

U (you) Can't Hide on the PHONE ☐📶

the *Way* you (U) can Hide in the BA-TH-

R O O M ! ! !

(try and find me)

By

*EJ Green*

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... EJ Green's, "You Can't Hide on the Phone the Way You Can Hide in the Bathroom," is a wandering brain's best friend. Half an artistic, ADD fueled spewing and half emotional confrontation of insecurity within one's past, present, future, family, and place, our protagonist's monologue is, at worst, an explanation of one's actions and motives for the sheer need to bolster what's left of our character's humanity and, at best, a depiction of the deeper insecurities we all face when slammed into confrontation with how we view our lives versus actual reality – an expression of impostor syndrome knowing that you're faking your way through the story you've crafted to frame your own myth. At the heart of this tale lies all of our emotional needs which define our concepts of success, happiness, family, life, and self-worth. We all want to feel as if the way in which we present ourselves to others reflects the deeper knowledge that we are who we say we are – i.e. we are as identical and honest with ourselves inwardly as the persona that we put on for others outwardly in the face of those that know us and love us the most. It's too easy to lie to strangers as an ego boost for the stories we create for ourselves, but it is always a challenge to live within the cracks of our tales when those who are listening already know better – we aren't always what we set out to be*

*and the compromises we've made along the way either make us more human or remove ourselves further from who we want to be. Green's story has honesty and family, humor and sadness, at the forefront of their work. Knowing that, sometimes, the same things that have the ability to build us up into the people that we've become have the same power to dismantle and shake the very foundations of who we thought we were. Self-discovery often requires re-invention, and when you're reminded about the love in your life there is always the chance that you can reassess the love that you carry for yourself. Solid work. .Enjoy.*

*Five Stars*

### **QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)**

You always have to pay. No matter what sphere I find myself in, including hugs from relatives I no longer see, there is always a price. A parting between myself and that which keeps me safe. And as the doors open and I settle into a hug I've dreaded, I let go of the safety I knew and trade it for another kind of safety.

#### **You Can't Hide on the Phone the Way You Can Hide in the Bathroom**

Hiding from my family is listed among my hobbies but not in a way that I am proud like I am with drawing comics and beating friends at poker, which is to say that I'm a coward that can't pick up the phone to say I'm sorry that he died because it requires a bit of nakedness that I am not and never will be ready to shred—shed, and the shedding is of course revealing which only allows them to see all the problems I'm having, which means that contrary to what I must have smugly walked around like as a youth, I am not winning at life but instead going to the grocery store and raging about how soup is now seven dollars a fucking can and I am not a great artist like I thought I would be and I am uninterested in having kids or going to church and therefore quite irrelevant to my extended religious family. There is a pall over what happens in the grocery store now. I don't know why but the price of olive oil makes me think of how I haven't sold a single piece of art in a long time. No one wants my shit and olive oil is six dollars and the fact that I can no longer justify the price of bacon has made me into this principled shopper who

thinks, as they walk the aisles looking for a salty bacon alternative—fucking American cheese or discount pre-sliced vegan pepperoni—that I actually feel bad for the pigs and that’s why I’m not buying it, and aren’t I a better person now? Has inflation made me more principled, forced me, this Satanic heathen, into this meatless state of holier-than-thou? (There might be a comic in this—write that down.) And does it matter how you get to a place as long as you get there? In the background I’m drawing comics that don’t sell while the Dilbert guy crashes and burns on Twitter and I think, bitterly chewing on my vegan pepperoni, how did he get a chance and I can’t? Like fucking seriously, who are all these people the world made room for? But then there’s a hurricane bearing down on an island and people are shuttering windows, and I’m sitting here comfortably uncomfortable in my artistic failures feeling like I’m not deserving of real sadness. (Write that down.) Meanwhile I can’t pick up the phone to call my extended family about my grandfather’s recent death because shedding is of course revealing that contrary to what I promised and boasted about as a youth, I am not a famous singer, but the questions will come: how’s your “doodling” career? Have you made it to the moon yet? Have you eaten all the cheese? Have you gone into the grocery stores there and reminded the billionaires that if they price out their customer base there will be no one to keep them billionaires? (Could be something...a political one this time.) And have you yet gone to DC and discussed how disgusting it is that student loans are, across the board no exception, predatory? Or that people who’ve paid rent for decades are not able to build credit despite being completely fucking reliable because **THEY’VE PAID RENT FOR DECADES?** (Yes! This one’s drawing itself.) Oh, they’ll say: You still have a day job.

And at the funeral I will do the bravest thing I’ve done in a long time—

but seriously, calling is scarier than showing up in person because you can't hide on the phone the way you can hide in the bathroom or in your car or positioned slightly behind your much more socially adjusted sibling

—and show up feeling estranged, like an alien thrust through a wormhole from another dimension who looks vaguely like everyone there and shares shreds of DNA mostly European with bits from other fine continents, and tell them despite my anger I've done nothing to make things better in the world, though I do give money sometimes and am kind on a micro level but no, I rage in private and cry sometimes, mostly about how I am essentially invisible artistically, and when they look at me their suspicions that I am nothing special will finally be confirmed, but they won't say that. Instead, they'll reach out and hug me and tell me I look good, and I'll say the same to them even though we're both lying, and I'll close my eyes and tell myself not to cry, don't cry, you barely know them anymore, don't do this you fucking stupid asshole—think about something banal like bacon. Think about how, like a buzzard cruising for scraps, you circle the chilly bacon bin and see that the prices are still astronomical and how you click your tongue and feel a small pang in your heart, unsure how people who make even less than you afford fucking anything. No, I tell myself. That doesn't work. Think of something happy as the tears squeeze out, flirting with my eyelashes. Okay, something happy. Okay. Bristol paper. Mechanical pencils. Submissions. Failures. No, something happy. Beating friends at poker without having to buy in again. That's right. They all drop like flies into my Texas hold'em web. If you want to stay in after I've battered you like the next climate change-fueled hurricane, you have to pay. You always have to pay. No matter what sphere I find myself in, including hugs from relatives I

no longer see, there is always a price. A parting between myself and that which keeps me safe. And as the doors open and I settle into a hug I've dreaded, I let go of the safety I knew and trade it for another kind of safety. One that is foreign, needs to be broken in, but fits. Even when I leave and promise to see everyone more, and find myself back in my apartment among my blank papers and strewn pencils, I put that other kind of safety on the shelf and see that in a certain light it looks a little like love.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I've been dealing with grief and loss lately – some expected and some not so much – and writing is how I grapple with things like this because therapy is expensive. I wanted to create something functional (is fiction functional?) out of the lack of control I feel in my daily life. A lot of the times I constantly compare my pain to others' pain, which I judge to be worse than mine, so I feel guilty for my pain. I wanted to explore that, too. And as an anxious introvert facing relatives during times of crisis. This is about realized fear, but it's also about soft landings. Surviving through it. Being better after.*

*I'm a huge fan of anything different that breaks boundaries, but I also love traditional fiction, too. One of my favorite books is House of Leaves. Another is The Sympathizer. My influences run the gamut, so I'll pick a few out of the pile. I adore anything John Jodzio does. Amelia Gray and Viet Thanh Nguyen too. Brilliant writers.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** EJ Green is the author of Confessions of a Curious Bookseller, (Lake Union, 2020). Their short fiction has appeared in Hobart, Wigleaf, McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Necessary Fiction, HAD and others. Originally from the bucolic countryside of Upstate New York, they now live just outside of Philly. Read more at [www.ejgreenwrites.com](http://www.ejgreenwrites.com)