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8:01 PM

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## **8:01 PM**

Jake Hjelmtveit

Jake Hjelmtveit's short story 8:01 PM was written as part of a creative writing group using the theme of Moving On.

### **MOVING ON**

Mari Hansen (English)

Jake Hjelmtveit, (English)

Christopher Peterson (English)

Eric Hoffheiser (English)

*Hans Hetrick, Graduate Student Mentor (English)*

*Richard Robbins, Faculty Mentor (English)*

For our group, Moving On represented the emotional weight in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Moving On implies change, and all good prose and verse possess change. As creative writers, we explored this theme through subjects ranging from the death of a loved one to loss of one's faith. By focusing on our theme, we examined our own lives and improved our creative writing skills. We attained our goals through observation, discussion, information gathering, writing, and revision of creative work. We met frequently to discuss our work and ideas. We strove to bring each individual piece to a publishable quality and plan to submit our works for publication. In the hopes that others will gain from our awareness, we plan to present our writing at the conference, individually reading our work to the audience.

Jake Hjelmteit

## 8:01 PM

7:56 pm. Terrence Mullen sits at the kitchen table and watches the snow swirl by out the window. Flecks of snow block out the soft yellow glow of the house next door. The street is covered with a layer of white. While he stares out the window, a chill runs down his spine like icicle hands caressing his skin. He finishes smoking a cigarette and puts it out in an ashtray overflowing with butts. Next to the ashtray is the .45 pistol that once belonged to his father.

7:57. Terrence goes to the dining room and picks up the cordless phone. The answering machine shows a digital zero. He walks back into the kitchen, going past a week's worth of dirty dishes all stacked up. In one of the cabinets, a bottle of booze rests behind a few clean plates. He fights the urge to pick up the bottle and drink until he blacks out. *Gotta keep my head clear*, he thinks. *Can't drink this or I'll never find her.*

7:58. Terrence sweats. He feels an urge to take off the sweater and sit in the kitchen with a bare chest, but he knows it won't do any good. The little things – paying bills, working, cleaning the house – cross his mind, but he can do little more than realize that they're things he has to do. Without her, his life has stopped. He thinks, *Why is this happening?*

7:59. Have to stay by the phone now. She'll be calling. Only two minutes to go. The urge hits Terrence to just turn the ringer off, or maybe smash the goddamn phone. He wishes he doesn't have to listen to the call that comes every night. But if he doesn't, he might not ever find her.

8:00. The minutes go so fast. She'll be calling in one minute, and what's he going to say to her tonight? He knows she won't tell him where she is. Allison's been so vague.

8:01. The phone rings.

It rings over and over. Terrence knows the ringing won't stop. His hand shakes as he picks up the phone. Exhaustion tightens its grip on him with each passing second as he hits the TALK button and puts it up to his ear.

\* \* \*

His favorite memory of her was on a night in November where, after a long string of fights, they had made a pact not to have one argument. "We're going to do things right," he'd told her. "No fights tonight. No bitching or blaming. Let's do something for ourselves, get out of the house, see a movie or something."

"Just like the first date we ever went on," she replied. He thought he heard sarcasm in her voice but he could see content in her face.

"All right, so it's a pact then?"

"Yes," she replied.

They went to the movie and went out to eat. They did this together without a scuffle. After the movie, they returned to their house laughing and smiling. They had had a conversation over pizza about some of their old friends and the things they used to do while they were dating. This set them off on a laughing spree all the way home.

"I'll make us some hot chocolate," Terrence said. "Wait in here." He made his way for the kitchen while she took her coat off and sat on the couch.

Terrence came back with two steaming cups of hot chocolate and two spoons. He set them down on the coffee table and joined his wife on the couch.

"That movie sucked," he said, "but I still had a good time."

“They don’t make horror movies like they did in the seventies,” she said.

Terrence put his arm around his wife for the first time since...well, he couldn’t remember. He pulled her close and she rested her head on his shoulder. This was the first night the television hadn’t been on, the first time in a long time they hadn’t been sitting as far apart from each other in the living room as they could get. Terrence sighed.

They were silent for awhile, and this time, Terrence felt good about it. He felt more at peace with himself than he had in months. The tension he felt was gone and Allison didn’t feel like a stranger to him. It was like he knew her again. They sipped hot chocolate and held each other.

Terrence broke the silence. “Honey, what ever happened to us?”

She looked into his eyes. “I don’t know. I can’t pin an answer on that.”

He finished his cup of hot chocolate and set the empty mug on the coffee table. He settled his hands on his wife’s shoulders and gave her a kiss – the first meaningful one in a long time. She leaned her body into his. He ran his fingers through her hair and kept her close the rest of that night, hoping things would be okay between them.

\* \* \*

“You can’t keep doing this,” he says. “You can’t keep calling me because you’re not helping. You know where you are. Tell me.”

Silence on the other end, then heavy breathing.

