

The Man in the Blue Jean Jacket

The man in the blue jean jacket had been following Andy all day. He was there, across the street, sitting on the stone half-wall Mr. Thomas built last year across the front of his yard, watching Andy get into Ezzie Clinton's shitty silver '01 Civic so they could head to school. He was there, in a booth at the back of the McDonald's eating a Quarter Pounder and fries, watching Andy and Ezzie blow off Chemistry to "eat some real fucking food," in Ezzie's opinion, instead of the slop they served in the high school cafeteria. He was there, standing at the open door of Mr. Arnault's bus, talking about how stupid it was for the town not to fix the streetlight that the Miller kid plowed down last year, watching Andy toss his books in the back of the shitty '01 so they could head back to Ezzie's house to play whatever *Resident Evil* Ezzie didn't think sucked that day. The man in the blue jean jacket was walking the opposite side of the streets Andy walked to get back home in time for dinner. He was at the mall food court when Andy joined Ezzie and a few of his D&D friends at the movie theatre to see the new *Spider-Man*. He was pretending to fumble for his keys one row over in the parking lot as they all piled into the shitty '01 to head home for the night.

So it came as no surprise to Andy that the man in the blue jean jacket was standing on his front lawn at 2:30 in the morning, looking up at Andy's window.

Andy wasn't scared of the man. He thought he probably should be. Only a real sick fuck followed teenage boys around like that, and since this guy didn't even try to hide himself, he was a *brazen* real sick fuck, the worst kind imaginable. He was probably some sort of pedo-slasher weirdo, aiming to turn Andy into some sort of skin trophy -- a severed head in a hat box, a pair of testicles in a mason jar -- after having his way with him, and for Andy the jury was out whether he'd fuck him before or after he was dead. This stalker was a walking red flag,

and he should have gone down the hall, given his dad a few good shakes, pointed out the pedo-slasher standing motionless in the front yard, and called the police.

But he didn't. He just watched him from his second-floor bedroom window, the man in the blue jean jacket watching back. They stood like this, staring, watching, for what felt like hours but was probably just a few minutes. Andy wasn't sure if the man was looking at him -- all the lights were out and he was mostly hidden by the semi-sheer curtains -- or just staring up at his window, examining it, memorizing it. Andy thought about turning on his desk lamp, or banging on the glass, throwing open the curtains, announcing himself to the man in the blue jean jacket, like a provocation, like a dare. Maybe he would run. Maybe he'd reveal a gun or a machete or some other kind of weapon, now hidden, in wait. Maybe he would rush the house, push open the front door and barrel upstairs, knowing the way, with murder in his eyes. Maybe he wouldn't do anything at all. *But he'd know*, Andy thought. *He'd know I know*. And there was something about that -- being known by the man in the blue jean jacket -- that thrilled Andy and yet kept him from doing a thing.

Andy watched as the man in the blue jean jacket walked over to where his dad's car was parked in the driveway. The man placed a hand on the trunk of the car, gently, almost reverently. Then he dropped to a knee, leaning in close to the stupid bumper sticker added just a few days before: *LOST YOUR CAT? Try looking under my tires!* Andy rolled his eyes when his dad bought the thing, and he tried to convince him to trash it or something, but his dad persisted, saying, "When you pay the note on it, you can decide what it looks like." Andy shot back, "But I have to drive the fucking thing!" which ended up a bonehead move, because his dad revoked his driving privileges and put the sticker on anyway. That sticker was why Ezzie was driving him around everywhere, so it became a vessel for Andy's resentment, over his lack of freedom, over his lack of money, over his lack of options.

Andy wasn't sure if the man in the blue jacket was laughing or crying as he ran his fingers over the stupid bumper sticker, but it was one or the other, his shoulders rising and falling in a familiar jerky rhythm.

Then the man in the blue jean jacket stood and quietly walked into the night.

