

THE CLOSE CALLS

By Christopher Coake

I.

The first time, Carl was ten.

His mother was driving the two of them from Fairfax, Virginia to south Florida, cutting downward across the south in the middle of the night. His mother's mother had suddenly begun to die in a hospital in Hollywood (*No, honey, not that Hollywood*) and goodbyes had to be said. His father had vanished three years before, but Carl still felt too alone, traveling with his mother, both of them exposed and small. His mother smoked with the window down. The wind lulled him as he lay across the back seat; he woke only to his mother's occasional sobs, to the thumps when big southern bugs hit the windshield like fists.

He held it as long as he could, but in the middle of Georgia he finally told his mother he had to pee. She stopped at a McDonald's. The only other vehicles in the parking lot were big rigs.

The lights inside the bathroom flickered. The tiles were cracked, uneven, the color of his grandmother's teeth. The mirror was a piece of polished steel, and Carl's face in it was warped and clouded. Someone had carved the word FUCK into the metal, which startled him; he should not, he thought, be seeing a word like that alone.

Nobody who'd used them seemed to have hit either of the urinals, and this offended him; he placed his feet carefully between the puddles before unzipping. But he couldn't go. Right before he started a man emerged from a stall—he didn't flush—and began washing his hands at the sink.

Carl kept his head down, waiting for the man to leave, but he didn't. He stood beside the paper towel dispenser and dug in his pockets. Carl could feel the man looking down at him. His cheeks grew warm.

"Now what's a little fella like you doing here, this time of night?" the man asked.

Carl didn't answer.

"What's your name?"

Carl zipped himself up without peeing. He went to the sink. He was compelled to. He wanted to run, but his mother always checked his hands; she'd be angry if he didn't wash. He didn't want to explain why he hadn't. What if the man came out of the bathroom and overheard?

"Why don't you want to tell me your name?" The man stood behind Carl, visible in the mirror, a cigarette hanging unlit from his lips.

"I have to leave now," Carl said. His voice sounded honking and stupid and weak.

The man—old, gray, his cheeks loose and stubbled—glared in the mirror. The reflection of his eyes touched the reflection of Carl's. The man's eyes were blue, bloodshot and desperately angry. "You didn't have to be scared," the man said, when Carl was opening the door. "It ain't like you're pretty."

II.

Then there was the time when he was sixteen.

This was a Friday evening in September: the beginning of the first weekend of Carl's life during which he would have both a car and a legal license to drive. Carl and his mother lived in Ohio, then. His high school was out in the sticks, but that night he was driving into Cincinnati, to a concert. Even better: he was in the car with two girls—the Davis sisters, Marie and Dora. He liked Marie, who was in his grade. Dora, one year younger, liked him. They were both smart and pretty

and he could make them laugh. Several of their friends were headed to the concert, too, but the girls had chosen to ride with him. He could not predict how the night was going to go, but for the first time in his entire adolescence, he felt any possible outcome was going to be one he'd like.

But then Carl got them lost, trying to navigate a back route through the suburbs into downtown. The sky was growing dark, and the concert would start soon; he grew angry, flustered. Finally Carl turned the wrong way down a one-way street. A car honked, roared past them; he jammed on the brakes. Marie laughed. He put the car in reverse. A group of black kids standing on the sidewalk began to laugh and jeer him, and he felt himself reddening. No black kids went to his school, and he was afraid of these.

When he'd turned the car around, another had pulled in behind him. It honked, loudly.

Carl didn't think. Or, maybe, he did. Maybe he was thinking he was grown up; maybe he was thinking he needed to seem tough in front of Marie and Dora, in front of the black kids on the sidewalk. Maybe he was too angry, at himself, at the girls who'd started complaining about his driving. He put his hand out the open driver's side window and flipped the car behind him the bird.

As he did this, his foot slipped off the clutch, and the car stalled.

He tried to start the engine, but it wouldn't turn over. Tried again and again. "Carl," said Dora—and when he looked up, a man, this one white, was standing beside the car. He bent down and looked into it, first at Carl, then at Marie in the passenger seat and Dora, sitting behind Carl. He looked like a biker—he was massive, bearded, and his bare arms were covered with tattoos. His breath smelled like cigarettes, and his eyes glittered.

Carl was holding his breath, and he could feel the Davis sisters holding theirs, too.

You just flip me off?" the man asked. His voice was surprisingly high and reedy.

"No," Carl said, stupidly.

"Oh god," said Marie.

The man looked at her, at Dora in the back seat.

