

THE COMMUTE

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On Tuesday morning, just before dawn, Robert Meyer starts his Camry, flicks on the headlights and pulls away from the curb. The engine hums as it warms. The dashboard clock reads 6:22. It is March, and the temperature is climbing. All over Chicago the molecules expand and the pavement buckles or splits wide. Robert pulls onto I-88 and drives in the right lane, moving slowly. He glances from the car in front of him to the pavement along the curb. His nerves are attuned to the road, waiting, feeling. His hands grip the steering wheel. Then he sees the taillights dip in front of him, hears the scrape of a bumper against pavement, and his heart shoots into his throat. Pothole.

He swerves carefully around it, then switches on his hazards and pulls onto the shoulder. He cuts the ignition, grabs the duffel out of the back, clicks on the flashlight, and, blood racing, picks his way through the crusted snow back along the road.

Experience has taught him to be careful. He sets a couple cones around the area, lights a flare since it is still dark. Then he takes a breath and holds the flashlight over the hole.

It's a bad one, deep and jagged, flecks of paint along the edges. A few pebbles and chunks of gravel lie inside. But that is all. Robert exhales, flicks off the light gratefully. He gathers the cones and extinguishes the flare and heads back to the car. Inside, he switches on the radio. The WBBM jingle comes on and a woman's voice rushes through the traffic report. Robert lays his head against the steering wheel and closes his eyes.

Sometime that past September, when the mornings were getting colder and the Dow had just hit a twelve-year low, Robert had started to believe there could be babies in the potholes. He couldn't pass over a bump without getting out of the car to check. This made driving anywhere difficult. He would pull over, click on the flashers, and walk back to the site, squatting down to have a look. Other cars would swerve around him; semi-trucks would skim by and blast their horns. Every time he stopped he knew it was

ridiculous. But it was worse if he just kept driving. The air around him would go prickly and dry and some invisible weight would press down against his chest. If he closed his eyes he could see them: babies wrapped in blankets, their faces streaked here or there with grime, their little bodies wiggling. Real babies, pink-faced and gurgling, wholly alive and unharmed.

It had started with that case at work—not his case, but a big one. Robert worked for the Fraud Prevention Investigation Program of the Illinois Department of Health and Family Services, the only job he could land after his layoff from Arthur Anderson. Most of the time he reviewed cases, ran numbers, made sure people were receiving the aid they were due. But Scott, two desks over, had stumbled on something big, something that had won him fifteen seconds on Channel Five and prompted a six-part series by the *Chicago Tribune*. A woman—multiple women, it turned out—had abandoned their babies, some of them hours old, and continued to collect their welfare checks. Scott’s offender had been caught when police interviewed a homeless man who’d seen her leaving the infant somewhere on Lower Wacker. The baby had been found, the paper said, wrapped in a blanket and placed in a gap in the pavement where a support beam had started to separate from the concrete.

“This is fucked up,” Scott had said, dropping the newspaper on Robert’s desk. “How many do you think there are?”

“I don’t know,” Robert said. The Inspector General had ordered them to review every case in Cook County for the past ten years for potential patterns. He had appointed Scott—gum-chewing, potbellied Scott—the new supervisor for their unit.

“You got kids, Robert?” Scott said. He leaned on the edge of Robert’s desk.

Robert was staring at the picture of the crevice where the baby had been found. “What?” he said.

Scott ran a hand along his buzz cut. “You got kids?” he said.

“No,” Robert said, pushing the newspaper aside. “No kids.”

“Probably for the best,” Scott said.

That was in June, months before all of it started, before things began to fall apart. That week they were repaving the city streets, and the first warm air off the lake was mixed with the reek of tar.

7:03. The sun is climbing. Robert works his way eastbound along I-88, stopping six times before the road merges with the Eisenhower. Most of the larger potholes are in the far right lane, so it doesn’t take long to get out and take a look. One, though, is in the center lane of traffic, and he has to don his reflective vest and set up cones and flares, waving cars around him. He

almost adds the hardhat he stole from a construction site, but it is not yet rush hour and most drivers just swerve around him and go by.

That pothole is a deep one, partially filled with standing water, and Robert's stomach lurches as the beam of his flashlight glances off the iridescent twists of gasoline. But it's empty. Thank God, it's empty. He gathers the cones and hurries back to the car, where he sits for a long time waiting for his heart to slow.

