torso from just above her belly button to slightly above her breasts. A clear plastic strap over each lean, toned shoulder helped hold it up.

"Is there a pay phone around?" I asked.

JOE KLINGLER

She glanced at the cell phone lying on the table and back at me.

“I need to see the letters on a keypad.”

She pulled a phone from her pocket, tapped it, and showed me a keypad. “Like that?”

I nodded, looked for the letters. MNO were all on the 6 button. So Mona was 6662.

“Thanks.” As she turned away I noticed her hair was short in back, maybe shorter than mine.

The 666 niggled at my mind even though I didn’t buy any of that superstitious mark of the beast mumbo. It had to be a coincidence; but then, I didn’t really believe in coincidence either.

I tapped the numbers. The phone unlocked. Long odds.

Six messages. I took another bite of egg and cheese. The first text had come in yesterday at 5:02 am. Early for a Saturday morning.

Did you get out?

Mona hadn’t answered. I scrolled down and up. She hadn’t answered any of them.

Hey, are you out? Let me know.

An hour later:

We’re on the road.

Just heard, pigs got everything.

Then:

Contact me asap.

The last had arrived at noon Saturday, less than 24-hours ago.

FIND ME!

Sort of a theme developing around Mona.

The sender was identified as *Z-Rox*. Didn’t help much, and made me think of dinosaurs.

I checked for email, wondering how many federal regulations I was violating.

MISSING MONA

Nothing. The phone hadn't even been set up with an email account. I checked to see if the browser had a history that might show where she accessed an account in the cloud.

The history was empty.

Contacts only contained the number of the phone itself, assigned to *redhoof*. How many twenty-something girls had only one entry in their cell phone?

I put the phone away and thought about a hitchhiker hiding a huge chunk of cash in my car. Go to the police? I had driven across two state lines, never asked her age or where she was from, accepted a cash deposit and prepayment. And why would they believe a guy from Ohio who told them: "She left the half-million under my hood, I have no idea why."

Solving this myself sounded like a better idea.

A newspaper abandoned on a neighboring table caught my eye; I reached over and collected it. The waitress with the clear straps watched. I waved her over.

"Do you have chocolate cake?"

"For breakfast?"

I smiled. "Anytime is right for chocolate and coffee."

"I have a brownie leftover from yesterday. Half-price."

"Yes, please." I hesitated. "Could I ask you a question?"

Her eyes held onto me as a BS deflector went up over her slender face: small nose, no makeup, like an athlete ready to run. She nodded.

"I need a place to stay in Chicago for a few weeks. Something simple, like a spare room in a house."

The shield dropped slightly. "Find someone who needs a roommate."

I recalled Billy Denster at Oberlin who thought bathing was for sissies. I definitely did not want a roommate.

"Maybe a little more private, but still cheap."

JOE KLINGLER

She tilted her nose toward the ceiling, scrunched her lips, tapped a finger against her cheek just the way actresses did in sitcoms.

“Victoria’s. That’s a bed and breakfast.” She pointed with a capped ballpoint pen. “That way.”

“Close?”

Her head bobbed. “Oh yeah. You can walk it easy.”

“Thanks, I’ll check it out. Do you have a backup suggestion?”

The smile tilted. “You could rent our spare room, but my boyfriend wouldn’t like it.”

“Narrow-minded, huh?”

She laughed and said, “One day-old brownie coming up,” before spinning away.

By the time I finished the brownie (fresh by my standards) and washed it down with brew, the white-faced clock on the wall told me it was nine o’clock and (with my old phone shattered to bits on I-80) I needed a watch.

I found a tourist’s walking map on a shelf near the cash register at the Pig, hefted the backpack intensely aware of its contents, and started wandering the city. As I walked along dodging pedestrians texting or pressing a cell phone to their ear, I thought about the vinyl records in the car. And my guitar. More reasons to find a safe place. As I turned onto Clark Street the three gold balls of the Medici family crest hovered ahead of me.

Pawnshop. Second score of the day, counting the free brownie.

I stopped out front and gazed through a window that had last been washed long ago by drunken frat guys. I didn’t much like wrist watches (too much like a hand grabbing my arm), but amid a sea of leather and metal straps a dozen pocket watches glistened. Unbelievably, one had a Chrysler winged logo on the face, and a slender silver chain. With my cash in my left pocket,

MISSING MONA

the retainer from Mona in my right, and a backpack that made me feel like a thief, I walked through the door to the jingle of bells. A short rotund gentleman appeared from a back room covered in monochrome: white shirt tucked into gray pants held by both a black belt and suspenders, overlaid by a wide slate tie. A study in shades of gray except for the suspenders — they were red with a narrow gray stripe. I thought of the Ohio State Buckeyes, but didn't ask, since this was Illinois.

His eyes followed me.

My jaw tensed as the thought that he had guessed what was in the backpack fled through my brain. I cleared my throat.

"I need a watch. You have anything with an automotive logo on it? Maybe a Chevy?"

"Ford wristwatches." He motioned toward a cabinet to my left.

I walked over and studied them. Ford was popular, as was Chevy and Toyota.

"Pocket watch?"

He considered me. My sport coat, backpack. "Not many young guys carrying those."

"Trying to get ahead of the hipsters," I said. "Jeans all come with this little pocket." I poked my index finger in the small pocket on the right side of my pants. "But no one ever uses it."

"Most kids don't know why it's there," he said, as he shuffled through the shop, apparently searching for my request. As he passed by the window display he said, "How do you feel about Chrysler?"

"Does it have a Hemi?" I asked, mimicking the TV commercials.

He answered with a low grunt of a laugh. "People don't know what to think about Chrysler. Government bailout. Mercedes buys them. Then Fiat. What a circus. That's worth two hundred easy. I'll let you have it for ninety-seven."

JOE KLINGLER

He handed me the watch. It showed 9:21. I held it to my ear: ticking. I wondered when he had last set it.

“Fifty if you guarantee it keeps time.”

He shook his head. “It’ll keep time like a Swiss Army captain. Seventy-eight, plus tax.”

This guy liked unusual numbers.

“Do I have to wind this every day?”

“Not if you carry it. Check the back. Self-winding. The motion of your hip keeps the spring tight.”

A bonus feature.

“No tax,” I said.

He nodded. I debated if this was a legitimate expense for Mona. Decided it wasn’t and pulled a hundred out of my left pocket.

My new friend held the bill up to the sunlight coming in from the window, turned it sideways, exposed it to bluish light from a small silver tube, and finally tilted it back and forth a half-dozen times. Satisfied, he gave me a twenty and two singles, and studied me as I slipped the watch in my pocket, attaching the chain to a belt loop.

I left the shop with an idea scraping the inside of my skull, the backpack feeling heavier than when I walked in, and Mom’s voice hounding me to never pick up hitchhikers because they always had secrets.