"You sure you just weren't high or something?" Ezzie said, thumbing past shirt after shirt on a rack at the Goodwill. He was looking for something "*that made you think I was a cowboy*" for a YouTube video he wanted to make. He had it in his head that if he was going to be famous, he'd have to do it on YouTube, because he didn't have any other discernible skills or talents. He'd been making videos for a few months, mostly comedy videos that tested the tensile strength of that word or videos where he subjected himself to varying degrees of physical punishment. So far, it hadn't netted him much traction -- he had 14 subscribers, and he was related to ten of them -- but Ezzie had hope. He had this idea to do a sketch video about the first cowboy who ever saw a train, (what Ezzie lacked in creativity he made up for in mediocrity) and he'd film it out on the tracks near his uncle's house. He didn't think finding a shirt that made you look like a cowboy would be hard to do in this town, but most of the shirts on the Goodwill rack looked like something you'd bury your grandfather in. Ezzie was getting frustrated.

"I wasn't high," Andy said. "He followed us around all day yesterday, man. You didn't see him?"

"He followed *you* around," Ezzie said, pulling out a green plaid shirt with a discreet tear across the left breast pocket. He eyed it for a second, then held it up against his chest, turning to Andy. "This say 'cowboy' to you?"

“Not really,” Andy said. Ezzie rolled his eyes and shoved the shirt back into the rack.

“You really didn’t see him?”

“No, dude, I told you,” Ezzie said, moving down to another section of shirts. “I didn’t see some creeper following us around yesterday. Yo, why is it so hard to find a cowboy shirt in Ohio?”

“Because they don’t have cowboys in Ohio,” Andy said. In a quick precision strike, Ezzie’s fist landed squarely on the thick of Andy’s left arm. He was stung as much by the surprise of it as he was by the impact. “Ow! Asshole...”

“Don’t be the man with jokes, Andy,” Ezzie said, and he pulled the green plaid shirt off the rack for a second look. “Okay, so what if it was a lumberjack seeing a train for the first time?”

Andy was about to tell him it was a stupid revision of a stupid idea, and the punch he delivered really fucking hurt, but the sight of the man in the blue jean jacket looking through shoes on the other side of the store stopped Andy cold.

“Holy shit,” Andy muttered. “Look, Ezzie. It’s him.” Andy nodded his head in the direction of the man in the blue jean jacket. He was looking over a pair of white sneakers with more intention and more curiosity than a pair of white sneakers deserved. Ezzie’s head snapped around, craning his neck to see. “Dude, chill out. Don’t draw his attention.”

But they already had his attention. They’d had it since yesterday. They even had it now, because the man in the blue jean jacket wasn’t looking at the sneakers. He was looking at them.

“*That* guy?” Ezzie said, a little too loudly. Andy nudged him with an aggressive hiss.

“What?”

“What if he wants to kill us?”

“Kill *you*,” Ezzie said. “Maybe fuck you. Don’t know what’s worse.”

“It’s not funny,” Andy said, eyes on the man in the blue jean jacket. This was the closest he’d ever been, and the details of him were clearer now. The jacket was weathered and dirty and torn, barely holding together in some places. Life had cut hard lines across the man’s face and carved deep dark half moons under his hollowed-out eyes. It was a look Andy knew well, the look cut into to the faces of almost everyone in town. It was the look you grew up hoping to avoid, by going to college a few states away or just making enough money to move to Columbus. It was the look Ezzie was trying to dodge by going viral on the Internet, no scheme too stupid or impractical to miss wearing that face. It was a look Andy was starting to see on his own face, dark circles forming under his eyes after the last three months of evening shifts at the Burger King, disappointment pooling into the blacks of this eyes because he hadn’t saved enough for another semester of classes at the community college. He recognized something of himself in the man in the blue jean jacket, and he didn’t like it.

“I’m gonna say hello,” Ezzie said, shoving the green paid into Andy’s hand.

“The fuck you are,” Andy said, as his stomach suddenly lodged square in his throat. He grabbed Ezzie in the meat of his right arm, planting him in place, holding him there, keeping the distance between them and the man.

Ezzie shook him off. “Dude. He’s just a *dude*. In a Goodwill. What’s he gonna do?” Ezzie raised his eyebrows, expecting some answer. Andy didn’t know what the man might do, what he wanted, why he was following them, what the endgame was, but he didn’t really want to know. The distance he’d kept made the danger feel like a game, a stupid game of chase played out in the woods behind the middle school, the way they played when the were kids, the abandoned blue pickup their “safe home.” There was no “safe home” now, and Andy couldn’t do anything but stand there, mouth fallen open just a little, and watch Ezzie cross the store towards the man in the blue jean jacket.

