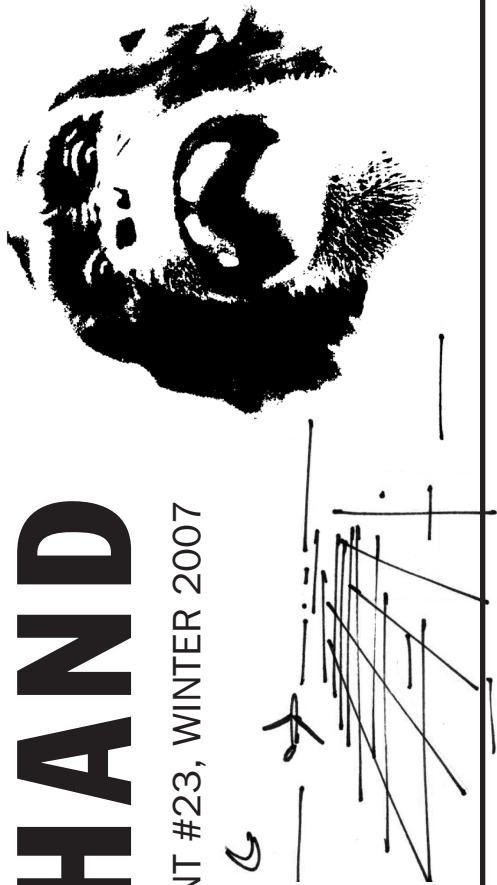


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## SPENCER HANGS OVER NEWARK

by Tobias Carroll

**1** Somewhere near 700 feet, Spencer looks down at the seaport of Elizabeth, street-lights like pinpricks in a child's planetarium. The 737's wing angles down by minute degrees, reaching out toward Manhattan as the plane makes its final approach. The airport beckons, a harbor of new glows and old concrete. He opts for the window seat just behind the right wing whenever he can get it for this moment: looking back over his shoulder at the ground, gazing at industry in miniature. The slumber of oil refineries, cargo loaders, outlet shops. The diminished motion on the turnpike, now that the day's commutes have ended.

He hopes the rental will be waiting for him with a minimum of wait time. Couple years before, he'd signed up with a few of the agencies, reluctantly put his vitals on file. That abbreviated wait helped to coax the lull into something manageable, something that reduces the old anxieties and apprehensions into a dull white noise, a simple shrieking, easily ignored. Six hours airborne—nine by local time—and another 90 minutes on the road; at least another 90. The lone downside to this seat is that, barring an empty flight, you're always one of the last to leave, standing hunched over, stray strands of hair flirting with the fans and reading lights.

Spencer dwells in the moment and doesn't regret his choice. He's always traveled light on these trips. A gym bag in the overhead compartment, a novel or two and a shaving kit. If he's lucky, if he's played time right, he'll pass a K-Mart or Target or shopping mall on tonight's drive to his destination. He'll get the casual clothes there, the \$8.99 three-pack of boxers, the navy blue socks and thin white undershirts, maybe stand there awhile to savor the 9PM crowd and share their exhausted feeling of displacement.

He'll buy the suit in the morning, as he's done in the past, and again thank his maker that he rarely needs tailoring. Shipping costs to send it back to Boise are always high, but the line item on the monthly bill is innocuous enough. He understands this: his method is far from the easiest way to travel. Spencer doesn't care. It's his preference to do things this way, and he'll bear the cost.

Below, he sees trucks and cars the size of gnats, tiny globes of light at the end of poles. Sees buildings, perfect squares and circles fringed with rust, mats of green dividing them. All rendered in a clear night's shadow, colors muted, their motion precise and determined. He can't shake the feeling that their speed is somehow wrong, that the highway's 65 miles per hour have had their danger stolen, from where he's sitting. Consider vantage the thief of velocity.

He reaches into his pockets: wallet in the left side, keys and phone in the right. Spencer is aware that he can pack his keys away until his return: the house keys and car keys and office keys from Boise will open no locks in the Garden State. And yet they're there, present because of the wet panic he feels between the moment when he reaches down and detects their absence and the onset of remembrance: keys on the table, keys on the dresser, keys in the duffel.

It's January. Bitter cold outside, he knows, and a bitter kind of cold back west as well. He'd told Alice almost nothing, alluded to a business meeting; his company had offices out here adjacent to military bases of a certain size, so the explanation was certainly plausible. He feels the plane turn and descend at a faster rate, his stomach seized by the rarefied sensation. He breathes slowly, skull tapping out something like a prayer, to slow this moment.

