

I.

It was the sort of glare that would have bothered most people, shimmering and flickering against the afternoon sun as clouds moved past, refusing to let anyone forget that it was there. For John, it made him curious, as most things did, but it was almost two o'clock, and his mother had said to be ready by then. Still, something was out there in the sand causing the light, and if he didn't investigate it, who would?

The teen ran across the beach behind his house to the water's edge and crouched down above the light he'd followed, positioning his back to break its line to the sun. The gleam cooled at his shadow, finally allowing him sight of his discovery: a half-buried, metal-rimmed circle of glass edging shyly above the flattened sand below him.

John tilted his head to the side and saw numbers engraved on the glass along its curve. A small metal arrow was almost pointing at a carefully etched nine from underneath. He'd found a wristwatch. John lifted it from the sand and shook it clean within the ocean before bringing it to his ear. It was still ticking.

Dangling the watch by its leather band, John looked through the glass and noticed something odd. Seated behind

the hands was a network of crisscrossed wires, each hair-thin and pulled taut against the frame. The nest they formed was so tangled and thick that nothing but more wires could be seen beneath the top layer. He wondered what possible purpose they could serve for so simple a machine.

John placed the watch on his wrist. As the metal touched skin, he felt an instantaneous jolt, as if two magnets had been suddenly joined together. The skin of his left arm prickled, and the small hairs that lived there raised straight.

His arm jerked back sharply from the shock, and to his surprise, even though he'd yet to latch its band, the watch didn't fall. John quickly spun his wrist upside-down. The two halves of its band dangled down as expected, but the metal base remained stubbornly in place against his skin.

Confused, he shot his fingers around its face and pulled. For over a minute he tugged and yanked, strained and jerked, but as hard as he tried, the watch sat firm against his wrist as if glued. Out of breath and exasperated, John let it go. He'd made no progress; the watch was stuck to him.

Suddenly, John noticed movement behind the face's glass. The tiny metal threads nestled beneath the watch hands had come to life, intermittently vibrating at

different intensities as the second-hand ticked past the numbers that circled it.

At first, the resonations seemed random, but the longer John watched the wires stir, the more he sensed an indefinable order behind their movement. The effect was bewitching.

"John!" His mother's call broke the trance. "John, it's two o'clock!"

John read the time from the watch; it agreed with his mother. Quickly, he latched the band beneath his wrist and ran through the sand back to his porch where his mother stood waiting and smiling. Embarrassed by his predicament, he hid his hand and the watch in his pocket as he approached.

"Are you ready?" his mother asked.

"I'm not sure how to be ready when I don't know where we're going," he answered, unlatching the Velcro straps on his dripping sandals.

"What's that on your wrist?" she asked, eyeing the watch he'd exposed.

"It's nothing," John replied hastily, kicking the sandals from his feet. "Just something I found on the beach." He moved swiftly past his mother and walked through the wide sliding glass door behind her to her bedroom.

John lazily plopped down on the edge of her still-made bed, being careful to place his arms, and the watch now stuck to one of them, angled behind him. His mother stood for a moment looking out past the sand to the ocean before turning and joining him inside.

"Another late night?" he asked as she closed the glass shut behind her.

"It's not so bad," she said.

He watched his mother's reflection as she checked what was left of her make-up in the mirror above the dresser. A once-white plastic nametag with her name written on it hung sloppily from the front of her shirt.

She unpinned it and turned around. "Come on, get your shoes. You shouldn't be late today."

John bounced from the bed and walked to the shallow closet outside his room where he found the worn, brown tennis shoes he'd left there the day before. As he crouched and laced them onto his feet, his eyes drifted to the watch still gripping his arm. Surely there was something simple he was missing, some button, switch, or trick to it.

John stood and walked toward the house's front door with his head still turned down at his wrist. He began to pull lightly at different points around the watch's face, hoping to find its weak point. Nothing seemed to work.

Suddenly, a familiar, feminine voice called his name from farther down the hall. "Johnny!" it exclaimed in a high-pitched squeal.

