

HEARTLOCK

by

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Heartlock

His phone falls from his hands and into the sink as he storms out of the bathroom. She'd moved on. If she wants to throw stones, he'll throw stones alright. In fact, he'll throw her entire existence into the void, he thinks to himself. He burns this idea into his brain. There's no reversing the thought.

Javier grabs an already opened handle of whiskey from his bedside table and takes a long pull from it. He sits down in a chair to think. It's not long before his eyes dart to something in his room. A Billy Idol vinyl. Javier jolts up out of the chair and violently swipes the vinyl from the table. He goes immediately to his closet and walks up to his shirt rack. He starts pulling shirts off their hangers. The last shirt he pulls is pink and has Greek letters on it. He then yanks the drawers out of his bedside table and dumps all of their contents onto his bed. Javier picks up certain items from the trainwreck strewn across his bed. A polaroid of him and Dylan. A music festival bracelet. Chopsticks. A hair tie. He grabs all of them and walks out of his room. Returning from the kitchen, Javier drags a half-filled, black trashbag along the floor. He swipes a blanket from his bed and grabs a ukulele from his bookshelf. Before he knows it, a fire is roaring from a black, metal fire pit in his backyard.

With his whiskey in one hand, Javier grabs the bottom of the trash bag and pulls it as all of the items empty out onto the grass. One by one, Javier picks up an item and drops it into the fire pit. He does this with no emotion yet great intention. He continues to drink and pours some whiskey into the fire pit after dropping the polaroid in. The flames dance. There are no more items on the ground. He walks over the black bag to make sure it's empty and then stands over

the fire and looks into it. His skin flickers and his face gleams with satisfaction and vengeance, but it's clear that a kind of evasion lies deeper.

In a daze, Javier continues to stare at the fire for a while. He's between conviction and hopelessness. Suddenly, his eyes shoot upwards. Something has dawned on him.

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Carrying a tool bag and a six pack of Lone Star's, Javier gets into his car, slams the door shut, and starts the ignition. His radio starts to blare as he burns rubber. Soon into his drive, Javier hits a red light as he pulls up to a busy four-way intersection. "Detlef Schrempf" by Band of Horses begins to play from his phone. He goes to skip the song but restrains himself at the last minute. Instead, he turns the volume down to a comfortable level and closes his eyes. His imagination begins to project Super 8 style footage onto the walls of his mind.

Javier and Dylan sit on a limestone slab atop Mount Bonnell. A blue, still expanse rests below them. Lake Austin. Javier says something to Dylan. She laughs, and he kisses her gingerly on the temple. He then pulls a little red Swiss army knife and brass lock out of his pocket and shows them to Dylan. He says something. She smiles and puts her hand on his thigh. He says something further. She kisses him. They then etch their initials and the date into the brass. 2-18-24.

Javier takes Dylan's hand and walks her over to a black, wrought iron fence. He secures the lock to the fence and locks it with a key. He hands the key to Dylan, and she chucks the key over the fence and down the hillside. They watch as a boat moves along the lake in the distance,

and he puts his arm around her. She tilts her head and rests it on his shoulder and puts her hand in his back jeans pocket. He looks at her funny, and they both laugh.

Javier is roused by the sound of a horn. His eyes are thrown open and he slams back in his seat. He looks in his rear view and sees someone angrily honking at him before realizing that the light is green. Javier quickly waves his hand up and zooms through the intersection. Later on, he cracks open a beer and takes a few sips. As he places his beer in the cupholder, he sees his phone light up. It's a notification that Dylan has posted to her Instagram story. Javier opens it without hesitation. It's a picture of a guy sitting across the table from her and sipping on an espresso martini. As if it's scalding hot, he throws the phone against the passenger window and punches the steering wheel as hard as he can. He cusses himself out.

Losing all concern for the world around him, he grabs his beer, crushes it, and tosses it into the seats behind him as he speeds through a stop sign. He turns up the music, grabs another one, and cracks it open. The gavel has fallen.

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Javier stumbles upon the wrought iron fence and finds his lock. "Her lock," he convinces himself. He grabs it and verifies it. Nothing has changed. He takes a Gerber out of the tool bag and unlatches the blade. Randomly and unflinchingly, Javier starts drawing lines over their initials and the date. After he's satisfied, he pulls out his phone and finds a video on YouTube on breaking locks. He sits down against the fence, opens a beer, and presses play. He watches the video for a few minutes. Eventually, he pauses it and peers into the tool bag. He pulls out two crescent wrenches, stands up, and begins to tighten each one around the two parts of the lock. He

white-knuckles the wrenches and pushes down on them. He lifts his heels and puts all of his weight into it.