Whenever he stands to use a plane's bathroom and begins his walk to the rear of the cabin, he feels intuitively that he is walking on something less substantial than the floor below, can sense the tens of thousands of feet beneath his feet and the surface of the earth. It never fails to quicken his heartbeat, as though a step to the wrong place would reveal the inherent illusion behind the floor, would send him on a quick descent through the clouds. That sensation never quite leaves him until now: that final movement of the final approach.

Ten years ago: he'd been back east for a conference, had found himself wandering near the old hometown. Late-night coffee at a Starbucks, reading a copy of the *Register* he'd bought earlier in the day. One of three patrons at that hour, the light brown wallpaper reflecting the hanging lamps' midrange luminescence. Patterns tattooed on the walls evoking a nautical womb, a maritime sweat lodge stripped of the discomfort. Going section by section through the paper, skipping the national news and delving into local politics, sports, and the like. Reaching the birth announcements after an hour, skimming it to see if any names looked familiar, if any middle-school pals or lost loves had become parents in the past few days.

It was then that he saw one of the names: Alphonse Tilden. A wildcat dread hit his stomach, and he knew—knew before the research, before the phone booth and the ersatz stakeout—that Tilden was one of them. Spencer added a day to his trip within the hour, put miles on the rental he'd never relate to a soul. Sat in the car outside a hospital for three hours drinking soda and reading a biography of Harry Truman. Finally, the doors opened and Tilden stepped out. Spencer saw his face, saw his head from the proper angles as he turned to go, and received the necessary confirmation, his memory coldly embracing the moment.

Spencer took down Tilden's address from the phone book. Upon his arrival back home, he dusted the wallet off, made sure that it was free of all traces of himself, replaced the \$23 that had lain within it that day in 1973, and mailed it anonymously.

It was a broiling hot goddamn July at the fairgrounds near Newark. Spencer up there with Alec and Ray, all of them fat pampered kids, barely seventeen, thinking a little danger would be a good thing. They thought it'd be smart, be keen, to make a minor-league ruckus. It was something they barely knew how to do: they'd been bullied once or twice, thrown into lockers; the near-miss boys' room fights; the stare-downs after the last bell rang, walking toward the buses parked outside. Spencer and Alec and Ray all were kids who looked away first.

Stupid kids, naive, without any idea of how to raise a proper ruckus.

The fair near Newark: Alec and Ray hinted at things, feinted starting something; Spencer called them on it and they eyed him and said, Well, what've you got?

And Spencer walked cold out through the fairgrounds, sweat wringing his eyes into squints, and stole a guy's wallet. Walked past him, saw the back pocket bulging, and reached, pulled. He figured the guy'd be onto him in a second, all of a sudden start wailing on him, but no such luck: he'd gotten it clean. Briskly, he walked deeper into the crowd, pulling three more along the way, Alec and Ray a hundred feet behind him, two hundred, gaping.

They dubbed him Spencer the Klepto when he got back, and it stuck long enough. Kept the money for themselves, tried to get beer but couldn't quite pull off the look to buy it. Ended up making a half-assed run to A.C. and getting laid up in Seaside instead, spending a weekend on the boardwalk acting fake tough and praying they'd find someone who'd sell

them some beer or gin, something in a bottle to get them wasted. Down there they were anonymous, no story before that moment, no preconceived notions but their own. They tried acting like the kids who'd stared them down, adopting gruff demeanors and glaring at one another and saying, "Awright kid, you're going down tonight." They could pull it off for maybe half a minute before one of them busted up laughing and called Spencer a klepto and he'd say Yeah? And who got us the money for this? There'd be a pause and then, Fuckin' klepto! And the laughs came, and it was all right.

Alec joined the Navy a few months after college and vanished. Ray stayed local, drank hard and ended up on probation by '77. Spencer sent him a card last Christmas, but the gesture wasn't reciprocated. He hadn't anticipated that it would be.

Below him, the miniatures grow larger. The airplane's rate of descent always amazes him, a traversing of thousands of feet, seemingly at minuscule increments, and yet the final hundreds pass in a moment. Cars and buildings now rendered at a one-to-one scale, earth's plane made tangible. A forced communion with one's fellow travelers, the impending hive-mind rush to exit the plane a singular concern. Traveling light meant you didn't have to reach into the compartments overhead, could simply reach under the seat in front of you, procure all that you needed, and make for the plane's doorway.