"Johnny?" he heard his mother repeat. She'd never met anyone who'd called him that.

John raised his head and saw the two women close in front of him. His mother was standing addled at an answered front door, while his girlfriend stood happily on the other side, just a foot away. They'd met each other, and that wasn't supposed to have happened.

"Molly?" John remarked. He choked on the name.

"Happy three!" she replied. Molly clacked past John's mother in high-heeled shoes and threw her arms around John's neck in a familiar hug. "Daddy and I came all the way from the mainland to take you to lunch for our three week anniversary!" She looked over her shoulder at John's mother. "Your mom can come, too. We can wait while she gets dressed."

John's mother looked down at the clothes she was wearing and crossed her arms over the dried coffee staining her chest.

John slowly backed from Molly's embrace and opened his mouth to speak.

"You didn't forget our three week anniversary, did you?" his girlfriend accused.

"No, of course not," he answered defensively. It was an innocent lie. He hadn't known that three weeks was an anniversary couples were supposed to celebrate.

"John starts his first job today," his mother chimed in.

"Thanks, Mom," John muttered.

Molly seemed confused. "So you weren't planning on celebrating with me?"

"Of course I was," he said quietly, turning his back to his mother and walking Molly a few steps away. "I just had it planned out for tonight, not this morning."

Molly's lips were bulged into half of a frown. "You have *what* planned out?"

"It's a surprise," he invented.

His answer failed to cure her pouting. "Well, how will I know what to wear?" she asked.

"Just be ready by six, okay?"

"My favorite number," she answered him, lifting her shoulders and curling her smile as tightly as her face would allow.

"John, we need to go," his mother interrupted.

John turned and nodded to her before returning his attention to Molly. "I'll call you tonight."

"I'll be getting ready," she replied.

John's mother stepped between them and put a hand on Molly's shoulder. "It was nice to meet you," she said, ushering the young, pretty, blonde from the door.

"You too, *Mom!*" Molly answered, flittering out of the house to the front driveway.

John and his mother followed Molly outside and watched her enter the passenger's side of a bright orange convertible parked in the driveway. The driver turned down his loud music as Molly entered the car. He grinned and shot John and his mother a loose salute before revving his engine and wheeling out into the road. John noticed the car's vanity license plate shimmer against the sunlight as it left; it read: "Saturday."

"Are you angry?" John asked.

"No," his mother answered, keeping her hands on the steering wheel, and her eyes fixed on the road ahead. "Why would I be angry?"

"I don't know, you just seem--"

"It's just that we've always been honest with each other," she said quickly. "So why wouldn't you tell me you were dating someone?"

"Well, I--"

"It's not a big deal or anything," she said. "It's just your first girlfriend. Sort of big news."

John closed his mouth and looked out from his window to the line of identical houses passing his eyes at twenty miles per hour, exactly the island's speed limit.

His mother looked over to his uncomfortable face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be weird."

"It's okay," John answered. "It's my fault for not saying something about her sooner."

"So her name is Molly, huh? I like that. Like Molly Ringwold."

John looked down at the watch still adhered to his wrist and answered her absently, "No, not like whoever that is."

His mother briefly looked over again. "I saw you pulling on that thing earlier in the hall. If it's uncomfortable you should just take it off."

"It's not," he answered quickly. "I was just trying to set the time."

"So that watch was just lying in the sand?" she asked.

John changed the subject. "Are we going to be there soon?"

"Yes," she said, "it's close."

"Can you finally tell me where we're going?"

His mother smirked. "I guess it's too late for you to run away. It's a company that helps the elderly."

"So, you mean it's a company that helps everyone here on Longboard Key."

His mother laughed. "Business is good. I guess that's why they're hiring."

"Well, what do they do?"

"It sort of has to do with computers. That's why I thought you might be interested."

John perked immediately. "Really?"

"Sort of," his mother answered quietly, impatiently eyeing the slow-moving car in front of them. "The way Virgil explained it to me--"

"Who's Virgil?"