“Yeah, you did,” the man said. “And you flooded the engine.”

“I know, sir.”

That last word hung for a while. All of them listened to it, considering.

The man looked up, around. Carl didn't think the kids on the sidewalk were there anymore.

The man was wearing a Bengals cap, and Carl wanted to babble to him about how they both liked the Bengals, that everything was okay. But then the man reached behind him, and then he was holding a large pistol. It rested on the doorframe, its barrel only a few inches from Carl's chest. The man's finger was on the trigger.

“Boy,” the man said, “do you have one of these?”

“No,” Carl said, his tongue made of cement.

The man looked at each of them again. “No sir.”

“No sir.”

“Do you know what kind of fucking day I'm having?”

“No sir.”

“Think I got room in my life for some little faggot like you?”

“No sir.”

“I could take you out. I could take your girlfriends back to my place and show them something.”

Dora screamed, a short burst of fear so intense and painful Carl was sure he'd been shot, that being shot in the chest must sound like a scream.

“I know,” he said.

The man nodded. He lifted the gun and placed it heavily against Carl's temple. A long second passed. "Bang," the man said. Then he took the gun away. He stood and slapped his hand against the roof.

"The fuck out of here."

Carl turned the key. He was sure that if the car did not start, the man would kill him.

But the car started. He pulled forward, working the clutch steadily, carefully. The man's form fell away in the rearview mirror. By the time Carl had steered the car back onto the main road, he was hiccuping sobs.

"I'm sorry," he said, to both of them.

"Let's just go home," Marie said then. She was holding Dora's shoulders, but she spoke to him gently, kindly, as though comforting a child.

III.

Then there was the time when he was twenty-four. Carl was living in an apartment in a redneck neighborhood on the south side of Indianapolis. He had just finished an MA in literature at Purdue, but had no job. He was getting fat off fast food. By Friday night of the second week in August he had just shy of a month's worth of rent in the bank, and no groceries in his refrigerator. Carl had moved into the apartment a year before with a woman he'd met at school, but she'd left him, suddenly, in May. She'd never been able to communicate a reason, but now, looking back, Carl understood pretty clearly: she was gone because he was unemployed, fat, and unperceptive.

That night, as he gathered up his laundry and a miraculous handful of spare quarters, he decided that the world was unjust if it expected him to do his laundry sober. His ex had given him a flask for Christmas, as well as a bottle of nice Scotch—though she'd drunk half of it before leaving

him. What better time to take care of the rest? He filled the flask and tucked it into his laundry basket.

The apartment complex's laundromat was a small concrete-floored room lit with overhead fluorescent bulbs that made it easy to check for stains. It smelled of detergent and spackle. No one else was inside, which was fine by Carl; the dramas of his neighbors all seemed to be worse, far more base, than his own. The laundry room was not air-conditioned, and his skin immediately sheened with sweat. He kicked off his shoes and threw the socks he was wearing into the wash. He had brought a book, but he didn't open it. Instead he sweated and drank quite a bit of the Scotch and watched the clothes slosh in the washer. All of this was better than reading a bad novel.

"The problem with you," his ex had told him, over the phone, "is that you—"

She hadn't finished. He'd asked her, twice: "The problem with me is what?"

She'd never answered. Carl had come to suspect he'd offered her too many choices.

A young woman—Chinese, and very pretty, and single, he thought; he'd seen her around—opened the door, a basket under one arm. She glanced at him, then down at her basket, then backed out of the room; the pneumatic door sighed shut behind her. He waited for her to return with whatever she'd forgotten, but she did not. He stood, unsteadily, and walked to the door. Outside the asphalt parking lot was still emitting heat, the overhead lamps humming and beset by clouds of insects. Not a soul was visible. Most of the windows of the surrounding apartments were dark.

The woman had looked inside, seen him, and decided she would do her laundry another time.

He drank the rest of the Scotch. He put his wash into the dryer and then walked, still barefoot, out and around the laundromat, to a grassy slope that dropped to the shore of a small artificial lake, fifty feet across. The lake was a pool of water, nothing more. The impoverished, unimaginative, Carl-fearing residents of Homewood Estates didn't use it for anything. Ducks

sometimes paddled around it. The end. No novelist could imbue this lake with any meaning beyond the fact of itself.

He had wanted to marry Laura, his ex. Yet even in the early days with her, back when he must have radiated some promise, he'd never looked into her eyes and seen any love. Lust, sometimes, sure, and that had compelled them forward, until he'd gotten so big. But maybe that wasn't it. Laura had told him once how afraid she was to be alone. Maybe he'd been counting on this fear, to keep her close. To keep him from being alone.

