

About 6000 words

## I'm Not Jerry

The leaves have mostly fallen. Their splash of color is now just wet globs stuck to the pavement. Like confetti after a parade. Or what I would imagine that to be. I've only seen it on television. Times Square on New Years Eve, the sky filled with sparkling color. For a few minutes. Before everybody goes home, a few of them about to get lucky, the rest with only a hangover waiting. Then the confetti is just scraps of paper on the ground, so thick that you can't see the pavement. A mess that needs cleaning up. That's what it looks like on the street outside my apartment. Only it's leaves, not confetti. Same empty feeling though.

I'm catching the 6:25 over on Grant. I don't know this neighborhood very well. The wife and kids are in the house on the other side of Division, but I am here. Just for now. This isn't the best part of town. It's not felony flats, nothing like that. Just what you'd call lower working class. Blocks full of cracker boxes built after the war. Some of the yards are kept up. A few even have a garage behind that opens onto the alley, but mostly they park on the street, old sedans and station wagons that spent the first part of their lives in better neighborhoods. Every few blocks there's a big two story, the original farmhouse before the land was bought up and parceled out. They're chopped up into apartments. I live in one of those.

My apartment is on the ground floor. It used to be the living room of the

house, but now it's a studio. My futon sits in front of the bay windows that face the street. I sit there in the evening looking out at the elm trees that line the street, the sidewalk broken by their pushed up roots. There's a '64 GTO sitting on blocks. That was a car. Somebody's restoring it, I think, although I've never seen them work on it. Its paint is peeling, rust showing through where the bondo has fallen off. Kind of like the houses. The people look like that, too, like once they were better, maybe even hot like a GTO, but now they aren't so good, paint peeling off. They move like they know it, what they look like, shoulders hunched over protecting themselves from the next calamity. But they keep moving, waiting for their next chance. Praying for a rebuilt carburetor, if you know what I mean. They're just one scratch ticket away from redemption. But it's never going to come. That is plain to see. Me, I'm just temporary. Karen needs a little space for a while is all. That's what she said when we were at the counselor's. Everything happened so fast with us, she said, getting pregnant before she even knew if she liked me, and her parents practically forcing her to get married. First I heard of that. All these years gone by, she said, the kids practically grown, and she doesn't know if she ever even liked me? And her mad because I never said I love you? It's just a phase she's going through. Hormones. My truck is in front of the GTO. It needs an alternator.

As the bus pulls over to the curb I can see that Tom is the driver. He'll have some smart remark about my truck not being fixed yet. He's O.K. He'll tell me about the crazies he had over the weekend. Like the guy that time that tried to get on the bus with a machete. Tom said he closed the door with him stuck half in and half out and drove off, the guy screaming and swinging his machete for eight blocks before the cops pulled him over. Monday morning there aren't any crazies out. Everybody's going to work. Sure

enough, Tom says he thought I'd get the truck fixed by now, with a smirk that says he knew I wouldn't. He has eyes that laugh and cry at the same time. How long's it been, he says, a couple of months now? Too long, I say. I'll have to look at your ugly mug a while longer, I say. Speakin' of ugly mugs, you should of seen the hooker that got on Saturday night, he says. Had a face like a bulldog, all painted up. A real 2:00 beauty queen, that one. Nose as red as a clown's, and chapped. Been sick for a week, she said. Business slow on East Main Street, thought she'd try her luck on the west end. Said seeing as how she was the only one on the bus, why don't I pull over. Said she'd give me a discount. That's all I need, he says. Lose my job and a dose of the clap. Tom's like that. Always has a story. I just listen. I haven't got any stories.

When we get downtown I transfer to the 24 up North Majestic. I don't know the driver so I move to the back. There's only a couple of people on the bus. One of them is a woman, someone's grandmother, with a Safeway name tag on her shirt. Probably works in the deli. Fried chicken and potato salad, all day every day. She is so short her feet don't reach the floor. She is swinging them back and forth, like a kid riding to school. I get off on Wellington and walk the two blocks to the church where they meet. It's an old red brick building, nothing like what you might think a church would look like. Just a white cross above the entry canopy to let you know it's not a warehouse. I go through the double doors and down the hall to the meeting room.

