

New Fiction by Adrian Bonenberger: "Checkpoint"



Every two or three months Jon and Steven would meet for lunch at the McDonald's outside the town center where Main Street met Route 1. Jon was married and Steven was single. Steven had been married before, but his wife caught him cheating. Now he was divorced. The divorce had not interrupted their tradition of meeting for lunch, though it had limited its frequency for a couple years while Steven sold his half of the house and packed up his college fraternity mug, cashed out his stocks to split 50/50 with his ex-wife, and, after some consideration, finally bought a dog.

The tradition had sprung up because both men enjoyed McDonald's, particularly the quarter pounder with cheese, and neither man's wife (ex-wife, in Steven's case) had appreciated their enjoyment of McDonald's. Jon's wife, in fact, was

offended that he preferred McDonald's fast food to her meals. He wasn't unreasonable. If you asked Jon, even if his wife was nowhere to be seen, he'd tell you that she was a great cook. Every once in a while an irresistible urge arose in him to buy and consume one or two quarter pounders with cheese, plus a medium fries and a Coca Cola to wash it all down.

In addition to the guilty pleasure of the food (if that's what you'd call it. They did), the men also enjoyed one another's company. Jon was a lawyer and worked at a firm in the city nearby. Steven was a developer, also in the city. They had met on the train during the middle of President Obama's first term, as young men. The friendship they formed had lasted all that time.

It's unusual that men form significant emotional bonds in adulthood with anyone besides family, and it would not be fair to say that Jon and Steven were close friends. Steven had never invited Jon and Jon's wife to the Christmas parties he and his now ex-wife had held when they were still together. Jon had never invited Steven over for Sunday football with his neighbors. Still, they enjoyed the respite their occasional forays to McDonald's provided from domestic life. So they had entered a small conspiracy together, which consisted primarily of talking about local and state politics or whatever extraordinary event was driving the news cycle, and eating fast food.

One day late November, they'd made plans to meet after the presidential election. The election had gone mostly how the previous election went: too close to call, with contested vote counts everywhere. A foul mood had settled over the state, as it had just about every state in the U.S. and probably the world.

The two men met in the parking lot, pulling in at almost the same time. Steven greeted Jon with a wide grin that Jon returned, and the two men shook hands with their right hands,

and hugged with their left arms. Even out here in on the pavement the men could smell that they were in the right place for fast food, the air greasy and warm.

Jon and Steven ordered their meals and paid for them both (they'd settled into a casual reciprocal rhythm years ago), then grabbed an order number and found a booth looking out over the road. It was mostly empty, just past the usual lunch rush hour.

"How are things looking? Feeling ok about the election? Still worried it's all going to fall apart," Jon said, reclining in the hard plastic seat.

"Not good amigo," Steven said.

"Cheer up! Things happen, people are used to disappointment," Jon said. "Unless the economy is truly fucked— and it isn't! Most people have a place to live, and food to eat! — you won't find people desperate enough to pick up arms and fight. The French Revolution was started by starving peasants, not by annoyed nobles."

Steven shook his head. "You're underestimating the anger out there, Jon. People are upset, not just about the economy, but about culture. All this DEI and woke stuff. And this is a middle-class country. So it has middle-class worries. Culture's something that middle class people worry about, how to be a good citizen and neighbor. That's always to the American been as important as food."

Jon crossed his arms and leaned back. "I don't know man. I get what you're saying, we're a bourgeois country with middle class values. It's just... you're gonna pick up a rifle and maybe die to own the libs? Or because there's a black family living down the street? Doesn't it sound ridiculous? You'd die because of something imaginary some rich guy made up with a bunch of suits he paid for advice?"

"Me and you wouldn't die, no, but we're not everyone," Steven said. "I know people in my world, you probably know people in yours, who sincerely believe every Democrat is a far left radical Marxist who's going to ruin America. I'm not even talking about the conspiracy nuts, the ones who believe Democrats are pedophile groomers harvesting the adrenaline of children. I'm talking about normal people who feel the 'progressive' centralized federal bureaucracy is out of control. People who lost their job or some crucial opportunity because of a woman, or a minority. They know, and you can't tell them different, that the most important thing is to ruin that federal control by any means necessary ."

