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ROCK YOUR BODY

Trisha Bartle

Backstreet's back, alright!" The cheerful tones rang from Ryan's nightstand. If he'd known that his guilty pleasure song would be waking him in the dead of night for weeks on end, he might have chosen a different song for his alarm. Something he hated instead, like "Sweet Caroline." Then again, none of this was really his choice. Of course, he'd tried to change the alarm. No matter what settings he'd hammered out on his phone the night before, it always woke him up at 4:27 a.m. to the dulcet tones of Nick Carter and the boys. Considering he had to be at work over four hours later, it wasn't exactly a welcome alarm. Even worse, it happened on the weekends when he'd normally be attempting to catch up on the sleep he'd missed or, more honestly, recovering from a night binge-watching *Twin Peaks*. Since this started, he'd wake at 4:27 a.m., smash at his phone until it stopped, then try his hardest to go back to sleep. It only worked about half the time. He cleared all alarms every night, but it still woke him up. He did a factory reset. He even bought an entirely new phone—something he'd usually avoid at all costs. Alas, at 4:27 a.m., as he was dreaming of riding a glittering rollercoaster to the moon, he was jolted awake with Backstreet Boys' seminal 1990s classic, "Everybody (Backstreet's Back)." Backstreet's back, indeed.

"Oh my god, we're back again ... brothers, sisters, everybody sing..." Ryan sang along grumpily, more zombie than man, as he rolled over and pawed at his phone, knocking it on the floor in the process. He had it on good authority he'd have that song in his head for the rest of the day. Rest of his life, perhaps. The thought crossed his mind to roll back over and hopefully succumb to the sweet nectar of uninterrupted sleep, but no. "What do you want from me?! Why, phone? Why?"

He'd had enough. Maybe it was time to do something drastic. He needed to do the two things he hated most in this world: go to Walmart and talk to a professional about his phone. Well, "professional" was a bit generous, but he couldn't wait for the AT&T store to open. He needed to figure this out now, at 4:27 a.m., and the only way to do that was to schlep his tired, moon-coaster-dreaming ass to Walmart, of all places.

“You’re coming with me, Buddy. Your Backstreet days are over.” Ryan pocketed the offending device and, with a little sprucing-up and a swig of day-old coffee to brighten up his life a little, he walked out into the crisp air of a much-too-early morning.

For a moment, he thought his local 24-hour Walmart might be empty. Who else would choose to be out at this hour? Instead of the empty aisles he’d hoped for, he had to dodge kids playing tag amidst inflatable pool unicorns and old men taking up the whole aisle on their Hoveround scooters. Though he had to hand it to the adult man walking around in Wolverine onesie pajamas carrying a stack of frozen pizzas. If only Ryan could be so brave.

To further burn his luck, the tech counter in the anemic Media and Gaming Department had a line. A man wearing tight pink leggings with *Dirty* written across the back in silver rhinestones was telling the tired-looking clerk about his DVD player and how it wouldn’t play movies when he put the discs in label-side down. Behind him was a woman about Ryan’s age with long, wavy brown hair. She was wrapped in a long beige coat and tapped her foot while holding her phone in her hand. She looked tired.

Ryan got in line behind her and tried his best to pretend that he was patient. He watched the wall of televisions as they cycled over and over through ads for the most recent Pixar release, the new Ariana Grande album, and an inexplicable video about Martha Stewart’s new line of baguette-themed scented candles, available only at Walmart.

Ryan tried. He really did. But he just couldn’t get the song out of his head. It pulled his attention away from the screens and the *Dirty* man that was currently getting red in the face from frustration.

“Gonna bring the flavor, show you how,” he muttered, low at first, barely more than a whisper. “Gotta question for ya, better answer now.”

Now he was in full-whisper territory, not so loud as to start an impromptu flash mob or anything, but loud enough that the brunette in front of him turned around with a glance. He cracked a tiny smile and continued. “Am I original? Yeah. Am I the only one?”

