

Fiction
The Unbinding
By Walter Kirn
Installment 1

[From MyStory.Com]

They call at all hours with a thousand problems and our satellites fix their locations to the square foot while our operators try to help them or put them in touch with specialists who can. They call because they've fallen and can't stand up, because they're alone and choking on their food, because they've been abandoned by their wives, because they smell gas, because their babies won't nurse, because they've forgotten how many pills they've swallowed, and sometimes because they're afraid that we're not here and crave reassurance in case they need us later. It's a costly service—\$60 a month for the Palladium Global Access package, not including the optional Active Angel Plan that remotely coaches users through more than 600 common Life Challenges, from administering infant CPR to negotiating the purchase of a home—and clients deserve to know we're at our stations even when the skies are fair and blue.

"AidSat?" they ask us, and as we answer them we check our screens for their pulse rates and other vital signs, which are forwarded to us from sensors in their bracelets or, for Active Angel clients, in their earjacks. If the numbers look bad we press a lighted red key that sends an ambulance from the nearest hospital. If the stats appear normal we stroke another key that records and stores the information, shielding the firm from legal liability should it turn out that the sensors have malfunctioned and the caller is, in fact, dying on the line.

Last Thursday around lunchtime this call came. Peculiar, but not as peculiar as they come. The only reason to write it down is that I decided this month to write it all down, everything, my morning and my nights, and to file it for perpetual safekeeping in the great electronic library of lives. I'm an interesting person, I've come to see. We all are. We don't deserve to disappear.

"I'm in my car. It's rainy—really foggy. I think I see a coastline on my right."

"How can I help you?" I asked.

"I'm lost, I guess."

"Humboldt County, ma'am, city of Eureka, lower Van Manson Avenue, heading south. On your left you should see a Best Western hotel-convention center and a home electronics superstore."

"Which state is this, though?"

"California."

"That makes sense."

"Do you need any further assistance?"

"No."

"You're sure? All conversations with AidSat are strictly private. You sound a bit frazzled, frankly."

"Time of month."

I let out a laugh I'd practiced and said, "No kidding," though what I meant by this I have no idea. Just trying to sound human, I suppose, which I'll admit can be hard for me sometimes.

The woman terminated our connection. But I tracked her vehicle for the next 10 minutes. It's in the contract folks sign when they subscribe. If an operator has cause to be concerned, he's authorized to continue passive coverage without the client's spoken permission. I've made a habit of this practice. Three years ago, when I was new at AidSat, I took a call from the distraught head chef of a Kansas City country club who'd learned just moments earlier that he'd been fired. Since the man subscribed to Active Angel, I led him step by step through a scripted two-hour crisis-mitigation plan. I stood by in his ear as he ate a light, warm meal, obtained a pen and paper at a drugstore and sought out a peaceful spot of natural beauty (a nearby city park I guided him to) where, in response to my whispered promptings, he sketched a series of detailed pictures depicting his hopes and desires for his future. He seemed composed after finishing the drawings and, at his request, I let him go. I should have shadowed him. The man returned to his workplace with a handgun, randomly let off five shots in the main dining room (wounding no one but traumatizing many), then discharged the weapon into his own right ear.

Though AidSat provided me with intensive therapy beginning the next morning and lasting six months, the guilt still scratches, the regrets still bite, and sometimes my dreams light up with violet firebursts from the bullets I might have prevented from being fired and never got to hear.

I followed the woman's vehicle on my screen as it passed through downtown Eureka and then stopped moving. That's when her breathing suddenly accelerated and her body temperature shot up. She wasn't running, though. Slow, even steps, direction north-northwest, along a side street whose major landmark was a Salvation Army thrift store tagged on my screen as a high-crime locale. At AidSat we're not merely counselors, we're cartographers. Our trademarked multi-axis maps of America's physical and social landscape are the envy of the industry.

They can pinpoint the safest neighborhoods for children, the highest concentrations of single black millionaires, and the most likely spots to contract a tick-borne illness. Location is destiny, is how we see it.

I fingered a key to buzz the woman's bracelet and waited 20 seconds for a response.

"What is it?" she said. Then a second voice, male: "Who's that?"

"We're checking back. As a courtesy," I said.

I heard the male voice say, "Fucking turn it off."

"That's nice, but I'm fine," said the woman, Sarah Flick, a Licensed Practical Nurse, age 34, and a resident of Unger Falls, Wisconsin. I had her call history in front of me and saw that she'd used the service just twice that quarter, both times for relatively trivial reasons: to verify the safety record of a child's playpen she was buying and to ascertain the legal penalty for driving while intoxicated in Iowa.

"I'm really completely OK now," Sarah insisted.

But the health sensors said otherwise. Blood pressure that would pop the plastic screw top off a soda bottle. Light perspiration. A faint but discernible coronary arrhythmia. I touched the key that opens my conversations to my superiors at our Portland unit and lets them review developing situations. Sarah needed a medic, most certainly. I sensed that she might also need a cop.

"I believe you're in danger. Answer 'yes' or 'no,' " I said. "Do you feel safe around this man you're with?"

"No." A quick and tiny "no," but vibrant.

"Is he threatening you in any way?"

"A lot of them."

"Physically? With violence?"

"Not so far."

"Could the reason you didn't know which state you're in be that he brought you there against your will?"

"He wants me to hand him the bracelet now, he says. He didn't know what the thing was before."

"Cooperate. We're moments away," I said. "We're almost there."

Such moments are what I live for in my job. They're why I get to work early for every shift and volunteer to fill in during the holidays: those times when I and the AidSat system unite—when the broad continental reach of our concern fixes on a single soul in peril and we stretch our arms down from the stars. Our infinite automated tenderness ought to have been built into the universe, and for a few years, as a child, I thought it had been. When my parents split up, I found out that I was wrong. But at last the flaw has been addressed. The machinery for answering prayers is now in place and I am seated at its mighty center.

Two hours after Sarah's call I heard from Portland—from a supervisor named Peter P. whom I'd dealt with once or twice before. I happened to know from AidSat scuttlebutt that he had come to us from the upper echelons of the personal wellness industry. It's a tame-sounding field, but in my experience it turns out some very potent personalities, including a young woman in my complex whom I've had the pleasure of watching at the paint-ball range where I blow off steam on summer weekends. Her name is Sabrina, she's lethal at any distance, and I happen to know through casual research that she works at the Heart Glow Spa downtown. We're headed for a date, I hope, as soon as I can finagle a chance meeting and come up with the right restaurant.

"That call could have worked in an ad," said Peter P. "The guy was her ex. Extensive prison record. He knocked her out with dope and stole her car and drove for two days before she woke back up. Only problem is she was wanted, too. Aggravated assault on the girl she left the ex for."

"Still," I said.

"I agree with you completely."

"We foiled an abduction."

"Sure as shooting. The second one this week, my files show. Now, head on home. Your day is over, Kent."

I asked Peter P. why.

"New mental-health directive. You engaged in a high-stress intervention there. Depresses the immune system, we've found, especially in the winter and early spring. We're trying to be pro-active on this front. Hit the gym, maybe. Take a sauna. Rest."

I did a few years at military school, so I recognize an order. Before I signed off I asked Peter P. a favor that I'd been thinking of asking for him months: a call history on this Sabrina cutie, whom I'd noticed wore an AidSat jack disguised as a clip-on sapphire earring. He went oddly quiet for a moment, the way people do when they're writing something down, then offered to "dig a bit" and left the line. My impression was that her

name meant nothing to him but that he wasn't entirely thrilled to learn that it meant something to me.

But that's my impression whenever I ask my colleagues for helpful tidbits on clients I'd like to bang.

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