

A NOVEL

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— *Library Journal*

flabbergasted

RAY BLACKSTON

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A Novel

Ray Blackston



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“Years ago I had the occasion to change Ray’s diaper. Then around the time he finished college, I taught him how to catch fish in the surf. His writing talent comes from my side of the family, so maybe that’s why he stuck me in his book.”

My name is Asbury, and I live on Pawleys Island.

“When Ray first asked if he could use my car in his novel, I declined, thinking everyone in the South would just be honking at me for the next fifty years until I was old and deaf. Well, not only did he use my car in the story, he had the audacity to use me!”

My name is Darcy, and I am tall and blonde.

“I just had to be in this book, so I offered Ray powdered donuts and lots of dating advice. He’s a pushover.”

My name is Lydia, and I am a short redhead.

“Had to wedge my way in, too. So I gave Ray a ride to the beach in my Jeep.”

My name is Steve, and I kill bugs.

“As a bribe to get me in his book, Ray offered me a root beer and a turkey sandwich. I just happened to have left my lunch at home that day, so I took a second swig and said, ‘Yeah, okay Ray, go ahead, but only if I get to do something fun, something besides mop floors.’ He shook my hand and agreed.”

My name is Maurice, and I am a church janitor.

“Ray-dude can still be found hanging out on my end of the beach. Like Steve Cole, he’s sorta uncoordinated, but at least he wears cool shorts.”

My name is Ransom, and I am a surfer.

“Ray traveled more than four thousand miles to interview me. He even got stopped and interrogated at a small South American military outpost before finding my location. Then he spent two days begging for permission to use me as the female star of his novel. I bit into a mango and told him only if I got to drive Darcy’s car. After all, she’s my best friend.”

My name is Allie, and I work for Google.

“Welcome, dear reader, to *Flabbergasted*.”

My name is Jay, and I will be your narrator.

For Mrs. Kretzer, my second grade teacher,
~~who liked my stories and poems~~
and was the first person to encourage me to write

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*In his heart a man plans his course,
but the LORD determines his steps.*

—Proverbs 16:9

Prologue

This is not my story to tell. Even if I wanted to, I could not tell it. Two dozen orphans, a remote locale, and lack of paper allowed me to write only this brief introduction, and even it had to be scribbled hastily in pencil and sent via snail mail. My letters take two weeks to reach the United States.

If you guessed that I am a missionary, you are correct. If you guessed that I am in my mid-twenties and have brown hair, then you are clairvoyant. If you guessed that I am about to tell you why I'm bending your ear instead of the story's rightful owner, then you need to be patient and spend a moment pondering yesterday's lesson in the village.

Yesterday I tried to explain to the children that life is full of ups and downs, and that some of the downs are actually ups, and some of the ups, downs.

They only wanted to know how far is down.

I said it depends.

Depends on what? they asked.

I told them it depends on if you view the downs as a green valley or an endless abyss.

After I explained what an abyss was, they said that was way too far down and that they hoped our village would never play soccer or eat jungle muffins in an abyss.

What you need to know is, by North America's standard of logic, what happened to the narrator of this story also involved something of an abyss. Call it a deep plunge.

The strange thing is that during my last furlough—home to visit the South, the beach, the seafood—witnessed his plunge. Well, at least the beginning of it.

At the last second he tried to reach out and grab my hand.

I refused.

But I did wave.

Now, whether the young man's down was really an up, I'll let you decide.

As for the orphans and the residue of yesterday's lesson, we settled on something shallower than an abyss, and with a red magic marker I wrote our lesson on a small section of plywood. It hangs on the wall of my hut:

There are potholes on the road less traveled. Some deep, some not so deep, some you dig yourself. Most are filled with mud. Many contain rocks. Once in a while, however, you'll be walking along and step in one a bit more accommodating . . . shabby, green, and pulsing with life.

It'll tickle your feet, like clover.

Act I

Ninety percent of life is just showing up.

—Woody Allen

At a quarter past midnight I set my paint roller in the pan, the pan in the tub, my bathroom the latest victim in a week of odd-hour renovations.

Hands scrubbed, teeth brushed, I walked down the hall, cut off the lights, and fell prostrate across a mattress in my spare bedroom. A whiff of khaki latex seeped into the darkness, drifted past my pillow, and reminded me to be up at 8:00 A.M.

In the fuzzy state between sleep and awake, I reached to set the alarm on my digital clock. But I held the button too long and had to wait for the eight to come around as I dozed and saw the numbers, saw the numbers then dozed, and around again went the numbers.

The rumbling of a car engine woke me. It was Sunday morning. I sniffed the air, and above the fresh paint I detected the scent of females four miles away at North Hills Presbyterian Church.

The wind strained to cool my Blazer when I ran the yellow lights, and I ran three. Greenville was an unfamiliar city, and it bloomed green across my new geography, the upstate of South Carolina.

Sprawled between two office buildings on the uppity side of downtown, North Hills appeared manicured and popular. A tiny steeple rose from the red brick sanctuary.

The lot was filling fast. I parked in the back row, pausing there to watch well-dressed couples with immaculate children hurry toward the building. I checked my hair in the mirror and wondered who might be inside.

Understand that I did not resort to such tactics without good cause—and the cause was not that unusual.

