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Mail

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About the Contributor (Optional)

Levi Gangi is a senior English major. "Think of me what you will, I've got a little space to fill."

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Mail

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Haley lingered for a moment at the door, absentmindedly turning the doorknob back and forth. She looked in every direction but his, pretending to take an interest in the neighbor who cursed emphatically as he fumbled underneath his jacked up 1975 Le Mans. Preston shifted his weight back and forth, aware that she felt his lack of something to say, something to end it all. She certainly wasn't going to say anything else; their whole talk had been awkward enough.

He took quick little breaths and let them out in a kind of sigh, trying to prolong the moment by giving her the impression that he was about to tell her something that would be worth her staying around to hear. Cold air rushed past them, through them, escaping from the apartment out into the thick Virginia heat. He saw her shiver slightly as she began to inch away from the doorway. It was over.

"I'm sorry about all of this," he said. As if it had all been some kind of mutual agreement.

Taking her opportunity before his breathing charade could start again, Haley moved down the sidewalk and flicked open her car door, giving him an apologetic look that seemed to whisper, "I'm sorry too, but, you know."

No, I really don't know. He closed the door and retreated to the couch. His stomach turned and he felt the urge to sleep for a long, long time. This sort of

menacing irony had left him helpless before. A year ago an old tourist couple had run the yield sign on North Boundary Street and broad sided his car, sending the old man to the hospital. Naturally Preston felt bad, even went and visited him once, but the story had arisen from the disgruntled fellow's wife that following the accident, Preston had cursed out her husband enough to give him a minor nervous breakdown. Absurd and untrue as it was, when he walked into the hospital room he received glares and a chorus of condescending throat clearings from the family members who stood vigil around the not-so-injured man's bed. The gray-faced wife whispered something in hostility to those around her and then approached him. She had addressed him as one would a fourth grader who just knocked someone's glasses off and stepped on them.

"I don't know why you young people think you have such license to do and say as you please, but you've left my husband with far more than just physical injury."

"Excuse me?"

"It's unfortunate that you're still able to receive insurance money. We'd like you to leave before Arnold sees you and becomes distressed."

Just as he had that day, Preston now felt the bitter taste of what he really wanted to say swirling in his throat, unable to find a voice. Then he had been

wrongfully accused; today his ex-girlfriend had made a fool out of him.

He reclined into the couch's broken arm and stared out the window. Def Leppard's greatest hits minus a base line crackled out of the Le Mans's tinny speakers. As if sleeping with the new assistant professor of history wasn't enough, the bastard had sent Haley to Mobil one night wearing a sweatshirt from his alma mater to buy a frozen pizza and some condoms. That's how Preston had found out about them. Josh, his senior research partner, had joked to him on the way to Second Street's how come Haley got off not saying hello to people she knew in public, and what was up with "ribbed for pleasure?" Preston had caught a cab home, but he hadn't broken it off that night. He was still stewing over it the next night when Haley came over to watch a movie and had asked him if he wanted to help her finish off some leftover pizza. He had just asked her to leave, and he hadn't seen her again until today. He guessed she must have gotten the drift that he knew.

Why did she have to bring over the damn pizza? Absolutely unbelievable. Preston had known Haley for a long time, but he never would have expected something like that from her. She had changed a lot in the past few months, and he was just starting to see it now. He remembered things; one night on the phone he had been explaining how his mother was having a tough go of it – her management job wasn't panning out and she might not be able to help him with grad school rent in Buffalo next semester – and he had begun to wonder if Haley was even listening. Finally she

laughed out loud when he hadn't said anything remotely funny – she was watching TV. He hated that more than anything, and she knew that. It was so impersonal. Then last month he had gone to a party looking for her and found her hammered, sprawled listlessly on a couch with some guy next to her trying to get what he could. Preston had dragged her out to the car and dropped her off at her apartment, and the next day she didn't even remember seeing him at all. She had apologized up and down, and he just wrote off stuff like that when it happened; he had learned to trust Haley. Trust was something that came as an automatic to him after knowing someone so long. But now he was paying the price.

The doorbell clanged – two quick high pitch rattles. Preston knew who it was, and so he took his time getting to the door. He liked J.T., in a neighborish sort of way, but he definitely wasn't someone with whom Preston felt compelled to discuss life and love. He gathered his thoughts up and canned them before opening the door. J.T. was slumped against the doorpost, casting a fond look at his old relic. He kept his eyes on his car as Preston addressed him.

"How's it coming?"

