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# To Jennifer Lee, I Owe You \$10

JONATHAN SAPERS

She got into the cab on her way to the airport. She sat down and gave her instructions. “To the airport please.” The cab driver mumbled something. From what sounded like far away, she heard music, something from the seventies, Chaka Khan? A tiny, muffled sound: “Ain’t nobody, loves me better than you. First you put your arms around me—.”

She ignored the sound at first, but it persisted, like the soundtrack of a dream. “Ain’t nobody, loves me better—”

She was not surprised to hear music. For a week, she had been contemplating songs; assembling the playlist for her wedding reception. She had the feeling songs were throwing themselves onto radio stations in a concerted attempt to audition for her final cut. “Ain’t nobody, loves me better—.”] Chaka Khan. Chaka Khan. She was old though, wasn’t she? Probably had a kid her age. Still, a crowd favorite. Was it one of theirs? “—Ain’t nobody, loves me better”] — oops, no, not with her fiancé, but with Matt, that guy she slept with freshman year, sophomore year and once more senior year for good luck, never once knowing why.

Sometimes one did things repeatedly out of a mistaken belief that the feeling itself made it good for you. Like eating cake even though you know you can't survive on cake because after cake you feel sated. But now someone did love her better. Was.

"Ain't nobody, loves me better."[] Where was the song coming from? And only the first few words, over and over again. She looked down on the seat. There was a small black cell phone. Who would choose that song as a ringtone? She started to answer, but the sound stopped. She opened the phone. The background picture was of two children walking down a street. It was like looking at someone's technological wallet. She put her thumb on the middle button intending to check out pictures. "Ain't nobody, loves me better." It almost sounded accusing.

"Home: Pickup or Ignore?" She pressed pickup.

"Hello,"[] she said, nervously.

"Tell him he owes me money for a tip," the cab driver said, suddenly.

"This is someone's cell phone. I picked it up, I'm on the way to the airport,"[] she began.

"Thank you, thank you," said a male voice. "I'm totally lost –"

"Do you want to pick it up from me?"

"Sure, from your doorman?"

"Well, I'm about to get on a plane. Shall I send it to you?"

"Yes, that would be great," the voice said.

"Okay call me tonight, 11 p.m."

She hung up.

“That phone’s been ringing non-stop,”[] the cab driver said. “I don’t care if he lost it. He deserves to lose it — he’s a lousy tipper.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll deal with it,” she said. So typical. Men with their petty resentments. The cabby drives like crap, this cell phone guy stiffs the cabby, gets out in a huff, leaves his cell phone and then the cabby is stuck listening to his fare’s old school ringtone — “Ain’t nobody, loves me better” — There it went again. He was a popular guy.

The cab arrived at La Guardia. She put the cell phone in her bag, next to her own. Mr. “Ain’t Nobody,” your phone is going on a trip.

She did not necessarily want to be in Florida, but here she was, at her in-laws-to-be. One didn’t choose in-laws. Nor where they lived. In-laws came fully formed like birthmarks or unfortunate personal habits. You hoped; you hoped what came later coincided with what you knew up front. Or that you had the imagination or experience to fill in what you didn’t know. But you couldn’t possibly predict everything and sometimes if the initial signs were great, the rest would be bad almost in proportion. In her case, her fiance was as good as his parents were bad. This morning, they were going boating. Boating.

“Ain’t nobody, loves me better.”[] The phone! She had been supposed to talk to him the night before. Would he be mad? She picked up the phone.

“Hi, it’s Sam, Sam Richards. Hi-.”[] She understood. What did one say to the person who, unbidden, had carried one’s phone away for the weekend to Florida? Sam had a nice voice.

“Hi,”[] she said.

“Thank you again,”[] he began. He was clearly hoping for something, wanting something, apologetic. She would accept this

apology on behalf of the cab driver. Men always got into funks, luckily there were cab drivers to take them out on, some of the time. “Could you possibly send it back to me? I’m lost without my –”

“Sure,” she said.

“Here’s my address.” He gave it to her. “Is there any chance you could do that this morning?”

