

Of Medians and Middlemen

by Trevor Huxham

The investigator set his French press mug down on the wooden veneer table, savoring the coffee in his mouth, and glanced up at the doorway. A woman in firmly pressed black slacks and an iridescent pink blouse knocked briefly before going ahead and opening the door. A twenty-something man with a messenger bag followed her in.

"This is Mr. Jerezano, Austin," she said, pulling out the unstable plastic chair in front of him. To the investigator, she said, "The others are waiting outside when you're ready, Tomás."

"Thank you, Jocelyn," he said. She exited and closed the door. "Austin, is it?" he said.

"Yes, sir," he replied. "Austin Lepelle. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Jerezano."

The investigator shuffled through some papers, sipped some more coffee, and pulled a pen out of his shirt pocket. "Let's get started," he said. Then, making eye contact for the first time, said "Tell me what you saw that Friday morning."

"Okay. I was driving south on 67 to go have lunch with a friend from college down in Cleburne. He'd just gotten out of jury duty, so I thought I'd meet him at the courthouse downtown and go from there. It was kind of a cloudy day, but a little chilly for here in the summer, you know? Anyway, I was driving on the highway—the speed limit, of course, thank God for cruise control—and surprisingly there weren't that many cars on the road. A few behind me, but no one in front or even northbound. I was going down a dip in the road before an underpass when I saw a brown Jeep dash across all three lanes of the highway and literally slam into the—"

"Mr. Lepelle, you said you saw the vehicle change three lanes at once?"

"Sorry, I should have said that the Jeep was originally on the access road," said Austin. "I don't know what happened, but the Jeep just went off the road, down the embankment or shoulder-whatever and straight onto the highway." He stared at a drop of condensation dashing down

the investigator's mug. He added, "Oh my gaaah, I'm so glad no cars were on that side of the highway when it happened. One minute the Jeep was on the access road and the next it was headed straight for the median."

The investigator said, "What happened after the vehicle crossed onto the highway?"

Austin replied, "Well, it crashed, 'f course. Actually, on impact, it rose up on its back wheels, see-sawed over the concrete beam, and then went nose-first onto the shoulder. If that median hadn't been there, the Jeep woulda gone straight across to the other access road." He looked at the investigator and nodded his head slightly after an awkward pause. "So," continued the investigator, "what did you do next?"

"Right," said Austin. "I immediately slowed down and pulled out my cell phone. I was shocked. I'd never seen something like that before; it was like one of those traffic clips on TV—really surreal. Also, I'd never called 9-1-1 before. I still haven't. I pressed those three buttons and was about to call it but—"

"But what?" said the investigator.

"I-I guess it's like the 'bystander syndrome.'"

"I've heard of that."

"Yeah. So, I moved over to the right lane and slowed down and didn't know what to do. Everyone behind me was driving real slow, too. A semi truck stopped on the right, and I remember seeing someone get out of their car on the left shoulder. I was going to call 9-1-1 but since everyone else was stopping, I decided not to. Looking back, I really wish I had, even though they got help: on my way home the wreck was completely gone."

"When did you drive back home?"

"On my way back to Dallas...let's see, it was probably early afternoon," said Austin.

The cold hum of the A/C unit filled the room as the voices paused. The investigator scribbled and drew some arrows on his legal pad. He lifted

up a crinkly leaf, full of observations, and added a note on the second page.

“Am I in trouble or anything?” Austin said.

The investigator shifted his eyes up from his notes. “This isn’t high school, Mr. Lepelle. And besides, we’re only trying to get some information. Thank you for helping us out.”

“You’re welcome. I just wish I could’ve helped out when the accident happened.”

“Well, there is this phrase in English, I think it’s ‘shit happens.’ ” The investigator reached his hand out for a handshake, and Austin quickly returned the motion.

