



Before Joe Cancino set the destination on his new car to drive him downtown, he fretted over whether he should've packed all those snacks. His autonomous car drove itself to the tech district as Joe fussed with the plastic bin he'd placed in the back seat, which was filled with bottled water, packages of kale chips, and organic dried fruits. He arranged the items into rows, then decided it looked too staged, so he tousled them a bit to make it look more casual. Then he cranked the temperature down to make sure his RidePair passengers would be comfortable. As cold air blasted through the vents, Joe ran his fingers through his thick brown hair and tried to push his glasses up his nose, only to remember he didn't wear glasses anymore.

He chose to start his first day as a RidePair driver in the tech district with the idea that he'd impress some of the computer guys that work there with his car. Autonomous cars were fairly new still and Joe had only once ridden in one, with his rich friend from college who pre-ordered the newest Tesla when it went on sale. But once they were officially legalized in Texas, and the automakers he could actually afford jumped on board, Joe didn't miss his chance to be part of the future.

As he circled the blocks waiting for a passenger, Joe felt a familiar heat rising up his cheeks, an embarrassment that often arose while driving his new car. He couldn't escape the memory of being laid off from his first job out of college — a week after he bought the car. In the stressful few days following his firing, Joe contemplated returning the car and even had a "for sale" post drafted on his FrontPage account, an admission of failure that he was ultimately too ashamed to publish. Instead, he decided he'd keep the car and try to use it to make him some money until another job came his way.

Joe was crossing the river on Houston Street, nearly missing the fact that another new building had been added to the block of cybersecurity firms at the intersection, starkly contrasting its sleek floor-to-ceiling-windowed walls to the older, brown stone buildings surrounding it, when his RidePair app buzzed — his first customer.

"Bri has requested a ride. Would you like to pick Bri up at house-ton and soul-uh-

dad street? Say yes to direct me there.” “Yes,” Joe replied to his car, which was fully synced with his RidePair app. A surge of nervousness shot up his spine. The name “Bri M.” appeared on the display screen protruding from his dashboard, along with a selfie of a young woman in her mid-20s, about Joe’s age. Her perfect black ringlets filled the border of the photo and framed her smiling face. Joe studied her deep brown eyes — *was that a fleck of gold?* he wondered — as the car turned its blinker on and eased into the right lane in front of a brand-new skyscraper.

The young woman from the photo stood on the street, staring down and scrolling on her HHC (short for handheld computer, Joe hadn’t caught on to referring to personal mobile devices this way — when he was a kid, they were just called phones). Quickly, Joe checked his appearance in the rear view mirror. Small, dark brown eyes stared back at him. After wearing glasses all throughout childhood, Joe had gotten used to the magnified size of his eyes, much preferring them to the dwarfed versions they appeared to be when he took the glasses off to sleep or shower. But now that eye glasses had gone out of style in the past few years with the rise in popularity of vision correction surgery, Joe had recently stowed the glasses away in his closet and signed up to have the procedure later in the year, ignoring the slight blurriness that perpetually smudged the world around him.

A car honked behind him, but Bri M. still didn’t look up. He knew the car would move on to the next passenger if he didn’t pick her up soon, true to the promise of efficiency. Joe fumbled around for the button to roll down the window, but realized he didn’t know where it was. July in San Antonio hadn’t called for having the windows down just yet, and this car had a lot of buttons.

Bri finally looked up once Joe began frantically knocking on the passenger side window. With her head still down, she glided over and got into the back seat. Joe tried not to stare at her, but he couldn’t help noticing her satiny complexion was the exact same color as the brown stone building that she just exited.

“The Pearl, please,” his passenger said as she put a pod in her ear.

“Umm okay, yeah, sorry,” Joe responded as he tried to sync the app back up with his car’s self-driving features since it became disconnected during his search for the window button. Cars honked and whirred past him one after another, sticking to their own autonomous efficiency time tables. Joe’s watch flashed “REST NOW” on its digital face; a frequent reminder that his heart rate had spiked again.

All he managed to do was finally get the back window down, which invited a gust of wind inside the car, sending Bri’s tight curls into a tangled cyclone.

“Dammit,” Joe mumbled under his breath, “motherfu—“

“Starting route to Marfa, Texas. You will arrive in five hours and 45 minutes,” the car said.

“What did she just say?” Bri was re-arranging her hair, ear pod in hand. “I said I’m going to The Pearl, like, as in San Antonio.”

