

In my business, where you put something like forty to forty-five thousand miles a year on your vehicle and the sweet suck of the engine at 3500 r.p.m. is like another kind of breathing, you can't afford distractions. Can't afford to get tired or lazy or lift your eyes from the road to appreciate the way the fog reshapes the palms on Ocean Avenue or the light slips down the flanks of the mountains on that mind-blowing stretch of Highway 1 between Malibu and Oxnard. Get distracted and you could wind up meat. I know that. The truckers know that. But just about everybody else—Honda drivers, especially, and I'm sorry—they don't even know they're behind the wheel and conscious half the time. I've tried to analyze it, I have. They want value, the Honda drivers, value and reliability, but they don't want to pay for the real deal—German engineering is what I'm talking about here—and yet they still seem to think they're part of some secret society that allows them to cut people off at will, to take advantage because they're so in the know. So hip. So Honda. And, yes, I carry a gun, a Glock Nine I keep in a special compartment I had built into the leather panel of the driver's-side door, but that doesn't mean I want to use it. Or would use it again. Except in extremis.

The only time I did fire it was during that rash of freeway shootings a few months back—a statistical bubble, the police called it—when people were getting popped at the rate of two a week in the Greater L.A. area. I could never figure it, really. You see some jerk swerving in and out of traffic, tailgating, and maybe you give him the finger and maybe he comes up on you, but you're awake, aren't you? You've got an accelerator and a brake pedal, right? But most people, I guess, don't realize that they've just made the driver charging up alongside them homicidal or that their engine is on fire or the road dropping off into a crater the size of the Sea of Tranquility, because they've got their cell phone clamped to the side of their head and they're doing their nails or reading the paper. Don't laugh. I've seen them watching TV, gobbling kung pao out of the carton, doing crossword puzzles, and talking on two cells at once—all at eighty miles an hour. Anyway, I just fired two slugs—*blip blip*. Didn't even

know my finger was on the trigger. Plus, of course, I was aiming low—just trying to perforate his rocker panels or the idiotic big-dick off-road Super Avenger tires that had him sitting about twelve feet up off the ground. I'm not proud of it. And I probably shouldn't have gone that far. But he cut me off—twice—and if he'd given me the finger it would have been one thing, but he didn't even know it, didn't even know he'd nearly run me into the median two times in the space of a minute.

On the day I'm thinking of, though, everybody seemed to keep their distance. It was just past noon and raining, the ocean stretching out on my left like a big seething cauldron, the surface of the roadway slick beneath the wheels—so slick and soft and ill-defined that I had to slow to seventy in places to keep from hydroplaning. But this wasn't just rain. This was one cell in a string of storms that had stalled over the coast for a week, sucking load after load of moisture up out of the sea and dropping it on the hills that had burned clear of vegetation the winter before. I was already running late because of a slide at Topanga Canyon, boulders the size of S.U.V.s in the middle of the road, cops in slickers waving their flashlights, down to two lanes, then one, and finally—I heard this on the radio after I got through—down to none. Road closed. All she wrote.

I didn't like driving in the rain—it was just asking for disaster. My fellow-drivers, riding their brakes and clinging to the wheel as if it were some kind of voodoo fetish that would protect them against drunks, curves, potholes, errant coyotes, and sheet metal carved into knives, went to pieces the minute the first drop hit the windshield. As you might expect, the accident rate shot up something like three hundred per cent every time it rained, and, as I said, this wasn't just rain in the ordinary sense. But I had a delivery to make in Santa Barbara, an urgent delivery, and if I couldn't guarantee door-to-door faster than FedEx or Freddie Altamirano (my major competitor, who rode a Pro-Street FXR and moved like a spirit raptured to Heaven) then I was out of business. Plus, this wasn't just the usual packet of bonds or stock certificates or the blockbuster screenplay passing from

writer to director and back again; this was the kind of thing I handled maybe two or three times a month at most—and it never failed to give me a thrill. In the trunk, anchored firmly between two big blocks of Styrofoam, was a human liver packed in a bag of ice slurry inside a Bud Light Fun-in-the-Sun cooler, and if that sounds ridiculous I'm sorry. That's how it's done. Simple fact. Ninety minutes earlier, I'd picked it up at LAX because the S.B. airport was closed, due to flooding, and if you want a definition of time-sensitive this was it. The recipient, a twenty-seven-year-old mother of three, was on life support at University Hospital, and I was running late and there wasn't much I could do about it.

