

Anthony

by Robert James Russell

ANTHONY

I decide after Jill and I have dinner at her flat and smoke an enormous joint that I need to call Tyler, a conversation I'm not particularly looking forward to. I leave and she's not happy, but I tell her I have homework and we kiss a little bit standing by her door. She tries to grab my crotch to entice me to stay, pleading with that crooked smile. I leave anyway. Walking back from Hugh Catanach Hall I cross the pedestrian bridge that extends over a Warwick Road, high brick walls on both sides of the road, old walls with old vines on them. Cars speeding, later afternoon almost dusk. Stop on the center of the bridge after I pass a black boy that looks familiar. Tall, striking, shaved head, stubble. He's walking and flirting with a chubby American girl who looks at me for an uncomfortable amount of time. Nondescript. Standing there I take a cigarette from my jacket pocket that I borrowed from Jill and light it with a Bic lighter I stole from Alex when I was buying some more Vicodin from him yesterday. He tried getting me to stay...again. Light it, inhale. Feel good. I turn to my right and study the bridge as it disappears into a thick bunch of trees, the leaves barely hanging now. The direction I will eventually head. Beyond the trees Hammond Student Village, a rugby field and a hockey field, separated by a flimsy partition made from a black tarp. The library somewhere even further back. I take a deep hit of the cigarette and feel the smoke bury itself so deep in me it may not come out. Burns, a pain I deserve. Striking hot. Study the lighter, black plastic casing, rub my finger over thumbwheel slowly then ignite a small red flame that I proceed to blow out. I do this two more times as I formulate what I will say to Tyler even though it doesn't really matter anyway. A couple of boys pass, boys I saw at a club during Orientation week although I can't remember any more details. I just remember them dancing closely. Whispering. Their eyes. They study me, I can feel it, and I just look down at the cars drive by. Cue

a gust of wind, my hair blowing. My North Face jacket keeping me warm and looking very cool. Imagine they check me out as I pose which makes me smile. Need to be more stoned. Once I'm alone again I take out my cell and unfold the piece of paper I wrote the number down on and call it. The rings sound distant like they are traveling far underground, through dirty wires buried like the smoke still in my lungs, the smoke I keep there. The burning I keep there. That I deserve.

"Hello?" Tyler says, angry. "Who's this?"

"Hey, Tyler," I say.

"Yeah, who's that?"

"It's uh...it's *me*, Anthony."

"Shit! *Anthony*. What the *fuck* are you doing, man? How are you? Didn't, in all honesty, expect to hear from you, at least not til Christmas, you know?"

"Yeah. Been, uh...meaning to call or something. Email at least."

"Do you even *have* my email address?"

"No, actually, but, I mean, I could get it from Shawn or something...if I wanted."

"True." Pause. "Shit man, what time is it there?"

"Like almost seven."

"Fucking crazy, huh? You used to the time change? I bet it's so fucking weird."

"Was, but I've been here since September, so...*you know*."

"Wow, that's right. Fucking two months. Crazy. How's school?"

"School's...you know, *fine*, I guess."

"*Classic* Anthony with his detailed explanations. Probably fucking stoned off your fucking ass right now, eh?"

"No, I'm sober."

"Totally?"

"Yup," I say, seeing the two boys who walked by a moment ago come back toward me, slowly, talking amongst themselves at the other end of the bridge. Arguing, maybe.

"So you don't do *any* shit anymore? Man, I don't even know you," he says, laughing. Disappointed I think.

"I didn't do *that* much to begin with."

"I guess, yeah."

"Anyway, you know, just not my lifestyle anymore. Better than that now."

"Well, look at you. Evolving before my very eyes."

"So, I have to ask you, Tyler, I mean...I've been *meaning* to call to ask you—"

"Ask away, sexy beast."

"Yeah, alright, well...saw my dad last week, he said you came over to my house?"

"Shit, right. *That*."

"I thought we had concluded we wouldn't be *doing* anything like *that*," I say, the wind picking up, the boys still conversing amongst themselves. A pack of freshman girls with blonde hair and bulky builds crossing now. Gaggling. A truck drives by below us, loud.

"Where are you? It sounds loud as shit."

"I'm outside...on a bridge."

"Oh...*cool*." Pause, an unwrapping sound coming from his end of the line, maybe mail being opened. Silence, then, "Are you *mad*?"