“Come on. Come on!” He keeps trying. It’s a futile attempt. “God...ugh!” he groans.

He then pulls the wrenches towards him and leans back like he’s sitting in a chair. He jerks his body back over and over, but the lock doesn’t budge. He kicks the fence in defeat and curses. Stepping away from the fence, he takes a couple of deep breaths. Feeling composed, he clanks the wrenches together and nods his head tenaciously.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

He retightens the wrenches, and with all of his energy he gives it one final shot. Nothing. He screams and spikes one of the wrenches on the ground. He grabs the fence and crumbles to his knees. He bumps his head against the iron.

“Please, God. Please, I’m trying.”

He starts to cry, practically wailing. Unbeknownst to him, a man appears out of the shadows of the trees. He looks to be in his mid-seventies, maybe early-eighties, and he’s wearing a floral button-down, straight-leg jeans, and brown leather work boots. On his face are round, wire-rimmed glasses. He’s got an old sleeping bag slung around him and is carrying a canvas bag in one hand. The other one grasps a harmonica. He plays a few notes. Javier whips his entire body around and spots the man. His catatonic shock quickly evaporates as he scrambles for something in his tool bag.

“Good evening,” the man says.

“Who are you?” Javier asks frantically.

He continues to search hastily in the bag and knocks over his beer in the process. The man winces and covers his hand over his eyes.

“Your drink is...” the man begins, then winces again.

Javier finds a box-cutter. He stands up and holds the blade at his hip. The man points at the liquid spilling out of the can.

“Oh, that can’t be good for the critters,” the man anguishes.

Javier looks dumbfounded at the man. “What are you doing here? It’s late. You’re not supposed to be here,” Javier complains.

The man approaches the can. “We just need to make sure here that–” he mumbles.

Javier backs all the way up against the fence and holds the box-cutter out towards the man. “Back off! I’m not messing around,” Javier warns him.

The man is unfazed. He kneels down on one knee and sits the can upright. He then begins to lightly kick dirt over the spillage. He continues to mumble to himself as he does this.

“As long as it’s less concentrated...they’ll be okay...yeah, they should be alright...just gotta dilute the soil some more,” he mutters.

Javier continues to gawk at the man like he’s some kind of phantom. The man pulls a mason jar filled with water out of his bag and starts to sprinkle it around the moist gravel.

“What are you doing?” Javier asks pointedly.

The man finishes and then puts the jar back in his bag. He looks up at Javier and smiles. He motions his head towards the blade that is back at Javier's hip.

"I already died once. Can't fool the old man upstairs twice now. Can we?," the man jokes.

He laughs to himself. His overall demeanor is very calm and soft-spoken.

"What?" Javier asks, confused .

Javier shakes his head in disbelief. "Am I tripping? Who are you?"

"I'm Alan," the man says. Alan sticks his hand out and stays where he's standing. Javier considers the situation for a few seconds before reluctantly stepping towards Alan. He shakes his hand.

"What's your name?" Alan asks with a tinge of excitement.

Javier steps back. "Javier," he says.

"Well, Javier, it's a pleasure to tend this earth here with you," Alan says.

Javier smiles nervously. "What are you doing up here?" Javier asks.

Alan takes a seat on a slab behind him and sets down his bags. He closes his eyes and exhales. "The trees: they're more alive up here. I can hardly sleep alone," Alan says.

"Okaaay. Ummm, sorry, but are you like—are you homeless?" Javier asks.

“No. Just traveling,” Alan says. “*Going up the country*. Gotta get back to Sequoia,” he adds, shaking his head with sentiment.

Javier sits against the fence. He’s accepted Alan and his presence sooner than he’d expect. He thinks it’s probably the alcohol. “Sequoia? Isn’t that in California?” Javier asks, cracking open another beer.

“It is,” Alan states plainly. Javier sips his beer.

“Dang, that’s a long ways away. You getting there on foot?” Javier asks.

“Yes,” Alan says.

“Geez, Alan. That’s some crazy work, man,” Javier laughs.

Alan smiles. Javier holds out a beer. “Want one?” Javier offers.