It was hard to hear just what Ezzie said, because the music piped in from some crusty backroom was loud and the conversation taking place between a woman and her mother about the quality of a mismatched set of dinnerware was louder and the sucking sound of the panic inside Andy's head was the loudest. He could just see his lips move, and his head bob up slightly, and his hands gesture over to where Andy was standing. The man in the blue jean jacket turned to look at Andy, but only held the look for a second, turning back to Ezzie and saying something short, maybe just a few words. *This is it, Andy thought. He's going to stab Ezzie in the throat, he's gonna strangle him, he's going to jump all four racks like some kind of fucking monster and his mouth will crack open to reveal five other jaws of teeth and tongues and --*

"What the fuck was *that*?" Ezzie said with a laugh. Ezzie was standing in front of him again, all in one piece, alive and breathing and definitely not dead. Andy was confused, his eyes darting all over the store now, looking for the man in the blue jean jacket. *Where the fuck is he?* Andy scanned every corner for movement or a sound. *Where the fuck did he go?* "Did you see that shit?" Ezzie said.

"Where is he?"

"He left," Ezzie said. "He didn't even try to fuck me."

"What did he say to you?" Andy said, eyes now focused on the glass door and the street beyond, where the man had gone.

"Something stupid," Ezzie said. "'Not yet.' Like, what is that? But look what I found." Ezzie held up a faded red western shirt, fabric thin from years of wear, pearl snap buttons mostly retaining their shine. Ezzie smiled broadly, as if there was no man in the blue jean jacket. "Cowboy meets a train after all."

Not yet. Andy carefully held those two words in his head like a newborn. *Not yet. Not yet.*

The premise of the video was simple: a cowboy from the Old West sees a train for the first time and loses his shit, both metaphorically by having a breakdown and literally by shitting his pants. It was a one-note gag, but Ezzie explained it as though it was *Lawrence of Arabia*, which to him it sort of was. This was his most ambitious video yet, filmed on actual railroad tracks behind his uncle's house instead of in one of the shitty rooms in his mom's mobile home. He'd explained it to Andy in words that tumbled over themselves, seasoned with some film lingo he'd seen on some TV show, the whole thing animated by the thumb and pointer finger on both of his hands shaped into an L, the way he'd seen film directors in movies frame their brilliant ideas. They'd get some B-roll of the tracks, then they'd get some closeups of Ezzie (demonstrated by his finger-Ls on either side of his face) making jokes about life on horseback. Then, they'd wait for the 9:35 freighter to roll down the tracks to get some shots of Ezzie freaking out as it approached, jumping and pointing and screaming, then suddenly stopping, with big wide eyes. Then he'd turn around to reveal the video's *piece de resistance*: a big brown stain on the back of his pants. Then he'd jump off the other side so Andy could get some shots of the train passing. Then they'd screw around with some head-on shots of Ezzie pulling faces and screaming. They'd piece it all together into what would hopefully be enough to get shared a lot on Facebook. Andy didn't see how any of it would work or how any of it would be funny, but Ezzie was his friend -- practically his only friend in this town -- so he wanted to support him. Besides, if by some miracle it did work, and a stupid video of Ezzie fake-shitting his pants while he screamed and pointed at a freight train gave him just the leverage he needed to get the hell out of this town, Andy wanted to have enough investment to get the hell out of here with him.

“You sure you don’t want to write out a script or something?” Andy said. It was 8:30, and they’d been sitting on the little hill near the tracks for the last hour and a half, drinking beer and talking.

“The best comedy is when there isn’t no script,” Ezzie said. He already had about a six-pack in him, so his words were a bit drowsy and melting into one another. “And what am I gonna write, anyway? ‘Scream, scream, pretend to shit your pants?’ Dude, I got this.” He cracked open another PBR.

“I guess,” Andy said. “But, like, don’t you want to make sure it works before we film it?”

“Dude,” Ezzie said, drawing the word out over three or four unnecessary syllables. “The more it’s just some dumb ass hick looking stupid and shitting his pants, the better it’ll probably be, you know what I mean?”