Before he could fill in the next response, Brunette, her eyes slightly wide, chimed in. “Yeah,” she sang along.

“Am I sexual?”

“Yeah.” They both sported large grins beneath their tired eyes.

“Am I everything you need,” they both sang in unison, louder now,

“you better rock your body now.”

They burst into laughter, making *Dirty* nearly jump out of his pink leggings. He turned around and scowled at the pair, a furrow where his non-existent eyebrows would have been. He swiveled back to the clerk to continue his tirade.

“That was awesome,” the woman said, her hazel eyes shining. She stuck out her hand. “I’m Hazel.”

What are the odds? “Hi, Hazel. I’m Ryan,” he extended his hand for a hearty, early-morning handshake.

“Hi, Ryan! Are you doing that thing where you repeat the person’s name to help you memorize it? Because that’s what I’m doing.”

“Ha, you guessed it.” He smiled. “If I don’t do something, I won’t even hear the name in the first place. Honestly, there have been a lot of awkward moments when I’ve gone through an entire date with a woman and had no idea what her name was. I don’t want to do that again.”

“Good thing this isn’t a date then.” She winked.

Don’t blush, don’t blush, Ryan urged himself, though his body was betraying him. He could feel heat rising from his chest toward his neck. Before he could come up with a witty response that would be the perfect mix of flirty and nonchalant, *Dirty* slammed the DVD player onto the desk.

“Screw this! What kind of place are you running here, anyway? Perverts are singing songs—”

“Perverts?” Hazel whispered quietly to Ryan, mid-laugh.

“—and you refuse to help me.”

“Sir, I told you. You just insert the DVD like this.” The clerk reached for a DVD he’d placed on the counter, but before he could grab it, *Dirty* took hold and launched it toward the wall of TVs like a Frisbee. It sailed a few feet before floating to the ground and skidding across scuffed linoleum for a soft, uneventful landing.

“Go to hell!” *Dirty* yelled before stomping away empty-handed.

Ryan and Hazel stared at the clerk for a moment, who just sighed and lowered his eyes. “I’m not supposed to say this ... but I hate my job. Anyway, who’s next?”

“Oh!” Hazel said, lifting her phone. “Yeah, it’s me.”

The line stepped forward so Ryan was a few feet closer to his hopeful destiny of a Backstreet Boys-free morning routine. Maybe he could get a solid seven hours of sleep from now on.

“Okay, this is going to sound really weird,” Hazel said. “And I prom-

ise I've done everything I could think of to fix it myself but ... Do you know the song 'Everybody' by the Backstreet Boys?"

Ryan had been trying to pretend he wasn't listening, but now he couldn't hide his interest. He stepped a little closer.

"No," the clerk said.

"Well, it probably came out before you were born. It's not important. I mean it kind of is, but ... Ugh, let me start from the beginning. Two weeks ago, my phone woke me up at exactly 4:27 a.m. to that song. But here's the thing: I didn't set the alarm. I don't even really care about that song." She blew out a breath that ruffled her bangs. "I restarted my phone. I removed all music and music-streaming apps from my phone. I even called Verizon customer service. Nothing. It won't stop. It wakes me up every day." Hazel, for a moment, sounded like she might cry.

"And?" the clerk seemed unimpressed. Ryan, on the other hand, was so beside-himself that he felt like he'd briefly detached from reality.

"And I want it to stop! Customer service told me to bring it into somewhere so they could fiddle with the settings in person. I was planning on going somewhere more professional, no offense—"

"None taken."

"—but it woke me up again. I seriously can't take it anymore."

The clerk sighed and turned toward his computer monitor. "Let me look it up online."

"I already did that. I can't find anyone else with the same problem."

Ryan cleared his throat. "Um, now you have."

Hazel turned. "What?"

"I've been having the exact same problem. Same song, same time. That's why I'm here." He stepped forward so they were both at the counter. Safety in numbers, right? "I did a factory reset. It didn't stop. I even bought a new phone from a completely different brand. It's still doing it. Can you help us?"

