

Procedural

by Joey Delgado

Val walks through the world, absorbed in the day to day. A plainspoken narrator drones on in his mind. The nondescript voice marks time to the beat of Val's banal footfall, hums along with the whirl of Val's modest, midsize sedan. The narration is loudest in the twilight hours of his solitary meandering, accompanied only by the crescendo and decrescendo of late afternoon street traffic. Doppler on backing vocals.

Val listens, terrified. The day's tasks recapped unceremoniously. The voice eerily calm, a steady timbre with no rise or fall, each entry tinged with an air of finality, the somber cadence of a detective reading off the stitched timeline of a murder victim's final hours.

6:03 P.M.—Rents movie from Redbox kiosk outside 7-11 half a mile from his house. \$1.75 charged to one of his three credit cards.

6:18 P.M.—Spends \$15 dollars on gas at Chevron. Buys fountain drink and a Slim Jim. The clerk at the Chevron remembers his stooped shoulders and tired eyes.

6:32 P.M.—Security camera in the designated resident's parking of the condominium complex where he lives caught him walking away from his midsize sedan, walking toward camera and out of frame, rented video in one hand, fountain drink in the other.

The voice never changes, never becomes hurried or frantic, the volume never climbs. The only changes are measurable physiological functions; heart rate, blood pressure, vasodilation. Autonomic flight response pushing Val to his front door, the fumbling of keys—

Scratches around the keyhole indicate panic.

—a hasty entry, the loud *thwack* of a deadbolt thrown into place. The measured Serlingesque tone sends him to the medicine cabinet, shaky hand knocking a bottle of ibuprofen into the sink, the contents

rattling until it settles against the rusted head of the drain stopper. He white knuckles a prescription bottle of Xanax, one falls on the bathroom tile, skidding out of sight, and he fingers out another.

*toxicology report shows he has/had benzodiazepine in his system.
Stray pill found between the toilet and an overflowing trash can.*

Val pours a glass of wine and starts the movie. He sits as far back on his couch as possible, knees pulled up against his chest.

11:56 P.M.—Texts the following to a male friend: Looking forward to tomorrow. That Instagram pic looks fucking hot.

7:56 A.M.—Parking lot security camera shows Val running to car, wearing scrubs, most likely leaving for work

Val drives to work, sees his heartbeat through his shirt. The blood in his veins, the acid in his stomach, lymph, all the humors contained in a human body feel like a shaken can of soda.

8:22 A.M.—Traffic cam shoots photo of Val running a red light at Grand and Arrow Hwy.

He does what he was told to do. Breathe in through the nose and out through pursed lips, yoga breathing.

He wants it to stop, the voice.

He's fucking frightened the voice will stop.