Understand, he is not an unreasonable man. He is an accountant; he has always believed in numbers, in things eventually adding up. When the business with the babies started he knew it was ridiculous. He thought he could dismiss it, as reasonable people do. But his mind clung to the idea, examined the angles, and stirred in his gut a terrible fear.

It had been an unusually cold September, and most of the leaves had fallen before they'd had a chance to change color. The news in the papers was bad. His wife Sophie read the front section each morning, her soft brow furrowing over stories of home foreclosures, personal bankruptcy statistics, spikes in unemployment claims. Banks and lenders collapsed and folded into each other. Lehman Brothers. Merrill Lynch. Sophie clipped pieces of the front page and spread them over the kitchen table—headlines, charts, photographs of men looking defensive and stern. She was finishing her

masters in visual art and printmaking, and was working on what she called “a visual record of the recession.”

On the sixteenth of September the government swept in to rescue AIG. On the seventeenth the Dow fell 449 points. Robert heard all of this as he switched between radio stations on the tollway. It took him a long time to get to and from work. Some mornings he sat idling on the side of the road, staring intently at the odometer. He always hoped that if he concentrated hard enough on the neat figures of the numbers, he could keep himself from getting out of the car; he could steady himself and pull back onto the road and drive to work like anyone else. But what if, his thoughts repeated, just this once, there *was* something there? Tiny hands, hair falling over the scalp in delicate wisps, bones fragile and so newly formed. What if he just drove off? What kind of man would that make him?

At work, he began to make mistakes with his numbers.

“What’s going on with you, Robert?” Scott said. “You’re all jumpy. You’re coming in late.” He glanced at a paper he was holding. “Very late. And now we’ve got four accounting errors in the past two weeks.” He lowered his voice and leaned across Robert’s desk. “You can tell me, man. Are you drinking?”

Robert blinked. “I don’t drink,” he said.

“Because I’ve been there,” Scott said. “I know people who can help. Good people.”

“Thanks,” Robert said. “I’ll be okay.”

Scott straightened. “Six years sober,” he said. He touched his fist to his chest.

That night government regulators seized Washington Mutual. Lawmakers bickered over a federal bailout. Half a mile before the I-88 ramp Robert passed an IDOT crew out filling potholes, their shovels scraping against the wet tar, and he suffered a moment of blinding panic at the thousands of places he’d failed to inspect.

When he got home, Sophie was standing in the kitchen with the phone to her ear. “Where were you?” she said. “I was worried.” Behind her, on the stove, he could see the remains of their dinner burned to the pan.

It takes him until noon to inch down the Eisenhower. At the Kennedy he turns north, pausing on the ramp to check a new fissure. Most people are still headed into the city, so the outbound lanes are clear for him to do his work. If he turns on the radio it is only to the music stations. At this point in the day he doesn’t want to think about unemployment, home foreclosures, angry rallies in D.C. It only makes his panic worse. It only keeps him out here longer, making sure the hidden and the vulnerable are safe.

He is bending over a pothole near the O'Hare exit when a cop car pulls up behind him.

"Having trouble?" the cop says, walking around Robert's Camry. He sees the pothole and whistles. "Damn. You hit that?"

Robert nods.

The cop glances toward the Camry. "Car okay?"

"Think so," Robert says.

"You should really report this to IDOT," the cop says. "Get their asses out here."

Robert scratches his head. "Isn't that something you could do?" he says.

A semi-truck thunders past them.

"Nah," the cop says. "Nobody listens to me."

In October Wachovia fell and Wells Fargo bickered with CitiCorp over the spoils. Congress agreed to pay seven hundred billion dollars to save the flailing economy. The auto industry was imploding. Designer stores on Michigan Avenue held liquidation sales. Unemployment was rising. Analysts and news personalities screamed over the airwaves. The presidential race was in full gear, and the vague promises and twisted allegations coming over the radio frightened Robert with their semantic ambiguities and random malice. He began to take different routes into the city, crawling up toward

O'Hare on the Tri-State and looping back around on the Kennedy. He thought if he drove fast enough he could get beyond the potholes before the compulsion set in, but often he'd have to exit and turn around, leave the car on the other side and jog across the highway to the pothole, waving cars out of his path. On a day when the temperature shifted and the roads buckled it might take him four hours to go fifteen miles.