At any rate, I was coming up on La Conchita—a little town no bigger than a trailer court, carved out of the hill where the freeway dips down to the ocean—just rounding the big curve at Mussel Shoals and dropping down to fourth to blow past a U-Haul truck (the worst, the very worst, but that's another story), when the hillside gave way. There was a series of sharp cracks, which I, at first, took to be lightning hitting the hill, and then a deep reverberant concussion, as if all the air had been knocked out of the day. By this point, I was shifting down, hyper-aware of the chain of brake lights flung up across the road in front of me and of the U-Haul, piloted by a zombie on his way to Goleta or Lompoc with his zombie girlfriend at his side and their little white dog in her lap, bearing down on me from behind. I was able to stop. They weren't. They skidded past me and hammered into the back end of a Mercedes with its panic lights on, the whole shimmering orange-and-white truck lifting up on two wheels before crashing down on its side.

I'll say right up front that I've never been much in an emergency—and when you're behind the wheel as often as I am you see plenty of emergencies, believe me. I don't know C.P.R., don't know how to stay calm or counsel anybody else to stay calm, either, and I've been lucky, because it's never been me wrapped around the telephone pole or nodding over the windshield and nobody I know has ever choked at the dinner table or clutched his heart or started hemorrhaging from the mouth and ears.



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I saw the dog lying there in the road like a heap of rags, saw the driver of the moving truck haul himself up out of the window like a pearl diver coming up for air, saw the rain eclipse him. And the first thing I did—for my own sake and for the sake of whoever else might be tooling up behind me—was pull the car off the road, as far up on the shoulder as I could take it without fear of getting stuck. I was just reaching for my cell to dial 911, the road blocked, the day shot, my mind churning and the donor organ sitting there undelivered and unincorporated and getting staler by the minute, when things got worse, a whole lot worse.

I don't know if the average person really has much of an idea of what a mud slide involves. I certainly didn't—not before I started driving for a living, anyway. You'd see footage on the six-o'clock news, telephone poles down, trees knocked askew, a car or two flattened, and a garage staved in, but it didn't seem like much. It wasn't hot lava, wasn't an earthquake or one of the firestorms that burned through this subdivision or that, incinerating a couple hundred homes every fall. Maybe it was the fault of the term itself—*mud slide*. It sounded innocuous, almost cozy, as if it might be one of the new attractions at Magic Mountain, or vaguely sexy, like the women's mud-wrestling that was all the rage when I was in high school and too young to get in the door. But a mud slide, as I now know, is nothing short of an avalanche, where instead of snow you've got four hundred thousand tons of liquefied dirt bristling with rocks and tree trunks coming at you with the force of a tsunami. And it moves fast, faster than you would think.

The sound I'd heard, even through the rolled-up windows and the ready voice of the narrator of the book-on-tape I'd checked out of the library, because I never go anywhere without a good story to take my mind off the raging idiots all around me, was the sudden angry shriek of the bulkhead in back of La Conchita giving way. Steel beams snapped like chicken bones, railroad ties went air-

borne. Up ahead of me, beyond the overturned U-Haul, a few cars had got through, but now a vanguard of boulders came sluicing across the freeway, followed by a soupy river of mud. A rock the size of a cannonball thumped into the underside of the U-Haul truck and a fistful of pellets—gravel, I guess—sprayed the side of my car, and that was going to mean a new paint job. I knew it, maybe even bodywork. The rain quickened. The mud spread out across the pavement, seething around the tires and underneath the car and beyond, and soon dark tongues of it had pushed across the southbound lanes, too.

What did I do? I got out of the car, the normal reaction, and immediately my shoes filled with sludge. The mud was no more than a foot or so deep, and here, at the edge of the slide, it was the consistency of pancake batter. But darker. And it smelled of something long buried and dug up again, damp and raw as an open grave, and for a moment there I flashed on my father's funeral, the squared-off edges of the hole with its fringe of roots, my mother trying to be stoic and my uncle putting an arm around my shoulders as if that could help. Let me say that it wasn't a pleasant smell and leave it at that.

Doors slammed. Somebody was shouting. I turned my head to look up the road and there was the driver of the U-Haul, pulling his wife or girlfriend or whoever she was up out of the cab even as she reacted to the sight of the dog lying there on a clean stretch of pavement, with the mud, working to its own logic, flowing around it. Behind me were at least a hundred cars, bottled up and idling, their lights dully illuminating the scene, windshield wipers clapping like a very tired audience. People were running up the street. A pickup just north of the overturned U-Haul began to float off, sustained on a wave of mud as if it were a dinghy drifting away on the tide. My jacket was soaked through, my hair hanging in my face. The liver wasn't getting any fresher.

