

Maria Temming

Stuck in Neutral

Clyde hangs a hard left through the intersection just as the yellow light wanes to red and hears the muffled slip-thump of twelve dead cats coming dislodged from where he neatly stacked them in the back. He winces and throws a glance over his shoulder, only to be met with the sight of the partition that divides the refrigerated rear of the van from the cabin. Right. Well, it's probably fine. Besides, Clyde has more pressing concerns. Namely, sufficiently caffeinating himself to avoid falling asleep on this last leg of his route. Clyde twists to face the front again and scours the side of the road for Whatever Beans Necessary, the coffee shop that his Near Me app assures him is off this exit of the interstate.

Clyde has passed by this place nearly every day since he started working for Pet Angels, a pet cremation business just outside Columbus, but never stopped in—usually by this point in the day, he's so ready to be finished with his rounds that he doesn't even break for dinner, let alone coffee. As a driver, it's Clyde's job to visit veterinary offices in southern Ohio and pick up the recently put-down, frozen animals, which he then delivers to the Pet Angels crematorium back in Columbus.

The job is, in a word, lame. He only started working for Pet Angels at the insistence of his sister, Margot, to get a job. Any. Job. Since getting his B.A. in English, Clyde had been coasting on Margot's charity and a summer gig working the ticket booth at a local water park. All Clyde wanted to do was become a professor, but that required more school, which, of course, required a big chunk of change. So, he worked. Unfortunately, when the water park inevitably closed for the season and Clyde had to find a real job with no definite expiration date, he descended into a funk, during which he consumed a primarily Cheeto-based diet and didn't leave his apartment for several days. When Margot arrived on the scene to find Clyde standing in his underwear at the kitchen counter eating peanut butter out of the jar with his index finger, all she said was, "Oh good. Thought you'd grown roots in your bed," and sat him down in front of the computer to conduct a job hunt.

The Pet Angels work itself not bad as it sounds, really. The corpses are all frozen and bagged before Clyde ever has to load them in or out of the van. And being a horror flick aficionado, Clyde is perhaps less squeamish about the whole dead-animals thing than someone else might be—not that these assurances did much to mollify Margot, who, when Clyde announced his new employment, said, "When I said 'any job,' I didn't actually mean *any* job," then walked away, muttering something about wasting his time and talent.

Clyde doesn't disagree with Margot. He would like to think that he deserves a job with more stringent qualifications than just "strong stomach," but he has yet to find an employer who agrees. Clyde comforts himself by taking the opportunity to listen to audiobooks for nearly ten hours a day. Besides, the Pet Angels job only temporary. This is just the weird in-between time before Clyde can afford to put himself through grad school, so. It's fine. It's all fine.

Clyde finds Whatever Beans Necessary wedged between a dry-cleaner's and a hardware store in a strip mall on the fringes of Ohio University's campus. After taking his coffee from a dread-headed employee, Clyde turns to face the wood paneled room for a place to sit. It's packed with about a dozen round tables and lined with book cases literally overflowing with paperbacks.

The shop is crowded with college students who, like Clyde, are probably getting their energy fix before a long night. Of course, for them the night will be filled with homework, whereas Clyde has nothing ahead of him but 75 miles of road. These days, he would prefer even studying through a bout of pre-exam panic to what he's doing—just floating in the ether of young adulthood. Not *college life* young adulthood, where, even if you're just trudging through a boring class, you can still reassure yourself that it's all building toward something. *Real* adulthood, where Clyde has nothing to propel him forward but paychecks and the UPS truck depositing new audiobook CDs on his doorstep like some sort of storybook stork.

As his eyes pan over the room, looking for an empty chair, Clyde spots a young woman whose table is tucked in a small alcove of book cases. Her attention is fixed on the pages under her nose, but on the table in front of her sits a little paper tent that reads in loopy cursive, *Creative writing questions? You're in the right place. Ask me anything!* And underneath: *A written word is the choicest of relics.* —Henry David Thoreau

Clyde isn't sure whether it's the cursive—seriously, who writes in cursive anymore?—or the Thoreau quote—he's read *Walden* half dozen times, give or take—but the sign intrigues him. In school, Clyde came across his fair share of lit geeks, obviously, but his new life as a driver makes these kinds of encounters few and far between.

