

New Fiction from John Darcy: “Sorry I Missed Your Call”

☒ An hour before the drive, Bubs finds himself sucking down an edible. A big blowout blowtorched dab of a brownie. He could feel it stonerizing his insides the second the swallow went down, that ashy grass-stained aftertaste staking a claim on his tongue

Been doing a lot of things like that, lately. Ill-advised things. Bubs' best guess pins the start of it back to February. March at the latest. And he didn't know where the hell this getting out of bed problem came from. The brownie was the prize he'd promised himself for completing the task this morning. Bubs has even stopped spying both ways when crossing the street. He just kind of steps out off the curb.

The weed thing's, like, not a big deal? is the argument he tries to make to Omar, his driver's licenseless trip mate and his best friend, hopefully, still.

'Why the whole thing?' Omar asks. His jaw is doing that thing it does when he's not happy. 'Why not just a bite?'

Bubs sags his shoulders in a sort of shrug. He does, however, feel Omar's disappointment as if it's parental in origin, a weathered, rock-like thing, barely shining in the clear bluish glimmer of this dazzling late-May morning, a steely cold shamework of the someone-expected-better-from-you variety.

Omar says, 'You do remember what we're doing here, yeah? Let's try not to forget.'

Bubs does remember what they're doing, thank you very much, but he gets to thinking about the purpose of the trip, about how Germ might feel when he understands that Omar and Bubs are not just saying hello, are not just passing through with their

sights trained on simple catch-up, that their actual mission is to complete a very serious and sober welfare check.

'No snacks in that bag by chance?' Bubs says in his best McConaughey.

'Seriously?'

'There's this side effect of THC called the munchies. Familiar?'

Omar's face says he isn't having it, isn't going to have it, today. Head to toe, Omar is one smooth motherfucker. A good six inches taller than Bubs, he's got that chill studied coolness of a hipster high school teacher, the dark haired young socialist you could probably call for a lift after getting blind on UV Blue. It's a first impression thing, impossible to miss.

Bubs can still remember when he had the experience. Fresh off zero hours of sleep, Bubs was getting his face melted off by the acid rain spittle of a Ft. Benning drill sergeant, a walking little napoleon complex who still shows up in nightmares from time to time. For taking too long to get his ass off the bus, Bubs was sentenced to a viscous fucking tongue lashing and a hip toss up the aisle. When he finally made it down the rubber-ribbed steps up front, he saw the formation of new recruits caught in a chokehold of screams and he went to join them in the full nelson, this new clan, his first tribe. Some were doing pushups and it was hot, hot as Bubs could ever remember feeling, and mainly his brain told him, Might have messed up here, Might have made the wrong choice. Then he saw what would turn out to be Omar, front and center, not a drop of sweat even thinking about trying him, not a screaming campaign hat anywhere near, as if a memo had made the rounds before the shark attack, indicating one young soldier in particular it would probably be better not to mess with.

'Okay then,' Bubs says, 'coffee it is. Java. Brain fuel.' The high still hasn't hit fully. He is looking forward to its blanketing caress, the slow juicy haymaker of it.

Strapped in, tunes on, shades perched smooth on the oily bridge of his bony nose, Bubs pulls out of the dashed-off fire lane in front of Omar's building. Bubs wouldn't call himself handsome, exactly. Especially not next to Omar. Adequate, maybe. Passable. His lips are on the thin side, pincer-like where they curve into each other. On his head an orchestra of dark black hair sits crazy and unbrushed, the texture of very fine straw. A spiraling tattoo of ones and zeros on his left forearm spells out BINARY CODE in binary. There is an efficiency to his composition. His dad used to say, *It's like you were made on an assembly line except with the brains God gave a dog.* Ignoring that last part, Bubs is thankful for the proportionality, though if anything he feels it makes him look calculated, indifferent, lame.

That said, Bubs comes alive behind the wheel. The inside-out knowledge he has of his machine, a stock Impreza with more miles than he'd care to admit, makes him proud as an honor roll dad. It takes some foreplay to shift from second to third, but timed properly the latent torque is enough to shove his heart against his ribcage. It's two make-and-models away from being a full-on rally car, and Bubs loves to remind himself of this fact. He basks in it, the low-level ladder rung of his vehicle, its impossible potential.

'Can I get one of those?' Bubs says. Omar has a cigarette rappelling from his mouth. He smokes a snooty, hard-to-find Turkish brand. It's the kind of thing that'd drive Bubs up the wall with anybody else.

