

AKA

Richard Heady

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Porter stands in line at the pharmacy, pressed for time. But he's down to his last two pills, because he's been eating them like breath mints, and he can't afford to run out. The last thing he needs, with the Baxter project due in two days, is an anxiety attack. He's already watched an old woman with a four-pronged cane get her prescription and shuffle away, and now he waits behind a short, balding man so obese that three distinct rolls of fat stand layered on the back of his neck. The man wheezes as if standing in line strains the limits of his endurance, and Porter reaches in his pocket to jingle his change impatiently. How do people let themselves get like that? he wonders.

The man finally waddles away, grasping his paper bag, and Porter steps up to the white-coated young woman behind the counter.

"I called in earlier," he says. "Porter. Henry."

She turns to the plastic tubs on the shelves behind her, reaches into the one labeled "Pa-Pu", and pulls out a bag.

"You live at 5506 Rosedale?" she says, reading the slip.

"What? No. I live at 1507 Hawthorn Place."

She looks again at the slip.

"Is it for Paxonal?" Porter asks.

"Paxonal. 50 milligrams."

"Then it's mine."

"Let me check the computer," she says. "What's your HMO number?"

Porter tells her and she taps it in.

"It's for you, all right," she says, peering at the screen. "We must have your address wrong."

Porter pays and takes his bag. The sliding glass door opens too slowly as he approaches, making him stop short. He checks his watch as he crosses the parking lot. No time to pick up lunch now, he'll have to grab a sandwich from the machines at work.

He's at the office until eight that night, and the next, but on Wednesday they make delivery to Baxter and he leaves early that afternoon. His wife is still at work, and he takes the mail from the box as he goes inside. He sorts through it, tossing it on the table in the foyer: the phone bill, some flyers, a credit card offer, a letter. The handwriting on the letter isn't familiar, and when he looks more closely he sees its delivery is a mistake. The name on it is Larry Miller. And then he notices the address. 5506 Rosedale. That stops him for a second. That strikes him as strange, beyond coincidence, as if changes were being made behind his back. But his brain is too tired to think about it, and he tosses the letter on the table. All he wants is a drink. A drink, and then maybe a nap before dinner.

In the morning, feeling he's earned a reward, Porter takes himself to breakfast at the Pancake House. He buys a paper from the vending machine outside, then orders a plate of eggs and pancakes, loading the pancakes with butter and then pouring syrup over the whole thing. After he eats he gets a refill on his coffee and picks up the paper. He reads the front page, the sports, the business section, feeling more relaxed than he has in weeks. But he doesn't want to be too late for work, so he gulps the last of his coffee and grabs his check.

A chubby young man stands at the cash register. A plastic tag pinned to his shirt says "Bob, Asst. Manager." Porter hands him the check and pulls out his wallet. Seeing he's down to a lone twenty, he hands Bob his credit card, and Bob swipes it through the machine. Bob waits, then frowns.

“Can I see some identification, sir?” he says.

Porter sighs and hands over his drivers license. Bob looks at it, looks at Porter, looks back at the license. He swipes the card through once more, then shrugs.

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s not taking it.”

“There must be a mistake,” says Porter.

“I’m sure there is. But if the machine won’t accept it, neither can I.”

A brief wave of irritation passes over Porter - it’s always something - but he knows it isn’t Bob’s fault.

“Okay,” he says, and hands over his twenty.

In the company lot Porter opens his briefcase and looks for his identification badge. He looks in the top pocket where he always keeps it, then paws through the papers and folders. He still can’t find it and decides he must have left it at home, something he’s done before. That means security will have to call Caster, his supervisor, to come and sign him in.

The guard, sitting at a counter inside the employee entrance, is one he hasn’t seen before.

“I left my badge at home,” Porter says. “Jim Caster is my supervisor.”

The guard flips the pages of his phone list and runs his finger down it.

“I don’t see any Caster here,” he says. “How do you spell it?”

“C-a-s-t-e-r. Jim.”

The guard looks again at the list.

“Nope, not here.”

“Look,” Porter says. “Caster’s extension is 2841. Can you just call him and tell him I’m here?”

The guard clearly doesn't like his tone, but picks up the phone and presses the buttons. He waits, looks up at Porter, then hangs up.

"No answer," he says. "Should I page him?"

"Please," says Porter.