I am the second person to arrive. Anne was the first one. She is in her fifties, fifty-two I think. Her husband died a few years ago. Heart attack, she said. Her kids all moved away for jobs, one in Seattle and two in California. She gets lonely, she says. I know this because I've been coming to the

meetings since Karen said she needed some time alone. I took it kind of hard and got picked up. Point one eight they said. The judge told me to come here, it being the second time and all, or else he'd have to lock me up. So here I am, even though I'm not really one of them. An A. That's how I know about Anne, from the stories she tells here. She smiles when she sees me and asks me how was my weekend. Not much, I say. Just hung around the house, watched some football. Anne says she worked in her garden all weekend, putting the beds away for winter, pruning the roses and spreading compost and straw. Picked the last of the vegetables, she said. Onions, spinach, squash. Said there was nothing better than butternut squash after the first frost, when the sugar sets. It was too much for her, she said, so she took most of it to her church. I watched her while she told me this and settled into her gentle eyes and the softness of her voice. I pictured her kneeling in her garden with a bonnet and gloves, patting the earth like it was a child's tummy.

Pretty soon the others arrive and the meeting starts. This guy Phil starts off. Says how he's been sober twenty-two years now and he owes it all to AA. Says he played pro ball, for the Giants I heard, and thought he was a tough guy. Thought there wasn't anything he couldn't handle. But the truth is, Phil says, and now his voice is real low, drawing you in, that he is weak. Helpless as a baby, he says. The only strength he has comes from AA, he says. Without it he'd be in the gutter. Or worse. When he finishes the room is quiet, still. Anyone can see what a big, powerful man Phil is. If he says he needs AA, then there must be something to it. Then they go around the room, everyone telling their story.

When it gets to me I start in about how he called me into his office. Danny, he says, how long have you been with the company? Twelve years, I

say. Twelve years, he says. And Danny, I can tell you it's been a good twelve years for us, he says. I'm thinking to myself, how would you know, you've only been here five. But I keep it to myself, him being the boss and all. Besides its going pretty good so far. I'm thinking maybe he's giving me a raise, I tell them. I glance over at Phil just to see if I'm doing O.K. He's heard the story before. They all have. It's not really about drinking, they tell me afterward. You're here because of the drinking. That's what you need to talk about. But this is where it all started. This is when it all went bad. With Karen, the court thing. All of it. So I tell the story.

Then he says, I tell them, that the main office says he's got to cut his crew. Everybody's good, he says. All good men. So what's he to do? He thinks about each one, how getting laid off would affect them. Lonnie, he says, is raising his little girl by himself. What would happen to her? No way he could lay Lonnie off, even if he has a mouth on him. He may be a little cocky, he says. Maybe the men don't all like him, but he gets his work done and he's got the girl to take care of. Then there's Dale, he says. Definitely not the brightest light on the tree, he says, and that's the problem. Where's Dale ever going to find a job in this market with college graduates to choose from? His wife already treats him bad enough. Everybody knows that. No, it wouldn't be humane to push Dale out into the cold. No tellin' what would happen to him. Then there's Jerry. Good God, he says, Jerry is already hanging on by a thread. It'd be back to skid road for sure if he lost this job. So you see, he says, I got no choice but to lay you off. And not because you're worse than them, but because you're the best of the lot. Unlike Lonnie, you got Karen and her job at the hospital. And you're a damn sight smarter than Dale. You'll have another job in no time. And, well, you're just a solid person. I don't have to worry about seeing you all red-eyed with your

hand out downtown like I might see Jerry. So there you are, he says. I picked you 'cause you're the only one that can handle it. When I am done telling it I stand for a minute, looking around the room, hoping that someone might be able to explain it to me.

Phil is leaning forward, one hand gripping the other, elbows on his knees, looking at the floor. I can tell he is disappointed in me. The room is silent for a minute. No one is looking at me. Then Anne says thank you for sharing that, Danny, and asks for someone else to share their story. Brenda raises her hand. She tells us her ex came over drunk last night and how hard it was, her wanting to let him in and all, how good the whiskey smelled on his breath. Then she thought of them, the people in the room, and suddenly she got stronger. Strong enough to close the door on her ex, she said. But she really needed this meeting, hadn't slept all night, she said. Her stories are always like that, wanting some guy, some bad boy, but finding the strength to turn him away. Some people have no shame.

After the meeting Anne comes over. Says I look tired, like I could use some breakfast. Bacon and eggs, toast, fresh squeezed orange juice. How bout it, she says. See, I've been there before. At Anne's house. It was after one of my first meetings. She could see I needed somebody to talk to, somebody more than what I got at the meeting. I have to admit, there wasn't much to me back then. I was moving around, going from place to place, but I wasn't really there. It was like there wasn't anyone inside me. I was unoccupied skin. She could sense that about me so she offered to fix me breakfast. I couldn't remember the last time I'd sat down with someone and eaten a meal. My belt was loose, pants falling off.