Modern communication was the cause.

Kimberly Hargrove had communicated to me, by e-mail, that she was now interested in a surgical resident at West Dallas Hospital and would no longer be requiring my attention. This humbling piece of news arrived just six days after I had moved halfway across the country. Her contribution to this story ends here. Just know that what had looked promising had totally unraveled with two Thursday afternoon e-mails.

Relational rope burn.

Maybe you can relate.

Now, I'm aware that being dumped was poor motivation for what I was about to do. But what I was about to do would not have happened had it not been for a second piece of communication.

From an older woman.

No, not a romantic interest.

The real-estate lady.

Having just been transferred, I knew not a soul in Greenville, S.C.—until she had agreed to meet me at a mistreated three-bedroom in the middle of a suburban cul-de-sac. I had signed the contract on the hood of her Saab as she stood beside me in her gold jacket and black heels, looking over my shoulder and drooling for commission. Seconds later she had tromped through the yard, proudly slapped a SOLD sticker across her FOR SALE sign, and nearly turned her ankle in the process.

“So where do the single people hang out in this town?” I inquired, noting that the sellers had even uprooted the mailbox.

“Well, Jay,” she said, leaning over to brush grass clippings from her black heels, “there’s the occasiona-

outdoor concert, and in the fall there'll be plenty of football, but your best bet is in the same places where I find clients. I usually rotate between Baptist and Methodist."

"Churches?" I asked, not sure of her meaning.

She pulled off her left shoe and shook out the grassy contents. "You know . . . the networking thing. Although sometimes it looks good to tote along a Bible, just to fit in."

"You use churches to network for clients?"

"Almost exclusively."

"Is that, um, legal?" I had a finance degree, and this sounded like the spiritual equivalent of insider trading.

"Who knows. But half the city does it." She paused to empty her other shoe. "You don't have a girlfriend? You look like the type who would have a girlfriend."

"I used to. She sorta dumped me."

"Well, is it 'sorta,' or is it permanent?" She was quite aggressive, the real-estate lady.

I walked over to peer into the mailbox hole. "Feels permanent."

"And she did this recently?"

"By e-mail."

"Sounds like an airhead to me."

After this brief exchange, she leaned against her Saab to check over the contract. She thanked me, tore off my copy, and got into her car. I was inspecting a bent drain spout as she backed out of the driveway. She honked twice, then stopped and stuck her head out the window. "Ya know, Jay, if you really want to meet people, try the Pentecostals. They're very outgoing."

"How so?"

"Quite loud . . . and they stand up a lot."

"I'd prefer to sit."

"Then pick another one. Our churches outnumber the bars by a twenty-to-one margin. You'll figure it out."

So there I sat in my Chevy Blazer on a Sunday morning in May, in the last row of the parking lot of North Hills Presbyterian Church, trying to figure it out, trying to remember the last time I'd set foot inside a church. Four, five years, perhaps?

In retrospect, I suppose it was not the best-laid plan. And one much more common to men than mice.

I checked my hair again. Then my slacks, my jacket, and the buttons on my light blue oxford. *Just blend in, scope the field, and try not to volunteer for anything.*

I stepped out of my truck.

Did I mention I was not wearing a tie?

Bells rang out in two-second intervals as I crossed the parking lot and reached the front steps. Beyond the top step loomed a wooden double door, nine feet high and richly detailed. I pulled it open, and there was a middle-aged man in a midpriced suit standing in the middle of the foyer.

He gave the customary nod and handed me a bulletin.

Down the burgundy carpet sat pews of dark wood, detailed along the sides in the same pattern as the door. I searched for an empty slot. No one looked up. Just five hundred heads staring into bulletins, fascinated, as if Shakespeare himself had penned the announcements.

I took a seat in row twenty-something, next to an old man whose Bible lay open beside him, the pages psychedelic from his marks. Two children scribbled in the next pew, their hands stained by magic markers. Their mother shushed them as a hymn began. The choir sounded rich and reverent, and

several sopranos made an impression, although the long green robes prevented me from checking for wedding bands.

Hymn over, the congregation stood to recite a creed, their voices a low monotone, my lips moving in mock conformity. We sat again. The old guy pulled out his checkbook.

Six men in suits worked the aisles, passing and receiving brass plates in the quiet manner of servants. A plate reached me containing a pile of envelopes and a twenty; it left with the contents unaffected.

The two kids turned and smiled. I made a face, and they whirred back around, giggling as their mother gave a firmer shush.

The pastor spoke of being in the world but not of the world, of having eternal thoughts in the midst of the temporary. His sermon was lengthy, definitely not monotone, but left me the same way I'd left the brass plate.

Blessed and dismissed, I shook strange hands, then looked around for a deacon to point me toward the singles class. Kids pulled parents through the pews, parents grabbed markers from the floor, and the elderly—the teeming mass of elderly—paused and dawdled on the burgundy carpet.

Leaving the twenty-fourth pew (I had counted the rows during the sermon), I heard the organist playing a lullaby and wondered if I should've tried the Pentecostals.

I caught the bulletin man midway up the aisle.

"The college class meets in the Sunday school wing," he directed, "just past the junior highs."

"What if I'm a bit older?" I asked. "College was five years ago."

