

REROUTING

by Rush Leaming

His life now moved in elliptical loops. Not circles, not clean, easy lines with perfect symmetry but, instead, curving motions that stretched outwards, then sideways, then out again, back, up, and down. Over and over. Like distorted ripples lifted from the surface of a pond but mashed, twisted, and tangled up with each other, stacked vertically, creating an abstract piece of public art whose meaning everyone debated, yet no one really understood.

Sunday, 10:02 a.m.; 1.6 miles; \$2.46

First call came the moment he connected his phone to the USB charger in his car and turned on the app. Matt at 241 Wheat Street was waiting for a ride. The loops began. He adjusted the rearview mirror of his Honda Pilot, and the gravel beneath his tires crackled and spit as he backed out the driveway of a small brick duplex. The left side of the home had been vacant for over a year, and the right side, the one-bedroom apartment where he lived, was nearly vacant as well. Ever since Betsy had passed, the only other living things he shared the space with were a potted ficus plant and the occasional palmetto bug that made its way inside. He had a big can of roach spray to take care of those, however, so it was usually just him and the plant.

A late September morning and summer was slowly drifting away. It was still hot during the day, but evenings and early mornings, the first swirls of cool fall air

were just beginning to appear, bringing welcome relief from past months of dog-day humidity. He rolled down his windows, filling his car with a crisp breeze that clung to the salt-and-pepper beard on his face. He drove through the neighborhood streets lined with oak, pine, and magnolia trees, and at the first stop sign, he pressed the music app on his phone and scrolled to a classical music playlist. It was his Sunday morning staple – Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart, Debussy – fitting his own mood as well as creating a tonic for those he would soon pick up, many of them, their heads heavy and throbbing from their Saturday night adventures.

Matt on Wheat Street fit that bill. A young kid in his twenties, certainly a student at the local university, he shuffled a bit wobbly and disheveled down the driveway of a wooden two-story house past a front yard that was packed with about a dozen cars.

“James?” the kid asked.

“Yes, that’s me.”

Matt opened the rear passenger door and collapsed onto the back seat. The smell of yesterday’s booze and cigarettes followed him.

James swiped the screen, and the map changed, curving blue lines now revealing the route to their new destination. “You going to Lincoln near Blossom?” he asked the kid.

The kid’s body was in a fetal position in the back seat, his hands covering his face, blocking out the morning light. He nodded.

James rolled forward. He knew that address well. He knew most addresses well. “Going to Greek Village? Which house?”

“Pi Kappa Phi,” the kid mumbled.

“I know it,” he said.

“Left my car there,” the kid said.

James turned right onto a wide four-lane road. “Good call.”

“Mm,” Matt grunted and pressed his face against the door.

James did a lot of that this time of day – taking people to wherever they had left their cars the night before. Sometimes he would tell them his own story, how over thirty years ago he had been busted for a DUI when he was in college and how great these ride shares were today. No excuse, really, to ever let something like that happen. Most people would agree and sometimes tell their own stories, sometimes sad and tragic ones, but he could tell this kid was not in shape for a long discourse, so he kept the conversation simple. “Is the air ok? I’ve got my front windows open to let this nice fall air in, but I can close them if you want.”

“No, it’s good. Feels good.” Suddenly, the kid began to swallow and gasp, pressing his hand across his mouth.

James glanced back and forth from the road to the back seat. “You need me to stop?”

Matt from Wheat Street gulped and gasped again.

James stopped the car in front of an empty parking lot. He pressed the electric unlock button. “You gonna be sick?” He jumped out the driver’s seat and ran around to open the passenger door.

The kid let half his body fall to the pavement, his palms catching him. James supported him around the waist as the kid gagged, his throat and body shaking in violent spasms. Nothing came out, just a trickle of clear mucus. Dry heaves. James

helped the kid back upright, then reached in the pockets of the door for a pack of tissues he always had tucked away.

“You ok?” He pulled out a few sheets, and Matt took them, wiped his mouth, and nodded. “You sure? We’re almost there. But I don’t want you to get sick in the car. They’ll charge you two hundred dollars for that. You don’t want that.”

“I’m good,” Matt said and took several deep breaths. “Please just take me to my car.”

Four minutes later, James pulled in front of a colonial-style fraternity house. Matt groaned and peeled himself off the back seat, still shielding his eyes from the morning sun. James watched the kid fumble with his key fob and point it at a row of cars. A blue Mercedes SL coupe responded to the call with a beep and flashing lights. The kid hunched over and dropped to his knees one more time.