Omar says, 'Always hanging with the smokers, never has any smokes.'

'Come on,' Bubs says, and Omar lights one up for him.

Bubs rolls down the windows in reply.

A rush of air and motion.

Before long they're gaining speed.

The wind blasts a racket through the nicotined interior. Sunlight is just absolutely pouring down, swallowing them up, threatening to swallow them whole.

Bubs says, 'What I didn't expect is that it'd be Germ.'

'Not really about how someone looks or acts, you know? Germ's been through a lot.'

'I mean who hasn't?

'I think the divorce puts him in a higher tax bracket.'

'I get that,' Bubs says.

'And his mom's cancer stuff.'

'I really get it. But sometimes it is the biggest fuck up—right? It's the king of the fuck ups, who, you know.'

'Fucks up?'

'Nailed it.'

'Sometimes,' Omar says. 'Maybe sometimes.'

'Not that Germ is one of those guys.'

'Not at all.'

'Just generally speaking. You see my water bottle anywhere?'

Omar says, 'What happens when that shit hits you too hard and we have to pull over?'

'Not even on my radar. I like driving high anyway. There's this thing about it, yeah? There's this way it makes you

feel.'

Omar had wanted to hit the road at ten-thirty, introduce themselves to Chicago traffic no later than one in the afternoon. Bubs makes no bones about the delay being his fault. Rolling from his sheets today, phone flashing a harsh nine thirty, it was about the earliest he'd mustered all year.

Omar, on the other hand, has really got his shit sorted. Bubs thinks he should run one of those schemey self-help seminars. Only with Omar it wouldn't be sleaze. It would be blue-suited and cologned, sharp, deathly fucking sharp. When Omar was enrolled on the GI Bill, he did some day trading on the side. He came out of college well in the black, psych degree in hand. Bubs had signed up for a few certificate courses at the technical college in Janesville, decided not to go.

There is a possibility, Bubs sometimes thinks, that his closeness with Omar finds its bedrock on their uneven terrain of accomplishment. That it's a necessary condition for their continued buddy status, a cornerstone from the start. He supposes there are worse foundations for a friendship, although it seems to him like a fuel source that'll eventually burn itself out. Bubs prays it does not. While it collapses his heart to imagine life without his best friend, Bubs is pleased that he struggles to picture the full bleak immensity of it. It is a good sign. Like checking your own pulse, surprised to feel the beating.

Bubs curves the car through the interchange and hauls them onto I90. He asks Omar to remind him about the plan. 'The plan,' Omar says, 'is to just see how he's doing. Snag a beer. Check out where he's living. Face to face stuff.'

Bubs is glad about the beer. He is also glad his eyes are on the road, preventing Omar from seeing how bright they flare at the sound. That's another thing about Omar. He's never tapping

on his phone during a conversation. He'll even say, like, *One sec, let me just pop this off, don't want it interrupting us*, and leave it clear in the other room.

'I'm excited to see him,' Bubs says.

'Yeah.'

'Honestly I am.'

'Okay,' Omar says.

Unsure of what Omar's deal is today, Bubs keeps focused on the southbound highway. The straightness of the road. Its continued reappearance on the far edge of his sightline leads Bubs to think that it wasn't so much built as dreamed, less engineered than imagined, plopped right into place from way up above, signage and all, aligned just so. If there's a single cloud in the sky Bubs cannot for the life of him find it.

'Germ is a good guy,' Omar says, apropos of nothing Bubs can gather. 'He'll be glad you came with.'

He asks Omar, 'How many guys we lose this last year?'

'I think it's three. Three or six. I can't remember which. But it's one of those.'

'How come we didn't go to any of the funerals?'

'I don't know,' Omar says. 'How am I supposed to know?'

'The war back home.'

'What?'

'That's what it's getting called,' Bubs says. 'The war back home.'

Omar rockets around, real intense with the motion. His dark eyes are little discs of deep set stormclouds. 'Why does

everything have to have a name? Why can't it just be people trying to figure stuff out?'

'I mean it wasn't me that came up with it.'

'Sure,' Omar says, slinking his head back, turning it to look out on the sectioned squares of farmland around the road. It's the only thing a person could look at on this stretch of federal street. Bulky portions of agriculture and landmass, barbed and divided, flat yet somehow still rolling, rippling, flowing. Cows out to pasture whiz by in the distance, lifeless specs against the green.