"I guess the question is whether they're ready to die for that, and – again – I don't see it," Jon said.

"Well I hope you're right," said Steven. "Look at that, right on time – the food!"

A heavysset woman who spoke with Spanish-accented English brought out their meals on trays. "Enjoy!"

The men thanked her and tucked into their lunch. Steven ate more deliberately, chewing each bite and seeming to savor the meal . Jon devoured his food. He was finished with his second burger before Steven was through his first. Jon leaned back in the booth and spread his arms out.

"Ahhhhhh," he exclaimed. "That hit the spot".

"Why do you eat the burgers first and not the fries?" Steven said between mouthfuls.

Jon looked at his tray. "I don't know. Maybe that's how I saw my dad eating."

"I'm the same way," Steven said. "Burgers first, fries second. You know Ellen, she always ate fries or salad first. Never understood eating the burger beforehand."

“The fries, also, I’d say, they’re more sortable. You can eat some of them. Much harder to eat ‘some’ of the cheeseburger and save the rest for later. And that goes triple for fast food. Maybe I’d do it differently if it was a restaurant burger. But I wouldn’t say it’s a deliberate thing. It’s just sort of how I eat.” He paused. “Hey man, what’s going on?”

“You see that?” Steven pointed. “What’s that?”

Jon turned to the window. Outside, about a hundred yards away at the intersection, there was some sort of commotion. Three pickup trucks had just pulled up and blocked the intersection. Armed men were getting out of the backs of the trucks or exiting the cab, about a dozen of them in total. They were carrying rifles, and wearing helmets and body armor. One of the people reached up and affixed a red light, like a police light, to the top of the middle cab. Several of the others were unloading materials from the backs of the trucks – orange construction cones, sawhorses.

“Is something happening? Is that police?”

“Must be FBI,” Jon said, thoughtfully. “Police have different uniforms. This looks like – I don’t know what it looks like. Can’t be police, though.”

Steven pulled out his phone and searched for information.

“Don’t see anything about it on the news.”

“Well, you know what they say,” Jon said. “If it’s not on the news, make the news. Film it.” He leaned forward. “Wait a minute. I think I know one of those guys. Yeah... the short heavy guy, over on the right. That’s his pickup truck. He goes to my church!”

Steven had begun recording the checkpoint. Lines were beginning to form at all roads. The intersection wasn’t busy at this time of day, which meant there wasn’t much of a line, but that’d change, this was a big road. Some drivers turned

around. One driver traveling toward the McDonald's in a Subaru Outback had rolled down his window and was gesticulating at the men. Two armed men walked over and talked with him, then waved him through.

"I guess it's a checkpoint," Steven said. "Look, he's turning in here – if he comes inside, let's ask him what's going on."

"Are they wearing balaclavas? They're wearing balaclavas, look. That's not police, or FBI," Jon said. "No way man. That's a militia."

The man parked the Outback. He got out and walked into the McDonald's. Wearing a ballcap, boots, jeans, and a plaid shirt, he looked like he could've been a lumberjack – which is to say, like most of the people who lived in the area.

Jon flagged him down. "Hey, sir – sorry to bother you. Who are those guys out there? Do you know what's happening?"

"Didn't say much except that the road was closed. I told them I was just here to grab a bite to eat, and then needed to get home. Didn't hassle me none."

"Did you recognize anyone? Are they local? Police?"

"I don't think so," the man said. Turning to the self-order kiosk, he indicated that the interview was over.

Steven continued to film the men, some were setting up concertina wires, others continued to block traffic. "Call the police," he said. "Let's figure this out."

"Already on it," Jon said, his smartphone at the ready. "I'm on hold."

"Did you call 9-11?"

"No, I can't see as it's anything urgent – I mean what if it is the police, or deputies, or something. Then I'd just be

clogging up the emergency line. Someone might be out there hurt or dying.”

“Makes sense,” Steven said, still watching the checkpoint.

By now all but one of the cars had turned around. That last car, an electric Chevy, was being driven by an older woman, as far as they could tell. It was hard to see from this distance exactly what was happening. But the two men near the car were gesturing , and seemed to be exchanging words with her. Finally one of the men walked back toward the center of the intersection, and consulted with a group of the men who were erecting some kind of booth or room. Jon pointed at the phone and nodded; someone had picked up.