Should he go say hello? Clyde wants to, of course, but Clyde is not and never has been someone who can just spot a girl from across a room and magically summon the courage to go talk to her. What's more, this girl seems to be here for the express purpose of answering creative writing questions. Does he have any of those? Clyde casts around for something innocuous, yet profoundly insightful to ask, but draws a blank. What *does* occur to him is that this young woman might be an OU tutor or something, and oh Christ is he about to be the creepy older guy hitting on an eighteen-year-old? Clyde recalls the pile of slowly thawing pet carcasses in the back of his van and decides that as long as he's working for Pet Angels, he's pretty much maxed out his quota for creepiness.

Unfortunately, just at the moment he's decided to down his coffee in the front seat of the van with no one for company but his furry cargo, the girl looks up. Her eyes find a spot just above Clyde's left shoulder and without thinking, he twists his neck to see what she is looking at, which turns out to be a cuckoo clock. Clyde turns back around and feels his face bloom red as he realizes that the girl is now looking at *him*, the guy who's very obviously just done a full one-eighty to follow her gaze. There's a pucker between her eyebrows and one corner of the girl's mouth is tugged up quizzical smile. Her head tilts to the side.

Well, fuck everything. Clyde gives an awkward little wave and walks over to her table.

"Can I help you?" The girl's voice is rough, like she hasn't spoken in a couple of hours.

Clyde clears his throat reflexively. "I saw your sign." He points to the table tent and then lowers his arm, feeling stupid. "I'm a Thoreau fan, too."

"Really?" Her face breaks into a real smile now, and she gestures to the chair opposite her. "Please, sit."

Now that he's up close, Clyde can see that the girl is indeed pretty, but not so pretty that it would defy all laws of nature for a guy like him to address her. Not like the cheerleaders in high school, whose very presence seemed to yank his gaze down to the floor, but the plain, subtle kind

of pretty you might expect from the love interest of a movie hero's sidekick. Everything about her is straight: her shoulder length brown hair, her nose, her teeth, even her eyebrows.

"I don't want to impose," Clyde says, already sitting. "It looks like you're waiting for someone?"

The girl shakes her head. "I'm working on my creative writing Master's thesis at OU, so I'm teaching a couple of undergrad intro classes. I come here a few nights a week, in case there are students who can't make my regular office hours and want to meet, but no one ever shows up."

"That's—that's awesome," Clyde says. "Not the no one showing up thing. Sorry. The Master's thing. That's really cool. I just got my lit degree from NKU." ("Just" might be a slight exaggeration; Clyde's been out of school for over a year, but he doesn't like to think about that.)

The girl perks up. "Oh yeah?"

It's the first time since Clyde graduated that the announcement of his major has elicited an excited response from someone. When Clyde told Bernie, the guy who works evenings in the pet crematorium, he'd just nodded like that pretty much explained why Clyde was where he was (specifically, helping unload a plastic bag full of basset hound from the back of a van).

"Yeah. I'm planning to go to grad school, but you know." Clyde shrugs like this next part isn't almost physically painful to say. "Money, and all that."

The girl's lips pinch together in a sympathetic frown as she nods. Then she straightens up in her chair and extends her hand to him. "Wow, I'm sorry. Rude of me. I'm Tammy."

"Clyde."

"Nice to meet you. I approve of your shirt."

Clyde looks down to see that he's wearing his *Gravity's Rainbow* shirt today, the one with the mustard stain conveniently camouflaged by the yellow print of the title. "Oh, thanks. It's one of my favorites."

"He writes in such rich detail, reading his work is like trying to hack your way through a jungle using a butterknife." Tammy laughs at her own joke and Clyde smiles. "But after reading that scene where Pirate makes banana breakfast? I craved bananas for a month, I swear."

"Oh yeah, totally." Clyde wishes he had something wittier to say. After a beat of silence, all he can come up with is, "So, you hold your pseudo-office hours in a coffee shop?"

"I know, I know." Tammy rolls her eyes. "And in a place like this? I'm a walking stereotype," she says, like nothing could be worse. "But at least here, even if no one comes to ask questions, there are other human beings in my general vicinity, you know?"

Clyde is pretty familiar with loneliness, yeah. "Well, what are you guys working on in class?" he asks, which is apparently all the invitation Tammy needs to launch into a clearly pre-written and refined monologue on works of Barbara Kingsolver. Clyde contributes all of a dozen more words to the conversation and it's easily the most at home he's felt in a year.

Clyde is still riding the wave of good spirits from his conversation with Tammy when he goes to Margot's place for dinner two days later. He joins Margot and her husband Tim for dinner every Sunday, since that's the one day of the week when Clyde isn't helping Bernie unload pet popsicles from a van at dinner time. Clyde must be having a lucky week, because Tim is out to dinner with business partners tonight, so it's just Clyde and Margot.