That moment, by Spencer's estimate, is 10 or 15 minutes away. He gazes back over his shoulder, feeling a barely discernible sensation of falling, and again sees the vaporous lights of industrial New Jersey. It's a train set, he thinks, a model train set, and wonders for a moment if that's something his sons would like, if he should bring something back this time. He puts his family out of his mind then, detaching himself from his life in Boise, his home, job, car. He's a portable man for the next few days, a device with one purpose.

After the return of Tilden's wallet, Spencer devoted the occasional Saturday to seeking out the remaining three names. He kept the wallets in a locked box in his desk and, after an initial cleaning of all three in conjunction with Tilden's, never looked at them.

Recent years had been better for his efforts. A wedding announcement in St. Paul gave him a lead on Mikal Devore, and a passing mention of Nicholas Bester in a story from a newspaper in Austin, Texas, had not gone unnoticed. In both cases, he fabricated a convincing reason for travel, observed each of these men, knew his instincts to be accurate, and made the anonymous mailing from back home.

Richard Leblanc had been harder to locate.

Web searches, phone books, and the usual avenues turned up nothing. The thought entered Spencer's head that Leblanc could be deceased, but a revitalized search of obituaries and death notices was equally fruitless. Spencer tried as best he could to keep the process from interfering with his life: searching only at home when his family was elsewhere, taking the occasional lunch at the library a few blocks from work, and developing an anonymous email account for any and all correspondence related to the project.

In the autumn of 2003 he found his answer. It came, unexpectedly and unwittingly, from an aspect of his home life. Although they had met at a conference years before in Kansas City, Alice's hometown and his own shared a state; a two-hour drive was all that divided them. Her cousin Raymond, an attorney more than a decade her senior, had been staying with them over a long weekend when a call had come for him. A news story, Raymond had explained later, about a case he'd handled as a young public defender. A con man and counterfeiter who'd broken the nose and jaw of his arresting officer; they'd locked him up for years, fights within the prison walls affixing more time to his sentence like trailers to an office building.

"I had some bad ones," Raymond had said, "but this guy seemed all right. Wicked temper, though. Wicked goddamn temper." And then the rueful shake of the head. Raymond was a virtuoso at that. "Guess that's what did him in."

This prisoner—the pugilist and forger—was due to be released in a few weeks. He'd return to society a man in late middle age, reformed but for all practical purposes lacking a place. A reporter from the paper would be profiling him, hence the call for Spencer and Alice's guest. Alice, who was fond of such information, asked the prisoner's name, and it was then that Spencer learned where Richard Leblanc had been for those many years.



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Spencer hangs over Newark, closer to the ground now, hoping that the landing will be smooth. He smiles as he thinks of the cold outside, imagining it scrape across his face and hands as he walks to pick up the rental. He never packs gloves when he travels in the winter, not for these trips or any others.

Tomorrow he'll wait for Leblanc to step off the bus, he'll confirm things and make the last return. He had planned initially to confess, to explain everything when he reached the last of them, but a new idea has come to him. Thirty years ago, he withdrew wallets as smoothly as one might swim through a sea of milk; thirty years later, can he unmake that gesture? Can he replace things as easily, as pristinely as he once extracted them? Tomorrow, he thinks, it'll be over. Spencer's never been one for credit. He and Alice are both well-paid for the work that they do, and financed their home themselves. This, for him, is the last marker he's carried forward through the years. The thought of being free from it is a momentary echo of a peace to come.

The plane approaches the gate, and Spencer is ready to stand. He wonders if, perhaps, he shouldn't just look Leblanc in the eye and explain himself as he hands back the wallet. Perhaps they can shake hands and find somewhere to eat, a small diner with cheap food a stone's throw from the water. There they can sit and talk and compare their crimes. All his debts paid in full, he tells himself.



**2** Spencer reaches the rental car office twenty minutes after landing, sees the line before seeing the logo, sees there's a wait simply to get inside. It's 8:45 on a Tuesday, the middle of January, and this line has gathered on the wrong day: it's a holiday line, a Thanksgiving weekend line. Quarter-hours pass and he draws closer, seeing a harried clerk carrying out separate transactions on three computers, fingers and legs spelling out poly-rhythms. Spencer hears mutters of disgust from the line both behind and ahead of him, bags dropped and shifted from hand to hand. A man four ahead sings along with something on his headphones: not a song Spencer knows. Twenty after nine, and fifteen still precede him.