Tonight—this—was what loneliness was really like. They'd been right to fear it.

The shore of the lake was fudgy and smelled of rot. He waded into the water, which was bathwater-warm. He had no idea how deep the lake was, or if anything lived in it. He kept going and going. The water cupping his balls, climbing his belly and breasts, was as erotic a sensation as he'd experienced in a long while. Then the lake lifted him off his feet.

As a high schooler, taking swim lessons, he'd learned he was good at diving to the bottom of the pool to collect the handful of pennies his teacher had dropped. A useless compliment had made him unduly proud: You have mighty big lungs, kid.

He filled them now and then dove, deep, the water silky, heavy, heavier.

The descent seemed to take a long time. It seemed, frankly, unreal; he was doing an illogical thing, and some part of his brain insisted that it was not happening. And yet his lungs began to burn, and panic began to shine in his stomach, and his eardrums hurt. His eyes were shut, but he doubted he'd have seen anything with them opened. He reached out and clawed against the water, pushing himself down and down. Then his hand caught the lake bottom, furred with algae. He hung there, compacted, invisible.

There, his ears pounding, his fingers twined into the silt, a voice spoke in him:

Open your mouth. Breathe.

He kicked toward the surface, heart rabbiting. Shambled, dripping, out of the water, up the slick and treacherous mud of the shore.

But not right away.

Down at the bottom, he thought, *Breathe*. The water trying to force its way through his clenched eyelids, his sealed lips, his cuts and crevices. He was a poor vessel, most systems near failure anyway. Why not let the water in? Then the trouble would be over.

For a long moment this all made sense to him. And then he fled for the air. In his apartment, showered, damp, his laundry folded in its drawers and Letterman on the television, Carl lay awake, mulling what might have happened. How it would have appeared in the papers. What Laura would have thought.

Local Man Drowns in Lake. Or would that take up too much space? Would he deserve any detail? No. *Man Drowns*, it would say. Beneath the headline the article would list his name, his age. Unemployed, single, *survived by his mother Dolores*.

He imagined Laura reading the article. Telling her friends, I really dodged a bullet.

You should have done it, he thought, his teeth clenched. You coward.

IV.

It's funny, how all this comes back to him now.

Carl is thirty-six years old. He is, to outward appearances, doing all right for himself. He is the manager of a bookstore on the north side of Indianapolis; he lives not far from it, in a small, neat, brick house. He works out every day, eats right, dresses like he knows what he's doing. For the

past two years he has been married to a baker named Meredith. The love of his life, he has told their friends, and has always meant it.

All of this is a fraud, of course.

Meredith has been living with her parents for weeks; they struggled for months before that, in a fashion that Carl found horribly familiar. Today, without fanfare, she sent him divorce papers. Carl walks back and forth in his socks across the tiled kitchen floor, unable to stop looking at them. The papers sit on the countertop, incandescent beneath the hanging lamp.

Ever since Meredith moved out, Carl has been thinking about the close calls.

Not the accidents, not those. Not the time when he was nineteen and blind drunk and fell down the dormitory steps, when he was lucky to have broken his arm and not his neck. Not the time when he was seven, and developed a fever so bad his mother submerged him in a tub full of cold water and ice. Not the two car accidents, either—not the one when he was twenty, when a drunk t-boned him at an intersection, bruising his ribs, nor the one he was in two winters ago, when he hit a patch of ice on the interstate and flipped over into a ditch; he'd broken his collarbone. (Meredith hurried to the hospital that night, her face gray with worry, her hands jammed in her pockets; how he'd loved her for coming to his side.) Not the countless slips in the shower, or on wobbly ladders, or the too-quick steps off the curb.

No. He's thinking of the other times. The ones that haunt him. The ones that would not have been accidents, when someone—when he—had nearly forced the issue.

They shame him, reveal him to himself. They always have.

He's never told Meredith about any of those stories. Would it have mattered if he had? Would she have cheated on him? Left him for her parents?

Weeks ago she'd told him, "I think I was trying to hurt you. Because if I could hurt you, that would mean you were someplace I could reach. It would mean we at least lived in the same world."

She'd said, furious, crying. "Say something. At least fight with me. It's like you've given up." But what could he say? That she'd been his last, best hope? That when she took his ring, he felt, for the first time in his life, a kind of safety? That, at last, he could hide the worst of himself away?

He told her, "I'm sorry."

