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The Desperado

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53-67 minutes

In April 2018, a blind man with one foot robbed a bank in Austin, Texas. This is a heist story—but unlike any you've ever read.

Edward Averill finished off the last slices of Genoa salami and sopressata from the deli packages in his mini-fridge, rolling them into tubes and eating them with his fingers. Between bites he drank a Modelo Especial. It was his favorite beer, and that night, April 5, 2018, he savored every sip. He didn't expect to have another one anytime soon.

The 58-year-old computer engineer climbed into bed around 10 p.m. and lay staring at the ceiling for hours before drifting off to sleep. He jerked awake without an alarm at 8:30 the next morning. After turning on his laptop and scrubbing it clean of files and software, he wiped his external hard drive and reformatted it—twice. Satisfied, he powered down the computer and began tidying his room.

There wasn't much there. He rented it from a woman named Anne Toney, who owned the house it was in. The rest of

Toney's home was cluttered—chairs, gnome figurines, even an old, empty candy machine. Averill liked to joke that people had vanished there amid all the bric-a-brac. But he took pride in his space, which was big enough for a double bed, the magnet-covered fridge, and a media cabinet he used as a pantry. He set drinks on coasters so they wouldn't leave rings on his computer desk, which is where he ate most of his meals.

Over the previous week, he'd thrown away many of his belongings, including five USB sticks, a Swiffer, and an extra computer monitor. On the morning of April 6, he tossed the magnets and coasters, too. All that was left, aside from the furniture, were some clothes in the closet, a couple of cold beers, and a blue expandable plastic folder where he stored sensitive paperwork like his birth certificate and Social Security card. Old tax forms were in one sleeve; his diploma from Oakton High School in Vienna, Virginia, was in another.

Averill picked up the folder, stuck a bottle of Tums in his pocket, and grabbed the cane he used to help him walk. His left foot had been amputated—a complication of type 2 diabetes—and the cane kept him steady on his prosthetic foot. It was time for him to go. He left his keys on the laptop, closed the door behind him, and stepped carefully down the short flight of stairs to the living room. Toney was watching *Matlock* with the drapes drawn. Averill didn't pause to say goodbye. He opened the front door, headed down the walk, and stopped at a sidewalk trash can to drop his blue folder inside, disposing of every paper record of his history and identity.

He turned right on the sidewalk and walked ten minutes uphill

to the bus stop. He waited, squinting in the Austin, Texas, sun as the temperature crept into the high seventies. The 325 bus appeared. Averill boarded and then bumped along until the vehicle groaned to a stop near a Walmart. He got off and waited again. Then he took the 3 to the Austin Diner.

When the server came to his table, Averill asked for grits, eggs, toast, a double order of bacon, and lots of coffee. Paying for his breakfast would require the last of the cash in his wallet. After that, he had only \$1.75 left in a Prosperity Bank checking account, which he'd opened roughly eight years earlier. But Averill wasn't worried about money. The bank was less than a block away, and when he finished eating he was going to rob it.

He'd been researching how to pull off the heist for weeks. Averill had read online that bank tellers were encouraged to remain calm during a robbery—the money was insured, so they shouldn't risk their lives. The employees at Prosperity seemed well trained, and armed guards weren't posted by the door, unlike a branch of Wells Fargo that Averill had cased.

Around 12:45, he finished his coffee, took a deep breath, and left the diner. Averill walked to a traffic light and crossed the street, leaning on his cane with each step toward the bank. He hadn't been nervous when he woke up, but as he approached the building he couldn't help but worry. What if something bad happens? he thought. What if the teller has a gun and decides to be a hero?

Averill was at the door now. He pulled it open and limped inside. He was a longtime customer, but he didn't recognize

any of the employees, and they didn't appear to recognize him. That was for the best. Averill felt himself calming down. When he got to the counter, he ignored the teller's greeting and passed the man a note instead. "This is a robbery," it read, "hand over all your 50's and 100's, thanks."

He hoped the "thanks" would reassure the teller.

Averill waited as the man opened his drawer and handed over \$2,900 in a loose stack of bills about two inches thick. No one else in the bank seemed to realize what was happening.

Money in hand, Averill hobbled back toward the entrance, then stopped halfway across the room. "Hey," he said, waving the wad of bills in the air to draw attention. "I just robbed you. Please call the police."

The *Austin American-Statesman* published a story about the crime the next day. "A man was arrested on Friday after he robbed a North Austin bank and waited outside for police," the newspaper reported, citing an affidavit. "Edward Austin Averill III, 58, was booked into the Travis County Jail on Friday on a charge of robbery, a second-degree felony punishable [by] up to 20 years in prison."

In his mug shot, Averill stares to the right of the camera, his clean-shaven chin tilted upward. His white hair is feathered back from his face and reaches his shoulders. On top of his head, where his hairline has receded, several strands curl into the air like cotton candy. He looks placid, even pleased.

I wrote Averill an email through the jail's website a few days

later, asking if he would be willing to tell me more about his unusual crime. I included my email address and phone number, which he called after a correctional officer delivered my message—printed out—and Averill borrowed another inmate's phone card. His last name is pronounced "aye-vrill," I learned when he introduced himself. He was surprised that I was interested in him. He was nobody special, he said. Still, he was happy to meet. We scheduled a visit.

I arrived at the jail and waited among the small crowd of people who'd made the same trip to visit boyfriends, husbands, dads, and sons. The guard called out a list of inmates' names, followed by the booth number that each visitor should use, but she never said Averill. "Not here," she told me when I asked where he was.

I drove home and checked the jail roster; he was still in custody. I scheduled another visit for later that week and sent him an email to let him know. When I went back to the jail, again he didn't show. I scheduled a third meeting, went, and waited.