Suddenly, unaccountably, I found myself at the trunk of the car. I inserted



the key and flipped it open, and I don't really know why—just to reassure myself, I guess. The lid of the cooler eased back and there it was, the liver, smooth and burnished, more pink than red—and it wasn't like meat, not at all, more like something sculpted out of very soft stone. But it was O.K., it was fine, I told myself, and I should just stay calm. I figured we had an hour, more or less, before things began to get critical. It was then that the woman with the dog—she was bent over it in the rain, wailing, and the water dripping from the end of her nose was pink with the blood leaching out of her scalp—looked up and shouted something to me. She might have been asking if I knew anything about dogs. Or if she could use my cell to call a vet. Or if I had a knife, an oxygen mask, a G.P.S. locator, a blanket. I don't know what she said, actually. She wanted something, but I couldn't hear her over the rattle of all those idling engines, the hiss of the rain, the shouts and curses, and in the next moment somebody else was there, some stranger, and he was taking care of it. I ducked back into the car, just to get out of the rain—mud everywhere, mud on the carpets, the doorframe, the console—and punched in the cell number of the assisting physician at the hospital.

"There's a problem," I said.

His voice came back at me in a thinly amplified yelp. "What do you mean? Where are you?"

"I'm maybe fifteen miles south, at La Conchita, that's what I mean, but I can't get through because there's some kind of slide—it just happened—and it's blocking the road. Totally." For the first time, I looked up at the mountain outside the window and saw the scar there, the trail of displaced earth and the crushed houses. Everything was gray with the rain.

"How long before they clear it?"

"Actually? Could be a while."

He was silent, and I tried to picture him, nobody I knew, an intern maybe, glasses, short hair because it was easier to maintain when your life wasn't your own, biting his lip and staring out the window into the pall of rain. "Is there any way I can get to you? I mean, if I jump in the car and—"

"Maybe," I said, and I wanted this to work in the worst way, because my reputation was on the line here and that

woman needed her liver she'd been waiting for for Christ knew how long. Somebody was freshly dead in Phoenix and this was the best match, and I'd have walked it there if I could have, no doubt about it, walked till my feet turned to stumps, but I had to be honest with him. "You got to realize the traffic's already backed up in both directions," I said, and I wasn't calm, wasn't calm at all. "I mean nothing's going through. There's an accident just in front of me and there's mud and rocks all over the road. In both directions. Even if you leave now you're not going to be able to get within miles of here, so you tell me. Tell me what you want me to do. Tell me."

Another silence. "All right," he said finally. His voice was pinched. "You know how urgent this is. How crucial. We'll get this done. We will. Just keep your cell on, all right? And don't do anything till I get back to you."

I must have sat there for five minutes at least, just staring out into the rain, the cell clutched in my hand. I was wet through and I'd begun to shiver, so I turned the engine over and got the heater going. The mud was still flowing, I could see that much, and the white dog had disappeared, along with the couple from the U-Haul. Apparently they'd found shelter somewhere, in the little gas station-cum-grocery store that was La Conchita's sole commercial establishment, or in one of the cars stalled behind me. There were people out on the pavement, hunched-over forms wading through the mud and shouting at one another, and I thought I heard the distant keening of a siren—police, fire, ambulance—and wondered how they expected to get through. You might find it hard to believe, but I really didn't think much about the danger, though if another section of the hillside had let go we'd all have been buried, no doubt about that—no, I was more concerned about the package in the trunk. Why hadn't they called me back? What were they waiting for? I could have been slogging down the road already, the cooler propped up on one shoulder, and somebody—I thought of an ambulance from the hospital—could have met me a couple miles up the freeway. But no, the ambulances would all be busy with the wreckage in front of

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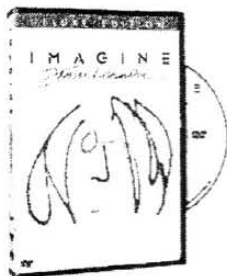
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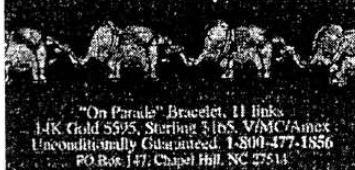
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me, with people trapped in their cars, bleeding from head wounds, their own organs ruptured, bones broken. Or in those houses. I turned my head to look out the passenger's-side window at the ghost of La Conchita, at the rectangular grid of split-level homes and trailers up against the hillside which had been there ten minutes ago and were gone now. Just then, just as I turned, a streaming dark figure surged up against the car and a woman's face appeared at the window. "Open up!" she demanded. "Open up!"

