

Listen

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Zero. That's the number of substantiated USA PATRIOT Act civil liberties violations. Extensive congressional oversight found no violations. Six reports by the Justice Department's independent Inspector General, who is required to solicit and investigate any allegations of abuse, found no violations. Intense public scrutiny has yet to find a single civil liberty abuse.

- House Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner

And if you put your ear to the cup, you can hear straight through the wall,” said Ms. Jessica. She looked over her charge of kids sitting on the green and gray stained carpet. Some were looking in her general direction, if not actually at her; most weren’t. They were picking at the carpet, or bouncing their knees, or sighing through open mouths and gazing out the window. It was a beautiful spring day, even at half past four the sky was a soft pale blue, with puffs of clouds that hardly needed an active imagination to show their true shapes: flowers, dragons, pirates on the rampage. It was stuffy in the portable classroom; it had just the one window, and with eighteen first through fourth graders cooped up inside, there was the underlying smell of sweat. Jessica had the bad habit of playing with her waist-length blond hair, running her hands through its tips when she lost focus, like she was doing now.

Jessica caught herself, and focused back on the bingo board of faces looking at her. “Since we don’t actually have enough cups for everyone to try it out, and I can see that some of us aren’t exactly focused on the activity, those of you that want to go outside and play for the last thirty minutes of class can go ahead. If anyone *does* want to try the activity, come up to the front and we’ll do it together. All right, make sense?” She paused, hands folded together, surveying the kids. They’d perked up at the mention of playing outside, their wide eyes now locked on Jessica’s. “Good, now go!”

The older kids bounded out of the room, making straight for the ball cage that sat next to the basketball court. Groups of second and third graders slowly clumped together as they made their way to the backtop, some heading to sit around the school yard’s pepper tree, others making patty rings on the grass, babbling happily. As the room cleared, Jessica hoped to see at least one child stay for the activity.

She was still in school herself, working towards her teacher's credential, teaching after-school classes to get credits for her classroom hours. It was little more than glorified babysitting for the kids whose parents couldn't pick them up when school ended, but she was determined to make it meaningful. This was a chance for her to have a little classroom of her own, without worrying about a looming supervisor overseeing her. Despite her best efforts though, her attempts at engaging the kids had fallen flat. She tried to come up with activities that worked for all the kids at once, but there was a world of difference between a first and fourth grader. One was worrying about tying their shoes, the other about the beginnings of B.O. and lining up at the drinking fountain behind their crush.

The brown metal door chunked closed, marking the last of the kids having left the portable. She sighed; it looked like today's lesson was a bust too.

"Ms. Jessica? Can I try the cup?"

She looked down in surprise, hands still stroking her hair. There stood little Danny Tanlin, hands behind his back, wearing his plastic glasses and tucked-in striped t-shirt. His hair was spiked in front, with enough gel in it for the crackle of his hair to always be announcing his imminent arrival. He was just about the cutest first grader she'd ever seen.

She bent down, hands on knees. "Yes, of course you can Danny. Here you go," she said as she offered a blue plastic cup from the stack. "Now, do you remember what I showed you? Just place the open end against a wall, and your ear to the back, and you should be able to hear what people are saying on the other side!" She pointed to her ear, then the cup, with slow, deliberate motion.

Danny inspected it, turning it over, flexing it. Jessica could see his brain churning, processing how he was supposed to use it. She let him mull it over a moment more, then said, "So how about we test it out? Come with

me.” She led him to the wall, holding his little hand in hers. “Just like this,” she demonstrated with her own cup. “Now, you try,” she said.

Danny solemnly placed his cup to the wall, and his ear to the cup, in perfect mimicry of Jessica. “Like this?”

“Yes! Perfect, just like that.”

Danny’s face lit up, a smile more filled with gaps than actual teeth, melting Jessica’s student-teacher heart.

“Now, stay just like that. I’ll go outside and say some things, and you tell me if you can understand what I’m saying.”

Danny almost jumped, he nodded so hard, but he made sure not to disturb his perfectly placed cup. Jessica turned and hauled open the classroom door, then walked down the gray aluminum ramp. She paused at the bottom, scanning the blacktop and field. A game of half-court basketball was in progress, and dollops of kids were scattered about the yard. Satisfied the kids were still alive, she lined up with where Danny stood and said, “I’m Jessica and I’m talking to Danny Tanlin, student extraordinaire.” She glanced over her shoulder, a bit embarrassed to be talking to a wall. She saw a kid pick his nose and wipe it on his shorts. She stopped caring, and said, almost shouting at the wall, “This is me talking to Danny Tanlin, student extraordinaire!”. She nodded, he’ll have heard that for sure. She didn’t want to disappoint him. “You’re too cute to disappoint Danny, you’ll have time enough for that when you’re older,” she said quietly, confident he wouldn’t be able to hear her.

She came back up the portable’s ramp and opened the squealing door, the handle warm from the afternoon sun. “I heard you! I heard you!” shouted Danny. This time he did jump, waving his cup around in delight. “You said I’m an ekshtroordin-air! What’s that?”

“It means you’re very special,” Jessica said, leaning down placing her hands between her knees. “Good job, wasn't that fun? Did you hear what else I said?”

“Yea! You said I was cute, and I have lots of time.”

Jessica stood up straight, hands clasped together. “You heard that? How?”

“I did like you said, I did this,” and Danny demonstrated his perfect listening technique, dramatically placing his cup against the wall, while still looking at Jessica.

Jessica was worried. It was an innocent enough comment, but she was always scared how parents might misinterpret things. Especially between a little boy and a young teacher. A young teacher who was alone in a classroom with him. She closed her eyes and clenched her jaw. Great job, she’d set herself up for a criminal investigation, and she hadn’t even hit fifty hours of classroom-time yet.

She sighed, and took a step back from Danny. “Now Danny, please don’t repeat what I said to the other kids, I shouldn’t have said what I did.” She paused, trying to come up with an explanation. “I don’t want them to feel jealous. Does that make sense?”

Danny looked down, then back up at her. “You mean, you didn’t want me to hear what you said?”

“I shouldn’t have said it, yes.”

“I heard what you shouldn’t have said? And you didn’t want me to?”

“Please, just don’t say anything to anyone else, Ok? It can be just our secret.”

Danny’s grin had returned to his face. But this time Jessica didn’t like it, she took a half-step back. It was a knowing grin, a smile of self-congratulation.

“Don’t worry Ms. Jessica, I won’t tell what you did.”

Danny Tanlin swung his van around the corner, into the cul de sac. Tan, two story houses flanked him as he drove to the end, parking along the curved curb. There was plenty of street parking; the lots were big, and so were the garages. Most fit two cars, some even had a third spot in the driveway. The occasional pine tree shaded the quiet street, not that it did much good. Danny turned the car off, letting the AC die away. It was a hot, cloying, summer day; he'd had the AC blasting on his hands for the past half hour as he drove out to the Lower Pines, and they were getting numb. He clenched and reopened them a few times, while he looked through his windows at the surrounding houses.

Danny was based in Dowden county, which was a mashup of small-street suburbias. The majority of his calls kept him in the town: neighborhoods off of four-lane streets, gated communities, single-unit luxury apartment buildings overlooking shopping malls. But large swathes of Dowden county were still wilderness; drive to the end of Felton street and it turned into Canyon Road, which made its way through Santa Maria country to the county reservoir, which collected runoff from the ring of mountains that ran the perimeter of Dowden. It'd been restored a few years ago, and the naturally occurring graffiti had only just begun to grow back.

Danny relished service calls out in the country, it was like having President's day off, unexpected, and all the more sweet for it. He liked its silence, its stillness. He'd roll his windows down and cruise the canyon road at 40 mph in the slow lane, letting the occasional commuter pass him by. No music, no talk radio, he'd even turn his dispatch comms off; he was unimportant enough to get away with it.

Lower Pines was a well-to-do enclave just off the main canyon road. Not strictly wealthy, you could still find Hondas and Volkswagens, but more often than not you'd find Mercedes and Range Rovers parked in

driveways, with the occasional college Subaru splattered with mud. Danny felt the cabin of his van begin to warm as he flipped open his laptop. There was something about sitting in a warm car that made him relax, it was like being in a brick kiln that'd just been fired, like being swaddled in blankets fresh from the dryer. He'd stay just long enough until it became uncomfortable.

He logged in past his laptop's welcome screen and queued the Ashton house up: 288 Scruboak Way. This was their installation visit, they had signed up for Leopold Security Systems last week after a successful consultation with the sales team. They'd certainly earned their commission: motion sensors, door and window alarms, break-glass alerts, all paired with dynamic video recording, and their premium thirty-day data retention policy. Danny glanced around the neighborhood. Many of the houses displayed signs warning they were protected by various home security systems; Critical Monitoring, Eagle Alerts, GTC Solutions. He was familiar with each of them, it was part of his field training to be able to speak disparagingly about competitors. They all, including Leopold, essentially offered the same service; some of them even contracted out to the same response center. The differences between them came down to marketing. Some emphasized intruder detection accuracy, others touted their data platform, while still others made a machismo appeal with tough logos and harsh slogans. Leopold Security Systems attracted attention in a rather unusual way. It had the highest pricing tiers available on the market, by far. It advertised itself through exclusivity. If you could afford Leopold's entry level tier, you could also afford its highest, and most customers chose to do just that.

Danny could feel the heat beginning to rise from his collar, his hands were clammy as he punched the keys on his laptop. He stretched his shoulders, then popped his door open and swung around to the back of his

van, opening the back. Inside were racks of equipment, everything he'd need to set the Ashtons up with state of the art security, and leave them with the peace of mind that they were totally and wholly safe, their money well spent.

He grabbed his toolbag and locked the van, then made his way to the Ashtons' front door. Their walkway had a few broad, shallow, brick-lined steps, which were flanked by mini palm trees and lavenders. The entryway itself was shaded by the roof's overhang, and Danny sidled into the shade as he rang the doorbell, clipboard in hand. He turned, looking out over the street as he waited. There were few things as quietly familiar as an empty street at midday. Parked cars, lamp posts, closed doors. The distant hum of an unseen lawn mower, the rush of cars from a nearby road. Swap the two-story houses and wide driveways for cramped housing and Toyotas parked bumper to bumper; the sound would be the same. He turned and rang again. From inside he heard a door close and the creak of someone walking down carpeted stairs, then a frail woman with a tight face and wispy hair swung open the front door.

She greeted him first with a look of suspicion, then, once she saw Leopold's scripted logo and his nametag, "Daniel T.", her face lost its natural pinch, and affected a welcoming smile.

"Hello," she said in a low pitched voice, drawing the word out, "I presume you're from the security company?"

Danny nodded and raised his clipboard, half cocked.

"Yes ma'am, Daniel, from Leopold Security. How're you doing today? Staying cool I hope."

She tittered, then said, "Oh fine, fine. My husband told me someone would be coming by the house today, I apologize if I made you wait at the door, I seem to have forgotten to record your visit on my planner."

“Not a problem ma’am, I hardly waited at all,” Danny grinned his winning smile, one of the tools he used to maintain his five-star customer experience rating. He’d have to be careful with this one, he thought. She was the kind of person to put on a warm exterior, but would be watching over his shoulder as he worked, making sure he didn’t pocket any valuables. Not that he would, Danny had never been tempted to steal on the job. He knew others that did; a loose couple of bills behind the couch, cufflinks lost under dusty pictures, he even knew a guy that’d taken a whole set of cobwebbed golf clubs from some retired empty nesters’ garage. Nothing major, but enough to feel a bit of the rush, stealing from the very people that were paying for their protection. Danny could see the appeal, but, no, forgotten trinkets and retiree schlock wasn’t what he was after.

“I’ve got everything I need out in my van, but I’ll need to do a bit of an inspection, just to make sure I know where everything’s gonna go, if that’s alright by you.”

“Oh sure, sure,” Mrs. Ashton said, waving her hand, “Terribly fine, go ahead, I don’t have anything else going on today, I’ve already finished my outings.” She stepped back and opened the door wider. Danny started in, then stopped as she tutted and half-raised a hand, “I’m sorry, I suppose I’m a bit of an old lady, but you wouldn’t mind wiping your feet now would you? The cleaners just finished, and they don’t come again until next week.”

“Oh, yea, of course,” Danny said, wiping his perfectly clean boots on the welcome mat outside: “All are welcome here.”

He stepped onto the entry way’s hardwood floor, eyes adjusting to the dim interior. The blinds were drawn, he could feel a gust of cool air from the air conditioner blowing overhead, down from the exposed beams of the second story roof. He was standing in a beige living room, with soft off-white carpet, eggshell throw blankets, and a coffee-creamer couch.

He raised his clipboard and said, “I’ve got a laundry list of things to check, if you don’t mind I’ll start in on them. If I have any questions, or if I get lost, can I give you a shout?”

The woman had closed the door behind him, and was turning to face him. “Sure, sure, you do what you have to do, I understand, I used to work for the city, I was an office safety inspector, I know what it means to have a checklist.” She smiled her slightly too large teeth and made shooing motions, “Just let me know if you need anything, anything at all, I’ll be down here in the kitchen. I’m making lemon bars, the real kind, tart, not like those sickly sweet candy bars you get at the stores. Mine’ll make your face pucker up, like they should.” She turned and strolled down the hall, talking all the while, towards what Danny could see was the kitchen.

“Yes ma’am, I’ll yell when I need help,” he said after her, then looked down at his clipboard. It really would be an hours-long job, an iron-dome project. No less than four motion sensors placed around entrances to the house and backyard, which all required wiring to external power supplies. Two video captured devices, window and door sensors, alarm-code keypad, even a garage door monkey-patch, all processed, backed up, and uploaded via a local compute node. He eyeballed the vacuumed floor and Pine-Sol’d tables. There was a massive disconnect between what he saw and the security he was installing. Some of the places he’d been called out to warranted the severe security he’d installed; this was not one of them. At least not at first glance. Danny bit his lower lip, holding the clipboard up to cover his face. Yes, he thought, either these people were morons and just wanted to spend money, or there was something going on here. He had learned not to assume the stupidity of others; let them show it to you first. Yes, he decided he was going to install one more piece of equipment for the Ashtons’, free of charge.