"Ah...", the correctional officer hesitated as she directed visitors to their booths. "Ah-vrill?"

I walked to my assigned spot and sat down. The chair on the other side of the plexiglass was empty. When Averill appeared, he was in a wheelchair pushed by a guard. A white beard had grown shaggy around his jaw since his mug shot was taken. His gaze was unfocused. The guard picked up the phone, punched in a number, and gestured for me to lift the receiver

on my end. He handed the phone to Averill and walked away.

We exchanged formalities and talked a little. Averill apologized for missing our other meetings; he'd had an appointment with a doctor that he couldn't miss. He was all but blind, Averill explained, which had everything to do with why he'd robbed Prosperity Bank.

A recorded voice interrupted our conversation—the line would disconnect in 60 seconds. Our time was up. I asked Averill if I could come back to hear the rest of the story.

"That would be fine," he said.

I watched as he reached forward, hooking the air with the phone as he tried to locate the cradle. Giving up, he gently set the handset on the counter in front of him. He turned his head and looked in the direction he'd come from. He said something, but I couldn't hear what. Other visitors filed past me, and a woman looked through the window at Averill. She suggested that I tell an officer that he was stranded. The blind bank robber needed help.

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Averill was born in Titusville, Florida, in 1959. It was the first of many places he'd call home as his parents moved around the country and the world. His father, Edward Austin Averill, Jr., was a smart, handsome computer engineer who relocated his young family to such places as Taiwan and the Bahamas, where Tres—that's what his parents called Averill, "three" in Spanish—learned to snorkel.

When Tres was a toddler, they moved to Texas, where his mother, Sylvia, had been a switchboard operator before she

married. They lived in Plano, north of Dallas, but Tres's father still traveled a lot. "Basically, I was raised by my mom," Averill told me in one of the many conversations we had after that first jail visit.

Sylvia taught Tres to play the organ and to read. He devoured science-fiction novels and an Edgar Allan Poe anthology she gave him. Sylvia liked to see her son tucked into a book—she wanted him to be well educated. She was less concerned about his social life. "My parents didn't like most people to come over," Averill said. His orbit consisted of his mom, his dad, and a few relatives. About once a month, Edward and Sylvia left him with his aunt Shirley so that they could spend the weekend without their son, who, they revealed when he was still a kid, they hadn't planned on having. "It's not an uplifting thing to be told," Averill said. "They tried their best to provide for me. I got a lot of material things. I didn't get a lot of hugs."

He had few friends, although when he was in elementary school, a boy in the apartment next door had permission to bring his Legos over to play. They built spaceships and crashed their Hot Wheels cars into them. In junior high, Averill slunk between his classes and his locker, sometimes hiding out in the library to avoid contact with the other students.

During his teenage years, the family moved to Otsego, Michigan, where his father had gone to high school, then to Virginia, where Tres began to notice girls. "I started talking to people a little bit more," he said. He played linebacker for the practice football team, but it was when he took a computer-

science class that he finally found his people. “I joined the geek gang,” Averill said. Soon he was hanging out with theater kids, artists, and musicians, too. During his junior year, he spent two months clearing a neighbor’s land to earn the \$200 he needed to buy a Fender Telecaster knockoff. When he brought it home, his mother worried that the guitar would ruin his grades. She discouraged him from playing. “Cut that damn noise out,” she’d say.

Sylvia kept a close eye on her son as he got older. She didn’t approve of his high school girlfriend and tried to impose a nine o’clock curfew and stricter rules. They argued. It felt to Tres like his mom was trying to control his life, which she’d never intended for him to have in the first place.

After he graduated from high school in 1978, he got a job programming computers and drove himself to work in a Mustang that his dad helped him fix up. When his parents announced that they were moving back to Plano, they assumed that Tres, who still lived with them, would come along. But the 19-year-old had work and a girlfriend, who suggested that they get an apartment together. Sylvia was horrified. “You can’t move in with a woman,” she said. She’d become increasingly religious over the years. “You’ll be living in sin!” Sylvia cried.

“I could feel the apron strings around my neck very tightly,” Averill told me.

His dad was supportive, even if Ed Jr. couldn’t say so in front of his wife. “Don’t listen to your mom,” he told his son in

private. “Just do what you need to.” He helped Tres pack up his things before he and Sylvia returned to Texas. Over the next several years, Ed Jr. visited his son, but Sylvia never did. She called from time to time, then stopped until the mid-1980s, when Averill and his girlfriend broke up. After that, every Sunday, Averill’s phone would ring at 9 a.m. “Why aren’t you in church?” Sylvia would ask when he answered. “Is there a woman in the house with you?”

Usually, there wasn’t. Averill dated, but he preferred being alone in front of his computer. A coding colleague did her best to lure him away from his screen by inviting him to parties at her house. Averill was reluctant at first, but finally he relented and was surprised at how much he enjoyed himself. The people—scientists and technology professionals—were interesting. Free beer didn’t hurt.

At one party, where Averill arrived carrying meatballs for the snack table, his colleague introduced him to Roan Dantzler. She worked for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on climatic models and liquid dynamics. He tried to listen carefully, but most of what she said was over his head. Then Dantzler pulled up her shirt and flashed him.

“Why did you do that?” he asked.

“You looked like you were bored,” she told him.

After the party, the pair started spending time together. Averill liked having someone he could share the world with. Dantzler’s personality sparkled—she was exciting. And her eyes didn’t glaze over when he talked about work or video games or

music. She was a musician, too, and a redhead. Averill loved redheads. A few months after the party, they moved in together.

When they decided to get married and told Averill's parents, his mother was furious. A letter arrived a few days later with a one-way ticket to Texas. "We'll pick you up," the note said.

