

D.J. THIELKE

Persons of Interest

My next-door neighbor secretly interviews herself. She prefers to imagine talking with Johnny Carson, but she settles for David Letterman, Oprah, and, sometimes, Ricki Lake—though you can tell she thinks she’s too good for Ricki Lake.

I first hear her in the kitchen one afternoon, when I’m eating a bowl of stale Chex Mix with milk and trying to figure out how to make the coffee maker stop beeping. My wife Delia sets it when she gets up and goes to work in the morning, and leaves it beeping all day while she’s gone. Most of the time I sleep through it, but by 2 or 3 p.m. I start dreaming about bombs and car alarms and searching for things that I can never, ever find. When I complained about it, she said, “What, you can’t figure out how to shut it off yourself?” Which, yes, I could, but that’s not the point, is it?

But I’m a good sport, and when I decide the best method is just to unplug it, I hear: “Thank you for having me, Johnny, it’s an honor to be here.”

I look around, thinking Del also left the TV on, but there’s no TV sounds—no tinned laughter, no transition music, no bantering co-host or a host at all. All I hear is this high tittering

voice, telling a story about when her son Paulie was three and decided he had to learn how to ride a bike—at three! The voice is coming through the drywall behind the cabinets, so I eat my bowl of sort-of cereal sitting on the counter to hear the rest, which is, as expected, that her kid got his arm broken. But it was interesting, the way she told it, and I sit there for a good hour, feeling relieved from my normal afternoon wandering. Del is always hassling me about getting out during the daylight, getting some sun, and for a while I would walk to the nearby high school to watch the lacrosse team hustle and juggle around, but someone must have noticed, because the coach started standing near the fence and eyeing me between plays. Listening to my neighbor is perfect. She doesn’t even know I’m there.

When my wife gets home a few hours later, I ask her about next door.

“Mrs. Rider? No, Mrs. Reicheck or something,” Delia says, unzipping her skirt, stepping out of it, starting to unbutton her blouse. Her pantyhose go up and over her navel, making her belly button look like a vacuum-sealed grape.

“She lives with her son?” I ask.

Del makes a face both thoughtful and annoyed. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen a son.”

She looks at me, at my boxers, at the combined effect of me, in my boxers, on the couch. “You send out any résumés today?”

Which is an adorable question in an *Are You Crazy?* kind of a way. Do I expect her to be sending out résumés while she sleeps? But I can’t say that, so I say, “Not today.”

She sighs and drapes her clothes over one arm, like a waiter in a fancy restaurant. I can tell she’s trying not to say something, too, which I appreciate, but instead she says, “What’s for dinner?”

Which is almost as bad.

Right now, I’m working night shift as a security guard for a parking complex downtown. Mostly my job is walking women to their cars, yelling at skateboarders, and digging kittens out from under the hoods of cars. There must be a million strays that just drop their kittens off here, like the cat version of a baby at a firehouse, and the kittens always climb up into the parked cars. They like to get in by the engine for warmth, but then I’m standing there for a good half hour or longer until the owner of the car comes out and pops the hood for me. I must drive twenty, thirty kittens a year to the shelter, and all they do is hiss and try to bite my fingers through my gloves.

It’s not exactly my dream job, not exactly taking advantage of my business degree, but it’s fine, it’s work, and I like the people. There’s three of us guards on graveyard: Me, Wendell, and Sharon. Wendell is just out of high school, an ex-wrestler who’s always complaining about how

fat he’s getting, and Sharon is a woman, who, if she were an animal, would be a crow. I don’t say that as like a mean thing, I say that because it’s one of those things you can’t stop thinking about once you notice it. Sometimes the janitors stop by the guard booth, too, when they get off, and they kind of remind me of a gang—not like a real gang, but like those gangs in *Grease*, jostling each other around, cracking jokes, screaming when someone messes up their gelled hair. Like tonight, when Wendell and I are in the booth for a break, Julio, our favorite, comes in and starts telling a story about one of the others. Seems like this one guy caught his girl masturbating to a picture of a famous actor. No big deal, right? Except it wasn’t just a picture of the actor in a tux or whatever, it was a picture of the actor when he was playing an elf. Not even Elf like *Lord Of The Rings* Elf. Like Elf Santa Elf.

