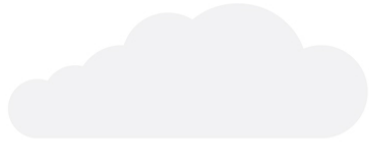


HOW LUCKY

A NOVEL



WILL LEITCH



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A NOVEL

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HARPER

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

To Alexa

Epigraph

HOW LUCKY CAN ONE MAN GET?

—*John Prine*

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Prologue

My life is not a thriller. My life is the opposite of a thriller.

What a relief. Who wants their life to be thrilling? Don't get me wrong. We want our lives to be *exciting*: we want them to inspire, to be surprising, to provide us a reason to get up and experience something new every day. But thrilling? No way, man. Everything that happens in a thriller would be completely fucking terrifying in real life. You've seen a million chase scenes in movies, so many that you barely even look up from folding laundry when one happens in whatever you are watching on Netflix at that particular moment. They are dull; they are rote and boring. But if you were *in* one of those chase scenes, it would be a nightmare. You'd be running . . . for your life! If you survived it, you would spend years trying to get over it. You'd shake and cower about it in therapy, you'd have nightmares reliving it from which you woke up screaming, you'd have trouble developing any sort of human connection with another person. It would be the worst thing that ever happened to you.

Real life, mercifully, isn't a thriller. Those things don't happen to you, and they don't happen to me. My life is nothing but small moments, and so is yours. We don't live in a series of plot points. We should be thankful for that. We should realize how lucky we are.

When I say that I know that she got in the Camaro at 7:22 a.m., trust that I know this for certain. My certainty is a result of my routine. You might not think so, but my routine really isn't that different from your routine. I am certain because the day was an ordinary, pedestrian morning like every other one. I am certain because I saw her like I always see her.

Marjani woke me up at 6:00 a.m. We had a silent breakfast. I answered emails and scrolled through Instagram until the *Today* show came on and alerted me to all the fresh horrors that had taken place in the world the night before. After Hoda cheerfully ran down how everything's falling apart, Al explained that it was going to be 106 in Las Cruces today, hoo boy, and then he grinned and threw it to 11Alive, the local affiliate in Atlanta, like he does every weekday at 7:17. Weatherman Chesley McNeil, which is somehow his real name, grinned like *he* always does every weekday at 7:17. Then it was WIZometer time. Every television station should have a WIZometer. It's

just a number between 1 and 11, 11 being the platonic ideal of weather on this planet and 1 presumably being a meteor shower that will kill us all, that sums up the weather for that day. Chelsey McNeil has exactly four minutes to tell us the local weather and get to the WIZometer before he has to throw it back to AI in New York.

Those four minutes can be agony. It is worrisome how much of my emotional well-being I sometimes wrap up in the WIZometer. I work out of my home. I'm here all the time. "Outside," beyond my front porch, is a place I visit only sporadically. The WIZometer is my invite to see the world for a few minutes. You give me an 8 or more on the WIZometer, like we got today ("You're gonna like the way your weekend is shaping up, Atlanta!"), I'm scooting out the door to the front porch posthaste. More to the point: I'm scooting out at 7:21 a.m. It was the case this day, it will be the case tomorrow, it will remain the case as long as I'm able to get out there, and as long as the weather report is good.

Marjani walked to her Honda Civic and waved goodbye, *See you tomorrow Daniel*. Our routine now is a wordless dance, forged from years of practice, Marjani the Astaire, me the Ginger Rogers, doing what she does but backward and in heels. Her English is really good now, but the years in which she spoke so little taught us this silent tango. Sometimes we talk. Sometimes we don't. I watched her old car groan and groan before starting. She's had that thing since I've known her, and I have no idea how it's still running.

Marjani drove down Agriculture, toward Stegeman Coliseum, where she had to help clean up after an athletic booster event the night before. There was a University of Georgia home football game coming up, which meant all sorts of big events during the week, which meant more work for Marjani. She helps me in the morning, and then it's off to a series of odd jobs, cleaning, babysitting, house visits, occasionally cooking. That's what she did the day before, and that's what she will do for hundreds of tomorrows. If that sputtering car can make it, anyway.

I took a sip from my water straw and watched her leave from my front porch. She had to slam on the brakes as some kid with a Misfits backpack absentmindedly waded into the middle of the street, and he raised his hand, partly out of apology, mostly out of obliged apathy, and shuffled off into the woods. The road was otherwise clear, a quiet type of morning when all of Athens is hungover. Everyone seemed to be sleeping an extra hour. Even

the student family housing building, which is usually clattering with dutiful doctoral students, was sluggish and dim. I took a deep breath and tried to absorb a rare moment of silence outside. How often is it just me out here? How often am I outside with no one else?