I was caught off guard—started, actually, the way she came up on me. It took me a minute to react, but she didn't have a minute, and she was pounding at the window now, frantic, both hands in motion, her eyes cutting into me through the smeared-over glass. I hit the button for the window and that smell came at me, that graveyard stink, and there she was, a woman in her twenties with smudged makeup, her hair wet and hanging loose like the frayed ends of a rope. Before the window was all the way down she thrust her head in and reached across the seat to grab hold of my wrist as if to tug me out of the car, going on about her husband, her husband and her little girl, her baby, her little girl, her little girl, her voice so strained and constricted I could barely make out what she was saying. "You've got to help," she said, jerking at my arm. "Help me. Please."

And then, before I knew what I was doing, I was out the door and into the mud again and I never even thought to crank the window back up, her urgency shooting through me like an electric jolt, and why I thought to take the gun, to tuck it into my waistband, I'll never know. Maybe because panic is infectious and violence the only thing to soothe it. I don't know. Maybe I was thinking of looters—or of myself, of insulating myself from whatever was out there, good, bad, or indifferent. I came around the front of the car, the mud to my knees, and without a word she grabbed hold of my hand and started pulling me forward. "Where're we going?" I shouted into the rain, but she just tugged at me and slashed through the debris until we were across the inundated railroad tracks—running now, both of us—and into La Conchita, where the mud flowed and the houses lay buried.

Though I must have passed by the

place a hundred times, doing eighty, eighty-five, with one eye out for the C.H.P. and the other for the inevitable moron blocking the fast lane, I don't think I'd actually stopped there more than once or twice—and then only to get gas and only in an emergency situation, when I'd been so intent on a delivery I'd forgotten to check the fuel gauge. What I knew of La Conchita was limited to what I'd heard—that it was cheap, or relatively cheap, because the hillside had given way in '95, obliterating a few houses and scaring off buyers and Realtors alike, but that people kept coming back to it because they had short memories, and the little community there, a hundred and fifty houses or so and the store I mentioned, exerted a real pull on the imagination. This was the last of the Southern California beach towns that anybody could afford, a throwback to earlier, happier times before the freeways came and the megalopolis ate everything up. I'd always meant to stop and look around and yet never seemed to find the time—the whole place couldn't have been more than a quarter mile from one end to the other, and that goes by in a heartbeat at eighty-five.

But I was here now, right in the thick of it, skirting the tentacles of mud and fumbling up the street to where the slide had broken through, and this woman, her bare legs mud-streaked and her shoulders pinched with urgency, never let go of my wrist. And that was strange, a strange feeling, as if I were back in elementary school and bound to one of the other kids in some weird variant of the three-legged race. Except that this woman was a total stranger and this was no game. I moved without thinking, without question, my legs heavy with the mud. By the time we reached the top of the street, a long block and a half in, all of it uphill, I was out of breath—heaving, actually—but whether my lungs burned or my shoes were ruined beyond salvage or the finish on the car was damaged to the tune of five hundred bucks or more didn't matter, because the whole thing suddenly came clear to me. This was the real deal. This was affliction and loss, horror unfolding, houses crushed like eggshells, cars swallowed up, sections of roof flung out across the street and nothing visible beneath but tons of wet mud and a scatter of splintered beams. I was

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

Now she can say her age, which she pronounces carefully, as "tew," sometimes flashing a victory sign. It's all over by the age of two, claimed J. M. Barrie, in "Peter Pan," and such is the invidious nature of great literature that I find myself looking carefully at her, to see if it's all over, and if it is, what it was. She seems not to have noticed. When someone shut out the lights and in the darkness set her cake on fire, she clung to me harder. And when we leaned together to blow out the candles she understood there was magic at work, for now she keeps blowing at things to see if they will go out. The dumb mothers and their babies came today to eat cake, and not one brought a gift for this child, which offended me, and felt like a mortal wound—not for the sake of the toys, which are tiresome, and take up space and are seldom wanted or needed—but because one brings gifts nearing a threshold, it quiets the gods. My own household god broke the coffeepot, and sent them scurrying back to the walk, and I'd have tossed pans and cups after them except I am older than two, it's all over for me, I have learned to pretend to be polite. And Lily, little Lily, smiled and waved her hand blithely, glad to see the company come, equally glad to see them go—because she is "happy!"—her favorite word—and because she is two, and mighty.