It's no surprise to Bubs that Omar took the reins in planning the check-up on Germ. What he can't figure out is why he himself was enlisted for duty. Bubs doesn't think of himself as a great instiller of confidence. Not really a compelling life-affirmer. But he is happy Omar asked him to come along, and he is happy he'd said yes since it would have been so much easier to say no. It's gotten so simple—and Bubs isn't sure why—to do nothing, nothing at all.

Germ is still an hour and a half away, but Bubs is getting the brunt of it now, getting socked by a storm of monster waves. A high tide of heady realizations. He has stepped up and done the right thing by coming along. This much he knows. He is doing what he is supposed to do: you help when you're able, you do what you can to endure; you carve out as much space as the world allows and if the world doesn't budge you gotta get yourself real low and push back, push hard, knowing it might not come to much. Bubs feels swaddled in something bright and endlessly comforting, wrapped and entwined, tight as granite, in the grand silky fabric of it. With a kind of worldwide tenderness moving through his body, the mot juste of existence takes shape on his tongue. For the first time in his life, Bubs sees the answers to his questions dead ahead. He's got them dead to rights. And it's just as he reaches out to grab them, to give them a healthy once-over, that a sweet lemony

haze washes over the frontside of his horizon.

Bubs, higher than he has been in his entire life, sits in a patch of tall grass near the picnic area of a rest stop south of Rockford. Omar is on the phone.

Here, knees tight to chest, Bubs recalls with a good bit of nostalgia the appearance of Germ in his life. Jeremy Heck Jr., known as Germ, got his sticky nickname due to the astounding biohazard dirtiness of his Ft. Bragg barracks room. More than the room itself was the way Germ managed to clean it up on inspection day. Bubs couldn't dismiss the possibility of little animated birds swooping through the window to help tidy up the filth. Bubs and Omar, bunkmates through basic training and airborne school, kept their lucky streak alive when orders came down sending them to the same platoon. The two of them learned early on that they had both grown up in Madison, had lived on opposite sides of the isthmus and attended opposing high schools, had both frenched Anna Cloverman and gotten the same tight slap of rejection when they'd tried to slither a hand down her jeans. And though they'd never directly met before boot camp, they sort of got the picture that this strange lifelong proximity meant they had most likely been at the same place at the same time—Eric Daniel's historic Halloween banger, most likely—and that this was as close to a sign from the universe as anybody was going to get. Unscrambling the source code, they figured it meant they oughta have each other's backs, ensure the other's safe return to the selfsame home. Germ and his petri dish lived straight across the hall from Bubs and Omar, and, according to Germ's account, got snatched up orbit-like in the pair's friendship. Bubs' nickname has an origin story, too. His last name is Bubsmiester. People just chopped off the suffix.

Bubs sees Omar standing above him. The grass is barely wet against his pants, coolly warm, smattered with leftover dew.

Straight to his twelve o'clock, making a rug of shade for which Bubs is super grateful, Omar says something kind and reassuring.

'I'm really sorry, man,' Bubs says.

'It's all right.'

'I am really high.'

'You said that already.'

'I really am, though.'

Omar says, 'It's all good. Don't worry.'

Bubs likes the phrase, recommits it to memory. How many times has he told someone not to worry? Not enough.

A spray of shade over Omar's collar. It passes quick. Bubs sees, understands, makes note of and comes to realize that he is happy where he is. Soothed. His best friend is a stone's throw. The weather is stupid calm. Exposed out here, sun on his skin, Bubs wonders if he might be able to undo all the damage he's done, unwind his own hurt into a manageable enough thread. He imagines constructing a kind of personal murder board for his own personal fuck ups. With enough hard work, he thinks he can do it. Because here's the thing: It's all bullshit anyway. So why not try. Failing that, he would settle for a glass of water. Sometimes he worries about having an unsuitable brain.

Sunlight. Slow breeze. Lulling hum of the interstate. Omar is out of sight now. Bubs knows he is arraigning things, talking with Germ, fixing what Bubs has broken. Impaired, definitely still impaired, Bubs stands up, wobbling, and goes towards the main a-frame building.

He passes the huge towering map of the state and the free-standing little dusty cubicle of waterpark brochures. The bubbler inside is broken; the vending machine doesn't take debits; the sink in the bathroom is automatic, and Bubs waves and waves his hand at the sensor but nothing comes. He is as thirsty as he can ever remember being, and fucking saying something, that is.

He decides to make himself stay with the discomfort, lets it ride through him like a train or a skateboard or some other thing that rolls and glides and breezes.

