

O S T R I C H

Aaron M. Green

Jacob was flipping through Netflix with the remote at his hip and his eyes still glassy from sleep. The impression from his head on the sofa pillow next to him was still deep and the blanket around his legs was still warm. The night before he'd dozed off watching a documentary about the Ostrich. The last thing he remembered hearing was, contrary to popular belief, that it was a myth that when hunted the Ostrich would bury its head in the sand, thinking it couldn't be seen. The documentary commentator had explained that when hunted the Ostrich was known for sitting and burrowing within itself, posing like a large stone or a mound of dirt. Here, because it believed itself to be unidentifiable, the Ostrich would feel safe.

The microwave sitting on the bookshelf in the living room was meant to be temporary. Until he could shop for a kitchen table, Jacob planned to let it live and operate among the stacks of unframed pictures and comic books. Its green, digital numbers read 11:23 AM. He glanced back to the TV where he thoughtlessly toggled with the remote, like turning magazine pages at the dentist, through hundreds of films and TV shows. There was the *plop, plop, plop* sound of his scrolling, an occasional yawn, and then suddenly the buzzing of his phone on the coffee table.

He dropped the remote. Picking up his phone he saw the image of Rebecca's face. It was a picture he'd taken after suddenly shouting, "Hey Rebecca!" This was following their first and only bike ride together. She'd reached across assertively to try to delete the picture, but Jacob playfully held his phone out of her reach.

They'd met a month prior at a place called East Bar, known for its cheap beer, dim lighting, and loud music. Jacob had been looking at his phone while walking from the bathroom and bumped the arm of Rebecca's that had just retrieved a pint of beer. Jacob was apologetic and snagged an entire stack of bar napkins to dry the beer from her arms and blouse. Rebecca appreciated the quick gesture and smiled, decidedly overlooking his clumsiness. By the end of the night Jacob assumed he'd made an impression since he'd managed to remain in conversation with her the entire time. As the bartender announced last call, Rebecca yawned and rose from her barstool. As she did she then paused, looked around, shrugged, and reached

into her purse. With another smile she revealed a pen and wrote down a phone number on one of the unused napkins.

Over the weeks that followed, Jacob came to understand that Rebecca was a rather busy person. While he was certainly not busy—being between jobs afforded him plenty of time to get great rest and stay up on Netflix releases—he knew that some people just had a lot to do. Rebecca was a full-time nurse who, when she wasn't at work, was gardening, reading, grocery shopping, or sleeping. Therefore, he determined that whenever she did choose to call him back it had to mean she'd been thinking about him. Or, as the reliable boyfriend he saw himself capable of being, that she might need him for something. For example, a few days after meeting at the bar, and after playing a game phone-tag, which he'd been invariably winning, Rebecca had called to see if he knew where to get tools to trim a tree in her backyard. To this he'd quickly responded, "Oh those? I've got those tools," and then, "when should I come by?" Jacob spent the rest of his afternoon dashing through the home and garden aisles of Home Depot.

The late-morning sun was streaming into the room from the top of his windows. That Rebecca would be calling him seemed less a shock and more a confirming surprise. He let his phone buzz for a couple seconds before answering.

"Hello?" he said, his face contorted to sound like he was smiling, like he'd been up and accomplishing all sorts of errands and items of importance—like he'd been awake for longer than fifteen minutes.

"Jacob."

“Yeah?” He noted the pause in her breath after his response.

“I need you.”

He sat up. “Yeah,” he said in a lower tone. “What’s up?”

“I’m at the hospital. This guy in front of me got nailed riding his bike. I jumped into the ambulance without thinking and—” Jacob could hear a PA in the background and the voice of someone handing over paperwork. “Anyway Jacob, just go to fiftieth and Orchard—go to the seven-eleven parking lot—my bike’s leaning against a wall. I need you to get it so it doesn’t get stolen.”

“Oh,” Jacob said. “Okay, yeah. Got it. No problem,” he said. He was hoping to keep her on the line, wanting to hear her say more, something that might indicate, maybe, some unconfessed feelings. He rose from the couch and felt his head go dizzy, a familiar sensation. He closed his eyes and put his palm to his forehead. “So,” he went on, thinking of the possibility of inviting her out as soon as she was finished at the hospital. Maybe they could go to Alberto’s for his favorite “Burrito Grande” with extra cheese and sour cream. And then, he thought, maybe a couple beers, and then a night bike ride, followed by a movie at my place! “So you were just out for a ride today or—”

“Jacob just hurry!” she said and hung up.