Clyde does not like Tim. He owns a couple of properties around town, but you'd think he was a Trump-caliber real estate mogul judging by his puffed-up self-importance when he talks about his properties. The constant *judging you* look Tim wears whenever Clyde talks about work doesn't help either—even though Tim, like Margot, is nearly ten years Clyde's senior, and therefore has had a lot more time to establish himself in the workforce. However, given that Clyde rents his apartment from Tim for dirt cheap (thank you, Margot), he can hardly bite the hand that feeds him. So Clyde appreciates this rare opportunity to spend time with his big sister without the burden of having to simultaneously make nice with Tim.

As Margot washes dishes in the sink and Clyde dries, though, Clyde's luck apparently runs out. "Still on the job hunt?" Margot asks.

Clyde restrains himself from rolling his eyes. He's annoyed by Margot hounding him, but not surprised. Margot has always been the self-appointed boss of him. "I have a job," he says.

"A real job."

"Driving is a real job."

"Clyde."

"Margot."

"I'm only trying to help," Margot says, exasperated. "Why don't you apply for the copy-editing position at the *Messenger*?" She holds up the newspaper in question, open to the job ads section. She's circled the posting in pink highlighter. This is the third rehash of the copy-editing job discussion this month. What Margot does not know is that Clyde already sent in his resumé, as well as two follow-up emails, to the paper with no response.

"Yeah, or I could do something equally as mind-numbing, like checking people out at the grocery or mowing lawns," he says. "Just because it's got 'editor' in the title doesn't mean I want the job, Margot."

"And driving a car isn't mind-numbing?"

"Van," Clyde corrects, like it matters. "And not when I'm basically reading all day. At least I have the freedom to do something interesting while I drive."

"I just think you should be doing something with the degree you worked so hard for," Margot says.

Clyde pinches the bridge of his nose. He hates disappointing Margot, who was always his biggest supporter when he was pursuing his English degree. Time and time again, she argued on Clyde's behalf with their father, who wanted his tuition dollars to be spent on a more marketable degree like...well, marketing.

"I *will* do something with it," Clyde says. He would be wounded by Margot's dwindling faith, if not for the fact that she expresses it so frequently these days...and the fact that he's ten months into his Pet Angels employment with nothing but eleven unsuccessful job applications and twenty-six completed audiobooks to show for it.

Still, Clyde doesn't need Margot badgering him all the time. Especially given that she's one of the few people he talks to on a regular basis. When Clyde moved to Columbus after graduation to be close to Margot (and far from their father, who was much less gentle in his criticism of Clyde's lack of job prospects), Clyde knew it would be difficult to maintain what little social life he'd ever enjoyed. His college friends were far-flung to all odd ends of the country, working internships or entry-level positions. Nowadays, Clyde can barely get himself to

call them, afraid that they'll ask what he's been up to. Even Clyde's grade school friends back in his Minnesotan hometown that didn't go to college all seem to have wives and kids and their general shit together. And here Clyde is, sitting idle, depositing cash into his grad school savings fund at a steady trickle, spending all his waking hours on the road save for evenings and Sundays, when he can barely make himself look at a car let alone get in one to drive himself somewhere farther than Margot's house. He's stuck in neutral and he knows it. He doesn't need Margot constantly reminding him.

"Promise me you'll think about the copy-editing job," Margot says, putting a freshly washed plate into his open hand.

Clyde keeps his eyes on the plate as he dries and lies, "Promise," because that's the only surefire way to get her off his back.

Clyde stops in Whatever Beans Necessary every weeknight now to visit Tammy. None of her students ever show, and they usually end up chatting about whatever Tammy is teaching in her class that week. Clyde even gets her to email him the syllabus so that he can make sure whatever they're reading is on his audiobook lineup. He jots flyaway thoughts on a notecard taped to the dash as he's driving, just to have something interesting to say on-hand. Sometimes he feels like he's back in school, prepping for a class.

Does that make Clyde pathetic? Maybe, but it actually gives him a moderate thrill. The most literary conversation he's had in the past year happened on his first week of the Pet Angels job, when Bernie invited him to stick around after his daily dump for dinner. Bernie would share his thermos of beef chili with Clyde, if he wanted. Clyde wasn't usually one to consume food mere feet from cooking cat carcasses, but he was too excited about making a work friend to say no.

Anyway, when Bernie asked Clyde what he liked to listen to during his drives, everything Clyde had been thinking as he listened raptly to a Daphne Demaurier book that afternoon spilled out of him, pure word vomit. At the end of his monologue, Bernie just sniffed, wiped a smear chili from one cheek and said, "I get it, dude. You like books."

