

"Can today get any worse?" Julius Martin asked a dead bird, not long before his day got even worse. He looked at the dead cockatiel, claws up and glassy-eyed, lying on poop newspaper, and said, "Okay, you're right."

Poppy, the dead cockatiel, lay on his back in a cheap cage on a very expensive wood table, in the parlor of the house of Mr. and Mrs. Donte Gallardo, who were taking their vacation in the Pyrenees. They had left an envelope for Julius with fourteen twenty dollar bills on this very table, expecting, in exchange, that he would be the caretaker of their house, and, in particular, of their beloved Poppy. Julius had earned nine days of his pay so far, but he had spent all fourteen already.

Julius took the plastic from the Sunday edition of the Tribunes that were stacked by the door and used it as a glove to remove the dead bird from its cage. Not wanting to throw Poppy in the garbage, or take time to bury her, Julius put her in the freezer. He watered the plants quickly and took in the mail and the newspaper.

He was anxious to get to the bank. He was behind on his mortgage. The payment that should have pacified his creditors for a while had bounced, and he could not understand why. A phone call, alerting him of the bounced check, had woken him up not long after he had finally gone to sleep, having been up most

of the night in severe gastrointestinal distress. He could not understand his illness, either, but suspected that it might be the fault of a jar of spaghetti sauce that had possibly been in the fridge for a very long time.

The morning was warm and damp. Julius checked his phone and found that he had two new emails. One was from EarthTech Solutions, thanking him for the interview and saying that, while they found his qualifications impressive, they had decided to hire somebody else. Julius had been doing whatever odd jobs he could find for the past six months, since the small ISP he had helped to start twenty years ago, when he was just a kid, had finally closed its doors. The second email was from Jessica, asking if he could please find her Buffy boxed set and mail it to her. Julius thought about writing back and saying that that would be inconvenient, because everything in the house he had bought for the two of them was now in poorly-labeled boxes, because the only way he was going to avoid bankruptcy was to sell the place quickly and move back in with his parents at the age of thirty-seven. Instead, he wrote back and said "sure."

The stoplights were out at the corner, and Julius had to jump out of the way of a pickup truck that made no effort to slow down. His phone went flying, skidded across the street, teetered for a second on the edge of a drain, and then fell into

the black depths of the Chicago sewer system. Julius closed his eyes and took a couple deep breaths before heading on to the bank.

There was a long line at the bank, and the tellers were frazzled. When Julius had looked for a bank, he had looked for a bank with high ceilings and marble floors, and brass grates at the teller windows. He had settled for a bank with complimentary Hinkley Springs water and a cool pneumatic tube connecting the drive-through to the main building. The carpet was clean and the fluorescent lights did not flicker. One of the tellers knew him by name, but she was not there today.

Something was wrong today. There was almost never a line, and this line was full of craning necks and tapping feet. Julius went to stand dutifully at the back of the line. He stuck his hand into the pocket of his jeans, habitually reaching for his phone to check the time. His pocket was empty and he sighed. He must have sighed loudly, because a young woman in a sun dress and a leather jacket stopped as she walked past him.

"It'll all be okay," she said, smiling at him. She looked positively giddy.

Julius smiled back at her, unenthusiastically, and she left.

It took twenty minutes for Julius to get to a teller, only

to be told that they had no record of any check being drawn from his account. In fact, they had no record of his account at all. He was told not to worry by a young woman who looked as if she had probably been perky when she had arrived at work, but who now looked vaguely defeated. Julius asked her, as nicely as possible, why he shouldn't worry, and was told that the problem was just with the computers. Julius asked whether his money existed anywhere other than inside their computers, and the unfortunate teller looked baffled.

"Is there a shoebox full of cash somewhere in the vault with 'Julius' written on it?" He asked, and then, worried that the teller might cry, mumbled, "Don't worry, it wouldn't be a very big shoebox."

Julius walked out of the bank feeling slightly numb. The clouds had burned off and now it was hot outside. Gross hot. Julius thought that if he stood in one place on the sidewalk too long, the soles of his shoes might fuse themselves to the pavement.

"Need a ride?"

It took a second for Julius to realize that somebody was talking to him. He looked around and saw the young woman in the sundress, with the leather jacket now slung over her shoulder, leaning on the hood of a black BMW convertible and smoking a

cigarette.

It was an odd question to be asked by a stranger, and so it took Julius a second to parse it. Then he shrugged.

"Sure," he said. It was hot out, she did not appear threatening, and it was a sweet car.

"Hop in," she said, tossing her jacket into the small back seat, on top of a pile of grocery bags, luggage, and blankets. She climbed into the driver's seat, and leaned across to unlock the passenger door. She had an unmarked CD case in her hand, and she put this in the glove box, making a face as the gear shift poked her in the ribs.

Julius got into car, thinking of perversely of the warnings he had received as a child, to never get into a car with a stranger. He looked across the car at the driver. She was wearing sunglasses now, much wider than her face, and a broad, private smile. She flicked away her cigarette and put the key in the ignition. Julius felt the growl of the engine.

"Cool car," Julius said, and she turned around to check her blind spots, put the car in gear, and left the parking space fast. "Is it an M6?"

"Something like that," she said. "What's your name?" She asked.

"Julius," Julius said, "and you?"

"Denali," she said. "Denali Song. Bad day?"

Denali glanced both directions as they sped through the flashing red stoplight.

"The bank lost my mortgage check," he said, "and I think I might lose my house."

They sped through another flashing stoplight. It seemed as if the lights were out all over the area. Julius grasped the door handle tightly and fought the urge to offer suggestions on her driving.

"I wouldn't worry about," she said. Julius was getting tired of people telling him not to worry. Denali said, "If the banks can't tell whether or not you paid the money, how will they know to take your house away?"

Julius did not follow her logic. They had to stop at the next intersection. Traffic had backed up as cars took their turns pulling up to the defunct stoplight and remembering how right-of-way works at a four way stop.

"...And besides," she added, "it's just you, right? No wife? No kids? You'll figure something out."

"Who says it's just me?" Julius asked.

"Married men don't get into convertibles with strange younger women outside their local bank, where anybody can see." Denali turned and grinned at him. "Smart ones, anyway."

"Well, you're right," Julius said. "Jessica took the dog. You'll want to get on the freeway going east up here."

"Huh..." Denali said, with pursed-lips, as if she was doing math in her head. "So no pets?" She asked.

"Nope."

"Houseplants?"

Julius shook his head, "I always kill them."

"Do you like your job?"

"I'm in between jobs..." Julius said. "Are you trying to make me feel like a loser?"

Denali shook her head.

"You'll want to get over," Julius said, pointing at the approaching on-ramp two lanes to their right.

"Some people might envy your freedom," Denali said. The traffic cleared in front of them.

"You need to get over," Julius repeated.

Denali hit the gas, blew by Julius' exit, and took the westbound exit instead. She accelerated through the turn, and they were going 75 by the time they hit the highway.

"I said 'eastbound'!" Julius yelled over the roar of the wind.

The wind whipped Denali's hair back over the top of her seat.

"I'm not taking you home!" She yelled back. Julius gave her a puzzled look. "I'm kidnapping you!"

Julius opened his mouth a few times and found he had nothing to say. Eventually, he managed to ask her "Why?"

"You seem like you could use it."