Eventually, he makes it to the head of the line, receiving an apology and a set of keys from the man behind the computer. This time through, he can't walk outside to retrieve his car: it's parked inside, forty steps from the counter. And so only when driver and car have left the garage can Spencer lower the windows and allow the cold air entry. It shears his face as he goes, raises the hair on his arms, and it's the first part of the trip since landing that has met his expectations. That it's now past 10PM means a change in plans; itineraries will need to be realigned: wake earlier, acquire the basics, back to the hotel, shower, change, eat. Then, he tells himself, a drive south and a suit.

His finger hesitates over the radio as the car moves down the turnpike, speedometer wavering around 70. The stations are never the same, he thinks; the ones he likes always change formats while he's away. He longs to find something familiar, a song or voice from his last trip here, but a survey of the dial offers nothing. His plans for the night still reshaping in his mind, Spencer considers a detour to the old fairgrounds, slows and maneuvers to the rightmost lane, but then regains his former position. It was Alec who had driven them all up there; Spencer hadn't watched the road in those days with the zeal he currently possesses, and he realizes now, wind still buffeting his forehead, that he would have no idea where to go.

Fifteen miles later, Spencer pulls into a rest area, coffee and a sandwich on his mind. Flying nearly always leaves him famished. He steps out of the car into the cold, closes and locks the door behind him, and stares upward; it's only in winter that the sky here gets so clear. He hears vehicles in transit going both ways on the turnpike, sees the occasional headlight beams of cars following his lead, and observes travelers, solitary and in pairs, making the trek back

outside. He rubs the side of his face for warmth, a solitary standing figure in the midst of subtle motion, and turns toward the entrance, its glow saturating the night.

Halfway through his grilled chicken, Spencer notes that he and the other patrons of the fast food alcove are all facing the counter. Their positions have no discernible logic, but nonetheless: all face the counter, and each sits alone. His own vantage is from one of the tables furthest back, and as his gaze travels the room, he takes in a series of backs, quarter-turned faces, each wholly absorbed in their own action. He recalls Leblanc's face now, last seen as a similar sliver: loose chunks of straight hair, a white T-shirt, and eyes that were not brown. Above him, a fluorescent light shivers. He looks back toward the counter, sees the last server on duty begin to close up. Spencer holds tight to the image of Leblanc's face in his mind: over Spencer's own shoulder, a fraction of another man's face. He clings to that half-memory.

Back in the car, he turns on the overhead light and looks at a map, focusing on a particular cluster of towns, tracing his route, remembering names and locations of hotels. He and Alice had contemplated a trip out here for his 25th reunion. At the last minute, they had backed out: Alice was concerned about leaving the boys unattended for so long, and he felt a surge of relief that he needn't run the risk of bringing her among people who'd known him in his wilder years. He turns the light off, starts the car, and shifts into reverse, savoring his memory of maps.

Forty minutes later, he's taking a familiar exit off the parkway, making two fast turns, and then he's there, he's reached the hotel, he can check in and call it a night. Six minutes to a K-Mart that opens at eight, provided the traffic's good. Breakfast sandwich from somewhere, to be eaten on the road—factor an hour twenty of southbound driving to be in Absecon. And then what? Wait for the bus; watch for the reporter and the man with the camera. Spencer checks in to the hotel, bag in hand, and asks the woman behind the desk, in passing, if there's somewhere nearby where he can get a drink. On the way up to his room, he decides against it: the novel he was reading on the plane will quiet his nerves well enough. Inside the room, he charts the following day's trip: 70 miles of the parkway, morning light on his face the whole way down.

The trip to Absecon is perfect, lifted from his schedule and rendered across time and distance. Ten o'clock finds him at the state's coastal fringes, where the land frays and drifts toward the Atlantic. He turns the car inland: five miles to the closest shopping mall. Any evidence of a rush hour has passed by now; he passes a few school buses on the Black Horse Pike, but nothing more. Leblanc's wallet sits in the passenger seat beside him.

Spencer minds the time as he enters the department store. As he settles on the right and proper fit, his eyes return again and again to the watch on his left wrist, each potential suit thinning the time before Leblanc. Three options are winnowed down to one, and Spencer ventures back into menswear for a matching shirt and tie. Once he's paid, he asks if he can return to the dressing rooms to change. The man behind the counter gives him the OK but can't help but ask about the occasion. "Something personal," Spencer says.

