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Line Up

Jason Saylor noticed the police car in his rear-view mirror before the light bar lit up. His pulse had already elevated. Pupils dilated, his focus shifted to ninety percent cop in the mirror and less than ten on the road ahead. He quickly glanced at the dials and noted thirty-seven miles per hour. The old school Garmin glued to his dash showed a thirty-five-mile-per-hour zone. The light bar flashed in alternating bursts of cop blue and emergency red. *Crap!* He did a mental inventory of anything possibly wrong. *Taillights? Registration should be good till his birthday, ten months out. Where is the receipt for insurance? Glove box, I think.* He glanced up at the mirror. It was a Franklin County Sheriff's patrol, not the City of Apalachicola.

He knew not to lean for the glove box until the officer was actually beside him. They'd think he might be going for a concealed weapon. Saylor had done ride-a-longs on his newspaper's cop beat too many times. *High beams? What the hell?* It had been more than a moment, and he had only taken his foot off the gas. *There's an empty parking lot.* He flicked a finger to his right turn signal. At the same time, headlights again flashed impatiently from behind. Retina searing high beams in the mirror added to the migraine-inducing flashes of colors pulsing in his car.

Saylor pulled his aging Prius into one of the white rectangles. The patrol car pulled up diagonally behind him while, to his astonishment, a second patrol car pulled up in front, boxing his car. *Damn, two patrol cars? Is it a slow day in the off-season? Breaking News in Backwater! Two patrol cars respond to a broken taillight.*

Saylor's mind, usually responding to new stimuli with plot or scene possibilities, was trying to continue the news flash idea when he heard the rap on his side window. He startled back to the current unreality and toggled the button to lower the passenger window. He

noted that both front doors on the patrol car in front had opened, and two uniforms had gotten out.

“Sir, please put your hands where I can see them.” The patrol officer’s voice, polite as it was, left no option.

He put both hands at the ten and two position on the steering wheel. “Certainly. Officer is there a...can I ask—”

“Sir, is this your vehicle?”

He looked up at the RayBan’d officer. “Why yes, I’ve had it since it was, since uh, about eight years now.” He flashed back to the dealer and the deal and the surprise purchase of the—.

“Would you mind stepping out of the car, sir?” The officer stepped back a few feet and opened an arm as if to ward off a shoved door.

Or maybe just to invite his presence outside his Prius. Jason’s mind was whirling, *not a taillight. What?*

“Sir?” A little more strident this time.

“Yes, of course. You’ve got me a little confused. Can I ask what the problem is?”

“Yes, but please step out of the car.”

Saylor opened the door, got out, and stood, arms loose at his side. “Don’t you want my license and registration?” The officer told him to reach in and get them. By this time, three officers stood around his car, a navy-blue Prius on its second battery pack. A junior officer with no rank insignia had his right hand on the black service holster on his hip. *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!* He stood again and offered the registration, then pulled at his wallet for ID.

The first officer, unsmiling as before, twitched on seeing the driver’s license. “Mr. Jason Saylor?”

“Yes.”

“You’re from Texas?” Saylor squinted from sunglassed uniform to sunglassed uniform. Officer One looked up from the license, from behind his shades. In the bright morning light, Jason could see through the heavy tint on his sunglasses. Sunlight reflecting off the bronzed name tag rendered it illegible.

Saylor answered inelegantly, “Uhm, yes, lately that is. Actually, I’m from here. I went to high school here, that is, class of 2001. Moved off to Tallahassee to go to college, then the army, more college, coupla jobs and, well, I’m back for a while.”

“I see.” The officer tapped the license on the fingertips of his left hand and having come to some conclusion, said, “Mr. Saylor, I’d

like to ask you to come for a ride with us if you don't mind. You can lock up your car. It won't take too long. But we'd appreciate your cooperation." Officer One stepped aside a half step, signaling a now opened rear door to his cruiser.

"What?" Saylor stretched his imagination for anything he'd done or even imagined doing lately that could have initiated police interest. Hell, he hadn't even smoked in over ten years. "Am I under arrest? Can I ask why I need to go with you?"

"You especially busy? Need to make a call? We need you to come to the station for a small chat. We can probably clear things up. Your car will be fine here. Lock it up. Keep the keys."

Saylor stood his ground, but with his arms raised in surrender. "Why exactly do I need to go with you. I've done my share of ride-a-longs with law enforcement while on the job. I get to at least know." He waited, as the three officers exchanged sunglassed looks. "Right?"