“You looking for someone with more curves?” says Wendell. He laughs at a joke he’s about to tell, then tells it: “Why not fuck Mrs. Claus?”

“Mrs. Claus—yo, why not? You know she probably needs it, Santa ain’t seen his dick in about a hundred years.”

We’re laughing and Sharon walks in and laughs like she knows what we’re laughing about and when we stop, she says, “What are we laughing about?”

“Masturbating to Christmas movies,” Wendell says.

Sometimes I feel bad for Sharon, all of us getting quiet when she walks in, but the alternative is her knowing how gross we are, which she does

now, and Julio has to tell the story again, but a little cleaner. She laughs after and shrugs.

“Elf, actor,” Sharon says, and smiles. “It’s all fantasy, right?”

Which is true, actually. I keep thinking about that for a couple days afterward: all these famous people, they’re all getting paid to pretend to be something, even if it’s just shiny, well dressed versions of themselves. But the funny thing about Mrs. Reicheck is she’s not anyone else, not anybody famous, in her fantasy interviews. She’s a housewife though her husband’s dead, a mother though her kids don’t visit, exactly the little old lady she is.

“Oh, just silly me,” she says, probably to some generous comment from Johnny and a swell of audience applause. “Nothing special, just silly old me.”

And isn’t there something amazing about that? About not pretending?

I think so, but I make the mistake of telling Delia. I ordered Chinese and we’re passing take-out boxes back and forth so she shouldn’t be pissy about anything, but we’re quiet, ugly quiet, and I tell her just to fill the silence.

“Creepy,” Delia says after.

“Come on,” I say. “She’s just a sweet old lady.”

“Not her, you, listening in. Have you ever thought about how she would feel if she knew you were listening in?”

The answer is no, I hadn’t thought about it, but can we take a minute to remember exactly who is calling *me* creepy? My wife works in the

HR department for a giant plastics company. Her job is to look at the Facebook profiles of applicants and make hiring recommendations. Sometimes she tells me the stuff she finds: one girl applied for a position in research and seemed totally normal, wore a cardigan and glasses, but then Del goes online and sees a picture of this girl pressing her thonged ass to another girl’s. I could remind Delia that looking at pictures of cardigan girl’s ass is hardly vanilla, but am I trying to pick a fight?

I say, “I don’t think she’d care,” in a nice voice, and then think of something better: “I think she’d like it. She probably wants someone to hear.”

“And you’re such a great listener.” A snow pea slides between her chopsticks, plops wetly on her plate.

When I first lost my job, Delia redid my Facebook profile, just in case I interviewed somewhere with someone like her. She deleted all wall posts that said anything with four letters, whittled down my interests to the mundane and conversational, untagged pictures from college where I was drunk or looked drunk. She even changed my profile picture, from one where I was tailgating to another so blandly professional—the stiff white shirt, the tie, the smile—that I always imagine “pussy” written across my forehead. I know she was trying to help, but what’s the point of a profile if it’s not even you?

The morning after I tell her about listening to Mrs. Reicheck, I hear Delia outside the

bathroom as I'm getting out of the shower. She's talking about me on the phone to her sister and I'm pretty sure she wants me to hear. First of all, since when does she call her sister at 7 a.m.? And second of all, acoustically speaking, she must be right next to the door. Actually, she must have her face against the crack.

"He's obsessed with this old woman because—surprise surprise—she's a total throwback. You can picture her sitting over there in heels, pearls, apron like—yes! Mrs. Beaver! Wait, no, Beaver was the kid's name, what was the—no, come on, Huxtable was—shit, point is, she's a throwback motherly type."

Which is an unkind thing to say, and unfair. My liking Mrs. Reicheck has nothing to do with her being a throwback, or motherly. I like Mrs. Reicheck because she's honest, and tough.

Is she lonely? Of course she's lonely, she says, and says it just like that—no shame, no self-pity. Her kids don't call, she tells the host, but they're busy, poor things, and her husband, God rest his soul, was a shitbag when he was alive. Not that she says shitbag, she just talks about him "straying" and her older brother having to go dig his sorry ass out of a "love nest." The verbiage breaks my heart as much as the story, and, a few times that afternoon, I want to shout questions or encouragement through the wall. Instead, I start pretending I'm the host.