"You and your self-pity," she said.

He thought about telling her: I actually died in a fast food bathroom; I died on a Cincinnati street. I drowned at the bottom of a lake. I should never have made it this far.

If he'd told her, I should never have been here. I should never have given you the hope that I might be.

He thinks of the lake bottom. A metal gun barrel against his temple.

Carl goes out for a drive, and cannot admit to himself why.

No, not a drive. He'll go to a bar. He will not be alone, not again. He tells himself he is engaging in a hopeful act. He doesn't look so bad, these days. He can tell a joke or two. He will prove Meredith wrong. He will.

As per usual, he drinks too much. Once several beers are in him, he asks a woman with red streaks in her hair if he can buy her a drink, and it's as though he's watching himself talk from a few feet away, embarrassed for himself. He can feel the flicker of his own confidence sputter out well before he's finished speaking. The look in the woman's eyes when she says no is nearly sobering.

He fights that impulse. Two hours later, when he stands up to leave, he's swaying, his throat swollen, his eyesight blurred.

He's thinking now about his Acura. About the handgun in the glove compartment. He bought the gun after Meredith moved out, and has been afraid to bring it into the house, no matter how the thought of it consumes him. He's thinking about how he's parked in a corner of a garage where no one will see him or stop him.

He's thinking that he's been living a life he should never have had. He's thinking that it's about time.

What happens next will preoccupy him for the long remainder of his years.

He's hurrying as fast as he can down the cold downtown streets toward the garage. It's two in the morning and the air in his lungs is painful; his cheeks feel scraped. He staggers from streetlight to streetlight. He's nearly alone out here, and he starts to laugh, because he's hurrying as though he's afraid someone might mug him, as though someone might hurt him, and it's almost as though this irony summons the man in the windbreaker and stocking cap, who rises up out of a recessed doorway and grabs Carl and turns him around and slams him down on the sidewalk. Before he falls Carl catches a glimpse of the man's eyes, bloodshot and full of a fury Carl has never felt, and he remembers them; then he feels cold metal against his temple, and the man is saying, "Don't you fucking move," and Carl shrieks, and the man kicks him in the ribs and says, "Quiet."

He's digging for Carl's wallet, tugs it out. He turns Carl over. "Gimme your fucking phone," the man says. "Don't fucking look at me."

Carl is stammering, his words in time with his heartbeat; he digs for his phone and hands it over. The man looms over him, young, white, his face gaunt.

"I said don't look at me!"

The man holds the gun to Carl's face. Carl holds up his hands and cries, "Wait!"

The man does not shoot Carl. Instead he kicks Carl in the stomach, doubling him over. Then a bright light blooms behind Carl's eyes.

The police come almost immediately, summoned by a passing pedestrian, when Carl is still struggling for breath. His tears and his spit have frozen his cheek to the sidewalk. Easy, the policemen say, easy. Soon EMTs are kneeling beside Carl, and the air is full of light. His head throbs and sings, and he's surprised to learn that he was not shot. The man kicked Carl in the temple, he's

told, but he barely remembers this. People are fussing around him, shining penlights in his eyes. Their gloved hands poke at his scalp and come away bloodied.

In the hospital a doctor tells him he's concussed, but not too badly. His skull is not broken, and his scans are all right. "You're lucky," the doctor says.

"I've seen blows to the head like this kill people."

The policewoman who takes his statement says, "I wouldn't take it personally. For most of these people it's just a matter of opportunity. You were there at the wrong time, is all." She smiles at him. "You were just unlucky."

Well, he wants to ask them, which is it?

They keep him overnight. His head pounds and they give him painkillers and water. Soon his body recedes from him. The nurse keeps checking on him, and apologizing, and he keeps saying, No, it's all right, I'm glad for the company. He's floating inches above his bed. He will hurt tomorrow, but he does not hurt now.

It is nice, not hurting. He is reminded of being a boy, sleeping in front of a box fan on hot summer nights, the sheet rippling over his skin.

Beside his bed is a phone. Late in the morning he calls Meredith's cell. She does not answer, but he is comforted by her voice saying, Leave a message.

He tells her the story, aware that he's drifting in and out. He tells her a lot that he suspects he shouldn't. He smiles as he talks, the pain at the center of his skull bobbing as though suspended in water.

He doesn't tell her he's sorry, because he remembers that makes her mad.

Don't worry about me, he says.

I just wanted you to know, he says.

Before hanging up, he laughs and tells Meredith the funniest part:

They say I nearly died.