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## Animals

It's nearly lunchtime and the woman on the phone is getting snippy, so I intentionally flub a word. "I know this must be fistering for you."

"I beg your pardon?" she says.

"Fistering. Fisterating?"

"Do you mean 'frustrating'?"

"Yes—I mean that. I use the wrong word sometimes," I tell her, just as I've been taught to say. My confession will cause her temper to subside.

"But your English is really quite good," she says.

"Thank you," I tell her. "You are kind."

"It's the truth, Raj. Have you ever been to America?" She calls me Raj because she believes it's my name. Because I told her it is.

"No, Josephine," I tell her. That's her name—Josephine Sanders. "Though one of my cousin attends U.C.L.A. He likes America very much."

I know nothing about this woman other than her name, phone number, and computer model, but I sense she isn't a bad person. Certainly, her frustration is warranted. The CD-ROM drive on her new computer shouldn't already be failing.

"There's a lot to like," she says. "Not everything, but a lot. You should visit your cousin if you get the chance."

I thank her again and feel glad that we're being civil now.

"So tell me," the woman says, "where about in India are you guys located?" She's speaking to me as if to an acquaintance who might someday become her friend. It wouldn't be hard to convince myself that she's lonely.

I tell her that the HCC call center is located in a small city named Veraval, on India's western shoreline. "It's traditionally a fishing port," I explain, "but we are attempting to modernize."

I would never have known about that distant city's existence had it not been circled in red marker on the map handed to us at orientation. The map is tacked to my cubicle along with various memos and reminders, a photograph of my parents, and another photograph of Pongo, the Doberman Pinscher I grew up with in Red Bank, New Jersey, and who is now buried in my parents' backyard.

"Everyone tries to modernize," the woman says. "It doesn't always lead to happiness."

"I know you're right," I tell her, because we're supposed to agree with the customer whenever feasible. I then repeat my feelings of personal sorrow that the CD-ROM drive on her Handel computer has stopped whirring, and I

offer another apology for being unable to get it whirring again despite the twenty minutes we've spent together on the telephone, not to mention the thirty or more that she spent on hold prior to our conversation.

"I know this must be very . . . *frustrating*," I say, as if forcing my tongue into a new, baffling position, "but if you would hold for a moment, I'll transfer you to a scheduling agent, who will schedule an appointment for a service technician in your area to come to your home."

"I'd appreciate that," she says. "I'm in the middle of writing my doctoral dissertation, and I desperately need a working computer at home."

"Really? What's your subject?" Without meaning to, I've veered off-script and spoken way too informally. But I couldn't help it. A Ph.D. takes years to obtain, and I'm always bowled over by people with the luck and stamina to see their plans through.

"Sociology," she says, apparently unaware of my change in syntax. "I'm studying workplace stress in Memphis—that's a city in Tennessee—and the way that people react to it differently across gender and racial lines."

"I know where is Memphis," I say, overdoing it a little now. "Elvis Presley. Graceland."

"That's right," she says.

But Elvis holds no interest for me. "How long have you been writing your dissertation?"

"Six months," she says. "But I've been collecting data for years. It's become my whole life."

"Your study is very important," I tell her.

"I used to think so," she says. "Now I just want it finished. I've become a horrible person to be around. At night I dream about data files. Or about murdering my dissertation director." She laughs, but I can tell she doesn't think anything is funny. "And yes, I'm aware of the irony. Do you know what I mean by that, Raj?"

Because I find myself wanting her to like me, I answer her question the way I imagine a bright, bilingual man named Raj from Veraval would: "Irony? I believe so. You are studying workplace stress, and your work is causing you stress." When I get it right—the answer, the accent, the syntax—I *feel* like Raj, an optimistic upstart from Veraval, a young and ambitious cog in the wheel of international commerce. I imagine him carrying a briefcase to work. I feel glad for him.

"You got that right, amigo." She sighs into the phone. "Look, you sound like a nice guy, but I really need that computer to work. It's kind of a big deal."

"I understand," I tell her, disappointed to be getting back on script. But it's just as well. Today is Catfish Wednesday, and on Catfish Wednesday you have to beat the crowd. My bank of cubicles abuts the employee cafeteria, and my stomach is growling in response to the deep fryer. "I'm glad to help. Thank you for calling Handel Computers, Josephine. I'll transfer you now to a scheduling agent."

And because her problem is not a Critical Operating System Error, I do exactly what I've been trained to do. I hang up on her.

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Training was a two-week affair in January. That was ten months ago, when I was desperate for work. To summarize: I'd come South for veterinary school, flunked out but didn't tell my family or friends back North, then decided to stick around so I could reapply the following year as an in-state resident. The dean said my chances for readmission were 50/50, which were about the best odds I'd ever been given for anything.

On our first day at Arihant, we twenty new hires followed our team leader to a windowless classroom deep in the bowels of the building, where we learned about the telephone system and call-tracking software, and about the Handel Computer Corporation, the Seattle company that was outsourcing its customer service and tech support to us. The next two days, we received rudimentary training in PC support.

The following Monday morning began with a biscuit-and-gravy breakfast for the eighteen of us who'd made it successfully through the first week. A tall woman who looked a little like Christie Whitman rushed into the room, whammed the door shut behind her, and introduced herself as Margaret Lighthouse, our CEO. After presenting her brief biography—Wharton Business School, executive positions here and there—she handed out confidentiality statements for us to sign. Her eyes narrowed as she explained the severe repercussions of revealing company secrets—dismissal, criminal prosecution, the works.