"The man who owns the company. He said he specializes in providing 'Internet services and benefits without resorting to the Internet.'"

"What on Earth does that mean?" John asked.

"I don't know, honey. I'm sure Virgil will explain it to you."

"But--"

"Oh look, here we are," his mother said, pulling the car from the road into a long one-lane parking lot.

John looked up through his window at the warehouse now beside them. He'd seen it in passing numerous times, but had never known what it was until now.

"So what do I do?" he asked.

"Just go inside and find Virgil," his mother said. "He'll explain everything. Now come here." She reached across the car and gave her son a sideways hug before kissing him on the cheek. "I love you."

John unbuckled his seatbelt and took his frayed brown messenger bag from the back seat before exiting the car and wheeling around the hood to his mother's window. She spun the short plastic handle beside her, lowering the glass in tiny spurts.

"I'll see you when you're done," she said through the thin opening she'd created.

"But I still don't know what I'm doing," John protested.

His mother smiled. "And now you and I have one more thing in common. Have a good day, kid."

As John lifted his left arm to wave goodbye, he felt a small electric jolt beneath the watch.

"Ow!" he yelled, whipping his arm back in surprise.

"John!" his mother exclaimed. "What happened? Are you alright?"

"It's nothing," John said swiftly, covering the watch with his hand and turning his body from the car.

"Was it that watch?" she asked. "Maybe you should let me--"

"It's okay, Mom. I have to go." He turned his head and smiled at her. "I don't want to be late on my first day, right?"

She looked him over suspiciously. "Just be safe today, okay?" she finally answered. John nodded and she backed her car out into the road.

After his mother's car disappeared down the same road that had brought them, John wrapped his fingers around the watch's rim and pulled, this time determined to not let go until finally breaking free of it. It held strong against his pull, and he increased his force. The skin around his wrist strained and turned red. Soon, his eyes began to tear from the pain. Finally, he let it go. Looking down at his wrist and the device now bound to it, the teen was no longer annoyed. He was worried.

A strong gust of breeze blew past John's face, and the loud creak of old chains sounded above him. He moved his

eyes up to a sloppily hand-painted sign swinging above his head and read the words "America Offline" made from large, stenciled letters. For now, the watch would have to wait. If he could make it through just a few hours of work, he'd have time to stop and think about how to deal with Molly, the watch, all of it.

John faced the imposing warehouse behind him and walked through its front double doors without further hesitation. The first step inside landed on a polished concrete floor with a bouncing echo.

The majority of the building's inside was wrapped in darkness, broken only by small, scattered, sections lit by low-hanging halogen lamps. The wall to his left was most illuminated. Over fifty people scrambled like moths around the light, huddled around what appeared to be a large map.

As John approached the wall, he saw the map for what it was, a series of regular, square corkboards hung edge-to-edge to form a large cohesive rectangle, easily twenty-five feet or more in length. Down its center was a thin, grey line representing a single road. Marker-drawn houses were outlined on either side, placed between the road and the blue water colored onto the board's edges.

John recognized the map immediately as Longboard Key, the island he'd spent his life on. Seeing it drawn out this

way made it seem even more simple and small than he already thought it to be. It further reaffirmed his desire to leave some day.

John leaned in closer and noticed photographs of people tacked inside most of the houses. White cards listing out birthdays, alma maters and spouses were furiously stuck and taped beside them. Some even held newspaper clippings, magazine cutouts, and scraps of paper filled with what looked like rumors and personal messages.

An older woman in a Hawaiian shirt and neon-pink vinyl shorts edged past John and ran a long yellow yarn between the house with her picture in it and another further down the island. It was one of many similar yarns and strings connecting the houses and photos to others along the boards.

John looked for where his house should be along the road and was surprised not to find it, empty or otherwise. Instead, someone had drawn in a new mortuary: *Priscilla's Prestigious Plots*.

Well, that's creepy, John thought.