He used the smooth stretches to think up excuses. He called Sophie and complained about big accounts at work, a backlog of Medicaid files, a coworker with car troubles that needed a ride home to Cicero. Most nights she was waiting up for him, a plate of food sitting in the oven, the scattered pieces of her project flung across the kitchen table.

"Hey," she'd say, her voice a mix of worry and exhaustion. She'd sweep aside some newspaper clippings to make room for his plate. "I can't believe they're keeping you so late every day. It isn't right."

"It pays the bills," Robert said, trying to smile. He hated to lie to her.

Nights he lay awake and listened to her slow breathing and tried to steady the thrum and skip of his heart. He calmed himself by counting the cracks in the ceiling, by inventing algorithms to explain their faint intersections, their wandering trajectories.

1:17. Beside an exit ramp Robert finds a dead raccoon, its fur matted with blood. He stares at the glassy eyes, the mouth fixed in a permanent snarl. It was angry, he thinks, though it probably never saw the car coming.

The first snow came early. The election inched closer. Sophie clipped the political cartoons from the paper: Sarah Palin skinning a moose, John McCain hugging a plumber, Barack Obama wearing a turban. The clips came together in a collage overlaid with paint to form a figure that looked to Robert like a man cradling his own severed head.

Sometimes he didn't make it in to work at all. By the time he got downtown, dodging the snowplows and skidding cars and the splattered salt from the big trucks, it was already past five, and he'd have to turn around and start back home again. He grit his teeth, he sang songs, he duct-taped the car's locks in place. But inevitably an image popped into his head—a salt-crusted blanket, lips turning blue—and he was filled with a guilt so deep he thought it might kill him if he didn't act. On election night, he got home well after the fireworks ended, and Sophie turned from the T.V. and said, "I'm starting to think you're just trying to avoid me."

Then one morning he walked into his office to find someone else at his desk.

“I know you haven’t been here long,” Scott told him, “so you probably don’t appreciate how hard it is to fire a state employee. But you were a piece of cake.”

“What about the child welfare audit?” Robert said. “I was right in the middle of some files.”

“You’ve been gone for two weeks,” Scott said. “I considered it your notice.” He shook Robert’s hand and pressed a card into his palm. *Thinking about AA?* it said.

Robert stared at the card. Scott clapped him on the back, steered him toward the door. “Take care of yourself, man,” he said.

Just before Thanksgiving, the next-door neighbors moved out. They couldn’t afford the mortgage, they said. They stopped by for a farewell dinner, the kids crying, the pizza going cold. Robert missed it. He was bent over a pothole on Ogden Avenue, trying to catch his breath. When he finally came home, Sophie wouldn’t speak to him.

“I’m sorry,” Robert said. “It’s just this audit—”

“I tried your cell. You didn’t pick up. So then I called your office,” Sophie said. “They said you didn’t work there anymore.”

Sophie had a little crease above the bridge of her nose whenever she was angry, and Robert couldn’t help thinking, even then, how beautiful she was.

“They said you hadn’t worked there for weeks.”

Robert looked at his hands, which by then had a constant fine tremor.

“I’ve been dealing with some things,” he said.

Sophie rubbed her bare toe into the floor. “What’s her name?” she said quietly.

Robert looked up. “It isn’t like that,” he said.

“Yeah?” Sophie said. “What is it like?”

Robert picked up one of the headlines that had fallen to the floor. The words blurred together and he dropped it on the counter. “It’s really hard to explain,” he said.

Sophie dropped a stack of plates into the sink and went back to the kitchen table to work on her collage. The figure was getting bigger now, the edges blurring. Robert thought it was starting to take on its own depth, burrowing through the table into the ground.

In December the governor was arrested for trying to auction off a Senate seat, then appeared on television quoting Kipling. Bank of America fired thirty thousand people, and a man in New York was indicted for stealing fifty billion dollars from private investors, international banks, and several foundations that supported orphanages in Jerusalem and the West Bank, which unfortunately had to be shut down.

By mid-afternoon he is getting tired. His back is sore, his clothes are crusted with mud and salt-grime, his lips are chapped and wind-burned. But he can't go home. He tried, for a while, just locking himself in, hiding the car keys, sitting on his hands in front of the T.V. But inevitably his head would start to ache. His palms would get sweaty, and his heart would threaten to burst out of his chest. He's long stopped trying to reason his way out of it, to tell himself that the scenario is so unlikely, that things will be all right. His neighborhood is half-empty and overrun with abandoned dogs. All the movies this spring are about the end of the world. His own life doesn't seem so strange, except that the house is too quiet without Sophie there.