“It was nice to meet you, Mr. Jerezano,” he said, buzzing the Z in his name. He waited a moment for a reply, but after not receiving one, got up, hung his bag over his shoulder, and left the room. Jocelyn returned with the second to be interviewed, a middle-aged woman with big Texas hair. She wore waist-high jeans and an embellished button-up blouse—and boots.

“Thank you, Miss Días,” she mumbled. The former shut the door as the latter clop-clopped in.

“Mrs. Owens?” said the investigator.

“That’s me!” Virginia said. “Ver-gin-ya O-winz. Lotsa folks call me Gigi, though, so call me whatever you like.” Then she added, laughing, “So long as it’s nice, ‘f course!”

“Okay...Mrs. Owens. On the day of the accident, you were walking across town on foot, is that correct?”

Virginia seated herself and let her trapezoid of a purse thud onto the table. “I’m actually not from around here, so I don’t like to drive as much if I don’t have to. Back in Marshall, we used to just walk to church, or the grosh’ry store, the beauty parlor, you name it. I’m still adjustin’ to this ‘Dee-Eff-Double U’ culture so I decided to go and take a walk to the Albertsons that mornin’ to pick up some bananas, since Charles—my husband—always likes them for breakfast and I ate the last one after he

The investigator said, “So, Mrs. Owens, you were *walking* to Albertsons?”

Virginia looked slightly surprised. “Yes, I was walkin’ there.” Then, in a sheepish tone, “I didn’t want to *have* to take the car, even though we *do* have two. Charles is always a little worried since we live so close to the highway, but I do *all* my walkin’ on the backroads, except if I absolutely *have* to. That Friday, I *had* to, ‘cause Albertsons is across 67.”

“Now, what side of the highway were you on when you saw the accident?”

Virginia cocked her head to one side and then said, “Well, I was actually on the city street that goes over the highway, so it was like a bridge on top of it. If I had to choose one side it would be closer to the northbound lanes.”

The investigator finished writing in his pad and returned to the previous sheet, pointing and circling notes of interest. “Can youuu...” he said, stalling while darting his eyes across the paper, “tell meee...oh! From your vantage point, what could you see of the accident? That is, what happened to the Jeep?”

“Like I said, I was walking west toward Albertsons, on the left side of the road, so the cars could see me ‘n’ all. All of a sudden, I hear car horns and tire screeches—I thought I was in one of those action movies they set in L.A.! That Jeep was all over the road, I’ll tell you what. It *flew* by in front of me on the access road, but I did catch a glimpse of the folks in the front row. They looked like they were fightin’ with each other, or somethin’. It was like the lady in the passenger seat was trying to commandeer the steerin’ wheel, and I’d be darned if I didn’t hear a shout or two as they flew by. It was the horns that really got me—got my adrenaline pumpin’ just like when I went to the haunted house in the State Fair last year. Charles made me go with him so he wouldn’t have to go *alone*.” Virginia pointed to a spot beneath her sternum. “I felt terrified, right here in the pit of my stomach!”

“And after the vehicle passed you, Mrs. Owens, what happened next?” She adjusted her hair and then continued. “They were all over the road. We call that ‘reckless driving’ back home, but I guess some people get away with it here. They were swervin’ and shiftin’ real sharply, and

then—this is when I stopped walkin' and just watched what was goin' on—the Jeep took a hard left and peeled onto the highway, drivin' on the grass shoulder like you're not s'posed to when the traffic's backed up! I couldn't believe it. In fact, before I knew it, the Jeep was on the other side of 67! Then cars started drivin' north and I was prayin' to Jesus and thankin' him that the freeway was all clear when it happened."

Crossing his Ts sternly, the investigator asked her, "Did you call for emergency help?"

