

A Bird's Eye View

By Katie Liske

John received the phone call on Tuesday evening while he was driving home from a long day at the auto repair shop. The dissonant staccato beeping of his too-old iPhone rang sharply, and he was taken aback by the fact that someone, anyone, had ventured to call him in the first place, let alone on his cell phone. After years of letting his loved ones' communications expire in the voicemail box, his phone had begun to buzz and ring progressively less frequently. He was surprised to hear it make any noise at all. Still, he wasn't excited to answer the unfamiliar number from an even less familiar area code.

There was a good reason he stopped talking to people, after all: nobody understood him, and he felt like even his closest friends and family didn't care for him that much. His parents were still unhappy with the fact that they paid for him to get a Master's degree only for him to choose a career as a grease monkey, and all of his friends from college had moved up in the world to an educated echelon in which he felt he had no part. Plus, none of them could comprehend how a once-inspired environmentalist with two degrees in ecology had come to be a burnt-out wage slave who drove a gas guzzler to his job, where he fixed up others' gas guzzlers so they could guzzle more gas. In a way, he didn't understand it, either. At some point during his studies, he simply lost the ability to hope for a better future. None of his efforts -- academically, individually, or as an eco-protester -- had managed to make the slightest dent in the crisis facing the natural world. With every endangered species gone extinct, every polluted water source, every sea turtle dead with a straw up its nose, he had grown weary of the futility. So he resigned himself to complacency, to compliance with the system against which he had once raged.

“...John? John Darwin?” questioned the voice on the other side, a voice that was gentle, but without timidity, without submissiveness. “It’s Maria. From Santa Barbara?” John swerved into the left lane, then back. This was the last caller he could have expected. In college, he had always had a thing for Maria, and they often worked on research projects together. If he was ever an avid environmentalist, she was almost an eco-terrorist. Plus, it was true that some of his *Save Our Mother!* energy was initially a fabrication, a facade put on to make himself more appealing to this hurricane of a classmate. At some point throughout his efforts, though, it became a part of him, the way that tweed patches on the elbows of a leather jacket eventually break in and join in essence with what began as a mismatched host. Hearing her voice reminded him of the youthful zeal he once had and lost. For a minute he couldn’t remember why he had lost his spirit in the first place. He regained a sense of peace, perhaps the first lighthearted -- or simply not heavy-hearted -- moment in thirty years. But the usual weight on his chest quickly returned as Maria spoke again.

“It’s been a minute, Johnny, and I know you don’t do this anymore, but we need all the help we can get out here,” she explained. “An oil tanker spilled a few miles off the coast of the Sound, and, well...” she trailed off.

Maybe it was the pretty girl on the other side of the phone, or maybe it was the way her typically unalterable voice broke as she failed to finish her sentence. Regardless, for some reason, he went. On the overnight plane ride, John got up to date on the situation in Alaska, where a midsize tanker had crashed into a barrier reef and leaked millions of gallons of crude oil into the Pacific. There was once a day when he would have scoffed at the chronic failures of the petroleum giants, but he couldn’t help but blame himself now. After all, hadn’t his work as a

mechanic supported their industry? Wasn't he flying in a jet fueled by the byproducts of their drilling?

Maybe I've done more harm than any good can ever redeem, he thought. Soon after, he fell asleep, a still and dreamless sleep, suspended between the waking world and the nightmare world on the other side. A flight attendant woke him up, gently but with purpose, and Maria picked him up from the airport. She already looked unbelievably tired. John noticed that, despite the obvious fatigue, she hadn't aged a day in the thirty years since graduation. Her eyes maintained the same youthful mischief, determination, tenacity, and sense of purpose that had first drawn him to her (and to her cause). The drive was almost silent -- for her part, she hadn't rested all week, and for his, he was deep in thought, wondering whether he still had the know-how or if it had left him along with the passion.

The site of the spill brought him to his knees. "Black gold" made shallow tar pits on the surface of the blue water, and the waves crashing to the shore brought blackened flora and fauna. John was assigned to clean up the wildlife. Just like the old days. He suited up, and the crew set him up with a sputtering bird, species unrecognizable. Timidly, John began to douse the poor creature in dish soap and gently scrub it of the sticky dark matter.

"I'm a grease monkey, too," he said to the bird. "The only difference is, when I get oily, it's my fault. I don't think you contributed to your problem here."

The bird blinked. John took it as a sign of encouragement.

"Weigh in on my dilemma, buddy," he continued. "How much damage can you do before your good can't redeem you?"

The bird blinked. John kept scrubbing.