He made his inspection quickly, thoroughly, professionally. He moved bookcases and dressers out of the way, he measured and penciled marks on the ceiling and walls where he'd need to install cable grommets. He used Leopold's patented indoor-outdoor topography-reconciler, a white-labeled version of the same app the competitors used, to place the motion sensors and video cameras.

An hour later, and he was coming towards the end of the installation. He checked over his shoulder, to make sure Mrs. Ashton hadn't found another excuse to peer at him from the doorway. She hadn't, he could hear her clanking dishes in the sink downstairs. He was installing a motion sensor in the master bedroom, overlooking the California king. Danny popped the plastic covering open and slotted in a rectangular device, the shape of a 9-volt battery. This was his own little addition to the Ashton's iron-dome, an audio recorder. Now, strictly speaking, the Ashtons hadn't asked for it, but they didn't seem like the kind of people that would mind too much, considering they had every square-inch of their house already being piped into Leopold's data centers. Danny stuck the tip of his tongue between his teeth and grinned. Well, he hoped they minded a little bit, after all, that was part of the fun.

He snapped the plastic shell closed and clambered up his half-ladder, then used his Dewalt cordless to drill it into place. That was the last of it.

He went downstairs, then opened the door and rested the ladder against the wall, outside. He'd learned his lesson earlier about laying "trade tools" down inside. He stood in the entryway and ran the final diagnostic; it ran successfully with a big green checkmark.

Mrs. Ashton came out from the kitchen, wearing yellow rubber gloves with soap foam on them, looking at him expectantly. "Okay ma'am," he said, "I've finished, everything's set up and the diagnostics look good."

“Oh wonderful, wonderful,” she said, gently waving her hands as she spoke, “Now, don’t tell me that I’ll have to learn how to use it all?”

“No ma’am, I can see that your husband’s scheduled a training session next Monday, someone’ll come out and walk him through how it all works. It’s really not too complicated, it just about runs itself.”

Mrs. Ashton had sidled towards the door and was hovering about the entry way, making the universal signal for “Please leave, you’ve been in my house way too long.”

“You’ve been absolutely marvelous, just marvelous,” she said. “I’ll be sure to let your superiors know. Thank you again for coming out here.”

“Of course, my pleasure, have a good day now,” said Danny, as he stepped outside and hoisted his half-ladder.

“Bye bye now, bye bye,” he heard as he walked down the steps, and the door closed behind him.

Danny could picture Mrs. Ashton now, a look of relief on her face as she had the house back to herself, alone. Danny grinned.

It was closing in on five o’clock, quitting time, if Danny faddled around on the drive back to the van depot, where he’d check his van back into the company fleet. He cruised down the canyon road, windows down, elbow perched outside. Langston and the Rocks banged away in the background about some brother of theirs doing time without parole. Danny was relaxed, thinking warm thoughts about getting back home and setting up the Ashtons’ audio channel, nothing but the hits all night every night, thank you, thank you. He could hear Mrs. Ashton’s low voice, her stilted way of speaking. He could get some good use out of that one, he thought.

Canyon came to a close and spat him back out onto Felton, at a red, thank God. He glanced at the time. It’d all work out, he’d be clocking out close enough to 5 that no one would say anything about leaving early. Back

in the city, he rolled his windows up and cranked the AC, letting it drone over wailing Langston. The light changed and he pulled away; he had just two turns to take before he was pulling into the depot, into his assigned spot, lucky number six.

He dropped the keys off in the lockbox then headed for the locker room. He changed and started out to his Civic, then decided to swing around and make a pit-stop at the front desk for a Hershey's Kiss. Justine wouldn't mind, and God knows she could use the help. This was the third year running she'd told him about her New-Year's-New-Me promise to join the local 24 hour fitness. He'd nodded and wished her good luck, pocketing the Lemonheads she'd had out at the time

She was packing her purse when he came around, the sun coming in muted and low through the tinted lobby doors. "Too late to grab a couple for the road?" he said, idling near the green ceramic bowl on the counter.

Justine gave out a high pitched, "Eep!" and flinched in her chair, grabbing her purse to her chest.

She looked up and gave a sigh of exasperation, "Danny! I told you! You're too quiet, you've gotta stop scaring me!"

"Me!" Danny said, hands raised, "I'm not doing anything, I'm just walking! You've gotta listen better, there's a world going on around you you know."

Justine huffed, then struggled up out of her chair. Danny pocketed a few Kisses, then unwrapped one and popped it into his mouth. "Thanks for the kiss Justine," he said, and gave her a playful smile. She sighed through her nose and looked up to the ceiling, but let a smile creep across her face. "You know, you're about the hundredth person to say that to me today, and one of the last I want to hear it from."

She held out her hand, he dropped the balled up wrapper into it, and she tossed it into the lobby's mini-trashcan. "Okay, out you go, out out out,"

she said, holding the door open. “I’ve got places to be, kids to feed, a husband to pick up. Not like you Mr. Free-wheeler.”

They stepped out, Justine locking the door behind them. For all of Leopold’s high-tech offerings, they still locked the offices with a plain old Master. Andy turned to Justine as they walked through the employee parking lot, “Whadya mean free-wheeler! I’ve been with Shawna for two years now; it seems to me you’re jealous of our childfree, glamorous lifestyle.”

Justine had reached her mini-van and was about to plop in, one leg already inside. “You say that now, but watch out. A life of fun can turn into the pits pretty quick, if there’s no substance to it. And you can tell Shawna I said that.”

Danny leaned against his Civic, elbows on the roof, “Night Justine.”

“Night Danny, see you tomorrow,” Justine said, and shut her door. Danny got in his own car and turned it over. He reached for his phone, then stopped, hand hovering over his pocket. Not yet, save it, save it, he told himself. Eat your greens first, then you can have dessert. He shifted into reverse, idled at the security gate as it rattled open, then made a left, audio static playing at the edges of his hearing.

Shawna heard Danny pull up outside their apartment, as the quietly humming engine idled, then cut off. She had the sliding door open, and an evening breeze was wafting in the fresh scent of lilies and water. The apartment complex had artificial streams running throughout it, along walkways and under foot bridges. Shawna loved the sound of the gurgling water; she kept the windows and doors open as much as possible when she was home. She worked for a local tech firm, managing projects and deadlines, setting expectations and owning outcomes. The only outcome she really wanted to own was relaxing on her very own leather couch, a

Danielle Steel romance in hand and wine glass beside her. If she had to turn a fan on in the summertime to have a little natural ambiance while she did that, she didn't mind.

She was just coming out of the kitchen, salad in hand when Danny came in. They had a loft apartment, bedroom and bathroom upstairs, living room and kitchen downstairs, with the entryway on a landing between the two. The ceiling had exposed beams and the bedroom overlooked the living room; she liked to joke they lived in a one room apartment.

"Hey," she said over her shoulder, setting her food down. Danny came down the creaking stairs and kissed her on the cheek, his lips warm and sticky. "Hey yourself, had a good day?" he said, pausing behind her.

"It was alright, nothing crazy. Got a couple new things dropped on me, but it's fine. You?"

Danny bent down and untied his shoes, speaking at the ground as he replied, "Pretty good, I got to go out to Lower Pines at the end of the day, that's always fun."

He stood and slung his shoes up the stairs to the landing. "I already ate at work, I'm going to do some listening."

"Okay, have fun," said Shawna.

Danny pulled off his work polo over, exposing his white undershirt as he trotted up the stairs and out of sight. They almost never ate together after work. They could if they wanted to, but it didn't seem very important. They had date nights, went out with friends, and late night talks in bed while the crickets chirped and possums roamed; who cared if they also shared a plate of spaghetti at 6:30pm every night? *My mom does, that's who*, she thought. Her mom didn't approve of Shawna playing house with Danny. And playing house badly, she'd added, when she found out they didn't eat together. Why live with a man if you weren't serious about

getting married? Mrs. Linwood thought Danny was getting a free ride, while Shawna got the short end of the stick.

She flicked the circulating fan on, then sunk into the worn leather cushions, feet kicked up resting on the coffee table. She could hear Danny rustling around upstairs. He was always listening to something, podcasts, books, comedy specials; it could be anything. When they drove in his car, she could see the history of what he'd last listened to on YouTube. The most ridiculous thing she'd seen was a podcast on the making of the Rugrats, Danny hadn't even watched TV growing up! But that didn't seem to matter, Danny would listen to anything, just as long as he could be alone when he did. She didn't love it, but it sure beat smoking, or clipping toenails before sex, both of which she'd discovered were major turnoffs from past relationships.

She couldn't hear him anymore, which meant that he'd settled down into his listening nest on the bed. He had a special pillow shaped like a back rest that he'd lean against, he'd pull his massive headphones on, hold his water bottle in his hands, and close his eyes. He'd lay like that for a couple hours at a time, not moving, not speaking. Sometimes she'd quietly watch him, out of curiosity. He'd shift around, but otherwise was motionless. Except once, when she quietly walked past him to use the bathroom, and she'd seen him with nostrils flared, breathing quick, shallow breaths. She'd paused, watching him for a minute before using the bathroom. When she came out, his breathing was normal again.

She flipped her paperback open and began eating her salad, thoughts of Danny slipping from her mind as she read the first few lines.

Danny's thoughts were sinking into a warm darkness as he settled into his nest of blankets and pillows on the bed. They circled in irregular patterns, but always nosed down deeper, deeper, until they settled on the

brick lined floor of his inner mind. He breathed in through his nose, out through his mouth. He could feel his heart beat slowing. He focused on his toes, feeling the blood pulsing in their tips. He envisioned an ever present weight lifting off of them, then from his feet, his legs, and the rest of his body; up, up, and out. Warmth spread through him as he mentally drained his attachment to the external world away. This was one of his habits, he tried to do it before tuning into one of his special broadcasts, he found it elevated the experience. He was going to be the only audience member, so dammit, he'd be a great one. Open, attentive, ready to receive whatever morsels came his way, no matter how insignificant.

He'd already begun playing whatever longform video was first up in his recommended feed, muted, in the background. Then he queued up tonight's main course, the newly minted Ashton audio channel. Danny's recording devices streamed audio to his own server, which recorded and separated them into individual audio streams he could tune into. He had access to the past week of audio before it automatically got deleted, unless Danny found something particularly mouth watering, and manually backed it up.

Danny had been an audiophile his whole life; well, since first grade at least. But not an audiophile that needed insulated cables running from a high-grade turntable to tower speakers and a perfectly placed woofer. No, Danny couldn't care less about the *quality* of what he listened to, he cared about its *source*. Some kids got off looking at porn, or buying half-grade weed from gangly high school juniors, but that didn't do it for Danny; someone *wanted* you to watch that porn or buy that joint. Danny went after the more intimate slices of life, the parts that couldn't be sold or packaged. He wanted what people thought when they were alone, or what private words they said to others. Give 'em to me bloody and still kicking.

Throughout his years of listening, Danny had refined his palette. He'd learned to take pleasure in the boring, the mundane; not just the brash crescendos of people's private lives. He could enjoy the pensive scratches of pencil on paper as a teacher graded schoolwork, a knife chopping chicken for the family dinner, or a child's breathing as they lay sleeping. He'd grown past the need to look for couples' fights, hushed phone calls, moans of pleasure.

On an evening with a new channel to tune into for the first time, Danny wanted to do it right. Mentally, he expected the dull, monotonous ticking of the bedroom clock, the shift of curtains, the drone of the Ashtons' AC. But his heart burst with possibilities. Would he hear their nightly routine, Mrs. Ashton putting on face cream and lotion? Mr. Ashton grunting as he rolled into bed and tapped away at his laptop, reading up on the latest news? Maybe they'd turn out the light and talk about their son, how he's wasting his life with that tramp that he's seeing. Or maybe, whispered one of the dark, warm, stone-dry crevices in Danny's heart, they'd lay in bed and whisper to each other, barely loud enough for Danny to hear, whisper their worries, their love, their fears to each other. Wouldn't that be something, yes-ma'am, no-ma'am, sign-right-here-ma'am.

He thumbed his phone and hit play, his noise-cancelling headphones dropping him into a pit of silence. And in that pit, he could hear a hum, a drone of air. The Ashtons' AC was running, circulating throughout the white toned house. He listened, letting the sound of the AC fill the pit, dance around in it, occupy his thoughts while he waited for more, like a spider content to wait in the center of the web, knowing dinner would come soon enough. He didn't have to wait long. Far off he could hear the sound of the front door slam, then the jingle of keys being dropped into a wooden bowl. Footsteps creaking on the carpeted stairs, then heavy footsteps in the bedroom. This wasn't Mrs. Ashton, oh no, this was papa bear, Mr. Ashton

himself. Mr. Ashton cleared his throat with a wet harumph, then grunted as he sat on the bed. Danny could hear the whip of a tie being pulled off, then a belt being unbuckled and tossed on the ground. He heard khakis being pulled off, then a few stumbling steps. Danny felt a beam of light glow in his dark place, a soft incandescent bulb quickly flicked on then back off again. Mr. Ashton seems to have lost his balance taking his pants off.

The scene spread out before him, in his mind's eye. One dim bulb illuminating the bedroom, casting warm shadows on Mr. Ashton as he rummaged around in his dresser. Suit and tie exchanged for a rumpled, striped polo shirt, and a pair of cargos. Yes, that fit, Danny thought. He heard Mr. Ashton walk out of the room and down the creaking stairs, then the faint sound of silverware rattling. Danny felt a slight moment of disappointment as he recognized he wouldn't be witnessing anything exotic tonight. But the act of sharing Mr. Ashton's evening snack, practically standing there in the kitchen with him, sustained his attention. He could hear the scrape of a fork, the opening and closing of the refrigerator, and once more let his imagination set the stage. Mr. Ashton under fluorescent lights, leaning against the tile counter, holding a plate in one hand and fork in the other, haybailing leftovers from the fridge. Or maybe, he was scarfing down one of Mrs. Ashton's lemonbars. Oh yes, Danny, shifted on the bed, maybe one of those tart, like they should be, lemonbars.