Clyde should never have expected anything else from the guy who stuck a "Hot Stuff on Board" bumper sticker to the side of his crematorium oven.

So Tammy is the highlight of Clyde's weekdays, no contest. She's clever and well-read and the first person to demand "textual evidence" from him in the past year. She tells him the ideas she has for her own stories and complains to him about her thesis advisor, who apparently is never around when she needs him to be, and about her students.

Unfortunately, Clyde's evening rendezvous with Tammy have time limits, courtesy of the corpses in the back of the van thawing every moment Clyde spends in the coffee shop. The fourth or fifth evening he hung out with Tammy, Clyde lost track of time and accidentally stayed at Whatever Beans Necessary for nearly a half an hour. By the time he got to Bernie for the drop off, there was a distinct odor permeating the back of the van.

"Pee-yew," Bernie said, waving a meaty hand in front of his nose. "What'd you do, man? Leave these fuckers parked out in the sun?"

"Sorry," Clyde told Bernie, trying not to stick his head too far into the van when he scooped up a bag of turtles. "I got held up."

“Mmm-hmm. Don’t let it happen again.”

Clyde won’t. He does not want to get on Bernie’s bad side. Even though Clyde can’t exactly pinpoint what he would have expected of someone who spends his days pushing animals into ovens—someone... vampire-esque? or maybe an Igor type?—he would *not* have imagined Bernie, who looks like the kind of guy who could have beaten Clyde up in high school: a six-foot-four monolith of muscle with a veritable mural of tattoos on his limbs.

Clyde sets alarms on his phone now, but it’s always awkward when he has to fumble for an excuse to leave. Tammy does not know what he does for a living, and he would like to keep it that way, thank you very much. She did ask, a couple of days after they met, about his job.

“I’m in between jobs,” he said, which wasn’t really a lie, if you went by Margot and her “driving is not a real job” philosophy. So Clyde did not feel guilty about that. Did *not*. It was just... Clyde didn’t know how Tammy would react if he admitted that he chauffeured around dead animals six days a week and cuddled his couch on his one day off. Maybe she would be disgusted. Maybe she’d laugh him out of the coffee house. In any case, he could not imagine a scenario where her response was not overwhelmingly negative. Besides, being “in between jobs” left room for interpretation. As in, Tammy might interpret that Clyde was on the verge of doing something real and significant with his life.

“Oh,” was all Tammy said after a long pause.

Clyde, wanting more than anything to loosen up the flat, unimpressed line of Tammy’s mouth just then, said, “Yeah, but it’s not that bad. Now I get to read pretty much all day.”

Tammy brightened at that. “Wow, I’m actually kind of jealous.”

Clyde has no doubt that eventually Tammy will learn the truth about what he does. All it would take is her watching him pull out of the parking lot and spotting the Pet Angels logo on his van. Clyde always makes certain to park with the driver’s side—the side where the logo is painted across the vehicle in big blue letters—facing away from the windows of the shop. But still. Tammy’s read every *Sherlock Holmes* and PD James out there, and Clyde’s line of work is hardly the kind of mystery that requires super-sleuthing. Clyde dreads the day he accidentally slips up and divulges what he really does, somehow. There is nothing more petrifying than Tammy finding out how pathetic and stalled out he really is.

Sometimes Clyde looks at Tammy and feels the sting of jealousy, but mostly, hanging out with her for twenty minutes a day is what makes everything else bearable. Talking with Tammy makes him feel like he’s back in his element, like he still belongs in the academic world. Whenever he says something particularly impressive, causing Tammy to pause in sipping her coffee or raise her eyebrows, Clyde feels a flare of excitement and satisfaction in his stomach. The kind of pleasure he used to get out of good grades on essays and compliments from professors.

On one especially memorable occasion, a few weeks after they met, Tammy told him, “You would fit right in at our department. I’ll have to introduce you to my thesis advisor at some point; I think you guys would get along great.”

Clyde could have melted into a puddle of happiness right then and there.

Clyde’s twenty-fourth birthday is a major bummer.

For one thing, it falls on a Wednesday, and even though he doesn't get home from work until late and has to start his rounds early tomorrow morning, Margot insists that they celebrate *tonight* because she and Tim are going to be out of town this weekend. For another, Clyde's birthday just so happens to coincide with the eleven-month mark of his time working for Pet Angels. Whoopee. One more reminder of how he's sunk almost a year into this Sisyphus-ian job (although if Clyde's talking Greek myths, he supposes he's more like Charon than anything else—ferrying the deceased domesticated beasts of southern Ohio to their final resting places).