Okay, here’s who Mr. “Ain’t Nobody” was. He was probably just like her boss. Mr. Thinks-He’s-Somebody, with the pinched head and glasses and my-mother-says-I’m-the-best attitude. Who asked her to do things to see if she’d dare say no.

“I’ll try,” she said.

“Where are you again?”

“Florida,” she said.

“Oh,” he said, as if considering. Hey, it’s your phone time.

“If I get a chance this morning, I’ll send it, if not, definitely Monday.”

“What’s your name?”

“Jen,” she said.

“Okay Jen,” he said. And hung up.

Today wasn’t impossible, but there was something about this phone that made her want to keep it a little longer. She looked at the phone. Her fiance was downstairs. She could do anything with this phone. Call friends in Egypt if she had any. China. This Sam guy trusted her with the phone. He had better, she thought. He had no choice. Still this was an appealing characteristic. Trust. She thought she would send it, except she was curious. Trusting,

a fan of old music, at least one kid — she opened the phone again and clicked to pictures. Here were children on a beach: one of the children from the backdrop plus an older one. A woman of middle age. A small dog. A collection of city pictures, of rearranged wet paint signs in subways. One said, “ain’t wet.” Humorist. This Sam. Guy with time on his hands clearly. But no pictures of Sam himself. Which was in all likelihood a good thing. Here was an older man, leaning over a stove in a kitchen — Sam’s father? She thought this was nice. Now she knew more about Sam. A way to find out about somebody without knowing them personally.

“Jen!”[] someone called from downstairs. The first thing she should have done, she concluded, was ask for her fiance’s cell phone.

UPS, Fedex or the Post Office? She could send it regular mail and it would be as good as done. She didn’t owe him more than that. But then she thought of him, without his cell phone, unable to call who? The little girl, the slightly older girl, the wife. Her fiance had said, “Why are you spending money on his phone? Toss it into the ocean. He’ll get a new one. It’s insured.”

It was a good question. Or to say it was a good question was wrong. And this was the point. It was a good question, but not for him to ask. He was jealous now — now? — of a phone? No, he shouldn’t ask it, but she should be able to answer it.

Her fiance said Sam would never pay her back. Why not? No one would do that, he said. The problem with him saying something like this is that it was obvious, first of all. Second of all, it was depressing. Third of all, what did it hurt anyone to send \$10 off to see if it could help another person? What was the absolute worst thing that could happen? She could lose \$10.

So how? US mail would be wrong. She’d taken the phone to Florida. That was, after all, her fault. Or her fiance’s fault, or really his parent’s fault if you wanted to drag it out. Not Fedex

either. At her office they always used UPS. There was a nice man with an Irish, she thought, accent, who picked it up. Of course, he would have nothing to do with it, but that wasn't the point. The point was when she sent this message out — because it was a message after all — she wanted to say something. Not just to Sam, but to herself and her fiancé — a message from this stage of life to the next — have faith, don't be so quick to doubt, and, if you lose something as unimportant as a cell phone, when you have all this, don't worry about it. Someone, somewhere, will send it back to you.

She looked at the phone. It hadn't rung for some time now. She took one more look at the two children, walking along a street. She wanted to have children herself one day. Girls if she were lucky, but boys would be okay. She looked at the little eye where the pictures were taken. She could, just by the press of a button, take a picture of herself. A little memento for Mr. Ain't Nobody. She could conceivably cause him trouble. Right now in this UPS place, she could slip into the bathroom, take a picture of herself naked. And. Ugh. This was the kind of thing her husband thought of, husbands think things like this. She hoped Sam was not this kind of husband. But all husbands probably were, a little bit. Perhaps she could smile into the camera and wave and say, I believe in you. And maybe the future would see her and pluck her forward through this marriage to this jealous man, with his Florida parents, who might be the wrong one, how could she know? She couldn't. She was guessing. So was everyone. "Hi!" she would say. She took a deep breath. She pressed the red button on the phone and turned it off. Then she tucked it into its comfortable little package, signed the last of the forms and sent it on its way.

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