"Ah, the singles," he said. "They meet in the little brick building across the parking lot."

The crowd forced me forward. "Thanks, I'll find it."

My first glance into the building revealed three rows of chairs arranged in semicircles. A thick wooden podium faced the center. A gray-suited man rested one arm on the podium, his back to the chairs, his attention in a book.

I strolled past the empty rows. Muted conversations made their way from around a corner. Morning sunlight angled in through sheer white curtains, and I turned to see a kitchen full of singles. They were having coffee, orange juice, and those white powdered donuts.

The first person to make eye contact with me was a heavysset girl with short red hair, her round face beaming hospitality. She wiped a crumb from her flower-print dress, smiled briefly, and extended a hand. "No ring? Then you're in the right place."

Disarmed by the humor, I returned the greeting. "Jay Jarvis. No hidden rings."

"I'm Lydia," she said, letting go of my hand. "Your first time?"

"Just moved to South Carolina last month."

She gave me a Styrofoam coffee cup and left to greet more visitors. I was filling the cup with decaf when someone tapped my shoulder. And I turned to meet one Stanley Rhone, complete with navy blue suit, sculpted black hair, and a handshake three degrees too firm.

"From where did you move?" he asked. He looked at me cautiously, warily, in the same way toddlers view asparagus. A white hankie sprouted from his coat pocket.

"Dallas," I replied. "My firm transferred me just this—"

The gray-suited podium leaner had called us to attention. Fifty singles began taking their seats in the familiar social pattern of women in front and middle, with males occupying the perimeter. I took a seat at the end of the second row, behind Stanley, and tried to look alert.

A latecomer hurried in and took her seat. "Mr. Rhone will open us," said Gray-suit.

In the act of bowing my head, I deduced that I was a half second behind. I glanced left to check my timing and, across the heads and the silence, our eyes met.

She was likewise in mid-drop, glancing to her right from the far end of the second semicircle. The glare through the curtain backlit the brunette hair resting at her shoulders, but that same glare prevented me from confirming the hint of a smile.

I went with my preferred answer and shut my eyes.

Audible grunts rose from the row behind me. The grunts seemed well coordinated with Stanley's voice inflection, a rising tone producing a louder grunt. I considered turning quietly for a one-eyed peek, but to the best of my knowledge, peekage wasn't allowed.

Stanley finished the prayer, the grunting stopped, and Gray-suit began our lesson from Galatians. Fortunately, there were hardcover Bibles under each chair, and I unstuck some pages to reveal Psalm 139. I figured Galatians was to the east of Psalms, and by the time he finished reading the five verses, I was there.

The word *idolatry* floated through the air, up and around behind the semicircles and past the donuts, bypassed everyone else and landed smartly in my conscience. It stirred around for a moment, clanged between my skull, then disappeared, like the sermon, to that place where all conversation fades.

I glanced again across the room, but she quickly looked away—out the window, at the empty chair in front of her, then down at her sandals, well worn below her yellow sundress. She was one shade darker than the fifty other reverent Caucasians. Definitely American, but without the American condiments. No makeup. No jewelry.

I figured that she, too, might be a visitor. But who knew. Regardless, I wanted to meet her.

More Galatian words hovered over me, dropping now, searching for sin. Gray-suit spoke of fruit, of faith, of goodness and self-control. Heads nodded their agreement, the grunter gave an affirmation, and strictly from peer pressure, I reached in my jacket for a pen.

"Fruit, not *fruits*," said our teacher. "We cannot pick and choose among the attributes of God like the dinner line at a Baptist buffet."

Everyone laughed, but she refused to look my direction. *Please look my direction.*

Closing announcements followed, mentioning a food drive, a visit to see a sick person, and something about a trip to the beach over the long Memorial Day weekend.

I had no plans for the long Memorial Day weekend; maybe she'd be going. Anxious for an introduction, I left my coffee cup on my chair and hurried toward the door.

Too late. The dark-haired girl was already in the parking lot. After a quick and insincere nice-to-meet-you to Stanley, I peeled off my jacket, flung it over one shoulder, and strolled toward my Blazer.

One row over, her faded red Beetle pattered away.

Tuesday evening while grilling chicken on my deck, I was thinking of brass plates and women, of women and brass plates, and wondered if contributing to that plate would hurry God up as far as meeting the right one. I flipped the chicken over, sprinkled it with lemon pepper, and thought maybe dropping two twenties in the plate would help me meet her this year, or a hundred bucks and we'd meet within a month, or five hundred and the person would arrive in warp speed, like Spock to Captain Kirk.

Smoke was pouring from the grill, my dinner only two minutes from perfection, when the cordless phone rang. The voice on the other end thanked me for visiting North Hills and asked if I had any questions. I was tempted to ask about the girl in the Beetle but stopped myself and muttered something about planning to visit again soon.

"You're in the singles class, then?" asked Mr. Kyle, who mentioned he was both an elder and the membership chairman.

I swatted at a fly with my spatula and said, "Yessir, but I haven't been in one for a while."

“Perhaps you met my daughter, Allie?”

“I don’t think so, sir.”

“She attends that class,” he said. “Whenever she’s in town, that is.”

I was certain he had some homely daughter with whom he’d try to set me up. I was not interested.