It does not help that, as usual, a staple of the dinner table conversation consists of Margot and Tim asking Clyde about work. Now that Clyde thinks about it, maybe that's because he has so little else going on in his life. He stabs a piece of broccoli fiercely with his fork.

"It's got to be kind of hard to have a social life when you're stuck on the road six days a week," Margot is saying now. "At least if you were in an office, you get a chance to socialize with people who have similar interests.

Clyde says, "I'm fine, thanks."

"Seriously, Clyde," Margot presses. "Aren't you lonely?"

"Maybe you should join a book club," says Tim, wearing a small smile that is either encouraging or teasing, Clyde can't tell.

Either way, Clyde's lip curls, because a book club? No. Just, no. Book clubs, outside the context of universities, are for old ladies looking to fill their time between knitting circles and church functions. Okay, maybe that's an exaggeration. The point is, book clubs are designed for the kind of people who have reading and discussing literature as a hobby. Literature is not Clyde's hobby, it is his livelihood. Or it will be, anyway. Someday. He hopes.

"Yeah, I think that could be really good for you," Margot says, looking thoughtful.

"I'm not joining a book club," Clyde says in a tone that means to leave no room for argument.

"Why not?" Margot wants to know. "You'd get to talk books, make friends, maybe even meet someone—"

"For your information," Clyde says. "I've actually met someone, thanks to Pet Angels. And I—I talk about books with her. All the time. So. Yeah." Clyde waggles a spoonful of mashed potatoes at Margot in a *what do you think about that?* gesture.

Margot and Tim exchange a look. "You're seeing someone?" Margot says slowly, like she can't be sure she's heard right.

Clyde immediately regrets saying any of that, but oh well. He's in it now. And the look of disbelief on Margot's face strikes a painful chord in him. "Yeah," he says, pulling his shoulders back and sitting up a bit straighter in his chair. "I met her on the road. Her name is Tammy, and she's a creative writing grad student at OU."

"Oh." Margot considers for a moment, then gives him a tentative smile. "Good for you. Can't wait to meet her."

Clyde's shoulder slump. "Right," he says, nudging vegetables around his plate with his fork.

"Hey," Tammy says, nudging Clyde's foot with hers and nodding in the direction of the door. "Look at this guy." Clyde makes like he's cracking his back so he has an excuse to twist and get

a look at the guy who's just entered wearing a trench coat and carrying a thick brief case. "What's his story?"

Tammy likes to play this game when there's a lull in the conversation about whatever she's working on for her thesis or intro class. In the beginning, Clyde felt more like Tammy's student than her friend during these games, since he consistently failed to match her wit. No matter what story he contrived for the designated stranger, Tammy was unimpressed.

"Spy?" he would suggest. Secret superhero? Criminal-turned-government-consultant?

"Too easy," she'd say, before throwing out an idea of her own.

Clyde has to admit, her ideas were often better. Of course they were. She's the one writing a collection of short stories for her Master's thesis, and he's the van driver. Besides, being a literature student rather than a writer, he's an analyst at heart. He likes to pick apart, not construct. Still, whenever Clyde lagged in these parts of their conversations, he could feel her interest slipping like rope between his fingers, burning him.

These days, when he suggests that the downtrodden woman in line just lost her son in a freak waterskiing accident, or that the man two tables over with the crooked nose once got punched in the face during a red-wine-induced fistfight over the last piece of fruitcake at his brother's Christmas party, Tammy smiles a crooked, contemplative smile. "Interesting," she'll say, and maybe even scribble something down on her notepad.

Clyde's not sure what to say about this guy, though. He tips his head to one side, then the other. "I don't know," he says. "What do you think?"

While Tammy weaves her tale, Clyde mulls over the prospect of actually asking her out. He's been through this several times in his head since his birthday party last night. In the canyon-wide stretch of time he spent driving today, he's repeatedly determined that yes, he's going to grow a pair and go through with it...and then knocked the legs out from under his already crippled self esteem again and decided against it. His cyclical thought process goes a little something like this:

On the one hand, Clyde could simply ignore the whole situation and continue lying to Margot until he can fake a break-up (Clyde has never had a relationship that's lasted for longer than a couple of months, so that kind of farce would be no long term commitment). This course of action is attractive because Clyde is, well, *not*. He's not hideous, or anything. He thinks. But he's got this traffic-cone red hair that's almost *loud* in its vibrancy—the kind of hair people feel comfortable commenting on because it looks so absurd in contrast to his pale skin and grey eyes, like his hair is pulling the color right out of him as it grows. Moreover, his constantly clean-shaven face often gets him confused for a teenager. Clyde could grow a beard if he wanted, but he feels like a beard is an outward sign that he's sinking into truck-driver-hood like a shipwrecked boat. So he's forever baby-faced, and decently sure that asking Tammy out would just get him shut down real hard, real fast.