“No thanks,” Alan replies.

Javier nods and takes another sip. A few moments of silence pass.

“Say, do you have any more acid?” Alan asks.

“*Acid*? What? What do you mean?” Javier asks, smiling.

“You said you were on a trip. Just a few moments ago,” Alan explains.

“Huh? No, I’m just, I don’t even—ohhhh...” Javier realizes. He nods.

“Nah, that’s just a saying. Like, ‘oh, I must be tripping.’ It means like you think you’re going crazy, or you’re confused. I guess your generation wouldn’t know that. Sorry, not to call you old or anything like that,” Javier says.

“No. That’s quite alright. I just figured you were on some kind of hallucinogenic or spiritual trip of sorts,” Alan says. Alan spots a stray plastic wrapper. He darts over, picks it up, and puts it in his bag. “With it being nighttime and the tool bag and...we’re all the way up here. You know?”

Javier laughs bashfully. “Yeahhh, I guess it must look pretty odd from an outside perspective. But, nah. Nah man, I’m not rippin’ acid. Just this stuff,” he says as he holds up his beer. “I guess you could say I’m on a kind of spiritual trip though,” Javier admits poignantly.

Alan leans forward. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. But, hey! That’s for another time,” Javier says. He shakes his head. “It’s all wack,” he says, dejected.

Javier fidgets with the tab on his can. Meanwhile, Alan picks up some rocks and dirt from the ground. He stands up and puts them in his pockets. Javier twists the tab off and drops it into his beer. Alan sits back down and looks at Javier.

“Is it a lady?” Alan asks.

Javier lifts his head up. “Huh? Sorry, what’d you say?” Javier asks.

“Your, your, um...” Alan searches. He doesn’t rush in his thoughts. “Your crossroads. Does it concern a lady?” he asks.

Javier perks up. “Yeah. How’d you know that?” Javier asks.

“Just a hunch. I was your age once,” Alan says.

“Ohh yeah. Right,” Javier says.

“The times may change, but a man’s burdens? That’s a universal constant,” Alan notes. He pulls a pear out of his bag and a pocket knife out of his shirt pocket. He starts to cut and eat, cut and eat. His fingers move slowly and carefully.

“Yeah, I don’t know. It’s not that big of a deal. I mean the world keeps spinning, right? Plus, it’s probably laughable compared to what you’ve been through,” Javier says.

Alan keeps cutting. “No...no. Our problems, they’re not commodities. They can’t be appraised or compared or even discarded. No. You and you alone are the arbiter. And don’t let anyone else tell you otherwise. It’s important you know that. It took me 27 years to learn that. And when I finally did, it was too late,” Alan remarks, rueful. Javier takes this to heart.

“Yeah. Yeah, thanks,” Javier says, nodding reflectively.

He sighs deeply and tries to let some of the tension out in his shoulders.

“Yeah, I don’t know, man. The breakup itself was bad enough. But then to find out that she’s already with a new guy. What? Just two weeks after we’d split. Let me tell you. I wanted to gouge my eyes out,” Javier says, on edge.

Alan slowly eats and processes this.

“This new fellow? Do you think it’s some kind of social advertisement or maybe even a defense mechanism? Or do you think they...” Alan suggests, gesturing his hand.

Adamantly, Javier says, “No, she wouldn’t do that. There’s no way she’d do that. But had they been talking beforehand? I mean it only took two weeks, so...God!” Javier stands up. “I don’t know,” he says, almost trembling. He turns around and grabs the fence. “God, could they’ve—oh, I can’t even—”.

Javier bends over and throws up. He puts his head against the fence and spits onto the ground as he begins to tear up. “Oh Jesus, what did I expect...I pushed her away...I was horrible. I stopped caring...about...about us. About everything,” Javier cries. Sniffing, he stands up and presses his entire body and face against the fence, still holding onto it. He looks off in the distance.

“I’m rotten,” he whispers.

Alan grabs a metal canteen out of his bag and walks over to Javier. “Here,” Alan says.

Javier turns around. His eyes are still welled with tears. Alan hands Javier the canteen as he brushes his face with his forearm.

“There’s some peppermint leaves in there. Should settle your stomach a bit,” Alan says.

Javier smiles weakly. He opens it and takes small sips. Alan steps over to examine the lock. He quickly notices Javier looking in his direction.

“Sorry, I don’t wish to meddle. Merely curious is all,” Alan says. Javier closes the canteen cap and shakes his head.