"Well, she's fightin' me all right. But I got her right where I want her now, just needs some more tinkerin' here and there and she'll be back on her legs again. Driveable now, anyways. I kept the windows open all day to air her out, so that oil smell's pretty well gone. I spilled some in there last week, an' ol' Henry fussed so much about it that I almost dropped him off

on the side of the road 'stead of takin' him all the way home. He's a cranky s.o.b., always tries to get me in trouble for sortin' the mail wrong." He reached up and wiped his forearm across his chin, adjusting his posture so he faced Preston. He had a gaunt figure, lean but with skin too ruggedly tan to make him look skinny. His uneven complexion matched the threadbare white t-shirt and gray jeans, and his thick black hair grew over his ears and stuck off the back of his head like a shag carpet. A mesh cap would have rounded out his appearance, but he never wore hats – "Don't want to lose my hair before I have to," was what he said. He shoved his hands into his back pockets, and his face asked the question before he spoke the words. "Wanna take her for a ride?"

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Anyone else in the apartment complex would have declined, but then J.T. wouldn't have asked anyone else to ride in his car. "I don't have nothin' 'gainst ivy leaguers, but it's hard to find a one who's real all the way through." Preston didn't know whether J.T. thought he was real all the way through or not; but in Preston's favor, the only doorbell J.T. ever rang was number seventeen.

"Yeah, give me a second to grab a jacket." Preston moved away from the door.

"What're you nuts? Man, it's steamin' out here. I'd walk around naked if I didn't think someone'd turn me in." He pushed off from the doorway and went to fire up the Le Mans. Preston didn't plan on wearing the jacket, but since the night Haley stopped over with that damn pizza he had just started bringing it wherever

he went. It was nice to have something to carry around.

They drove around for a while, J.T. carrying the conversation by explaining where the various odd engine noises were coming from. Preston hummed and nodded, uninterested but glad for J.T.'s company. He had never really appreciated his neighbor's company before; he didn't mind it but he had never really thought twice about it. J.T. knew nothing that had happened, nothing about Haley or the history professor. In fact, he wondered whether J.T. really knew anything about him at all. Maybe that was a good thing; J.T. never talked about much besides cars, the U.S Mail, and ECHL hockey. Preston cracked the window to let out some of the heat. It felt good not to be treated like a wounded duck or like someone who needed a whole lot of alcohol.

J.T. pulled up at Napa Auto for some parts, and Preston grabbed his jacket and walked across the street to the gas station. He knew the girl behind the counter, Gina, and he nodded toward her as he walked over to the coolers. She eyed his jacket, and her voice carried past the snack aisle.

"You hear about the break-in over at the commuter student house?"

"No, was it bad?" *Where the hell's the Snapple?* He rummaged around the case, clanking the bottles all around. He stood for a minute with his head bowed, letting the frigid air dry the sweat on his forehead. Finally he sighed and grabbed some generic fruit juice. As he headed back toward the counter, Gina began to assail him with the details of the break in. He stood back and looked at her as she went off about the

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whole affair. Gina had gone out on a double date once, sophomore year, with Preston and Haley; she was one of Josh's "projects," although she wasn't one to have guessed it. He remembered how Haley had eyed him from across the table at the restaurant, trying to get him to hurry up and finish so they could make an excuse and leave. Gina had already spilled her drink all over Haley's entrée in the heat of one of her stories. Preston had done all he could not to burst out laughing at Haley's painfully overdramatic facial expressions; she was just so *cute*. At her apartment later that night he discovered that Haley had a bigger U2 collection than he did. They danced to "One" in her living room. "This is the first time I've ever kissed a girl," he lied. She laughed, they danced some more and she told him he'd never want to kiss another.

Preston paid for the drink and stepped back out into the heat without giving Gina a chance to ask any more questions. He walked across the street and got back into the Le Mans. J.T. was still in the store; he always took his time wherever he went. "People always pushin' past me to get nowhere," he liked to say. "I bet I'm savin' least ten years on my life by keepin' my heart rate steady all day long." The thing was that he actually did it. Preston had never seen him in a rush to do anything or go anywhere. He knew that well enough not to ask J.T. to work on his Nissan.

They drove back to the apartments, and J.T. asked Preston in for a drink to "beat the heat." It was barely five o'clock; the brutal sunlight was just starting to ease up. Preston sipped a Busch and felt the weight

of everything that had happened pulling his insides toward the floor. He hated that feeling, that sickening pressure that just wouldn't go away. It was one of those things that didn't get better the more you experienced it.