“I know, I’m sorry, it misunderstood me. Cancel route. Go to The Pearl,” Joe said.

“For your safety, please put on your seatbelt,” the car said as it lurched forward into the stream of cars.

“No, stop car!” Joe tried hitting every button on his display screen, but it only confused the system.

“It is unsafe to stop the car in moving traffic. You will arrive in Marfa, Texas at 8:33 PM.”

“What the hell? I’m not going to Marfa,” Bri leaned forward, her torso in the front half of the car. “You’re going in the completely wrong direction. Can’t you stop it?”

“I’m trying. I just got this car recently. Looks like it’s, like, crashing or something..”

Bri slid across the soft leather, climbed into the passenger seat, and pushed a few buttons on the screen.

“Yep, it’s totally bugging out. I saw on FrontPage that this was happening to some of these new self-driving cars. It has to...*shit*,” Bri finished under her breath.

“It has to what?” Joe asked, each word rising a bit higher.

“I read somewhere that it has to...complete its destination before it can restart.” Bri didn’t look at Joe as she continued to run a futile diagnostic on the digital display.

“What do we do?” Joe’s spacey midsize sedan was starting to feel cramped with all these people and snacks in it.

“I guess I have to tell my friends I’m not going to make it after all.” She replied with a heavy return to her seat. Her sarcastic response made the sinking feeling in Joe’s stomach drop even lower as he watched her pick up her HHC and compose a message. In a desperate act, Joe peeked at what she was typing to her friends, but no message was sent. Instead, he watched as she opened up the messaging application, typed gibberish, then exited to the home screen.

After being on hold during a call to RidePair (“It’s an issue with your vehicle”), the dealership (“We’re experiencing a high call volume at this moment”), and even the police (“The only way to stop your car would be to ram into it...do you want us to

ram into it?”), Joe gave up.

By then, they were already on IH-10 past Junction and Bri had her head back down looking at her HHC. A traffic jam brought the car to a crawl.

“Want a snack?” Joe asked.

“Where are we?” she responded.

“Looks like we just left the Hill Country,” Joe looked at the car’s GPS. Still more than four hours left.

“I didn’t see any hills,” Bri said as she scrolled. She sighed and leaned her head on the passenger side window, her body a backslash heading away from Joe.

Joe didn’t know if she was serious or making a joke about the quality of Texas’ hills. He was worried if he laughed, he’d offend.

“Have you ever been to the Hill Country?” Joe asked. He had grown up in the area and always thought the hills were pretty impressive. His dad and brothers and him used to hike to the ravine on their property. One summer evening after a storm, the rainwater runoff into the ravine formed a massive waterfall. Joe’s dad insisted him and his brothers stop playing video games to trudge over there in the mud and see it with him. They’d protested, of course, but he ultimately guilted them into it with his ominous reminder that he won’t be around forever (his recent cancer diagnosis had made him bold and shameless). The rushing of the water pouring into the small valley on their property was loud enough that they had to shout over each other, yet the raucous chirping of cicadas prevailed over it all.

He hadn’t thought about that memory in a while, not since his dad’s health rapidly declined shortly after. Even though he ended up joining on the hike down to the ravine that night, and he was able to share that experience with his dad, he thought back on the memory with guilt — how close he was to rejecting his father’s request made his stomach hurt.

“I’ve never been to the Hill Country. I’m from Colorado,” she responded.

Joe tried to continue the small talk, being sure to ask more about her instead of just talking about himself, as he’d learned from his RidePair driver orientation. She kept her head down while she answered; Joe kept his head forward so he didn’t look creepy staring at her. Out of habit, he kept his hands on the wheel at 10 and 2 even though he wasn’t in control of the car.

He found out she was from Denver and moved to Texas six months ago. She liked the weather better in Colorado but the food better in Texas. No, she didn’t need the

air temperature adjusted.

Just as Joe was beginning to memorize the top of her head through stolen side glances, Bri's device went black. "Dammit. I'm dead. Can I borrow your charging pad?"

"Oh, I don't have one actually."

"You're a RidePair driver without a charger for your passengers?"

Joe knew he had forgotten something. At least they had snacks. "Want some kale chips?"

Bri accepted the kale and looked out the window as she placed her depleted mini-tablet in view on the seat next to her.

"I'm Joe, by the way. Joe Cancino. I realized we haven't actually had introductions."

"Bri Mays."