“You’re all good,” Javier says. “Thank you,” he adds, handing back the canteen.

Alan smiles faintly and walks back to his sitting rock. “May I ask what that is? I have an idea, but I’m not quite sure it’s right,” Alan says.

Javier holds the lock in his hand and looks at it with desolation. He takes some time to register Alan’s question. “Umm, yeah. Sure. It’s, uh, it’s called a heart lock—at least officially I think that’s what it’s called,” Javier says. He turns back around and faces Alan. “You saw the initials?” he asks.

“J and D? I take it you’re the J,” Alan says.

“Yep. And my ex. Her name is Dylan so...” Javier finishes. Alan nods and thinks.

“Is it supposed to be a symbol for love that is...eternal? Indestructible?” Alan asks.

“Yeah, something like that. Whatever that means,” Javier remarks sardonically.

Alan speaks without judgment. His tone remains calm and amicable. “If I may. Why would you want to destroy it?” Alan asks. Javier looks at him intently as Alan pulls out a very old pack of cigarettes. Lucky Strike.

“What? The love or the lock?” Javier asks.

“The lock. Care for one?” Alan asks, holding up the pack.

“Sure,” Javier says. Alan starts to get up. “No, no, no, sit down. Please,” Javier insists. He rushes over to Alan, who hands him a cigarette and lights a match for him. Javier bends over

and puts his cigarette up to the match. Alan lights both and shakes the match out. He pulls out a mason jar filled with water and old cigarettes and drops the match in there.

“Thanks,” Javier says.

“Sure thing.”

Javier walks back to the fence. “So, the lock, huh? The bane of my night,” Javier jokes. He smiles bleakly and takes a drag of his cigarette. “Why’d I wanna destroy it?” he says. “Well...I went kinda nuts when I found out about this new guy. *Cameron*. I mean just absolutely livid. As any guy would. I think. And so, I don’t know. My first thought was that I didn’t want any imaginable remnant of her in my sight, so I started to burn stuff. Gifts from her. Some of my shirts that she’d worn. Just anything and everything that remotely made me think of her.” Javier takes a deep breath.

“And then I remembered this,” Javier says. He looks back at the lock. Alan closes his eyes and nods discerningly. “God, I probably sound like a psycho, huh?” Javier says. Alan looks at Javier and shakes his head reassuringly. “I don’t know man. I just don’t know how else to deal with all of this crap,” he explains.

Alan exhales as he blows out smoke. “I can tell you this. There’s certainly no blueprint for it,” Alan says. “For longer than I can remember, I’ve searched for one. A solution or an anesthetic for this...” Alan searches for words. “This inimitable, yet universal feeling?” he continues. He shakes his head. “Couldn’t find one.” Alan looks Javier square in the face. “But, you know, I think about that and I ask myself: Is that really a bad thing?” he reflects.

Javier nods solemnly and drinks his beer. A peaceful quietude fills the air between them. Finally, Alan speaks. "Have you ever seen a sequoia cut open?"

"A sequoia? You mean like those big boys out in Cali?" Javier asks.

Alan smiles. "Precisely," he says.

"Nah, can't say I have," Javier says.

"My God, they're magnificent," Alan says. He jolts up and walks around as he talks. "So then you've never been? To Yosemite?"

"No," Javier says, smiling.

"No?" Alan is shocked.

"No," Javier laughs.

"Agh! I pity you. Your family has done you a great disservice," Alan says.

"What's with your woody for trees?" Javier asks. "Ayyy, you like that one? A little pun action?," Javier smiles temptingly.

Alan blushes and smiles. "Good one."

Javier throws his hands up. "Hey, I try."

Alan starts to chuckle. Javier points at him. "Seeee. See. See, I knew I'd get you," Javier teases.

Alan continues to laugh. “You indeed have,” he says. Javier watches him laugh and smiles.

“Oh man, what was I even jabbering about in the first place?” Alan says.

“Sequoias!”

“Oh yes! The sequoias. Yes. At Yosemite, you’ll see. Some of them are cut open,” Alan says. “And these cross sections, they’re available for the public to look at and even touch some of them. I mean...phew! They’re absolutely enormous. Easily twice your height. Some are even the size of...imagine this: triple the radius of a jet engine. I mean we’re talking thousands of years old, these beautiful creatures. Some as old as three millennia, Javier.”