Did she frighten any of us away? Not a chance. Not in this recession. We needed the work.

After collecting the forms, she smiled as if

seeing us for the first time, shut off the lights, and began a Power Point presentation about the history of the American customer service industry. Projected onto the white screen were dry statistics about the loss of American jobs and the number of call centers being established overseas, where wages were low and employee motivation high.

“Riveting stuff,” I whispered to the middle-aged woman beside me. She moved her chair away.

Margaret Lighthouse flipped on the lights, causing us all to blink and sit up a little straighter. “So now I have one of those company secrets to tell you about,” she said, and winked.

Five minutes later, people were grinning. They tittered nervously. An elderly gentleman in a crisp suit muttered, “Holy shit,” which caused more titters.

Fortified with an amazing secret, strong company coffee, and the knowledge that we were being paid for our time, we spent the next five days learning how to hide our natural dialects—Southern, East Coast, whatever—and to speak English with a proper Indian accent. Our teachers alternated between a retired TV meteorologist from Calcutta and a Mississippi-born linguist with a doctoral degree from Georgia State.

For eight hours a day, our instructors lectured us, grilled us, popped quizzes, and made us speak in front of the class. They assigned homework and expected us to do it. They taught us to drop our diphthongs and pronounce our W's like V's and our V's like B's. The three days

devoted to phonology demanded tremendous concentration and practice. The final two days covered syntax and diction: applying plurals incorrectly, overusing gerund constructions and reflexive pronouns. And by the end of the week, my classmates sounded, to my ears anyway, less like residents of northern Mississippi and more like native Hindi speakers with an impressive command of the English language.

And if we could fool me, then surely we could fool some fed-up customer in the American heartland.

The con—there's no other word for it—went like this: The customer waits awhile on hold. And when he hears me say in my brand new accent, "Thank you for calling Handel Computer Corporation, may I please verify your name and computer model number?" he thinks: *Another goddamn foreign call center*. His expectations diminish. Rather than satisfaction, he expects courteous but ineffective service from somebody thousands of miles away. And a customer base with lowered expectations means that Handel computers can generally avoid paying for actual tech support and replacement parts.

What Arihant has done is to implement a key cost-saving service, heretofore handled beyond our shores, right on good old American soil.

I take thirty-seven calls today, seven above quota, before shutting off my computer terminal and heading for the parking lot. The sun has set and the evening is cool and pleasant, and for the briefest moment I feel as if I'm in the exact right

spot in the universe. But as I begin to drive past residential streets and see the decorations—Santa on his sleigh, a blow-up snowman—I begin to feel nostalgic for those frigid northern winters. Unable to face my parents, I told them I had to stay here over Christmas to study.

"My son, the scholar," my old man said. "I'm sad, but impressed."

For decades, my father was an editor at the *Asbury Park Press* but recently got laid off. Now he's writing a book about the decline of print journalism. The man writes a great sentence, but I can't imagine who would want to read about anything so obvious. It's like writing a book about the wetness of water. "How about just for a few days?" he asked.

I can live a lie over the phone and in emails. But to stay in my parents' house over the holidays would've been too much. "Wish I could, Dad," I told him.

I know they're disappointed. Driving home, I try to tell myself that I did the right thing. Then I start thinking about the doctoral student, Josephine. When she spoke about her dissertation, the phone line practically hummed with anxiety. I should have told her to take a day or two off. Drive to New Orleans and clear her head. That would have been good advice. But I'm not paid to give good advice. That's the job of the handful of actual computer techs on-staff, who handle only the most urgent problems. The rest of us, earning far less, run interference. We're polite. We ask the customer to reboot. To make sure all cables are plugged in tightly. We do our best, then we lose

the call. Losing the call is pretty much the key part of my job.

Here's what I know happened the moment I hung up on Josephine: At first she wondered about the absence of hold music. Then, realizing the call had been disconnected, she became furious with me, with Handel Computers, and with the U.S. economy in general. This is the kind of service you get, she'd be thinking, when you ship all the jobs to Asia. Her instinct would be to call back immediately and demand a supervisor, maybe even the head of the whole damn department.

All part of the plan. Because then—and here's the important part—she looked at her watch and realized that she'd just spent thirty minutes on hold (our hold music is on a 15-second loop, making even the shortest hold-time feel endless) and another thirty minutes with me, only to achieve nothing. Screw it, she eventually decided. Her time was too valuable. For now, she'd use the computer without the damn CD-ROM drive.

If she ever calls back, it'll be weeks from now, late at night, when she's unable to sleep. Might as well give it one more shot, she'll think, and get out of bed. After another thirty minutes on hold, she'll speak with another compassionate but unhelpful member of the Handel customer service team who will, as trained, lose her call again.

Nobody ever calls back a third time.

I'm halfway home when I come across a small puppy walking along the shoulder of the road.

I pull over and get out of the car to investigate. The animal is young—maybe eight or nine weeks. No collar. Malnourished. People in Mississippi have different relationships with their animals than they do in New Jersey, but still. A puppy is a defenseless creature, and somebody chose to dump it here at the edge of a residential neighborhood so it would become somebody else's problem. At times like this I fear for the human race.

I kneel down. "Hi, little puppy." A puppy should be happy to see you. It should come over, tail wagging. This one glances up at me and looks away. It takes a few shaky steps in the other direction.