The clerk looked back and forth between them, then sighed again. "Did you try turning it off and on again?"

"Did you not hear what we've been saying? Of course we did." Hazel cocked a thumb at Ryan. "He even bought a new phone, which, to be honest, I was hoping to avoid. Do you have any other ways you can help us?"

"No," the clerk responded, eyes dulled.

"What do you mean, 'No'?" Hazel asked.

"Look, we're not exactly trained to handle big stuff. It sounds like

you've done all the troubleshooting steps I would have tried. And if there's nothing to Google, then I really don't think I can help. But if you want to buy a new phone, I can help you with that."

"Wow, no thank you." Hazel rolled her eyes.

Ryan and Hazel turned away from the tech counter, allowing a teen holding one of those electronic hoverboards to move forward.

"I can't believe you've been having the same problem as me," Ryan said as he turned to her.

"I know. I told some people at work and they all thought I was nuts. It's not like I could prove it or anything. As soon as I turn off the alarm, it disappears from the menu without a trace, like it never happened."

"Mine too!" He turned back to the clerk, now wiping the bright red hoverboard with a cloth, and scowled. "I finally got up for the alarm so I could take care of this thing, and look what happened?"

"There must be something we can do," Hazel said. She grasped her phone, white knuckles pronounced over a pink glittery phone case.

"I'm really at a loss for—"

"Pssst."

"—what to do about this. I feel like I've done everything short of downgrading to a flip phone, but that's honestly a last—"

"Pssst."

"—Okay, what's going on?" Ryan whipped around to the source of the noise to find a man leaning against a pillar next to a display of stuffed hippopotamuses wearing tutus. His leather-clad arms were folded in front of his thin chest. "Can we help you?"

"No, but I might be able to help you. Sir," he nodded toward Hazel, "ma'am. I couldn't help but hear about your ... predicament."

Ryan could see their confused faces reflecting back at them from the mysterious man's mirrored sunglasses. "You know how to fix phones?"

"Not me, no. My powers are of the more ... earthly ... persuasion."

Hazel shivered. "Eww, what does that mean?"

"Let's just say I'm a bit of a cat whisperer."

"Double eww," Hazel said. She turned to Ryan. "I don't know about you, but I'm getting as far away from here as I can."

"Wait, wait!" The man stood up from the pillar and took a step forward. "I'm just a veterinarian. I was just trying to be cool, okay?"

"Sure, man. Very cool. But you said you can help us. How?"

The man leaned back against the pillar, resuming his stance. "There's someone you should talk to. Downtown. Do you know that bagel place

that sells unicorn bagels? They taste like cotton candy.”

“Future Bagels. I love that place.” Hazel was back next to Ryan, her interest piqued. She smelled like Head and Shoulders dandruff shampoo and watermelon-flavored Bubblicious.

“Well, have you ever noticed that little gap between that building and the one next to it with the Super Cuts?” The mystery man raised an eyebrow.

“No,” Ryan and Hazel said in unison.

“Of course you didn’t.” He chuckled. “Go there. Now that I’ve told you about it, the way will be open to you. Inside that thin alley is a door with pi on it—the math symbol, not the food. Knock on the door and you’ll find someone who can help you.”

Hazel turned to Ryan, a mix of exasperation and intrigue lighting her face. “Well, should we go? I imagine there’s about a twenty-percent chance we’ll get murdered, but safety in numbers, right?”

“Normally I would get as far away from this guy and some weird back alley as I can, but I haven’t had a decent night’s sleep in ... hell if I know. I’m too tired to even remember.” Ryan hoped his face didn’t look as tired as he felt.

“True, but we don’t even know any details. Hey, guy—”

Hazel turned to the pillar, but it was now empty. Only sparkling turquoise eyes from the rows of stuffed hippos were there to greet them.

“He’s gone.”