“Yeah, that’s, that’s insane,” Javier says.

“I sometimes dream about planting the first seeds with my own hands,” Alan says reverently. He stares off in a reverie-like trance as Javier starts to put his cigarette out in the ground. This breaks his transient state. He rushes over to his canvas bag. “Oh no. The cigarette. Hold on,” he says.

Javier promptly stops. He sees Alan pull the mason jar out of his bag and laughs to himself. Alan opens the bottle and extends it to Javier. “Sorry. It just can’t be good for the ecosystem, you know?” he says.

“Yeah, I got you,” Javier says, smiling. Alan takes one last drag and puts his cigarette in the jar too. Javier finishes his last beer.

“These sequoias. They’ve gotta have thousands of rings, right? One per year?” Javier asks.

This piques Alan. “Yeah. How’d you know that?”

“Shoutout Mrs. Gonzalez!” Javier says, pumping his chest. Alan looks confused. “My 7th grade science teacher,” Javier clarifies.

“Ohh, I see. Yes, you’re completely right. Each ring is about a year. Roughly. And so, these, these cross sections, they reveal the entire lives of these...behemoth treasures if you will. You stand there in their midst, and it’s all laid out in front of you. Quantitatively speaking, yes, you can see their journey from their inception to the present day, but you can also feel it too. You can really feel it just by looking at them. You can truly get a sense of the emotions they’ve felt through the years,” Alan revels.

Javier looks skeptical. “I don’t—what do you mean? They’re trees. They’re nonverbal. They’re, I dunno. They’re a plant. I don’t think they’re capable of communicating emotion, let alone feeling it.”

Alan walks up in front of Javier. “Ohhh, my boy, that is far from the truth, let me tell you. These are sentient beings we’re talking about. Not just some wooden edifice. Don’t let them fool you. They are capable of feeling pain and joy just the same way you and I are.”

“But how do you know that? I mean how can you be so sure? You’re not a tree,” Javier asserts.

“Their rings! Hidden inside their trunks, these rings—they’re not perfect circles as if they were drawn with a machine. No, sir! Each ring is a unique outline—a reflection of the trials and tribulations and even triumphs of that particular year. See, there’s all kinds of distinctions in these rings. Some are jagged. Others are more smooth. Some have sections that curve inwards. This indicates healing from some kind of trauma or environmental stressor. And then you have the space between the rings. In years with, you know, bountiful light and water, growth is good, and the space between the rings is greater. In not so good years, it’s less. More narrow,” Alan explains. “And in some of these trunks, you’ll see cracks or, uh, or these gaping lines of sorts. Almost like an unfinished sawing job. And when you see these, you know there was some kind of fire or severe drought—the toughest of times for a tree. Yet the rings, they continue to appear. Around these wounds.”

“And you can tell all of this just by looking at their rings?” Javier asks dubiously. Alan sits back down and nods seriously. “But you have to cut open and kill a tree to know all of this? Isn’t that kinda counterproductive?”

“Sure. It is. It’s certainly no celebration. But like you said, they’re nonverbal. So that’s the only way that we as humans know how to understand them,” Alan says.

“Okay...” Javier says, still lost.

“Should we as humans have to cut one another open to understand each another?”

“What? No. We’re verbal. We can understand each other through speech. Through communication. Stuff like that,” Javier says in frustration.

Alan takes a sip from his canteen. “How do we learn speech? And communication? Words in general?” Alan asks, waving his hand.

“I mean I’m not a psych major or anything like that, but I don’t know. I guess we see and hear our parents do it, and just, uh, just like replicate that. Like muscle memory. But for a baby,” Javier says.

“Memory! Yes! We understand each other through communicating, but we can’t communicate without our memory. Without it, we become...untuned instruments.”

“I see that, but what does all of this have to do with trees?” Javier asks.

“They too have memory!” Alan beams.

Javier thinks for a bit and then looks up. “The rings,” he says.

Alan smiles. “Yes, Javier! The rings.”

Javier nods intently. “Okay,” he says softly.

“And without their rings, the good ones and the bad ones, without them, they’re nothing. They diminish,” Alan says. Javier sits in silence. Alan stands up, walks over to the fence, and looks out at the lake below. He plays a melody on his harmonica. Javier looks up from the ground. He closes his eyes and lets the song speak to him. He opens his eyes as Alan signals the outro.

“That was nice. How long you been playing for?”