“Sir, I’m sure your daughter is a nice girl, but my dinner is on the grill and . . .”

“I understand, Jay. We’ll talk more later. But when you do visit us again, please say hello to my Allie. She’s easy to recognize—she has dark hair and a year-round tan.”

I dropped the spatula on my picnic table. “You say she has dark hair and a nice tan?”

“Yes. She’s been working near the equator.”

My chicken began to blacken. “Elder Kyle, what kind of car does your daughter drive?”

“An old VW.”

I was back at 9:30 sharp the following Sunday. After the church service, after another uninspiring sermon, and after I had dropped two twenties and a five in the brass plate, I made my way across the parking lot in a drizzle, using my just-found Good Book for an umbrella.

I suspect there are various reasons for sticking the singles class across the parking lot, in a building by itself: The married-adult classes may be discussing sex from a spiritual point of view and worry we might overhear them, or the elders may think our single minds are cluttered with sex and believe we should meet alone to repent, or the parents may worry that we’re hung up on sex, and fear a bad influence on their children. Whatever the answer, it’s got something to do with sex.

Entering the mecca of half circles, I wiped off my Bible and said hello to Lydia, and to Wade, who stood at the podium in the same gray suit. From the coffee crowd, mingled nods welcomed me back.

I’d nearly finished my orange juice when we were called to our seats, though I decided against a refill because I did not want to walk back in and have to sit by Stanley.

I sat at the opposite end of the row from my first visit and looked around for the elusive Allie Kyle. She was not in the room.

I didn’t know what had happened to Galatians either. For now Wade was speaking on inheritance and lineage and begating.

Obed begat Jesse. Jesse begat David. No notes were taken because all the lesson contained was three thousand years of begating, and I supposed if an Old Testament man did not begat he’d get banished to the singles class, which met by itself, in a tent, out across a wheat field from the temple courts.

“The trip to Myrtle Beach is scheduled for Memorial Weekend,” announced Stanley, back in the role of emcee as our lesson ended. “Rooms are already reserved, but we need four volunteers to serve on the planning committee.”

He tugged at a cuff link, ran two fingers through his perfect hair, and scanned the room.

Raising his hand was a stocky fellow named Steve, the only other guy in the class who forgot to wear a tie. Didn’t shave much, either, and from the way he was leaning back in his chair, I could tell he was a singles-class veteran.

Lydia took the last bite of a donut, coughed, and said she could help.

“That gives us two,” said Stanley. “No, make that three. Allie’s not here but said she’d volunteer. There’ll be a meeting Wednesday night . . . anyone else?”

The class was silent. I sensed opportunity.

Suddenly my hand pulled away from my side and rose into the air. “I can help.”

Heads turned toward me. Polite smiles all around.

“Thanks, Jay.”

I missed the meeting. No Wednesday night with tiny steeples, powdered donuts, or the Beetle-driving daughter of Elder Kyle.

A gray-haired client had insisted on talking with me. I was a stockbroker, firmly entrenched in the world's largest paper shuffle, turning cash into shares and shares back into cash, as many times per week as possible.

Buying low and selling high, but occasionally buying high and selling low, it was always with other people's accounts, so I got paid regardless. The pace was frantic, but a day passed quickly. The firm liked my tenacity; I liked the money.

Glenda, our secretary, liked to do her nails and say "Mr. Franklin Gruber on the phone, sir."

"Mr. Franklin Gruber on the phone, sir."

"Thank you, Glenda. . . . You can't sell now, Mr. Gruber, at a loss. Just buy some more and be patient. Yessir, that fund was up 40 percent last year, but that was last year. Ever go to a party after all the guests are walking out and the punch bowl has nothing but foam and crumbs floating around the bottom? That's what you're doing when you buy last year's winner. Be early to the next party, Mr. Gruber. You gotta buy into panics and sell euphoria, not buy euphoria and sell into panics."

"Another call for you, sir."

My headset slipped off. I held the mouthpiece to my lips. "Yes, ma'am, Microsoft is down eighteen points, but let's buy some more and be patient. No, ma'am, there are no do-overs in the stock market. It's sorta like dating—just look forward to a new day."

"Mr. Gruber on the phone again, sir."

"Buy Toys 'R' Us? You buy that before Christmas, Mr. Gruber, not in May. You heard they're coming out with a remote G. I. Joe? Buy a G. I. Joe for your grandson, Mr. Gruber; now let's you and me talk about Microsoft. It's down another three points from yesterday, a real bargain."

This was the most entertaining aspect of the brokerage business—the old people. I mean the really old people. Best of all was the widow Dean. Beatrice Dean.

I was given her account early on, after one of our older brokers retired. Like Mr. Gruber, she called me often, and sometimes just to chat.

That Wednesday night, her high-pitched voice crackled over the phone, and I was ready for anything.

"Hellooo, Mr. Jarvis?"

"Yes, Beatrice?" I said, propping my feet on the desk.

"I . . . I saw on the news that Atheon is way down. I don't like it when my stocks go down."

"You don't own Atheon, Beatrice. You own AT&T."

"Oh, well, good for me. What's the stock symbol for AT&T?"

"T."

"What?"

"The symbol is T."

"Sweeten my tea? No, dear, I can't drink tea anymore. Makes me have to go too often."