There was a clatter of dishes, then the sound of Mr. Ashton coming back up the stairs, into the bedroom. A woomph as Mr. Ashton relaxed on the bed, and the flicker of newscasters voices filled the room. Danny tuned it out, focusing on what he could hear from Mr. Ashton, he could catch the local news on his own time. There were some gentle sounds of shifting as Mr. Ashton got comfortable, then silence from the bed. Mr. Ashton had settled in for the evening it seems, content to turn-on, tune-in, and drop-out. Danny was humming with contentment, coming along for the ride. He

pictured Mr. Ashton propped up on double-pillows, one hand resting on his potbelly, the other languidly gripping the remote resting on the bed. Socks off, toes flicking against each other idly.

Despite his efforts, Danny did catch a few words of the news broadcast, “-olice are still looking for the group behind Sunday’s bombing, none yet have claimed responsibility.” He registered an instant of annoyance, a cold draft in his otherwise comfortable pit. There had been an explosion at the local mercado, injuring three people, one of which was in critical, but stable condition. Danny refocused, and tuned the TV out. Mr. Ashton was breathing heavier now, big breaths of air through his nose. Was he dozing off? “Goddamn morons, hmph” Mr. Ashton muttered.

His cell rang, the default ring tone. It rang again before Mr. Ashton picked it up, “I’ll call you back,” he said, without pausing to listen to the caller. There was the rustle of pillows, then a drawer being opened and shut. A pause. Danny waited in anticipation.

“I’m here, go,” said Mr. Ashton, no longer dozing. “Yes, it’s still on.” A pause. Danny could barely hear the phone’s speaker, it was garbled and undiscernible. “Yes, the big one.” Danny heard the speaker reply, then nothing more. A drawer opening and closing again, then Mr. Ashton laying down on the bed. Danny’s pit was glowing now, the switches had been flipped and the lights were on. It was moments like this that Danny craved. Danny didn’t know what the conversation meant, he didn’t know who Mr. Ashton was talking to, but that wasn’t the point. The point was that *Mr. Ashton* didn’t know Danny was wondering about those questions. Danny knew that Mr. Ashton had taken the call, had spoken to someone, had said those words. And Mr. Ashton was none-the-wiser. He was sitting there, perfectly confident in the privacy of those words. Only he and the caller knew. And Danny.

Danny came up for air, opening his eyes. The evening had begun in earnest, he could see the orange and purple sky through the window over the bed. The apartment was cooler now, and the scent of jasmine was strong on the breeze that came in through the open sliding glass doors. He closed Mr. Ashton's channel and took his headphones off, scooting over the bed until he sat with his feet on the ground, hands on his knees. He took a moment to collect himself, savor the last bit of feeling that was draining from him. He was climbing up out of his pit, leaving its warm, glowing confines, shedding its amniotic safety; returning to his bed, returning to the low hum of the distant highway, the TV chatter rising up from the living room. He stood and stretched, then walked downstairs.

Shawna had put her book down and was watching a nature documentary. A close up of a spider engulfed the screen. He stopped and hovered over her, next to the couch. It was nighttime in the documentary, the spider's bulbous body lay perfectly still in the center of its magnificent web. The web was huge, many feet across, quietly undulating as it wavered in the breeze. Then suddenly it rippled, and the camera cut to a beetle that had been caught. It writhed against the web, but couldn't escape. Slowly, cautiously, the spider began to approach the beetle. It kept its distance, waiting until the beetle stopped thrashing. Then, the spider closed in and wrapped the beetle in webbing, covering it until it was totally encased, the beetle no longer visible.

Shawna looked up at Danny, "Isn't that cool?"

"Yea, pretty neat. I've always liked spiders, in documentaries at least."

"Are you all done up there?"

Danny nodded, "Yea, I finished."

"Good, then how about sitting down and hanging out with me for a while," said Shawna, eyebrow raised.

Danny smiled and squeezed her shoulder, “Yea, I think I could manage that.”

They got up at half past 7, as usual. Shawna needed a few minutes to start her engines, as Danny liked to say, before getting up. Danny kissed her on the forehead then rolled out of bed and into the bathroom, Shawna heard the hiss of the shower. She lay staring at the wall, blinking to clear the blariness from her eyes. As they cleared, she focused on Danny’s cell phone, laying on the bedside table.

Shawna wasn’t stupid, but she was trusting. Danny must be doing something more than listening to podcasts and shows when he gets home from work. Those were background activities, something you do while on a walk, or driving. She’d asked Danny about it a few times when they first started dating; was he really content to sit for hours, just listening? He was, he said, it’d been a habit of his growing up. Lots of people watch tv or read, why couldn’t he listen?

Shawna still didn’t buy it, but she didn’t want to press. She didn’t have any reason to doubt him, just a feeling that something wasn’t totally square. Only once did she give in and snoop through his cell phone. She had the passcode, Danny had told her once when he was driving and she was navigating. He would leave it out around the apartment, signalling he had nothing to hide, which made Shawna feel all the worse when she picked it up and scrolled through it anyway. She hadn’t found anything. His YouTube and Spotify history lined up, she didn’t find any suspicious apps, just a few she didn’t understand, work related she assumed.

Shawna looked at the phone, once again feeling the urge to grab it, check it one more time; but she resisted. She rolled over, pulling the covers up tight around her body.

Danny had seen the terrorist attack without realizing what it was. There'd been a plume of black smoke in the sky, rising from the direction of downtown. He was on a call, between customers, and had assumed there'd been a fire. The oldies station was playing "Disco Inferno", and he'd smirked at the irony. He watched the smoke as he drove, but it slipped from his mind as he turned the corner and it slid out of view.

It was Justine, good old Justine, that had told him about the attack. He'd finished work for the day, and was making a pit stop at the front counter for a handful of chocolate kisses. As he came in he made a big show of taking big, loud steps. Justine glanced up in amusement.

"Yes, very funny Danny, I heard you coming, thank you very much," she said.

"I just didn't want to scare you again, I know how silent I can be, I've been told so by certain people."

He reached into the bowl and grabbed a few kisses, and began unwrapping one. Justine scrunched her face and gave Danny a sarcastic smile. She let it drop, then said, "Oh, I was gonna ask, did you see any of the attack at all? I know you were in that area today."

"What attack?," said Danny, chewing on the chocolate.

"You didn't hear? There was a terrorist attack! A real life true-blue terrorist attack at the mosque downtown, you know, the new one that opened last year?"

"Holy shit, what do you mean, what happened?"

"There was some kind of bomb, it exploded and killed some people I think. They're saying it's definitely a terrorist attack, it can't be anything else."

"Jesus, in Dowden? Why the fuck is there a bombing in Dowden?"

“I mean, there was the one a couple weeks ago at that Mexican market, it wasn’t as big, but they’re saying now that the two are probably related, that the same group did both,” said Justine.

Danny paused, “You know, I think I did see it, I was driving over on Hefton, and saw smoke in the air. I thought it was a fire, that’s all.”

“Yea,” said Justine, looking at her phone, “At the Islamic Center of Dowden it says, four dead, five more injured. It went off during a fundraiser for their youth groups. Looks like a fair or something, it has some Arab name I can’t pronounce.”

“Damn,” Danny, leaned on the counter, looking down.

Justine nodded, “Yeah.” They looked at each other for a moment, nothing more to say, sharing looks of resignation. “Guess I’ll take off then,” said Danny. Justine nodded, “Stay safe.”

Danny held up a parting hand, then left through the lobby doors and got in his car. Some of Justine’s words stuck in his head, the attack at the market “wasn’t as big” as this one. That seemed familiar to Danny, but he wasn’t sure why.

He pulled up to the security gate, thinking while it ratcheted open. He made his usual left turn, and started home. On the way he saw a new billboard, advertising the re-opening of Mercado Alvarez. That also struck Danny, “mercado” had a ring to it. Then it came together, and Danny had it. Jesus, did he have it? His stomach felt leaden, his head was dizzy. When listening to Mr. Ashton last night, the TV had mentioned the mercado bombing. Mr. Ashton had reacted to it, Danny had assumed he was upset that the police didn’t have any leads. Then the phone call, Mr. Ashton saying to go ahead, and use the “big one” this time. Then today’s bombing.

Danny had to pull over into a strip mall, his vision was fuzzy and he was having trouble thinking. He parked and gripped the steering wheel, looking straight ahead. On the Ashtons’ channel he’d heard the planning of

a terrorist attack. He'd heard the words that had killed four people, injured more. He felt bile start to build in his throat, but fought it down. He breathed in and out, in and out, quickly at first, then slower. He loosened his grip on the steering wheel, he felt blood come back to his brain, his thinking cleared. He leaned back in his seat, calm again. Then, deep down, inside himself, he felt a breath of warmth begin to build, just a hint. It twisted and circled, grew stronger, it turned into a current, a breeze. And with it came the crackling and popping of incandescent bulbs flickering on. Danny bit his lower lip. He'd heard the words that planned and created a goddamn terrorist attack. An awful, horrible thing, and he'd been a fly on the wall. No one knew, no one knew except him. The cops were fumbling around in the dark. Mr. Ashton thought he was secure and secret. But Danny had seen it all. *Mr Ashton?* Danny thought, *Maybe I will tell what you did, we'll see.*

Danny was calm the rest of the drive home, but as he parked outside his apartment, he could feel his excitement mounting. His hands tingled as he jingled his keys, walking through the greenery of the apartment complex to his stoop. He had to steady his shaking hands as he unlocked his door. Shawna's shoes were missing from the shoe rack, and he hadn't seen her car in the parking lot. She must be staying late at work. She sometimes did that, especially when starting new projects. He kicked his own shoes off and bounded up to the bedroom. He pulled open his laptop, and opened up the Ashtons' audio recordings. He made sure to back up last night's conversation, then opened the audio visualizer. He had a bit more than twenty hours of audio to skim through. He could see the recordings' wave forms, and could pick the segments that had more activity than others. Looking at the activity, there weren't too many obvious spots for him to start listening to. He paused, then opened his web browser and searched the

news for today's attack. He clicked the first link, looking for when the attack had happened. Reports suggest around 1:45pm. He opened the Ashtons' audio activity again, looking for activity around that time. Danny bit the inside of his mouth; right at 1:50pm there was a sharp spike in activity.

Danny glanced around, then checked his cell phone for Shawna's location. Yep, still at work. If Shawna had come in while he was listening, he didn't think he'd be able to contain himself, he'd give himself away, dead certain.

He slipped on his headphones, positioned his mouse, closed his eyes, hesitated, then clicked play.

Danny could hear soft footfalls, quiet at first, then growing louder; then quiet again. A pause, more quiet footsteps, then louder. Someone was pacing up and down the hallway outside the bedroom door. A cell phone rang. It was the same default ringtone Danny had heard last night, Mr. Ashton's. He cut it off after the first ring, but didn't say anything. Danny heard the opening and closing of a drawer, then a moment of silence. He heard the sound of a ringtone being played through a cell phone speaker, then someone on the other end picked up. They said something Danny couldn't understand, and Mr. Ashton replied, "Good, this is strength, the tide is turning. Stay ready." The sound of the drawer again, then footsteps out of the bedroom, and the slam of the front door.

Danny sat still, letting the wash of static fill his head as he processed what he just heard. He had no doubt now. Mr. Ashton was involved with this somehow, he knew about the attacks, and maybe was even ordering them. And it sounded like there were more to come. Danny opened his eyes and scanned for any more activity on the Ashton feed. None yet, seems like he beat the Ashtons home today. He closed his laptop and sat cross legged on the bed, head in his hands.

He knew he should call this in, make a report to the police or FBI or whoever. It could be anonymous, to keep his own little listening habits from being discovered, though he wasn't sure how anonymous the tip line would really be. But, when he thought about turning Mr. Ashton in, he hesitated. After years of lowering himself into his inner pit, tuning out the outside world and focusing on his own inner one, Danny knew himself well. He could tease out what he really wanted, regardless of what he thought he *should* want. He'd had his moral reflections on his listening habits in the past, and had come to grips with what he did. He knew it wasn't totally innocent, but goddammit, it was part of who he was. To stop listening would be like cutting off an old friend simply because they might be a bad influence. Sure, it could be the most pragmatic choice, but Danny only had one life, and he didn't want to live a dull one.

But this was different. He had the chance now to save lives, to catch a madman, help families get justice. That definitely wasn't dull, it was pretty heroic actually. If he didn't turn Mr. Ashton in, could he live with himself if there were more bombings? If more people died? Danny didn't think so. And besides, once he did make a tip on Mr. Ashton, he'd still be able to listen to the channel for a while, at least until Mr. Ashton was arrested. So it wouldn't be totally over.

Danny nodded, beginning to convince himself. He searched online for the police tip line. A few clicks later and he was presented with a text box, prompted, "Description: (Including... Who, What, When, Where and How Do You Know)".

Danny started typing, filling out the details that he could, excluding the "how do you know" part entirely. As he typed, he stayed aware of his internal listening space, waiting for a flutter of warm air, or a gentle glow of light. Neither occurred. He finished his tip, mouse hovering over the submit

button. But there was no rush, no feeling of mastery or delight in holding secret knowledge.

