

The Fake Headlines*
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Ben woke up in his van. Early morning sun streamed through the windshield, bouncing off the Atlantic and stinging his eyes. He was in a parking lot by the boardwalk, and *Sergeant Pepper* was playing on repeat in the van's tape deck. "And though the news was rather sad, well I just had to laugh... He blew his mind out in a car..."

Ben sighed, and pulled the key from the ignition. He'd parked there so that he'd see when the security guard unlocked the gates. The dashboard clock read 7:30 a.m., and the gate was open. No more sleep. Between his thighs rested a Michelob, four hours warm: he swallowed its remains.

He got out of the van, paused a moment staring at the beachfront amusement park, and headed towards the gate. The guard looked familiar.

"I thought that was you snoozin' out there. You're here to check the vending machines?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Jose. We met when I was working the bowling alley. You're Ben, right?"

"Yeah. Ben. How's it going?"

"All right, all right. I'm supposed to call the cops if I find anyone camped out here, but I was pretty sure you weren't a bum."

"Glad to hear it."

"Haven't seen you around for a while. Still working the same route?"

"Yeah. I've been around. Mostly afternoons, though." In fact, Ben had been at the amusement park the previous afternoon, his last stop of the day. He wondered how many hours ago that was.

The guard nodded approvingly. "Got an early start this morning, huh? Glad to see someone else taking a little initiative. Me, I'm here till three this afternoon, then I head over to night school. I'm taking pre-law, you know?"

"Yeah?"

"Hell yeah. Gotta get out of this town. You ever see that show *L.A. Law*?"

"Maybe. I guess so."

“Yeah, you know it! Jimmy Smits is the man, dude! Hermano livin’ large, out west. Once I get my degree, I’m hopping the first plane to L.A., and Mid-Atlantic Security can kiss my ass goodbye. You gotta hustle, you know?”

“Yeah, you’re right, I’d better hustle. See you later.”

“All right. Keep your head up, dude.”

Fuck you, Ben thought. Passing through the gate, he walked towards the first machine on his circuit.

He had no reason to be cheerful this morning, but Ben was at least relieved the guard hadn’t called the cops while he was passed out. When he’d left his apartment at 3:00 this morning, they hadn’t been by yet to post a summons, or a warrant or whatever it was, but he was sure it was only a matter of time. Thanks a lot, Amy.

The first machine he checked had only collected \$3.50 in change since yesterday—somebody had jammed an arcade token in the coin slot the night before. He grabbed the coins, zipped them into a pocket of his gray coveralls, and closed the machine.

The one around the corner was in worse shape: the motor smelled like it had died overnight. Ben felt his jaw clench. The previous morning, Manny from the repair shop had woken him up to tell him the two machines from the Holiday Inn couldn’t be salvaged, that their parts had fused during the fire. Two more machines down at the end of the season, down for the last few moneymaking weeks till Memorial Day, and now the third in as many days.

He pocketed the money and moved on to the next machine. Why do I even try to keep up, he thought, it’s all going to shit.

He had swung by Amy’s place after work yesterday to see whether the letter was still sitting on her car. He’d slid it under the wiper blade of her Miata on Saturday night; the car had been there, but the house was dark, and the thought occurred to him that she had left town, taken a cab to the airport and just disappeared.

The letter was gone when he drove by yesterday. He pulled over a few houses away, contemplated knocking on her door. As he debated, she hurried out her door and hopped in the convertible. Curious, he followed her as she’d pulled away, taking a right onto Atlantic.

As they approached the police station on 18th, just as Ben began to wonder where they could be going, he saw Amy's turn signal go on.

Shit. Oh, shit. Does she see me? Is that what this is about?

He floored it in front of the station and drove a few blocks away, cursing every second. Jesus Christ. Just because I leave a few letters under her windshield, a few messages on her answering machine?

Walking through the deserted amusement park, Ben scowled. That stupid security guard had pissed him off, and he didn't even know why. He hated morning people, and he hated people who told you their life's story at the drop of a hat, but it was more than that.