Averill upgraded the ticket to round-trip and bought another one for Dantzler. When they arrived together, his mother erupted. Sylvia and her son spent the weeklong trip fighting. When Averill and Dantzler returned to their home in Rockville, Maryland, they called their friends and her relatives, bought rings, and convened at the courthouse to become husband and wife. Two weeks later, they boarded a southbound train to Disney World for their honeymoon.

When Averill called his mother to deliver the news, he warned her that if she gave him trouble, he wouldn't talk to her again. A few days later, Sylvia called and said he should reconsider the marriage. After they hung up, Averill kept his word. His father visited a few more times, but eventually Averill stopped communicating with him, too. He never spoke to them again. When his parents died in the early 2000s, none of Averill's extended family knew how to reach him.

For 15 years, Averill and Dantzler lived together companionably. They moved to Sunnyvale, California, and she joined him on hikes in Muir Woods, exploring the redwood groves along the Pacific Coast. They played video games together. But eventually, they started fighting. Sometimes their

disagreements were small; they bickered over the grocery list. Other times they screamed at each other. Averill felt like Dantzler was trying to micromanage his life. He would hike without her sometimes, and on one trek he fell and hit his head. The injury caused him to permanently lose vision in his right eye.

He moved out in the early 2000s, living in his car in the parking lot of IBM, where he worked at the time. In 2003, Averill and Dantzler filed for divorce. As the split was being finalized, Averill met Sabine Sklar at a video-game conference in Silicon Valley. She was 38, a little younger than Averill, now well into his forties, and lived in Sunnyvale, though she was originally from Vancouver, British Columbia. She worked in human resources at a video-game company and spoke English, German, and Dutch. Averill thought she was beautiful—she was a redhead—and brilliant. They both played guitar; Averill liked ambient music, and she plucked out folk songs. They had the same sarcastic humor. Sklar made Averill feel good, happy. If he was in a bad mood, she perked him up.

Soon into their friendship, Averill told her he was in love with her. Sklar said she really liked him but added, “I’m just not ready to fall in love yet.”

That was OK with him, as long as he could be around her. He liked to help her. Sklar had type 1 diabetes and problems with her endocrine system. A cold could knock her out for a week. When it did, Averill would pick up chicken noodle soup and take it to her apartment. “It’s what friends do,” Averill said. When the company Sklar worked for closed her office, she

took a job as an exotic dancer, and Averill visited her at the strip club. Other times they'd go to Murphy's, an Irish bar that served great bangers and mash.

One night, in October 2003, Averill was supposed to meet Sklar at a bar called Hiphugger, but she never showed up. He went to her apartment and knocked. Nothing. He knocked again and pressed his ear to the door. It was quiet, but that wasn't unusual. Sklar often shut herself in her bedroom to sleep when she didn't feel well. Averill went home and fell asleep, too.

Sklar's friend Trish called Averill from the strip club early the next morning. "Come down to the club," she said. "Drop everything. I need to talk to you." When he got there, Trish and several more of Sklar's friends were in tears. Averill sat down warily.

"What happened?" he asked. Sklar had gone into a diabetic coma during the night, Trish said. She was dead.

Sklar asked Averill what he'd do when she wasn't around anymore. "Find the tallest building in San Francisco," he joked.

Averill imagined Sklar inside her apartment, dying as he knocked on the door. He blamed himself. Why hadn't he tried harder to reach her?

When she was alive, Sklar would ask Averill what he'd do when she wasn't around anymore. "Find the tallest building in San Francisco," he'd joke. Now that she was really gone, Averill was despondent: crying, often drunk, inconsolable. He once took a razor blade into the bathroom, but one of Sklar's

friends, who had a copy of his key, happened to stop by and prevented him from cutting his wrists. She and other friends organized a watch rotation to make sure he didn't hurt himself. When he went to Sklar's wake at a British pub, he thought he'd be strong. Instead, he burst into tears as soon as he walked in. After the memorial, he didn't get out of bed for two days.

Averill never wanted to feel that bad again. He needed to protect himself, he decided. So he vowed to never again care about someone as much as he'd cared about Sklar.

He declined invitations to go out with friends. "I'm really busy," he'd say. After a few weeks, his friends stopped trying. Averill had long frequented internet chat rooms and forums, and he knew some of the other users well. "I shoved those guys off," Averill said, "changed my email address, changed my online persona."

Step by step, he severed ties with everyone he knew. When a woman wrote him in 2004 and introduced herself as the half sister he didn't know he had—from his father's first marriage, which was also news to Averill—even she failed to get any traction. Averill didn't have the energy to forge a new relationship, not after what had happened with Sklar. Soon, he told me, "there was nobody around anymore."

Averill relocated to Austin around 2010, and eventually moved in with Anne Toney, whom he'd met in an online forum for hobbyists who like making 3-D models on their computers. Toney had inherited her house from her father and rented out the two spare bedrooms to a string of tenants. Sometimes she

even offered up the couch to homeless men and women who slept on nearby streets. Averill paid \$400 in rent, plus utilities. Sometimes he helped with the yard work or took out the garbage. He and Toney liked to sit around together and dream up inventions, like a doorbell that opened the refrigerator so a visitor could grab a beer on the way into the house. “He could be funny,” Toney said, laughing at her memories of Averill. “But he didn’t have any friends, not with what I would call real people.”

Averill secured contract work as a software engineer. On payday, Toney said, he went out drinking. He liked to go to the Yellow Rose, a strip club in North Austin. “They’d send him home in a limo,” Toney recalled. The women who worked there were nice to Averill and seemed to like him. He tried to be polite and respectful, and to tip appropriately.