“Yeah, hi ... I’m at the McDonald’s at the three-way intersection at Main Street and Route 1. Armed men in pickup trucks are setting up some kind of barricade or checkpoint and turning cars away... uh... rifles, assault rifles, that kind of thing. They’re wearing body armor and camouflage... about a dozen... three pickup trucks... not that I can see, ma’am, no. One has a red light on top of the cab of his truck. Ok, thank you.” He hung up. “It’s not police. They’re sending a car over.”

“Hope they get here quick. Things are escalating,” Steven said.

At the checkpoint, the woman had rolled down her window and was arguing with the men. One of them backed up, and raised his rifle, pointing it at her. Circling around to the other side, the second man tried to open the door.

“Holy shit,” Steven said.

The woman put the car in reverse – hers was the only car in that lane – and the man on the passenger side fell to the ground. Even from inside the restaurant, they could hear the other man shouting what must have been “get out of the car.”

Instead the car whipped around and took off in the other direction as the man holding the rifle continued to aim.

One of the men from the center had run forward and was yelling "don't shoot." He reached the man and pushed the rifle down.

"Jesus," Jon said. "Jesus are you getting this?"

"Every second," Steven said.

"Here comes the cavalry," Jon said, as a squad car appeared from the other direction – the direction of the town center. That's where police HQ was, a couple minutes' drive away.

The car pulled over to the side of the road, and two officers stepped out. After looking at the center, where one of the men nodded, the rest of the people took their hands off their weapons and raised their hands. The police officers walked up to the checkpoint. One of the armed men – he was short and stocky, well-built, the same one who'd disarmed the situation with the old woman – walked out, and shook hands with the lead officer. The two of them talked, the officers nodded, then returned to their squad car and left.

Steven laughed nervously. "What the fuck?"

"Should I go out there? Like I said I know that guy. We're on OK terms."

"I think we should get in our cars and get the hell out of here while we still can," Steven said.

"Woah, look at this," Jon said. Google maps was showing red traffic at several 3- and 4-way intersections around town. "We might be too late."

"But what are these things for?"

"If the cops are ok with it, how bad can it be?" Jon said.

"Bad enough I don't want to find out how bad it can be,"

Steven said. "Hell I'd even say ditch the car, let's just hoof it out of here."

"Fine, I'll finish recording. You finish your burger and fries."

"I'm not hungry anymore," Steven said.

The men at the checkpoint resumed their positions. One sat in a running truck, five were in the middle assembling some sort of ad hoc building or office, and the rest in pairs, guarding the roads and turning cars away.

A car approached that they waved into the checkpoint. The car – a maroon Toyota Prius hybrid – slowed down as it was approaching, almost as though it was having doubts. Like a warthog approaching a lounging pack of wild African dogs on the savannah, wondering whether to taunt them with its strength and quickness, or to escape. One soldier pulled back a strand of concertina wire and the other waved it into the area, while two of the men in the middle, who had stopped working, approached. The car moved through, and the concertina wire was replaced.

"That car looks familiar... can't place it, though," Jon said.

The leader of the armed men, or at least the leader of this group, opened the door, and a middle-aged woman stepped out from the car. He motioned her to walk with him, and another one of the armed men accompanied them, as the two appeared to talk.

"That's our State Representative, Steve. Trish Froem. I knew I recognized the car, we worked together on a couple cases in the state capital."

"Wasn't she – there was some kind of scandal, right? She pulled influence to get her kids into that prep school on full scholarship?"

“That was a while ago,” Jon said. “And I think it was kind of blown out of proportion by conservative media.”

It happened so quickly. The man accompanying Trish and his leader jabbed her with what must have been a taser; while she jerked spastically, (flopping like a fish, Jon thought) he gently lowered her to the ground, then flex-cuffed her. Two of the other men ran up to help. After securing her, they carried her limp body into the back of the running pickup truck, and rapped on the hood. The driver exited the checkpoint and headed off down the road, away from the town center. Another one of the men piloted the abandoned Toyota into the McDonald’s parking lot.