Immediately, he pulled on his jeans, stepped into his boots, and, laces untied, was out the door and on the road.

He was twenty blocks from 50th, riding his bike swiftly up Orchard when he suddenly realized that he'd have to guide her bike by the handlebars with one hand while carefully steadying his own bike with the other. He'd heard this was called *ghost riding*. Ghost riding could end hilariously, he thought, like him falling into a ditch and Rebecca's bike continuing to roll along unmanned. He laughed. Or, he thought, deciding he should take on a more pragmatic sense of Boyfriend-like responsibility, what if I just sling her bike over my shoulder? I've seen people do that before. Yeah, that's it. No problem.

As he zigzagged through traffic he thought about the moment he would pass Rebecca's bike back to her. Meeting her at the hospital he'd see her at the doorway beginning to jog over to meet him. In exchange for her bike she'd give him a warm smile and a long hug. That's when he could say something funny, maybe about having to fight away some homeless guy just to get her bike back. Then he could suggest Alberto's and she'd smile again and say something like, "Yeah Jacob, that sounds really nice."

The smaller favors, he thought. The bike retrievals, the gardening tools, the trimming of trees. A subtle but consistent presence in her life. Regularity; letting favors pile up slowly, one small thing after another. Soon I'll have an undeniable foundation.

After ten more blocks, when he could see the traffic signal for 50th, he felt exhausted. His breath was wheezy. Having kept a quicker pace than he was used to, he was now pushing hard on his pedals like heaving up a hill. His lungs and his legs burned; his jaw was clenched and his fists were

tight around his handlebars. It was then that it occurred to him that Rebecca's bike may not even be at 7-11 anymore. What if somebody already grabbed it? Then what? Asking around would be pointless. It would have made the most sense to call his friend Kenny who lived two blocks away from 7-11 to see if he could have grabbed the bike and saved it for him at his house. But then of course Kenny would have retrieved the bike and not him. He could have lied and never mentioned Kenny and taken the credit. That would have been the smart thing to do.

At 49th he saw the green and orange 7-11 sign. He steered up onto the sidewalk and, just before braking, suddenly felt unable to move his foot. His right shoe was taut. Peering down while rolling he found that a shoelace had spun around the crank and was snagged by the teeth of his chain ring. He'd have to stop. Looking up, he suddenly veered left while yanking hard on his brakes in order to miss colliding into the back of a mail-carrier who'd appeared from behind a hedge. But he was too late. His right shoulder hit her left side, causing her to fall forward, tossing a handful of letters into the air, while Jacob, attempting to miss her, felt his body over-compensate to the left and, because of the suddenness of his braking, launched over his handlebars, his right foot sliding from his snagged boot and his left shoulder bearing the brunt of his weight upon the asphalt as he somersaulted into the street. His bike crashed into the side of a car somewhere after him.

He lay quiet and still.

In the amount of time it took to blink two, maybe three times, Jacob entered a place of his own. His heart was beating in his ears. His chest was

rising and falling where he lay. He wasn't noticing the cars screeching to stop all around him. He was only staring into the sky. He felt safe here, unidentifiable, anonymous, unable to fail. He knew he was nobody of consequence, nobody of notice at all. Here, he thought only of Rebecca.

When he recovered his attention he then realized the scene he'd created. Cars were stopped everywhere. He wondered if he'd be recognized. He feared how he'd explain the situation if any cars had collided, or if he'd caused any harm to the mail-carrier. He knew that the proof of his error—his shoelace, his collision, his tumble—would be the way to verify his guilt. He had to get up, get Rebecca's bike, and get away.

When he tried to rise he was met by a sharp pain in his shoulder and hip that was absent when he'd been lying still just seconds before.

“Hey man, you okay?” came a man's voice.

Jacob looked at the man. He could have been the driver of the car that his bike ran into. “Uh, yeah,” he said, “I'm fine.” He tried to examine the man's car.

“Can you move?” The man said. “I mean can you get up? Actually don't get up and don't move if anything hurts. Just stay here. Let me call this in. I'll take care of it man, don't worry.”

Jacob lay his head down and turned to look at the sidewalk facing the mail-carrier, who'd lost her hat and whose bag had spilled across the lawn in front of her. She was brushing herself off and looking around. Her knee resembled the deep red of a sliced plum. Blood rolling down her leg. She started picking up her letters and then stopped. One of her fists was clenched

as she turned to look toward the street. “Don’t you know you can’t ride on the sidewalk? Don’t you know it’s the law. A law is a law for a reason, you know. It ain’t safe!” She wasn’t looking at Jacob directly, but at the street, like appealing to the cars and everyone in them. “Should watch out—should watch where you’re going. I could have been a child. Oh and look at that—” she said, discovering her knee. She held her leg up under her thigh and let it dangle in the air. “Now how am I going to clean this off?” She let her leg go and threw her hands up before slapping them down at her sides.