Other than visits to the club, Averill spent nearly all his time in his room on his computer. He composed his ambient music. He self-published a book of poems. In one of his online profiles, on Medium, he described himself as a “software engineer, musician and all-around annoyance dabbling in too many things to even keep track of.” On AuthorsDen.com, he called himself a “poet,” “prose writer,” and “introverted intuitive.” He spent money on computer and music equipment, slowly building a studio in his room. He bought a real Fender—a Modern Player Telecaster Plus. He named it Christine. “Texas blues, here I come!” he wrote on Facebook.

As he turned inward emotionally, it became harder to do things physically. Before Averill moved to Texas, a doctor in California

had noticed that his blood sugar was high when he came in with strep throat. She prescribed medication, but Averill never took it—he didn't really understand what it was for. It wasn't until he stepped on a piece of broken glass in Texas that a nurse again checked his blood-glucose level in the emergency room. By then, he had type 2 diabetes.

Averill described himself as “an all-around annoyance dabbling in too many things to even keep track of.”

He tried to cut back on carbs but often ate hunkered down in front of his computer, hewing to what he called a “programmer's diet”—pizza for breakfast, hot dogs and popcorn for lunch and dinner. He weaned himself off soda, but it wasn't enough. In 2016, he had to have his foot amputated. He struggled to adjust. It disturbed him to look down at the stump at the end of his right leg when he didn't have his prosthetic attached. The music he made got a little darker.

Soon it became hard to play music at all. He had a tingling sensation in his fingertips. He couldn't hold a pick or feel the strings on his guitar. After his amputated leg got infected, he slipped deeper into isolation, rebuffing even Toney's offers of food or conversation. Between work contracts, Averill would drink, polishing off a bottle of vodka and several beers a week. When the anniversary of Sklar's death rolled around, he'd drink even more heavily. Toney always knew when it was that time of year again, because “Ed was on a spree,” she said.

In November 2017, Averill's latest contract expired. He wasn't worried at first; he managed his money carefully, keeping a

cushion for the inevitable breaks between engineering and coding gigs. He knew he could always get another job developing video games.

Then, in early December, Averill woke up with what looked like blood clouding the vision in his good eye. He didn't have insurance anymore—that had ended with the work contract—but he went to a doctor, who ordered an MRI. He had diabetic retinopathy, meaning his retina had detached from the back of his eye, causing capillaries to break and bleed. More worryingly, it looked like he had suffered an unrelated stroke about a month earlier.

The doctor prescribed hypertension medication, and Averill paid for eye surgery. An ophthalmologist used a laser to repair the detachment and put silicone oil in his eye to keep the retina in place while it healed. The oil, though, meant that he could barely see afterward. He needed glasses to decipher words on paper, and reading a computer screen was even more challenging. When Toney walked by his room, she'd sometimes see Averill wearing two pairs of glasses and holding a magnifying glass up to his monitor. Work became impossible.

He was paying for his appointments and prescriptions out of pocket, spending down his savings. He didn't know what else to do. Help seemed out of reach, even in the era of the Affordable Care Act. If he'd lived in a state with expanded Medicaid eligibility, for people with chronic health conditions and low income or no job, he likely would have qualified for federal insurance. But in 2012, Texas's then governor Rick

Perry had declined to expand the program. It's uncommon for a single Texan to qualify unless they're over 65 and receive Social Security income. Averill wasn't even 60 yet.

When the ankle above Averill's amputation began to swell, it affected how his prosthetic fit. The device pushed against his skin, rubbing it raw. He needed to have it adjusted at a clinic, but he was running out of money and couldn't pay for a more permanent fix. Toney noticed that he was eating cold hot dogs wrapped in tortillas. "Every time I tried to help, he'd say, 'I'm a grown man, and I've been taking care of myself for 58 years. I don't need your help or anyone else's,'" Toney recalled.

He was her longest-ever tenant, and reliable, but in January 2018, he was late paying rent. Toney told him she couldn't let him stay if he didn't pay. She had to cover the mortgage and the utilities. On February 1, he gave her \$400 and notice. "I will be gone by the end of March," he said. But March came and went, and he was still there. He now owed her \$800. "I can't keep this up," Toney told him. Somebody else was interested in taking the room.

He was trying, Averill told her: "I can only leave so fast." He'd spent weeks in front of his computer trying to discern the text of search results and figure out what to do about his eye, his foot, his diabetes, his stroke. He looked into the possibility of getting some kind of private insurance. That was a dead end. The companies wanted a lot of money—the premiums he saw quoted were several hundred dollars each month, which he didn't have. He looked into whether he might qualify for

government disability or Social Security benefits but realized that, even if he did, the process could take months.

Well, he thought, I'm screwed.

Then he found a decades-old article about a homeless man who robbed a bank because he had health problems and couldn't get insurance or a job. In prison, the article said, the man was getting decent care.

What the *hell*? Averill thought. Then again, it didn't seem like such a bad idea: commit a crime, get free medical assistance.

If it had worked for the homeless guy, maybe it would work for Averill. He could plead guilty and get shipped off to federal prison. The food would probably suck, he thought, but at least he could see a doctor regularly. It wasn't like he had anyone counting on him for anything. Who would miss him in prison?

When he told Toney that he was finally moving out, she asked him what he was going to do. "I'm going to rob a bank," he said. She waved him off.

Averill shook as he sat on the curb outside Prosperity Bank, under the shade of an oak tree. His mind raced as he thought about the ways the robbery could have gone wrong.

Somebody could have shot him. He could have tripped on his way out and hurt himself. But the crime had gone exactly as he'd planned.

A bank employee followed Averill and, recording the moment on his cell phone, asked why he did it. Averill explained that he

needed to go to prison to get medical care. When the employee asked if he was armed, Averill pulled out a bottle of Tums, shaking it in the air. “Just antacid,” he said.