Danny knew what he wanted. He felt disgusted with himself, shamed by his voyeuristic urge for the first time in many years. But there was no denying the truth to himself. Danny wanted to be there when the next bomb went off. He wanted to see the destruction, see the mayhem and death it caused. He wanted to stand there, waiting, knowing it was about to happen, anticipating the moment as it crept closer, looking at the unaware people in the crowd. He'd watch the lady with two small dogs, the man with backwards hat and shades hung upside down, the woman in the electric scooter with American flags hanging off the back. He'd see them, knowing some of them would soon be dead, blasted across the street, park, shopping mall. It didn't matter where, so long as he was there.

He closed the tip page, closed his laptop. He stood up, tensed his body, then let it release. He realized he was sweating, he looked in the mirror, he had pit stains spreading out to his chest and down his sides. He looked himself in the eyes, blinking slowly. Yes, he knew what he wanted, and he'd get it. He'd make sure of it. Wasn't that what you were supposed to do? Look out for yourself, a little bit of self-care? He walked into the bathroom and closed the door. The hiss of the shower turning on filled the bedroom.

Shawna lowered the volume of the TV. Danny was up in the bedroom, listening, again. It was closing in on 10pm, usually when they started getting ready for bed. Usually. Over the past week Danny had taken to staying up later and later, slipping into bed after Shawna had already fallen asleep. Last night she'd woken up to him slipping under the covers. When he put his face near hers, she could smell sweat, and the day's unwashed grime. He hadn't washed his face, or, she sniffed, brushed his

teeth. She'd turned over, away from him, and on the nightstand clock saw it was 3am.

With the lowered TV volume she strained her ears, trying to hear anything out of the ordinary coming from the bedroom. But no, nothing. As far as she knew, Danny was listening, just listening, he said, laying on the bed in his "nest". She'd started to hate that word, "nest". Yes, it *was* like a nest now, somewhere an animal might live. He spent so much time there that she'd started changing the bed sheets almost daily. Otherwise they felt dirty, and warm, much too warm she thought sometimes. Danny didn't notice, he didn't notice much of anything. He'd begun getting up early in the morning, hours earlier than he had to for work. Sometimes he'd shower, sometimes he didn't. But he always, always listened. He'd take his phone and lay out on the couch with earbuds, eyes closed. Shawna had peered over the loft's halfwall down into the living room, a few times now.

She'd confronted him, told him point blank he'd changed, something was up with him. He'd denied it, said he'd just found something he really liked listening to. With the recent terrorist attacks, he said it'd grabbed his interest, and he'd been listening to podcasts about terrorism, the origins of it, its history, its impact, everything. That didn't do much to comfort Shawna. Even if it was true, she didn't want Danny going down that rabbit hole. She'd heard horror stories from her co-workers about boyfriends and husbands that got sucked into online echo chambers and had dramatically changed for the worse. But she still suspected there was something else at play. Whatever Danny had already been doing while he was "listening" had intensified. She needed to find out what it was; she couldn't live in a state of suspicion, never quite trusting what Danny was up to.

With Danny using his phone almost all the time now, it was rare that she had the chance to go through it. Yesterday though, Danny had left it out while taking a shower, thank God, in the morning. Shawna didn't think

twice, she grabbed his phone and unlocked it. She scrolled through all the apps, including the private ones hidden in a separate folder. She double checked his listening history, and sure enough, there were hours of podcasts from professors and overweight armchair historians on the history of terrorism. Nothing new there, it was the same as when she'd last gone through his phone. But she was more suspicious this time, and more thorough. She opened any app that she didn't recognize. She opened a few games, some news feeds, online sports betting, random restaurant apps that were probably only used once. And then she'd opened an app named "Channels".

She'd seen this one before, and had quickly closed it, but she spent longer this time, she really looked at what was on screen. Lists of names, each in their own folder. Tapping on one led her to a bunch of audio waveforms, and a "Play" button. She'd tapped play in a folder called "Tanner". She wasn't sure what she was hearing at first, it was mostly static. But then she could make out the shuffling of papers, and the sound of someone typing at a keyboard. She backed out, looking at other folders, listening to a few other channels. Then the shower had turned off, and she'd quickly closed and put Danny's phone back in its place.

She hadn't known what to make of the app, but she had a gut feeling that it was part of the puzzle she was trying to solve. It clearly let someone listen to a bunch of different audio channels, but she didn't have the first clue as to what they were. There wasn't anyone speaking in any of what she'd heard. It almost seemed like they played ambient noise, ambient household noise at that. She'd heard the paper shuffling and keyboard, like an office, but also rolling closet doors, laundry machines, and TVs. And what was with the channel names? She remembered a few of them: Tanner, Billings, Manzer. If they were people, she'd never heard of them.

The questions stuck with her throughout the day, playing at the back of her mind. She'd been distracted at work, and didn't get much done. There were times when she found herself staring at her monitor, hands on the keyboard, but not typing. She'd created a mantra for herself that she repeated, echoing in her head over and over, "*Tanner, Billings, Manzer...Tanner, Billings, Manzer...*".

And that led her back to now, laying on the couch, once again trying to spy on her boyfriend. She began to suspect her mother was right, it wasn't going too well playing house with Danny right now.

Then an idea hit her, such an obvious, pick-me do-this-one-first idea that she couldn't believe she hadn't already thought of it. She grabbed her phone and searched for the channel names. She searched, "Tanner channel", and got some results on YouTube. One was a kid that made popsicle reviews, one was a CPA that gave spreadsheet tutorials. Missed the mark by a mile. She tried just "Tanner" and also "famous Tanner", and succeeded in getting targeted ads for tanning salons and at-home bronzing kits. She sighed, and moved on to Billings. Again, no luck, unless Danny was hiding his secret love of taxes, or small business management software, or potentially a blog written by Mark Billingser on the merits of growing your own vegetables.

Third times the relationship-breaking luck, she thought, and typed in "Manzer". The second link caught her eye, "Local businessman Anthony Manzer opens third location in Canyon Plaza". She knew Canyon Plaza, she went there all the time to get smoothies in the summer. She scanned the article. Apparently Anthony Manzer, local Dowden county manicure mogul, had opened a new salon a few years back. It gave a brief backstory on Manzer, his humble origins from a cramped, single room apartment on Olivier street, to his now proud residence in Tower Apartment Homes, claiming two suites for his family of four. There was a picture of Manzer as

well, he was Hispanic, short, a bit pudgy, with an aqua polo shirt tucked into blue jeans and running shoes. He also had a wide, tooth-filled grin, and he had his arms wrapped around his wife Lisa. Next to them were their two sons, Mark and Phillip (ages 12, and 9), according to the attribution.

Tower Apartment Homes was nice, Shawna knew that. It was where you lived if you wanted to stay in town and had real money to spend. She glanced down at her own plain nails, and had the briefest of thoughts about needing to schedule a manicure for herself soon. She looked back at the screen. So, if this was the Manzer in Danny's phone, what did that say about the other two, Tanner and Billings?

She searched again for Tanner, this time specifying "Tanner Dowden county". And just like that, she'd found her fish. A member of the school board for five years, owner of his own family medicine practice for the past 18, Michael Tanner seemed like a respectable member of the community. He apparently volunteered to organize youth trips to the local nature center, and helped raise funds to install new "anti-vagrant" park benches to help with the growing homeless problem. A picture of Tanner confirmed Shawna's mental image: tall, white, early sixties, pale gray eyes. *Good for Tanner*, she thought, *a man with kids first in his heart*.

Searching for a local Billings found similar results. Evan Billings was a retired chief of police for the city of Hefton, one of Dowden's smaller cities. He currently served in an advisory role for the new police chief, and was also a security consultant for Leopold Security Systems.

Shawna's eyes widened, she sat up straight on the couch, and read the last sentence again, "For the past two years Billings has acted as lead security consultant for Leopold Security Systems, a local firm specializing in residential security."

She began breathing harder. She opened a new tab and searched, "Billings Leopold Security Systems". The first link took her to the Leopold

marketing site, where Mr. Billings had given a quote last year, “Leopold is the only security service I trust to guard my loved ones.” She wondered what the paycheck for that particular quote was. So, he had Leopold installed in his house. Had Danny been the one to install it? Shawna screwed up her eyes and thought, racking her memory for Danny ever having mentioned Billings. She began seeing yellow and bruised purple rings playing across the inside of her eyelids, but couldn’t dredge up any memory of the name. Maybe it wasn’t the same Billings, but what other connection would there be? The three names she’d looked up were all successful Dowdenites; she snorted. That didn’t prove anything, but it sure was a strong link.

She glanced up at the loft. The shadows of the night had begun to dominate the ceiling’s exposed beams. Her bare shoulders broke out in gooseflesh as a draft from the sliding door tiptoed through, into the apartment. The soft light from the lamp was no longer cozy, instead it called into notice all the parts of the room that weren’t illuminated, sitting coated in shadow. The rustle of the bushes outside the screen door made her think of windswept sidewalks along empty streets, bare feet walking along cold, rough pavement, then tripping over wet tree roots, falling and skinning a knee, a palm, feeling the sting of the dry midnight air. She clenched her fists, then stood up off the couch defiantly, and marched over to the door, shutting it. She turned back and looked up at the loft again, folding her arms.

So. Danny Tanlin, listener extra-fucking-ordinaire had a list of well-off Dowden citizens in his phone. For each of these people he had a mysteriously boring piece of audio to listen to. One of these people worked for the same company as Danny, and even had their security system installed in his house. What does that all mean? A whole heap of nothing. But Shawna was determined it wouldn’t stay that way. She’d get his phone

again, into that Channels app, and see what it was all about. She was mad. Danny had been lying to her. She'd suspected it, but now she knew. Well, she wasn't going to give him the chance to lie to her anymore. She'd find out what was really going on, and confront him with it. When he lied again, which she knew he would, he'd been doing it these past two years it seems, she'd be ready. She'd catch him out, grab his pewter tongue and kick his ass to the curb. Then she'd apologize to her mom. "Mom, this is Shawna, you were right, milkslop Danny had it too good for too long, I'm done with him." She strode up the stairs, not caring to try to hide her anger. Let him see how mad she was, maybe that'd scare some sense into him. She walked into the bedroom and flipped the lights on.

Danny was laying in his cocoon of blankets and pillows, stewing in his body heat. He opened his eyes and glanced at her. He even had the nerve to look annoyed, the asshole. Shawna stuck her foot out and tapped it, "I'm going to bed, if you're gonna keep on listening to your precious phone, do it downstairs." Danny was smart enough to keep quiet. He wormed off the bed and passed by her. She caught a whiff of his B.O.. "And can you shower before getting in bed? You fucking stink, I don't want it rubbing off on me." Danny had already started down the stairs, he had one earcup of his headphones on, and was reaching to put the other one back on as well. He nodded absentmindedly as he grabbed the handrail and turned the corner on the landing. Shawna heard him lay on the couch, *her* couch. She'd brought it with her when they moved in together. The thought of his grimy undershirt pushing up against its treated leather incensed her. She looked around the dim bedroom, one of his work shirts hanging in the closet caught her eye. She grabbed it off the hanger and balled it up, throwing it into the corner of the closet where only an archeological dig crew would find it. She huffed, and felt a little better.

Danny was frantic. For the past week he'd been spending every minute he could listening to the Ashton house, only stopping to sleep, and shower. He'd initially stopped to use the bathroom as well, but then found that wasn't actually needed. He'd taken to wearing an earpiece at work, so he could keep one ear tuned in even while he worked in clients' houses. So far he felt like the ugly girl at the bar, lots of eye contact from across the room, but nothing to show for it. He'd been able to catch muted phone calls from Mr. Ashton, brief exchanges that didn't hold any concrete details. But taken together, Danny was sure another bombing was being planned.

From Ashton's point of view, the bombings were surely a huge success. Despite the mercado's grand re-opening, local news bulletins reported foot traffic was down by 22%. There'd been a broader survey across other ethnic (not-white) stores, and they showed similar trends. People were afraid to go to anything other than Ralph's and Walmart. And if that wasn't enough, the bombing of the mosque had caused a public outcry, not against the bombing, but against the mosque itself. Write-ins to the newspaper blamed the mosque for indoctrinating kids with radical beliefs. Posts to the Dowden county Nextdoor page lamented the loss of life in one sentence, and in the next proclaimed the evils of Sharia law and readings of the Quran in schools (Christian students get *suspended* for praying). When members of the mosque had put on a march protesting the bombings and calling for justice, a small group of very loud counter-protestors camped out across the street with American, Christian, and thin blue line flags. There were more than just White people, there were few Mexican and Black people as well, like cinnamon and chocolate sprinkles on top of whipped cream. They of course weren't in support of the attacks, but they *were* in support of America they said, and they wanted to remind people of what country they were in.

Danny had looked up Ashton last week. He was the owner of a chemical distribution company out on the fringes of the Dowden county line. His LinkedIn profile showed he'd done two years with the US army, stationed in Georgia. Ashton was big, a heavy six-foot something with dark skin, short gray hair, and a thick beard that reached his chest. He'd been ex-military for most of his life, and he looked it.

According to channel 4 Dowden county news, the police weren't any closer to finding out who was behind the bombings. Danny was actually relieved at that. He'd come to terms with himself, he'd accepted what he wanted, and didn't shrink from it. Life's a gas, right? So let there be a little fire too.

Danny knew he was acting suspicious; Shawna was annoyed with him all the time, she'd stopped trying to initiate conversations past his one word grunting replies. He hadn't spoken to Justine at all this past week; when they had seen each other in the lot he'd ignored her, content to drive off with her looking after him in his rearview mirror. He just couldn't bring himself to care. It was Ashton on the mind all the time. *C'mon Ashton, he thought, I'm losing my girlfriend because of you, least you could do is blow me; and a few other people while you're at it.* He giggled.

Shawna grabbed Danny's phone. She'd made a big stink, well Danny had really, and forced Danny to take a shower. She'd all but shoved him in the bathroom, and yelled through the door to not come out until he was pink all over. She didn't want to spend one more night sleeping next to a goddamn alley cat, she'd said. That'd been one of her mom's favorite phrases, she realized after she'd yelled it. A fine way to start a Saturday morning.