James remembered those kinds of mornings vividly. Been twenty years since he had touched a drop, but the taste still hovered above the surface of his tongue, like a pair of alligator eyes poking out from black water, patiently waiting for its prey.

He gave the kid a five-star rating, cleared the trip from his phone, and immediately another ping came chiming through, a request for another ride.

Time for the next unknown loop.

Sunday, 10:24 a.m. - 1:08 p.m; 9 rides, 48.2 miles; \$56.04 + \$7.00 tips

Pulled along through the neighborhood streets . . . there was something very existential to it all. That was what he often thought about. These trips, these undulating, elliptical loops seemed so random to him here on the surface of the earth: where you happened to end up on the last ride determined where you happened to be going on the next ride, and you never knew exactly which direction you would be heading or how far you would go. But something far above him was making those decisions: The Great Gods of The Cloud. With their secret algorithms, they called down to all mortals driving blindly in their cars and spoke to them through their touch-screen scrolls, revealing what their futures would be.

Of course, there was still some semblance of Free Will. He could decline to do what The Cloud Gods told him. He could even mute their thunderous voices—he could simply turn off the app—then he would be free to do what *he* wanted to do.

But how was that really any different?

Thoughts of Betsy, as they always did, drifted in and out of his mind as he rolled in and out of driveways and parking lots, down side streets and along curbs. The beginnings of the brunch crowd, a couple more “find my car” rides, and some churchgoers all blended together as did the memories of their eight years together, tucked away in that little duplex of theirs, walks most mornings, curling on the sofa at night to watch TV.

He changed the playlist in his car to folk-pop that played acts such as Jack Johnson, The Head and the Heart, and The Lumineers, still mellow grooves for a Sunday. Small talk with his riders flitted from the weather (of course), yesterday’s football games, and how long he had been doing what he did. He was always a bit evasive on that one. He thought it made him seem like a loser, a big nobody, if

someone at his age now did this full-time, but since he had been made redundant two years ago from his job at the EPA, it was what it was. Twenty-three years he had spent as part of a team that inspected groundwater for contamination (the last twenty sober and highly productive) until they said they no longer needed so many people doing the same job. Bullshit. What they really wanted was someone younger and cheaper and with less benefits and less opinions.

His daughter, Lisa, had been the first to suggest that he look into this, during one of their monthly Skype chats from her home in faraway Austin, Texas (those chats which had lately begun to feature more stretches of awkward silence than actual catching up). He could be his own boss, she had told him. He could work or not work whenever he wanted; all he had to do was turn on the app and connect to The Cloud Gods and follow their commands. And really, especially when the university was in session and all the students in town, he could usually make enough to cover his bills and buy enough food to keep himself alive by just driving on the weekends. But he drove most everyday anyway, mostly to escape the screaming silence of his one-bedroom home.

He pulled into the parking lot of a Walgreens and stepped out of the car for a bit to stand up and keep away blood clots in his legs. He stretched his arms above his head and twisted his waist from side to side. He was in decent shape for his age. Even though Betsy was gone, he still went on walks every morning and still did fifty push-ups and a hundred sit-ups each night before going to bed. After a couple of minutes, he heard a ping coming from his phone. He climbed back in the driver's seat and pressed Accept, then saw the pickup address. James took a deep breath; he knew that location well, too well.

They were always very sad rides.

Sunday, 1:18 p.m.; 2 miles; \$2.25

James pulled into the parking lot of half a dozen low-slung brick bungalows at 2124 Two Notch Road. A sign said “Palmetto Ministries Family Shelter.” Trips to supermarkets, day cares, medical centers, police stations, and lawyers offices: the shelter paid for all rides.

A slender black woman in a faded blue windbreaker came out from one of the bungalows. She wore sunglasses. A boy of about six or seven tightly grasped her hand. He wore a Spider-Man T-shirt and kept his eyes pointed to the ground. They settled into his back seat without speaking, and the mother’s shoulders slumped against his door.

“Hello,” James said.

They didn’t respond. He looked in his mirror and saw a deep bruise poking out from under the edge of the mother’s sunglasses. The boy stared at the floor. He swiped the app and saw they were going the Dollar General store, just down the road. Barely a mile. Two miles roundtrip. This would be a minimum-fare ride . . .

Two songs on his playlist, about seven minutes, went by as he waited in the car outside the store. A fire truck blared down the road. A breeze kicked up a pile of leaves at the edge of the parking lot. The mother and child came rushing out the front doors, no bags in their hands, and they scrambled into the back of his car.

