

Service Call

My cell phone rings and before I even look at the caller I.D., I know it's my boss. I run a hand down my face. Lou's going to chew me out for being late to my previous cable repair appointment. I stare at my phone, postponing the action of sliding my finger across the screen to answer Lou. It's humiliating to get yelled at by him, not because he's clever with his insults, but because he's so stupid that it's degrading to work for him. Might as well get it over with, I think. I take a deep breath and answer the phone.

"Hello Lou," I say.

"Can you please explain to me why Mr. Newman had an hour-long conversation with me about how to run my business?" Lou said.

I've learned to understand Lou through whatever food he has in his mouth. Today, it's something greasy, something that really slimes up his vocal cords. Lou looks exactly as he sounds, a big guy with a gut, a wreckage of teeth, and a backstory about his wife divorcing him. Rumor has it that before they were divorced, Lou used to live in a ritzy house down by the Hudson River. Now, he lives on Grand Street in the city of Newburgh. Being lucky to Lou means waking up to find that your tires weren't slashed overnight. It almost makes me feel sorry for him. Almost.

"Mr. Newman is a complainer," I say. Mr. Newman is a seventy-eight-year-old man who accidentally switches his television to HDMI2 at least once a week and, even though I've shown him seventeen times, can never figure out how to get the television back to HDMI1. At most, I'm at his house for five minutes. Over the past four months, Mr. Newman has called multiple times to tell Lou that I arrive too early to appointments. I was only trying to arrive as early as possible to get the appointment over with. Today, I arrived a half-hour past the four-hour time slot. It

wasn't my fault though, not really. I stopped off for breakfast at a diner and the server didn't bring my food as quickly as expected. That's not my fault.

"Don't be wise with me," says Lou. Wet, heavy drops of food falls and lands on wax paper. "You're a smart kid. Start acting like it, otherwise we're going to have a chat."

"If I were smart, you'd be driving around, and I'd be the one sitting at a desk," I say. I mean it as a joke, but there's too much bite in my voice. The animosity is tangible, and Lou can hear it, too. It's too apparent to miss, even for him.

"How many jobs do you have left?" asks Lou.

"Just one in the town of Newburgh," I say. I still have two more hours before the time window closes. I was going to stop off at a QuikCheck to grab a milkshake, but it's out of the question now.

"Stop by the office after that. We're going to talk." Lou hangs up.

My stomach twists thinking about Lou slurping down an Icee as he tells me how useless I am.

The gentle voice of the GPS tells me to turn right.

I guess it would be fine if I were fired. There's enough in my bank account to hold my apartment down for another month. And now that I'm thinking about it, every day at work makes me tempted to electrocute myself anyway. Being a cable repair man is a special kind of shitty job. It's like being a ghost, a spectral spectator to people's lives because they want to forget you're in their living room when they yell at the dog, their significant others, or their kids. Once, I arrived at a house to find the cable box smashed to bits. When I asked what happened to it, the man said, "Television makes me lonely," and then he asked my sign. I see so many people who talk over their screaming children and so many sad old people who tell me about the soda they

can't drink anymore because their teeth are too soft. Their faces come to me late at night, a collage of modernism.

I sink lower into the driver's seat. I'm making myself depressed.

I pull up to the Douglas' ranch, a long tube of a house perched on a hill. Their house is settled almost in between the town and the city of Newburgh, but closer to the city. I can hear the sirens screaming even through the car door. The ranch is quaint with beige vinyl siding and black shutters, the kind that open and close. African violets wave from their places in the window boxes hanging off the railing of the steps. Everything about the house looks like someone's been trying to keep it nice, except for the lawn. It died during the winter and hasn't been cared for yet, even though it's July.

I park the car in the driveway, grab my case from the passenger's side, and get out of the car. The blue logo of the company car catches the sun, and the glare hooks me right in the eye. I'm rubbing the sun out of them when the door opens.

"I'm supposed to tell you that you're late," says a woman. I look up and see a face that clarifies my mood. It belongs to the barefoot woman standing at the top of the steps. A gauzy skirt winds around her waist and clings to her like fire on wood. Her black tank top falls just short of her hips. Bits of shadow play on her midsection. I'm jealous of them.