After a few minutes, a police van pulled into the bank’s drive-through lane. Two officers got out and asked the teller at the window what had happened.

“We just got robbed,” the teller said.

“Where did he go?” one of the officers asked.

The man pointed. The cops looked toward the curb and Averill as if they couldn’t believe what the teller was saying.

The officers eased Averill into the back of their van and turned up the air-conditioning. Then they drove downtown to the headquarters of the Austin Police Department. There, detective Christopher Brewer peered through his glasses as he watched Averill on a video monitor outside the room where the suspect awaited questioning. Averill was perched on the front of his chair, leaning forward, “like he was eager for something,” Brewer said. When the detective and his partner walked into the room, Brewer’s suspicions were confirmed: Averill wanted to talk. “He was genuinely trying to help us with our investigation,” Brewer said. “I was kind of taken aback by it.”

It wasn’t unheard of for people to commit crimes to get health care—a North Carolina man with arthritis and slipped discs robbed a bank of \$1 in 2011, and two years later an Oregon man did the same thing for the same amount. Still, Brewer didn’t think anyone had ever done it in Austin. He asked if Averill was having a mental health crisis. “Nope,” Averill said. “I

know exactly what I'm doing." He described the robbery in meticulous detail. He said he wanted to be found guilty and go to prison as soon as possible.

When Brewer walked out of the room, he turned to his partner. "This is not one I'm going to brag about," he said.

Brewer went to the municipal court to get a magistrate judge's signature on Averill's arrest affidavit. Judge Stephen Vigorito stared at Brewer after he read the document. "Are you kidding me?" Vigorito asked. After several minutes, the judge set a bond of \$10,000, the lowest Brewer had ever seen for this particular crime—bonds in bank-robbery cases are usually several times that.

As the detective walked down the courthouse hallway to file the paperwork with the county clerk, he heard Vigorito running behind him. "Give it back, give it back," the judge said, reaching for the affidavit when he caught up to Brewer. Vigorito wrote a new bond amount— \$7,500—pressing hard with his pen so the numbers would be legible over the original figure.

After a brief stint in the downtown jail, including a trip to the ER because he hadn't taken his hypertension pills and his blood pressure was dangerously high, Averill was booked at the Travis County Correctional Complex, a large detention facility just outside Austin. His bunkmates couldn't believe what he'd done. "Damn, dude!" one of them said when Averill told him about the robbery. None of the other men in his cell—three in all—had committed such a serious crime. One was caught selling pot; another was busted for possession.

Averill felt relief. For the first time in months, he didn't have to worry about where he was going to live, what he was going to eat, or how he was going to get medication. He was treated well, too. He was too weak to walk far, so guards wheeled him to the cafeteria to eat cream of wheat and fruit, cheese sandwiches, and chicken quesadillas. "I've had worse food in nicer places," he told me on my second visit to see him. He squeezed his eyes shut describing a good meal, savoring the memory of it.

He'd been sitting in the booth when I arrived that day, but he couldn't work the phone and waited while I found a correctional officer to ask for help. A nurse appeared on Averill's side of the glass and handed the receiver to him, then left to get a code that would connect our phones. Averill couldn't quite see me, but he knew I was there. He spun his finger by his ear to signal "crazy" and then shook his fist in feigned exasperation until the nurse returned and dialed the number that allowed us to talk.

By then the county had paid for his second eye surgery, just as Averill had hoped. The bad news, Averill explained, was that during the procedure, the doctor had discovered cataracts. So while the retinal damage was somewhat improved, his vision was still poor. The doctor had told him a third surgery would help.

But what if the justice system gave him a break that he didn't want? Averill wasn't a seasoned criminal knocking off banks across Texas. He was a blind bandit without an arrest record. The FBI had no interest in pursuing his case, which meant that he wouldn't wind up in federal detention or get the health

benefits he'd read about online. Cheryl Hinder, the attorney appointed to defend him, suggested that he might not even go to *state* prison. She was working with the prosecutor on a plea deal.

Averill wasn't sure how to feel about freedom. He told me that he'd rob a jewelry store if he wound up back where he'd started, with no income or insurance.

While the lawyers worked toward an agreement, Averill was released from custody on his own recognizance, allowing him to go free without putting up any money for bail. In June 2018, nearly three months since Averill's arrest, a correctional officer returned his few belongings—his clothes, the Tums—and he stepped out the door of the facility. Maybe, Averill thought, he shouldn't have thrown away his Social Security card and the other documents in the blue folder.

The county sheriff's office had him dropped off on the corner of East Seventh and Neches Streets, at the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless. The building had beds where more than 200 homeless men could spend the night and a free clinic where they could receive care. A line of weary, ragged people stood slumped against the building or were curled up on the sidewalk when Averill arrived. Some appeared to be smoking synthetic marijuana. It looked to Averill like there were drug dealers in the mix, too.

Once Averill was inside, a staffer told him he couldn't see a doctor for at least ten days. Not going to work for me, he thought. This was exactly what he'd feared before robbing the

bank, that he would wind up on the streets and die. He'd rather be in jail, so he decided to get arrested again.

Averill walked to a window and whacked it with his cane. "You can't do that!" the receptionist said. She went to get a police officer, who told Averill, "We're not throwing you back in jail."

Averill gestured to another employee. "How about I just assault him?"

I learned all this when Averill called to let me know where he was. I'd been worried about him. I knew he'd been released from custody, because a visit I'd scheduled at the county detention center had been canceled, but I didn't know where he was. A few weeks had passed by the time he called from the Guy Herman Center for Mental Health Crisis Care. That's where he'd been taken after he threatened assault—not to jail, but to a place that assists people with mental illness, substance abuse, and developmental disabilities.