Inside the building, he slips out a side door. He makes his way over a field of mown grass into a thicket of sick-looking trees. Bubs keeps the trucker's parking lot on his right when he moves into the bramble. When he heads back, he's just gotta keep the blacktop on his left.

Now he is here, alone, standing at the mud-slathered edge of some kind of retaining pond. A nasty spot, about the size of an above ground pool. The water is dark, murky. A kind of loose film of grime covers its surface. The water buzzes with tiny bugs, the swirling gray leftovers of vehicular exhaust. A few branches hang over the water at uncertain angles. Bubs pulls out his phone, sees a missed call from Omar.

He feels the sun on his back, feels it lowering against his spine. His surroundings are summer and sky. He stares at the pond, dirty and calm, the color of old dryer lint. He watches its surface do things with the light. Bubs bends down, brushes away a layer of dirt and gristle, cups his hands, fills them with water, and drinks.

When he makes his way back from the water, a silvery trembling thrashing in his stomach, he tells Omar what he's done. Omar, without a change on his face or a clue in his eyes, balls his left hand and hits Bubs on the side of the head and Bubs hears

the tinnitus in his right ear, always present, spike like a line on a chart and he is on the ground; the pain is hot and tender, but its heat is concentrated, boxed, not overwhelming him, and he groans a little mainly from the shock of it, the power of the strike and the unforgivingness of the ground.

Omar offers down a hand. Bubs takes it.

'I'm sorry,' he says.

'It's all right,' he answers.

'I shouldn't have done that.'

'I shouldn't have, either.'

The silence in a way becomes to Bubs like a kind of song, rhythmic and brassy and tempo-heavy. A few birds fly sorties along vapor trails in the sky. Part of Bubs' gut feel like it's at a rolling boil.

'You know what you have to do, yeah?' Omar says.

Bubs does know, thank you very much. He stares a patch of prickly grass, mainly at the space between blades. He says to Omar, 'Alright, alright. You know I'm a real retcher so plug your ears.' Bubs bends down and aims his middle finger to the back of his mouth.

They move to a different piece of real estate after Bubs' hurl. He flips his middle finger, the slimy one, at the mess he made. This makes Omar laugh. With the last of the high still dribbling out of him, Bubs recalls with a fondness bordering on sorrow when the three of them—himself, Omar, and Germ—timed their terminal leave and Army departures for the same day. Piled into a younger version of Bubs' beloved whip, together they drove off Ft. Bragg for the final time, flipping the bird to the gate guards on their way out, sticky pre-

rolled already sparked, two or three extras stinking up the center console. For Bubs it's a source of serious regret. What good does it do to give your past the middle finger? Talk about a waste of time. It's the only thing that remains, sure as the resin on the inside of a bong—nothing is forever except your past. But Bubs knows they were different then, on the far shore of that four year lapse of time: Germ, down half a finger from a faulty .50 caliber spring, marriage on the rocks but hopeful for a rescue operation; Omar, newly purple-hearted, lost in a lagoon of survivor's guilt, dreamily hearing at all hours the deep metallic click of the pressure cooker bomb whose fuse tripped but ordinance didn't; and Bubs—bias as he might be for knowing more about himself than his friends—coming off a less than honorable discharge for pissing hot, testing positive for an amphetamine they didn't mind him taking down range, driving too fast towards middle America with his two best buds, ripping huge and unholy tokes from the joint and feeling more than anything like he was alone, cheated out of some promised purpose and belonging, a sort of cancerous growth of dejection sprouting tendrilly in his guts, as lonely leaving the Army as he was going in.

'You can't worry about that stuff anymore,' Bubs hears Omar saying, either somewhere in his head or right there in front of him. He isn't entirely sure. 'The stuff you wish you did different? I think that'll eat you a-fucking-live.'

Back at home, three days later, Bubs snoozes his alarm only four times. It is Friday, and through the slats in his blinds the day broadcasts a teaser trailer: cloudless, bright, disturbingly blue. It's been like that for a stretch now. Bubs knows the rain will come, is coming soon, but it isn't here yet. Before leaving to pick up Omar, Bubs decides to call his father, himself a veteran. 'It's not so much the bad stuff staying with you,' his father tells him, 'as it is the good stuff that you miss.'

Germ is driving up for lunch. After the rest stop, Omar said it might be better if Germ made the jump north to Madison. Bubs agreed.