Shawna unlocked Danny's phone and turned on location sharing, so she'd be able to track Danny and make sure he was staying on the

reservation. Then she opened the Channels app and pulled out her own phone, scrolling through the list of names and snapping pictures. Now she had some evidence, but of what, she wasn't positive. She opened the name at the top of the list, Ashton, and hit play. An audio stream opened up, seemingly not recorded, but coming at her Live from the Garden!. She was more and more sure that all these names were of people in Dowden, but she hadn't landed on an explanation of what the audio clips were. She increased the volume just loud enough for her to hear it over the shower.

Through the tinny speaker she heard a cell phone ring, and what sounded like someone rummaging in a drawer. Then, a deep man's voice said, "Confirmed, the brownie law center, today, 12 o'clock." Footsteps and more rummaging in a drawer, then silence. What was that? It sounded unedited, raw, not an actual piece of produced story or dialogue. She held the phone in both of her hands, scrolling up and down the list of names. She noticed a menu icon, and tapped it. A new screen appeared, titled "Saved recordings". There was another list of names, the same ones from before. But these names repeated, the top few entries were all titled "Ashton", and showed a date and time. Was Danny somehow recording this Ashton guy? Was Danny recording all of these people? She had a queasy feeling in her stomach, like she'd just eaten a greasy double-whopper and fries. She hit "Play" on the first entry, and held the phone up to her ear.

The same deep voice spoke again, "Hold on, don't move yet. Soon." The clip ended. She frowned, not sure what she was listening to. Ashton was talking to someone? She hit play on the next clip in line, it started off with the same cell-phone ring she'd heard before, then the same deep voice answering it, "Still deciding where. Needs to send the right message. I'll contact you." It sounds like Ashton is planning something. Is that what Danny is after, is he spying on Ashton, wanting to know his plans?

Shawna had had enough. No more sitting by and making furtive swipes at Danny's phone when he wasn't around. She wasn't going to let this creep, that's how she thought of him now, walk around as if she didn't know what he was up to. Well, she didn't know *exactly* what he was doing, but she knew enough to call him out on it. Her anger had been left on medium-high for the past few days, and it was now beginning to boil.

She sat on the bed with legs crossed, and clenched Danny's phone in her hand. She practiced what she'd say when he came out of the bathroom, hair dripping and one hand holding up his towel. "So, been doing a little spying have we?" No, she wasn't a James Bond villain. She tried again, "Hope you can pack quick, cause you're about to hit the bricks." Mmm, maybe that's what she felt, but she didn't want to open with it. How about, "I KNOW YOU'VE BEEN LYING TO ME FOR THE PAST TWO YEARS!" Yea, some cathartic screaming could be the way to go.

The shower shut off, and she heard the curtain *schwing* to the side. Danny opened the door, and froze. He saw Shawna sitting there with his phone in her hands, eyes narrowed, leg bouncing, lips pressed thin. Danny's eyes locked onto his phone, he couldn't tear his eyes from it. Shawna coolly lifted it to her eye level and said, "You wanna tell me what you've really been listening to?"

Danny's Adam's apple bobbed comically as he swallowed. He used both hands to hike his towel up around his waist. He tried to affect a casual tone, which was hard to do when your girlfriend's eyes were shooting death beams at you. "What do you mean? Like, on YouTube?" he said.

"Cut the shit," said Shawna, "I know all about your 'Channels' app. You've been spying on people! I have a list, I looked them up!" The idea clicked together in her head as she was talking, "You've been spying on people you install security for! Yea, that's it, you go out there and shake their hands and wriggle your scrawny ass putting in all their video cameras

and motion sensors, except that's not all you install is it? No, you leave behind a microphone or something, and you spy on them! No? Tell me it's not that, go ahead, well, go on!"

Shawna had uncrossed her legs and stood up as she hectored Danny, waving his phone around over her head like a military baton. He shook his head, slowly, as if trying to buy some time before having to answer. His dripping hair was leaving a wet spot on the carpet, and he'd started to shift his weight from foot to foot. The steam from the bathroom was fogging the bedroom mirror around the edges.

"Uhhh," he started, then paused. Shawna rolled her eyes. "No, it's not that at all, that's crazy...uhh...no, not crazy, just a little wrong," he corrected himself mid-sentence, after a look from Shawna. He seemed to suddenly light on an idea, he stopped shifting his weight, and spoke with less hesitation, "You're right, those *are* customers, it's just something I do for work. I test the audio recordings, that's all. I get audio recordings for work, and I'm supposed to make sure they're okay, yea, that's what it is, that's all."

Shawna crossed her arms, "Oh yea, is that why you have secret recordings of people in their homes? Yea, that's right, I *listened* to them. Those aren't for work! You have literal recordings of people in their own houses! That's spying Danny! You're spying on people! And you seem to have the hots for this Ashton guy, you're saving so many of his conversations."

At the mention of Ashton, Danny's demeanor changed. He no longer cringed at Shawna's harsh words. He stood up taller, and looked Shawna in the eye with hardened eyes. He sneered at her as he spoke, "What do you think you know about Ashton, huh?" He took a step forward, "I *guarantee* you don't know anything, only me, only *I* know, no one else." He advanced across the bedroom towards Shawna, taking hard strides. "Who do you

think you are, going through *MY* phone, accusing *ME* of spying? Take a look in the mirror! What I do is my business, no one else's." He held out his hand, "Now, give me my phone."

Shawna hesitated. She wasn't scared of Danny, never had been, never will, but she didn't want to provoke a fight. Danny didn't look very reasonable just then, sopping hair, goosepebbled skin, one hand holding up his damp towel, the other held out in front of him, taugth with anger. She looked up into his unblinking eyes. She handed over his phone. "Thanks," he hissed, and turned away from her, towards the closet.

She glared at his back as he dropped his towel and hopped on one foot to put on his fruit-of-the-looms. She didn't want to stay in the same room with him one more second. She narrowed her eyes and said, "I'm outta here". He didn't turn around. She swung herself down the stairs and slammed the door behind her. She pulled out of the apartment complex, driving she didn't know where.

Danny pulled his shirt over his wet hair, and threw his damp bath towel into the bathroom, not caring that it landed half on the open toilet, drooping limply into the bowl. He was *mad*, M.A.D. that spells furious. Shawna had the gall to go through *his* phone, rifle through *his* recordings, and flaunt them in a stupid argument, as if they were trifling things so easily flung about! She didn't know the first thing about what she'd been talking about. If he had thrown some of the things he knew about *her* in her face, you best believe she would've lunged at him, gone for the gullet. A snide comment about her mom, and he would've *deserved* whatever he had coming. Well, so did Shawna then. Let her go, let her stomp out as if she'd been the one wronged. He couldn't believe how selfish she was being.

He stood on the open carpet of the bedroom, between the mirror and the bed. He reflexively unlocked his phone and opened his Channels app.

As he did so his anger lessened, got out of his face a bit, reduced to a pulsing drumming in the background. He opened Ashton's audio, and bit his lower lip when he saw there'd been some activity, and just a few minutes ago too. Maybe Shawna had listened to it, the timing would've been right. At the thought of Shawna listening to Ashton before he did, Danny's anger leapt up, threatening to overflow his walls of self-control. He had the urge to yell, to *shout! That absolute BITCH!* he thought.

He looked at his phone screen, breathing hard through his nose. This was not the emotional state he wanted to be in when he listened. But he didn't care just now. Shawna knew something that he didn't, and fixing that was his first priority. He turned the phone's volume up and hit play. He heard the now familiar cell phone ring, and Ashton rummaging through his drawer that he kept it in. Then Ashton said, "Confirmed, the brownie law center, today, 12 o'clock," and put the phone away.

Danny was stunned. This was it, the motherfucking motherload, his Moby Dick had surfaced, and who had seen it first, by pure luck? Not Danny, no of course not Danny, but Shawna. *Nothing to it but to break up*, he thought. But it was the thought of some backroom worker in Danny's head. A guy way down in the last cubicle on the left. Up in the board room, the real decisions were being made. "Today, 12 o'clock" Ashton had said. Danny checked the time, he had just over an hour before then. Not much room to spare. And where was it? The "brownie law center"? What was that? Danny replayed the audio, checking to see if he had misheard. Nope. That was right. Okay, so what did that mean? Danny began to pace diagonally across the bedroom, from the stairs to the far corner, where the laundry hamper stood, heaped with Leopold work shirts and Shawna's blouses. He didn't know any law centers, and he certainly didn't know any brown ones, whatever that meant. He tried to put himself in Ashton's head.

Who was Ashton? He was violent, extreme, and racist. Ah, yes, a racist bigot. “Brownny” as in brown skinned person, Danny realized.

He stopped pacing and searched the web for “ethnic law centers dowden”. A handful of results popped up: “Asian Americans Cultural Center for Change”, “Labor Workers Justice Community”, and “Council for Islamic Solidarity”. It didn’t take a brain surgeon to figure out which one Ashton and the Monocells were planning to hit. He looked up the Council for Islamic Solidarity (CIS for those in the know) and saw it was on the far side of Dowden, nestled in a shopping center next to Premium Cleaners Today and a Wells Fargo. It’d be about a half hour drive, even in the light Saturday traffic.

He had the urge to grab his keys and *go*, but stopped himself short. He needed to think, what was he actually going to do there? He’d pull up and what, hang out? Watch the people walk by, wait for something to happen? As he thought, he began to feel currents of air deep down inside himself, in his pit. *Yes, he thought, exactly. I’ll sit there, I’ll watch the people muck about at their errands. They’ll walk on by, I’ll nod to them and their kids, the little pooches and re-usable bags slung on their shoulders. And I’ll wait. And the feeling will build and build, and then, when it can’t build anymore, when 12pm rolls around, I’ll see it happen with my own eyes, I’ll feel it in my chest, I’ll hear it with my ears. It’ll wash over me, and I’ll drown in it.*

He found he’d closed his eyes at the last thought. He opened them and trotted down the stairs, slipping on his white tennis shoes. He slipped out the door to his car, put it in reverse, and threaded his way through the narrow apartment parking lot, out to the main road. His anger had fallen away, like snow melting off a house that’d had the heater turned on full bore. He was excited, eager, he practically hummed with light. He made a left, and merged into the flow of traffic; he was on his way.

Shawna sat outside Manzer's Manicures, slurping on a strawberry and blueberry smoothie, the Berry Burst. She hadn't known where she was going when she had left the apartment. She was furious at first, she felt as if she hadn't won her confrontation with Danny. She hadn't lost, no sir, but she definitely hadn't won, which pissed her off. She'd come at him with facts, with evidence that he was up to something, and he'd put her on the back foot, as if she'd done something wrong. And to top it off, *she* was the one that had left the apartment! She was fuming at that, upset with herself for not sticking to her guns and going toe-to-toe with Danny.

Distracted, she'd been driving on autopilot; turn left, turn right, it doesn't matter, it's all in the wrists. With a rush of focus she came back to herself; she was on Ridgeline, a busy six lane street with wide lanes and pine trees shading the median. It was lined with strip malls and shopping plazas, one of Dowden's main arteries. She was cruising in the left lane, just rolling through green lights, when she saw the sign for Canyon Plaza on her left. She remembered the article she'd read about Manzer and his new manicure location, so she pumped the brakes and slid into the left turn lane at the last minute, receiving her fair share of honks from the Ford Explorer behind her.

And now she sat, fishing for the last bit of Berry Burst in her styrofoam cup with the AC on, staring through the nail salon's window at the tiled checkerboard floor and rows of reclining chairs, most of which were filled. It seemed like Manzer's Manicures was doing alright. As she watched, a short man came out from the back of the store and walked up to the thin, wispy Korean woman at reception. He was holding a stack of papers, tapping at them with one finger as he spoke. Shawna felt he looked familiar, looking at his polo shirt and blue jeans. Then she realized it was Manzer himself!

She hesitated, then tossed the mostly empty cup into her center cup holder and got out of the car, locking it with the key fob over her shoulder as she pulled open the salon's glass door and stepped into the lobby. A cheery tone played overhead as she entered, and the scent of perfumed soap and chatter filled the air. She stopped a few feet away from the receptionist, and Manzer.

Manzer looked up and gave her a wide grin, the same smile that all small business owners give to customers, *Please, it said, come in, buy something*. "Hello, come in, come in," said Manzer, waving Shawna up to the front desk, "How can we help you today? We have a special on manicures, buy five fingers get the other five free!" He said this with a wink and a laugh. A tired joke Shawna was sure he'd said a thousand times before, but she smiled.

She stepped up to the desk and said, looking at Manzer, "Um, I'm actually not here for a manicure, but, could I ask, are you Mr. Manzer? Anthony Manzer?"

"Yes yes, that's me," he said, nodding his head, "humble proprietor and owner, why do you ask? I don't owe you money I hope."

Shawna shook her head, saying, "No, definitely not, nothing like that. I just wanted to ask you a question, but it's a little weird." She hesitated, then said, "Do you by chance use Leopold Security Systems at your house? For your home security?"

Manzer squinted his eyes, pausing before answering.

"Uhhh, I do, yes. At my own house you mean? Yeah, I've been using them since I moved in, everyone in the building uses them." Manzer looked a bit uncomfortable, as if he wasn't sure he should be telling Shawna this, but his desire to please customers caused him to answer reflexively. "Why do you ask? How did you know that?"

“Oh um, well,” Shawna stalled. She hadn’t thought about a cover story, and she definitely didn’t want to tell the truth, not yet. “I was thinking about using them for my place, and I saw you in the window, and figured if you use them, they’re probably good, that’s all,” she said, looking down, away from Manzer. When she was done talking, she forced herself to look up at him; his lips were pursed, he didn’t buy it. If he had, he’d have been a very gullible man, and you didn’t get to become Dowden’s manicure mogul, *Three locations near you!*, by being gullible.