Steven and Jon looked at each other. Steven stopped recording and put the phone in his pocket.

“You were right, we should’ve driven out while we had the chance,” Jon said.

“Wait – isn’t that the dude you said you know from church? In the Prius?”

Jon cocked his head. “Yeah, that’s him.”

“Ok, check it out. We’re gonna walk out of here like we didn’t see a thing and pretend to just bump into him, casually. Offer him a ride to the checkpoint. That’ll get us through.”

“What are you going to do about your car?”

Steven sat back, his food unfinished. “I don’t know, I’ll figure that out later. Right now we need to get out of here. Some bad shit’s going down.”

Jon nodded and they got up together, trashing the uneaten food, letting the empty wrappers slide off the tray and into the bin, then stacking their trays. Jon had this impression that he was floating in a swimming pool. Step by step, he thought. Don’t lose it.

Going out the front door was the hardest part. The doorway felt like a portal to a strange new world , one in which the election of a person, a human, to public office – state rep! – was less important than a handful of men willing to do that same person violence . Maybe that was the real world, and civilization was the delusion, a happy fantasy that enough people had tolerated for a few decades or centuries to make real. Maybe the truth was a world of violence like a crocodile catching a deer drinking water on the savannah and making the deer its dinner, and these people had figured that out. The question now, the urgent question, was how Steven and Jon were going to fit into this new world. Would they be waved through, or tased?

Jon willed himself to place his hand on the door, like walking into a courtroom, nothing to it, and then pushed through. Steven followed into the parking lot.

They'd timed it perfectly – the short militiaman was pulling himself out of the Prius, having parked it. Jon stopped somewhat dramatically – selling but trying not to oversell the moment of recognition. "Jeff? That you?"

The heavysset militiaman froze.

"Jeff Parsons! Hey, what's – what's going on, new car? What's the getup?"

Jeff seemed disarmed by the questions. He froze, then pulled down his balaclava. "Hey Jon, how are you."

"Good man. What's, what's going on?"

"I'm with a group of folks who are looking for enemies of the, uh, state," Jeff said unconvincingly, shifting from foot to foot. "We got deputized by the local police to help."

"Is that right," Jon said, looking up at the checkpoint. "Well, this here's my friend, Steve. Steve, Jeff and I go to

church together.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Steven said, extending his hand. Jeff pulled off one of his tactical shooter gloves and shook Steven’s hand. Jeff’s rifle – an AR-15 secured by a one-point sling – dangled awkwardly from his plate carrier, spinning unsecured. I could grab it, Jon thought, but the moment passed.

“Hey so, I guess we should probably head home, if something’s going down – is that right?” Jon said.

“Yeah, that’s probably smart,” Jeff said.

“Let us give you a ride back to the checkpoint. I’m right here, hop in,” said Jon.

“Oh, thanks,” Jeff said.

The three climbed into Jon’s car, a Chevrolet Suburban. Jeff huffed and puffed a little pulling himself into the back seat. Steven got into the front passenger seat, and Jon piloted the car slowly to the checkpoint. When they were near, the car slowed, and Jeff got out the back, approaching the checkpoint on foot. He turned back to wave them forward and through.

“Well done,” Steven said quietly, his lips barely moving. Then raised his hand to wave, an insincere smile plastered across his face. Jeff waved back.

The two militiamen at the checkpoint pulled back the concertina wire, and Jon drove through, slowly navigating the wire and barriers. As the SUV moved through the checkpoint, militia men watched it. Behind their balaclavas it was impossible to know what they were thinking, or who they were. Other men from the town or area, Jon thought, men pulled into a movement or who had sought it out. Were they extremists? Or regular folks, like Steven said? Like Jeff? It wasn’t until they exited the other side that Jon exhaled. He hadn’t

realized he'd been holding his breath. Without accelerating quickly, he pulled the SUV away, and the place receded into the rear-view mirror.

"Jesus Christ."

"Tight, that was tight," Steven said. "But listen. Where are we going."

"I'm going home to get my wife and kids, gotta figure out what the next step is for the family. Might be able to make our way there through side roads, miss any more of these bigger intersections. I can drop you anywhere you want after that."