As he's adjusting his tie, it occurs to Spencer that he has given the impression of a man headed for a funeral, a memorial service, an early wake. The suit's dark enough, and Spencer knows his demeanor at this moment: anticipation, apprehension; a sense of duty, of obligation, and above all else, closure. He recalls the tone of his words spoken minutes before, and those words and the manner in which they were spoken are clarified to him. Consider misdirection as mocking the true funerals, memorials, and wakes he's attended in recent years. He feels blood run to his cheeks and sweat on his brow. Once finished he makes for the counter, meaning to give a fuller explanation. But the salesman he'd spoken with is gone, nowhere in sight down the racks of shirts and shoes, and when Spencer steps outside and feels the air attack the sweat beaded on his forehead, he savors it.

By 11:20 he's waiting for the bus to arrive. He realizes that he'd been wrong about the presence of a photographer: there's only the reporter, young and clean-shaven, adorned with notepad, recorder, and digital camera. The reporter is leaning up against the side of the bus shelter,

staring intently down the road. Spencer, parked 20 feet away, considers joining the watch. Grey inches into the sky above them, accenting the harsh winter light as it nears its apex. Spencer forces his eyes closed and then opens them as he reaches for the door handle, setting his feet onto the pavement as stronger daylight floods in. He inhales as he turns toward the bus shelter, slams the door closed, and checks his pockets for both his own wallet and Leblanc's. He walks toward the reporter, keeping his distance. The reporter looks up at him and says, "Waiting for Richard Leblanc?" And Spencer nods his head, waiting for the reply. But the reporter doesn't: he only nods his head in silence.

Spencer has checked bus schedules, has pinned down times in his mind like horses in a photo finish, and now he feels his heart in his ears as he waits. He glances again at his watch: 11:22. One more minute, he tells himself. Braces for the reporter to confirm the time, to make small talk, to interact with him in some way; but no, the reporter is silent, fingering the settings on his camera, adjusting the white balance, contemplating a scrawl on his notepad and adding a few more. Eleven twenty-two on a weekday: no early lunch traffic to be seen. Spencer eyes the road and sees motion on the horizon, but as the speck grows larger it resolves into a compact car, navy blue, a solitary man inside. More motion a minute and a half later: this time, a white pickup and a grey sedan moving in tandem.

The bus pulls up two minutes after that, and Richard Leblanc is the only passenger to disembark.

Spencer takes the whole of Leblanc in: his back still straight, a few inches shorter than Spencer, thin build, wiry then and wiry now. Thick glasses over red-stained cheeks. He wears a winter coat, unzipped down the middle, and paint-stained khakis. Of all of Spencer's names, time has been the least kind to Richard Leblanc, but as Spencer stands there watching, he realizes that that was to be expected. His heart's resonance is now a tattoo through his bones. Leblanc is a handful of feet away and everything else—the reporter, the bus, Spencer's own form—loses substance. There's only Leblanc's modest form and the pounding, an echo turned inside out. Spencer hears, "How do you feel?" and it brings everything back. Words rush into in his mind, form pages upon pages, before he turns slightly and realizes that the question is Leblanc's to answer. Disappointment hits his throat. Leblanc says nothing, and the reporter volleys back with a question on work. Does he have a job now? Somewhere to stay?

"A hotel," says Leblanc. "Cousin of mine has work." He eyes the reporter for a second and continues, "I'd rather you not say which. Could make his life harder." And then Leblanc's eyes drift over to Spencer. "You got a light?" spoken in a lower octave. Spencer sees Leblanc's face clearly now, pale green eyes and a few dark strands left in his hair. He freezes, recognizes Leblanc as the sort of man who threw him into lockers in high school, who could stare him down, no questions asked.

"Sorry," Spencer says, first to look away. "Sorry, I don't." He wonders what the reporter makes of this, but won't turn back to see.

Leblanc gives the ghost of a shrug. "That's all right." He returns to the reporter, asks if he has anything more.

The reporter says, "Nothing for now," takes one more photo of Leblanc, then walks to his car. Spencer again confirms Leblanc's wallet in his pocket and looks into the distance, away from Leblanc and the reporter. Hears, "You're not with him?" Leblanc's voice sounds diminished, fading with age, but even so it can summon up a force to beat back memory.