“That’s all I wanted to ask, thank you, thanks again,” said Shawna, as she backed up towards the exit. She turned around and strode out to her car, the cheery tone of the door cutting off behind her as it swung shut. She’d been nervous while she was talking to Manzer, and when she plopped into her already sun-warmed car, her shirt pressed up against the beads of sweat trailing down from her armpits.

Manzer was still looking at her through the salon’s window, she wanted to go, but she wasn’t sure where yet. She opened her phone and looked at Danny’s location, expecting him to be at the apartment, but he wasn’t, he was on the move, driving on Highway 22, way across town. She set her GPS to Danny’s location and buckled her seat belt, *Click It or Ticket*, and looked behind her, throwing her right arm behind the passenger’s seat as she backed up. Her car had a backup camera, but she still reverted to how she’d done it for the past decade when she was flustered. You can teach an old dog new tricks, but it might forget them when it’s upset and chasing after its maniac boyfriend.

She pulled out onto Ridgeline, squeaking through the yellow left-turn, and headed for the highway’s on-ramp. She glanced at the time, half past 11. She thought back to how Danny had acted when she mentioned Ashton. He’d been aggressive, condescending. Only *he* knew something about Ashton he’d said. Ashton had said there’d be something

happening at 12 today, just a half hour away. Maybe that's what Danny was so worked up about, maybe that's where he was going now.

Shawna gripped the steering wheel as the on-ramp came up, and she began the long loop to merge onto the freeway. If that's what Danny was doing, Shawna would make sure she was there too. She wanted to see what it was that Danny was spying on Ashton for. Knowing Danny, it was probably some weird, esoteric, bullshit podcast related thing, maybe a meetup. But, she realized, she really *didn't* know Danny, he'd been lying to her their whole relationship. She didn't know him at all.

Danny was blocking the intersection leading into the shopping center. He stared straight ahead, trying to ignore the white Dodge Ram that was laying on its horn a few feet from his passenger's side door. There was nowhere for him to turn, he just had to wait it out, and so did the Dodge.

Danny had been in a long line of cars waiting to make a left into the center. The light hit green and the line of cars was flowing smoothly across the intersection, until all of a sudden it wasn't. It'd stopped, and Danny was stuck jutting out into the rightmost lane of oncoming traffic. *Gridlock, and I'm the moron causing it*, he thought with chagrin. He dared a glance to his right, at the driver of the Dodge. It was a heavysset man with mutton chops and slick, black, plastic sunglasses. His face was deadpan, but staring straight at Danny, *You've fucked me, so I'm going to lay on this horn until you've stopped fucking me*, it said.

The center was unbelievably busy, and Danny didn't know why. There wasn't any high traffic business in this area as far as he knew, just a standard CVS, Harbor Freight, the law center, and some other one-unit stores. Sure, it was Saturday, but all the teens and their parents flocked to the Grove, Dowden's bustling outdoor mall, a few miles away from here, closer to downtown. The van ahead of Danny started to pull forward, he

could see its dreamcatcher hanging from the rearview mirror sway as the van humped over the driveway and into the lot itself. Danny did the same, and finally he was in. The Ram peeled off, holding the horn a few more seconds as it passed, lowering in pitch as it did.

The traffic was still bumper-to-bumper, but at least it was moving. Danny turned to the right, idling forward slowly to avoid the people walking around his car and through the parking lot. There were couples holding onto young kids, old men with rollators shuffling next to their middle aged children, men and women picking their way through the traffic. As he got further into the lot, the line of cars began to disperse and he was able to start looking for a parking spot, wheeling up and down the aisles like a vulture. He found a spot next to the rusted, white, dumpster enclosure. The spot was small, and he had to squeeze out of his driver's side door to avoid hitting the green Honda minivan parked next to him.

He closed the door and stood next to his car, looking around the parking lot and shading his face from the sun. The smell of garbage from the dumpsters provided an unwelcome undertone to the day. As he looked around, he noticed three things about the people maneuvering through the lot. For starters, they were almost all Arabic. Some were wearing head scarves or hijabs, others wore tightly wrapped turbans, mixed with Quicksilver and Tommy Hilfiger t-shirts and floral blouses. Many of them were also carrying manilla folders or sheets of paper stapled together, legal looking documents from what Danny could see; marked and signed and with additional smaller slips tucked in between the pages. And they were all heading in about the same direction, across the lot and to the right, congregating in a small line on the wide walkway in front of the storefronts.

Danny walked through the jungle of parked cars, slipping sideways between sideview mirrors and over small shrubs that lined the evenly spaced palm trees planted throughout the lot. He could see now the line was

outside a small one-suite unit. It had a tinted glass wall facing the parking lot, with the words “Council for Islamic Solidarity” in flowing gold script written across the center. “One community, together” was stenciled beneath, also in gold script. Lower and to the right, in readable block letters were the store hours, *Mon-Fri 10-7pm, Sat-Sun 10-3pm, Closed for most holidays*. The door stood wedged open, the line of people stopped just outside, the people at the front of the line waiting to be called in. There was a white plastic A-frame with a rainbow of balloons tied to it, placed to the side of the door:

FREE CASE EVALUATION
AND DEMAND LETTERS
ALL FEES WAIVED
PAY ONLY IF YOU WIN

So, that’s what’s bringing the circus to town, thought Danny. And he wouldn’t be surprised if some of these people were victims of the mosque bombing, too.

Danny looked at his phone, it was 11:45pm. Damn, he had sure cut it close, not much time to get a good seat. The law center was in the far corner of the shopping center, past it were waist high bushes that wrapped back and forth, lining a ramp leading out of the center and connecting to the sidewalk. Maybe twenty feet down was a Dowden County Transit Authority bus stop, its green and white colored sign waving familiarly to Danny. He could sit there and have a good view of the whole place.

He turned and began walking across the blacktop; he didn’t want to pass through the crowd of people on the walkway. A few spots down, he saw a woman unloading a stroller from the side of a minivan, two tottering boys already stumbling around her knees as she struggled to buckle a wailing infant into the stained seat. He could see a thick stack of papers waiting to be picked up on the floor of the van. He looked to the ground and

was just past the hood of the van when she called out, “Excuse me! Excuse me!” He stopped and looked back, pointing to himself, *Did you really mean me? The Lone Ranger Whitey?*

“Yes, you, you,” she said in a slight Pakistani accent, “I’m sorry, but could you help carry these papers for me? I just don’t have enough hands, and well, I don’t trust my kids to hold them, they’d end up all over the parking lot, I can guarantee it.”

Danny was a bit stunned, but his social training kicked in, and before he knew it he had said, “Uhhh, yes of course, I can do that, no problem.” The lady beamed at him, grateful for the help of someone who could hold a conversation past “nap time”, “I want”, and “euwaaagh!”.

“Just wait there, I’ll get us out of the way, and then could you grab the papers from the car? They’re right there, just on the floor.”

“Sure, no problem,” Danny said, apparently nothing was a problem for him. “Looks like you’ve got your hands full huh?”

Hands-full lady corralled her kids forwards, making room for Danny to slip past, grab the bundle of papers, and slide the door shut. The van chirped twice to show it was locked.

“Usually I have some help on errands like this, but my husband isn’t up to it, so I had to take all the kids myself,” said Hands-full lady as they trundled through the parking lot. She kept a tight grip on the hand of her youngest son, and her eyes just as tight on the back of the other, seemingly trying to control his movements with her sight alone.

“He was hurt in the bombing last week, you know, at the Islamic Center. He was working the line at the dunk tank when it went off; he’s okay though, mostly, his ribs are still healing and his arm’s in a sling, but he’s able to shuffle around the house.”

Her words were upbeat, but her face was lined with worry as she spoke. Three kids and an injured husband to take care of, she must be

slamming back energy drinks just to stay awake, if the bags under her eyes were anything to judge by.

“I’m sorry, that’s awful,” said Danny, saying what sounded right to his ears, “And they still don’t have any leads, the news is saying.”

“None, which is so unbelievable. How can they not know who did it! Nothing else happens in Dowden, there’s nothing else to take up the police’s time! They’re a bunch of *asshats*.” She whispered the last word, so her kids wouldn’t hear.

They reached the edge of the walkway and Hands-full lady wheeled the stroller onto it, maneuvering to the back of the line. “Thanks for holding those, I can take them now,” she said, and held out her hands for the papers Danny was holding.

Danny passed them to her, over the head of one of her sons who was now staring up at Danny with his mouth open and small arms clasped over his chest. “Here you go, hope everything works out for you,” said Danny, gesturing at the line.

“Oh you have no idea, we really need help with my husband’s hospital bills. The city should be paying for them, but of course they haven’t offered up anything. I’m here to make sure they do what they’re supposed to. I’ve heard this place has had some really good wins, really good wins.” She trailed off, looking past Danny, lost in thought, no longer seeing the line, or the cars, or the parking lot.

Danny took a half step back and said, “Well, I’m sure you’re in good hands, have a good day,” and turned on his heel, walking up the line. Behind him, Hands-full lady took a quick, deep, breath through her nose and snapped back to her surroundings. She pursed her lips, aware that she’d been monologuing at a perfect stranger, then called out, “Thanks again!” after Danny’s retreating back. He held a hand up without looking back and kept walking.

Danny looked to his right, out over the parking lot and away from the milling people in line. He walked quickly, and after a handful of long strides he was past the door and the A-frame and the balloons. He walked to the end of the walkway and up the ramp that led out to the sidewalk, turning to his right and making his way towards the bus stop, eventually sitting on the edge of its green thermoplastic bench. There was no shade structure, he felt the heat of the bench through his jeans. He sat backwards, away from the street, facing the parking lot and the line of hopeful plaintiffs. He reached for his phone and checked the time: 11:54, not too much longer now.

He opened his Channels app, he couldn't help himself, and checked if there'd been any more activity from Ashton. None, the audio waves were flat for his feed. Damn. *Well*, Danny looked back up, *time to take in the sights*. He squared his legs, placing both feet flat on the hot sidewalk. He braced his hands on his knees, and began breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth. Fast at first, as he was still agitated from Hands-full lady's ambush, then slower as he caught his breath. Slower still, as he moved towards a detached state, present, but removed. His surroundings took on an artificial quality. The colors became too flat, the people slightly too thin, as if they'd been printed just as the ink was starting to run dry.

But the noises, *oh*, the noises were incredible. They'd been amplified so he could take in every detail, without distortion. The *whoosh* of wind from the cars passing behind him, swirling and tumbling over itself, making pirouettes and arabesques as it passed over his ears. A child coughing open-mouthed, the air from her lungs coming up and out to mix with the same air that rustled sheets of paper in a black plastic folder, held by a man with gnarled and calloused hands. A car door slams, a grandpa mutters into the ear of his son, a cell phone rings.

Danny cocked his head, listening to the cell phone. He *knew* that ringtone, he absolutely *knew* it. He'd heard it in the Ashton house, it was the same ringtone that Mr. Ashton had. *Could it really be?* Danny stood up, hands by his sides, scanning the parking lot. The cell phone rang again, and Danny was positive now. No doubt about it, that was Mr. Aston's phone. But why would Ashton be here? That would only get him caught. He'd been able to avoid the police for weeks now, coming here didn't make any sense. *But*, thought Danny, *maybe he was here. Maybe he just had to be here, to see his handiwork.*

Danny kept looking, looking for Ashton's stocky build and graying beard, but didn't see anyone matching the pictures he'd seen online. But maybe it wasn't Ashton, maybe one of his men was here instead. That'd make more sense. Yea, that'd make *way* more sense. He began looking not for Ashton specifically, but anyone that looked out of place, anyone loitering with a cell phone and white skin.

Across the parking lot, Danny saw a tall, beefy man leaning against the cab of his truck, facing the law center. He had his arms crossed, and one of his hands was stroking a thick, gray beard, dark on the outside and growing lighter towards the center, like a reverse zippo flame. He wore dark sunglasses and a baseball cap. Was that Ashton? Danny wasn't sure, he couldn't see the man's face very well, and while he was tall, like Ashton, he had never seen Ashton in real life. The builds *seemed* to match, but Danny had no way of knowing if it was really him. Well, not by sight at least. Turn out the lights and let him talk to the man, and Danny would be able to tell if this was just a contestant in the White Supremacist look-a-like contest or the real deal.

Danny started back down the sidewalk, towards the ramp that led to the parking lot, glancing over his shoulder every few steps at the man leaning peacefully against his truck.

“What the fuck?” muttered Shawna as she pulled into the parking lot. It was crowded, she had to wait in line behind a dirty Rav4 before she could turn out of the main line of cars and begin looking for a parking spot. Why was Danny here? She recognized some of the chain store names, but none of the others. And any store she did recognize had a closer, more convenient location to their apartment.

She found a spot in the far corner, parked, and got out; she stood by the back of her car, getting her bearings. There was some promotion happening at the closest store to her, that was obvious from the balloons and line of people spilling out the door. She checked Danny’s location, and saw that he was close, on the perimeter of the parking lot. She scanned the lot, but didn’t see him. Outside the lot, on the neighboring street a city bus pulled up to the sidewalk, stopping with a *pssht* from its air brakes. It caught her attention, and she looked over.

That’s when she saw Danny. He was walking down the sidewalk, towards the parking lot. He was moving slowly, hunched at the top of his back, as if that made him more difficult to spot. Didn’t work for Quasimodo, and it didn’t work for Danny either. He kept peering over his shoulder, looking at something to Shawna’s left. She didn’t like that look, it reminded her of their argument that morning, when Danny had sneered at her with a hard glint in his eye. She looked to her left, trying to figure out what Danny was preoccupied with. Nothing stood out to her, just the blinding reflections of hot car windshields and a few skinny palm trees placed throughout the parking lot.

Looking at Danny in the heat of the afternoon, any misgiving she’d had about not starting a fight flitted away. Barney’s song about loving and being one big happy family could shove it. She’d had a family, with Danny,

until he decided that spying on strangers was his new hobby. And worst of all, lying about it to her. Yea, Danny wasn't getting away this time.