He turns away, jingling the coins in his pocket. He hears the guard's voice over the PA system, asking Jim Caster to please call security, as he looks out a window at the parking lot. Naturally this would happen on a day he came in late. A Paxonal would calm him down, but he doesn't want to take one in front of the guard.

One minute stretches into five, and Caster still isn't answering his page. The rule, if your supervisor is unavailable, is to call the next person in the chain of command, which would be Tony Sanders, their division head. Porter debates what to do, hating the thought of Sanders seeing him like this, an hour late, without his badge. But he doesn't have any choice. This has already gone too far for him to leave and call in sick, plus he has follow-up calls to make on the Baxter delivery.

"I guess Caster isn't answering," he says to the guard. "Can you call Tony Sanders instead?"

The guard nods and consults his phone list. He stares at the page for a few seconds, then looks at Porter.

"I don't have a Tony Sanders," he says.

"Oh, good Christ," Porter says. "Call Human Resources then. Have them send someone down to verify my identity. I've got a lot of work to do."

"Yes, sir," the guard says.

Porter ignores the sarcasm in the guard's voice and resumes staring out the window. Minutes pass. He hears the guard's chair scrape and turns to see him walking toward the end of the hallway, where he meets a woman Porter doesn't recognize. The two of them have a short conversation and the guard walks back to Porter.

"You'll have to leave the premises, sir," he says.

“What?” says Porter. “Why?”

“They have no record of you.”

“I can’t just leave.”

“If you don’t, you’ll be charged with trespassing.”

Porter’s face flushes and blood throbs in his temples, but he manages to keep his voice fairly steady.

“All right, I’ll go home and get my badge,” he says. “Then we can straighten this out.”

“Whatever,” says the guard.

But as soon as he turns the corner onto Hawthorn Place, a chill runs through him. His house, standing at ten o’clock, is all wrong. Its light gray paint has changed to brown, and the pale pink trim is now white. The car he parks next to in the driveway, a silver sedan, is one he’s never seen before.

He gets slowly out of his car, knowing he’s not dreaming, because the sensations of his feet on the concrete and his hand on the car door are undeniably real. He climbs the steps of the porch and tests the brown paint with his fingertips, expecting it to be tacky and wet, but it’s not. He puts his key in the lock of the security door, but it only goes halfway in. He tries jamming it, but it’s no use.

He rings the doorbell, pressing it three times, then steps back to look along the front of the house. The drapes in the front window are open, but he can’t see in. He glances over his shoulder at the two cars in the driveway, then hears the lock turning in the door beyond the bars. It opens just a crack, and he sees a woman with curly gray hair, glasses, and a long, thin face. Sixty, maybe seventy years old. He has no idea who she is.

“Yes?” she says, peeking around the edge of the door.

He hasn’t even thought about what to say.

“What’s going on?” he blurts out. “Who painted my house? Why are the locks changed?”

The old lady’s eyes widen.

“What?” she says.

“This is my house!” he shouts. “What are you doing in there?”

The woman is genuinely frightened now, but he doesn’t care.

“There must be some mistake,” she whispers.

“Mistake?” he says, and for a second it’s funny. He laughs and looks up at the sky in exasperation. When he looks down again the door is closing.

“Hey!” he says. “Open up! Open the damn door!”

He rings the doorbell, pressing it again and again, but he knows she isn’t coming back. He steps off the porch, marches across the grass to the front flower bed, and cups his hands against the picture window to peer inside. The furniture is all wrong, the room is still, and the old woman is nowhere to be seen.

He stands in the center of his yard. The double driveways of his neighbors are all empty. He strides next door to the Anderson’s house, where he rings their bell and waits, then rings it again and waits some more. He knows no one is home, but he’s at a loss for what to do next.

Back at his car, he decides he has to convince the old lady the house is his. He pulls out his wallet, thinking he can show her his drivers license, with his address. But his license isn’t in his wallet, and he remembers showing it to Bob at the Pancake House. Obviously he left it there. He reaches to open the glove box, thinking his registration will also have the address, but the envelope with the registration isn’t wedged in the back where he always keeps it. He heart is thudding in his chest now, and he breathes in short gasps, as he flings the contents of the glove box onto the floor - road maps, parking receipts, the driver’s manual. He even runs his fingers around the empty compartment. Then, staring at the little light in the glove box, he realizes there’s something else, too.

Something just reaching his awareness. It's a siren, wailing in the distance, coming closer.