"No." Spencer turns back toward Leblanc. Spencer's rental is the only car in view; fringes of grass covered by leftover snow bracket the sidewalk, and both are held to account under the barren sky, neither with any apparent reason to continue speaking. Spencer says, "You need a lift?" and it feels hollow as it reaches his ears. How can it sound to Leblanc, he asks himself. It can't sound right, and yet suddenly he hears Leblanc agree, hears himself asking if Leblanc is hungry, hears Leblanc acquiesce, and as they start toward the car it comes to him that Leblanc's probably been in stranger positions over the years. Immediately, Spencer loathes himself for the thought.

They're sitting in a small Jersey diner, ten tables at most, half-full with the lunch crowd. Sitting opposite one another in a booth large enough for four, neither having spoken since they entered the car. Leblanc's jacket hangs on a hook above his left shoulder. As Spencer picks apart pieces of a chicken salad, his eyes move to Leblanc's arms. On both, ascending toward

his sleeves, he sees a series of scars, as though a crude ledger of time was carved into his skin. Leblanc, devouring a hamburger, doesn't seem to notice Spencer's stare.

When about a third of the burger is still uneaten, Leblanc abruptly speaks, both elbows on the table, hands supporting his forehead. "They let me out when I stopped fighting." His eyes don't leave the table. "And I stopped fighting when it hurt too much." He breathes deeply and resumes his meal. Spencer looks down at Leblanc's hands, knuckles scarred and busted, pale thin lines across his fingers, scars he'll bear until his death.

Spencer does not reply, and Leblanc offers nothing more. Spencer sits his fork down and wipes the corner of his mouth with a napkin; that he sits down as well. Leblanc methodically finishes his hamburger and moves to the rest of his food. As Spencer watches him, his eyes drift to the handful of people seated behind them, and he wonders if they recognize Leblanc. He observes the waitstaff moving quietly among the tables, his gaze coming to rest on a tired older man stepping out of the kitchen and sitting at the lunch counter for a few minutes, head down, breathing deeply. Spencer suddenly feels aware of his suit, of how at odds it is with everything around him: a formal statement in a space with no use for formality. He loosens his tie and unbuttons the top button of his shirt and sets his hands on the table, waiting, looking at every square inch of surface around him. Fifteen minutes later, a handful of fries still on his plate, the coleslaw half-gone, the neon still burning above, Leblanc says, "You can get the check if you want."

Spencer signals their waitress and leaves \$25 on the table. Both men stand and walk toward the door, Spencer in the lead. They pass a glass-and-metal cabinet full of cakes and pies on the way out, the side facing them mirrored, and Spencer catches sight of his own face in it just as Leblanc enters the reflection. Two men, an abundance of lines on their faces, hair gone to grey, a weariness somewhere. He thinks, we could be family, and curses himself for the comparison. They step out the door and into the afternoon.

Spencer says, "Do you need a lift somewhere?" and Leblanc shakes his head.

"My cousin can get me here. He's not far off."

And Spencer says, "All right." Breathe, he tells himself, breathe like a normal person. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out Leblanc's old wallet. "I should be giving you this," he says, and hands it over. Leblanc takes it cautiously, his eyes moving from Spencer's to the burden in his hands. He opens it, slowly surveys what's inside. Spencer watches his face, training himself in that moment to detect any signs of recognition, but sees none. Leblanc thumbs through the wallet, noting the currency, checking the feel of the leather. No emotions cross his face: neither nostalgia nor elation nor hate.

Finally, Leblanc looks up at Spencer and begins to open his mouth, just for a moment. No words come, and he closes it again. Spencer can see something form in Leblanc's eyes but can't interpret it. They stand in the sun, Leblanc with a pay phone in arm's reach and Spencer closer to his car, each waiting for words. It's Leblanc who breaks the silence first: without malice, he looks Spencer in the eyes and says, "Go home." Not a warning, not meant as a command; a benediction, Spencer thinks. A benediction. Spencer nods and swallows and then says, "Good luck," as he walks to his car. He looks back at Leblanc twice, each a little more than a blink in time.

As he pulls back out of the parking lot, he sees Leblanc put the wallet into his side pocket, sees him pull change from the same pocket and initiate a call, and by then Spencer's facing the highway adjoining the diner, anticipating his next turn, the traffic grown more dense.

Spencer reaches the second hotel of this trip an hour and a half later. He changes out of his suit and stands at the window watching the descending sun blur colors at the horizon. He sees a pool covered up for the season, no chairs for families to relax in, no students standing guard over it for summer salaries. Spencer picks up the telephone, pauses for a moment, and dials Alice to tell her where he's been.

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