"I said the symbol for AT&T is T, Beatrice."

"Of course, it is, dear. . . . Now, how many shares do I own?"

"Same as last week. Nine thousand, four hundred shares."

"I've owned it a long time, haven't I?"

"According to the firm's records, you've held the stock since 1961."

"Oh, my. How much is it worth?"

I checked the quote screen for a price. "Multiplying the current price times the amount of shares give you about 160,000 dollars. But that doesn't include your larger holdings of Wal-Mart, Ford, and Procter

& Gamble stock.”

She paused for a moment, then asked, “Do you think I should sell some, dear?”

“To be honest, Beatrice, if I was near eighty and in your good health, I would grab my three craziest friends, a wad of cash, and travel the world.”

“Travel . . . hmmm, never thought about that.”

“Isn’t there something you’d like to spend money on?”

“Well, there are some new daylilies in fabulous colors at the nursery. I thought I had all the colors, but you should see these, just radiant! He wants a dollar too much, though, and when you buy a half dozen at a time, like me, well, that really adds up.”

“Yes, ma’am, a half dozen daylilies would add up to two whole shares of AT&T.”

“Okay, then sell two shares, Jay. You are so sweet to spend all this time with me.”

“But Beatrice, the commission on selling two shares is more than the proceeds.”

“Do you *have* to charge me a commission?”

“Well, ma’am, I’m supposed to. I mean, the firm would prefer—”

“I’ll bring you some snapdragons.”

“What are snapdragons?”

“I grow them in my garden, dear. Would you prefer the primrose yellow or the deep crimson?”

I glanced down the hallway and lowered my voice. “I’ll go with the crimson.”

“You’ll have to water them daily.”

“I will, I promise. Every day. Anything else, Beatrice?”

“Enjoy your tea, dear.”

As I hung up with Beatrice, line two glowed red. The voice said he was from North Hills Presbyterian Church, that his name was Steve, did I want to share a ride to the beach, and could I please get Friday off.

I put him on hold as Glenda beeped in. “*Mr. Franklin Gruber on the phone again, sir.*”

“No, sir, Mr. Gruber, I do not know what time Toys ‘R’ Us closes.”

Two thoughts dominated my drive home that afternoon: Me and my sunblock are definitely taking Friday off, and I might’ve just found religion.

That first thought had me smiling; it was the second one that felt ominous.

Steve Cole didn't say much, just scratched the dark stubble on his chin and checked his rearview for the police. He had said a travel prayer in my driveway, so maybe that gave him license to speed. I scooted the passenger seat back one notch and tried to hear the music, but the music was muted from the wind rushing over the half doors of his Jeep. We merged onto I-385, the sun reflecting off the driver's side while I sat content in the shade.

Whipping into the fast lane, we were vehicle five in a nine-car convoy, the midsection of a metallic snake, weaving from fast lane to slow lane and back again. The breeze felt warm and humid, but it was a welcome relief from stale air, fluorescent lights, and the twelve calls per day from Franklin Gruber.

Twenty miles passed in silence, and there was little to see from the highway. Pine trees begat pine trees, begat kudzu vines. Kudzu, if edible, would do for South Carolina what oil did for Texas.

"Steve?"

He checked his speed. "Yeah?"

"How'd ya end up at North Hills Presbyterian?"

"Honest truth?"

"Honest truth."

He weaved back to the slow lane. "More females there than at Baptist or Lutheran."

"Sounds logical." I pulled a map from his glove box.

Back in the fast lane, he steered with one hand. "Down there is where the money's at," he said, pointing at the map.

I held it closer, scanning the Carolina coast. "Hilton Head?"

"Lotsa money there. Ahead of us is Columbia. That's the state furnace."

I asked about Myrtle Beach, but Steve only wrinkled the edge of his mouth and said to let Myrtle surprise me. The convoy split up, and we eased down to eighty.

I stuffed the map back in the glove box. "Concrete and neon?"

"Be there in three hours," he said, weaving again.

Blue lights snuck up behind us and reflected in the Jeep even before we heard the siren. Braking hard, Steve gave me an I-can't-believe-this look and pulled to the shoulder. Through my mirror I watched the officer approach, and there was no swinging nightstick or mirrored shades, just a side-to-side swagger, wrapped in navy, that suggested he did this forty times a day and drowned it all in barbeque.

"Slowly, son." He stood to the side, leaning over; I could only see his chin.

"Yessir, just gettin' my wallet," said Steve, bending forward in his seat.

"Just pull it out slowly."

"Here's my license, sir."

Thick fingers took the license. "You boys headin' for the beach?"

"Yessir."

"Did ya know, Mr. Cole, that you were doing eighty-six in a sixty-five zone?"

Steve sighed and said, "No sir, but I was probably going a bit fast."

The officer peered through the window. First at me, then back at Steve. "Can you explain your hurry, Mr. Cole?"

"To be honest, sir, thirty-two single women from our church are gonna be on the beach in about three

hours.”

“Aww, son,” he said. “You drive like that and you attend church?”

“Yessir, sorry,” said Steve, wincing through his words.

The officer frowned. “I gotta give you a ticket.”

“Yessir.”