The old lady has called the police! Of course she has. And in the next instant he knows he doesn't want to be there when they arrive. He'll be a man terrorizing an old lady at her door, without identification, without registration.

He shoves his key in the ignition and the engine roars. He jams the car in reverse and backs from the driveway. At the end of the street he lowers his window and listens. The siren is closing in from his left, so he turns right and steps hard on the gas. He's only gone three blocks when he sees the flashers in his mirror. They disappear up his street, and he figures he has at least a few minutes while the old lady describes him to the police.

He drives in a straight line away from his house, and after a few miles he calms down enough to think about what comes next. Looking for his license has reminded him he had only ten dollars after paying for breakfast. Whatever is happening, he doesn't want to face it with just a ten. His bank has a branch two miles away, and that's where he goes.

He hops out of his car and approaches the machine, which is set in the wall next to the door. He slips his card in the slot, enters his code, and selects the withdrawal option. But instead of asking how much he wants, the machine swallows his card and displays a message he's never seen before:

“Unable to complete transaction.

See a representative to reclaim your card.”

Porter wants to smash the keypad of the machine with his fist, but instead he takes three steps to his right and enters the building. He passes a guard sitting at a desk and gets in line. He shuffles forward between blue velvet ropes hung from metal poles, and soon he's at the head, waiting for one of the three tellers to be free. A man at the leftmost window walks away, and Porter steps up, facing a woman with huge red-rimmed glasses and blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail.

“How can I help you?” she says.

“I tried to make a withdrawal, and the machine kept my card. It said to see a representative to reclaim it.”

The woman nods.

“That means your card was reported stolen or missing,” she says.

“It’s missing now,” Porter says.

She smiles, but doesn’t seem much amused.

“Can I make a withdrawal?” he asks.

“Of course. Your name?”

“Porter. Henry.”

“And your account number?”

Porter opens his mouth - it’s a six digit number he’s memorized - but it doesn’t come to him. The teller watches as he struggles, and he knows it looks bad.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I can’t remember at the moment.”

“No problem,” she says. “I’ll look it up. But before that, I’ll go back and report your missing card. I’ll just be a minute.”

Porter nods and she leaves through a side door. He looks to his right and sees an elderly man at the next window and a young woman at the one beyond. He looks to his left and sees a small waiting area with four chairs and a magazine table. And then the thought hits him: they’ll want identification. His license is missing, and so is his badge from work. Those are the only things with his picture, and that’s what they’ll want. His glance jumps up to the security monitor on the wall. Its picture cycles through the front door, the woman at the first teller, the old man next to him, and his own face squinting upward.

The front door comes on the screen again, and he wonders where his teller has gone. He takes a step back and sees her beyond a glass partition, standing next to a man seated at a desk, both of them staring into a computer screen. The man looks over his

shoulder and says something to her. The teller nods. The man picks up his phone and Porter hears a ring. The security guard answers his phone, and Porter sees his lips move, sees him nod his head. Then the guard looks up and their eyes meet.

Flustered, Porter looks away. He sees the man beyond the glass make another call. His teller is watching him, so he turns his back. His eyes are drawn up to the security monitor and he sees himself again.

The side door opens and the teller comes back.

“Sorry for the delay,” she says. “We’re having computer problems.”

She’s still smiling, but she’s nervous now as she taps the keyboard next to her.

“It should be up in a minute,” she says.

But the other two tellers are still doing business. Their computers are fine. Which means his teller is stalling, which means he needs to get out of here. He doesn’t want to just run out the door, though. There’s the guard to contend with, if nothing else.

“You know what?” he says. “I just remembered. My checkbook has my account number, and it’s in my glove box. I’ll go get it.”

“No need,” she says. “In a minute I can look it up.”

“It’s no trouble,” he says. “I’ll be right back.”

She doesn’t argue further, and Porter walks to the door. He nods and smiles as he passes the guard. As he unlocks his car he sees the guard watching him through the glass doors. He puts his key in the ignition as he pretends to lean over and open the glove box. Then he sits up and turns the key. He backs, jerks forward to the exit, and slips into the stream of traffic without looking back.

For the next several hours Porter chases fading hopes. He calls his wife’s office and a recorded voice tells him the number has been disconnected. He drives to her

building and a new sign hangs on its front. Inside they have never heard of her, and by now he has learned not to argue and make a scene.

