

The 22

By

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Saturday, December 23. Motel 6 – Room 143.

72°

Jim Chase, 58, lanky with blonde crew cut, sits wrapped in a towel on his bed, talking on the room phone. The towel has holes in it. The air conditioner is loud and on high. Jim's face is flush and he coughs incessantly.

“I just want some fresh towels sent up!” Jim says into the phone. “This is the third time I've called. How fucking difficult is it to just get some goddamn towels?! Thank you.”

Jim hangs up. Peripherally, a blue jay lands outside his motel room window. But Jim doesn't see the blue jay, because Jim has no peripheral vision; which is to say that if you came at him straight on, he'd see you fine, but if you approached him from the side, he wouldn't even register you as existing. From the side, you would be the perfect, invisible ninja.

Jim grabs his obsolete 2003 Motorola cell phone and hits redial.

“Hi. It's Jim again. I'm having car trouble. My goddamn rental actually seized on me this morning. Can you believe that? Yeah, they're working on it, but I'm running about an hour late. No, they said they can't get a replacement for three hours because of the holidays. But I'll take a cab. No big – no – no, don't do that – don't do that – I can – you're sure? Really? It's no – “

Jim opens his laptop and hits the “on” button. Immediately: beep beep beep beep
beep beep beep beep

“Oh – oh Jesus – Jesus! I just got this thing fixed two days ago. It’s my goddamn laptop – I’ve got a blue screen. This is not my goddamn morning!”

Jim hits the “on” button several times. Nothing happens. He opens and closes the cover. The beeping continues.

“Fuck,” he mumbles. “Fuck, fuck. Hold on – “

He shoves the laptop under a pillow. The beeping continues, muffled.

“Okay, fixed,” says Jim. “Look, I’ll take a cab. I – uh huh? You sure you don’t mind? Okay – alright – there’s a – “

He looks out the window.

“There’s a Charlie Brown’s across the street. Next to – Electronic Liquidators – yeah, on the 22. You know where it is? Great. You’re sure? It’s no big – no, that’s a big help. Thank you. Great. Thank you. See you.”

beep beep beep beep beep beep beep

Kenilworth. 210 Naomi Ave. Dan Morgan, 24, a cop, stands in the backyard of the Mohr residence. He holds Louis Mohr’s Marlin 44 mag rifle and writes out a court summons. Earlier that morning, Louis Mohr, 82, after reading his mail, went into his backyard and started firing the rifle into the shrubs against the back fence, putting bullet holes into his neighbor Jerry’s garage. Louis got off 12 shots before the police arrived. Ten minutes after that Louis’ daughter Kaye, 46, showed up.

“Danny,” says Kaye, “I am so, so sorry. I am *so* sorry. I promise you this will never, *never* happen again. I swear.”

“No problem, Kaye.”

“Why’s he taking my Marlin?! Gimme my fuckin’ Marlin!” says Louis.

“You get in the house and you *stay there*,” says Kaye to Louis.

Inside the house. Kaye reads the letter from Wachovia. Louis, on the couch, watches a bass fishing show on TV.

“*Oh my god*,” says Kaye.

“Goddamn deer,” mutters Louis.

“You haven't paid your mortgage in *21 months?!?*”

“Why should I? Won't change anything! Won't clear 'em out! Goddamn deer.”

“When were you gonna tell me about this?”

“Nothing to tell.”

“I swear to god, Dad. What were you thinking? You’re just gonna wait till the police come and lock you out?”

“*It's not my fault!* It's the goddamn – “

“This has *nothing* to do with deer, Dad. This has to do with you being fucking insane and making my life miserable! Why the fuck do you do this to me?!?”

“It's not me! It’s not my fault!”

“Who's your loan officer?”

“Who cares,” he mumbles.

Kaye shuffles through the papers, finds a foreclosure notice.

“Here. Okay. Oh – hey, Dad – “

She shows Louis the note.