She balled her hands into fists, her stick on nails digging into her palms and causing red welts that'd last until tomorrow. She struck out across the parking lot, down the aisle towards the storefronts, heelstriking as she went. Danny was coming down onto the walkway now, he was directly in front of her, but he didn't see her. He was looking out and slightly to his left, past Shawna. Well, he'd see her soon enough.

"Hey! Danny!" she shouted, not breaking stride. "We've got a long ways to go before we're ready to kiss and make up, asshole!"

He jumped, startled out of his trance. He looked at her incredulously, mouth agape, dangling.

Shawna felt a sense of smug satisfaction seeing his shock, "Yea, you're not the only one that's able to do a bit of spying, it's not so hard." She skipped up onto the walkway and planted herself in front of Danny, fists resting against her hips.

Danny wagged his mouth, opening and closing it twice before saying, "Wha- What are you doing here? You can't be here!"

"What am I doing here? What about you? I followed you to see what you've been up to, and now I'm glad I did, because I have *no* idea why you're here, unless it's related to your spy master fantasy. And I definitely deserve to know if it is. You've been lying to me for two years now, but that stops today. Tell me what's going on. *Now.*"

Danny moaned, and reached for his pocket, "Oh god, oh my god, what time is it," he muttered to himself, digging out his phone. The screen read 11:57.

He let out a mournful groan, as if foretelling a coming tragedy. He dropped his phone to the ground and grabbed his head with both hands, grasping at his frizzy hair.

Shawna rocked back a step, caught off guard at Danny's sudden change. "Danny? Danny? What the hell is wrong with you? What're you doing?" She reached out, putting one hand on his hunched back. Danny quivered at her touch, but stayed motionless, looking down. Then he started to stand, but paused. He started again, then, didn't quite pause, but slowed, as if he was resisting himself. Slowly, steadily, like a heavy iron door, he straightened until he was staring Shawna in the eyes.

Danny's face was gleaming with sweat, and perhaps also a trail of tears tracked down from his eyes. "There's going to be an explosion, a bomb, in one minute. You have to leave," he said.

Shawna blinked at Danny. She didn't understand what he was trying to say. A bomb? She pulled her hand back, as if from a dog that'd suddenly started growling. "What? What are you talking about?"

"Just what I said. You asked for the truth, this is it. If you don't take my hand right now and come with me, we're both going to die."

Danny held out his hand, palm up. It was steady, calm, just like Danny's voice. He held his hand there in the space between them.

"Shawna, please."

She looked at Danny's face. His eyes pleaded with her, begged her, and most of all, were devoid of deceit. They were full to the brim with fear and terror, and even a bit of love, she thought.

She hesitated, then reached out and took his hand.

As soon as her hand touched his, he ratcheted down on it and *yanked* her off the walkway. He pulled her across the parking lot, Shawna nearly fell, but he pulled her upright and kept running, almost dragging her as they crossed to the far side. They ran between a Lexus sedan and a coupe that were parked on the perimeter of the lot, facing chest high box bushes.

"Get down!" yelled Danny as he crouched in front of the hood of the gold Lexus. He was still grasping her hand, and he steadied her as she knelt

down next to him. Her face was inches away from the peeling paint of the hood and the faded Lexus logo. As she crouched there was a shotgun *roar* of noise; she felt like a rust covered wrecking ball hit her in the teeth, jarring and setting her bones vibrating. Her body reacted, she ducked her head down and curled up as much as she could, as if imitating an armadillo was the best defense thousands of years of human evolution could come up with. Maybe it was.

She held her face pressed to her stomach, eyes and mouth screwed closed so that her cheeks ached and she saw blotches of red and black glowing beneath her eyelids. She could smell tar, or petroleum, or just plain fucking exhaust she didn't know, but whatever it was it was black and heavy. Her lungs began to burn as she breathed, forcing her to take sharp, shallow breaths. She stayed like that, head down, eyes watering, nose burning, until she felt a hand on her shoulder, nudging her, patting her.

She uncurled from her roly-poly defense, her neck already cramping, and opened her puffed and irritated eyes. She saw a rough hand, tanned and strong, certainly not Danny's. She followed the hand with her eyes to a tendoned arm with graying hair, up to the face of a man with a thick graying beard. He had his sunglasses pushed back and there was a ring of soot outlining where they'd been when the bomb went off, like a coal miner that'd just emerged scuttling and clawing up out of the earth.

As she looked at him she realized he'd been speaking to her. She watched his mouth move, his eyes on hers, but she didn't register what he was saying. Was she deaf? Had the explosion blown out her eardrums? No, she could hear him, it was just washing over her. Time to dig in sis. She concentrated, looking at his flapping lips under his gray whiskers, flecks of spit shining in the air.

“-all right? Look at me, are you all right?”

The sounds of the bomb's aftermath came to her in a rush, an avalanche of shrieks and wails, crunching glass and snapping flames. Children crying and men yelling for their wives and loved ones. She could hear the rumble of boiling air, and, she paused, unsure of herself, it sounded like, rain? Light rain, but smeared and spread out, almost crisp at times. Behind the man that was speaking to her, she saw sheets of paper wheeling in the air, falling gently. Some were pristine, but many were partially burned; immaculate white bordered with ash black edges. They tumbled and fell to the ground, making the bleary patter that Shawna heard.

She looked back at the man, finally focusing on his concerned face. "Yes," she gasped; it was more difficult to speak than she expected, "Yes, I'm okay."

The man's brows relaxed, she hadn't noticed how high and tight they'd been.

"And what about him? He don't look okay. I think he's in shock"

The man was pointing behind Shawna. She turned on her haunches to look at Danny. He too, had reverted to the armadillo defense. Except where Shawna had been terrified, Danny looked, almost, at ease. He rocked back and forth on his heels, arms clutching his knees to his chest, face resting on his knees. His face was placid, as if he was just resting it for a moment, taking a ten minute cat-nap.

Shawna shook his shoulder the same way the man had shaken hers. A three man game of telephone, loser doesn't wake up.

Danny stirred, but didn't open his eyes. She shook again, and this time Danny took a deep breath in through his nose, then flung his eyes open as he choked. He hacked the smoke filled breath back up, eyes watering and snot flowing to his chin.

"There we go, he's doing better now," said the man. He stood up from leaning over Shawna and looked to his left, back to the storefronts. "If

you two are doing fine, I'd suggest you get outta here if you can. You don't want to see this."

The man gave them a parting glance, his own eyes bloodshot and tearing up, then turned and walked squarely towards the source of the gut-ripping roar that'd fired when the bomb went off. Shawna heard the crunch and grit of shattered glass under the man's work boots as he trekked across the marred blacktop.

Danny had stopped coughing and was merely wheezing now. He panted like a dog that needed a bowl of water. Shawna rose to her knees, wincing as she shifted against beads of glass and rock, then braced herself on the hood of the Lexus and pushed herself up. As she took in the scene before her, her knees buckled and she leaned heavily on the hood to keep upright.

The line of people outside the store was gone. The store itself was a shattered wreck, the top half of the black aluminum door frame was blown off, gone to kingdom come. The tinted glass wall was wrecked and splintered, most of it having been blown outwards, with just a jagged sharktooth perimeter of glass clinging to the remnants of the window frame. The glass that'd been blown outward was now scattered across the parking lot, not on the ground, but embedded into people's arms, backs, shoulders, faces. Shawna saw a man reaching over his left shoulder to grab an arrowhead of glass that stuck through his hoodie. A woman tried to hold down two flaps of skin on her forearms, as if a careening blade of glass had twinkled by and given her two clean cuts across them both, precision work.

On the walkway, over the carcasses of burst balloons and shards of fiberglass, a mother dragged herself on mottled red and white puckered hands to an upturned stroller. Shawna saw the woman scream in agony as she extended her arm to grab and turn the stroller around to face her. She saw the woman scream in terror when she saw the stroller was empty.

Shawna threw up, quick and unexpected, chunks of Berry Burst spewing out, then dribbling down her chin and onto her green blouse.

Across it all rolled dark waves of oily smoke, coating all it touched with a miasma of filth, adding even more pain to the scene of carnage as it worked its way insidiously into open and bleeding wounds.

But amongst the dark scene was one dab of white. The man that'd helped her was making his way across the field of injuries, his white t-shirt smudged, but crisp in contrast to the roiling carrion field. He was kneeling next to a grandfather that was on his side, propping him up against a nearby tire well, pressing two hands against his bleeding leg. After a moment, he took the grandfather's hands and placed them against his own leg, coaching him to keep the pressure on himself. Once the grandfather came out of shock, and could hold his hands on his pulsing wound, the man stood up, patted the grandfather on the shoulder, and made his way to the next victim. He may as well have had a red cross helmet on.

Shawna looked down at Danny. He hadn't stood up; he'd laid his palms down on the Lexus's hood and had his eyes closed, as if he couldn't bear to see what was going on around him. Maybe he had the right idea.

"Danny," said Shawna.

He didn't respond, he kept his eyes shut and face tight, as if he was concentrating on something, and couldn't be bothered.

"Danny," she said again, louder, her voice quavering.

His mouth twitched at the corner, but otherwise he didn't react.

"Goddamn it Danny I'm talking to you!" shouted Shawna. She'd turned and faced him, shoulders square to his hunched body. She'd balled her hands into fists and her arms were tensed. Strands of hair lay across her cheeks and forehead and mouth, stuck in the rivulets of sweat that framed her blotchy face.

Danny placidly opened his eyes, as if waking from a form of meditation. He looked up at Shawna, expectingly.

“Danny,” she said, evenly, but only a fool would mistake her for calm, “how did you know there was going to be a bomb?”

A moment of silence stretched between them. Tendrils of smoke wisped and danced in the air, in the distance the growing sound of sirens wailed.

Danny wet his lips, then spoke.

“I knew there was going to be a bomb, because I’m a listener. It’s what I do, I’m a part of this world, but I go deeper than most. I don’t stay within just myself, I reach out and connect to others, without them knowing. And in that space, where I’m there, standing behind that other person, invisible and silent, they reveal themselves. They are real, they are authentic, and I am a witness to that. When you look at me, you should see more than just this one body. I’m a nexus, a hub that holds spokes to people that didn’t know they were alone. I’m weaving a web that binds and holds true. I knew about the bomb because I’m connected to Ashton, and Ashton knew about the bomb. Through him, I knew, and, for just a second, you knew too. From him, through me, to you.”

Shawna didn’t know what the fuck Danny was talking about. He’d lost it, she could see that. Whatever she’d thought of his quirky listening tick was much more sinister than she’d thought. Maybe this bomb had pushed him over the edge and he wasn’t thinking right, but Shawna suspected he was being more honest with her, even more honest with himself, than he’d ever been. But he had mentioned the name Ashton, and she latched onto that one sane buoy in the middle of his storm of insanity.

“Ashton? The guy you’d been listening to? What does he have to do with this?”

Danny's eyes widened. "But, you heard it," said Danny. "You heard him say it was gonna happen today, I know you did! You knew too!"

She thought back to what she'd heard on Danny's phone earlier that day. She'd listened to a few recordings, but there was one that was from the live stream, something from today. It'd mentioned a law center, and a time.

Overhead, the pylon displaying the names of the stores in the shopping center was visible. There were a few chain stores whose names she recognized, and a few that she didn't. Of the ones she didn't, a particular name in gold script caught her eye, "Council for Islamic Solidarity." Her eyes widened, looking at the placard. She looked back across the parking lot at the store that'd been blown open, victims scattered in front of it like so many bleeding bowling pins. It was so damaged she couldn't find any mention of a name, but she suspected she already knew it.

"You knew! You knew ahead of time that this was gonna happen!" she shrieked, "You're insane!"

She took a step back, away from Danny, and banged against the car to the right of the Lexus. "You let this happen, you could've warned people, *saved* them, but you fucking let it happen!"

She looked down at her feet, puzzling something out. "Did, did Ashton also do the mosque bombing?" she said, more to herself than Danny. "Jesus Christ, he probably did, that's what the news is saying, both done by the same person."

She glared at Danny, "And I bet you knew about that one too, didn't you! Jesus you sick *fuck!* I'm turning you in, you know that right? You're going to jail, and so is your friend Ashton. You're going to jail *forever*, I'll make sure of it."

Danny stood up from the crouching position he'd been in. "Shawna, you're mad at me, but think about it, I didn't do anything. I listened to a couple phone calls, does that make me a murderer? Like I said before, I'm a

connector, I hold people's secrets and actions, but I'm not a puppet master. Yes, there's a piece of string that ties me to Ashton, but I don't hold the controls to make him dance. He's his own man, I'm just a witness."

"That is some real bullshit and you know it. Didn't do anything? *That's the problem!* You have a responsibility to help people, and you didn't. You wheedled into Ashton's life and stumbled on something actually useful, and instead of being a real person with real feelings, you let the power trip go to your head! You got off thinking you were some kind of mystical shaman or whatever the fuck you were just saying! No, there's no wiggle room here. You are responsible for that slaughter house out there. And you're gonna pay."

As they were talking the sirens had grown louder, and now were almost piercing the air with their wails. Shawna turned away from Danny and moved up out from behind the Lexus, into the parking lot proper. There was a fleet of whirling lights coming down the street towards the shopping center. She watched as firetrucks and ambulances poured into the entryway. They filed in, then, when the trucks couldn't go any further, they stopped and the EMTs and firemen jumped out of sliding doors, off of running bars, heavy passenger doors opening and slamming shut.

Behind them, back out on the street, a cordon of police cars were assembling, blocking traffic and forming a ring around the entrance to the shopping center. It was there that Shawna headed.

"You don't know what you're doing! You don't know anything about what *I'm* doing!" shouted Danny behind her. She ignored him and kept walking along the perimeter of the lot, stepping on pieces of charred paper. There weren't any injured people this far away from the explosion, thank God, Shawna was sure she would've puked again if she had to step over dismembered arms or hands or...