A long while passed between them without a word. An incessant barrage of worries marched through Joe's head. He imagined complete conversations with his supervisor at RidePair, with the police, with Bri. None of them turned out well for him. The worries turned into expectations — catastrophizing, as his mom used to call it when Joe started freaking out.

His carefully curated playlist of Top 40 hits finished, leaving him and Bri in an awkward silence. He could hear her take a quick, deep breath in.

"Have any music requests?" Joe asked.

"Just something soothing," Bri responded. Her right leg was bouncing up and down.

"Are you okay?" Joe noticed a bead of sweat on her forehead. He found a playlist called "Chill Beats" and pressed play.

Joe couldn't hear her response. His car started emitting a loud honk, causing him to look up. An oncoming SUV had veered across the yellow line and was headed straight towards the front of their car.

Bri gasped and grabbed her door to stabilize herself. Joe laid his palm on the car horn out of instinct — a useless act since his car had already taken it upon itself to alert the oncoming driver. With just one car length between them and the SUV, Joe's car swerved quickly to the right, cleanly avoiding a collision. Joe swung his

head around to see the SUV finally right itself into its own lane.

Bri's heavy breathing was louder than the music now. Her eyes were wide and staring at the floorboard. She breathed quickly in and out of her nose and placed her hand over her heart. Her other hand grappled for the door handle as they sped along IH-10 at 70 miles per hour.

"I need to get out," she said so quickly that Joe barely made out the words. Tears lined the bottom of her eyes. "Let me out."

"We can't...I still can't stop the car..." Joe replied feebly.

"Let me out!" Bri's eyes had taken on a wild quality as she pulled on the door handle over and over. She turned towards Joe in a seething panic.

"Here...window," Joe sputtered as he located the button to roll down the window. Bri unbuckled and stuck her entire head out of the window. The heavy feeling in his chest turned from anxiety to guilt as he mentally berated himself for putting her in this situation.

Her hair whipped around flame-like and her eyes squeezed shut. She took giant gulps of air like she'd been stuck underwater. Joe grabbed a bottle of water and presented it to her, grazing her arm as he did.

Bri took the water bottle and dropped back down into her seat, eyes closed. She still breathed hard, but her inhales and exhales were regular now.

"I'm so sorry. My stupid car. That SUV! I'm so dumb. I can't believe we're in this situation. I'm really sorry."

When Joe stopped rambling, he looked up to see Bri staring back at him. The tears in her eyes magnified their color. They were a light brown color, almost tan. Joe relaxed again as his eyes met hers. He followed her eyes as they took in his face for the first time and settled on the scar on his temple. A few tendrils of hair fell in front of her eyes.

He thought she was ignoring him as she steadied her heart rate with several long, halted breaths. But then she replied.

"It's not your fault. I just get anxious sometimes," Bri said. A half smile appeared on her face as she took another big inhale, held it at the top (Joe counted five seconds) and let it out slowly through her mouth.

"Does that happen often?" Joe asked.

"A few times a week, yeah. Actually, it's gotten pretty bad lately." She rubbed her

palms back and forth across her jeans and finished her water bottle.

“Here, I’ll take that,” Joe reached out and accepted the empty water bottle. Bri’s hands were freezing, so Joe turned the A/C down.

They sat without speaking as Bri continued her deep breathing. If he listened close enough, Joe could hear the mantra Bri was telling herself in a kind, but firm, tone at the conclusion of each exhale: *you are calm.*

“I can’t remember the last time I went on a road trip,” Bri finally spoke. “We used to go all the time as kids. My favorite was to Arches National Park in Moab. When the sun is setting, everything is just...red. It’s wild. Ever been to Utah?”

“Nope, mostly just stuck around South Texas. We didn’t get out much. But there’s a lot to see around here though. Our favorite was Stonehenge II.”

“Wait, did you just say Stonehenge II? What is that?” Bri was facing Joe now with a look of amusement on her face.

“You don’t know small town Texas charm until you’ve been to Stonehenge II. Some guy in Ingram made a replica of Stonehenge out of limestone,” Joe loved sharing this bit of Hill Country trivia with newbies. “Get this. They even threw in a few Easter Island heads for good measure.”

“That is the most Texas thing I’ve ever heard,” Bri said through a giggling fit.

Joe tried to hide the smile on his face, growing ever wider without his permission.

“So have you been on any road trips in your fancy new ride yet?” Bri asked.