The next machine was working fine, but light. It must have been too chilly for soda on the boardwalk last night. He pocketed a few bucks in change and checked the machine near the Whack-a-Mole. Same story. After Labor Day, everything slows down. Every year, the same story. He slammed the machine shut.

Last night had been spent in and out of bars. He ducked into a no-name dive a few blocks off the Avenue, just after he sped past the police station. Old men scowled at the late afternoon sunlight as he opened the door. He lit a cigarette, his first in several months, and tried to steady his hands.

He thought back to last week, when he'd spotted Amy on her lunch break. Hadn't she been talking to a cop outside the diner? He remembered the officer, short, built like a fireplug, with a sandy blond crewcut and a bristly moustache. Just a few years off the lifeguard stand. Had she told him about his letters?

He spent the rest of the evening in Windjammers, drinking Michelob and reacquiring his smoking habit. He sat in a corner and watched the college kids mingle sporting end-of-season tans, a sea of freckles and sunbleached hair. Wait a few years, kids; you'll be scowling at the sun.

All he'd done was ask Amy to reconsider. Work was slow, sure, but it was always slow going on fall, and he wasn't worried—hadn't been until all this happened, at any rate. Now, between this breakup shit and the dead machines, he wasn't so sure. He wondered: how can I right myself?

When he'd gotten back home from Windjammers, he spent the next few hours trying to compose another letter to Amy, but every time he started it sounded angrier: How could you think that I would ever

hurt you? Don't you have any respect for the time we spent together? He crumpled each in turn; he wouldn't get her back like that.

After a while, he decided he had to get out of the house, make sure his route was okay. Most places he couldn't get into in the middle of the night, but some he could—hotel lobbies, a few machines next to parking-lot pools. When he'd exhausted those, he drove to the amusement park lot, put on a tape, and waited for the gates to open.

See, that guard Jose didn't know anything about responsibility. He didn't have to worry about losing a bowling alley, or an amusement park. But these machines, this route, Ben thought—this is my life. I can't just watch some stupid TV show and pretend things aren't falling apart. I have to do something.

He approached the last of his machines, outside the entrance to the rollercoaster. This thing had been acting up every week for as long as he could remember. It didn't even sound like it was running right now. The front had been tagged with graffiti and most of the lights had been broken out. You son of a bitch, he thought, and ran the rest of the way towards it, delivering a flying kick to its casing as he arrived. "You son of a bitch."

"Believe you'll find it's unplugged."

Ben turned from the machine. An old man stood behind the wire fence of the rollercoaster, the door to the control booth open behind him.

"Yeah, great, thanks," Ben said sheepishly.

The old man nodded. What remained of his hair fluttered in silvery wisps in the ocean breeze. Morning sunlight reflected off lenses set into tortoise-shell frames. "Hear about that fire over at the Holiday Inn Sunday?"

Ben winced. "Yeah, sure did."

"I was there with the wife when it happened. Some kind of pancake-related incident, I heard. Set the whole damn kitchen afire. Torched a good portion of the lobby, too—blew up the Coke machines, which is why I mention. Black goo everywhere. Godawful mess."

Is this guy fucking with me? "I'm the one who had to clean up that mess."

The old man smiled. "Thought you might have been. I see you around here and there with your truck."

Ben wasn't in the mood for jokes at his own expense. He looked up at the rollercoaster's marquee, fishing for a retort. "'The Fast Forward'?" he scoffed. "Great name, old timer."

"Mm. Bought the ride a few years ago from a Hungarian gentleman. Name came with it. Guess it works alright for me."

Ben crouched down to plug in the vending machine, but the line of questioning continued. "So, friend. What brings you out so early to look at the same machine you saw yesterday?"