I scoop it up and place it on my passenger seat. A few miles away, at the vet school, is a 24-hour clinic. I could go there, but I won't. Applications were due two weeks ago, and I failed to send in mine. True, that application was my entire reason for staying in Mississippi this past year. But as the deadline neared, those 50/50 odds started to weigh on me. I couldn't stand the thought of getting rejected—or, worse, getting accepted and then flunking out again. I started thinking that when you only get accepted into one school out of twenty applications—which was what happened the first time around—maybe it means that the other nineteen schools knew what they were doing.

When I was flunking out last year, the dean called me into his office, where I flopped around like a hooked fish trying to save itself. "All I ever wanted was to be a veterinarian, sir," I told him.

Just one semester living in the South and I'd already fallen into the habit of calling everybody "ma'am" and "sir." It's one of the reasons, besides the easy availability of cheap labor, why Arihant set up shop here. No one needs to be taught courtesy. "Ever since I was a little kid, when my dad brought home those two baby chicks for Easter, and they got sick and died. Ever since then, I've wanted to help animals."

The dean, a round-gutted Southern gentleman who smelled of spicy cologne and horses, had a habit of sighing deeply, as if he'd just finished a big meal and now felt guilty for it.

He sighed deeply. "I've always wanted to play shortstop for the Cardinals. Do you see what I'm saying, Charlie?"

That conversation kept weighing on me as the new deadline neared. It kept me from downloading the required forms, kept me from ordering my college transcripts and writing the entrance essay. I couldn't face the thought of another meeting with the dean. So I chickened out.

I'm not sure if it's chickening out now, too, or if it's the opposite—that maybe I'm showing resolve—but I head away from the vet school and toward home. When I arrive, I get the puppy crate out of the garage. I fostered several puppies the semester I was enrolled—lots of vet students do it—and accrued a lot of pet supplies.

I sit on the garage floor and examine the dog: short hair, big floppy ears, long tail. Probably a hound mix. She'd be cute if she weren't all ribs.

She doesn't appear to be injured—just

malnourished and flea-ravaged. But my laundry room closet is filled with supplies: flea shampoo, antibiotics, pills for heartworm, tapeworm, cures for every ailment, courtesy of the vet school.

"You're gonna be OK," I tell her, running a flea brush through her matted fur. "I'm gonna make you well, little lady."

Unless she has parvo. Then she's finished.

I shouldn't have told the Easter chick story. I remember lying in bed after my meeting with Dean McKenzie—the blinds drawn, a cliché of depression—and thinking that I should have told him what mattered most, which is that when I was twelve years old, my family's Doberman Pinscher bit my friend Seth and had to be put down. It's a story I don't ever tell—I still ache over it a dozen years later—but my meeting with the dean would have been the right time. Especially since it was the truth. I believed that my becoming a vet might help to make up for getting our family dog killed.

I won't romanticize my relationship with Pongo. His bark rattled the windows. His chronic accidents on the dining room carpet put a constant scowl on my mother's face. He killed the occasional gopher or baby rabbit unwise enough to find itself in our lawn, and even though it was just the dog doing what he was hard-wired to do, the carnage always upset me.

Still. When I entered the house after school, he would follow me from room to room. He fetched a stick like it mattered, he had a belly that loved being scratched, and he was a licker, not a nipper.

I taught him tricks, and my parents told me I had talent as a dog-trainer. What I had was patience, an even temper, and a smart animal. At two years old, though, the dog was still too energetic for his own good.

My friend Seth Hoberman was like an untrained dog, good-natured but mannerless. His voice was always twenty decibels too loud and he had no sense for how to respect an animal. One Saturday afternoon, my parents decided to go to a matinee and leave me at home unsupervised for a few hours—a new and wonderful development since my twelfth birthday.

Seth and I were in our small living room, sitting on the carpet in front of the sofa and watching professional wrestling on TV. During a commercial break, Seth turned to me and said, “Let’s wrestle.” I was never a physical kid, but Seth had three older brothers and no qualms about pinning me to the ground. I strained to get free but was too weak. Pongo watched us, lying flat on the ground and barking, and then Seth got off me and began rousing the dog into a crazy state, teasing him with a sofa cushion, putting him in a headlock. I remember watching as Seth pinned the dog, same as he’d pinned me, and held him against the carpet. He started a slow three-count. The dog squirmed and whimpered. I knew I should tell Seth to ease up, but I was his friend, not his parent, and I was still annoyed that he’d pinned me so easily. I wanted to see if the dog would fare better than I had.

Seth had just shouted “Two!” when the dog bit his face. It was only a single bite on the cheek,

not an attack, but it was no warning nip, either. Pongo immediately squirmed to his feet and, knowing he’d done wrong, scurried, tail down, to the corner of the room.

Monday morning at school, Seth was peeling back the bandage to show his six stitches to anyone who’d look. I trailed him, explaining word-for-word what my parents used to explain to me when the dog was still a puppy. *You have to be gentle with him*, I told Seth. *He’s only an animal. Once you rile them up like that, it’s not their fault.*

The hospital was required to notify animal control. Most family dogs are given a second chance, but the breed had a bad reputation then. Nowadays it’s pit bulls. Before that it was Rottweilers. Back then it was Dobermans. Bad luck for us. Worse for him.

I’m still not sure whose fault it was. It might have been the dog’s. Just because they’re animals doesn’t mean they’re blameless. But I do know this: There are certain people in the world who have a knack for keeping the peace. And those people have a responsibility. I’m one of those people. I’ve always been one of those people.