—Liz Rosenberg

staggered. I was in awe. I became aware of a dog barking somewhere, a muffled sound, as if it were barking through a gag. "Help," the woman repeated, choking on her own voice. "God damn it, do something! Dig!" And only then did she let go of my wrist. She gave me one frantic look and threw herself down in the muck, flailing at the earth with her bare hands.

Again, as I said, I'm no hero—I'm barely capable of taking care of myself, if you want to know the truth—but I fell in beside her without a word. She was sobbing now, her face slack with shock and the futility of it all—we needed a shovel, a pick, a backhoe, for Christ's sake, but the tools were buried, everything was buried. "I was at the store," she kept saying, chanting it as her fingers raked and bled and her nails tore and her blouse clung wet to the hard frenetic muscles of her digging, "at the store, at

the store," and my mind flew right out of my body. I snatched up a length of two-by-four and began to tear at the earth as if I'd been born to it. The dirt flew. I knew nothing. I was in a trench up to my knees, up to my waist, the mud sliding back in almost as fast as I could fling it out, and she was right there beside me with her martyred hands, looking like Alice, like my Alice when I first met her, with her snaking hair and the smile that pulled you across the room, Alice before things went bad. And I wondered: Would Alice dig me out? Would she even care?

Back, shoulders, bending, flinging, gouging at the face of the earth: will it sound ridiculous if I say that in that hard labor, that digging, that sweat and panic and the headlong burning rush of adrenaline, I found my wife again? And that I saw something there, something in the fierceness of this woman's need and the

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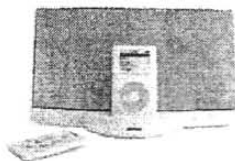
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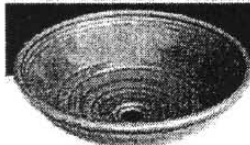
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taint of her smeared limbs that I found incredibly sexy? I didn't know the husband. I didn't know the little girl. I was digging, yes—in my place, the average person would have done the same—but I was no hero. I wasn't digging to save anybody. I was digging for her. And there came a point, ten, fifteen minutes into it, when I saw what was going to happen as clearly as if I could predict the future. Those people were dead down there, long dead, choked and asphyxiated, and she was going to grieve, this hot young woman, this girl in muddy shorts and a soaked-through top whose name I didn't even know, who kept saying over and over that she'd gone to the store for a can of tomato paste to add to the sauce, the sauce simmering on the stove, while her husband set the table and the little girl bent over her coloring book. I saw that. The grief. The grief was only to be expected. And I saw that in time—six months, a year maybe—she was going to get over it, very gradually, in a tender and fragile way, and then I would be there for her, right there at her side, and she could cleave to me the way Alice couldn't and wouldn't. It was Biblical is what it was. And I was a seer—a fortune-teller—for fifteen hard minutes. But, let me tell you, digging for somebody's life is a desperate business, and you don't know your thoughts, you just don't.

At some point, a neighbor appeared with a shovel, and I couldn't tell you whether this guy was thirty or eighty, ten feet tall or a hunchbacked dwarf, because in one unbroken motion I flung down the two-by-four, snatched the shovel from him, and started stabbing at the earth all on my own, feeling the kind of ecstasy only the saints must know. I was shoulder-deep, slamming at something—a window frame, shattered mullions and teeth of glass—when the cell in my right front pocket began to ring. It rang on and on, five times, six times, and I couldn't stop myself, the motion of pitching forward and heaving back all I knew, the dirt looser now, fragments of shingle appearing at the bottom of the hole like treasure. The ringing stopped. Shingle gave way to splintered wood, chicken wire, and fragments of stucco, an interior wall—was that an interior wall? And then the cell began to ring again and I dropped the shovel, just for an instant, to pull the thing out of

my pocket and shout into the receiver. "Yeah?" my voice boomed out, and all the while I was looking at the woman, at her hopeless eyes and bloodied hands, and there was the hillside poised above us like the face of death.

"It's Joe Liebowitz. Where are you?"

"Who?"

"Dr. Liebowitz. At the hospital."

It took a moment, shifting gears.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm here."

"Good. All right. Now, listen: we found somebody and he's on his way to you, on a motorcycle, so we think—he thinks—he can get through, and all you have to do is hand the package over to him. Are you all right? You think you can do that?"