"Actually, I'm two hours on time," I say. The woman shakes her head and smiles. The hills of her cheeks glow in the sun, and the glare brightens her eyes.

"I guess you're Mrs. Douglas?" I say.

"You guessed right," she says. "You look a little young to know about cable boxes." My instant love for her falters. Everyone says I look too young to know how to do my job.

"Paid training is included in the hiring process," I say.

Mrs. Douglas tilts her chin toward me. “Well then, I guess you’re qualified. Come on in, youngster.”

Youngster. She couldn’t have been that old. Maybe in her thirties? But thirty is a far cry from twenty-two.

I pound up the steps and head inside the house. The entrance opens on a pleasant living room, colored from a paint can probably labeled Robin’s Egg Blue. The furniture is done in tawny leather, and there’s a hint of gentle personality in the unoffending decor. Everything that stands in the room is pushed to the corners as if it’s trying to hide and not be bothersome.

“My husband was a little miffed you weren’t here earlier.”

Her husband sounds exactly like everyone else following the first customer of the day.

“I wish I could’ve been here sooner,” I say. Mrs. Douglas’ easy nature is exactly what I need after that call from Lou. “We’re going to talk,” he’d said. What the hell about?

Mrs. Douglas shrugs. “You may not get the pleasure of meeting him. He had to leave to go to the office, but he wants the television fixed when he gets back. We can’t figure out what the problem is.”

Mrs. Douglas snatches the remote off the table and points it at the entertainment center. The television and cable box flicks on. The television is tuned to a retail show, the one where women living on SlimFast model jewelry. Mrs. Douglas starts running through the channels. The television goes through five channels before clicking back to the original retail show.

“But we’re paying for over two hundred channels,” says Mrs. Douglas. I stop looking at the diamond pattern on the band of Mrs. Douglas’ skirt and turn my eyes to the television.

According to what she’s said, there’s a connectivity issue.

“I’ll have to fiddle with the wires, but this isn’t a huge problem. It won’t take long to fix.”

“That’s great to hear,” says Mrs. Douglas. She hands me the remote. “I’ll be in the kitchen if you need anything. Just give a yell.”

“I will, Mrs. Douglas.”

“Just Amy, please.”

“Of course, Amy,” I say. Her name spelled out on my lips, she walks into the kitchen, probably to continue whatever she was doing before I got here.

Alone, I face the cable box. If the television went back to its base five channels, then the communication between the connect cables and the cable box isn’t working. I open my box and remove a new package of wires. I start unscrewing the old connect cables and take out a can of compressed air, blow it into the open cable wire fittings. After that’s done, I begin inserting the new connect cables. Focused on my work, the living room begins to fade. I can push away my meeting with Lou later and every other little thing that I find a way to complain about as I assess and fix the problem. I’m getting into the groove of work when the door opens.

“You decided to show up,” says a man. A clean cologne pierces my nose. I turn and find myself standing before I even think to rise. The man, who has to be Mr. Douglas, shakes my hand hard like a dog ripping at a chew toy. He’s wearing a crisp suit with creases running down the legs of his pants, so straight they look like they were made with a ruler.

“Sorry sir, I was caught up on my other jobs.” I blink. I’ve never called anyone sir in my life, but something about Mr. Douglas’s aesthetic triggers the word.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says. We drop our hands, and I see Mr. Douglas size me up. “You’re just a sprout, aren’t you?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“Newly graduated from high school?”

“A couple years out now, yeah.” I graduated in 2002, and even though it’s only been two years, I feel like a different person who now understands the opening theme song of *Friends*.

“Is this your plan?”

Translation: Is this your plan instead of going to college?

“For now, yes.”

I don’t like Mr. Douglas, and it’s not just because he’s looking at me like I’m gum on the bottom of his shoe. It’s because he looks but doesn’t see me. I know his type. Mr. Douglas been a bully all his life.

Mr. Douglas claps me on the shoulder.

“Well, I guess this is a good job for you.” He leaves me and goes into what I assume is the ranch’s bedroom. I feel like my insides are burning.