He drives to his brother-in-law's workplace, then to his house. At work they don't know him, and another family inhabits the house.

Late in the afternoon, he sits dazed in his car, waiting for a traffic light to change. He has been driving aimlessly, trying to come up with a logical next move, and has wandered into a part of town he doesn't know well. The storefronts have a grimy look, and flattened trash litters the streets and sidewalks. Through his windshield he sees two young men loitering on the street corner. They wear baggy, low-slung pants and long, oversized T-shirts, and they're staring at him. One says something, and they both laugh, making a series of quick handshaking motions.

The light changes and Porter accelerates away. His gas gauge says he has less than a quarter tank left, and it suddenly occurs to him that he doesn't even have enough money for a motel room that night.

As he drives he opens his briefcase and rummages for his little plastic bottle of Paxonal. With his hands together at the top of the steering wheel he wrestles with the child-proof cap, shakes out a pill, and swallows it dry. He's pretty sure it goes down, but the pill feels like it's stuck in his throat. He screws the cap back on, his eyes flick back and forth between the bottle and the road ahead. "5506 Rosedale," the label says. It makes no sense, but then neither has anything else since he left home that morning. So even though he knows it's pointless, and the address is a good half hour away, he turns and drives in that direction.

Through a window Porter can see a woman working in her kitchen. He sits slumped behind his steering wheel, the blood surging in his ears with every beat of his heart - zzzgh, zzzgh, zzzgh.

He presses his hands to his face and stares at the dashboard through his fingers. He hears a noise, a door opening, and jerks his head upright. He looks straight ahead, but from the corner of his eye he can see someone walking toward him. A quick glance tells him it's the woman from the kitchen. He reaches in his jacket pocket, pulls out his address book, and begins paging through it.

The woman leans down to his open window.

"What are you doing out here?" she says.

"Nothing," he says. "I'm just looking up an address. I'll be leaving in a minute."

"Larry," she says. "What are you talking about?"

Porter risks another glance, still pretending to search through his book.

"Come on," she says. "Put the car in the garage and come inside. Dinner's almost ready."

He watches her cross the lawn and reenter the house. He thinks he should just drive away, but he has no place else to go. He pulls into the driveway, and before he realizes the absurdity of it, habit makes him reach in the compartment next to his seat and press the button of his garage opener. The door shudders and begins to rise.

Porter enters the house and finds himself in the kitchen. The woman stands at the stove.

"Fifteen minutes," she tells him.

He smiles and keeps moving, afraid of giving her too close a look. He skulks down a hallway, and on his right sees a room with a desk and a computer. He ducks into it and tries to calm himself. The smell of food reminds him he's had nothing to eat since that morning.

He explores the room, feeling like a burglar. The blinds on the window are drawn, so he switches on a fluorescent desk lamp. Propped next to it is a framed picture of the woman and a boy, both of them smiling. On the oak desk are two neat stacks of paper, a

calculator, and pencils in a holder. Porter sits in the brown leather chair and opens the center desk drawer. He finds a box of business cards and draws one out:

Larry Miller

Market Analyst

Stenner Industries

He opens more drawers and finds files, office paraphernalia, boxes of envelopes. He swivels around, and in the corner of the room, on a small table, lies a briefcase. He pops it open. Inside are papers and reports, an appointment book, and an identification badge for Stenner Industries. He stares at the photo on the badge.

“It’s time!” the woman calls.

Porter jumps up and follows the hall to the dining room, where he sits with the woman and a gangly teenage boy. The boy looks both bored and ill at ease, but Porter is mainly interested in the food. He waits for the woman to start before he digs in.

“How was your day?” she asks.

He has just filled his mouth when the question comes, so he chews as fast as he can and forces it down.

“Hectic,” he manages to say.

As he aspirates his reply, a tiny glob of meat flies out of his mouth and lands on the table, but they’re both intent on eating and seem not to notice. He pinches the brown speck between his thumb and forefinger and wipes it on his napkin.

“I’m surprised that job hasn’t given you a nervous breakdown,” the woman says.

“Who says it hasn’t?” he says, and turning his head catches the end of the kid’s eye-rolling response to his joke. The kid freezes, realizing he’s been caught, and looks down at his plate.

“And how was *your* day?” Porter asks him.

“Okay,” the kid says sullenly.

Porter takes a few seconds to study him. The kid, he realizes, has a withering adolescent contempt for him. Not that it matters. He doesn't care much for the kid, either.