James watched her hands shake as she pushed her sunglasses farther up the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry," she said. "I forgot my money. It's back at the shelter."

James looked at the boy, his eyes still pointing toward the floor, and wondered just what horrors he had already seen at such a young age.

"It's ok," James said. "I'll pay for it."

"No, no. You don't have to do that."

"It's fine."

"No—"

The boy looked at James then his mother. "I'm hungry."

The mother stroked the back of his head. Her sunglass-covered eyes pointed toward James. "You sure?"

"Yes." James turned off his car, and the three of them went inside the Dollar General.

The yellow hand basket packed with her items still sat on the floor next to the checkout register. James picked it up and told the cashier he would take care of it. Shampoo, toothpaste, deodorant, boy's socks and underwear, white bread, peanut butter, grape jelly, cans of tuna, Doritos, boxed mac and cheese. James looked at the candy rack and picked up a King Size Reese's Peanut Butter Cup.

"Can he?" he asked.

The mother nodded. James paid \$18.36 with his Bank of America debit card and carried the yellow plastic bags back to his car.

When they got back to the shelter, the mother placed her hand on James's shoulder. "I got money in my room. Let me get it."

"It's fine. No need."

"Well, bless you, then. God bless you."

The boy held the pack of candy in his hand. James winked at him.

The mother and child left his car and walked toward their temporary brick bungalow. Halfway down the path, the boy turned his head over his shoulder — haunted eyes — and looked at James one final time. James waved goodbye.

Sunday, 2:04 p.m.; 4.3 miles; \$6.56 + \$2.00 tip

Afternoon sunshine trickled down the side of a large oak tree as a man in his mid-thirties and a golden retriever on a leash approached James's car.

"Do you mind if he rides?" the man asked.

"We're only supposed to allow service animals," James replied.

"I know, but it's not too far. Just over to Rosewood Park."

James watched the dog pace and pant outside his car. Golden retrievers were always so wired up. He loved golden retrievers. "Sure. In the back, please."

"Thanks, man!" The two passengers leapt inside. The dog quickly sniffed the back of James's head, then settled down. "Come on, Jonsey. Be a good boy," the man said and scratched the back of the dog's head. "You a dog person?"

James turned left onto Assembly Street and cut through downtown. "Yes."

"Man's best friend! What kind do you have?"

James slowed down to change lanes and pass a city bus. "Had," he said. "Had one. She recently passed."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. What was her name?"

James came to a stop at a red light. He watched an Asian woman push a stroller through the intersection. "Betsy," he finally said. "Her name was Betsy . . . She was a beagle."

"Oh . . . Beagles are such good dogs."

The light turned green. James eased the car forward. "Yes," he said. "She was a very good dog."

He dropped the man and his dog off at Rosewood Park and watched the man pull a Frisbee out of his backpack and fling it in the air. Jonsey the golden retriever exploded across the green field, as if he had been shot from a circus cannon, and leaped high in the air to catch the white plastic disc in his mouth.

James drove around the corner to a Circle K gas station and stopped in front of the tall silver vacuum. Four quarters and it roared to life, and James grabbed the long twisty hose and began to clean off the dog hair from the back seat. He scraped the hard plastic nozzle over the tan fabric, scooping up strands of reddish-orange hair, moving his hand back forth just as he had done for eight years, the Dirt Devil vacuum at his home picking up brown, white, and black hair that Betsy used to leave behind on the sofa, the carpet, at the foot of his bed where she used to curl up every night making sure her body was pressed against his legs, oftentimes draping her neck over his ankles, hair everywhere really, until he noticed grey stains beginning to form on the tan fabric of the back seat of his car, drops of water like the beginnings of a late-afternoon shower pelting sand, and his hands shook and his face twitched, and his stomach felt like someone had stabbed him with a red-hot poker. He let go of the twisty hose, dropped to his knees on the hard pavement as dripping

tears burst forth into a full-blown flood. His whole body convulsed and heaved, and he pressed his face against the warm steel of his car.

She was just a dog. Just a goddamn dog.

But she wasn't.

He had had many in his fifty-two years of life, but there had been something special about her from the first time he had seen her in a cage at the local PetSmart, a rescue dog up for adoption, soulful eyes peering hopefully, hesitantly from behind the wire door. An empty-nest tonic after Lisa had grown up and started her own life, something alive and moving and loving and, yes, loyal. He had never known her real age; the vet had guessed she was six or seven when he had first gotten her, so eight years later would have made her fourteen or fifteen when her kidneys and heart began to fail, and her old bones turned to dust making it harder for her to move around until the vet said the best thing was to make her comfortable, take away her pain, so he held Betsy the whole time, his face pressed against hers, staring into those big brown eyes as she slowly slipped away.