I think at the wall, *But didn't you ever want to leave that shitbag?*

And, I swear, it's almost like she can hear me, because that's when she sighs and says, "Things

were different then. We believed in supporting our husbands, whether they deserved it or not."

At work, there's a call over the radio that one of the lawyers needs an escort to her car and I'm the only one in the booth. I don't mind walking women to their cars, in theory. But the problem is, I can tell the women hate it. Like they know it's smart but hate that they have to be smart, or know they're scared but hate that they're scared. The women are always really impatient for you to get there, and then really impatient to get to their car, and they always walk a half a step in front of you in dead silence.

I can tell that's exactly how tonight is going to go. The woman in a pinstripe skirt suit must hear me walking towards her but she doesn't look up from her phone until I could have snatched it, if I wanted to.

"I got in late today," the woman says, kind of jerking her shoulders to get her bag higher. "So I got screwed with a parking spot way on the other side."

"No problem," I say. "I don't mind."

The woman starts walking like she's thinking, Well, it's your job, isn't it? but it could just be her face under the lights. We have these big yellow lamps dangling every ten or fifteen feet, giving off a dull and mucousy light, and in between them the overlap of shadows makes everyone look swarthy or skittish.

Like the shadow, rapid and rat-like, that darts in front of us now.

Pinstripes gasps and loses her stride, almost

runs sideways into me. I put out a hand to steady her but that makes her jump back the other way, so I change directions, point, say, “Quick, look!”

She does, just in time to see the kitten, black with white paws that look almost separate from its body when running, claw its way up a tire and disappear inside an SUV. Pinstripes lets loose a laugh or something like it. I see her shoulders release as her hand comes to her chest.

“Shit,” she says, and laughs again. “Shit, God, shit, that scared me!”

I laugh along with her now, we’re laughing together, her manicured hand pressing against her chest, fingers fiddling with some small gold thing on a chain.

“Sorry,” she says after the laugh settles. “And thanks.”

“No worries,” I say, happy to mean it. We start walking again but only about get about two steps before she stops, her face turned serious again.

“Are you just going to leave it there? The cat?”

I promise I’ll return for it as soon as I get her to her car. When we do get there, to the car, I stand away and watch her get in—the way her body leans one way to fold her legs in, then the other to dump her bag on the front seat, the way she tosses her hair to get it out of the seatbelt’s way.

“Nice.” I turn and see Wendell coming over, his eyebrows up. “Who’s she?”

“One of the lawyers,” I say without looking at him.

“Fuck, man,” he says, dipping his voice lower. “You always get the good calls. And here

I was hauling my fat ass after some fucking skateboarders.”

Pinstripes’ car starts and eases out of its spot. Her hand rises in a quick, flicking wave of thanks as she pulls out and I raise mine in answer, annoyed when I see Wendell doing the same.

Our apartment building is a newly built pink stucco deal, has a remote controlled gate and open-air parking. It’s a nice place, though I knew moving was hard on Delia. What I didn’t know was that she thought the move was humiliating. I hear her say that—“humiliating”—on the phone to her sister this morning, and it seems a little harsh to me. Yes, we had been renting a house, a house we could no longer afford. Yes, we had planned on starting a family sooner than later. But humiliating?

“This whole Have It All thing, I mean, how fair is that to women?” she says on the other side of the bathroom door. “So, what, I’m supposed to pick up the paycheck slack for you *and* still be the little woman around the house? He actually asked me to make him a sandwich last night. I mean, are you serious? Can you be more of a stereotype? Make me a sandwich, woman! Make it yourself! Baaaah Luu-seeee! And all this after I’ve been working all day, I mean, come on!”

To which I think: You and me both, sugartits.

Not that I ever call my wife sugartits—or “woman,” for that matter.

Not out loud. But it felt good to think. Because did anyone ask me if I wanted to lose my job? Did they ask if I wanted the company I worked for

to downsize, and then find that the market was overflowing with white-collar business degrees, and then find that I had no skill set or experience whatsoever?