When the bedroom door shuts, Amy comes into the living room. When I see her, I have a hard time she’s married to someone as gritty and shallow as him. His personality must swallow her whole, I think. I can hear Mr. Douglas against the wall, opening dresser drawers and shoving them closed so the trinkets on the dresser rattle.

“I’m sorry. He can be abrasive,” Amy says.

“It’s fine,” I say. In my head, I’m reconfiguring Amy every which way I can think so that she’s a match for Mr. Douglas. I picture her young and mean, a biker chick, a manic pixie dream girl. But everything looks wrong on her, except the version of Amy that’s standing in front of me, apologizing for her husband’s behavior.

“I think I’m almost done here,” I say. “It shouldn’t be more than ten minutes.”

“Great,” says Amy. She smiles again, but it’s not as bright or wide as before. Something is causing her to wilt. “Do you need anything?”

“Actually, some water would be great.” I’m still jazzing for something cold because I couldn’t stop for a milkshake, and Mr. Douglas made my body heat rise.

“With ice?” she asks. I nod, and Amy disappears into the kitchen. The bedroom door opens, and I snap back to work, making my hands busy by switching wires in and out of slots.

Mr. Douglas comes into the living room wearing a crewneck t-shirt and a pair of pajama pants. Any hope that his suit elevated his intrusive nature vanishes. Mr. Douglas still looks like he’s the boss of everyone. He sits down on the couch and grabs the remote.

“It’s not done yet,” I say.

“Won’t be too much longer though, right?”

“I guess not.”

He settles on the couch, spreads his arms across the cushions. A light sweat breaks out on my neck. My head turns cloudy. Why does he have to sit there? My chest begins to feel too tight to breathe, but my hands still work fast. I want to leave, get out of this house as soon as possible. I’m used to feeling ignored, not watched while I work. I barely hear the telephone ring, but Mr. Douglas does. He gets off the couch and goes into the kitchen.

“Hello?” says Mr. Douglas. His voice booms through the house. He’s a man who’s never been told to be quiet or use his “inside voice.”

“The bill? I thought my wife sent the check. No? Well pal, I’m glad you told me. Amy’s going to get the beating of her life when she gets home.”

My ears prick. I turn my head to the kitchen, confused at what Mr. Douglas said. When Amy gets home? Isn’t she in the kitchen with him? I stop messing around with the connectors

and stand, listening for the sharp sound of flesh on flesh. Instead, I hear Amy say, “Henry, stop. It’s not funny when you do that.”

“What do you mean, of course I’m serious,” says Mr. Douglas. I hear quiet huffing, and I think it’s supposed to be Mr. Douglas laughing.

“Are you sure you have the wrong number? All right then, your mistake. Good talking to you, too.”

The phone clatters to the counter.

“Don’t look at me like that,” says Mr. Douglas. “I’m only kidding.”

“You shouldn’t do that,” says Amy. Her voice is nothing more than a weak wind rustling through the reeds of her throat.

“I just forgot to mail the checks,” says Mr. Douglas.

“Is that really the reason why?” Amy says.

“What other reason would there be?” asks Mr. Douglas. There’s a quiet challenge in his voice, a low rumble that seems to say: Go ahead, try me. I wonder what other reason it might that Mr. Douglas still hasn’t paid the bill. It’s probably for some seedy reason. I imagine him in one of those stupid visors, the ones with the green transparent rim. He’s sitting under a single, naked bulb and surrounded by bigger men than he is. They’re all holding cards and sweating despite the clammy basement air. Yeah, I think. That’s it. Mr. Douglas is a scummy guy who blows their money on poker games. I’d believe it.

Amy’s voice cuts through my brain, cold as a blade. “If you let me see what we have, maybe I could help. But you don’t let me see anything.”

“We’re not doing this now,” says Mr. Douglas. “We’ll talk about it later. I promise.” A wet smack rings through the air. I cringe thinking of Mr. Douglas kissing Amy. “Is that water for me?”

She sounds tense when she says, “Yeah, sure.” I can’t tell if she’s angry or hurt.

The ice cubes knock into the side of the glass when Mr. Douglas takes it from her. He’s so loud, I can hear his throat working down the water.