Drinking made a lot of things harder for Ezzie -- walking, talking, not vomiting -- but it sharpened his view of the world and his place in it. Andy liked drinking with Ezzie, because a six-pack in, and the goofy, unfocused aimless loser who drove them around in a shitty ‘01 Civic gave way to an introspective aimless loser with an eye for the way the universe had fucked them both. Of course he didn’t want to write a script. It needed to be a mess. Ezzie never intended for anyone to think he was actually clever or funny. He just wanted them to laugh, and if it meant having people laugh at him instead of with him, Ezzie was content to bear that burden.

“Dude, I just wanna know I *exist*,” Ezzie said, gulping down half of his current PBR. “Some stranger on the Internet thinks I’m funny ‘cause I don’t know what I’m doing? Cool. At least they saw me, right? At least they fucking saw me.” He grabbed the pair of jeans sitting next to him and held them up to what was left of the light in the sky. There was a big brown

splotch of magic marker and dirt on the seat. “That look like shit to you?” He didn’t wait for an answer, and started expanding the stain to make sure it read on camera.

If Andy was honest with himself, this was really the reason he went along with Ezzie’s dumb ideas: the time they got to spend together just hanging around talking. He’d never say this to Ezzie outright, because he’d probably get laughed at or get a hard punch in the arm, but Ezzie was the one who saw him. Ezzie made him know he existed. Andy didn’t always feel that, so the times that he did, the times he felt like he was more than just the sum of a string of wasted opportunities, like he was part of the world and part of something that *could be*, he was grateful. And he felt that most strongly when he was hanging out with Ezzie Clinton.

“Oh shit, Andy. *I-I-I-I’m* the denim jacket pedophile stalker!” Ezzie stood up and with a spin was now donning a crisp denim jacket. It was a deep, fresh and clean blue, and it still had a starchiness that kept its lines intact.

“Your jacket’s too nice to be my pedo stalker,” Andy said, laughing. “Where’d you get that?”

“Guest room closet,” Ezzie said. “I think it’s my dad’s, but he’s never worn it. I had to take the price tag off. Ooh, but I did this.” He held open the jacket on the right side, revealing a black fabric patch sewn shoddily inside. It was cut from a t-shirt, one of Ezzie’s band shirts, a “Shout at the Devil” shirt with the big-haired Motley Crue boys’ heads occupying the negative space in a white pentagram.

“Nice.”

“Had to make it badass,” Ezzie said. “Does it look cowboy, though?”

“Not all clean like that,” Andy said.

“Then you wear it till we’re done.” Ezzie spun out of the jacket as quickly as he spun into it. By the time it hit Andy’s lap, Ezzie was already on the train tracks, looking off. Way down the

tracks, a small pinpoint of light hung in the darkness. “The train’s on time. Let’s do this!” Ezzie attempted a spin, but was too drunk to keep his balance. He fell on his ass, laughing.

“Maybe we should do this another night,” Andy said. “You’re wasted, dude.”

“Come on dude,” Ezzie said as he got to his feet. “Let’s roll!”

Andy slid Ezzie’s jacket on, and pulled his iPhone out of his pocket. “Alright, Ezzie. Let’s do this.”

The second Andy hit play for video, Ezzie launched into a grotesque acting display, all bent elbows and bowed legs, a wide-eyed shucking and jiving in a too-thick country accent that was one-part John Wayne, one-part toothless Appalachian hillbilly, one-part minstrel show. His improvised performance had a lot of pointing down the tracks, toward the pinprick light that was growing brighter and rounder, coupled with double takes to the camera with “aw shucks!” tomfoolery. Andy hated to admit it was sort of funny, but it did make him laugh. And every time it made Andy laugh, Ezzie would shuck a little harder, point a little more broadly, draw out the drawl an extra second or two, working for the laughter, working to be seen by his friend.

Down the train tracks, Andy could begin to make out the shape of the train. The light had grown in size and intensity, now setting its glow on the still-performing Ezzie.

“Hurry it up,” Andy said, seeing the rails begin to shake a little with the weight and power of the oncoming train.