"There it is boy, the future in front of you," a raspy voice whispered into his ear. "Now, what do you think?"

John quickly turned to find the source of the voice. The words had come from an older man, hunched in half over

a tall ornate cane. His skin was an elephant's, grayed and folding over itself in heavy wrinkles. From the golden monocle adorning his left eye to the identically colored chain circling out from a pocket in his striped vest, John thought the man looked like some sort of old-timey train conductor.

The man cocked his head and looked into John's eyes.

"You mean this board?" John finally asked him.

"Yes, the board," the man asserted. "What do you think of it?"

"It's long," John answered conservatively, not exactly sure of what to say.

"Quite right, lad, quite right," the man agreed, looking out across the boards. "I call it *Face Board*. It's just one of the things my company is doing to help curb the techno-tide." He turned his eyes back to John. "Jonathon, I presume?"

"Just John," John answered. This must be Virgil.

"We've much to do, much to talk about. Follow me."

Virgil jiggled his cane at the crowd of people behind him and they parted at the motion as waves. John followed closely as Virgil led him to a back wall, far from the group.

"Of course the board is just one of America Offline's ventures. Each of those people you saw back there pay a hefty subscription for the service, but it doesn't stop with the boards." Virgil pointed to a door on the wall in front of them, the first in an identical series. "Behind here is the Search Department. People can call in at all hours to ask us questions. Some are simple: 'How many ounces in a cup?' Others are more philosophical: 'Does God exist?' We research the answers and phone them back with top results."

John carefully hid rolling eyes.

"That next one," Virgil began, pointing at the neighboring door, "is *The Bay*. Soon, I'll grow it into a large weekly auction house. The restroom is there beside it, and the one after that is my office. We'll head there in a moment, but first let's take a look at that scooter we got for you."

"Scooter?" John asked.

"Yes, it's just back here in the ell."

Virgil led John around the corner at the end of the wall and pointed to a slim silver machine. John left the man's side and approached it in awe.

"What is this for?" John asked.

"What do you mean, lad? It's for you!"

"This is mine?"

"Yours after you work for me a few months, though you may take it up front. I'm beginning an Almost Instant Messenger Department that you'll be spearheading. I'm going to send you out scooting short messages between folks on the island. Here's the key."

Virgil extended his arm to John, holding a small key ring and chain between his fingers. As John took the key, it flooded him with visions of riding to and from his school on the mainland each day, swerving around the slow cars, a crisp wind rushing past his face, and Molly riding behind him in a bright pink helmet, squealing with joy as she held tightly to his midsection.

"Now follow me, lad," Virgil said. "You'll need to sign some insurance papers so your mother can't sue me once you've killed yourself on that thing."

John pocketed the key and followed the hunched old man into his small, dusty office. The walls inside were vacant, save a portrait of Virgil overlooking the room, painted in nineteenth century style.

An ornate desk took most of the floor space, though supported nothing more than a few overstuffed accounting books, a fancy looking Mont Blanc pen, and a messy Rolodex sitting slightly askew to its axel.

Virgil sat down at the desk and fished through a file. "Ah, here's the one!" he said, removing a form. "Come give it a sign."

John reached across the desk to Virgil's pen. As his fingers wrapped around it, Virgil's fingers wrapped around John's wrist.

"And what's this, then?" Virgil asked, eyeing the strange watch on John's arm.

"Just a wristwatch," John answered.

Virgil released the teen's arm and leaned back into his chair. "Well, you'll have to take that off. Leave it here on the desk along with your cellular phone, if you have one, and anything else that's digital or high-tech. We've a corporate image to maintain, you know."

John stood silent, unsure of what to do.

"Come on then, lad! Let's have it off!" Virgil said gruffly.

"Well sir, you see, the thing is--"

"Yes?" Virgil asked. The man looked to be growing more impatient by the second. He stood from his chair, placed his thumbs into his vest pockets, and expanded his chest.

"I can't take it off," John said.

"Of course you can, boy, just take it off."

"That's the problem. It's stuck."

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