I'm still pissed off about it after I wake up in the afternoon and pace in the kitchen thinking about what I might say to her through a bathroom door.

Like I might say, *Let's look at these gender roles you supposedly hate.*

Because have I ever screamed for you to come stomp on a cockroach?

Have I ever claimed to be an expert in your computer? Have I ever called you over to bitch when Norton AntiVirus interrupts my Google search?

And do I expect you to know every possible thing that might be wrong with the car and act offended when you don't know how to change a tire?

You don't seem to mind gender roles, then, princess, I think with satisfaction. When Mrs. Reicheck's voice appears, she's right with me, telling another story about her husband, God rest, and one of his lies.

Tell me about it, I think at her and go into that morning's sandwich story, half of which was pure fiction—*pure fiction!* I emphatically think. Like it wasn't like I was sitting around and she was sitting around and I asked her to get up and make me a sandwich. She was making herself a sandwich so I asked her to make me one, too. It's not like I never handle dinner. It's not like I hadn't just ordered Chinese. *Was that really so outrageous?* I think at Mrs. Reicheck. *Was it really so insensitive to say, Hey, let's take turns giving each*

other disappointing meals?

I hear her soft sigh on the other side of the wall. She says, "There's really no end to the ways other people let you down, Johnny. There's no end at all."

Julio says that there's this new gang initiation, one of his cousins told him about, where you have to kill somebody with something they own—like take their keys and ram it into their throat. Which is what Julio says he would do if he had to.

"It's solid, man," he says while we weigh whether or not this would actually work. "Everybody's got keys, you just have to really gouge them in there."

Julio makes a swift punching and twisting motion, but Wendell's already shaking his head. "Around here? They've all got guns you could take, no need to make it hard on yourself," he says.

"Everybody's got guns except the security guards, huh?" Julio says. Wendell plays like he's about to jump up and Julio plays like he's ready but they're smiling. "Christ knows you never make it hard on yourself, lazy fuck."

"I don't make it hard on myself, I make it hard on your girl," Wendell says.

Then all of a sudden, here's Sharon, bolting in, making a low grunty sound. You can just see a yellow kitten, head no bigger than a tennis ball, gnawing on her cupped fists before she tosses it, probably rougher than she meant to, into the small kennel we keep under the desk. Wendell

mutters something about pussy and Sharon smiles at him, which makes me pretty sure she didn't hear him right.

"I'm definitely a dog person," she says. And then, because no one is saying anything, she says, "What are y'all talking about?"

"Gang initiations," Wendell says, and Sharon's eyes get wide.

"I hear there's a new one," she says. "Some gang up from Mexico where, if a guy is alone in a bathroom, they'll cut off his penis and let him bleed to death."

This is surprising—the story, and that Sharon says it. Right away she starts blushing, maybe because she said penis or maybe because she said something about Mexico in front of Julio.

"Damn," Julio says eventually. "That's fucked up."

"Don't worry," Wendell says. "You'd have to have a dick to cut off."

If Delia has something to say that morning, I don't hear it. I zip through a five-minute shower and come out dripping. She walks into our room with the phone nestled into her ear and makes it halfway to the bathroom before she sees me, drying myself on the other side of the bed.

You should have seen her, I think at Mrs. Reicheck after I've woken up. The phone almost slipped from her shoulder, she was so surprised. So I raised my eyebrows like I'm asking who's on the phone and—it was hilarious!—I could see her thinking, does she admit that she's been making up these phone calls, or does she keep up the act?

She definitely kept up the act, mouthing her

sister's name and going back out in the kitchen to finish her "conversation." When she came back, I was already under the sheets, trying to keep my breathing slow and not snicker. Even Delia's not enough of a bitch to wake me up after working graveyard, so she had to leave without getting in her normal jabs.

It was hilarious! I think at Mrs. Reicheck again, and I really expect her story to be about something equally buoyant, like my excitement is infectious enough to permeate the walls.

But Mrs. Reicheck and I are not on the same page today, not on the same page at all. She's kind of down, I can tell, talking about her daughter going to California to visit a friend even though she had half-promised last Christmas she'd come stay with Mrs. Reicheck for at least a few days when she had enough vacation time stored up at work.