“This is your loan officer?”

“Maybe.”

“Oh shit.”

Jim Chase, in blue Oxford shirt and blue slacks, walks from the Motel 6 to the edge of Route 22 with his beeping laptop under his arm and waits for the rushing traffic to pause. A pause comes and Jim darts to the center guardrail, climbs over, and waits for another break in traffic. After a moment, he dashes the rest of the way, and enters Electronic Liquidators, home of the Nerd Specialists.

73°

Louis Mohr's house. Kaye, on the phone, paces. Louis, on the couch, watches men prepare a bass fishing lure on TV.

“I'm calling about loan number 400029546,” says Kaye.

“I can help you,” says a woman with a slight southern lilt in her voice.

“This is Randi Saenz?”

“Yes, it is. Is this Mrs. Mohr?”

“This is - this is - Kaye Mohr. Louis Mohr's daughter.”

There's a pause on the other end of the line.

“Kaye Mohr – of Bound Brook?”

“That's right.”

“*Kaye!*”

“Randi? Randi Saenz?”

“Kaye! Kaye! Oh my god! Oh my god! Kaye Mohr! Oh my god!”

“Hi, Randi. How are you?”

“*How are you!?*”

“Okay. Good. You know – I – “

“Are you still in Bound Brook? Kaye Mercer, right?”

“No, no – just Kaye Mohr again.”

“Oh - I saw that - I saw you had that status change - when was it - June? Married and then - “

“Yeah. It's been a long year. Randi - ”

“God - what is it - 35 years? I *love* those pictures you posted!”

“Yeah. I really don't go on as much as I used to - ”

“Oh, you should, you should! I was on ten minutes ago! I love that talent night picture you posted with everyone in the back - and I've got that terrible scream - ”

“Yes - “

“I was *so* ticklish! Still am!”

“Randi - I would love to catch up with you - but - could we just talk about my father's mortgage for a second?”

“Oh - oh - of course! Of course! Hold on - it's right - right in front of me.”

Louis shifts on the couch.

“Goddamn - “

“Oh - *oh my,*” says Randi. “You know he's gotten a final foreclosure letter?”

“Yes, I know. That’s why I’m calling. Randi, honestly, I just saw this today for the first time, ever. See, my father – he suffers from certain mental deficiencies – “

“The hell I do!”

“Shh!” says Kaye, swatting him.

“We’ve made several attempts to contact him,” says Randi.

“I know. I understand that, Randi,” says Kaye. “But honestly, anything I can do to make this go away would be really, incredibly – “

“I wish I could help you, Kaye, but the paperwork's done. We're all set to - “

“Randi - I could bring you a check *right now*. Right now! Seriously. You'd be the hero of the bank, Randi. I can bring you a check for the whole thing. We could make this all go away. Think of that.”

“Right now?”

“Right now. What's the balance? Twenty-one months? So, it's what - twenty-nine something?”

“Twenty-nine thousand, three hundred and forty-three dollars.”

Kaye takes a deep breath and swallows. She girds herself.

“Is that a problem?” says Randi.

“No – no – that’s fine,” says Kaye. She covers up the phone and sneers in Louis’ ear. “It’s just all the money I have in the fuckin’ world!” She returns to the phone.

“That's perfect. Randi. Twenty-nine, three forty three. I can bring the whole thing.”

“Well, I do have an appointment – “

“I’ll be there in one minute, Randi. We can wrap up the whole thing!”

“Oh – well, oh sure. Come on over!”

“Great! Randi - you're a peach!”

“Oh,” says Randi.

“What?” says Kaye.

“Oh - look at that.”

“What? What Randi?”

“I just flipped over to FB for a second - “

“Randi - “

“And you're not there.”

“Randi - “

“Did you – did you de-friend me, Kaye?”

“I – “

“You did. You de-friended me.”