Then I saw her. I am making it sound, as I describe it to you now, as if it were a big dramatic moment, like she jumped out at me, like I couldn't miss her, like she was wearing a bright red coat in a black-and-white world. Like I was in a thriller. But it wasn't like that at all. She was just walking like she always walks. She is usually not the only person out this early but was the only person that day. I had seen her every day at this time for the last three weeks, prompt, right on the button. A sophomore college student, maybe, carrying a blue backpack and walking on the sidewalk in the same direction Marjani had just driven. She was meandering up Ag Drive at 7:22 in the morning on a beautiful fall day, an 8, maybe 9 on the WIZometer, easy, just another kid walking to class.

As usual, the only thing different about her was that she wasn't staring at a phone. She never even had headphones in. She doesn't look up, she is always by herself, she blends into the sidewalk. She has never seen me out here, and frankly, I would never have thought to notice her either if she weren't out here the same time as I am every day. She just walks. That's all she ever did.

Until that day. That day, she stopped for a second. No reason: no car pulling in front of her to get out of the way of or anything. She just stopped, looked up, and for the first and only time made eye contact with me. It was a clear accident; her eyes darted away faster than they'd landed on me. But she saw me. And I saw her. She then stopped again, glanced back up at me, closer this time, with a little smile. She raised her right hand. *Hello*. Then she went back on her walk.

The Camaro turned left off Southview Drive onto Agriculture. It was a drab tan one that needed a new paint job and a lot more tender loving care than it was currently receiving. I'd guess it was late '60s, vintage—back when the Camaro was considered a classy sports car rather than something you tried to go parking in with Sally or Betty back in the 1970s. It is a car worthy of the work you'd need to put into it to restore it to its former glory, work it wasn't currently receiving.

The car pulled beside her and stopped. She looked inside. She seemed to shrug. I couldn't see what was happening inside the car. She shook her

head once, seemed to laugh lightly, then shrugged again. The driver then opened the passenger door. I couldn't make out his face, but I caught two things: a glimpse of a shiny, almost translucent boot tip on his left foot—it shone like chrome—and a blue Atlanta Thrashers hat on his head. I remember finding the Thrashers hat strange, even in the moment. There was an NHL team here called the Atlanta Thrashers back ten, fifteen years ago, but no one in the South likes hockey, so they moved to Winnipeg. Who wears an Atlanta Thrashers hat?

She paused and looked slightly to her right, as if she were making sure no one was watching. Then she looked to her left and saw me again. She quickly looked away, as if embarrassed, or maybe just searching, as if she were looking for . . . what? My permission? Maybe she was just glad someone was looking. Maybe she wished no one was. I have no idea. It was just another fall morning. There was no reason to think about it the rest of the day, and I didn't. You wouldn't have either. It was nothing.

But she did get in the car. It was 7:22 in the morning. I am certain of it.

Tuesday

1.

At 11:13, I'm called "zombie intern cocksucker" for the first time by a stranger, and all told, that's not a bad little run for a sleepy Tuesday. Midweek travelers are mostly business travelers, who are on the average nicer than tourists but much more devastating and furious when wronged because They Have Status. But today's an easy Tuesday. It's another good WIZometer day, which must have everyone in a better mood.

"Zombie intern cocksucker" is, I assume, a reference to my soullessness, my lack of power and influence in society, and my general odiousness, respectively. (The latter is too crude and too irrelevant to the pertaining conversation to refer specifically to what may or may not be my sexual orientation.) The instigating incident is a minor storm, the only one I can see on my Weather Underground radar, that is apparently keeping the airplane @pigsooeyhogs11 is hoping to take to Nashville grounded in Little Rock, Arkansas. While I can appreciate the unfortunate situation of being stuck in Arkansas, there is not much I can do for him, being as I am sitting in this chair and this desk in Athens, Georgia. But he doesn't want me to do anything for him. He just wants me to sit and take it. I possess a unique set of skills for this job, and sitting and taking it is foremost among them.

@spectrumair sitting at LIT for 25 minutes now no updates WTF?