She takes me in her car, a baby blue '98 Ford Escort that looked like it just came off the show room floor, not a speck on it, inside or out. She's got

her Sunday suit on with a ruffled blouse, both hands on the wheel. She doesn't look like a woman who would take a stranger home. Make yourself comfortable, she says. Lie down on the sofa if you want. I haven't slept for a week, but I'm not going to get that relaxed, so I sit at the kitchen table while she fries up some eggs. She makes small talk while she's cooking. Nothing too serious. Tells me about her kids and grandkids. The usual stuff. After I eat she can tell I haven't got much to do the rest of the day. It's good to keep busy, she says. Busy hands are happy hands, she says. She asks me if I want to help her in the garden. I'm good with a shovel, I say. So I spent the day working in her garden.

It was last spring, March. Or April maybe. I turned the earth. Then we raked it out. I've never seen dirt like that, I'll tell you. It even smelled good. And full of worms, too. It's amazing what you can do with a patch of dirt if you give it a little attention. Anne was good at that. She could really tend a garden. We worked all day and by evening we had most of the seed planted. That was nice, standing back and seeing all the rows laid out straight and smooth, wooden pegs with seed packets marking each one.

Might as well stay for dinner, she said. You've earned it. It was the first good day I'd had since he'd called me into his office, and I didn't mind letting it last a while. After dinner she sits down next to me on the sofa, kind of half turned toward me, and says she wants to hear my story. Says she can tell I'm a good man and wants to know all about me. Well, when she says that about me being a good man I get all choked up. It was embarrassing, having the tears well up. She puts her hand on my shoulder and says it's all right, just to let it all out. I fell into her, my head in the crook of her neck, and the tears wouldn't stop coming. She gave me a kiss on the forehead and the next thing I know I'm kissing her lips. She didn't say a word, just took

me in her arms. After we were done I slept like a baby.

No thanks, Anne, I say. I've got to get to the unemployment office. Which is true. Maybe another time, I say. I've got to catch the 24 back downtown, but thanks anyway, I tell her. I hurry out of there. Ever since that time I have to be careful around her. If Karen ever found out, that would be the end of that.

I take a number at the office. The waiting room walls are lined with wooden benches where people try not to sit too close to each other. On the wall across from me is a picture of a blond woman in a blue suit. She is smiling out at the room, her eyes bright and teeth shining. She doesn't look like anyone I know. She is the governor, it says. There are men in work boots and baseball caps, men who haven't shaved for a couple of days. There's a worried looking woman shaking her foot, a girl next to her coloring in a book. There's a whole family of people, Vietnamese or something, little people. They are the only ones talking. The rest of us sit staring at the worn linoleum floor, trying not to notice each other, pretending we don't belong there. It's all an accident, I'm not one of you, our body language says.

Number one seventy-nine she calls out, an older woman who walks with a cane. She needs the cane because she is so fat, I think, or maybe she is fat because she needs the cane. Cat eye glasses are perched halfway down her nose so she can look down at the paperwork as she calls out the number, then over them searching the room for the body that is rising from the bench. Come with me, she says.

You say your check was less than it should have been? she says, fumbling through the papers in the folder. She doesn't look at me, make eye contact. I am just a name on a page, a case to be processed and filed. She finds



something that captures her interest, studies it for a while.

You're divorced, she says.

No, just separated, I say.

But you filed, she says.

What, I say.

You filed for divorce, she says.

No, I say.

Somebody did, she says.

I am turning my cap in my hands, over and over, as I look at her studying the paperwork.

Well? she says.

I don't know, I say.

On the 23rd, she says. They garnished your benefit.

So what about me, I say. How do I pay my rent?

She reaches in her drawer and hands me some brochures. One lists all the places I can get free food, the other one talks about homeless shelters. I have my coat on but I get cold all over.

I've worked all my life, I say.

You're not working now, she says.

And I'm a good worker, I say. My boss even said so when he let me go.

I'm not a therapist, she says.

And now she looks at me, but it's like I'm not even there. I'm just the one before the next one, someone else with a problem that isn't hers.

I walk the ten blocks to the bus plaza. I have seventeen dollars and change. I have to figure something out. When I get to the plaza I call the lumber yard.