Caring for a sick puppy, I remember too late, is no one-person job. When I was fostering those pound puppies, I had help from my girlfriend, Linda, a fourth-year with confidence and clinical experience. We didn’t date long, just a few months. When I flunked out of school, her pity seemed to loom large, and I decided I couldn’t be around her or our vet school friends. The last

time she and I spoke, she informed me that she was staying an extra year for her internship and offered to help me with my application this time around. That's the kind of person she is. I told her I had it all under control, even though I didn't. That's the kind of person I am.

I'd sure accept her help tonight, though. I lie on the kitchen floor next to the crate and fail to guess when the puppy will suddenly squat and pee or, worse, excrete something truly awful. The night passes glacially—the puppy whimpers, a car passes out front, the refrigerator motor clicks on, then off. Every couple of hours, I turn on the kitchen light, let the puppy out of its crate, and measure out and administer various medicines.

I begin to think, as I'm prone to do late at night, about booking a flight and traveling halfway across the globe, all the way to Veraval, India. Except for coming south to Mississippi, I haven't traveled much, haven't ever left the country other than for one drunken spring break in Cancun, which reminded me an awful lot of Wildwood, New Jersey. So I wouldn't mind seeing the Eiffel Tower, or Big Ben or whatever. But what I'd really like is to walk the beaches of Veraval. I'd like to smell the fish as they're being gutted and talk to the people who are gutting them, even if we're speaking two different languages. I'd like to visit the ancient Nawabi summer palace, which, according to Wikipedia, is mainly ruined but still standing.

At some point I notice that the sky is becoming lighter, revealing a frosty December morning. I'm sweaty with exhaustion. I take the

dog outside again, then crate her, take a long shower, throw on some clean clothes, and drive to Arihant. Carrying a full-to-the-brim coffee mug, I mumble hello to some co-workers and head to my cubicle. As I plug in my headset, I'm actually looking forward to the human voices about to come through my telephone extension, even if all they're doing is complaining.

Mid-morning, a group of new hires passes by. They're practicing their new accents on one another. A middle-aged woman wearing a Rudolf the Reindeer sweater gives me a friendly wave. Rudolf's nose is a red button. I wave back.

The real city of Veraval, I learned from the internet one sleepless night, is suffering from the global recession. Fish exports are down. The cement plant is producing cement just three days a week. The rayon manufacturer is close to bankruptcy. No business has gone unaffected. Men are leaving their families to seek out work. Raj, if there really were a Raj, would most likely be in a desperate situation.

But here at Arihant we're thriving. So is our little Southern town. There used to be no bowling alley. You had to drive to Meridian for decent Chinese food.

Before Arihant, we were a one-horse town. Now we have at least three horses.

Her call comes a little past noon, the same time as yesterday. I was about to head home and let the dog out of its crate. But when I say, "Thank you for calling HCC, this is Raj speaking, may I ask for your Handel warranty code," and she

says, “Is this the same Raj as yesterday?” and I say, “Josephine?,” the dog slips my mind and I feel a small thrill.

“Yep,” she says. “It’s me.”

And then I say something way out of bounds: “Buenos días, amiga.”

Fortunately, her response is without suspicion. “You speak Spanish, too? My god, we Americans are provincial.”

“I do not,” I tell her. “Those are the only words I know. So how is your dissertation today?”

“We got cut off, you know.”

“We did?”

Repeat customers are strongly discouraged. If a customer on my line tries to reconnect with Sanjay, for instance, then I’m supposed to say that Sanjay is home sick, or on vacation. If the customer is insistent, I’m supposed to say that Sanjay isn’t actually at home or sick, but rather that he no longer works here. We’re not supposed to say that Sanjay (or Bintu, or Leema, etc.) is deceased, but there are times when death is necessary.

What accounts for Josephine ending up on my line again? Pure chance. Her call was the next on the queue when I answered.

“When you went to transfer me,” she said, “the call got screwed up. I was pretty fucking mad, pardon my French. But I feel a little calmer today.”

“Yes, I deeply apologize,” I tell her. At Arihant, we are always deeply apologizing. “But if you’ll hold just a moment, I’ll connect you now—”

“Wait,” she says. “I mean, that’d be fine.

But listen. I was wondering—what’s it like in Veraval?”

Ah, I think. So you *are* lonely.

A surprising number of customers engage us in small talk. The human impulse to forge a connection runs deep. That, and the impulse to manipulate a situation—as if by getting to know us a little, we’ll fast-track them toward a new computer. During orientation we were given a sheet titled *Facts About You*. I keep mine tacked to the wall of my cubicle.

- **Who Do You Work For?:** Never say that you work for Arihant. Instead, say that you work for the Handel Computer Corporation (You may also use the letters HCC).
- **Where Are You?:** Veraval, India. It is located on India’s west coast.
- **Veraval’s chief industry:** Fish exporting.
- **Have You Ever Been To America?** No. (Nor are you familiar with any part of American geography. If you must, say this: No, though I would like to someday. Or this: No, though my [relative] went to [name of major American university]).
- **Your first language:** Hindi. But you studied English in school from early on.
- **Type of fish caught/processed in Veraval:** Ribbon fish, cuttel fish, squid.
- **What time is it right now where you are?:** Add 10.5 hours to the current time.

I find myself giving Josephine an unusually detailed answer, telling her what I imagine to be true in my city-by-the-sea and what I imagine would be true about Raj—how he comes from a long line of fishermen, how his family and friends view him with admiration but also skepticism because of his education and indoor job. And because this life I'm describing is fantasy, I tell her that I have plans to travel to America one day to earn an advanced degree.