"Well, friend," Ben said, turning to face the old man, "since you asked, it turns out that I'm a parasite. I've gotta scrounge all the money that tourists drop into these decrepit, piece-of-shit sugar-water dispensers as fast as they can spend it, or else I don't get to eat at night. Of course, I'm sure you wouldn't know anything about sponging off tourists." He fixed the man with a cold stare that dared a response, but the old man just hitched up his shorts. "And the reason I'm not at home asleep in my bed is because I'm expecting a visit from the police at any moment," he continued, stepping closer. "Does that work alright for you?"

The old man leaned in, and took a whiff. "Long night?"

Ben looked away. "Wouldn't have it any other way. Nights like these you find out who your real friends are." He wandered back to the vending machine. "Somebody who'll stay with you when everything falls apart." He smiled grimly, relishing this release. "Sometimes the only choice you've got is how fast you hit the bottom."

The old man looked at Ben for a while, then shuffled back towards his control booth. "Gotta run the diagnostics on the machine here." He turned back to Ben almost as an afterthought. "Don't suppose you'd feel like a ride?"

Ben chuckled in spite of himself. He felt himself getting drowsy, and couldn't face going home yet. He remembered a Grateful Dead lyric: "I may be going to hell in a bucket, babe, but at least I'm enjoying the ride." Fuck it. "Might as well," Ben said.

It occurred to Ben, after the metal restraining bar had lowered and the low throb of the coaster's machinery began, that he hadn't been on a ride in a very long time. He looked over his shoulder and saw

the old man in the booth, working unseen controls. He nodded at Ben; Ben gave a halfhearted thumbs-up.

As the car began to climb, Ben saw his little beachfront town spread out before him, big hotels on the boardwalk, restaurants and motels in the near distance, houses and apartments beyond. His nervousness was dulled by lack of sleep and a faint hint of last night's buzz, but it grew as he ascended.

The plummet sucked the air from his lungs and he dropped, nearly freefall. His fingers tightened on the restraining bar. A sharp veer to the right, towards the ocean, and then everything became a blur interspersed with freeze-frame glimpses: a snapshot of the Sheraton's 16-by-16 beachfront balconies as he rose, scattered tourists suspended on rented bikes as he fell. He tried to hold each image in his mind as long as possible to hold off his rising nausea.

The coins zipped into his pockets vibrated with the roar of the machine. They felt like chains around him, jerking him from side to side. The coaster made its final turn, heading towards the admittance platform.

He rocketed past, the ride's speed unchanged. Ben jerked around as the car began a second climb, looking at the control booth. The old man was nowhere to be seen. What the hell?

The second drop was worse than the first. It was harder now to focus on a particular landmark, and his disorientation grew. The bass throbbed in his chest, made his body shake. Too much motion.

He approached the platform again, and again the coaster kept its pace. Did the old man have a stroke? He wondered how long before someone found him sprawled on the floor of the booth, how many circuits he would have to endure. There was nowhere he could jump out.

On the third plummet, he thought, this machine is never going to stop. Eventually it might build up enough momentum and fling itself off the rails, crash onto the concrete boardwalk or into a concession stand, and that would be that. But he couldn't stop it; he wasn't in control. He thought about his machines outside the gate, his van in the parking lot, Amy sleeping in her bed.

By the fourth circuit, just as his inner ear stopped trying to discern between up and down, Ben felt a strange euphoria come over him. Everything was a blur now, and he no longer tried to capture the details as he hurtled around the track. The vibrating change in his pockets was almost reassuring, absorbing the kinetic energy like a battery, transferring it to him.

And then, after some time, the car began to slow, and then stopped at the platform. The old man stood near its edge, staring out at the sea.

“Diagnostic’s five cycles,” he said.

Ben looked at him, beyond comprehension.

“Have to run the coaster through five cycles to warm it up. Make sure nothing falls apart. Forgot to mention it earlier.”

“Oh. Okay.” Ben slowly stood, clutching the back of his seat. Everything spun. The old man offered his hand, and Ben pulled himself onto the platform. He was going to be very sick.

He walked toward the fence by the boardwalk, watching the horizon of the sea pitch at weird angles with each blink of his eyes. He locked his fingers into the wire mesh, and spit. He closed his eyes. A wave of nausea washed over him.

