

Questions
by Eric Cecil

It's the year after next, and everyone has questions. An angry woman asks one of you now. Why? she says, eyes burning. You don't respond. You stand on the sidewalk, leaning against the low wall, and glare at her until she goes. To get the police, she says.

There's nothing left to say at all, but everyone's still talking. They wait in the crosswalk and the turn lane: kicking along the white lines that limn the road, loitering at the verdant strip of a median, murmuring. It's strange enough to see the truck and small sedan there, both cockeyed and fixed to the intersection. Stranger still to see all those people in the street.

Most of them step over the pebbled glass, speaking in hushed tones. Others stare, hold hands to their mouths. An older man points in your direction. You dagger him with a severe look until he disappears. For a moment you consider walking, not running, around the low wall, then crouching behind it and closing your eyes. The urge is senseless. You smirk and lean deeper into the wall instead.

You hear the police well before you see them, their siren howling throughout the surrounding blocks. It sings the car's colors to you as it approaches: Black, it seems to say, its consonance rising and fluttering. Then: White. The black and white car curves into the road and stops at yet another angle unnatural to the intersection, facing both the jackknifed truck and the battered sedan. The sedan's front end is so ruined that it seems to greet the third car with a sneer.

All watch and whisper as two cops exit the cruiser. The police are grim and lumbering, absent the woman who went to get them. In her stead a third man emerges from the crowd. He trots stiffly to the police, pushing a white towel to his head. The towel has bloomed a dark stain, which rusts and reddens the spaces between his fingers. His hand splays against it as if holding in its color.

If you ran, you tell yourself, they would catch you. But at least you'd make them work for it. There would be some satisfaction in that. You'd make them find you and interrogate you until the folks would arrive. Then you'd let the folks do all the talking. Just before they leave, you'd finally speak: No, you might say. It's not their fault. They just never had the nerve. Because that's what it takes: nerve. And that's what made you do it, and it's all yours.

Him? one of the cops says. He stands directly in front of you: taller, but not by much, and far heavier. The man with the towel nods. He removes the soiled cloth, checks its underside. It's darker now. The man frowns at it and pushes it back to his head and turns the frown on you.

C'mon, says the cop. You stay quiet when he and his partner duck you into the car and reverse out of the street, pulling away from the crowd. The sneer of the sedan's front fender draws into a grimace as you lean your head against the side window. You smile back at it.

From the back of the car, the musk of a million arrests leathering the air, you look between their shoulders and through the windshield. You watch as they run the first light, siren bleating, then slow at a line of traffic gathered at the next. As if descending from a hill, a new howl pitches up and down the block. Its peeling is sharper and higher than the cruiser's. Red, it yells. White. The pug nose of an ambulance follows. It eases through a break in the traffic, bounds past a gauntlet of idle cars.

You see the road reeling toward you again, faster now: ribboning under a canopy of trees and past a park downtown, then through a block of low buildings without windows.

Where are we going? you ask. The officers ignore you. That's fine, you think. That's the way you like it. You like that they don't explain anything as they shuffle you into one of those buildings, and you know it doesn't matter anyway.

And anyway, you tell a man seated across a wide desk, there's nothing left to say at all.

Then we'll wait here until you find your voice, he says.

The deskman's voice is high, thin. He uses it to tell you why you might've done what you did, then offers reasons why you'd never, several questions strung up in the spaces between. You're not under arrest, he says. But we just need to know. And as he speaks, you'd know the color of that wheedling tone anywhere. It's watery, bilious, queasy.

Yellow, you say.

The deskman pauses. Yellow?

Your voice sounds like the color yellow. That's all.

He flashes a grimace worse than that of the wrecked sedan. You look past his creased face and study the two cops behind him. You get a good look at them now: a much better sight than earlier, when you'd first seen them on the street. On the street you'd been busy surveying the cars, the glass, all those people standing in it. Now you look at the cops, their arms crossed at their chests. The policeman who approached you before has his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, forearms cinching the length of a broad tie. A full holster weighs at his hip. You note the black handle of something inside the other's jacket.

What are you thinking about? asks the man at the desk.

The ambulance, you say.

Explain.

You shrug and say, The guy could walk. I saw him with a towel to his head. He was talking to them: and at this last word, you tilt your head to the two cops. They return your stare with cold indifference.

The deskman nods and says, He could walk, yes. The other, he says, pausing. The man in the smaller car may not be so lucky. Not as lucky as the truck driver, he says, and not as lucky as you.

I don't think there was any reason for an ambulance.

Well, there was, he says. It took the one driver to the emergency room. He'll be there for a while yet.

You don't say anything to that. You cough and glance at the cops again, then look to the floor. The deskman leans into your sightline. I'll ask one more time, he says. Why?

It's the same question the woman asked of you on the street. The same word and all. That seems very long ago to you now. When you hear the question this time, in that yellow voice, it suggests too many other colors: maybe, you think, a black mix of them all. You glance at the holster at the belt on the one cop and the bulge behind the jacket of the other.

Do I get a phone call? you ask.

Your parents are already here, the deskman says.

I want to call a friend.

He blinks and says, Is that who put you up to it? Your friends?

You cough again. He sighs, signals to the cop with the rolled sleeves. The chair slides as the cop stands and looms over you. You don't move. You wait for the policeman to grab your elbow, make him yank you to your feet. You then wrench your elbow away, and when he pulls a second time, you release, feel the blunt end of the holster at his hip graze the back of your arm.

Easy, says the cop. His voice is the color of nothing.