"No, I don't believe she's angry at me," I hear her say, "not about that. She has to know that I just wanted her to confide in me, to be honest with me."

She goes on to tell a story about her daughter taking a break from college a few years ago, a happy time because her daughter came home for a semester, but hard, too, because she suspected her daughter had been raped. Her daughter didn't say anything to her about it, but got very defensive when Mrs. Reicheck suggested setting her up with the son of a friend, and moved out soon after, and there was a story on the news around the same time about men who waited for women under their cars and isn't it a scary

world to think about children being out in? It's a scary world and hardly anything anyone can do to keep the ones they love safe.

I pace around the apartment after that, feeling like my thoughts can't settle. Basically, Mrs. Reicheck got me thinking about the shitty world and that got me wondering about the last time Delia and I weren't snapping at each other. And I can't think of the last time. So when Del gets home, I suggest we go out to dinner, somewhere nice.

"Where?" she says. She's kind of pouting, kind of suspicious, but I can tell she's willing to be warmed up to the idea.

"Anywhere," I say. "Wherever you want."

She looks around, and I know she's thinking of all the reasons not to, but I also know she's hoping I'll tell her to forget those reasons.

"Go on," I say. "Put on something nice, we deserve a night out."

"This is nice," she says, but then she goes and puts on a party dress she's been waiting to wear and freshens her make-up and is chatty on the drive over.

We go to Pappadeaux, which used to be our date spot. It's not cheap, but it's not crazy expensive either, and they have crawfish boiled to the pink of freshly slapped flesh. We smile at each other, lips slicked with oil, and then Del hides her mouth with the back of her hand, as if so say, Don't watch me suck the head, please. She used to do the same thing when she was drunk and we were first dating in college. She used to turn away

from me to puke, asking between gags if I would please get the fuck out please, but she liked that I wouldn't. Del was beautiful even then, and she is beautiful, I still think so. She's the only person I've ever seen whose bottom eyelashes are as long as the top ones. Some mornings she has to separate the corners with her pinkies—they get tangled when she sleeps.

When we're done, we wipe our fingers with warm, lemon-scented wipes, lean back in our chairs, and communicate in groans. When the check comes, I lay down my debit card, but we both know it's to our joint account, and we both know it's mostly her money in that account, and even though she's being a champ about it, I feel a dark mood settle in, the heaviness in my gut turning heavier.

I have to get to work, so Delia drives and drops me off.

"Everything good?" she asks when I hop out.

And I want to tell her, Actually, everything's shit. I want to tell her that I know it's stupid to be upset that she makes more money than me, but, hey, I'm stupid, and it's a feeling too deep to fix. I want to tell her that working at the parking garage freaks me out, and that I hate getting dropped off, like a fucking kid, while she's going to go home alone, no one there to double check that she's put the chain across the door, no one to slide under the covers beside her in the dark. I want to tell her how much I fucking miss watching her separate her eyelashes in the morning. I want to tell her but how can I, leaning in the passenger window to say goodnight? What can I say?

I say, "Everything's great." And kiss her goodbye.

A few nights later, Pinstripes, the late working lawyer, needs to be walked to her car again. Wendell groans when she requests me, specifically, by name.

She's not wearing Pinstripes this time, though that's still how I think of her, but a pale beige suit, the legs wide and floaty, like twin spotlights on her massive high heels. Delia would roll her eyes at shoes like that, but that's also because Del's a bit of a klutz and couldn't stand up for two minutes in Pinstripe's shoes. The dinner out with Del has brought a few mornings reprieve from the complaints outside the bathroom door, but now every night she comes home and looks around disappointed, like she thought there was something to look forward to and there isn't. She tries not to let me see that's she's disappointed, but I see it.

Pinstripe's gives a lot friendlier of a hello this time and the two of us make small talk about the weather. The silence that falls during the walk is awkward but not tense awkward.

"So, you work for a law firm?" I say.

"Yeah," she says.

"They keep y'all late," I say.

She doesn't answer at first, then sighs, says, "It's a competitive field."