Hey, how are you? he says. Good to hear from you! I can feel him

slapping my back through the phone. I'm feeling better already.

Boss, I've got to get my job back, I say.

The market's gotten even worse, he says. We're barely keeping our doors open.

I'll do anything, I say. Cut my wages, I don't care. I just need a job.

I let Lonnie go, he says.

What about his daughter, I say.

Couldn't be helped, he says. Say hello to the wife and kids for me, he says.

That's just it, I say, but the phone has already clicked.

A group of kids moves through the plaza. They are dressed in tight black clothes with chains hanging everywhere, faces pierced, hair spiked red and green. They look menacingly at the other people, grownups who got that way because time passed. One of them points to a woman and says something, then the others laugh. They surround a man who is sleeping on a bench, grocery bag by his side. What's this here? one of them says. He reaches in the bag and pulls out an apple, takes a bite and tosses it to one of the others. Pretty soon the man's bag is emptied, packages and cans spread around the floor of the plaza. The man wakes up, sees them tossing his groceries back and forth, and waits for them to finish. His eyes are big and glassy, an old person's eyes. When they have moved on he crawls around the plaza putting his groceries back in the bag. I step around him like everyone else. I have a bus to catch.

I haven't seen the house for what, six weeks? Two months? I used to drive by every day, stop outside with the truck idling, think about what it used to be like. Then the truck broke down. A watched pot never boils anyway, I

say. Walking up the block I can see all the things I should have done. The roof needs replacing, needed it years ago. The gutters are falling off. The lawn looks good though. Karen's doing a better job than I ever did. I ring the bell, but I can see through the window that no one is home. She's working the day shift. I try the door, but it is locked. I try all the doors and windows. Then I remember that she always hid a key under the flower pot on the patio for the kids. I go around back and lift the pot, but the key isn't there. She's too smart for that, I say. She knows I'd look there. But there's a key somewhere. I find it on the fence rail next to the garage.

The house is different, furniture rearranged, walls painted. There isn't a sign of me anywhere, no clothes in the closet, no razor in the bathroom. Even the Lazy Boy is gone. It's like I was never there. I look through the kitchen till I find it. Just two fingers, I say. She'll never miss it. I turn on the TV and kick off my shoes, lay back on the sofa. Brett Favre fly fishing for bonefish in Belize. The Vodka good and warm going down. It doesn't get any better, I say. It feels like old times.

I guess I doze off, because all of a sudden I'm looking up at Bobby. He looks a foot taller than the last time I saw him. Hey Bobby, how's it going, I say, getting up from the couch. Long time no see. I stick my hand out for a shake, him being all grown up now, too big for a pat on the shoulder or a rub on the head. He just stares at me like I'm some kind of alien, like he's trying to find out if my life form is friendly.

I found the bottle right where I left it, I say, didn't think anybody'd mind if I had one. He's already seen the bottle on the counter, no use lying about it. I was just watching Brett Favre catch fish on the Outdoors Channel, I say. Have you seen my old football trophy around? I couldn't find it anywhere.

Mom says you aren't supposed to be here, he says. He's got a grim look

on his face.

Hey lighten up, Bobby, I say. This is your dad talkin' here, not Jack the Ripper.

Why'd you leave, he says, turning away. His head's bowed down, shoulders heaving. I want to put my arms around him, tell him everything is O.K.

I didn't have a choice, son, I say. Things don't always work out the way we want them to. I guess that's what happened to your mom and me. The train ran off the tracks, if you know what I mean.

You could have called, he says.

I did call, I say. Remember?

No you didn't.

Yeah, Bobby, I called every day, but you wouldn't talk to me. Your sister either. It got hard, Bobby.

Mom says.....

What, Bobby? I say. What does your mother say?

He just stands there, looking at the floor.

You hungry? I say. I'll bet your mom's got a pizza in the freezer.

After we eat the pizza I say, hey, you want to throw the football around.

Naw, he says.

Ah come on, I say. You used to have a pretty good arm on you, I say.

He shrugs his shoulders. I can tell he's not interested. I'm trying to think what I can do, what I can say to him, but it's like his mother is in the room, sitting right between us. I turn the TV back on, sit on the couch.

You want to see something, he says, after we sit like that a while, like we're not in the same room.

Sure, I say. What you got?