When Bubs sees Germ outside the restaurant, he is surprised to see a person that looks exactly like someone who does not need help. Healthy skin, clipped nails, sweater crisp like hospital cornering. A damn near pregnancy glow.

'This is the place you picked?' Germ says. He has a small nose, short sandy hair. The smile might burst off his face. 'Nah, no way, this won't work. You know what we need? Tall boys and a secret spot. You guys know a secret spot?'

'This fucking guy,' Omar says.

'I know one,' Bubs offers. 'I know where to go.'

Doubled up on six-packs, Bubs leads the way. It served as his go-to toke location in high school. They weave down the downtown one-ways and steam towards the lake. The stocky city skyline is a jagged EKG in the rearview. They park near the bike path trailhead. Exercisers stretch their calves against car tires, dressed in tight cycling attire. The air is warm and still, a breathy room-temperature bubble. It isn't a long walk to the clearing. Bubs hears Germ pop a preliminary can.

The spot hasn't changed. Set into a downslope, peeling towards the water, it's a dewy little outcrop shaded by oaks and maples and shrubs, a few logs and damp boulders for sitting. There is even a metal folding chair, a new addition. The memories Bubs has of the place come back in a clattering stampede. Starlight. Music. Older-brother-bought booze.

'This,' Germ says. 'Much more like it.' The water is so still Bubs can barely believe it. Doorway-cracks of light drip down through the trees. Beers are passed around.

Omar says, 'You know what I was thinking about the other day?'

Adkins and his fucking trains. In the arms room, remember?’

‘Jesus,’ Germ says. ‘The trainset. He had the fucking little trees and conductors and everything. The whole floor, covered with his trainset.’

Bubs goes, ‘And then the suits came in to inspect the arms room? You remember that guys’ face? Like he had to control-alt-delete himself because he had no idea what he was seeing.’

‘And the chickens,’ says Germ. ‘You remember the chickens? We show up one morning, and it’s pretty early, we were going to a range or something, and what’s-his-name had a fucking kennel full of chickens.’

‘What was it that he said again?’ Bubs asks. The lapping of the lake fills the gaps between his words. Omar hands each of them a cigarette.

‘I said to him, like, basically, What the fuck? And he goes, Well, I couldn’t keep them *outside*. As if that fucking answers my questions?’

‘Man,’ Omar says. ‘What the hell was that guys’ name? Apple-something. Something with fruit.’

‘*Something with fruit*,’ Bubs says. ‘Helpful.’

‘It’s good to be here with you guys,’ Germ says. ‘We live pretty close, you know, relatively speaking, but we don’t see each other enough. That’s my fault.’

‘Shut up. Nobody’s fault,’ says Omar. ‘We all have stuff going on.’

Bubs, feeling like now is the time, says, ‘It wasn’t Germ we were going to check on, was it? If you wanted to do a little intervention or whatever, you didn’t have to drag me down to Chicago.’

'You didn't actually make it,' Germ says. 'Just to be clear.'

'You guys could have just told me though.'

'Probably true,' Omar says. 'Guess I was worried you wouldn't come, you know?'

'I get it.'

Germ goes, 'How often would you say you're getting blitzed and driving, though?'

'Follow up,' Omar jumps in. 'How often would you say you're drinking, like, industrial runoff?'

'Choke on it. That was a one-time thing.'

Germ now, 'Doesn't seem like it.'

'I'm figuring things out,' Bubs goes.

Omar, his eyes jumping from the lake and back to Bubs, asks, 'Should we head out?'

'Not sure. What do you think?' Bubs says.

Germ says, 'What, nobody wants to ask me?'

Bubs takes a drink, then a drag. Sitting there with his friends, Bubs sees the moment as pound-for-pound one of the better ones he's had in some time. He is also proud of himself for noticing this—the pleasantness, the ambient joy—while still in the middle of it. Not much feels like it's changed, except for maybe everything. His stomach still gives him a pang or two, the side of his face faintly red.

They toss a few smiles back and forth. The summer daylight shows no signs of retreat. Omar, stubbing out his cigarette, looks over to Germ and says, 'Okay then, what now?'

'No idea.'

But Bubs has one. He polishes off his beer and slips his feet from his shoes. He aims his body at the shoreline. Moving towards it, he sheds his belt and his pants and his shirt. There are only a few yards left before the land gives way. He crashes into the water and strokes out into the blue. A chill comes over him in layers but before long it's gone and he feels himself floating, sinking, floating again, drifting, and the silence surrounding him is broken by the sound of two splashes somewhere behind him.