She stopped that line of thought before she got nauseous. To her left she saw a break in the bushes that lined the parking lot. She stepped up the curb and through the gap; and was overwhelmed by the chaos in front of her.

The police were attempting to block and divert traffic, but there was a jam of cars that were being forced to turn around across the dividing yellow line into oncoming traffic. New oncoming traffic had been blocked off and was being forced to turn around on the far side of the police ring, but the existing traffic was still there. Many had tried to pull to the side of the road when they saw the sirens in their rearview mirrors, and had gotten snarled into a pile. A police officer at the head of the pile was gesturing to drivers to “MOVE! MOVE! PULL FORWARD!”. Until they did, the others were all stuck.

Pedestrians and gawkers that had come running at the sound of the explosion were being pushed back, coralled to the side by a few loud officers using their arms to form a barrier and wave them back.

Shawna marched to the line of officers waving the onlookers back. Coming from the bushes, she was already past the boundary they were attempting to create. The officer closest to Shawna noticed her and shouted over his shoulder, “Hey! You! Behind the perimeter, now!” He had a bulletproof vest on and a riot helmet, with its heavy duty face mask pulled down, its glare obscuring his face.

“I know who did this!” said Shawna as she approached. The officer reared back for a moment, then strided towards her saying, “I said get behind the perimeter!”

He reached out and guided her forcefully back towards the growing group of gawkers, not pushing, but not allowing any argument.

Shawna let herself be guided backwards, repeating, “I know who did this! I know who set the bomb off!”

The officer in the riot gear ignored her, looking only to keep the crowd in check. But the officer next to him looked over at what she'd said. He wasn't wearing any of the heavy duty gear the first officer was. He was a black, heavysset man, with yesterday's stubble on his face and a dropping shirt collar. Instead of yelling at the crowd, he'd been calmly waving them back, taking small steps every few moments.

"What'd you say?" he said, catching her eye.

"There was a bomb! I know who did it!"

The officer paused, then turned to his partners saying, "Keep holding them here, I'll be back."

He held out a hand to Shawna and said, "Come with me."

Shawna took the offered hand and stepped through the perimeter, out of the crowd and into the ring of operations the police had set up. Once through, the officer dropped her hand and walked next to her. He had one hand hovering behind the small of her back, not quite touching her, but enough to let her know she was going in the right direction. "I'm bringing you to my sergeant, he'll listen to you."

They approached a knot of four officers, each with more chevrons on their shoulders than the man leading Shawna. They were in a semi circle facing in, listening to another officer that had more chevrons than them.

Shawna's officer approached one of the four on the perimeter of the semi circle and quietly got his attention, saying, "Excuse me sir, I've got a woman claiming to know who did this." The officer glanced over at Shawna. He gave her a once over, and decided her blackened, trembling face was proof enough he should hear her out. He bowed out of the semi circle, and faced Shawna.

"You got a notion as to what's going on here?" he said to Shawna. His teeth clicked as he spoke, and his s's made a slight high-pitched whistle.

Shawna glanced from the sergeant's face to the officer that'd held her hand. He gave her a tired, but reassuring nod.

She nodded to the sergeant, and said, with a voice at first quiet and hesitant, but more decisive with each word, "Yes, yes, my boyfriend. He- He knew about the bomb. He *knew* it was gonna happen, he warned me just before it exploded. He's right over there, right there!" She pointed to where she'd come from in the parking lot. "I swear it's true, and he's in the parking lot, just standing there!"

The sergeant exchanged a look with the first officer, then said to Shawna, "Just in the parking lot?"

"Yes! Right there! I'm telling you he fucking did this!"

"Okay, calm down there ma'am. Tell you what, you tell us where he is, what he looks like, and we'll take a looksie. Sound okay to you?"

Shawna clasped her hands as if she were about to pray, bless us these thy gifts Amen. "Yes! He's tall, thin, bushy brown hair, uh, he's got white shoes, and I think jeans on. He's in the corner of the lot, behind a gold, uh, um, Lexus! Yes, a gold Lexus."

The Sergeant turned to the officer, "You got that Adams? Good, volunteer Martin and Espinoza to go with you."

"Yes sir," said Adams, as he turned and headed back to the picket line. By then a couple more officers had been added. He tapped the officer in riot gear on the shoulder, and another next to him. Shawna saw them fall back from the perimeter; as they did the others still on the line spread out to plug the gaps. As Adams was talking to the mandatory volunteers, she saw the officer in riot gear look at her for a moment. Then, with Adams in the lead, they turned and started for the break in the bushes.

"I'm gonna ask you to take a waltz with me for just a moment ma'am," said the sergeant, guiding her with an outstretched arm. He led her to the back door of a massive police SUV, and opened it for her. "You're

not in any trouble ma'am, in fact you're free to boogie as you please, but I'd ask you to stay here while Officer Adams tracks down your boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend anymore," said Shawna, looking at the Sergeant.

"I'd say that's a given, he doesn't sound like a handsome fella to me." He motioned for Shawna to get in the back seat, which she did. He shut the door behind her, and as he did Shawna's world constricted from a hundred yards of terror in every direction, to three feet of muted silence. The car was warm, with an oiled, tan, dashboard and black cloth seats. She closed her eyes and let her forehead fall against the steel barrier that separated the front seats from the back. She didn't want to think of Danny, but she couldn't help it. Danny, who had been to her mom's birthday party. Danny, who had picked her up from the airport. Danny, who had shared her bed. Danny, who had let that bomb go off and was now a certifiable nutjob. Danny goddamn Tanlin. She did her best to clear her head, and waited for a knock on the window.

Danny stared at the man with the beard as he squatted next to a wailing boy in a Spiderman t-shirt. The man's white shirt was flecked with red now, and had hazy smears of soot spread across it, as if it were the canvas for a charcoal sketch. He glanced at his own white sneakers, they gleamed white, as if Mr. Clean had come by and given them a shine himself. All around him were the sounds of the bomb's aftermath; a soundscape of pain and loss. And underpinning it all, audible only to Danny, was the constant hum of a passing zephyr, reaching out and touching each person in the parking lot.

Danny had never been able to articulate what he felt, what he was doing, when he listened in on other people. But Shawna and the bomb had pushed him to it. He had never imagined such connections with others

before. But now that the fishscales had dropped from his eyes he could hardly imagine it being any other way. People were living in a giant web, connected through ways they could hardly imagine. But not each person to everyone else, no, that wouldn't be a web, that'd be a snarl of stories and paths that shouldn't cross. No, most people were connected to just a few others. There were only a few, like him, that acted like hubs in the web of life. *Yes, that's what it is*, he thought, *the web of life*. Through the bomb, he'd added trailing strands of silk to each of the people in the parking lot today, all leading back and centered on him.

He took a step to his left, and in his mind's eye he could see the piano string fan of gleaming spider webs shift with him. They stretched out from his chest, hovering a few feet in the air, allowing people and cars to pass through them, until they terminated at their respective individuals. A man leaning against a wall, unaware of the thread extending from his right ribcage to Danny's chest. A woman on a gurney, placed inside an ambulance. The doors slammed, and the ambulance drove off, but still the web extended from Danny, down the street, and through the ambulance doors to the woman laying there, semi-conscious. They were all...entangled. Yes, all of them were part of a larger collection now, even if only Danny was aware of it.

As he surveyed his new connections, he noticed a group of men that were *not* entangled with him. They left a conspicuous hole in his web, a tear in its otherwise perfect pattern. He turned to face them.

There were three police officers, guns drawn and pointed at the ground, walking in formation towards him. "Sir!" the officer in front said, "I'm gonna ask you to turn around and place your hands on the back of your head."

Danny narrowed his eyes. Shawna had really done it, even after he'd explained it to her. He hadn't done anything!

Danny raised his hands and said, “You guys don’t know what’s going on! I didn’t do this!”

“Turn around!” The lead officer didn’t seem to hear what Danny had said.

“I didn’t do this! Shawna doesn’t know what she’s talking about!”

The lead officer took a step forward, he was now at the end of the Lexus, blocking off Danny’s only exit.

“I don’t give a fuck, turn around.”

Danny was starting to panic. The other two police officers were starting to raise their guns from the ground. One of them was in full riot gear for chrissakes.

Danny looked into the eyes of the lead officer. There was no hesitation in them, Danny saw an absolute certainty of control.

“You guys don’t get it,” he said, as he began to turn around, facing the street. He heard the lead officer step up behind him, and winced when his wrists were dragged together and clasped behind his back in a pair of cold handcuffs.

“Never have, never want to,” said the officer. He jerked Danny around and led him out to the two waiting officers, pushing him as they went.

“Martin, grab the other side,” said the officer in charge, and the officer in riot gear grabbed Danny’s left arm. The third officer walked a few steps behind them as they led Danny through the parking lot, holding him upright as he stumbled.

They swung left and shoved him through a break in the bushes, leading him to the circle of police cars. He was taken to a short, ruddy faced man with a belly hanging over his belt. He gave Danny a long look, from his shoes up to his face, then back down again. He gave a low whistle when he was done, then sauntered to the back of a black and white SUV. He

knocked at the tinted window, too tinted for Danny to see through it, then pointed to Danny. He waited a moment, looking at someone inside, then slowly made his way back to Danny.

“Son, you’ve been personally ID’d as a person of interest in this, whatever this is. You’re gonna take a ride with us to the station, and I think you’re gonna be there a while. You understand me?”

Danny looked at the man’s cool, blue eyes. Danny could guess who was in the back of the SUV. “I understand,” said Danny, “And I’ll do my best to make you understand too.”

“Well, I hope you do, yea, I sure hope you do. Get him outa here.” The man stepped back and gave a small circling gesture towards a cruiser a few yards away.

The officer that had cuffed him began reading him his rights as they walked. He opened the back door and folded Danny down into the rear seat. “Do you understand your rights as they’ve been told to you?”

Danny was about to answer when the door was slammed shut on him. He shifted, his wrists were uncomfortable where the metal cuffs dug into his skin. Off in the distance, he thought, looking towards the parking lot, he could still make out a blot of white.

The detective leaned back in his metal chair and let his clipboard drop against the steel gray table. He held his paper coffee cup to his lips and slurped, twice. His eyes never left Danny’s, even as the steam from the coffee fogged his wire-rimmed glasses.

The detective was thin, with a deeply lined face and large saucer eyes. His hair had decamped to the sides and back of his head, and he wore a sports coat over a denim shirt and jeans. He could’ve just come from teaching third period U.S. History.

He slowly put his coffee down on the table, as if it was a precision maneuver that could end in disaster if not executed properly. He held his hand around the cup's rim for a second after setting it on the table, then withdrew it and folded his hands together in his lap. He cocked his head at Danny, sitting handcuffed across the table from him. He ignored the little man in a brown suit sitting next to Danny, who had a worn briefcase sitting on the table in front of him, both hands laying flat upon its face.

“So,” the detective said, “it says there you’re a nexus, a hub of connections to the whole human race.” He nodded at the clipboard. “Why don’t you go ahead and tell me what that means.”

Danny took a breath to answer, but the man next to him interrupted. “Detective Sawyer, we’ve been over this already. That has absolutely no relevancy to keeping my client in jail. Your only claim is that he knew about the bombing ahead of time. Your own witness, such as she is, says that Danny didn’t plan it, that it was someone else entirely. There are no good samaritan laws in California, my client had absolutely no obligation to report the crime. I suggest you spend your time investigating the real criminal in this case, not an innocent bystander.

“Now, are we free to go, or are you going to charge Mr. Tanlin?”

The detective looked up at the ceiling, his pupils constricting against the fluorescent overhead lights. He sighed, and said, “Mr. Tanlin, such as he is, is accused of committing an invasion of privacy with an electronic listening device. Eavesdropping, in other words. So no, he is not currently free to go, though I’m sure you’ll extricate him soon enough, it’s a small enough fine.

“Now,” he leaned forward, letting the front legs of his chair stab into the concrete floor. “As I say this, I’m overstepping the confines of my role as a detective, but I think it needs to be articulated.” Sawyer looked Danny

in the eyes. The detective's eyes were watering at the edges, but not from looking at the lights.

“You are not a nexus. You are not a hub. You are a sick man that could have saved the lives of twelve men, women, and children. But instead, you chose to bask in your own myopic stupidity. You think you're connected to the world, but you've mistaken your para-social voyeurism for the real deal. You need a wake up call, and I pray you get it.”

He stood up, swept his clipboard and coffee cup off the table, and rapped on the door leading from the room. A buzzer sounded, and he walked through, letting it slam behind him.

Danny sat on the stoop of his apartment, watching Shawna haul the last few boxes to her car. The sky was orange, turning into a deep violet. The front door was open, leading upstairs to a now half empty bedroom. As she traipsed by him, he said, “I told you I didn't do anything.”

She tossed the boxes into her passenger seat and glared at him.

“Technically you didn't really do anything either,” he said to her. “Not to catch Ashton. None of my recordings were admissible.”

“I did do something Danny, I told the police about Ashton, and that was enough. They found more than enough evidence on that shitbag to put him away for life, even without your recordings. But I'll never forget how you looked *squirming* in your chair when they played those recordings in front of you, for the whole room to hear. That just about killed you. I wish it had.”

He didn't say anything back to her.

She walked around to her driver's side door and opened it. She stood with one leg poised in the car. “Goodbye Danny, I hope you rot in Hell.”

She got in and turned the car on, backed up, and pulled forward, around the corner, out of sight.

Danny sat in silence for a few minutes, looking about at the vine covered walls of the neighboring apartment homes, breathing in the scent of jasmine on the evening air.

Then, through an open window he heard a man ask, “Honey, what’s for dinner?”

He sat up a little straighter, and deep inside himself, felt the first breaths of a warm breeze begin to stir.