On the other hand, while Tammy treats everyone else who walks into this coffee house more or less as raw story material just waiting to be mined, Clyde has somehow managed to convince her that he's worth more than that. If they were to go out, Clyde would have more excuses to talk to Tammy, who, if Clyde's being honest, is the one good thing he's got going for him right now. He'd have an excuse to get Tammy's number, to contact her outside Whatever

Beans Necessary and her university email, because she's not on Facebook or Twitter or anything ("social media is the poison of productivity, Clyde").

If nothing else, getting a girlfriend, especially one as smart and successful as Tammy, might make it feel like he's making some actual progress with his life, somehow.

That settles it. He's going to do it.

"Clyde? Clyde."

Clyde blinks up at Tammy and realizes he's been staring out the window for some embarrassingly indefinite period of time. "Er, sorry," he says, rubbing the back of his neck. "Was just...thinking."

"About what?"

Clyde inhales. Here's his window of opportunity. *About asking you out. About taking you for dinner. About getting your number.* Any of these things. Take your pick, he tells himself. Just say something, stupid!

Over Tammy's shoulder, Clyde catches a glimpse of the Pet Angels van out the window, blank white side faced toward the coffee shop, and loses his nerve.

Clyde exhales. "Nothing," he says.

Tomorrow. He'll ask her tomorrow.

A full week passes. Clyde chokes every day. He wants to just get it over with, for Christ's sake, he really does. He just doesn't think his and Tammy's tentative friendship—could you even call it friendship, when the basis of all your conversations were people entirely constructed out of words on a page?—could survive the awkwardness of an unrequited romantic gesture.

Finally, the following Friday, it's only the knowledge that Margot will ask about Tammy on Sunday that solidifies Clyde's resolve. He even makes himself stop at a florist's on the stretch of road between Cincinnati and OU to purchase a bouquet of flowers, thinking that maybe an actual monetary investment will prevent him from backing out at the last minute today. The florist takes way longer to arrange his bouquet than Clyde anticipated, and he's practically dancing around like he's holding his bladder as he waits for her to ring him up. Will Tammy stick around Whatever Beans Necessary to wait for him if he arrives after her defined pseudo-office hours? Clyde would like to think yes, but he isn't certain, and if he doesn't get a chance to ask Tammy out today then he's sure to lose his nerve over the weekend.

Clyde takes Route 32 at a brisk 80 miles per hour in his haste to blaze through one last pick up and get to Tammy on time. Unfortunately, when Clyde pulls up outside Dr. Speckman's office, Speckman is standing out on the front porch with his hands in his white coat pockets. This can't be good.

"Afternoon," Clyde says when he's parked the van. "What've you got for me?"

"Well, I don't want to alarm you," Speckman says, which seems to Clyde like the kind of statement that can only preface something quite alarming, "but I had a client yesterday who put down his pet llama, Bruce."

Clyde doesn't actually face-palm, but it's a very close call.

"Doctor Boyd is going to help us load Bruce up," Speckman says, hands up, palms out. "Just wanted to make sure there's room in the van before we brought him out."

Which is how Clyde ends up spending the next twenty minutes maneuvering a two hundred pound llama into the back of his van with the help of two vets, as well as one of their clients who was walking out the front door with his dog and saw Clyde very nearly get knocked in the groin with one of Bruce's cloven feet.

"Watch the—" Clyde reaches out just in time to prevent Bruce from smashing the bouquet, which Clyde stashed in the back of the van because there were a bunch of flowers in refrigerators at the florist's.

When Clyde finally, *finally* pulls up outside Whatever Beans Necessary, he slides out the door of the van, bends at the waist to check himself over in the side mirror. His hair is still stuck to his forehead with sweat, but there's not much he can do about that now. He glances back and forth to check for oncoming traffic before jogging across the parking lot. Clyde shuffles in the front door and surveys the cramped coffee house for Tammy, who's sitting at a table in the back, one hand simultaneously holding back her bangs and propping up her forehead while she reads. This is it. Clyde tries to fix his face so as not to look so nervous. *Be cool*, he tells himself, and strolls with affected swagger over to Tammy's table, even though she's not looking. "Hey."

Tammy glances up and smiles when she sees it's Clyde. He breathes out. He's got this. Probably.

"Hi," she says. "I was starting to think you weren't coming today."