“Nope, just around the city. You were my first RidePair passenger actually.” In reality, Bri was his first passenger entirely. He didn’t have anyone to show his car to.

“Don’t worry, I’ll write you a great review,” Bri imitated typing on an invisible screen with her thumbs. “*Joe was an excellent driver, even though his car did all the work. Took me almost six hours out of the way and gave me a panic attack, but the snacks were great.*”

Bri caught the look on his face and must have realized he didn’t think her fake review was funny.

“Oh I’m sorry. I’m just joking! I’m not mad about this at all, by the way,” she said. “It has actually turned out pretty fun.”

“I just really wanted this whole RidePair thing to go well. And I feel terrible about dragging you into all this.”

“It’s not exactly how I intended to spend my afternoon,” Bri said. “But the company isn’t all bad.”

Joe quickly turned to look at her and saw she was turned away in a shy smile. Ever since they were almost hit by the SUV, Joe had been rehearsing a line he wanted to say in his head. He’d mentally repeated it to himself enough times now, so he took a deep breath and spoke.

“I have anxiety too. Well not so much anxiety as...well, my doctor says he thinks I’m depressed or whatever.”

“What makes him think that?”

“I guess losing, like, fifteen pounds in just a couple months was a hint.”

Bri raised her eyebrows and did a micro up-and-down scan with her eyes.

“And, well I sleep a lot too. Ever since I got laid off from my job. The only thing that feels good is sleep.” Joe finished this statement with a little shrug, but noticed Bri wasn’t convinced of his nonchalance. Her eyes looked so sad.

Over the course of the next hour, Bri led the conversation between her and Joe. She asked him questions about his old job and college and they talked about their families and futures. Joe told her about his dad and she admitted that she’d had trouble making friends since she moved to San Antonio. The conversation flowed easily in a way neither of them had experienced in a long time and wasn’t once interrupted, not even when Bri’s HHC slid to the floorboard out of her view.

By the time they reached Fort Stockton with an hour and a half left in the drive, Bri had moved up to the front seat, and her and Joe were turned sideways in their chairs facing each other. Almost all the snacks were gone.

“Where’d you get that scar?” Bri asked and touched her own temple to signal what she meant.

Joe had never told the story of how he got his scar — the few people who had asked had been childhood friends and he’d recited the story his mom made him memorize about a skateboarding accident — but it came out comfortably as he explained his mother’s drinking problem she developed after his dad died, her abuse, and the night he got in her way when he was twelve.

Bri didn’t say a word as he told his story, but watched him intently. When he got to the end, all she said was, “I’m so sorry.” He told her that it was nice to hear that, and he meant it.

Joe's inner monologue fell silent. Where there usually lived a tense coil of thoughts, he now felt light and emptied, like a newly decluttered closet, rid of clothes that were damaged or didn't fit anymore. Suddenly, there was room for better things — items of his own choosing.

They continued talking as the light slowly disappeared outside the car, so incrementally that they didn't notice until the yellow-white glow of the display screen auto-illuminated in the darkness.

"Looks like we're almost there," Joe said and glanced out the window behind Bri's head.

The car inched along the gravel drive at the end of the road until it stopped at the edge of a large field. A neon orange sun balanced on the West Texas horizon, painting the sky in a brilliance of yellows and oranges. Pastel pink clouds softened the expansive and darkening sky and the landscape stretched on farther than the eye could see without a single building in sight. The word *freedom* appeared on the tip of Joe's tongue.

"You have arrived at your destination," said the car.

Joe and Bri looked at each other again. Bri reached behind her and attempted to open her car door. It unlatched with ease and the cicada song that filled the West Texas air took the place of the silence in the car. They both exited their seats, walked around to the front, and sat face-to-face on the hood.

"It's warm," Bri said.

"It's safe," Joe said.

He placed his hand down in front of him. After just a moment's thought, Bri reached out for the first time and encircled his hand with hers. He carefully looked up and into her eyes, the fleck of gold even more radiant when reflected against the sunset. She looked back into his eyes as her breathing slowed and at that moment, the only thing on his once-busy mind was her.

Brooke Blanton is a writer and editor from San Antonio, Texas on a search to consume as much cathartic and transformative content as possible during her short time on this earth. When she's not creating, she can be found nose down in a novel or catching the latest feature presentation. Brooke is a member of the San Antonio Public Library Foundation and San Antonio Writers' Guild, and she volunteers as a Reading Buddy for San Antonio Youth Literacy.