"Oh, you should," Josephine says. "I can tell you're ambitious. A lot more than I am, that's for sure."

"I don't understand," I say. "You are earning your doctorate."

"Yeah. About that—do you mind if I tell you something? It's kind of a confession. I wouldn't mind getting it off my chest."

The puppy has been in its crate for over four hours and needs me. I have to leave, but I can't help lowering my voice and saying, "Your confession is safe with me."

Last week, I overheard two co-workers talking at lunch about a caller who confessed to being involved in an extra-marital affair. Customer confessions aren't so rare. People need to unburden themselves, and they believe we're a world away.

I want to believe, though, that this conversation is different. Josephine's voice yesterday held a mix of desperation and camaraderie, which was why I decided to tell her my life story, fictitious as it was. Now that we've had these exchanges, isn't it at all possible that we're forming a bond, this

stranger and I?

"I fabricated all my data," she says. When I don't say anything right away, she adds, "Do you know that word? Fabricated?"

I want to hear her say it again. So much so that I tell her, "No. I do not know this word."

"It means I made it all up. Five years of data. None of it's real."

"You are talking about your dissertation now?"

"Of course."

"What about your dreams of data files?" She is suddenly fascinating to me. "Are you not having those dreams?"

"Sure I am. I'm scared to death of getting caught. I've accepted a lot of grant money."

"Why did you make up your data?"

"You're a smart man, Raj. You can figure it out." Of course I can. But then she tells me anyway. "It wasn't coming out the way I wanted. This was easier. I got lazy."

"I see."

"*You see?* What are you, a therapist?"

"I mean, I get it," I tell her.

"You *get* it?" Her voice rises in pitch. "Jesus, don't you have anything to say that means anything?"

She's been holding her secret for so long that there's no way for my reaction to match her expectation. "What would you like me to—"

"Well, *I* don't know," she says. "I'm an American doctoral student who just admitted to fudging all her data. Be shocked or something. Call me a bitch."

The word jolts me back to standard protocol and broken syntax: “I am not calling you that. But if you will hold a moment—”

“Do you have a wife, Raj?”

Her question surprises me enough that I answer it truthfully.

“A girlfriend?” she asks.

“No.”

“Are you gay? Do you have a homosexual lover?”

I tell her I am not homosexual.

“I’m naked, you know,” she says. “I’m naked right now and touching myself.”

I disconnect the call.

The puppy is worse. She has soiled her crate and barely lifts her head to look at me. She finally stands, shakily, tail drooping. I clean her with a damp towel, carry her out to the yard, and wait for her to do her business. This comes in the form of bloody diarrhea. No, not exactly. There is only blood. I run inside for a bowl of water and a can of wet puppy food. She isn’t hungry or thirsty. I dip my fingers into the water and hold them up to her muzzle. She licks the water off them, but she needs more fluids. And I swear she’s skinnier than yesterday.

I’m cursing myself for not getting home earlier, but the real mistake happened yesterday, when I decided to take her home and save her myself. She needs to be hydrated intravenously. Or maybe not. I’m in over my head. In fact, I know only two things for certain.

One: I’ve failed.

Two: The dog needs a vet.

The only animal hospital in town is fully booked for the day. There are only two vets working there, the receptionist explains, and Dr. Blinder is off buck hunting with his brothers in Missouri.

“Are you sure the other doctor can’t make time?” Evidence that I’m no longer new to Mississippi: I’m unfazed by a vet who hunts.

“Sir,” the receptionist says, “if it’s an emergency, you should try the veterinary school.”

And so I do what I must—I call Linda’s cell—and when she answers we have a no-nonsense clinical conversation that ends with me carrying the puppy in its crate to the car and driving to the vet school’s emergency clinic.

Linda is from New Jersey, too: Paramus. Shortly after we met, we learned that as teenagers we used to hang out at the same malls. She came to Mississippi to specialize in large animals—horses, cows—and there is something both rough and reassuring in the way she handles the puppy. Linda’s hands are dry and raw from washing them all day long, but she looks pretty in her green scrubs, and I remember how she would sometimes wear a freshly laundered pair for pajamas.

She shakes her head. “We’ve got one sick patient on our hands.”

I was right—the dog needs intravenous fluids, and I hold her still while Linda inserts the needle. This should be painful, but the dog doesn’t make a sound.

“Good girl,” Linda says.

While we wait for the bag of saline to drain, I ask Linda if she has nice holiday plans, and she tells me that she does. She asks me if I got my application off okay.

"It's out of my hands now," I tell her.

She inserts the IV into two other places on the dog's back, and the animal begins to look puffy from the sacs of water that have inflated under her skin.

Linda collects a fecal sample from the dog to test for parvo and heads off to the lab, which these days is off limits to me. I stand beside the examination table, pet the dog, and wait. When she returns a few minutes later, her expression reveals nothing. But when she says, "It's negative," I feel myself exhale.

"Don't feel too relieved," she quickly adds. "If she caught the virus recently, it might not show up yet on the test." She tells me to take the dog home, give her the meds, and hope for the best. "And no food," she says. "Not for a day or two."

"But she's so skinny already..."

When Linda looks at me, her face softens. "Look, Charlie—she's either going to perk up or she's going to get more dehydrated and die. Either way, it's going to happen fast."

"Don't you think she should stay here?"

"There's nothing we can do for her here that you can't do at home." Linda strokes the dog's head. "Trust me, she'll be better off with you." *I'm not the vet!*, I think. *They kicked me out, remember?* As if reading my thoughts, she adds, "If you want, I could come by later and help out."