@spectrumair 35 minutes now still waiting #fucksspectrumair

@spectrumair i know you dont give a shit but im still here

We are trained not to respond to every single tweet. It might be possible for us to do so—Spectrum Air is a regional airline that only flies back and forth between eight different airports, three times a day; there aren't enough passengers to overwhelm us even if every single one of them were pissed off—but responding to each one would give them the illusion that we actually cared about their complaints, which we do not. Sure, we have to

look like we care: the last thing any brand wants, even a tiny regional airline based in a field in Alabama, is to appear as if it does not value each and every one of its loyal customers. But they do not care. If they cared, they would hire a full-time public relations staff, and a social media coordinator, and I dunno, maybe get some planes that don't have to be grounded because a couple of clouds were spotted fifty miles away. That is not what kind of airline Spectrum Air is. Spectrum Air is the sort of airline that pays me twenty-five bucks an hour to blandly respond to “dissatisfied” tweets. At \$79 one-way from Little Rock to Nashville, you get what you pay for.

Of course, this is not what I tell him. After his third tweet, and an alert from the home office that the flight is on an indefinite hold until the “weather incident” has resolved, I respond. It takes me a little longer to respond than it might take other people, which I suspect is another reason they like me at this job.

@pigsooeyhogs11 We apologize for the inconvenience. Weather has delayed your flight. We have no further info at this time but will update as soon as we know anything. 🙏

Always use the hang loose emoji when responding to angry people. How angry can you be at an emoji? If we communicated solely with emojis, there would be no wars.

Turns out, @pigsooeyhogs11 can be quite angry at an emoji: the zombie intern cocksucker line comes out two tweets later. Once a customer becomes obscene or abusive, there's nothing you can do with them, so they tell us to just mute them on Twitter right then and there. You aren't supposed to block them—that lets them know you heard them—you are instructed simply to mute them, turning all their screams and complaints into empty wails into the ether. They are simply shouting into space.

I'll confess there is a certain lonely justice to the idea of pissed-off people pounding insults into their phone that literally no one will ever see because they've been muted. In this way, my job is almost a public service. Everybody has their demons, and in your daily life, it's difficult to find places to vent all those frustrations. You can yell into your pillow, or take it out on your dog, or just let it all build up until it explodes at the wrong time, hurting yourself or someone you care about. Expressing rage online toward a discount regional airline, I'd argue, is in fact one of the most productive,

healthy ways to express your rage. People have to get it out somehow. Might as well get it out at us.

But, still, I never mute them. Right now they're furious travelers, but outside our plane they're just sons and daughters and moms and dads and coworkers and bosses and the fifth guy in line at Publix and worried hospital visitors, and eventually they're just the guy lying in the coffin that everybody sitting in the fold-up chairs feels guilty they didn't spend more time with. They are working through something, desperate to be heard, and it feels churlish to deny them that. Once he threw out the "cocksucker," the conversation was over. But shutting someone up, someone in pain, feels cruel. Company policy is to mute them. But I just can't do it.

One of the things I do like to do, when someone has crossed the line and company policy says I'm not allowed to interact with him anymore, is to look for other people who are on the same flight, who have complained about their flight in less vulgar ways, and give *them* information. Maybe they're sitting near the angry person, and they can tell him. That's what I want to believe. I like to imagine that when a stranger on the flight of a person who called me a cocksucker learns that the flight is taking off in twenty minutes, she'll walk over and let that person know. The angry person puts down his phone, forgetting he was ever angry in the first place, smiles, and says, "Oh, thank you." The other person smiles back. Two strangers have exchanged information in a pleasant fashion, and each has made the other's day, in a small but not inconsequential way, a little bit better. We have these sorts of interactions all day. Someone opens the door for us. A man picks up the glasses we dropped in the checkout line. No one remembers these quiet, passing, minor acts of banal kindness we see every day. We only remember the guy who called us a cocksucker on Twitter. People are kind to one another in the real world, even if it's a meaningless kindness. It goes unremarked upon. But it shouldn't. We are always much angrier on our phones than we are in the real world.

I'm either terrific at this job, or horrible at it. I haven't figured out which. But it's a job, and to be honest, there aren't that many jobs that would have me. I'm certainly not going to complain about this one. Even if @pigsooeyhogs11 just told me he hopes I get brain cancer and die in a fire. Come to think of it, I am not sure why having brain cancer would make the fire any more painful or fatal.

The doorbell rings, and as usual I've been online for so long I haven't noticed that the entire morning has passed. I log out and make my way over to the front door. Travis is making his Tuesday lunchtime visit, and he brought Butt Hutt BBQ sandwiches. I've already forgotten @pigsooeyhogs11 and every other interaction I had this morning. Funny how that works. 🤔