That had been three weeks ago, and he realized this was the first time he had cried about it. He sometimes still came home and called out for her, waiting for her to jump off his bed, where she mostly stayed when he was gone, and greet him at the door, jumping and wagging and yapping with nothing but pure, pure joy. Last weekend, he had driven to the same PetSmart where he had found her, looking to get a replacement, but he couldn't even get out of his car.

The four quarters of time ran out, and the vacuum shut off. He stood up, reached into the pocket of his door for the tissues, and wiped his face and eyes. He used his hand to brush the remaining dog hair off the back seat as best he could. He

settled back behind the wheel, turned on the app, and The Cloud Gods wasted no time in contacting him. He turned around and drove down the road.

Sunday 2:41 p.m. - 11:17 p.m.; 24 rides, 104 miles, \$142 + \$14 tips

He had completely lost track of where he was. It had been busy all day heading north, southeast, west, northeast, northwest, south, west again, north again – those crazy loops running over each other in a furious pattern, like a Spirograph toy. He was far outside his city, he knew that, in neighboring counties and driving through podunk towns with podunk names like Gilbert, Gaston, or Swansea. His shoulder and neck throbbed, and his misanthropic tendencies were now raging after ten thousand idiots not using their turn signals, five thousand morons cutting him off, two thousand dipshits talking on their phones while driving, and a dozen or so maniac eighteen-wheelers nearly slicing his car in half.

The Cloud Gods called out to him, and James decided this would be his last ride of the night. He was closing in on \$250 for the day, and that would be a nice number to quit on. The Gods told him to go to some place he'd never heard of called Bubba's Wing Shack on Highway 302 near Pelion. Before he could put the gear in drive, his phone rang, a call from his soon-to-be rider. He answered through the console on his car, and loud, distorted music blared through his speakers, maybe a song by The Doors.

"Hello, James?" a voice yelled, barely discernible from the noise.

The pain in James's shoulder dug deeper. "Yes?"

"I'm Colin, your rider!"

"Yes, I know."

"I'll be standing outside the restaurant!"

"Fine."

"I'm blind!" Colin yelled then hung up.

Great. Another drunken idiot in some crappy backwoods bar. This was definitely his last ride of the night. He'd had enough.

The restaurant was true to its name: it was a shack sitting in a gravel lot and surrounded by nothing else. As James came to a stop, he saw a light-skinned black man standing near concrete steps. The man wore dark sunglasses. In his right hand, he held a slim red and white cane and, in his left, a large white plastic bag.

He wasn't blind drunk; he was blind.

James leapt out of his car and went to the man, who waved him off.

"It's fine," Colin said. "I can manage. But can you take this bag? Got four dozen wings in there. Can you put them on the floor so they won't spill? Don't want to mess up your car."

James took the bag and wedged them on the floorboard behind his driver's seat as Colin sat in the passenger seat. They both pulled the straps of their seatbelts and locked them in place.

"You ever drove folks like me?" Colin asked.

"Yeah, sure. There's a center for the blind near where I live."

"In the city? The one on Walker Street?"

"Yes."

"Was just there last week. Place has gotten a bit run-down. They need to fix it up. Guess they think we won't notice!" Colin said and laughed, then punched James

on the shoulder. "By the way, turn off your GPS. It don't work well out here. Always wants to take you the long way. I'll show you how to get there. Turn right out of this lot, then travel about a mile, and take another right when you see the orange storage shed on the corner."

James began to drive.

"Boy, this fall weather is starting to feel nice," Colin said. "Had enough of summer. Felt like I was melting every time I went outside."

"Definitely," James said and turned right at the orange shed.

"Great, now you want to follow this road about another mile and turn left when you see a row of green recycling canisters . . . You watch that game yesterday?"

"No, I was driving during it. But listened to it."

"As did I!" Colin said and laughed again. "Gamecocks were lucky to win that one."

James turned left at the row of canisters. They continued in silence a moment until Colin spoke up, his voice a bit lower.

"Shame what happened with that girl a few weeks ago."

James knew what he meant, and each day he drove, at least one person would bring it up. The whole country had seen it: grainy security camera footage of a college girl, standing alone outside a crowded bar at 2 a.m. downtown in his city, getting into a car she thought had come to pick her up, only to be found the next day, her body sliced up and dumped in a rural field. It had – and continued to – send shudders and hot stabs of anguish through his body every time he saw it or thought about it. *What if it had been Lisa . . .*

"Yes," James said.