For ten minutes Steve and I sat motionless, the cop returning to his car to write the ticket, his lights flashing out blue reminders of our sin. With traffic rushing past, I wondered what would be expected of me over the course of the weekend. Would I have to look up obscure verses of which I had no knowledge? Would there be, unbelievably, a curfew?

All I knew was that my new olive beach shorts with the palm-tree print were not much use as long as we were parked on the side of a sweltering interstate.

Hurry up, officer.

The officer returned and asked Steve to sign the ticket. Steve dropped the pen. As he recovered, a Mercedes passed and honked her horn. At first we thought she was flirting, but Mercedes rarely flirt with Jeeps. Steve was signing his name when a minivan rubbed it in with another honk. The cop looked over his shoulder and smirked.

“How many women gonna be at this beach?” he asked.

“Thirty-two at last count,” I said.

“And how many guys?”

“Nineteen,” Steve muttered.

The officer folded his copy of the ticket, his lips straining to hold back a smile. “You boys have a safe trip.”

“Jesus is my copilot,” said Steve, setting the ticket on the console.

The officer, with his back turned, hesitated then slowly turned around. “Don’t believe Jesus would drive an orange Jeep with whitewalls.”

“So what would he drive?” asked Steve.

“I’d figure on a big Lincoln.”

I had no idea what the Almighty would tool around in but was willing to give it a shot. “You don’t think he’d drive some old jalopy and pick up hitchhikers?”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” said Steve.

“Me either,” said the officer, leaning one arm against the roof. “Lemme tell you something, boys. I been in church for most of my forty-eight years, and I think Jesus would either drive the Lincoln, or if pressed for time, maybe one of those muscle cars. You know, the *power* and the glory.”

The mirrored shades were on now; he put two fingers to his cap and said, “Drive careful, boys.”

The next thirty miles passed in silence, except for the music, now resembling a funeral dirge. The white dashes on the highway, formerly a continuous blur, had become dashes once again. I glanced at the speedometer; Steve was doing sixty-three on a seventy-mile-per-hour interstate and was getting passed by the elderly in gray Oldsmobiles and migrant workers in the backs of pickups.

I offered to drive. He shook his head.

I offered to pay half the ticket. He said that cop wouldn’t know Jesus from Aunt Jemima.

“Now, Aunt Jemima,” I said, “there’s someone who’d need a big Lincoln.”

“Stifle it, Jay,” he said. “I just blew my vacation money on that ticket.”

“Aww, get over it,” I countered, opening a bag of pretzels. “Think of whatsername.”

“Who?”

“The one you were talking to after church . . . the tall, willowy, blonde-haired whatsername.”

He glanced in his rearview. "Oh. Darcy."

I decided to dig into both the pretzels and his personal life. "Anything up with her?"

"Smart girl. Looks good in that ol' Cadillac. You seen it?" "Nope."

"A '75 Cadillac convertible. Parents gave it to her after she got her master's."

"But is anything between you two?"

"She painted that car lime green; everyone calls it Lime Sherbet. She's driving it down today."

"Was that a no?"

"Okay, we went out once."

"Cool."

We passed Columbia, the state furnace, inhaling hot garnet air as if straight from Aunt Bea's oven. I kept looking in my passenger mirror for some approaching lime sherbet, but only eighteen-wheelers, SUVs, and minivans dotted the highway.

I stuck a towel behind my head and reclined the seat. The pavement sent heat through the bottom of the Jeep, and I was back in the fuzzy place between sleep and awake, the breeze lulling me off, then bringing me back.

"Hey," said Steve.

"Yeah?"

"You daydreamin'?"

Not interested in talking, I flopped the towel over my head. "Sorta."

"Gotta question for ya."

"Not till after my daydream."

He jerked the wheel, jarring me from slumber. "I was gonna ask which of those single women have *you* been talking to?"

I spoke beneath blue terry cloth. "Tried to meet that one named Allie."

"So," he said, "you've been to our little church twice and already spied Allie, eh?"

"Yeah, during the prayer thing, between all the reverence and that glare through the curtains, I might've caught her eye."

"That's about all you're likely to catch, bro."

"Why you say that?"

He weaved right, cut his speed. "Independent, self-sufficient—she's always *gone*. Right before you came to church, she'd come back from South America. Some sorta mission thing. Just quit her job and went."

I jerked the towel from my head. "So what's she doing now?"

"Who knows? . . . Maybe working on her tan. Both she and Lydia are riding with Darcy, so I reckon you can ask her soon enough."

Below the steering wheel, his legs twitched. And I suppose, for two single males, we'd just had what amounts to deep conversation.

"Rest stop?" he asked.

"Sure."

Five minutes later Steve pulled into a rest stop and jumped from his Jeep. He took quick steps toward a rest room overflowing with the Memorial weekend crowd. The air smelled of Cheetos and warm cola. I lingered on the sidewalk until he came out, then decided that I, too, had better have a go.

"You're wasting beach time, Jarvis," said Steve, pointing at his watch.

"I'll hurry."

While waiting for an opening in a crowded men's room, I thought of the Atlantic Ocean and would be warm, of the Carolina shore and would it be white, and why so many more girls had signed up than guys. This latter point was not an issue; in fact, it was quite a pleasant thought. I was still in line when behind me a southern drawl rung familiar.