A shiver ran up Ryan’s spine. It was too early for mystical Walmart shenanigans. “Oh crap, what are we getting ourselves into?”

“Oh, hey guys.” The mystery man poked his head out from behind a shelf. “I thought we were done talking, so I walked away. I still have to pick up a bulk order of Ensure for my grandma. Did you have any other questions? It’s really easy. Just knock on that door I told you about.”

Ryan wiped a palm down his face and sighed. “Nah, man. No other questions. Thanks.”

Set inside a lightly crumbling brick wall was a steel door. The metal was scraped and weathered, old stickers hastily peeled off of it, then re-stickered and peeled off again. Over everything was a pi symbol made of faded red paint, encircling an old peephole.

“Go ahead. Knock on it,” Hazel said, finishing off the last bite of her unicorn bagel. The pair stood beside each other, the narrow alleyway pressing in on either side.

“No, you go ahead,” Ryan said. He chewed on a hangnail that he’d been worrying over for days.

“Ahh, what the hell.” Hazel shrugged and stepped forward, kicking an old can that had once contained evaporated milk. Her fist hovered briefly over the pi symbol, then came down to rap twice on the steel.

Ryan waited a beat, listening for any signs of movement. “Maybe no one’s home.”

“Let me try one more time.” She lifted her fist again, but just before her knuckles touched metal, a shrieking sound of grinding metal pierced their ears. Slowly, the door opened and a young Asian woman with an asymmetrical bob stepped out from the darkness.

“Can I help you?” She said, half-bored and half-tired.

“Uhh...” Hazel muttered. She slowly lowered her fist and stepped back next to Ryan.

“Yeah,” Ryan said, raking a hand through his hair. The low light of dawn filtered past the woman, but he could only make out a few feet of orange shag carpet. The rest was darkness. “We met this guy at Walmart today. He said you could help us. With our cell phone problem.”

The woman crossed her arms in front of her and leaned on the door jamb, nearly a perfect copy of the way the Walmart Mystery Man leaned on the pillar. “Julien sent you here? Figures. He thinks I’m some kind of tech wizard.” She rolled her eyes. “He’s right, though. Come on in.”

Ryan and Hazel followed behind her as the orange shag carpet gave way to pale green laminate, then wood, then beige wall-to-wall.

The woman looked back and caught their downward gazes. “My dad owns a flooring company. Don’t worry about it.”

She led them through dark hallways until they reached a bright room with empty, white walls and a desk sitting right in the middle. She sat down in a swivel chair behind a computer.

“Have a seat,” she said, as she typed on her keyboard.

Hazel looked around. “There aren’t any chairs—”

“So, what can I do for you? You said you had cell phone problems,” the woman said, her eyes still on her computer screen.

“Uh, yeah,” Ryan said, stepping forward. “Our phones are doing this weird thing. Every night, at exactly 4:27 a.m., they wake us up with a song.”

“Did you try turning off the alarm?”

“Of course we did,” Hazel chimed in. “And before you ask. Yes, I turned it off and on again. And this guy apparently even bought a new

phone.”

“What song? Is it the same every time, or different?”

“It’s the same every time: Backstreet Boys’ ‘Everybody (Backstreet’s Back),’” Ryan said.

“Never heard of it,” the woman muttered, sounding bored. “Did you choose that as your alarm?”

“No,” the pair said in unison.

The woman turned away from her computer screen and seemed to see them for the first time. “How long have you guys known each other?”

Ryan glanced at his phone. “About an hour.”

The woman’s eyes flitted back and forth between the two, then she sighed. “I can’t help you.”

“What? Why? You didn’t even look at our phones.” Hazel threw up her hands in exasperation.

“I don’t need to. The problem isn’t the phones.” She paused. “The problem is you. Both of you.”