Averill's arrival at the Herman Center had been tough. He was depressed. He was broke. His vision was getting worse. The cataracts made everything blurry, and his damaged retina blacked out the top and bottom of his vision, which made it seem as if he was always looking through blinds. He scheduled an appointment with his doctor, but told me that the staff member at the Herman Center who was supposed to take him overslept. The next available appointment wasn't for a couple of weeks.

As we talked, Averill described avoiding the other residents; there was no one he wanted to have a conversation with. He

sat by himself during meals and was curt with other people when they spoke to him. But then one afternoon, that changed.

A patient named Danielle Morris sat down and persisted through Averill's short temper. The 41-year-old was petite, with a "sparky personality," Averill said. She wanted to know about his life. As she probed deeper into Averill's history, she learned about the bank robbery and how desperate he'd been before he was arrested.

She knew what it was like to feel helpless. Morris told Averill that she'd been waiting for Social Security disability benefits for more than a year. After moving from Illinois to Texas, she struggled to get the services she needed—she'd been diagnosed with Crohn's disease, bipolar disorder, and PTSD. Eventually, she tried to overdose on Xanax. "I didn't know what else to do," she said. "Since then I've found that the system is pretty broken." Waiting lists for low-income housing in Austin were typically two or three years long. If your application paperwork wasn't perfect, it could gum up the process. Facilities meant to help the needy or mentally ill were overcrowded and case managers overworked.

Averill and Morris bonded over their shared frustrations. "We kind of clicked," Morris told me. Averill reminded her of Alan Alda with a Santa Claus beard. (Averill was desperate to shave, but it was too hard for him without an electric razor.) His humor was dry, which she liked. They'd started to linger after meals with another resident, Arron Herrera, at a table in the dull gray dining room. They talked about old relationships, their health, the future.

This guy is way interesting, Herrera thought of Averill, who spoke with his face as much as his mouth, scrunching up his nose or rolling his eyes or dropping his jaw when he heard something stunning. Even after what Averill had been through, he struck Herrera as graceful, eloquent, and humble. “He has one of the sweetest souls ever,” Herrera said. “He permeates very positive energy.”

Averill sounded excited and happy during our phone calls, which happened every week or two. “The most terrifying thing is she is a redhead,” he said of Morris during one conversation. “I have apparently some kind of fatal attraction to redheads.” He called Herrera and Morris his little brother and sister, but he considered them friends. “You know,” he said, “I hate to admit it, but I might as well tell the truth. I kind of missed hanging out with people.”

Still, he struggled to understand why they wanted to hang out with *him*. He worried that he was weighing them down. He was roughly 20 years older. “They don’t need an old man bothering them,” he told me. It sounded like Averill was instinctively looking for ways to push other people away.

A few days after Herrera left the center—generally, patients can stay for only a couple of weeks—he returned with a bag of shirts, pants, and socks, because he knew Averill had only a single outfit: the one he’d worn to rob the bank. Averill was shocked. He gave Herrera a hug. When Herrera visited again the next week, he brought Averill two bacon cheeseburgers and coffee, because Averill had bemoaned the brown liquid they served at the center. As they ate together, Herrera said

that when Averill got out, they'd go to Barton Springs and look at women in bikinis.

"Dude, I'm too old," Averill said.

"Shut up," Herrera replied.

Morris left the center, too, but she visited Averill nearly every day. She kept coming after he was transferred to another facility. She knew that Averill didn't have a support network, and she wanted to be that for him—"to try to keep his mind off what's going on," she told me, "or talk him through it." Which of those Averill preferred depended on the day, and his mood.

By August, Averill was living in a respite and recovery center. He shared a room on the second floor. He woke up each morning when sunlight came through the window and slowly made his way downstairs to eat.

Before it got too hot, he tried to make a visit to a blue bench surrounded by palm trees where he fed bread to the grackles, tossing chunks toward the birds' outlines, which was as much he could see. Inside, people tried to talk to him. Here he could watch shadows flutter in the trees.

Sometimes he was optimistic about the future. He was learning that, even if he didn't go to prison, there were agencies in Austin to assist people like him, people in crisis. Maybe, he told me, he didn't need to be a criminal. "You live, you learn," he said.

The staff had helped him apply for Social Security benefits for

people with disabilities and Supplemental Security Income, a government allotment based on financial need. How much disability a person received depended on how much they'd paid into the system, and Averill didn't know how much he might get. He hoped it would be enough to pay for health insurance and still have some left over to cover living expenses. In the meantime, the center's staff scheduled doctor appointments for him, and he was able to get his prosthesis fixed. They also wrote my phone number on a piece of paper in large print so he could read it. Usually, though, they dialed my number for him when he wanted to talk.

When we spoke, he almost always sounded cheerful, and he made self-deprecating jokes. Yet he worried that he might never be able to work or make music again. He grew insecure about his new friendships whenever Morris or Herrera didn't show up for a few days to see him.

Maybe, Averill told me, he didn't need to be a criminal. "You live, you learn," he said.

He was unfailingly polite when we met—he almost always had an extra Styrofoam cup of water waiting for me. I took the lead from his friends and started to bring Averill a large drip coffee. "Bless you," he'd say. Still, Averill sometimes seemed like he was tired of talking. I'd ask him questions about Sklar and other parts of his life that he'd tried to forget, and the next time we spoke he'd grumble about having replayed the conversation in his mind for the rest of the day. Yet he always agreed to another interview. One morning as he shook my hand, standing uncertainly without his prosthetic foot, he said,

“You know more about me than anyone.”

At the beginning of another visit, he said, “I have a plan.” We were sitting at a round table in the main room of the center, where the residents ate their meals. The sun streamed in through the windows, and several people in scattered chairs stared up at a TV that was turned up too loud.

