

The Least Non-negative Integer
Curt Eriksen

For Chiqui Mariscal

The ringing of the phone disrupts my concentration just as I'm about to solve the equation. But it could be my wife, so I get up and answer it.

"Carl? This is Mary Ann."

If I wouldn't have said hello I could simply put the phone down again. But now it's too late.

"Carl, I know we've had our differences. I know you don't like me. But something's wrong now. I haven't heard from Sonny in a month."

"What do you mean?"

"It was a Thursday, Carl. That's the last time I saw him. Exactly four weeks ago today."

It sounds like she's standing in the next room, and since the phone is cordless I walk in there to make sure she's not around.

"Where'd he go?"

"I don't know, that's why I'm calling you." The anxiety lifts her voice higher. "I don't know where he is."

"I haven't talked to him since"—I think, and remember—"September. That's the last time he called to bum some money off of me."

She knows this, but won't admit being party to it.

Instead she says, “The window in the living room is still open. Just a little. And it’s been that way for a month.”

She does admit that they argued that afternoon, but she blames it on him. “I talked to his doctors. He was bipolar, you know.”

Once, before my first son was born, when I hadn’t heard from Sonny for a couple of years, it had occurred to me that he might have died. We went way back—grew up on the same street, smoked dope together for the first time, even fondled some of the same neighborhood girls—but Sonny was always entering and leaving my life, once he dropped out of school and we parted ways. Just like the photo on the now classic album cover, where he’s walking out on the front and just a shadow on the back. You never knew what to expect from him.

“I’ve been in touch with all the hospitals. And I’ve called the bank too. But they need a court order to release any information. I’m going to notify the Bureau of Missing Persons. Do you think I should do that, Carl? It’s been a whole month. I’ve waited long enough.”

It’s true, I suppose, he could have just wandered off somewhere. Though he wouldn’t have gone far.

“I would have stayed with him that last night, but my mom wanted to go out. She has a beagle that starts howling whenever it’s left on its own.”

Mary Ann keeps talking, and I listen very carefully.

“The neighbors always complain. They’ve threatened to cut out its vocal chords. So I had to go over there and sit with the dog.”

Now I know that Sonny was lying the last time we spoke, when he assured me that he hadn’t seen Mary Ann in months.

“He lost his keys and he came back demanding mine. He was so angry to lose his keys again.”

It wasn't that long ago that he'd been hospitalized after an overdose and came home to find that she had ransacked his apartment. He hadn't bothered to change the lock after he kicked her out, and she used her own keys and satisfied her coke habit by taking all the cash he had stashed under the loose floorboard. When he called to tell me this, within days of the eviction notice being served, he was sobbing and I had to hold the phone away from my ear.

“I gave him my keys and then he went out again. I don't know where he went. But when he came back he had that look in his eyes. You could always tell when a fit was coming on.”

I've still got one of Sonny's spiral notebooks, dating from the days immediately after he left the band, when he tried to make it on his own. He was less interested in rock and roll than he was in the sounds nature produces, and he would climb mountains with a recording device in search of inspiration. At the same time he was intent upon experimenting with every hallucinogenic or psychedelic plant he could find. His old man was a day laborer and Sonny left school in the middle of the ninth grade, but these notebooks are filled with chemical schemata and symbols and carefully observed drawings of leaves and roots. The descriptions are worthy of a botanist, at least until the toxins in question started to flow through his veins. That's when he wrote things like, “It makes you feel like a king, but the comedown is bad, bad, bad...”

“I called the police but they can't force the door without the authorization of a judge. And I don't have my keys anymore. They said he couldn't be in the apartment. It would stink too bad. Someone would have noticed.”

Although it is winter.

There's a calendar near the phone jack and I bend to take a closer look at it. If Sonny ODED that night, on the anti-depressants and other medication he was always consuming, it would have been the 13th of December. I try to remember, but despite his having told me—and more than once—I can't recall the date of Sonny's birth, though it wasn't far from my own.

"I would have called you earlier," she says. "But I didn't have your number. Someone stole my cell phone..."

My wife walks in then, with the baby in her arms. It's raining heavily and she's talking to me as soon as she pushes the door open, telling me about the grocery bags in the car and dropping the umbrella in its stand. She sets the baby down and he crawls to me and grabs the legs of my jeans and pulls himself to his feet. He has gentle brown liquid eyes, like Sonny had, and he looks up at me and lifts his arms and starts insisting that I pick him up.

"I don't know what else to do," Mary Ann wails. "I'm beside myself now. I've been waiting and hoping, but now I'm starting to imagine all sorts of horrible things."

"Who are you talking to?" says my wife, as she drapes her coat over the back of a chair. She never understood Sonny, or my relationship to him. She thought he took advantage of me. "Always bailing him out," that's what she used to say.

"I thought maybe he might have gone out there," says Mary Ann. "He always liked it so much out there, in the country. It was so peaceful. You can't imagine how much he appreciated that."

The baby's stamping a foot and tugging on my jeans and my wife is demanding to know who it is I'm talking to.

"I've looked everywhere," says Mary Ann. "But I can't find Sonny anywhere."

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