"Lincoln or muscle car?" he asked.

I turned and got an eyeful of navy. "Officer, you following us?"

He frowned, tossed a candy wrapper in the trash. "Nah, middle of my route. Where is ol' Whitewall?"

"Out in the Jeep, stewing over the two hundred bucks you cost him."

"I gave him a break," he said. "Shoulda been three-twenty and four points."

Two stalls opened, we entered, and I could see the top of his cap over the metal wall. Awkward, going next to Officer Theologian.

"So how many tickets you given today?"

I heard him lift the lid. "Bout twenty so far. Still early, though."

"I guess most of your customers are young males in Jeeps and sports cars, right?"

He paused a moment. "Nah, it's a mix. Just gave one to some babe in a Caddy."

"Wasn't green, was it?" I asked, curious now in my shiny cubicle. "Convertible?"

"Green? Son, it was the ugliest green, some awful bright lime color. She drove even faster than your buddy."

"Where?" I asked.

"Pulled 'em in front of this rest stop," he said. "Now don't go telling me they're also part of . . . no way, are you kiddin' me?"

"No sir, thanks."

"Son," he said over the top of the stall, "y'all drive worse than the pagans."

I dodged two cars in the parking lot, then jogged over and banged on the Jeep's hood.

With eyes shut, his head resting against the seat, Steve looked annoyed, mired in the reflective muck the ticketed. Back in the passenger seat, I decided to cheer him up.

"Lime Sherbet is just ahead of us, bro."

"Howda you know that?" he asked, reaching for his sunglasses.

"Had a man-to-man inside with Officer Theologian. He gave Darcy a ticket, too."

"At least Darcy can afford it."

I gave my seat belt a yank. "He said you got off easy."

"Hardly." And we merged back onto the interstate.

Nearing Myrtle Beach, traffic slowed, tarried, then stopped abruptly. Exhaust fumes enveloped us and billboards hailed us, advertising everything from T-shirts to tanning oil. They were countless, colorful, and staggered in height, each straining for attention like pageant contestants with too much rouge.

We rolled forward for a mile. A congested bridge halted the flow.

"So this is Myrtle . . ."

"This is Myrtle," said Steve, tapping his fingers on the dash. The sun hovered just west of noon, sending white and gold lasers off our windshield. Steve tuned into a local radio station, and I heard unfamiliar music, the beat light, the lyrics lazy and beach-woven, making me want to sit under a palm tree and quit the brokerage business.

Horns blared, engines revved, and from the top of the bridge, over the billboards, I could see long rows of condos, hotels, and assorted high-rises. We arrived twenty minutes later at the Sand Towers on the oceanfront, where concrete had begat concrete, and bottle blondes had begat bottle blondes.

There was no grass, and the sound of boom boxes joined the roar of motorcycle gangs in echoing off Atlantic Avenue. As with downtown Tokyo, the only direction Myrtle could expand was up. Guests in one condo could borrow toothpaste from the next by reaching an arm out a window. A giant could give one a shove, and twenty miles of high-rise would topple like dominoes.

In the parking lot, Steve checked his tire for glass. I opened the rear hatch, grabbed my duffel, and took a deep, balmy breath of the Carolina coast.

Inside the lobby, I stood on black marble flooring, hoping the girls had arrived. The air felt cold as I leaned against the wall, over a vent, flipping through a Myrtle Beach coupon book. The one with the picture of perfect people eating greasy shrimp.

Moments later Steve flung open the lobby door, faked a shiver as he felt the cold air, then wiped at his forehead with the bottom of his tank top.

“Seen anyone yet?” he asked.

“Just that desk clerk.”

That desk clerk looked up our names. He reached for a folder on the corner of his desk and scanned two columns, one twice as long as the other. “It’s now thirty-four females, nineteen males. Hmmm,” he said, restraining a smile. “You guys had a change of residence.”

“Different floor?” I asked.

“No, sir.”

“Different hotel?” asked Steve, still sweaty and impatient.

“Not exactly. Seems we ran out of room for your group, so the girls who came in agreed to move everyone into five beach houses just south of here. We made an arrangement with the rental folks at Smith Realty,” he explained, handing me a sheet of directions. “The place is called Litchfield, and your house should be unlocked.”

It took us five minutes to turn left out of the Tower’s parking lot, since Myrtle’s main drag was awash in traffic. A huge yellowy figure squatted across the street, gazing out over a smattering of astroturf. He was twenty feet tall and the width of an elephant.

Buddha Golf beckoned to all.

Steve leaned down to glance through my window. “I didn’t know Buddhists played golf.”

“Me either.”

Traffic thinned as we drove south along Highway 17. Billboards and Buddha faded from view, the terrain changing rapidly from tacky to understated. No more bottle blondes, just strawhatted women weaving baskets along the roadside; no more cement strips, just general stores tucked between moss-covered oaks; no more motorcycle gangs, just bicycles outfitted with wire baskets and bulging granny tires; and no more boom boxes agitating the air, just the blue Carolina sky filling slowly with pelicans, silent and flying single file.

We turned into the seaside community of North Litchfield, admiring weathered beach homes set high atop stilts. Elevated screen porches covered the fronts, filled with rocking chairs not rocking and sand dollars not earning interest, only stuck to the screens and bleached white from exposure.