“Ooh-wee, it’s been, God, you know I probably really started taking it seriously when I was about your age. Yeah,” Alan says.

“Why harmonica? I feel like most people usually gravitate towards piano or guitar initially.”

“Ahh man, the blues, Javier. It’s all about the blues. It’s the lifeblood of music. Of me. It’s everything. The stuff of life” Alan shrugs. “I play a little guitar too, but there’s just something special about being able to—” He puts the harmonica in his pocket, pulls it out, and plays a few notes. “You know?”

“Spontaneity. Yeah,” Javier says.

“Precisely, yes. Spontaneity. Just like the blues,” Alan says. They both smile and enjoy the moment.

Out of nowhere, a strong gust of wind rustles all of the trees and leaves around them. It continues to blow for some time before abruptly stopping. Alan looks up towards the sky and smiles. Javier feels something inside, but he’s not quite sure what it is. He looks off into the distance as his face becomes etched in thought.

“Well, old friend, I think they’re finally calling my name,” Alan says. He grabs his bags. “These live oaks up here. They’ve always looked to me like someone was trying to reach up to us from below. Maybe God,” Alan posits.

“Or maybe the dead,” Javier whispers to himself. He sees Alan approaching him and stands up. “Headed to Sequoia?” he asks.

“Soon enough,” Alan says.

“It was good to meet you,” Javier says warmly.

“Likewise.”

“I, I really don’t know how else to say it, Alan, but you...you brought some light to my night. Weird as that sounds. And you’re a real one for that,” Javier says. He wants to cry, but he doesn’t. Alan sticks his hand out, and they shake hands. Alan pats Javier's hand with his free hand and smiles sympathetically.

“Oh, hey,” Alan says. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the harmonica. “This has always brought me solace. I want you to have it.”

“Seriously?” Javier says.

“Seriously.” Alan puts the harmonica in Javier’s hand with great intention.

“Are you sure? This is really nice.”

“Yes,” Alan says earnestly. He clasps Javier’s hand shut. “You ought to have it now.”

Javier smiles. “Thank you, Alan.”

Alan lets go of Javier’s hands. “*On the road again,*” Alan says. He slaps Javier on the shoulder and winks. “So long.”

“See ya.”

Alan turns around and begins to walk away. Javier watches him.

“Safe travels!” Javier yells. Alan waves his hand in the air as he continues walking.

Javier takes a closer look at the shiny silver harmonica. There’s a metal engraving on one side. It reads: “The Blind Owl”. He looks back up to Alan and shouts. “What’s the blind owl?”

Alan stops walking. He pauses and then turns around. He’s smiling. “Just an old nickname my bandmates used to call me.” Alan points to his glasses.

“You were in a band?” Javier asks.

“A long time ago. Yeah,” Alan says.

“What was it called?”

“Canned Heat,” Alan says.

“Hm. That’s cool.” Javier looks back to the harmonica.

Alan calls out. “Hey! Javier!”

“Yeah?” Javier replies.

“The rings. Remember the rings?” Alan says.

Javier smiles. “Of course,” he says.

“You have your own. I do too. We all do. Okay?” Alan says.

Javier nods with endearment.

“Don’t lose your rings, Javier,” Alan says.

Javier continues to nod and wipes a tear from his eye. Alan turns around and walks into the darkness. Javier tries to wave goodbye, but he's already gone. He looks in Alan's direction with a sense of longing. He keeps looking and then remembers the harmonica. He looks it over a few times as he moves the cool metal around in his hands. He eventually blows into it. A quiet thrum.

"Canned Heat," he says. He picks up his empty beer can and looks at it. "Canned Heat? Nah." He drops the can. "Caaannned-Heat," he says, accentuating the syllables. He pulls out his phone and goes to Google. He types in "canned heat band" and scrolls on his phone for some time.

Slowly, Javier's face contorts to confusion and then awe. He quickly looks up in the direction of where Alan disappeared. "What the..." he says, stunned. He opens up Spotify on his phone and looks up Canned Heat. He plays the first song that appears. "Going Up The Country".

Within seconds, he exclaims, "Noooo way. No way. No way. No way, man!"

Complete and utter surprise is still painted on his face. He lets the song continue to play, and slowly he begins to smile.

And then he starts to laugh.

...

TO ALL THE ALAN'S OF THIS WORLD. TREASURE THEM. *PROTECT* THEM.