And then receded. Ben breathed slowly, dared to move a little, but it did not return. “Oh, thank God. Thank God.” He opened his eyes: the sun still hung low above the water in a cloudless sky. He saw a dolphin leap from a distant wave, and submerge again.

Ben wondered whether it was just the adrenaline that made him shake. He felt jarred back into alignment with himself, standing straight even as the world continued to tilt before him. The ride was over and he had descended, but he was upright. He gazed into the sun and felt his euphoria return.

Beyond the fence, the other carnies were setting up shop, preparing for their day’s business. As Ben watched, a small woman in a yellow pantsuit emerged from a tent of the same shade and propped up a sign that read “Fake Headlines.” He peered into the tent, and saw newspapers hanging from a string.

Ben slowly regained his footing, then walked over to the control booth. The old man sat inside, gazing into the middle distance. “I want to thank you,” Ben said.

“That so?” the old man asked.

“Sometimes, something shakes you up so much that...you know... you see things differently.”

The old man said nothing. “So, thanks.”

In response, the old man stood and saluted him. “Go west, young man.”

“Really?” Ben said.

The old man smiled, then nodded towards the sea. "Can't go much further east, can you?"

Ben smiled, not really understanding. "I understand," he said. "Thank you." As Ben walked through the rollercoaster gate, he thought he heard the old man laughing.

He entered the yellow tent. "I need to get one of those made," he said to the proprietor.

"We don't open for another hour, Duckie," she said.

"Please, I have somewhere I need to be and I need it now." He looked at her posted prices: \$5.00 for one. "I'll give you ten dollars right now." Ben unzipped a pocket, and a stream of silver change flew singing to the pavement.

The owner studied Ben as he gathered his money. "What do you want it to say?"

Ben paused, uncertain of the right words. "I can roll with the punches," he said, finally.

She squinted at him through her granny glasses. "That's it?"

He thought a moment. "No. Under that, put, 'Believe me. Come back.'"

The woman in yellow smiled wistfully. "People say such sweet things when they're desperate. After I found out he was cheating on me, my husband wrote me love poetry to win me back."

Ben smiled. "That's beautiful."

She sighed. "Six months later he was living in Las Vegas."

"You didn't go with him?"

"Well, I'm here, aren't I?" The two looked at each other, puzzled.

Walking back to his van, Ben found himself glad to see that Jose wasn't there—he wanted to get to Amy's, and didn't want to hear more about law school or Los Angeles. As he drove, he kept glancing at the paper resting on the passenger's seat. He really wished they'd had some other masthead in stock, the *Washington Post* or *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. *The Fake Headlines* was a pretty unconvincing name for a newspaper. But the headline read exactly as he'd said.

He parked in the same spot as yesterday. Her car was there: today must be her day off. He didn't notice the police cruiser in her driveway until after he'd placed the paper under her wiper and turned back to his van.

Ben's first thought was one of dread. Something's happened to Amy. Then paranoia: is she dead? Is someone trying to frame me? Should I run, or should I go in? What's my alibi for last night? He stood paralyzed at the curb.

For a second, he wondered for a minute whether he even had the right house. As he stared, he saw a shirtless man wander past the living room window, shuffling as if fresh from sleep.

He was beefier than he'd looked in his uniform: the realization arrived before he knew he'd had it. He'd looked fitter outside the diner last week, younger, more like a lifeguard. Ben continued to stare; he didn't care if he was seen, although the half-naked cop in Amy's living room seemed to be looking for something he'd misplaced.

Ben walked back to Amy's car. He looked at the paper on the windshield, then looked at the windows, at the tires. He felt for rage, and was surprised to find none. He felt embarrassed by the idea that she would find his final message there, like this, but then he felt embarrassed by the idea of taking it home. He drove away leaving the novelty paper where it lay, its corners flapping in the Atlantic breeze.

** with apologies to the New Pornographers*