I can feel it again, the pity, and tell her no

thanks.

We ease the dog back into her crate, and Linda jots down a medication schedule. She loads me up with cans of prescription puppy food and more drugs. I can't decide if I should give Linda a hug, or a kiss on the cheek, or maybe just a handshake. In the end, I don't touch her at all.

"Thanks," I tell her.

She smiles. "It's all right, Charlie. It's what I do."

Back at home, the call to my boss goes fine. I haven't used a single sick or vacation day since taking the job, and my complete lack of a social calendar has been misinterpreted as dedication.

I carry the crate into my bedroom, shut the blinds, turn off the light, sit on the bed, and watch the dog sleep. Were it not for this animal, I would be fielding phone calls, smoothing ruffled feathers, making empty promises until five p.m., when I would go to the Tavern or maybe Big Daddy's for a burger and a few beers. I'd watch whatever game was on TV over the bar, soaking in the warmth of others' conversations, until at some point I'd feel tired and sober enough to drive home, where there is more TV and an internet that will connect me to absolutely anything, you name it, including pornography.

Some days, especially when the weather is warm and sunny, I imagine that my current life is rehabilitative. I'm off the grid, an explorer in this small town of crepe myrtles and catfish po-boys, working a secret job, almost as if I were C.I.A. I tell myself that someday I'll return to New Jersey

a little worldlier than those around me, full of Southern yarns and witticisms. I'll be the life of the party.

I've been feeding this story to myself because loneliness, if you dwell on it, only gets worse. It makes a person do strange things. For instance, before I left work today, I jotted down Josephine's telephone number on a scrap of paper. And I find myself, now, taking off my shirt and pants, and then my boxer shorts, and when I'm lying completely naked on the unmade bed I use my cell phone to dial her number.

I'm wondering whether she'll pick up—she won't recognize my name on the caller ID—and what I'll say if she does. She answers on the second ring.

"Josephine?" I say. "This is Raj calling. From HCC."

"Oh," she says, her voice flat. "The caller ID said *C Falcone*."

I explain that I'm not calling from my usual extension. "I want to apologize for hanging up on you this morning."

"Really? No, I'm the one who needs to apologize. What I said earlier..."

"It's okay."

"No, it isn't," she says, her voice more animated. "It's fucking crazy. I mean, who says that? Don't answer. I'll tell you: a fucking lunatic, that's who."

"Please. Josephine." At first, I thought the reason I was calling her had to do with sex, but now I see it's something else. "You should cut yourself some slack," I tell her, and think:

*forbidden diction!* I'm still keeping up the accent, still using my invented name. I take a slow breath. And in my full-on Jersey dialect, doing my best impression of myself, I say, "Anyway, I think it's time for me to make a confession."

I tell her everything: my company's Big Secret (Her response—"Holy shit!"—reminds me of the older gentleman I first trained alongside), and how I flunked out of vet school, and how nobody up north knows a thing about me anymore. I tell her that I've got a sick animal on my hands, and if the dog doesn't die on her own I'll probably find a way to screw up and kill her anyhow. Telling Josephine these things feels like when you've been holding your breath underwater for too long and then you surface and take that first greedy gulp of air.

The silence at the other end of the line makes me think that she's hung up the phone. But then I hear a sigh. "So 'Raj'—that's a bullshit name, isn't it? You're 'C Falcone.'"

"Charlie," I tell her.

"You really have some accent there, Charlie," she says.

"They trained us well. There was a linguist, and—"

"I'm talking about your New Jersey accent."

"Oh." I can't help smiling. It's human nature to fantasize, and what I fantasize is that we become friends. She lives in Memphis, just a few hours away. And if she's half as lonely as I am, and especially with the holidays so close. . . . "It sounds like we both have a few secrets, don't we?"

“Yeah. Well, about that. I should probably tell you something.” Now, I assume, is when she’ll mention the boyfriend or the husband, and I’ll be quick to assure her that it doesn’t matter. This is no longer about sex, if it ever was. I’ll tell her that speaking to her, like this, means a lot. It doesn’t solve everything, or anything, but that doesn’t make it unimportant, this unburdening—even to a stranger. “The truth,” she says, “since we’re being truthful—is that I lied to you. About my dissertation. It isn’t fabricated. Every bit of it is legit.”

This isn’t the confession I expected. “For real?”

“Of course,” she says.

“Then why did you...” But I know. It should have occurred to me that our customers’ confessions might be false. That maybe they’re less interested in admitting a sin than in inventing a life.

“Let’s just say that writing a dissertation isn’t the best thing for one’s mental health,” she says. “You’re in your own head all day long, except for when you meet with your dissertation director and she tells you that your methodology is wrong. Which means another six months in this hellhole. You can’t imagine the neighborhood I’m living in, because my student stipend is so laughable. I’m not talking about roaches, either—I’m talking gunfire in the middle of the day. Heavy artillery, too, if you ask my landlord—who, by the way, sold me a .38 for protection and even showed me how to use it.”

As I get this glimpse into her real life, I

sympathize with her—how could I not?—but I feel betrayed. Her deep, dark secret, which led me to tell her mine, has ended up being no secret at all.

“But all this is temporary,” I remind her. “Your dissertation will be behind you soon.”

“Sure it will,” she says. “Along with the last five years of my life.” She is upset suddenly, her words sounding as if they’re coming through tears. “And when I’m already feeling like shit, and then I call a customer service line for help and get jerked around, and hung up on...”