"Tell me about it," I say. I start to tell her about getting laid off, but that's probably more like a third, fourth walk-to-the-car story. "I don't know how you do it," I say, just because I feel the

need to say something.

But Pinstripes surprises me, says, "I don't know how *you* do it."

"Sorry?" I say.

"This place, late at night?" she shivers dramatically. "Seems like the set up for a *Law and Order* episode."

I laugh. "Yeah, it can be kind of creepy." And then I am very conscious of the sound our footsteps make, the hard thud of my boots, the hurried clatter of her high heels, the echoes that bounce back to us from the concrete. It's easy to imagine another set of footsteps behind ours, following ours.

"A daughter of my friend got raped," I say.

And, yes, as soon as I say it, I know it wasn't a good thing to say.

Pinstripes misses a step, then says, "How horrible."

"It is horrible," I say. "And it happens, just like that."

"Horrible," she says again, and she's walking faster, her heels really walloping on the concrete, and I know I should let it go, but I plow ahead and tell her about some guy waiting under the daughter's car and everything, and I should definitely shut up but something makes me want to warn her, makes it important that I keep going, so I say, "There's a new gang initiation—"

"I just said this place freaks me out," she cuts me off. She kind of shouts over her shoulder a few feet in front of me, "I just said that!"

"Hey, no, it's OK." I start jogging to catch up but she jogs faster so I can't.

"I'm right over there," she says, which is the sign that she wants me to stop, doesn't want me too close when she opens her door in case I bum rush her or something, and that's fine, I get that, but I don't want to leave her freaked out.

"Hey, look." I drop to my belly.

What am I doing?

I'm trying to be a good guy.

I say, "I'll check for you." I say, "Which one is yours?"

"I'm fine." I hear from farther away.

"No, tell me," I crawl forward a little bit, trying to skirt an old oil stain. I can see under the row of cars and there's no one there until Pinstripe's heels run up next to one. I stay on my belly as those heels disappear—one, then the other—into the driver's side and she starts the ignition. She squeals out, doesn't even raise a thank-you hand, doesn't even look at me, and guns for the exit.

I raise myself up, beat at the crud on my work uniform, try not to feel pissed. Because, hey, I get it. Who's to say that I'm safer than some asshole hiding under her car? Who's to say that I'm not myself a psycho rapist who stole a security guard uniform? But really, if I were a psycho rapist who stole a security guard uniform, couldn't I have already had her? Especially Pinstripes, with those stupid super high heels, and her phone always out and easy to snatch, and no one but the two of us, only our two footsteps? Couldn't I, if I had wanted to?

•

There's a news program on where the host

interviews the most important people of the moment. One night there's an actress who's getting remarried. Then a baseball player who got caught doping. Then some YouTube celebrity.

They're never particularly good people, I notice, because Mrs. Reicheck points it out. In the afternoon, she criticizes the host's choices: "In my day, staying in a marriage was more impressive," she says. And, "In my day, heroism required some selflessness." And, "In my day, you didn't just offer your life out there for anyone to take."

I try to get Delia to watch the show with me—it comes on right before I leave for work—but she's bored by it, I can tell. I can tell because she starts asking me about résumés again during the commercial breaks. Which seems like a low blow, just to get control of the remote back.

"I'm just asking," she says when I accuse her of this and toss, with maybe a little bit too much force, the TV remote in her lap. She gapes at me, at the remote, then picks it up and waves it around. "Though I don't know why I bother. When have you ever said, yeah, I actually did something today?"

In my day, I imagine Mrs. Reicheck saying, *we supported our husbands*.

"And I'm the bad guy?" Delia says, "Because I want you to find a better job? Because I want our lives to pick back up where you dropped them?"

I have to leave soon and I don't want to leave pissed, so I put my hand on her thigh, just to try to chill her out. But she smacks it off, like I was trying to do something else. "You don't care," she

says. "You've just given up."

It pisses me off—her hand, that smack—and then all the questions, the accusations, the fight that we've been putting off just comes ripping out. She's screaming about our debt because I work for shit and I'm screaming she didn't seem to mind the debt when it was for her dream wedding and then she's screaming I'm not the person she married, she can barely stand to touch me and I'm screaming that's pretty fucking obvious since God knows when's the last time she tried and she says I've given up again and I say she's given up on me.