Officer One said. "You are middle-aged, dark hair, dark car, and you're not from here." He tilted his head as if this were enough. "You do ride-a-longs you know what a BOLO is."

"Sure, 'be on the lookout.'"

The officer put a hand out as if encompassing the totality of what he was seeing. "That's you."

In a surreal sequence, he was guided to the back of a green and white and assisted into the rear seat, a palm on his head as he'd seen various criminals escorted away on TV. He noted that the two other officers both circled his car, one talking into a recorder as he peered into the back seat and passenger compartment. The ride to the sheriff's compound was short, only a few minutes. In those few minutes, Officer One said little. He'd only offered some reassurances that he'd probably be back to his morning in less than an hour.

An hour? What could take an hour? And nobody had mentioned Miranda. No cuffs. Everyone's polite but clam tight. No hint of the cause of the traffic stop. A young female officer ushered Saylor into a small room with a few other civilians who, if anything, looked as bewildered by their presence in the sheriff's office as he felt. He had been instructed to say nothing to the others and was sure they had been told to be silent as well, but the group communicated enough by shrugs, raised eyebrows, and wagged heads for all to understand that none of the others knew why they were there.

Officer Two, the driver of the second patrol car, entered, followed by Officer Three, who told the small group to follow him. They were each given a small card with a number and led into a line-up booth that he immediately recognized from several crime dramas—a white backdrop, with thin black lines marking height at six-inch intervals from four-foot-six to six-foot-six. Jason then realized that he and the others were all white males of about six feet in height, dark hair in varying stages of receding hairlines, and varying waistlines. Looking left and right, he saw that the youngest was maybe late twenties, the oldest was probably pushing fifty.

“Please stand still, and face forward.” A voice directed through a tired speaker with more squawk than anything manufactured since the 1970s. “Please hold your number card up.” Jason looked down, reversed his, and realized he held number two, but his location was in the three out of five position. He exchanged a glance with the guy to his right, then immediately knew that he didn’t know from which direction they would have counted one.

“Number two? Eyes front, please.” He stared forward at his reflection in a two-way mirror. He squelched a temptation to reach up and smooth his hair. He’d remembered in afterthought that as he had been first standing beside his Prius that a sea breeze had stirred his thinning hair, and he’d not thought to press it back into place. *No matter, I’ve just been caught up in a BOLO, and I resembled someone’s description of a suspect.*

The squawk box demanded, “Please turn to your right. Left shoulder against the wall, please.”

He shuffled to the right. He leaned against the wall, then noticed that the three in front of him were standing erect. He shifted his weight back to center. He took a deep breath, wanting to scratch an itch that announced an untimely need for a scratch on his left elbow. He resisted that and noted he could smell his sweat. Or was that the guy in front of him, another slightly balding thirty-something.

“To the front again.” They all shifted again, back to the mirror. “Please look down and to the right.” Most of them did so. “To the RIGHT.” Amazing choreography, he thought. Five guys picked up at random, and now we’re practicing our manners in a syncopated sweat-stained line-up. *What the god-damned hell?*

The speaker squawked again. “OK, stand straight and turn to your left.”

They turned, more or less in unison. He could see beads of sweat forming on number four's neckline, despite the air conditioning.

Saylor heard the creak of a door to his right but didn't look until spoken to. A young woman in uniform said. "Thank you, please exit to the right, and thank you for your cooperation." Her smile was genuine, her uniform was county issue, her crossed-arm stance said don't even think about it. She directed them into another small room with no chairs.

Officer Three, Mallory by his nameplate, said. "Gentlemen, I know this has been unsettling, but we are working a missing person case, a possible kidnapping. A person described as being young to middle-aged, dark hair, dark-colored car, and not from here is all we had to work with."

The twenty-something from the line-up spoke up first. "The Hell you say?" He hocked up a spit, realized he was still in a police station, and swallowed. "You pull me off'n the fishing pier to come stand in your line-up, don't tell me a god-damned thing, scare the living bejeezus out of me? Hell, all of us. And you just say, thank you?" Several more raised their questions and complaints. Jason just stood, took it in, absorbed the details, the other guys' facial hair. It might make for a good scene in the work-in-progress.

Saylor had only seen the line-up sequence from the point of view of a witness in numerous cop shows and movies. He'd never seen it produced from the point of view inside the line-up. The real thing was what? *The real damn thing!* The bright lights, the mirror. You stood looking at your own hopefully innocent face. The closet-sized viewing room was small enough that he could have reached out and touched that reflected face. Not enough time to conjure up why the deputies pulled him over, but if he had been the guilty party? What would THAT guy have been thinking, staring at his reflection? Each of them smelling each other's sweat. Was it the sweat of a warm Florida morning, or nervous sweat, or guilty sweat?