If Clyde actually did possess the swagger he pretended to have on his walk to the table, he'd say something like, *And miss seeing your pretty face? No way*. Real-life Clyde, on the other hand, is only cool enough for, "I'm just glad you're still here." He slides into his seat and realizes he forgot to order a coffee and so has nothing to do with his hands. Clyde pulls a sugar packet out of the lineup and folds it between his fingers. He also realizes too late that he was so distracted by the prospect of asking Tammy out—which he doesn't plan on doing until they part ways, in case he gets a negative response—that he didn't prepare anything else to say in the meantime.

Ah, dammit. He totally forgot the flowers, too. And after all that trouble he went to, to save them from being pulverized by a frozen llama.

Clyde is just about to open his mouth and say...something, he hasn't quite figured it out yet, when the barista behind the counter clears his throat loudly and says to the room at large, "Excuse me? Folks. Excuse me. If anyone here is the owner of a 'Pet Angels' van out in the lot, your lights are on. That is all."

Oh, shit. Clyde almost stands up but resists the urge. If he goes to turn off the lights, Tammy will surely ask what on Earth "Pet Angels" is. And then if he lies, she's one internet search away uncovering his deceit. Of all the days Tammy could find out Clyde's real job, today is hardly ideal. Clyde tugs on his shirt sleeves and pretends not to have heard.

"Huh," Tammy says. "I wonder—"

"How is your that short story coming along? The one you were telling me about yesterday."

Tammy blinks, obviously surprised by Clyde's rudeness, but she latches onto the topic almost immediately. "I'm in a major rut of writer's block," she says, and then proceeds to recount every halted plotline she's juggling in her mind right now.

Normally, Clyde would listen with the attention of a kid seated in the first row of desks, but after what he estimates to be fifteen minutes or so, he finds himself slightly distracted by the headlight situation. Plus, thanks to that damn florist and Bruce, Clyde is even more crunched for time than usual today. He tries to inconspicuously check his watch as Tammy rattles on. How long does Clyde have before his dozen passengers start to smell? Let's see, he sat down with Tammy around 5:50, so that means he's been here for...

"Do you have to be somewhere?"

Clyde startles. "Sorry?"

Tammy nods at his watch. "It's okay if you do," she says. "You just seem distracted."

"I—uh, yeah. I have a...thing." He cringes. Smooth. "Sorry."

Tammy waves away his apology with a lazy hand. "No problem. I should head out too. Lots of work to do." She stands up and brushes muffin crumbs from her skirt.

"Yeah. Of course." He stands up and hovers at the table, unwilling to proceed to the parking lot. He's never departed at the same time as Tammy before, but when she leads the way out, he has no choice but to follow.

When they step out onto the sidewalk, Tammy gestures to the right side of the parking lot, several rows away from where Clyde parked. Far enough that she's unlikely to notice him getting into the Pet Angels van. "Well, I'm over here."

Clyde sends up a silent thank you to whatever cosmic force has granted him this pardon. Encouraged by his stroke of good luck, Clyde says, "Wait!" surprising both himself and Tammy with the force of his exclamation. "Um." Tammy arches an eyebrow and waits while Clyde works himself up to it. "Would you be interested, or have time to, uh, grab dinner with me on Sunday?"

"Oh." There's a pause, when Tammy looks neither pleased nor uncomfortable at the question. "Sure," she says. "Same time as always?"

Clyde feels as though a tight string running from the base of his spine up to the crown of his head has just been snapped. His shoulders drop and he feels a big grin unfurl between his flushed cheeks. "Sounds great. We could go somewhere nearby?"

"Definitely." She smiles and adjusts her purse on her shoulder. "See you then?"

"Yes. Yeah, looking forward to it."

Clyde gives an awkward little wave and then, before he can embarrass himself further and ruin this golden moment, he heads off to the van, where he plans to sit idle until he's sure Tammy has left the parking lot. He feels buoyant with relief. Best Thursday ever.

Except, no, because the van headlights are out.

Oh, *fuck*.

Clyde stumbles toward the vehicle and unlocks the door, hand gripping the key quivering so badly he has to hold that hand with his other hand. He slides into the driver's seat and twists the key in the ignition. Nothing. *Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck*.

What should he do? His first coherent thought is, "Bernie is going to kick my ass." More pressing is the concern that he won't get this van towed in time to prevent his passengers from melting. He pulls out his phone and starts scrolling his contacts for the AAA phone number. Jesus, how could he let this happen? He's such an idiot.

When the AAA employee answers the phone, Clyde quickly gives his information and finishes with the request that they “please, please hurry up.”