At the next stop sign I looked skyward at tiny decks rising above the rooftops. “Feels calmer here, doesn’t it?”

“Feels like nap time,” said Steve.

“Those little roof decks are cool.”

“It’s called a crow’s nest, Tex.”

He made a left beside the oceanfront, and we paralleled the beach along a two-lane road, both lanes sandswept and sedate, nearly vacant at midday. To the ocean side, the dunes sprouted sea oats; wooden

walkways curved between the dunes. The mounds appeared cloned, like an endless row of buried Volkswagens.

Steve slowed for a speed bump, watched three kids drag a pink float toward the beach, and turned onto Seaspray Drive, our weekend address. He parked his Jeep beneath house number four, then reclined in his seat. “Four hours, twenty-five minutes,” he said, “and thank ya Lord for safe travel.”

Standing in a driveway of crushed shells, I saw we had a house with a crow’s nest, and I was up the front stairs, through the screened porch, and past a couple of whitewashed rocking chairs.

Inside the front door, inner stairs led to the roof, then two long flights of skinny stairs to the nest. Climbing the second flight, I felt my legs complain. Reaching the rooftop, I heard the wind strengthen. Salt air tickled my sniffer. The crow’s nest was only six square feet, and it squeaked when I leaned on the wooden railing.

The Atlantic looked bluer than I’d figured.

I could see waves breaking against a rock jetty and the sand morphing from cream to beige to dark gray as the tide receded. A volleyball game was in progress on the beach, fishing boats speckled the sea, and, far to the north—where the dunes dissolved—concrete Myrtle jutted itself through an early afternoon haze.

Looking south, I watched a line of pelicans gliding just over the breakers, a flap of the wings and glide now repeat. After a few minutes I turned away from the ocean and felt the breeze on the back of my neck. Three more rows of beach homes sat behind ours, and a dozen empty crow’s nests stretched high their wooden necks.

Seagulls squawked overhead as my line of sight dropped from the rooflines down to the road. Two houses over, onto another driveway of crushed shells, a large, topless sedan pulled in.

Lime green, just like he said.

Palm trees whizzed by in the median, and a hot wind whistled through the convertible's backseat. Blown from its habitat, a light-colored hair wrapped around my chin. I wanted to hand it, across Lydia, over to Steve in exchange for a darker one. Darcy's mane was the blondest of blonde, with the slightest gold tinge in the sunlight, cut straight at the shoulders where it flayed back when she hit the accelerator. Which was often.

Impossible to talk given the speed, though in the front passenger seat, Allie raised her arms as if aboard a roller coaster. An embroidered toucan flapped on her shirt sleeve, its colorful beak all aflutter.

The girls had said only a brief hello as we jumped into the car; no formal introductions. I felt like the new guy, but at least we were at the beach. I wondered if the Pentecostals ever came to this beach.

Darcy parked Sherbet across two spaces, then turned in her seat. "So, Mr. Cole, how much did the officer charge you for your speeding frenzy?"

"Two hundred," said Steve, unhitching his seat belt. "And you, Miss Yeager?"

"Three hundred sixty."

Entering Piggly-Wiggly, I yanked five stubborn carts from a cluster and passed them around. Darcy pulled sunglasses atop her head, reached into her purse, and handed each of us an index card. "We are shopping for fifty-three people," she explained. "Just buy what's on the card. Quantities are noted on there, too."

"Tall, organized, and lead footed," muttered Steve as we split up.

Lydia and Allie stood on the back rail of their carts, pushing off with one foot, like they were on scooters. They were coasting toward fruits and vegetables when they disappeared.

Armed with the milk and cereal card, I made for the dairy section. Fifteen gallons, said the card, so I loaded five gallons of 2 percent, five of skim, and five of vitamin D fortified, wondering where I'd put twenty boxes of cereal. The cart felt heavy as I wheeled it around, rumbling past meat and seafood, tires clunking and milk sloshing but gaining momentum as the cereal aisle came into view. Flakes or puffs, puffs or flakes? Cutting the corner, almost on two wheels, I was a chrome locomotive.

Then a smashed locomotive. The jolt stopped us cold; my arms tingled.

On the floor lay five bags of grapes, uninjured, and two tomatoes in critical condition. Red guts stained the tiles just below the Fruit Loops, and Allie Kyle was in hysterics. She picked up an injured piece of tomato, said, "Poor guy, he's a goner," and without hesitation flung it at me.

Thick, red juice clung to my shirt. I grabbed a stray grape and, taking dead aim, bounced it off the side of her head. She was bent over, almost snorting, trying to slide another piece of tomato off the slick floor when a fleet-footed clerk entered the battle with a mop. "I'll get this for ya," he said, swiping tiles.

"Sorry," Allie said, glancing at my T-shirt. "I've been out of the country for a while and just lose it sometimes."

I reached past her for the Raisin Bran. "I won't tell you what we threw at girls while growing up in Texas."

She pushed onward, back toward the veggies, talking over her shoulder as she turned the corner. "Your vitamin D sprung a leak, Jay."

An odd introduction, for sure. But a decent start.

Five carts overflowed at the register, Steve Cole bringing up the rear, loaded with white bread and

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