"Lotsa sick people out there," Colin said. "You got kids?"

"One."

"Local?"

James gripped the wheel a bit tighter. "No. Out West."

"Mm," Colin said. "Ok, your third left you'll see a brick sign that says Arbor Lake. You want to turn in that subdivision . . . Boy, them wings smell good. Having a birthday party for my brother tonight. Turning sixty. Starting a bit late 'cause his flight got delayed."

"Sounds nice." James turned into Arbor Lake past rows of large brick and wood homes with big yards.

"Second right will be a street called Willow Circle. Take that. It snakes around the lake, then right past the playground, take your next right. That will be Magnolia Lane . . . You ever have any problems driving folks around?"

"No, but I rarely drive past midnight. Nothing much good happens past midnight."

"Got that right . . . Third house on your right, pull up just past the purple Jeep Cherokee," Colin said.

James pulled to a stop in front of a long white brick ranch-style home. A large front window glowed from inside, and he could see about a dozen people gathered around a dining table packed with dishes of food.

"Looks nice, doesn't it?" Colin asked.

It did. It looked like an old Hallmark card come to life.

Colin turned in his seat to face James. "Why don't you come join us? We got plenty of food."

"What? Oh no, no. Thanks though."

"You sure?"

James stared at the window, watched the people move about, seemingly each one of them with a big smile on their face. "Yes. It's late. I need to get back to the city. Thanks though."

Colin kept his sunglass-covered face pointed in James's direction. James held onto the steering wheel tighter.

"By the way, you know what they say about blind people?" Colin asked.

"What?"

"That all our other senses are stronger?"

"Yes?"

"It's true," Colin said. "I can hear it in your voice."

"Hear what?"

"Everything," Colin said. "All of it."

They sat a moment in silence. James looked at the skin on his knuckles turning white, feeling like he was going to snap the steering wheel in half.

"Some folks do well by themselves, in solitude. Others drown in it. Hate to see that happen to you."

James released his grip from the wheel. "Thanks for the offer. But I'll be fine."

Colin placed his hand on James's shoulder. "Ok, brother. 'Preciate the ride."

James got out to hand Colin the large bag of chicken wings. He watched Colin maneuver up the walkway.

“Be safe out there,” Colin said one last time, then opened the front door of the house. As soon as he did, a large cheer erupted from the people inside the dining room. Colin raised his hands in triumph, and shut the door behind him.

The smell of the wings lingered in the car as James made his way out of the subdivision back out to the dark, two-lane country highway. He said goodnight to The Cloud Gods and turned off the app. He came to a stop sign. He wasn't sure exactly where he was or how to get home so he typed his address into the GPS. It said he was thirty-one miles away, due east, and it was then he noticed on the map that the roads made a perfect cross. He looked up through the windshield and saw the real world version of it. The two roads intersected each other perfectly: straight, hard ninety-degree angles. There was no ambiguity. A computer could not have created them better. Directly in front of him was due north. To the right of him was east, behind him was south, and to the left of him was straight west. The GPS was telling him to turn right if he wanted to go back home.

Turn right to go back home.

But suddenly, he didn't want to go home. Suddenly, there was not one thing in that apartment that he ever cared if he saw again. Not one piece of clothing, not one stick of furniture, not one pot or pan, or painting or souvenir. All his personal belongings like photos and documents, he had digitally offered up to The Cloud Gods long ago for safekeeping. There was absolutely no reason for him to go that empty duplex ever again.

He looked to his left. There was an orange glow at the edge of the horizon. He seemed to remember there was a natural gas refinery out that way. Beyond that would be Georgia, then Alabama, then Mississippi, Louisiana, and then Texas. He

hadn't seen Lisa in almost three years, physically in person, not on the fuzzy Skype screens. That distance seemed to be causing a bit of strain between them: death by paper cut. On their last video chat, she had told him she was getting ready to open a new office for her dermatology practice. They would be adding two new doctors and four nurses, and there would be huge windows in the lobby to bathe the place in natural light.

Sunday 11:58 p.m.; 1 ride, 1011 miles; \$0.00 and \$0 tip

James turned the car to the left. The GPS spun in a spasm, and a voice came on over his phone.

“Rerouting,” it said.

James sighed out. “You’re goddamn right,” he replied.

He headed toward the orange glow on the horizon.

END