It was time for the big shit reveal, and Ezzie was more than ready. He turned towards Andy and the phone camera, and bugged out his eyes in surprise. “Ooooooooooh sh-i-i-i-i-i-t!” Ezzie said, performing a three-act play over the word’s four little letters. Then he grabbed his behind and started contorting his face, beginning to collect harsh, lengthening shadows from the growing light of the approaching train. It was time for the reveal, and Andy just wanted him to

hurry, get it done, the train was still far, but it was getting closer, and this wasn't really funny anymore, so just show the fake shit stain and let's go --

Ezzie dropped the act and stared off, just behind Andy. "What the fuck are you --"

Before he could finish, Andy felt the bat connect with the space behind his kneecaps, the pain, quick and immediate, shooting upwards and everywhere. He watched the world crane up as he went down, everything vibrating inside him and out. Ezzie was no longer in his line of sight, but the sky was, the stars, and after a second, the man in the blue jean jacket was standing over him.

"What the fuck are you doing, dude?" Andy heard Ezzie's voice in the distance. The man in the blue jean jacket looked up, and began to move in Ezzie's direction.

"Ezzie!" Andy took whatever strength he had that wasn't numbed by the pain still seeping into every part of him and turned his body so he could see the tracks. Ezzie took a step off the tracks, moving toward the man in the blue jean jacket moving towards him. "You wanna fuck somebody up?" Ezzie said, slurring the words together and moving in a jagged line. "That's my *friend --*"

As he lifted his hand to point at Andy, the man in the blue jean jacket lifted the bat again to swing and hit Ezzie squarely in the chest. Andy heard a loud *thump!* underscored by the crack of his chestplate, and he watched as Ezzie started to crumple in on himself. The wind was knocked out of him, so he couldn't make a sound, but his eyes were wide with fear, this time no performance, and he shifted his gaze to where Andy was lying. Andy started to pull himself along the ground, or try to, to reach his friend, to help Ezzie out, but there wasn't the time.

The rails began to vibrate hard as the train blew its whistle a few times. The light was now filling the stretch of track they occupied, so Andy could watch, with the clarity that comes with daylight, the man in the blue jean jacket push Ezzie back onto the tracks. Gasping for

breath, finding it hard to move, Ezzie's fingers reached out to Andy on the ground, his mouth moving but not making sounds, or making sounds quiet enough to be drowned out by the sound of the oncoming train. The man in the blue jean jacket stood still, watching Ezzie, nudging him gently back to the center of the tracks each time he got close to the rail. Andy still struggled across the dirt toward the tracks, pulling himself forward, determined to stop what was no seeming inevitable.

"You *fucker* --" Andy said, as he attempted to heave himself closer to the man's leg. The man in the blue jean jacket turned, and sighed.

"Just... let it... happen," he said, as he walked the few feet to Andy. "Why you gotta make this harder than it is?" With a deep intake of breath, the man in the blue jean jacket raised the bat again and brought it down hard across Andy's ankles. Andy howled as a new white fire raged upward from his feet, clouding his eyesight, sending his muscles into convulsive fits, raising the roar of static noise in his head.

The man in the blue jean jacket returned to Ezzie, pushing him back into the center of the tracks. Andy turned his head toward Ezzie's direction, hoping the cloud of pain would clear just long enough for him to make eye contact. The noise of the train was louder now, the whistle blowing more intently, the light now bright enough to throw the world into sharp relief. *I want him to know I see him*, Andy thought. *I want him to know he's my friend. I want him to know he exists.*

Andy caught Ezzie's eye and held it for a second or two. *I see you*, Andy thought, hoping that if he thought a thing hard enough, Ezzie would hear it, he would know it. *I see you I see you You're my friend I see you.*

Ezzie broke the connection as he turned his head towards the train.

Andy closed his eyes before the train hit Ezzie. He didn't want that image taking up space in his mind. He was thankful the roar of the train covered the crunch and the meaty thud of the impact, and he told himself the warm wetness that spotted across his face wasn't blood, but was rain.

It was a rain that mixed with the tears coming out of him, in deep guttural sobs, shaking him. Maybe if he kept his eyes closed, he could erase all of this. Maybe if he kept them shut, Ezzie would be lying in the dirt next to him. If he kept his eyes closed, time would rewind, taking the train and the bat and the man in the blue jean jacket back to some place that wouldn't touch them, not ever, and everything would fine.

"Open your eyes," the gruff voice above him said. Andy just kept crying, eyes welded shut, keeping the world without Ezzie out for a while longer. Andy felt two hands grab Ezzie's jacket and lift him from the ground, a new storm of pain shooting out like lightning from his decimated knees. "Open them!" the voice said again, this time with more force.