“Randi - Randi - I don't - I don't do Facebook at all anymore - honestly - it's been such a long - “

“You posted a comment to Jill Krementz this morning. And there you are commenting on Bobby Meisner's bowling party picture. Huh.”

“Randi – please – I can be there in ten minutes. Maybe we can go get a bite to eat? Talk about camp. Please. For my Dad's sake – “

“Tick-ridden bastards,” says Louis.

“Just let me clear this up. Okay? Let me make everything good again. Please?”

Kaye waits.

“Oh. Sure. Sure. Of course,” says Randi. “Come in. Come in. We'll clear the whole thing right up.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much, Randi. I can't even tell you. I really *really* appreciate this.”

“No problem. See you soon.”

Kaye hangs up. She turns to Louis.

“*Stay here and don't move!*” says Kaye, and she rushes out.

Louis grumbles, watches men fish on TV. The day's mail on the stained coffee table stares at him, belligerent, makes him anxious, angry. And then he sees it. There, among the letters, that thing – that – *that deer – the deer itself!* - towering, wistful, doe-eyed, proud, challenging, *boastful!* That goddamn, goddamn – and – *25% off, this weekend only!*

Jesus, 19, short and portly with thick sideburns and a nickel-sized stud in his earlobe taps a reset button on Jim's laptop. The beeping stops. He flips the laptop over and looks at Jim, boredly.

“She dead. Gotta get a new one.”

“Dead? I just got it fixed last week.”

Jesus shrugs.

“Dead.”

“Aren't you going to do a diagnostic?”

“Just did. She dead.”

“You just flipped it over.”

Jesus shrugs.

“I want a diagnostic. A full diagnostic,” says Jim.

“I know this model. Piece a shit. I know when she dead. And she dead.”

“You didn't do a full diagnostic!” Jim points to a nearby poster of a friendly, eager Caucasian Nerd Specialist holding up a sign for a *World-Class, 12-Point Diagnostic*.

“Don't need it.”

“I want to talk to a manager.”

“I'm the manager.”

Jim coughs incessantly. He stares, coldly, at Jesus. Jesus shifts, boredly.

“I just fixed this goddamn thing last week!” says Jim. “I put in a new RAID drive - whatever the fuck that is - for \$400!”

“Should've bought new one.”

“It was fine yesterday!”

“Today, she dead.”

“*Jesus Christ!*” says Jim. “*What the hell kind of nerd are you?! You don't even look like a nerd! Listen – I use Nerd Specialists in Albany - and those are quality nerds! If you think this is quality nerd service – your idea of nerd service is way under par!*”

“Mm,” says Jesus.

Peripherally, a growing line of customers grunt and shift. But Jim sees none of them because he has no peripheral vision.

“I'll tell you what I want. I want *that* service!” Jim says pointing to the cheerful poster. “I want the goddamn, 12-step, world-class diagnostic *everything! Full-on Nerd service!*”

Jesus shrugs, sticks a sheet in front of Jim.

“Name, address, credit card, driver's license,” he says, handing Jim a pen.

“*Whatever!*” sneers Jim and he starts writing.

In the back room of Nerd Specialists - a place commercially trademarked “The Nerd Cave” - Toi, a 17 year-old with a McCartney haircut, and enough eyebrow rings to hold a shower curtain, watches Jesus' hands dance across a keyboard.

“S'up?” says Toi.

“Nother asshole,” says Jesus.

“Give you his driver's license?”

“Yup.”

“Assholes never learn,” says Toi.

Kaye Mohr stands outside the Westfield Wachovia branch, holding a small white envelope. She peers inside, and taps on the glass door with a key. Inside, the bank is dark. She taps louder and louder, accidentally nicking the glass.

Charlie Brown's.

Jim Chase sits at a window seat with an outstanding view of the 22 and the Motel 6 across the street. He holds up a spoon and stares at his upside down reflection. He coughs. His untouched beer gets warmer by the second.

74°

A large-boned, platinum blonde with a hefty set of worn, rubber band-bound folders stands over him.

