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Emergency

Gary Duehr

I am an emergency. My name is Bernie Smith, my colleagues at HR Block used to call me St. Bernard, like the hospital on the South Side, because I was always trying to save someone a few bucks. I still live a couple blocks from the hospital, near where the Dan Ryan Expressway split the old neighborhood in half, in a post-war cottage. It's nice, white brick, with a long narrow backyard like a bowling alley. Just five minutes from the Red Line El, though with a bad leg I don't get around much anymore.

You wouldn't know it, chatting with me in Billz Coffee on the corner, how extraordinary my life has become at the age of 72. I make a point to be polite, yes ma'm and no sir, with a firm, quiet voice like I'd use with clients. When I look in the mirror, I see myself 30 years ago, reddish hair swept to one side, fair skin, a veil of freckles across my nose and forearms where I got sunburnt as a kid, tall and a little bony — my wife, Jennie, who died three years ago, said I reminded her of some 1940s cartoon character.

I started having visions a year and a half ago. They came like dreams, every week or so, in that haze when you first wake up in the morning, rubbing my face and looking out the window at our gnarled crabapple tree. In each one I saw the same tall glass building with balconies, a glittering shard in bright sun, behind it Lake Michigan's boiling gray expanse. The address was 1353 Lake Shore Drive, I could see it etched in marble above the revolving doors; it was on the Gold Coast, a stretch of luxury condos and Gucci and Nike stores north of the Loop.

The first time, I saw a fire break out in the upper stories, belching smoke into a crystal blue sky, so real it looked like the TV news. It shook me. The next day I heard about a big fire in a condo downtown, and I wondered if there was a connection. So when I had my next vision of a bomb being planted at the same building, I called 911 to make sure.

"This line is being recorded. Do you need police, fire or medical?"

"Police, I think. Maybe fire too."

"What is the emergency?"

"It's happening right now. 1353 Lake Shore Drive. I saw two foreign-looking guys in a van leave a suspicious black bag outside the lobby. Please send someone right away."

"Where are you located?"

I hung up. When I didn't hear anything about a bomb on the news, I figured I may have prevented a tragedy.

The visions started to come more often, every few days, and all about something awful happening at 1353 Lake Shore Drive. Drug trafficking on the loading dock, a would-be jumper teetering on the roof, Lake Michigan's waves crashing in. Why that address, I don't know. But I began to feel like the building's secret guardian, keeping watch like a security guard. It became my building.

"This line is being recorded. Do you need police, fire or medical?"

"Medical. A middle-aged male looks like he's had a heart attack on the 5th floor balcony. I can see him slumped over in his deck chair. There's no one with him."

"Address?"

"1353 Lake Shore Drive."

"Where are you located?"

Click.

My public defender, Will, says I have to stop. The police finally tracked down my phone. Will insists there is no 1353 Lake Shore Drive. At the beginning, every time a ladder truck would roar up or patrol cars and an ambulance with sirens blaring, they'd block the road and drag their hoses, axes, and stretchers into the lobby of the nearest high rise, 1350, where they'd confront an exasperated security guard behind his counter who'd start to yell at them before they could say a word. After logging more than a hundred calls, the 911 Center taped up warnings by the phones with a Google map of the area: THERE IS NO 1353 LAKE SHORE DRIVE. DO NOT DISPATCH.

I understand what Will is telling me, when we sit together in the cafeteria after a court hearing. But it doesn't make sense. I can see the building like it's standing right in front of me, its black iron balcony railings, the gleaming reflections of sky and clouds in the windows, the address in a fancy script above the front door. And the trouble plays out like a movie in my head with bone-chilling screams, closeups of desperate faces crying out to me. I can't resist.

"This line is being recorded. Do you need police, fire or medical?"

"All three. Everybody. It's terrible, terrible."

"What's the emergency?"

"A big construction crane next door has toppled over. There are hundreds of people trapped up there. The whole thing might collapse. The boom woke me up, it sounded like a huge explosion."

"What's the address?"

"1353 Lake Shore Drive."

"I'm sorry, sir, could you repeat that?"

Click.

Will is a nice kid, right out of Loyola, with soft brown eyes behind his wire rims. He listens to me go on, then explains what the court order means. They can't send me to prison, and the evaluations come back normal so hospitalization is out, and they can't make me take medication. But they can hold me in contempt if I keep making 911 calls, fine me, detain me for a few days. He says they can't charge me for being lonely and a little crazy, otherwise the jails would be full. But he pleads with me to stop, for pete's sake, Bernie, stop. You're causing everyone a lot of trouble.

I tell Will I'm sorry. I feel bad that he has me for a case. I know I'm difficult. Once I accidentally broke my phone, and I started to miss my court appointments. The 911 calls stopped for a while, but because I'm on assistance the judge was forced to give me a new phone, which everyone found painfully ironic, including me.

I told Will my theory of where my visions come from. My real first name is Joseph, Joseph Smith, which is why I go by my middle name Bernard. I was born in Carthage, Illinois, down by the Mississippi, where the Mormon founder Joseph Smith was killed by a mob that dragged him from his jail cell. Growing up I heard all about my namesake, how he had visions of an angel who led him to upstate New York to dig up golden plates, the Book of Mormon, which tells the story of an ancient American civilization where the Garden of Eden is in Missouri. Crazy stuff, we used to laugh at it as kids. There's a plaque on the site of the old jail we'd use for BB practice.

But what if some of the same spirit has gotten into me, stranger things have happened. I didn't ask for this, any more than Saint Francis of Assisi or Catherine of Siena did. I was raised Catholic by my mom, so she told me the stories of the saints on these playing cards. Inside I'm scared, terrified, but I don't share this with anyone, including Will. I'd tell Jennie if she was here, she'd help me figure it out, but now there's no one. It's fallen on me. What if it's all true, and I've been chosen to save everyone? They need me. I can't let go.

"This line is being recorded. Do you need police, fire or medical?"

"I don't know. I don't know what to do. Please help."

"What's going on?"

"Please don't hang up. I can see an enormous cloud of locusts in the sky over Lake Michigan, it's so dark it's blocking out the sun. They're buzzing like a hundred airplanes, and they're headed straight for a high rise."

"What's the address?"

"1353 Lake Shore Drive."