J.T. talked for a few minutes about the threat of mail bombs. "Happened down in North Carolina not too long ago. If I don't come back one day, well you'll know what happened - gets me kinda scared, some days. Hard to believe all the damn sickos that're out there." He finished up his beer and stuck the empty bottle back into the cardboard holder. Then he did what he always did when he didn't have anything else to say, he cleared his throat and said "Well," and then went over and turned the TV on. Preston stuck his empty bottle into the cardboard and got up to leave, then stood by the TV for a minute to be polite. He looked at the plaque hung above the entertainment center. U.S. Mail Dedicated Employee, Jeffrey Taylor DuBoise, Ten Years Service. He read it again. *Dubois*. They could've gotten his name right.

Josh and Derek came over a couple of nights later, and Derek put in *Lethal Weapon 4*. Afterward, they went out for a Food Lion raid. Preston drove. He always drove when they went out at night, and Josh started complaining and proved why.

"You got that light - shit, dude. You always stop. There's no one around." He stuck his head up front. "It's almost one o'clock, and *no comprende las Coronas* after one, man."

Derek rolled his eyes. "Quit with the Spanish,

Josh, you don't even know what you're saying, and you never get it right." Josh started talking mockingly in Spanish, and Derek yelled over him. "And who's gonna pay for Corona? That's expensive, and I know for a fact that you're freakin' broke."

The Nissan pulled into Food Lion and the three jumped out. Preston told them to cool it in the store, he didn't want to get kicked out. Derek and Josh made a beeline for the beer, and Preston stopped to grab some Gatorade. He definitely wasn't drinking with them again, not for a while. Preston read the prices underneath the bottles and reached into his pocket to pull out a handful of change. Then his eye caught some movement in the glass reflection next to him. He turned his head, and somehow kept everything in.

"Hey." Haley leaned up against the drink case and started squeaking her tennis shoes on the tile. He immediately realized that he didn't have his jacket with him.

"Preston, I'm sorry about the other day. I just didn't know what else to say." She seemed a whole lot different; the distance was gone. She always looked good to him with her hair in a ponytail and her blue sweatshirt on and that only made it worse. He closed the door and counted the Gatorades in his basket, then looked up into her face. *So much like before.*

"Seriously, I didn't know what else to say either. I just...Haley I don't know what to think anymore." He felt like he was in a blender.

"Listen, I just have to say this. I really don't want to lose you, Preston. I don't know what will

happen but I know that it's been hard not having you to talk to. I almost called you that night." She sounded tired. "Everything's been going crazy lately." She made an awkward movement and for a second Preston thought she was going to grab his hand. She didn't, but he shoved it into his pocket anyway and started fishing through his change again. *This can't be happening.* Everything was rushing to the top of his stomach. He fought against the urge to let his guard down.

"Haley, I just need some time. I'm just really confused, I don't even understand...this." He motioned toward her.

"I know, I..." She bit her lip. "Can I see you tomorrow and we'll just talk? I just want to talk, Preston. You know that wasn't really me the other day."

"Yeah, sure, I mean, I think we need to." The glimmer was too bright to pass up. He grabbed onto it with both hands, and she told him she'd stop over at his house after work. For a second, just a brief second, he thought she mouthed, "I love you" as her eyes left him. On the way home he didn't tell the guys what had happened. He had no idea what he was going to do, and talking to them might only give him a worse headache than he already had.

What am I supposed to think now? He sat against the broken couch arm, absently staring at the TV, trying to convince himself that she was for real. He so badly wanted to believe it. She said she had *almost* called...so why hadn't she? It was just by chance that they met at the store, would she have called him

anyways? Maybe not. It didn't matter now. They had stumbled upon each other, and now he was back at the table with a new hand. The only thing he was sure of was that not too long from now, she would be standing right here again.

He saw a shadow go by the window and then heard three raps on the door. He tilted his head back and moved his neck around, back and forth, trying to lose the headache. It wasn't going away, and he sure wasn't falling asleep anytime soon. He jolted himself off of the couch.

J.T. usually wasn't up this late, but there he was, slouched against the doorpost, looking at his car.

"She really needs a good washin'. Dirt on the windows shows up at night better'n in the daytime. Dustier'n hell around here in the summer, when it don't rain." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You're up pretty late. Guess it is Friday night." Preston wondered sometimes whether it might actually be hard for his neighbor to look away from his car. Finally J.T. turned to face him, and his expression tightened.

"You believe this crap? AC's broke. Musta broke early, I got home from work and got hit in the face with stale-ass air, the kind that's just been settin' all day. Just too doggone tired to monkey with it, an' I can't sleep much 'less it's cool." Preston stepped aside and J.T. crowded past, taking a satisfied breath. "Glad to see yours is crankin'. You got anything to drink? Beer just don't cut it when a man's this thirsty."