Just something, he says, and he goes into his room and brings out this big box, the kind that you get at a fancy department store when you buy a sweater or a pair of pants. He opens it and inside there is a piece of Styrofoam cut the same size as the box. Stuck on the Styrofoam with straight pins, organized in neat rows, are about a hundred bugs, all of them different. Under each bug is a label with the bug's name typed on it, both in English and in Latin.

Holy shit! I say. You do that?

Yeah, he says, like it was nothing.

Where you find all those bugs? I say.

In the back yard mostly, he says.

Which one's your favorite? I say.

He points to a small black spider with two red dots on its back. It's called a black widow, he says, because after they mate the female eats the male. I found it in Grampa's wood pile.

Jesus, I say.

He tells me about some of the others, but I'm not listening. I can't get that picture out of my head. It's like I am looking at a movie of my life.

Hey, you sure you don't want to toss the football around, I say. Just for a couple of minutes?

I guess, he says, and puts the bugs away.

It's good, spending time with him, just the two of us. We toss the ball around and pretty soon we're playing a game, keeping score. I'm going for the winning touchdown when he hits me on the one yard line. About knocks the wind out of me. The kids got it, I tell you. A chip off the old block. I tell him I'll take him camping next summer for sure, someplace where there's lots of fish. Then we go back inside and I clean up, put the pizza carton in

the garbage and the Vodka back on the shelf. I don't know what I'm going to do when Karen gets home. Ask her to take me back? She's already made up her mind. I can see me and her yelling, Bobby slouching off to his room. We've had a good afternoon, good enough to keep.

Hey Bobby, I say. He looks at me like I'm his dad again. This is just between us, O.K.? I say. No use getting feathers riled. I can still see him standing there in front of the window, a shadow framed in sunlight, watching his father disappear.

Walking across town to my apartment I think about what I'll do. I think about the room in the church. I think about Phil and how he's done it, come back from nothing. Then I hear the softness of her voice, feel it wrap around me like a blanket. How about some breakfast she says. Yes, I say, bacon and eggs. And fresh squeezed orange juice? she says. You bet, I say, and orange juice. The more I think about it, the better I feel. I sleep good that night. When I wake up the next morning all the comfort has been sucked out of me. The things I imagined are just that, things I imagined to make me feel good enough to sleep. It is morning now and I must face the hard facts of my life. I have seventeen dollars to get me through the end of the month. My unemployment check won't pay the rent. It's cold in the room, but I can feel the sweat in my armpits. Even my feet are clammy. I don't want to get up. If I get up I'll have to do something. But there is nothing to do. There is no way out. So I lie there. Finally I have to pee so bad I have to get up. I run to the toilet. It rushes out of me so fast that it hurts. But it feels good, too, getting rid of it.

Two women are fighting with each other. They are big, so big that they can't move too fast, but they are landing some blows. Then three big guys

come out on stage and separate them, put them back in their seats. The camera moves to the host of the show. He is talking to a young guy who is also big. You should see the arms on him. He is leaning back in his chair casual-like, like there aren't two women fighting over him on national TV. Jamelle, are you ready to find out if you're the father? the host says. Jamelle shrugs like he has better things to do. The two women lunge at each other again, the three big guys come back to separate them. This is good, I say. This is what I need to take the mind off. Then the screen goes blank. I hurry and change the batteries in the remote, but the TV still doesn't work. If I can't fix it right away I'll never know if Jamelle is the father of Latisha's baby. Then I see the power company truck pulling away, and I run out onto the back porch. My meter is red tagged.

I sit on the couch and look out at the street. It is cold in my apartment so I have on a heavy sweater and gloves, a stocking cap over my ears. I think how nice it would be if there was something to look at, some movement. Children playing a game. Teenagers throwing a football. Mothers pushing strollers. But there is nothing, not even a car driving down the street. I sit staring at the GTO, at my truck. Which one will get fixed first, I wonder. The pain in my chest comes back. I can hardly breathe. Then I remember: busy hands are happy hands. That should work for feet, too, I say, so I go out the door and start walking. I don't know where I am going. But I am alive, I say. There is that. So I walk. I walk down to the river and find a bench to sit on. Some geese fly low over the water. I watch them glide onto the river's surface. I wonder how it is that you never see a goose alone. What would that be like, I say. For a moment their honking makes the pain in my chest go away. I walk through downtown. People are everywhere, rushing along the sidewalks.

Like the geese, they have somewhere to go. Buses pull in and out from the curb. Cars honk. I see them all. I feel their footsteps around me. I smell them, the perfume, the stale cigarette smoke on their coats. But it is like watching Latisha and Jamelle. It is like I am not even there.