“Jim Chase?” she says.

“Randi?” he says. He stands and shakes her hand. “Thanks for coming all the way out here!”

“No problem!”

She sits.

“Listen,” he says. “Al says you've taken over great for him - haven't missed a beat. How's he liking retirement?”

“A little too much! Never off the links!”

“Why should he – with this weather?! Jesus! Is it always this hot in December?!”

“No – no – it's a fluke – “

“Can I get you something to drink?” says a mysterious waitress.

“Well, I guess we're being casual?” says Randi, grinning and eyeing Jim's beer.

“Hell, it's Saturday!” says Jim.

“Can you do a Mojito?” says Randi.

Fifteen minutes later. Randi pokes through the bottom of a cob salad. Her cell phone rings. She ignores it. Near Jim, sit the remains of a blood red steak and a third beer. He pores through folders, property lists.

“Uh huh, uh huh...and this one's – “

“East Brunswick. That's the four bedroom, three-and-a-half bath. They cleared out a week ago.”

“Guy with the chainsaw?”

“It's not as bad as everyone says. Two walls in the kitchen, a chandelier-thing, some drywall. We'll have it spic-and-span in a week.”

“Uh huh,” Jim makes a notation on a ratty, dog-eared map. “These two are near each other, right? We can hit ‘em together – “

“That’s fine.”

The waitress returns with Jim’s VISA card.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she says. “Your card was rejected. Do you have another?”

Randi’s cell phone rings. She ignores it.

Wachovia. Kaye leans up against the glass door, annoyed, sweating, fanning herself. She calls on her cell phone. No answer.

Charlie Brown’s.

The waitress returns Randi’s VISA card to her.

“I told you those aren’t my goddamn charges!” says Jim into his cell phone. “I was never in Texas! No – I need you to clear it off, now. *Now!!* I can’t wait three days! Lemme speak to your supervisor! *You’re* the supervisor? *Christ!*”

“Jim – “ says Randi.

“Let me talk to your – your – “

“Jim, hang up. Hang up. It’s okay.”

He looks at her. She nods.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. I took care of it.”

“I – my card’s blocked for three goddamn – “

“I know.”

“Where’s the – “

“Kaye!” says Jody Peerless from the Keystone Committee.

“I *love* those!” says Jody. “Those are *so* you!”

Shit shit shit.

“You think?”

“Absotively!” She holds up a pair of black pumps. “We're headed for the Caribbean in an hour - and I need a pair of dress shoes.”

Ten feet away, Mike and Jordan Peerless boredly lean on each other, transfixed by cell phone games.

“Those are nice,” says Kaye.

“Holiday plans?” says Jody

“Just me and dad.”

“No Tommy?”

“He's with his father skiing.”

“Not in this weather!”

“True.”

“Y'know,” says Jody, “I am *so* jealous. I wish I could trade places with you and do nothing! That would be heaven!”

“Sure is,” says Kaye.

Charlie Brown's.

Jim looks through property lists. Randi stares at him.

“Y'know,” says Randi, “I don't think I've *ever* seen you on Facebook.”

“Maplewood. Maplewood? Newark.”

“Okay – I know – I know that’s not a terribly professional thing to say – but we *are* being business casual! I know what you’re thinking. It’s a complete waste of time. But I’ll tell you – I’ve caught up with so many people I’ve known throughout my life – grade school, high school – and they’re there all the time!”

“Camden? Six houses in Camden? God.”

“It’s like a little museum of everyone you’ve ever known – all under glass. Like – like eBay – but with people instead of junk. Y’know what? Y’know what, Jim?”

Jim reads through properties.

“I have – and I say this not to brag – but because it’s true and I have to say it – today, *I have 2,000 friends*. Just this morning! *2,000!* Okay, that’s it. I got it out of my system! Whew!”

Jim looks up, stares at her, blankly.