I decide to give her some actual, practical advice. “Do you have a flash drive? You know, for backup?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“Listen to me,” I say, trying to sound soothing. “I want you to back up your dissertation. I field calls all day long from customers who’ve had their computers crash. Trust me, the computer you bought sucks.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty bad at backing things up... but I just found one of those thingies here in my drawer while we were talking.”

“Good. Back up your dissertation.”

“Okay, Charlie. Point taken. I will.”

“No, I mean do it now. While I stay on the line. Otherwise, you won’t—I know what people are like.”

She laughs a little into the phone. “You don’t mind holding?”

I tell her I’m glad to—that it will be payback for all the customers I’ve put on hold. She says okay and sets her phone down. It’s good to feel

useful. I can't fix all of her problems, but I can make sure her data doesn't get lost. And just knowing that makes me feel a little better.

While I'm waiting, I think about whether I should stay at home tomorrow, assuming the dog lives through the night, or whether I should take her with me to work. With all the medication she's on, it would be easier to take her. She'd be safe in the crate, and I'd feel better being able to look in on her—

My thoughts are interrupted by a distinct “Fuck!” This is followed seconds later by “Jesus. Oh, Jesus.”

“Josephine?” I say into the phone.

The expletives—distant, as if coming from across the room—keep coming and coming. It's a little frightening, as if she's been hurt somehow—electrocuted? Did something fall on her?—but then I listen past her words to the emotion behind them, the particular mode of anger. I've heard this before. I've sounded like this before, working late at night on a college paper, when I'm exhausted and not thinking as clearly as I should be.

It's the sound, I realize, of losing all your data.

“Charlie!” She's back on the line now. “Jesus, Charlie, I think I did it the wrong way.” She's speaking very quickly. “I think I saved the old file over the new one. Oh, shit shit shit.”

“How old is the old file?”

“It's . . . I don't know. A couple of *years*! Oh, Jesus, Charlie . . .”

“What about your old computer? Didn't you just buy this one?”

“I threw it away. It's gone.”

The spit has dried in my mouth. “Don't do anything,” I tell her, trying to maintain a calm voice. “Don't touch anything.” I wish I knew how to help her, but all my training is in avoidance. “I'm going to call work right now and get one of the real tech guys to call you right away. These guys are good, Josephine. They'll be able to help you. They're going to walk you through this.”

I don't know whether this is true or not. If the file's been overwritten, it's been overwritten. Gone is gone. Or not. I just don't know.

“Charlie. Oh, fuck. Oh . . . oh . . .” the sound she starts making then isn't English. It isn't even words. It's a horrible, retching sound, and I feel desperate to make it stop.

“Are you okay?” I ask. “Please, try to relax. It's going to be all right. I promise. Please. I'll get someone to help. They'll be calling your cell in just a couple of minutes. Can you hear me? This will all be fine.”

I dial the direct extension for tech support and ask for Randy Adams, the supervisor. I don't like Randy. He drives a BMW and calls everyone “big guy.” Still, he's the man to call, so I call him.

He listens to my predicament and says, “The girl's probably fucked.”

“Are you sure?”

“No, that's why I said probably.”

This is why I try to avoid Randy Adams. “But you have to call her and try to help. Or somebody does. She's really losing it.”

He yawns audibly into the phone. “All right. It

probably won't be until tomorrow, though."

"No, that's no good," I explain. "I told her somebody would be calling right away."

"Now why would you do that?"

No answer would satisfy him. And anything truthful—*Because it's the right thing to do. Because she knows all our secrets*—would get me reprimanded or fired. "Randy, *please*—do me a personal favor."

"Who did you say you were again?"

I repeat my name. Then I say, "I go by Raj," and describe where my cubicle is located. "Just have someone call her as soon as you can," I say.

"As soon as I can?" He laughs. "Now *there's* a promise I can keep."

Five minutes later, my cell phone rings. It's Josephine. I don't want to answer, but I do anyway.

She's discovered language again.

"Where's the fucking tech support, Charlie? You said they'd call."

I tell her it's imminent.

"It had better be—for your sake."

"It's coming," I say. "Guaranteed."

Another ten minutes goes by and my phone rings again. I don't answer. When a message is left, I delete it without listening and call Randy again. He's out on dinner break. I ask for another tech. I'm put on hold. After the hold music loops forty or fifty times, I hang up.

Ten minutes after that, Josephine calls again.

I shut off the phone.

A magazine is glanced at and returned to the

bedside table.

The ceiling is studied.

Finally, I put on the television and settle on The Weather Channel—but The Weather Channel is playing cheery Christmas songs, so I shut off the TV and stare at the bedside clock until the numbers tell me it's time to administer the antibiotic. Then more ceiling-staring until it's time for the anti-diarrhea.

At some point long after the sun goes down, I remember that I haven't had any food since breakfast.

I make a sandwich, eat the sandwich. Then back to the bedroom. I flick on the bedside lamp to look at the schedule that Linda drew up, then flick the light off again. Between the frequent administering of medications and a fruitless attempt to keep the dog's crate clean, I know I'll be awake all night. The minutes and hours creep along as I wait for the next time to give a pill or squirt medicine or remove a soiled towel from the crate. By midnight, the dog has soiled so many towels that I can't keep up with the washing and decide to use T-shirts—first the cheap white ones, then whatever I happen to grab out of my dresser in the dark.