Preston killed the TV and went to the fridge.

He grabbed two Gatorades, tossed one to J.T., and sat back down against the broken arm.

"Hey, here's the stuff!" J.T. exclaimed. He unscrewed the lid and drained half the bottle in a matter of seconds. He let out a sign of relief and then threw himself into a chair. The room was quiet for a moment, and J.T. got a little embarrassed. He cleared his throat and held up the bottle. "Thanks. Preciate it, bein' late an' all." He sat up a little in the chair.

"No problem." Preston came out of his wandering thoughts. "I'm just a little out of it tonight." He shifted and leaned forward onto his quads. "Henry give you any hell lately?"

J.T. relaxed. "Naw, he's been mostly quiet. His wife passed on a couple of months ago, and it gets to him once in a while. That's gotta be a hard thing, losin' a woman who's been with ya from the start. He's a good man, Henry is, I suppose a man's entitled to fuss sometimes after livin' for seventy-five years." He was pensive for a moment. Then, "How's your girl? I ain't seen her come in here as often as she used to."

Preston looked up. J.T. had never asked him a question like that before, at least not that he could remember. He answered before he thought enough to think up a lie.

"No, things got rocky about a week back and we broke up." He stopped. *What the heck.* "I found out she was sleeping around with some professor." He thought it would feel good to say it again, but it sounded more like a cheap shot. He just couldn't shake that look on her face tonight.

J.T. was silent for a few minutes, and now Preston began to feel embarrassed. He tried to think of something to say to change the subject, but J.T. broke in first.

“You know, you’re a real good guy. You gotta be kiddin’ me. With all the bastards at this college, she finds you and then goes and screws you over. Damn.” His face took on a determined look. He pulled at the loose threads on the arm of the chair and took a swig of Gatorade. “Damn.”

J.T. had never been so adamant about anything. He always said, “Life’s just a ride we’re on. Ain’t no good getting’ hung up on all the details.” Preston looked at him, unable to say anything. He kept going.

“She don’t even know what she done to you either, I bet. It’s hard to sleep cause you’re stomach’s all in knots. Shit, I know the feeling.” He was sitting on the edge of the chair now, waving his free hand all over as his voice rose. “Then, what she’ll do, because she don’t give a damn what you’re feelin’, she’ll come back around one day and she’ll wanna keep things going and stir the whole thing up again when you’re just gettin’ over it. God, man, I’d hate to see that. They just wanna drag it all out till you don’t know what to do.” He took another swig and then set the bottle down beside the chair. The kitchen clock ticked loudly through the silence, breaking it in waves. Preston thought he should say something.

“We really had a lot of good times together, I just didn’t see it coming. I guess that’s what’s getting

at me right now, me not seeing it coming. She wasn’t...like that.” *Ok, don’t get yourself worked up again.* He forced a laugh. “It’d be nice if there was something to make it all go away for good, you know, some really bitter German lager or something.”

J.T. didn’t change his expression. “I’ll tell you what’ll cure it. You gotta drop her and clear out of the whole thing, clear out for good. She’s gettin’ the best of you now, but you let her keep comin’ around, and you keep on hopin’ for her to be the way she was, and it’ll eat you alive. She didn’t just step over the line, she went and leaped off the cliff. Clear out, man. She’s made her bed, and you sure weren’t in it, man.”

Preston bobbed his head in acknowledgement while J.T. talked, amazed at what he was hearing. This was the guy who thought “real living” was watching an all-out brawl at a Richmond Renegades game. It was quiet for a few minutes after J.T. finished; a few sets of headlights scanned the window as the college kids rolled in from long nights. J.T. leaned back in the chair, looking a little spent. He finally said “Well,” and wondered aloud what movies might be on this time of night. Preston fumbled through the channels until he found an old Clint Eastwood flick, and then slid down on the couch and closed his eyes. He didn’t even wake up an hour later when J.T. turned off the TV and got up to leave.

Preston gathered up his senior research in the morning and put everything he needed into his backpack. It was almost finished anyways. He grabbed the remaining Gatorades and threw them in too. He

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thought about leaving a note on the door for her, saying that he was going home for a few days, wanted to get away for a little while. He sat on the couch thinking about it as the sun bled through the red curtains. He slid a note under J.T.'s door instead, and left a message on Josh's answering machine, saying he'd be back by Wednesday or so. He found the landlord's address up in Buffalo and wrote out the check for the security deposit for the new apartment. He walked through each room, turned off the lights, turned the AC down, and shut off the answering machine. Then he locked the door behind him and threw his bag into the back seat of his car. He turned out of the parking lot and drove east, mailing the check on the way out of town.