“Excuse me?” Ryan stared at the girl, then the room around him, this improbably bright room filled with mismatched flooring. *How did he even get here?*

The girl sighed. “Listen. We all define ourselves by problems. Whatever’s wrong in our lives, they become our identities. I think I can safely assume that this song—and 4:27 a.m.—has become your identity, correct?”

“Well ...” Hazel whispered.

“Exactly. But it’s not our problems that should define us—it’s the way we overcome them. It’s time to slay the dragon, as it were. Pick yourselves up and fight. Of course, I’m being metaphorical right now. But my real-world advice is this: Go chill out. Grab a drink. Hit a museum. Forget about your phones, your alarms. Just have a good day. The two of you, together. I have a feeling that’ll do the trick.”

Ryan furrowed his brow. “How old are you?”

“Fifteen. Now go. I have things to do.” She waved a hand toward the door, back the way they came.

The pair stared at her for a moment, then turned without another word.

“Backstreet’s Back, alright!” The song bled through Ryan’s dream. In this one he had been a bear, stalking through a forest and following an injured fawn that had his childhood babysitter’s face. He’d have to unpack

that one later. For now, all he could hear was the Backstreet Boys serenading him like they always did. He let the music flow over him, his toes bobbing to the beat. He refused to open his eyes. Not yet. He wanted to savor the sleep for a moment longer. But no. As seemed to be his life now, he had to get up at 4:27 a.m. He might as well accept it.

His arm flopped to his nightstand and tapped vigorously at his phone, but the music didn't stop. "Ugh, fine." This time he scooted up to a sitting position and grabbed his phone. That's when he knew something was off. He could see his phone just fine. Sunlight filtered in through the half-open blinds of his bedroom window. He wasn't plunged into darkness like he normally was when the infernal forever-alarm went off. He looked at the screen and, instead of 4:27, it read 9:15 a.m.

"What the fuck?" In his haste to get out of bed, the slate grey top sheet tangled around his bare feet and clung to him, sending him careening toward the floor. He hit the hardwood with a thud, banging his hip in the process.

Rushed footsteps padded into his bedroom. "Whoa, are you alright?"

Ryan looked up to see Hazel. Her brunette hair, a little wilder now, shined in the morning sunlight. She wore a Leavenworth Urban Art Museum t-shirt she'd bought in a gift shop the day before, her tanned legs poking out from underneath. "It's nine o'clock," was all he could utter.

A large, toothy smile spread across her face. "Yeah it is. I woke up without an alarm for the first time in weeks. I mean, granted, I didn't get a lot of sleep," she winked, something that was clearly her trademark, "but at least I got up at a realistic hour. Can you believe it?"

"Everybody, yeah, rock your body, yeah, everybody, rock your body right. Backstreet's back, alright!" The song continued to fill the room.

"That's amazing, but what about the song?" Ryan looked down at the phone clutched in his hand. Rather than the alarm notification, it looked like his typical lock screen: a picture of his childhood cat, Mittens. No alarm.

Hazel's smile grew. "Oh, right." She walked around to the other side of the bed and picked up her phone, pink glitter case and all, from the other nightstand. "I was just messing with you." She tapped her phone, and the song stopped.

Ryan sighed and fell back onto the floor, his legs still tangled in the sheets. "Why did it stop? I mean, it's not that I'm not grateful, but why?"

She walked over and laid on the floor beside him. Her wild brunette waves splayed out across Ryan's chest as she snuggled up into the

crook of his arm. She smelled pleasantly of the day before. Hints of coffee grounds, unicorn bagels, and then movie theater popcorn, among other things. It had been a full day. “What I don’t understand is why it happened in the first place.”

“Right. It’s bothered both of us for weeks. We only finally got fed-up enough to actually get up with the alarm yesterday.” He stroked the arm that she’d let flop across his stomach.

Hazel looked up at him and held his gaze. He had the feeling she was thinking of their day—and night—as well. An improbable day that began improbably—with Backstreet Boys and a trip to Walmart. Her eyes glinted. “You’re right, it probably doesn’t mean anything.”