She left just after the New Year, after Robert started disappearing overnight. He stumbled in one morning, eyes bloodshot and tie askew, and he knew how he must look to her; he couldn't blame her for being angry. She was sitting on the couch with her things in a bag. The collage-in-progress leaned against the armchair. She stood.

"I was going to leave hours ago," she said. "But I wanted to see you first."

She brushed his shoulders and straightened his tie. He breathed the scent of her hair.

"Don't go," Robert managed. He was weaving with exhaustion. "Just let me explain."

Sophie shook her head. “Honestly, I don’t really want to hear about it,” she said.

“It’s not what you think,” Robert said. He wanted terribly to lie down. “Don’t go.”

She laughed. “God, Robert. The whole fucking world is falling apart, and all you care about is yourself.”

Since then, Robert has stopped trying to fight the driving. It is his mission. He listens to call-in traffic programs where drivers warn of particularly bad spots and he plans his route according to those places. His nightmares are no longer of live babies recently abandoned, but of dead ones, frozen, their skin a terrible blue.

It is 4:18 now, and starting to get dark. He is somewhere along I-355, snaking his way north. The sky is gray. The weather report mentions snow somewhere over Iowa. Robert imagines miles of wide, steady fields, the snow moving over them in a silent white cloud. He doesn’t notice the pothole until he hits it.

The car scrapes against the pavement and the windows rattle as the shock rises through the tires. He pulls over, his stomach in knots. He flicks on the emergency flashers and opens the door. A semi-truck skims by as soon as he steps out. He reels backward, then hurries to the pothole, limping a little from so much time in the car. At the edge he pauses to press his fingers

against his eyes. He imagines little fingers, tiny bare toes. He takes a breath. Looks down.

It's empty. Relief rushes through his blood, the familiar fleeting sensation that things are okay. He bends over and rests his hands on his knees. More than anything he wants to hold onto that relief.

That's when he hears the horn.

He barely has time to turn before the car is upon him. He looks up into the sudden headlights, sees the pale face of the driver, hears the squeal of the tires. At the last second he leaps into the snow and covers his head. The car skids, turns, and smashes head-on into Robert's Camry, sending both cars into the ditch beside the road. As he lifts his head, Robert has the intense feeling that he has lived through this before; that he's seen it, in all his close calls, the possibility playing out frame by frame.

He stands and wipes the salt from his mouth. The other car sits smashed and smoking several hundred feet away. Robert runs to the driver's side just as a man in a torn business suit kicks out the door.

"Are you all right?" Robert gasps. He holds his hands out but sees they are shaking. The man turns and helps a woman out after him. She has tousled blonde hair and a cut over her eyebrow. She is crying.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" the man says. "You're lucky you're not dead."

“He’s lucky we’re not dead,” the woman says.

The man gestures toward the road. “What were you doing out there?”

Robert speaks without thinking. “I was checking that pothole,” he says.

The woman snuffles, wipes her nose. “Checking it?”

Robert looks at them helplessly. “For babies.”

The man and the woman move closer together. They don’t say anything.

“I’m really sorry,” Robert says. “I never meant to hurt anyone.” He stares at the gash above the woman’s eyebrow. Blood trickles down her face. Robert turns, afraid he might vomit.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Oh, God.” He bends down toward the snow.

The man moves to catch him. “Hey,” he says. “Easy.”

Robert pulls away, focuses on his feet. He moves one, then the other. He is still doubled over, trying to breathe.

“Hey, where are you going?” the man says. “You can’t leave until the police get here. Hey!”

But Robert is moving steadily. He crosses the field beside the highway and pulls his way over the fence. There is another road down the slope. A lone stoplight stares back at him like an eye. Slowly his mind slides back into motion. *He’s lucky he didn’t kill us*, the woman said. The next time, Robert thinks, he might. The potholes are always empty, but one day there might be just one that isn’t. Any terrible thing you can think of in this world—it can

happen! And there is no way of knowing when it will. There's no way of knowing anything, he thinks, no matter how vigilant you are.

On the road below him, a hundred cars go rushing by, each one moving toward its own personal catastrophe.

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