From the side of the road, the man with the car calling in the accident suddenly turned and looked at Jacob. “Seriously?” he said into his phone. “Okay, no problem. Thanks.” He hung up. “There’s been two bike crashes here today,” the man said aloud, walking over. “A block up, some other guy. And now you.” He shook his head and folded his arms. Then he knelt down. “Hey look man, you seem like a nice guy. Really, don’t worry about my car. You’re gonna be okay. You’ll be alright.” The man then stood and took out his keys. Jacob could hear him walking away, the sound of his car door opening, and the firing up of his engine. He shifted into gear and pulled his car up and into the 7-11 parking lot.

Jacob wanted to get up and let the traffic around him move again but the pain in his shoulder and hip was growing. There was a twinge now in his back. He attempted to sit up but his back suddenly flashed with pain. Now his breath quickened, and he tried to swallow. He looked to find the mail-carrier for some kind of help, but she was already walking away. Drivers in

the street were peering over their passenger seats to glance down at him as they slowly rolled by.

When he heard the sirens and imagined the paramedics coming and questioning and assessing and then wanting to take him to the hospital, he began to panic. The loss of anonymity was impending. He wondered how he'd explain this to Rebecca—and what if she was still at the hospital when he arrived? How could he attempt to explain that he'd failed to collect her bike and wound up in the hospital because of getting a shoelace stuck in his bike?

An ambulance turned onto Orchard St. and in seconds he saw it pulling across the road and bringing traffic to a stop again on both sides.

He would have liked to have the man with the car come back to explain to the paramedics what happened. The man couldn't have known about the shoelace, and so maybe he'd already thought of a reasonable explanation for Jacob flying into the street in front of him. Yes, and maybe his story would be convincing enough to report to Rebecca. Jacob slowly propped himself upon an elbow and peered back toward the 7-11. There, he saw the man studying the wall. His arms were outstretched and he was balancing something. Jacob watched in horror as the man knelt to examine what he'd found. Amid the clamor of the ambulance, the slow traffic, and the silent but wrenching pain in his back and shoulder, Jacob couldn't muster a cry of protest loud enough. He seemed only able to whisper and stare at the man who, by now, was steadying the object by his car in plain sight. A bicycle.

Jacob tried to sit up again but was instantly prevented, pressed back upon the asphalt by a paramedic who was starting to ask him questions. Name? Address? Phone number? Date of birth? “Why does any of this matter?” Jacob cried. “All I did was fall off my damn bike!”

“Please sir, just answer the questions,” the paramedic said.

Jacob exhaled. He tried to answer with composure and then peered back again.

“No sign of concussing,” the paramedic reported to another. “No dilation of the eyes. Possible contusions from impact.”

“So that bike,” Jacob said. They’d begun readying a gurney. He tried to motion toward the 7-11, but the paramedics held his arm down.

“Your bike’s fine. An officer will take care of that. More important things to worry about now,” the paramedic said.

“Jacob,” the other paramedic said, “we’re going to raise you up and slide this gurney underneath.”

“No!” he said quickly. “Stop, you can’t!”

Two paramedics were trying to restrain him gently while another was preparing the straps of the gurney. “No!” Jacob said again. The tone of his voice rose suddenly. “The bike—that bike!” he cried terribly, trying to wriggle himself free. “It’s right there! It’s why I came, this is why I’m here—it’s for her—” Jacob suddenly pulled his right arm free and swung, landing the backside of his forearm against the first paramedic’s face.

The first paramedic tumbled backward, and the second, confused, released him. “You little punk,” the first said, holding his nose. “The hell is wrong with him?”

Jacob was trying his best to rise while swinging his arms in every direction, and though the pain in his back writhed, he managed to prop himself up to his knees. He peered toward the man in the parking lot, trying again to yell and pointing with all his strength. But then he felt his head going dizzy and his body relenting, and soon he was back on the pavement laying on his side. The paramedics were around him again, gently easing the gurney beneath his body.

As they hoisted him into the air he could see through the rear window of the man’s car what appeared to be a bike frame in his back seat. The man was leaning against his trunk with his arms folded at his chest, and with a look of concern. He waved and then gave Jacob a thumbs-up.