"Yeah, no problem." Steven consulted his phone. "Look there's a kind of long way around where you only hit one intersection. It's down the road a bit, you'll take a right on Landsdale, past the high school, but we avoid the center. Obviously local police are part of whatever this bullshit is. But there's no way to make it clean to your house without hitting any intersections. What do you think."

Jon was already piloting the Suburban where it needed to go. "Good plan."

They drove for a few minutes in silence, the measure of their friendship overwhelmed by the magnitude of the circumstances.

There is a paradox in moments of crisis. One spends much of one's life dreading catastrophe and everything that catastrophe means. But when the bad moment arrives, when the wind carries ill fortune, most people have within them the animal intuition for how to respond. Fight or flight. Everyone knows what to do, based on how evolution and education formed them. Jon was thinking about his wife and kids. Steven was thinking about his ex-wife and their kids, living a state away in Massachusetts, though they weren't his family anymore. Also, he was thinking about what was happening, and his likely part in what might be to come. The old New England style

houses and various small businesses of the town flashed by while Steven looked out the window at the newly foreign landscape.

“Here we go,” Jon said, slowing as they approached a long line of cars that heralded the checkpoint. It was still out of sight, around a bend in the road. “Guess the story is, we’re heading back to my house, you’re my friend, we’re grabbing dinner with my family.”

“Best lies happen to be true,” Steven said.

Though the line of the cars was long, it moved quickly. Some were peeling off rather than waiting. As they rounded the bend, the checkpoint came into view.

This one was different. It was made up of two police cars, one pulled off the road, the other in the middle. An officer was in each lane checking cars and directing traffic, while two more lounged by the parked squad car, carrying shotguns. This checkpoint worked as follows: a car would be brought forward, the officer directing traffic would take a photo of the license plate, then take a photo of the car’s driver holding up their license. It took each car about 30 seconds to be processed and sent on its way.

“So much for our clever cover story,” Steven said.

“Let’s not celebrate yet,” Jon said. “We don’t know whose laws these cops are enforcing.”

When they pulled forward and rolled down the window, Jon asked the officer about the other checkpoint.

“Can’t say what’s happening elsewhere,” the officer said. “But we haven’t deputized anyone. We’re state police,” he said. “Maybe local police are doing things different.”

“Doing what different,” Steven said. “What’s happening, sir?”

"Best you get home and watch the news," the officer said, waving them through. "You'll know more about what's happening than I do. We just got orders to establish this checkpoint and log transients and that's what we're doing."

They drove through. "'What's happening.' Dude!" Jon said, shaking his head. "What were you thinking? The cop was waving us through!"

Steven didn't respond.

"Well, it didn't get us killed this time. So, straight shot to my house from here. You want to come with, figure out what the next steps are?"

Steven was still looking out the window. "Actually, why don't you drop me off. It's not too cold. Think I'll walk back to my apartment. Maybe get the lay of the land."

"You sure? I can drop you there later, once we've sorted out what's happening. Safety in numbers."

Steven didn't want to say so but the idea of plugging in with Jon's family did not appeal to him. Being part of a family at a moment like this, it was an implicit commitment to others he didn't feel like making. He had too much (or too little) self-regard to insert himself into another man's family. To be their Kramer, some guy who was a third wheel, to the main plot of Jon and his wife's journey with their children.

Part of him had this idea that whatever was happening was an opportunity, a change in the order of things. The state representative (Steven resented how Jon had put it; he remembered her being crooked, a person of low integrity, not 'blown out of proportion' at all, if anything tolerated and swept under the rug) had been poorly treated. Nobody deserved to be tased. But was her removal unjust? No, the people had just had enough of being oppressed. he thought about how his ex-wife had demeaned him and gotten into all that crazy woke

DEI stuff. He wasn't sadistic, Steven; he was a reasonable man. And you can push a reasonable man so far, he thought.

"Yeah, let me out here. I need the exercise."

"Good luck," Jon said pulling the car to the side of the road.

"Maybe I'll see you around."

"You too," Steven said, opening his door. He paused, then turned back to Jon. The men shook hands and looked each other in the eye. Then Steven nodded, and closed the door.