“I know. I know what you’re thinking! Those are like teenage numbers! I mean – I don’t *know ‘em* – know ‘em. Y’know? Most are just online folks, friends of friends of friends – and some of the folks I know better now than folks I knew in the first place. Y’know?! It’s like a little growing universe, a little planet all in one place. *I love it.*”

“Uh huh.”

“But I don’t do MySpace or anything like that,” says Randi. “That’s just stupid.”

“Okay,” says Jim.

“So...?” says Randi, leaning into him.

“Come on,” she says. “I told *you*. Come on. Give it up.”

“Uh,” says Jim.

“How many? I mean, if you don’t mind my – if it’s not *too* intrusive - “

“What?” says Jim.

“How many do you have?”

“How many what?” says Jim.

“Friends?”

“How many - ?”

“Friends do you have?”

Jim looks at her strangely.

“I’ve never counted,” says Jim.

Randi laughs a loud *yowlp*.

“You don’t have to count! The number’s counted right there for you!”

Jim says nothing, fidgets, looks at the maps. Randi’s eyes go wide.

“Oh my - oh my - *you’re in single digits, aren’t you?* That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Maybe if we stick to New Brunswick, and stay north of - “

“You know what I’ll do? I’ll tell you what – I’ll send a friend suggestion to some of the folks up in Albany, and in REO - there are *so* many people - you probably know half of them - “ Randi pulls out her iPhone. “This’ll just take a second.”

Jim watches her like a squirrel in a tree watching an approaching bulldozer.

“What’s that?” says Jim.

“This? My iPhone?” says Randi. “So what are you under? Chase? J. Chase? Jim Chase? You use another name? Do you have a picture?”

“Uh,” says Jim.

“Show me,” says Randi. She takes Jim's hand, and presses the phone firmly, warmly into his. She holds it there and stares at him. The large blue Facebook icon glows.

“*Show me*,” she whispers, and gets closer. “Show me your Facebook page. *Please?*”

Jim and Randi, carrying file folders, dodge traffic and get to the center divider of the 22. Jim helps Randi climb over the guardrail, and they cross to the other side.

75°

“AAAAAAH! AH! AH! AH!”

Randi, naked, heaving, writhes on sheer, rumped Motel 6 bed sheets. Jim, naked, is atop her, behind her, under her, over her.

“AAAH! AAH!”

Ultra-sensitive, Randi screams every time Jim touches her. The noise gives Jim a migraine. Randi pants and sweats, raking his back with nicotine-stained fingers. He coughs, exhausted, out of breath.

“I can't believe,” she yells as he thrusts from behind, “you've never been on the internet! That's *so* exciting!!”

She screams again. Jim winces and stares at a painting on the wall of Sioux warriors trying to kill an enormous bear.

Electronic Liquidators.

“Deer traps,” says Louis Mohr.

“Deer traps?” says Jesus.

“Yes, where are the fuckin’ deer traps?”

“The - the - “

“Want ‘em big, but not too heavy. Y’know?”

“Deer traps?”

“Yes. Right.”

“Don't sell deer traps,” says Jesus.

“The hell you don’t,” says Louis and holds out the circular from the mail. “25%
off!”

“Oh...” says Jesus. “Hold on.”

He goes into The Nerd Cave and returns with a small, rectangular, orange box, labeled *Deer Hunter Pro*. He hands it to Louis.

“Cash or charge?” says Jesus.

“The hell is this?” says Louis.

“What you asked for,” says Jesus. “Just the game. Gotta buy the gun separate.

That's where they get you.”

“*I got the gun,*” says Louis.

“Great. Then you're set.”

“I don't want this shit!” says Louis. “What else you got?”

“On sale? *Jewel Drop.*”

“You got traps? Nets? Camouflage?”

“Uh...” says Jesus.

“Explosives?”

“Uh,” says Jesus.

Toi comes out.

“What's he need?” says Toi.

“Explosive and nets,” says Jesus.