Andy opened his eyes. He was face to face with the man in the blue jean jacket. *He's got green eyes, Andy thought, just like me.*

"You don't recognize me?" The man in the blue jean jacket's voice sounded genuinely hurt. Through the haze of his tears mixed with Ezzie's blood, Andy shook his head no.

The man in the blue jean jacket dropped Andy back to the ground with a dismissive grunt. Andy howled in pain.

"Look!" Andy looked up. The man in the blue jean jacket pulled open the right side of his weathered worn jacket, revealing a black fabric patch sewn shoddily inside. It was cut from a t-shirt, a "Shout at the Devil" shirt with the big-haired Motley Crue boys' heads occupying the negative space in a white pentagram.

The world around Andy started to come undone.

“The world that’s coming, it’s more fucked than you think,” the man in the blue jean jacket -- Ezzie’s blue jean jacket -- said. “It’s too fucking much. I’m doing you a favor. Just too. Fucking. Much.”

The man in the blue jean jacket knelt down close, straddling Andy so they could be face to face.

“Look at me,” he said, urgent and quick. “Recognize me. Recognize *you*.”

If you moved the lines on Andy’s face in just the right way, the way rivers cut into mountains over centuries of flowing, and if you rounded a few corners here and deepened a few nooks there, you’d get the face of the man in the blue jean jacket. Once he could see it, Andy found he couldn’t unsee it. What was once curiously observing a stranger became staring into the future, staring deep into himself.

“There you go,” the man in the blue jean jacket said, seeing the recognition creep into Andy’s eyes. “It gets so bad, Andrew. So bad for us. For *everyone*. I had to. I... just had to.”

The man explained that Ezzie had to die. He was going to anyway, in three weeks, behind the wheel of the shitty silver ‘01 Civic, too drunk to be driving, careening into a tree.

“That’s why I have the jacket,” he said, “His mom gives it to us at the funeral. Because she thinks we might like it. Well, that’s how I got it. But you get it this way.”

Because it had to be this way, for the man in the blue jean jacket to get what he wanted. This way had to hurt.

In another version of the world, the world belonging to the man in the blue jean jacket, Ezzie makes it off the tracks before the train barrels through, and the video is stupid, and no one watches it, and while Ezzie doesn’t make it through another month of the world, Andy carries on, living some kind of life. In that version of the world, something goes wrong, something in the world breaks, goes rotten, turns upside down, becomes unbearable. In that version of the world,

someone learns how to do the impossible, to erase the difference between the past and the future, opening doors that probably should have remained unopened.

So there had to be this version, the one where Ezzie is smashed to bits by a train, the one that Andy won't be able to bear, the one (says the man in the blue jean jacket) where Andy decides he can't live another day, and kills himself.

"I keep going back, trying to find the right moment," the man said. "I tried so many others, but I kept on living. So I'm trying this one. And if it doesn't work, I'll try another. And another, and another --"

Before Andy can say anything, the man in the blue jean jacket froze and sucked in a breath.. A smile spread slowly across his face.

"Oh thank God," the man said, his voice heavy with relief. "Good luck with the time you've got left."

The man in the blue jean jacket's face began to change. His eyes -- the green eyes Andy saw every morning in the mirror -- clouded over in a thick murky white. His skin began to curdle like spoiled milk, pooling into globs and clusters that moved of their own accord. The pink of him began to fade into greens and browns, like swampwater. The man in the blue jean jacket began to laugh, and as a musty breath seeped out of his open mouth, he began to peel away like dried paint in the sun, pieces of him flaking off into the world, some catching the wind, some falling onto Andy. With every heave of his laughter, more of him tore away into the night, until there wasn't enough of him left to make sounds, not enough of him left to have known he was once there.

Andy was on the ground, alone, in pain, still wet from his tears, still aching from his sobs. From his position, he could turn the edge of an eye to the tracks, and what he saw there cracked his heart in two.

Not yet, he thought. *Not yet. Not yet.* If he could die there, he would be happy. *Not yet.*
Not yet. Andy wondered when the world would become so unbearable. He wondered what
could be coming that would this the answer. *Not yet.* Was it tomorrow? Next year? Three years?
Not yet. If he could die right now he would be content. *Not yet.*

Andy knew he'd wear Ezzie's blue jean jacket until it was finally time.