"Tyler, it's just...*not* cool. I didn't go to *your* house, did I? I didn't...fuck, I dunno, I didn't do anything like that to *you*."

"What exactly did your dad say, man?"

"What?"

"Your dad, what did he say...*exactly*."

"Just that you came over...asked about me, if I was home."

"Speaking of which, asshole, thanks for telling me you were fucking leaving."

"Yeah."

"I don't really...get that. I'm over it, I am, but like, why did you tell me the wrong time? I thought you still were in town for like a few more weeks, felt like a douchebag."

"It was...easier. Things got complicated on my end and...I just needed to go, alone."

"Well, whatever. Done now, anyway."

"I guess," I say, igniting the Bic a few more times, letting the wind shush the flame this time. Always does. Five for five.

"Anyway, what are you doing these days?"

"Same shit."

"Are you, uh...seeing anyone, now?"

"I am, but I don't know if we should talk about this."

"Probably not. Are you happy about everything, though?"

"Ha, I guess. You know I don't like questions like that."

"I know. I'm dating a pretty cool chick. I guess we're dating, anyway."

"I see," he says, silence again. "How's *that* working out for you?"

"It's...everything's good. She likes me a lot."

"What's her name?"

"Jill."

"British?"

"American, actually. From San Diego."

"Always did have a type, eh?"

"I...*guess*."

"I'm sorry this is so awkward, Anthony."

"Me too."

"It really shouldn't be, and I'm sorry I, you know, stopped over."

"It's not really your fault. I should have told you I was gone."

"Yeah, you should've. But...oh well."

"And, uh...don't worry, I'll have that money for you when I get back. I don't want you to think that I left because of that, okay?"

"I know you didn't," he says, the unwrapping sound again.

"You think I *actually* fucking thought that? Jesus, you don't know me that well, then."

"No, I know, I just needed to say it. I don't like shit like that hanging over my head."

"I know you don't, *Schott*."

"Don't call me that."

"Ah, yes, distance yourself from the Schott legacy. How *could* I forget?"

"Well, I have to...I have *dinner* plans."

"With *Jill*?" he says, annoyed again.

"Yeah. What are you doing tonight?"

"I dunno. I'll find *something*."

"You always do."

"I know. Don't be a fucking stranger, man. We don't have to play house or anything, but I mean, we should talk more."

"Yeah."

"I'm serious. And I always appreciate drunk calls too, fucker."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Ah, but you don't *do* that shit anymore. No drinks or drugs. Nothing. *Boring* Anthony these days, right?"

"Yeah," I say. Pause. "Alright, I'm gonna get going. Bye."

"See ya around, Schott."

"Okay," I say and hang up. Dump what's left of the cigarette on the ground. A headache comes up from my neck, pounding hard. Furious. The two boys are still there and they approach when they see me pocket my cell phone. One of the boys, he appears to be the leader, scruffy, hair short, blue ribbed sweater with a logo I'm not familiar with, raises his hand as he comes toward me. Parts his lips. Large brown eyes.

"Hey," he says, "I'm a...sorry to do this, hope we're not bothering you, but we think we know you, or...met you *somewhere* before. You look familiar," he says. English.

"Yeah, I was thinking that too," I say back.

"Jack," the leader says, extending his hand to shake. I do.

"Anthony."

“George,” the other boy says shyly. Blonde hair, English. Tight Burberry sweater. Dark jeans, bootcut.

“Yeah, you really *do* look familiar,” Jack says, pauses, looks me up and down in a way I'm not familiar with, an English way, then, “Do you go out much or—”

“With my flatmates, yeah.”

“Brill,” George says.

“What are you...I mean, we were wondering what you're doing tonight. You got plans or—”

“Yeah,” George says, interrupting, feeling a bit less shy now it seems. “We were going to go back to Jack's room, back *this* way. He lives in Hugh and, anyway, we were going to drink or play some games or something.”

Smile, feel the thumbwheel of the lighter against my index finger. Been spinning it this whole time, unaware. Oblivious. This whole time, oblivious. Right there in front of me. Look quickly behind me, toward Hammond, the rugby fields, etcetera. Turn back to the boys. Talking amongst each other, sharing glances at each other and at me. Smile again. Look at cars. Look beyond them to the path that snakes away from the bridge back toward the many dorms of Hugh Catanach Hall wondering what Jill's doing and if I could sneak by her place without being seen.

“Lead the way,” I say, still smiling.