“Someone will be over as soon as possible,” the employee tells him, infuriatingly unconcerned. Clyde jabs the “end” button with his thumb and checks the time.

“Car trouble?”

Clyde flinches and looks over to see Tammy standing next to the open driver’s side door. Christ on a cracker.

“Sorry,” she says. “I just wanted to get your number before leaving, since we didn’t set a place to meet.”

Clyde tries to school his expression into something less, ah, stiff and horrified. “Oh, right.”

“I can give you a lift, if your car’s broken down,” Tammy says.

“No, no. Thanks, but I don’t live around here.”

Tammy raises her eyebrows. “Oh. Okay.” Her eyes flick over to the logo painted across the side of the van and her eyebrows pull together. “Wait, you’re the one with the Pet Angels van?” Tammy looks back at him with incredulous eyes. “They made an announcement in the coffee shop about the headlights being on. Didn’t you hear?”

Tammy is looking at Clyde like he’s stupid. There’s nothing he hates more than feeling stupid in front of Tammy. “Guess not,” he says.

Tammy shakes her head. “You have someone coming, though? A tow truck?”

He nods.

“Okay. That’s good.” Tammy leans against the side of the van. “I thought you didn’t have a job,” she says. “Or is this your personal mode of transportation?” She’s smirking, and Clyde would love it if the ground under his feet would open up and swallow him whole right about now.

“Yeah, no, I got a job,” says Clyde.

“Congratulations,” Tammy says. “What is Pet Angels, anyway? A cat food delivery service?”

Clyde wishes. “No. It’s a, uh, pet cremation service,” he says, and waits for her to start laughing.

Tammy squints at him, like she can’t tell if he’s lying or not. “You’re serious.”

Clyde nods.

Tammy points at the back of the van. “So your job is to…”

“Transport the dead animals,” Clyde cuts in before she has the chance to say it in less professional, more demeaning terms. “Yeah.”

Tammy thinks on that for a second, and then her face splits into a blinding smile. “No. Way. This is *amazing*.”

Clyde’s mouth pops open, but he’s too caught off guard to formulate a proper question. “Huh?”

Tammy bats Clyde on the arm. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about this. What incredible fodder for a story! Here I was, complaining to you all afternoon that I don’t have anything interesting to write about, and you’ve been hiding *this* out in the parking lot?”

Please excuse Clyde while he picks up his jaw off the parking lot pavement.

“Can I see in the back?” Tammy digs in her purse for a notepad and then draws out a pen, poised like a reporter.

Clyde numbly leads her to the back, figuring it makes no difference now whether or not he opens the van doors.

“Wow,” Tammy breathes, like Clyde revealing the heap of plastic bags in the back is on par with unearthing the Holy Grail. “This is so weird. Oh my god. What is *this*?” She reaches out to brush a few fingers over the very large bag containing the llama.

“That’s Bruce,” Clyde says, tugging at his sleeves.

Tammy laughs, high-pitched and happy. “This is such good material.”

She turns to him with such amused astonishment in her eyes that Clyde can already feel it all slipping away: the book discussions, the collaborative brainstorming, the casual literary references like a shared secret language across the coffee house table. From now on, all he’s going to be is the weird guy with the van full of dead llama. That’s his story, just waiting to be mined for material.

“What are these?”

Clyde looks around to see Tammy tugging a crumpled bouquet of flowers from underneath one of the bags. He feels dead weight of dismay settle in his gut.

Tammy examines the flattened buds with slightly parted lips and pinches a petal that’s barely hanging on between her thumb and forefinger. Then plucks it off.

“Oh, um,” is all Clyde gets out in response.

“Did some poor soul leave these with their deceased pet?” Before Clyde can even answer, Tammy is so apparently moved by this hypothetical touching gesture that she puts a palm against her heart. “Wow. That’s just—wow. What an incredible detail.” She puts that down on her notepad. “I have so many questions for you, but I really have to dash. Oh, wait.” Tammy taps herself on the forehead with the heel of her hand. “Duh. We’ll see each other on Sunday. We can do a whole interview then. Here, let me get your number.”

“Okay.” Clyde feels his face settle into a wooden expression as he lists off the digits of his phone number for her. When she’s finished taking down his information, Tammy reaches up to envelop him in a hug. He puts his arms limply around her waist and waits for it to be over.

“I’ll see you on Sunday!” Tammy says over her shoulder as she heads back to her own car.

Not likely, Clyde thinks as he sits on the bumper of the van next to his lifeless payload while he waits for the tow truck to come and save him.