"Why are we doing this?" Delia sniffs after we've blown ourselves into a dull, mean silence. Tears sit on those eyelashes and I can't look at them or her. "I mean, really, why are we even doing this?"

And nobody—not her, not me, not a gentle voice on the other side of the wall who probably heard every word—has an answer for that.

Sharon can see I'm in a pissy mood and suggests I do the perimeter walk, she can take the calls. I start wandering the levels and see Wendell alone in a corner, standing in a crouched fighting position. Every once in a while he'll lunge and quick jab at nothing before dancing back. He seems embarrassed when he sees me watching but runs over, smiling and pretend-boxing with each stride, like he's not embarrassed.

"Hey," he says. "You read that email from the Super?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Wants to talk to us about our behavior with some of the tenants?"

"I read it," I say, because I did read it, not because I want to talk about it.

"What's that about?" Wendell says. "You think—" but then he pauses and cocks his head, both of us alert to a whistling sound. A loud, harsh whistling sound. We take off towards it, and it surprises me that Wendell pulls ahead, since he is getting fat, and disappears down the ramp before me.

"Hey," I hear Wendell say, and again, louder, "Hey!"

When I get to the level below, Wendell is standing in front of a woman. My first thought is, She's chained up? But she's not, she's just wearing a fancy pocketbook with a chain strap and a skirt suit and high heels. My second thought is, Pinstripes? It's not, but this woman jumps, too, her whistle giving another breathy squawk, when I come up next to her.

"What's going on?" I say.

But Wendell barely notices me. He's tense, head down and body forward, one hand by his side as if reaching for a holster, the other aiming his flashlight at the bottom of a car. I get out my flashlight and do the same.

"Come out!" Wendell yells. "I said come out, now!"

"Chill, man! Chill!" says a voice.

One sneakered foot comes out from under the car, so dark at first I think it's a rat. Then the other. Then a set of knees.

"Is this your vehicle?" Wendell says, though

we all know the answer.

“No,” says the voice half under the car. His feet walk the rest of his body out, a skateboard under his back like a mechanic’s dolly. After more scooting and fumbling he stands, a teenager, and fiddles with his sweatshirt. “I was just—”

“Stay back,” Wendell says, his arm reaching out in front of the woman. He’s still tense but there’s something in his voice that makes me think he’s also loving it, absolutely loving playing the hero, and this pisses me off.

“It’s not like that,” the kid says. He’s kind of jerking around, holding his chest, and then staggers a step forward.

“I said stay there,” Wendell yells again.

“Yo, it’s not like that!” The kid’s voice echoes across the level.

And it’s clear then that there’s definitely something off about him—can’t Wendell see that?—because he’s not staying back, he keeps jerking towards us, and his one hand on his chest is really gripping it now. What would he be holding like that? What sort of weapon could you hold like that? It still doesn’t make sense when the kid yells, “Fuck!” and tips back like he’s about to burst open. The woman screams and Wendell steps in front of her and that’s when

I realize I’m moving. When I started moving, I don’t know, but I am and I’m moving towards the kid and I’ve got my flashlight raised above my head and feel the dull thud of it, of its collision, and his head jerks sideways from the impact, starts to fall back and I fall, too.

Then the kid’s back on the ground, groaning, under me, and I see it—a cat, a kitten—a bright orange meteor rips out of the top of the kid’s sweatshirt, explodes onto the concrete with a scattered, panicked clicking of nails. Wendell’s next to me, crouching, grabbing at the kid and then letting go immediately. Wendell draws back and there’s a bright red smear on his hands. Wendell starts swearing and the kid, groaning, the woman, whimpering, all of us, there, in the dingy yellow light.

All I want is go home. All I want is to go home and crawl into bed and shake my wife awake. I want her to ask me what’s wrong and rub her hand over my chest and tell me it’s OK, everything’s OK. I want to wrap her in both arms and hold her and keep her safe, protect her, be a man who can protect her. I want to close my eyes against the dark and fall asleep and wake up in the morning and what, tell me what, could be so wrong with that? 