“What’s your plan?” I asked. Averill warned me that I wouldn’t like it.

He had an eye appointment coming up, and if he got bad news from the doctor, he was going to either stop eating or drink so much sugary soda that his body went into shock. He gestured toward the vending machine behind me. He couldn’t bear to spend the rest of his life handicapped. Averill was contemplating killing himself.

I froze, not sure how to respond. He told me that he’d listed me as someone the center could disclose his personal information to if he died. He told me I was a priority, that he didn’t want all the hours I’d spent talking to him to go to waste. He still hoped that the story I was writing would help someone else.

I left that day feeling afraid about what Averill would do and wondering what my responsibility was—whether I should talk to a staff member at the recovery center or maybe his lawyer. I was relieved when Averill called a couple of days later with good news: The doctor had told him that the odds of improving his vision were high. He might even be able to take care of himself again.

In late August, Averill received a letter from the Social Security

Administration informing him that he would receive \$750 a month. More good news arrived in the mail the next day: He qualified for Medicaid. Then, a few days later, Averill received another letter from Social Security. He'd been approved for retirement, allowing him to collect what he'd invested in the system. In lieu of that \$750 disability check, he would receive \$2,851 every month.

When he woke up the next morning, he still couldn't believe it was true. He asked someone at the front desk to read him the letter again, just to be sure. He would have enough money to take care of himself even if he couldn't get a job. He could afford a new laptop to make music again. A charger for his phone. A cellular plan. He started saying good morning to people passing through reception. "Did they up your meds?" someone asked him.

"It's really strange," Averill said when I visited him. We were sitting in the courtyard; he sipped his coffee, and I swatted mosquitoes. He had shaved most of his face, but the hair along his chin, which was hard for him to trim, curled into a long, bushy beard. "There's an old me and a slightly different, new me," he continued.

Then he coughed forcefully and hit his stomach. His digestive tract was irritated, Averill said, and the gas made him cough. But he assured me that he'd had a colonoscopy once and the doctors had told him that gas wouldn't kill him. "I can't think of a more boring way to die," he said. "Imagine that on a tombstone: 'Died of indigestion.' Honestly, let's try for something a little different."

By September, a case manager had scheduled eye surgery. The cataracts were so bad—“the size of an elephant,” Averill said—that a laser wouldn’t work; doctors would have to surgically remove them. He was used to life looking like the film noirs he once watched while eating burgers at a restaurant in downtown Austin, everything in hazy black and white. The doctors told him that the surgery wouldn’t completely repair his eyesight but should improve it. For starters, he’d likely get his color vision back.

It seemed certain now that he wouldn’t have to go to prison to get the care he needed. Once he entered the mental health system, he had access to the appropriate resources. Still, his legal case was pending.

I woke up on the morning of October 2 to meet Averill at the Blackwell-Thurman Criminal Justice Center, where his presentencing hearing was set for 9 a.m. The judge wasn’t there when I arrived, and the prosecutor in Averill’s case, Jeremy Sylestine, had taken a seat in one of the juror’s chairs.

I found Averill sitting in the back corner of the room and bent down to let him know I was there, since he likely couldn’t see me; his eye surgery had been postponed. He said he was doing well but wanted some coffee. His lawyer, Cheryl Hinder, hustled around the bench. She moved so fast at times that her feet wobbled slightly in her black patent-leather heels. She finally sat next to Averill, who rested his hands gently on his cane with a calm expression on his face. “It doesn’t look like any courtroom I’ve ever seen, so that’s kind of depressing,” he

said. He'd been expecting a *Judge Judy* scene, with people yelling and drama.

Before Judge Cliff Brown heard Averill's case, Hinderer needed her client to complete some paperwork. But because Averill couldn't see, Hinderer had to fill it out for him. "Are you currently in a gang?" she asked.

"Hardly," he said.

Judge Brown called Averill's case a few minutes before 10 a.m. and explained what pleading guilty would mean: Averill would waive his Miranda rights and wouldn't be allowed near a Prosperity Bank branch ever again. The state was recommending a sentence of three years deferred adjudication with treatment or counseling.

"How do you plead?" Brown asked.

"Guilty," Averill said. He was glad to say it.

Formal sentencing was set for November 13. Before that, Brown explained, probation services would conduct an investigation to determine whether it could support the plea agreement. Katie Cullather, a social worker assigned to his case, gave Averill her wrist, and the three of us started a slow march to an office five blocks away. We paused at one point so Averill could hike up his pants—he'd removed his belt before passing through the courthouse's metal detector and hadn't tightened it properly afterward. "Do you want to fix it?" Cullather asked.

"Out here?" he said. "Oh, God no, because next thing you

know, they'll say he's exposing himself, and I'll be right back in there."

Cullather guided him down the street, pointing out gravel and dips and cracks in the concrete. By the time we reached the office, she wondered if he'd be able to find his way back without her. Averill told her not to worry. Next time he visited, he said, his friend Danielle Morris would accompany him.

A woman opened the door to a small office and called his name. "Yes, hold on a second," he replied, gesturing in my and Cullather's direction. "It takes this many people to keep an eye on me."

Inside the office, the woman told him that he needed to come back in about three weeks and bring \$43 for the assessment fee unless he wanted to add it to his court costs. No problem, Averill said. He'd received his first Social Security payment that morning.

Later that day, we went to a Starbucks so that Averill could have the coffee he'd been craving. He said that after everything—jail, the homeless shelter, the mental health facilities, contemplating suicide—he was grateful for two things: Social Security and friends. "And the friends," he said, "may be on top."