I am afraid to go back to my apartment, to sit alone in the cold. So I walk all night. I walk through neighborhoods that are quiet, dark, only the porch lights on. It is terrible walking past all the houses, thinking about them in there, laying side by side, their muffled breathing; the kids in their rooms dreaming. The dishes cleaned and in the cupboards, carpets vacuumed, clothes ironed and folded. Everything in its place. As if that is enough to protect them, I say. If they only knew.

The sun is just coming up when I ring her door bell. I ring it a few times before she comes to the door. She is in her bathrobe, her hair in curlers.

Bacon and eggs? I say.

My daughter is over from Seattle, she says, and then I notice the car in the driveway.

I stand there for a moment, shifting from one foot to the other. I can see in her eyes that I look pretty rough, like a guy that's been walking the streets all night. I don't want to leave, but I don't want to make it bad for her, either. When her kids are gone it will be better, I am thinking. Then it will be bacon and eggs time.

Maybe we can talk Monday, she says. At the meeting.

Sure, I say, Monday.

And Danny, she says, you really shouldn't just drop by like this, O.K.?

Then I see it, that it was something in my head but not hers, a story I'd invented.

Sure, I say, no problem.



I start to walk away when I see the cardboard she's put out with the recycling. I turn and ring the bell again. This time her daughter is standing next to her and the chain is on the door.

Hey Anne, I say, could you get me a crayon?

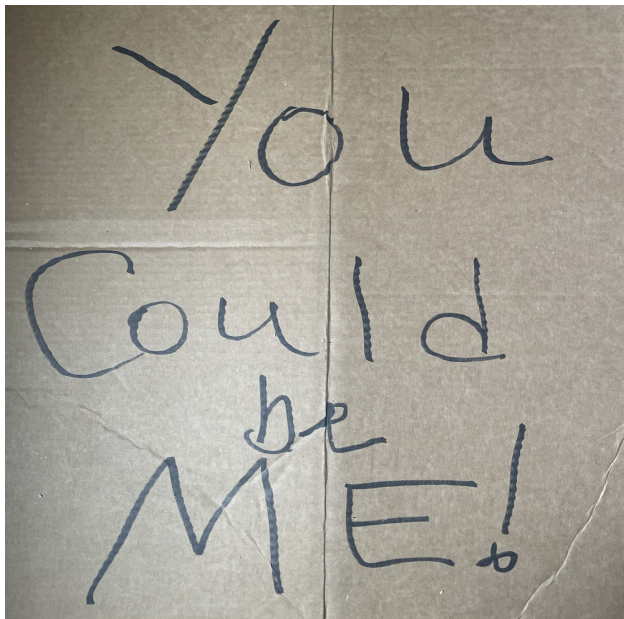
A crayon? she says. Her daughter has her phone in her hand, ready to dial 911.

Yeah, a crayon, I say.

What color, Danny?

Oh, anything would work. Something dark maybe. Black would be good, I say. How about black?

It must be eight o'clock by the time I get up to Franklin Avenue. The cars are lined up like a funeral procession. While I was walking I had plenty of time to think about what I wanted to write. I don't want to be like all the others, worn out looking, with some story about a family to care for or being a veteran looking for work. We all know what they really want. No, I am going to tell the truth, so I kneel down on the sidewalk with the cardboard and I write



in big, bold letters.

It is hard standing there with faces two feet away staring straight ahead, pretending I'm not there. I hold my sign up for a few minutes as one car after another pulls up to the light, the people holding their breath waiting for the light to change, like I might be contagious. I decide to leave. This isn't me, I say. I am not one of them. Then I see it, an Abe Lincoln rolled up in the window, just waiting for me. I grab it as the car pulls away. Then another car throws a dollar out as it goes by. It goes like that all morning. Ones mostly, but every once in a while a fiver, even a ten, stuck in my hand, thrown out the window, dropped at my feet. It's starting to add up.

This could be good, I say. Who needs the lumber yard, I say.

Then I see him, three cars back. He's squinting at me, mouth hanging open, like he doesn't want to see what he's seeing. Hey Boss, I say. It's me, Danny! How's it goin'? I say. And I head back toward him. Everything's O.K., I want to tell him. You were right to pick me, I want to say. But the light turns and the cars start moving. He rolls past me without turning his head. I can see his knuckles, both hands gripping the wheel.

It's O.K., Boss, I yell at the disappearing car. I'm not Jerry! I say.