But here's the thing: Sometime after three a.m. I drop into a deep sleep, and when I awake again it's to the sound of the puppy walking around in her crate.

Despite the drawn blinds, the room is beginning to lighten. I'm shocked to see it's 8:05—I never expected to sleep so soundly, and now I'm late for work. I sit up in bed and take a

look. The dog is perched on my Metallica concert T-shirt, looking up at me. Tail wagging.

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She isn't a new dog, but all that medicine must have kicked in overnight, and when I carry her out to the yard she actually squirms in my hands like a real live animal. I won't understate the feeling: It's magnificent. She does her business, which is noticeably less disgusting than yesterday's. It's another frosty morning, crisp, a morning with possibilities, and it occurs to me what a difference even an awful night can make.

I decide that it is most definitely take-your-puppy-to-work day.

I give her water, then take the bowl away and crate her again while I get dressed—I'm running late and skip the shower—and then carry the crate out to the car. Most of the houses on my street have their Christmas decorations up. It's the sort of neighborhood I'd never be able to afford up north. In Hoboken I paid a fortune for a one-bedroom apartment with the shower in the kitchen. Now I pay half that for a house with a dishwasher and washer/dryer, with a yard out back where this dog, should she survive, would enjoy romping.

I head to work with Josephine on my mind, my guilt diminished somewhat by my motivation to get her some much-needed help when I arrive. She almost certainly did not receive a call from tech support yesterday. Her night must have been awful. But I'm going to help her today. I'll camp out in Randy Adams's office all morning if I have to. I'll plead with my boss. I'll get it done.

I turn on my cell phone and brace myself for the voicemails, but there are none—only missed calls: seven from Josephine, all in a two-hour span last night, and two from my mother this morning. I call my mother as I drive.

"Thank God," she says. "Are you all right?"

"Relax, Mom, it's only been a couple of weeks." Actually, it's been longer than that. We don't talk nearly enough, because of the lie. It's something I need to remedy. I know that. Hearing her voice, I'm transported to frigid New Jersey. I see mulled wine on the stove and a fire in the fireplace and every other damn Christmas cliché in the book—but I also see the puppy, peeing on their kitchen floor and pulling ornaments off the tree and getting into all sorts of trouble, and I want all of it. "Anyway," I tell her, "I think I'm going to—"

"The news," she says. "Isn't that your town? I've been watching all morning."

"Isn't *what* my town?" I ask.

I round the vast magnolia trees at the entrance to Arihant to find myself facing the flashing lights of emergency vehicles. Not just a few. The parking lot has been overtaken with police cars and ambulances and firetrucks, which have created a barrier between the building and the dozens of people—my co-workers—who must have been evacuated and are now gathered in clumps along the lot's perimeter. Away from the fluorescent lights of our cubicles, these people look strange to me, alien, but as I drive closer I see it isn't the light, but rather the sagging posture and contorted faces of the grieving.

This is no fire drill, no bomb scare.

"I have to go," I tell my mother.

Only when I get out of the car do I notice the news helicopters hovering overhead. Uniformed police are everywhere. Police tape blocks all the entrances to the building. I try to imagine what must be inside: the bodies, the blood.

The dog must not like being alone in the car, because she emits a piercing cry and begins to bark. So I open the back door, get her from the crate, and approach one of the police officers, a thick man wearing sunglasses.

"What happened?" I ask, though I already know. This is the new millennium, after all, and I own a television and a computer. I read the news. My entire life, I've grown up seeing this parking lot, these first-response vehicles flashing their harsh lights. I can easily decode this message.

"Do you work here?" he asks.

I tell him I do.

"There's been gunfire reported. That's all I can say."

"Was it the tech support people?" I ask.

He looks at me and frowns. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It was a woman who did this, wasn't it?" When he doesn't answer right away, I say, "Listen, I think I know what happened. And why."

"Is this a for-real claim?"

I nod.

He removes his sunglasses. "What's your name?"

I tell him.

"Mr. Falcone, are you saying you know the

perpetrator?" But the answer isn't so simple, and when I hesitate the officer takes me by the arm. "We need to get you to a detective."

Just then I feel a tap on my arm. Standing beside me is a young woman whose cubicle is across the office from mine. I don't know her real or Indian name. All I know is that she always brings a mandarin orange to work, and for ten minutes every afternoon the air smells like citrus.

She looks up at me, eyes bloodshot. "Can I hug your dog?"

Her words make no sense, until I look down and notice what I'm carrying. So I hand the dog over. And what does this woman do? She hugs my dog. That's all. Just hugs her and then, without another word, hands her back to me.

One of the cafeteria guys sees us and comes over. Big guy with a crew cut and a dirty white apron. I don't know his name either. He doesn't know mine.

"Man," he says to me, "can I hug him, too?"

"Okay," I say, and hand him the dog.

"Mr. Falcone," says the cop, "you need to come with me now."

I follow him away from the building, toward one of the patrol cars where a group of officers is gathered. But I don't wait to start talking. I start saying things at a mad pace to this officer—I'm telling him about the secrets I never should have kept, and the secrets I never should have revealed—until he says to me, "Hold it a minute. I'm not the one who needs to know."

I keep talking.

But at one point I turn around and see that

more and more people have gathered where we stood—new hires, upper management, the girl from the mailroom—and they're all waiting their turn to hug my dog, who doesn't squirm or protest at all as she's passed around from person

to person. She lets herself be folded into each set of arms, remaining completely calm, either because she's sick or because of the cold or the strange surroundings, or, more likely, because that's the kind of animal she is. 