Yes, I was going to say, *of course I can do that*, but I didn't have the chance. Because at that moment somebody—some guy in a blue windbreaker and a Dodgers cap gone black with the rain—made a grab for the shovel, and they're saying I brandished the gun, but I don't know, I truthfully don't. What I do know is that I dropped the cell and wrestled the shovel away from him and began to dig with everything I had, and I could have been made of steel and rivets, a digging machine, a robot, all sensation fled out of my limbs and hands and back. I dug. And the woman—the wife, the young mother—collapsed in the mud, giving up her grief in a chain of long shuddering sobs that fed me like an intravenous drip, and people were gathering now to comfort her and some guy with a pick was starting in beside me. The cell rang again. It was right there, at my feet, and I paused only to snatch it up and jam it down the front of my pants, mud and all.

I don't how long it was after that—five minutes maybe, no more—before I broke through. I was stabbing at the bottom of the hole like a fencer parrying an invisible opponent, thrusting away, when all at once the shovel plunged in all the way to my fist and everything went still.

This was the miracle: he was in there, the husband, and the little girl with him, preserved in a pocket where the refrigerator and stove had gone down under a section of the wall and held it in place. As soon as I jerked the blade of the shovel back his arm came thrusting out of the hole, and it was a shock to see this grasping hand and the arm so

small and white and unexpected in that sea of mud. I could hear him now—he was shouting his wife's name, "Julie! Julie!"—and the arm vanished to show a sliver of his face, one eye so intensely green it was as if all the vegetation of the hillside had been distilled and concentrated there underground, and then his hand thrust out again and she was there, the wife, clinging to it.

I stood back then and let the guy with the pick work at the hole, the rain settling into a thin drizzle and a long funnel of cloud clinging to the raw earth above us as if the mountain had begun to breathe. People were crowding around all of a sudden, and there must have been a dozen or more, wet as rats, looking shell-shocked, the hair glued to their heads. Their voices ran away like kites blown on the wind.

Somebody had a movie camera. And my cell was ringing, had been ringing for I don't know how long. It took me a minute to wipe the scrim of mud from the face of it, and then I pressed the talk button and held it to my ear.

"Gordon? Is this Gordon I'm talking to?"

"I'm here," I said.

"Where? Where are you, that's what I want to know. Because the man we got has been there for ten minutes now, looking for you. Don't you realize what's going on here? There's a woman's life at stake—"

"Yeah," I said, and I was already starting down the hill, my car up to the frame in mud and debris, the police there, lights revolving, somebody with a plow on the front of his pickup trying to make the smallest dent in the mudflow that stretched on as far as I could see. "Yeah, I'm on it."

The doctor's voice ran at me, hard as a knife. "You know that, don't you? You know how much longer that organ's got? Till it's not viable? You know what that means?"

He didn't want an answer. He was venting, that was all, hyped up on caffeine and frustrated and looking for somebody to take it out on. I said, "Yeah," very softly, more as an interjection than anything else, and then asked

him who I was supposed to hand the package off to.

I could hear him breathing into the phone, ready to go off on another rant, but he managed to control himself long enough to say, "Altamirano. Freddie Altamirano. He's on a motorcycle and he says he's wearing a silver helmet."

Before I could answer I saw Freddie, logging his way through the mud, the

Harley looking more like a dirt bike in the Motocross than a street machine. He gave me a thumbs-up sign and gestured to the trunk of my car even as I waded through the muck and dug in my pocket for the keys. I was soaked through to the skin. My back began to signal its displeasure and my arms felt as if all the bone and sinew had been cored out of them. Did I mention

that I don't have much respect for Freddie Altamirano? That I don't like him? That he lives to steal my clients?

"Hey, brother," he said, treating me to a big wet phony grin, "where you been keeping? I been here like fifteen minutes and they are *pissed* up there at the hospital. Come on, come on," he urged as I worked through the muddy keys, and the grin was gone now.

It took maybe three minutes, no more, before Freddie had the cooler secured—minutes that were ticking down till the donor organ was just a piece of meat you could have laid out on the stainless-steel counter at the market—and then he was off, kicking up mud, the blast of his exhaust like the first salvo in a war of attrition. But I didn't care about any of that. I cared about the liver and where it was going. I cared about the woman who'd taken hold of my wrist and her husband and the little girl I never did get to lay eyes on. And though I was wet through and shivering and my car was stuck and my shoes ruined and my hands so blistered I couldn't make a fist with either one, I started back up the hill—and not, as you might think, to watch the lucky man emerge from the hole in the ground or to take a bow or anything like that, but just to see if anybody else needed digging out. ♦



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