Virginia's smile turned flat as she focused on the legal pad in front of her. "You know," she said, focusing back on the investigator, "now that you mention it, no, I didn't. I usually carry my cellphone with me, but I must've left it at the house that mornin'. Yes, I remember—'cause I was about to call Charles to see if he wanted guacamole or not (I always eat it, but he has to be 'in the mood' for it), and when I went through my purse for it, I couldn't find it. But to be honest, it never really crossed my mind. I was as stunned as a smoked-out honeybee. (I've got relatives that raise bees for their honey.) So I jus' stood there and stared. The whole highway slowed down, too. The folks going south, I mean. One or two actually stopped, so I figured they would be able to get it under control. The Jeep wasn't on fire or anythin', so."

"I'm assuming you continued on your way to Albertsons, then?" said the investigator.

"Yes."

He breathed in deeply before saying, "Thank you, Mrs. Owens. That's all for our interview," he said.

"Well it's been real nice talking with you, Mrs. Jerryzano," Virginia said, gathering her purse and standing up. The door opened and she walked out: plock, plock, plock.

The investigator took a long gulp of lukewarm coffee and sat back in his chair. He pinched off two perforated sheets from the legal pad and tried to align them beneath the pad's cardboard. On an empty page he drew in firm strokes the pound sign and then a numeral 3.

"Tomás," said Jocelyn as she entered. "This is your last interviewee for today. I'll be in the foyer when you're ready."

"Okay, thanks." He smiled plainly while she left and a man in his thirties with a trimmed afro-style haircut entered.

"Roy Denton," he said while extending his hand.

The investigator followed up and shook his hand, still sitting down. "I'm Tomás Jerezano. Nice to meet you. Please have a seat."

Roy unbuttoned his jacket and sat down. "I've got to get back to the library pretty soon here, but how can I help?"

The investigator exhaled and pulled his notes back out from beneath the legal pad. "Do you remember the accident you saw earlier this summer and stopped to help at?"

"Yes, I do. Although, I didn't see it happen myself, since I was further back in the pack on the highway. I was tryin' adjust the radio, and then I looked up and saw a Jeep hangin' over the median up ahead. It really caught me off guard, know what I mean?"

"Yeah," the investigator said, smiling. "I think I do."

"Anyway, I couldn't just *drive by* that mess, so I pulled off to the left and got out. Thank God everyone slowed down, 'cause I had to get those doors open." Roy shook his head. "The driver was dead on impact. The passenger, she was crazy, blabberin' on and on. People these days! She was fussin' with the airbag and yellin' at—at this corpse, I guess you could say, and all of this in a car hangin' off the median of 67!"

"Pretty crazy," said the investigator, writing down Roy's account.

"I helped the passenger lady get unbuckled, but then she started hollerin' at me so I went over to the driver's side to see if the other one was alive. That's when the semi truck driver came over after the pack drove by. He told me he had called 9-1-1 and radioed for help. We both carried the driver out, but she was already gone by then. I stayed until the fire trucks came and the police, too. They told me I should get on my way." He looked down at the table while picking at the veneer with his thumb. He gave a short laugh and continued. "A few other people had stopped their cars, too. Thankfully, it was late morning, so there weren't any crazy jams to worry about."

The A/C unit droned on. The investigator clicked his pen close, took a swig from his mug and let the beverage sit in his mouth before swallowing it. He leaned back and stared at Roy.

"Is there something wrong, sir?" asked Roy.

"Nothing's wrong, Mr. Denton. Although, you actually told me the least about the accident itself of all the people I've interviewed today. But nothing is wrong at all. Thank you for telling me your story."

"You're welcome," he hesitated while reading his nametag, "Tom-miss. If you excuse me, I've got a meeting to get to this evening, and I don't wanna be late for it."

"Goodbye, Mr. Denton."

Left alone, the investigator smiled to himself. After sitting for a few moments, he scratched behind his ear, then stashed his notes into a manila folder, which he then stuffed inside his briefcase. He drained the dregs that remained of his coffee before standing up and exiting the room. He passed through the hallway and into the foyer, where Jocelyn was waiting for him.

"Pues, vámonos," she said. *Well, let's go.*