Mr. Douglas has already forgotten I’m in the other room, and I’m grateful because it gives me time to set my nerves straight. I go back to the cable box and kneel again. I make a few more adjustments to the wiring, take the remote, and turn on the television. The Douglas’ television turns on and two hundred channels appear in the menu.

Mr. Douglas grunts at the noise of the television and comes out of the kitchen. I hand him the remote.

“We’re done here,” I say.

“Great,” he says. “May I?” He holds out his hand for the remote. I slap it into his hand, and it hits his palm with a satisfying *smack*. Mr. Douglas turns on the television and begins flipping through the channels, testing my work. I want to take the remote and knock him across the jaw with it. Instead, I open my case and take out the bill pad. I write down some charges to an amount that equals a \$135.93. I rip it out of the pad and try to hand it to Mr. Douglas.

“You’ll have to write a check for the bill or someone will call to take your credit card number,” I say. It’s information that I relay to every customer, but my mouth tastes sour when I hear it. He’s not going to pay now and we both know it. Some poor cable bill collector who also works for Lou will call Mr. Douglas, and he’ll probably hear the same thing I did, just louder and directly into his already-abused eardrum.

“My wife will handle the bill information,” says Mr. Douglas.

Always on-cue, Amy comes out of the kitchen, her arms wrapped around her body. My chest swells. I want to hold her.

“Let’s go outside,” she says. I follow her onto the front porch. Mr. Douglas has settled himself in front of the television and is brain dead. I look at him until Amy shuts the door. It’s hard to meet her eyes, so I find myself reading off the cable bill explaining to her the prescribed charges. Amy can sense my nervousness. Who wouldn’t? When I reach the end of the list and I don’t know what to say anymore, Amy tries to give me a smile.

“I’m sorry about him,” she says. “He has a raw sense of humor.”

“It’s none of my business,” I say. “I’m just the cable repair guy.”

Amy says, “He would never actually do that.”

“Like I said, it’s none of my business.” Only, I feel like it is. I make myself look at Amy. I see bruise marks, the nylon strap of a sling, dead dollar signs

“Henry said you have some information about the bill?” asks Amy.

I look at the bill in my hand. It’s just a stupid piece of paper. If I rip it up, no one will know that I was even here. I like that idea.

“Don’t worry about the bill,” I say.

Amy’s face changes again, grows darker with all the shadows gathering.

“What do you mean?”

“You won’t get charged. It wasn’t that big of a problem. I was only here for twenty minutes.”

“Look, we don’t need any charity,” says Amy. “And I’m sure your supervisor wouldn’t like you ripping up repair tickets.” She snatches the bill from my hand. The paper catches the crease of my fingers and leaves a burning papercut across my hand.

“You should go,” she says. All the cheeriness of our first encounter is gone. I sense a coldness that combats and overpowers the warmth she gave me when I first arrived. She’s right. We’re done here.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Douglas,” I say.

By the time I get settled into the car, Mrs. Douglas has gone inside. It’s still bright out, but the blue wash of the television is making the curtains glow. I think of Mr. Douglas pulling Amy down onto the couch with him, placing a heavy arm across her shoulders. I bet she sinks into the cushions of the couch and almost becomes buried in the cushion crevice. I shudder. It sounds like it would suck.

As I pull into traffic and the GPS corrects my route to the parking lot of Lou’s cable company, I grab my phone. For fun, I unroll the windows and turn the radio off so that maybe, if I stop at a red light, people will hear me. I wish Amy could hear me. I wish she were sitting right next to me, watching as I hit Lou’s number, and wait. My call goes to voice mail.

“Hey Lou, it’s me. I quit.”

I throw my phone in the back of the car, so I resist the urge to redial Lou and say, “Just kidding, I’ll be at your office in twenty. It clatters around with all the other equipment I have for climbing telephone wires, but never used.

The GPS is trying to redirect me back to the office. I have to go back. I have to return the company car. But I’m ignoring the GPS now, the directions of, “Turn right now.” I’m kind of floating, suddenly aware I’m untethered. I could drive around in this car for however long I

want. Or until Lou calls the cops and reports the car stolen. Would the boys in blue beat me down easier if I told them about Amy?