Averill felt so good that he started to think about getting into activism, to aid people who felt as desperate as he once had. If only they knew that they weren't alone, he thought, maybe they'd reach out, find people who could help them access the services they needed. Maybe his story could become a rallying

point. “If somebody doesn’t start it,” he said, meaning a movement to help the sick and isolated, “it’s not going to happen.”

Of course, there are many activists and organizations dedicated to improving the lives of vulnerable people in America. It’s easy to imagine Averill’s story becoming an anecdote in their literature or in a politician’s stump speech. *The man who robbed a bank to get health care!* Another example of how our system is broken. Sympathetic voters might nod their heads in favor of health care for all. Then they’d probably forget all about Averill. Perhaps, like he once had, they wouldn’t think too hard about what it means to be alone and needy—unless they actually were. Even then, they might not be willing to ask for help outright.

Averill told me that he wanted to start a Facebook group to advocate for streamlining systems that help connect the sick, poor, and unemployed with services. He recognized that sometimes people need a push, and he was ready to push. “You can’t help people from a position of weakness,” he said. “You have to help people from a position of strength.”

When I visited Averill in December at his new home, an apartment he shared with Morris, he’d hung a plastic shopping bag on the doorknob so that I’d know which place was his. He showed me the patio where he liked to sit and watch the trees sway in the wind and the bees buzz around the flowering ivy—at least he thought it was flowering ivy. He couldn’t really see it. He had an appointment with an ophthalmologist at the end of January. After that, he hoped, he would finally have surgery.

“This is pretty much a very high-class, very fancy prison cell,” he said of his home. “I can’t go anywhere. I can’t go outside without falling over things. I can’t drive a car and get anything. I cannot rely on the bus, because I can’t tell you which bus I’m going to be getting on, and I couldn’t see to get on the bus anyway.”

I couldn’t tell how happy—or unhappy—Averill was with the arrangement. There was an edge to his voice. Yet he was making plans. His bedroom had only a floor lamp and mattress then, and he wanted to show me where he would put things once he bought them. “Here is going to go my writing station,” he said, pointing to one wall, “either a folding table or a desk. My laptop will go here. I’m going to put a big ol’ monitor behind it. Here on the other side of the table is going to be a Keurig machine or an electric kettle. Then I’m going to have possibly a slow-brew, slow-pour coffee maker—pour by hand—and flowering tea.”

He turned to another wall. “This area here is set aside for musical instruments. Guitar will probably go over there, and then put a bass over here, and maybe a second guitar here, and all my studio gear will go right here in front of this window.”

He showed me the spice carousel in the kitchen, the knife block, the microwave, and the panini press. The dining table was covered in Morris’s crafts—she was going to make ornaments for the artificial Christmas tree in the living room. A new Swiffer leaned in a corner. “She cleans everything up even though I say, ‘You don’t need to clean everything up!’” he said.

Averill covered the rent, and Morris paid for utilities, internet, phone, cable, and half the groceries. She'd helped him pick out a 68-inch television, so that he could see what's happening on the screen. She did the cooking and had helped Averill sign up for Ambetter, one of the options available in Texas through the federal government's health care marketplace, after his higher income disqualified him for Medicaid. She drove him on errands and had called a cab to get them to his first meeting with his probation officer. Averill worried that he was burdening Morris. But he cared about her. He liked her company. And, he admitted, it was nice to have someone around in case something happened to him.

I walked to my car feeling glad that Averill had a safe and comfortable place to live. He'd found not only housing but also a community, even if it was a small one.

About a week later, Averill called. It was a Tuesday. On the previous Friday, he said, Morris had vanished. By Saturday morning he was worried, for his friend and for himself. He couldn't sleep. He was chugging coffee and plowing through hundreds of Tums. "I was stuck here without a caregiver, with no way to get medicine," he said. Morris had all his health-insurance information, which he wouldn't be able to read even if he had it. "I was up the proverbial creek," he said.

Unlike his circumstances just a year earlier, this time he asked for help. He called Katie Cullather, the social worker, and she connected him with an agency that sent a caretaker to his home. That woman renewed his prescriptions, helped him make his first health-insurance payment, bought food, and

cleaned up the apartment. Averill arranged to pay for her to continue to help him twice a week. He felt like he'd dodged a bullet. But he was still distraught: Where was Morris?

Averill called me again later that evening and left a voice mail. Morris was back, he said. She'd stayed at the hospital for a few nights and thought that someone had told Averill that she wouldn't be home. But no one had. Averill sounded angry. "I'm not sure what the hell's going on," he said when I called him back the next morning. "She opens the door and walks in like nothing has happened and just says, 'Hi.'"

What he feared most had transpired: He'd let himself feel vulnerable, and now he was hurt. "I'm not willing to risk myself ever again," he said. "I'm not going down that path ever again for anybody for any reason."

What he feared most had transpired: He'd let himself feel vulnerable, and now he was hurt.

I asked if he thought Morris's disappearance might just be a misunderstanding. Maybe, he said. But it didn't matter. He'd lost sleep over the ordeal. Was life with friends, people you counted on, really so much better than life without them? "I can create my art, I can work on my music, I can have casual interactions with people online and not tear my soul apart," he told me.

Then he said what I was worried he would say: "I'm going back into isolation."

I made the case that Averill shouldn't give up. Maybe, I said, Herrera and Morris and the counselors he'd talked to at the

Herman Center were like a lily pad—“or a life raft!” I said hopefully. Somewhere to land as he emerged from the remote world he’d occupied for so long, before he took another step, and met another person and then another, and finally found his way.

“Possibly,” Averill said.

He wasn’t sure he was ready to find out. He needed time. Then he would reassess. In that moment, he didn’t think that he mattered. Someday soon, I hoped he’d realize that he did.

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