He stepped out into bright April sunlight, thinking about how to put the details in his next novel, or maybe its sequel. He squinted against the glare coming off a crushed shell parking lot and let Mallory guide him to one of the patrol cars. As it pulled out, Mallory spoke, with an edge of civility that had been missing before. "Mr. Saylor, I'm sure you are a little confused or pissed. It happens. Please accept our apologies. The sheriff said not to give any explanation

going in. We had a mic on in that ready room to see if we might pick up some grumblings.”

“Did you? I mean, did any of those guys say anything to help you?”

“I really can’t say.”

“Oh, right. Even if you had, you couldn’t tell me. Right?”

“Yes, Sir. It would have been material to the case.”

“Who is missing? You don’t mind if I ask, do you?”

“Local girl, trouble in the family, but a good kid. She’s been missing three days now. We’re probably going to have to call in the FBI missing persons if something doesn’t break soon.”

“But the line-up, what info did you have that would have led you to pick me up? It couldn’t have been my car. That one kid said you guys picked him up on the pier.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Saylor. That would be material,” Mallory added after a pause, “too.” This as he pulled into the parking lot where his Prius waited.

Saylor reached for the door handle and noticed there wasn’t one in the back of the cruiser. Officer One was out of the driver’s seat and at the door before he had a chance to panic. Looking up, Mallory was actually smiling beneath his Ray-Bans. *Too little, too late*, he thought. *Way to ruin a day!*

But later, as he drove back to the campground, he had to admit, the experience, out of the blue like it was, had been full of snapshots of realism that he could jot down for later inclusion in his thriller. He just had to find a way to get his hero in trouble with local law enforcement.

Being a writer is a lonely occupation for most in the trade. By natural law, it is an endeavor done in private with only the company of the characters he/she invented. True, he’d admit after a few drinks, you do identify with them. Cheer ‘em on. Get them in danger to the brink of hopelessness before you toss a lifeline. They even talked back occasionally as you typed them into a corner or steered a bad plot mechanism into something that worked better. He would share that bit of tradecraft or craziness with anyone, no matter how many drinks.

His separation and eventual divorce the previous fall had made life even lonelier. Even his old group of writers had become tiresome. His critique group had been his only avenue of occasional cordial

interaction, support, and valuable criticism, tips on style and structure. He had two published novels under his belt. The first, an espionage slash coming of age story, was a self-pub. The second, a cold war thriller, had been picked up by a real publisher. But he had still been working then and only been able to attend regional book signings and promotional events the publisher set up. A national tour to major markets and events had been out of the question while still working the Harris County crime beat. That second book had sold only four thousand copies, still three thousand more than the self-published effort.

Jason approached the campground in a funk. The funk arose from knowing that he was burning to tell someone about the BOLO, and there was no one around to talk about the experience. He'd been back for three weeks and hadn't taken the time to look up any of his old friends. Turning in, he saw the silver Airstream that, although smaller than most campground denizens, still blocked the water view. The old man in the Airstream had the annoying habit of digging deep for some tale that always seemed a lame attempt to go one better than the one being told. Weird old man. Most of the others in the campground were weeklies. They'd be gone in a few days, or maybe in another week. Then there was Mr. Montana, Dwayne Biggs.

Saylor noted the return of a long gray interstate bus conversion. Dwayne Biggs, the owner of the Class A cross-country land yacht, was little better than Mr. Airstream. Kicked out of his house by his third wife, Dwayne was trying hard to drink himself to death and usually was only capable of a rational discussion before 11 a.m. and that was if he was even up by eleven. Everyone else he'd met was a weekly. Saylor pulled up to his Class-C twenty-four-footer that sported a single red strip horizontal at driver's window height. He looked up at it from the car. *At least it's bigger than a tiny house.* Stepping up the two-step ladder he thought, *but not much bigger.*

He settled in at the dinette that converted into the base for a kid-sized bed and turned on his battered newspaper-issued laptop. An hour later, he had a draft of a new scene in which the hero was apprehended by the Mannheim Polizei, questioned, presented to a hostile witness in a line-up with four of Europe's worst, and picked by the unseen accuser beyond the mirror. He tapped a triumphant period to end the paragraph that described said hero being tossed unceremoniously into a cold cement-walled cell. He ended the

section with the loud clang of the cell's heavy steel door. He momentarily debated if it should get an exclamation.