“Huh,” says Toi.

66°

Motel 6

Jim Chase, in blue slacks, blue socks and blue Oxford shirt lies in fetal position on the bed.

“You should call the front desk,” Randi says from the bathroom. “Your towels have holes.”

She comes out dressed, prim and proper, picks up the maps and folders.

“Oh look! Look!” she says and goes to the window. She grins, gleefully, and heads out the front door.

Electronic Liquidators.

Louis Mohr comes out to the parking lot. Shrill honking grabs his attention. Traffic on the 22 has halted as a disoriented pack of white-tailed deer carefully leap the guardrail and cross the highway towards Electronic Liquidators.

“*Mother of God,*” whispers Louis.

On tiptoe, Louis darts to his pick-up truck, reaches into the bed, withdraws his Ruger's 44 detachable rotary rifle, scurries to the edge of the 22, and kneels down.

60°

Motel 6.

“Jim! Jim!” says Randi. “Come outside! So pretty! And they're hardly – “

CRACK!

CRACK! CRACK!!

“Randi?” says Jim.

Jim comes out on to the Motel 6 parking lot. Randi lies in a pool of blood, a gaping gunshot wound in her left shoulder. Maps, folders and signed, authorized documents lie in a deep puddle of red ooze.

At the 22, blocked cars honk and sirens blare from a huddle of police cars. Over by Electronic Liquidators, uniformed policemen wrestle Louis Mohr to the ground.

Jim, shocked, kneels by Randi, his mouth agape. Peripherally, the unmolested white-tailed deer lope past him through the Motel 6 parking lot, back towards the Watchung Mountains. But Jim doesn't see the deer, because he has no peripheral vision.

Overlook Hospital. Emergency waiting room.

54°

Jim Chase sits in a worn, blocky wooden chair. His hair is in disarray. Large splotches of dried blood cake his shirt. He stares at the floor.

“Jim?”

He looks up. A short, stout out-of-breath man in damp, gray sweat clothes stands over him. Jim looks up and sees him. The man grabs Jim's hand and shakes it, furiously.

“Thank you so much!” he says. “Thank you for bringing her in!”

“Sure,” says Jim.

“You probably saved her life.”

“I - “

“How's she doing?”

“She's - she's - who are you?” says Jim.

“Harvey,” says Harvey.

Jim stares at him.

“Her husband,” says Harvey.

Jim nods.

“Nice to meet you,” says Jim.

Hospital hallway. Dan Morgan, the cop, and Kaye Mohr stand outside Louis Mohr's room. Inside the room, Louis Mohr sleeps, snoring loudly, his arm in a cast.

“He'll be fine,” says Dan. “He'll get a psychiatric evaluation and they'll give him probation. Trust me, it could've been worse.”

“He's not dangerous!” says Kaye.

Dan looks at her.

“Okay, when he's carrying a rifle, he's dangerous,” says Kaye. “But that's over! He's just a crazy old man – he – “

“Its fine, Kaye,” says Dan, pleasantly. “Don't worry. Everything'll be fine.”

Kaye goes to the emergency waiting room and sits. She sits in a worn, blocky wooden chair, and stares, exhausted, at the dilapidated orange and brown carpet. Next to her sits Jim, exhausted, staring at the carpet. They both breathe, tired, numb. Jim doesn't see Kaye. And Kaye doesn't see Jim either.

And nothing else happens.

“What a fucked-up day,” says Kaye.

Jim nods.

“I don't think a day can *get* more fucked-up,” says Jim.

Jim turns to see who's speaking. And Kaye turns towards him. They see each other. And they both breathe slowly and turn back to the carpet.

And an orderly stops and looks up and out through the large, glass overhead ceiling.

“Mmh!” says the orderly. “Bout time!”

And Jim, Kaye, and the orderly stare up at the black, cool night sky and the beautiful, flickering white crystals pouring down upon them.

Snow.

41°

the end