The meal ends and Porter takes a cup of coffee to the study. Sitting at the desk, he skims the papers from the briefcase, knowing he has to get a handle on what this guy does before tomorrow. Not the details, obviously, but the gist. He's completely lost track of time when the woman appears at the door.

"I'm going to bed," she says. "Don't work too late."

"I won't," he says automatically.

He looks at his watch and sees it's after ten o'clock. He goes back to reading, but soon he can barely bring the words into focus. The day has drained him completely.

He follows the hall, lit by a night light, and passes the dark kitchen. He climbs carpeted stairs. Through an open door he sees a large bed and the contour of the woman's body under a blanket. A dim lamp stands on a night table.

He finds a bathroom door in the corner of the room and closes it behind him before turning on the light. Pajamas hang from a hook. Two toothbrushes are suspended in a holder, one red and one blue. He hesitates, not sure he should use either one, then chooses the blue. As he brushes he looks in the mirror. He looks haggard, hunted.

He changes into the pajamas, reenters the bedroom, and sits carefully on the edge of the bed. The woman lies on her side, turned away, the covers drawn up so only her head is exposed. Her brown hair looks so soft spread out on the pillow that he's tempted to touch it. Instead, he turns off the light and lies rigid in the dark, dreading the morning, until anxiety finally succumbs to exhaustion.

Before seven Porter is in the lot of Stenner Industries. The building is long and low, with a flat roof and no windows.

He approaches the entrance, opens the door, and steps inside. A guard, sitting at a desk sipping coffee, looks up as he flashes his badge.

“Early start this morning,” the guard says.

“Lots to do,” he says, and keeps moving.

He knows he’s a market analyst, so the first thing to do is find Marketing. He turns down a long corridor, passing evenly spaced gray doors. He passes Accounting, Human Resources, and Purchasing. Then comes a door that just says “Work Group 1.”

The corridor ends and another leads to his left. He walks its entire length, but now all the doors are just numbered work groups. He climbs a flight of stairs, and at the top the corridors are identical to those below. He goes left and is encouraged when the first door is Sales. He approaches the next, and bingo, it’s Marketing. He looks both ways and turns the knob.

He enters a large, dim room and flips the light switch next to the door. Fluorescent tubes flicker, then blaze to life. The entire area is sectioned into cubicles by portable dividers, and each cubicle, at its entrance, has a black name plate. He turns right and follows an aisle to its end without success. He retraces his steps, and halfway to the opposite end finds the plate that reads “Larry Miller.”

He enters the cubicle. On its desk are a phone and a scattering of file folders. Next to the desk are a computer and two tall file cabinets. He sits and starts reading.

Over the next hour and a half he hears people arriving all around him. Afraid of being exposed, he keeps his face buried in the papers until a voice at his cubicle entrance startles him.

“Hey, Larry. Staff meeting in five minutes.”

“I almost forgot,” he says, jumping to his feet.

His companion’s badge says “Bill Crenshaw.”

“Andrews is going to tear us a new one today,” Crenshaw says, as they move between the cubicles.

They leave Marketing, cross the hall, and enter a conference room with a long table and a white marker board mounted on the wall. The table is nearly full, but he avoids meeting anyone’s eyes as he sits next to Crenshaw.

An angry-looking man comes through the door and stands at the head of the table.

“Okay,” he says. “Let’s get started.”

A lot of the words - project names, names of customers - are familiar to him from the papers he’s skimmed. But he has no understanding of the underlying issues. Andrews asks people to report on the status of their projects, and he sits knowing that at any time he might be next. He has no idea what he would say.

Crenshaw gets his turn on the hot seat and talks about his project for several minutes. Andrews listens with visible impatience.

“Essentially, then, no change from last week,” Andrews says.

“Essentially, no. We’re still waiting for a response to our memo.”

Andrews frowns, but moves on. Now he’s talking about a new project, an important one that will take the company in a new direction. He says the project needs better definition, and that somebody needs to take the lead on it.

“Any volunteers?” Andrews asks.

Everyone stares at the papers in front of them as Andrew’s eyes march relentlessly around the table. Porter feels a trickle of sweat slide from his armpit down the side of his chest, and then Andrews’ eyes are on him.

He raises his hand just off the table and extends his index finger.

“I’d like to take that on,” he hears himself say.