“I only wanted to fix our relationship, but you left me. Remember?”

“Yes,” she says. “We’re long past any moment where I could apologize to you for what I did. The time to have done that was a long time ago, and neither of us can get it back.”

He’s sitting on the linoleum floor, his mind a jumbled mess of thoughts and words – Allison’s words – and he’s trying to figure them out.

“Who are you with, Allison?”

“I was with *him*,” she says. “Not anymore. I’m trapped in a room with only a telephone. It only works at 8:01 pm. Because that’s when it happened.”

“What happened?” Sweat pours out of him, soaking his shirt. The wind winding through trees and between houses makes a whooshing sound that seems like a part of the phone conversation, accentuating his isolation. Is she really alone in some room? She still hasn’t answered him. “What happened, Allison?”

A sudden static crowds the line, shocking his ears with an onslaught of sound. He drops the phone to the floor and still hears it over the rushing wind.

The wind dies. The static quits.

\* \* \*

A week of her phone calls and he still hadn’t figured out where she was. And every time she called, he got a strange sensation that something was wrong – much worse than her having left him for another man. There was something else behind it; something had happened to Allison the night she left.

The first two nights of the phone calls, he had gotten angry and screamed at her over the phone. “Where the *fuck* are you?” he hissed at her the first night. He wanted to know. He had a right to know. But after that, he began to think about what happened and tried to place his feelings in the matter. She was his wife and he was still willing to try and make the marriage work if she just came home. That was all he wanted. But her calls were filled with useless information that resulted in pain instead of answers. With each day that passed, he felt more and more like he would never find her.

*She's making this harder than it has to be*, he thought. His mind screamed with misplaced rage at her absence and her deliberate evasion of his questions. His anger came in private sobs and exhaustion took over his body. Staring into the bright lights, he tried to get up the willpower to bring his sleeve up to his face and wipe away his tears.

Terrence took a deep breath and held it for as long as he could, staring into the lights, trying to cast his anger out and think. As he cleared his mind of all the garbage, he started piecing things together. *Allison fucks man. Allison leaves me when I find out and tells me she doesn't love me anymore. Allison goes to stay with man. Allison calls every goddamn night at 8:01!*

Clearing his head turned out to be the best thing to do. *Allison calls every night at 8:01.* He ran the thought over and over again in his mind – refusing a dead end result – and realized he could find out where the last call had come from. Star 69. An adrenaline rush hit him as he picked up the phone again and dialed.

A computerized voice read a local phone number back to him. He grabbed his pen out of his jeans pocket and scribbled the number down on the heating bill envelope. His adrenaline rush peaked.

Terrence got a fresh line and dialed 0. An operator greeted him.

“Yes, I just got a call from my wife. I don't know where she is but I Star 69ed the number and got 235-2369. I was wondering if you could give me the address to that number.”

The operator told him to hold on.

As he waited, he tapped his feet on the floor and twirled the pen in his hand.

The operator came back on the line and told him the address was three-thirty-four Willow Street, which was the residence of James Darkow.

“Thank you,” Terrence said, and hung up.

He figured James Darkow was Allison's lover. Terrence had never met him or heard his name. Before Allison left, she had told him she'd been sleeping with someone else and nothing more. He wrote the address down below the phone number and stood up.

Terrence walked into the living room and over to the large window that overlooked the front yard and the street in front of his house, peering out to see large flakes of snow falling in the gleam of the streetlamp. He knew he wouldn't be able to drive over to Willow Street in the snow, but it wasn't too far away to go on foot.

He put on a flannel shirt and covered himself from head to toe with winter gear. Terrence was on his way out the door when he stopped. Something wasn't right. He hadn't thought this thing through. Nakedness and defenselessness gripped him because he didn't know what this James Darkow was like or what to expect of him. He'd need a weapon.

“The gun,” he said out loud to himself as he went back into the kitchen to get the .45 from off the kitchen table. When the gun was in his hand, he headed back towards the door.

\* \* \*

He trudged through the snow. Under the dim glow of streetlights streetlights, he walked past houses with lights on. Television sets flickered blue from windows. No cars passed him on the roads.

A wave of regret washed through him as he trudged through snow, his hand on the butt of the pistol. He regretted not having thought to try and track his wife down earlier. If he would've been thinking with his rational mind instead of the dark emotions going through his brain night after night, he would've saved himself a week of pain.

Terrence fought through the snow faster. He thought, *I'm the last person in the world tonight. The houses people sleep and watch television and make love in are different worlds. Entering their doors would be like entering new dimensions.* He was the last one left in the real world, hiding behind the wall of the snowstorm.

\* \* \*

James Darkow's house was in his sight. The black numbers of the address seemed burned into the gray wooden siding. The house was dark and quiet. Opening the door meant stepping into a wicked dimension.

Terrence stood in front of the house, wondering if he should go in there with the gun in his hand or wait. A quick decision yielded that he should wait. There was no telling what this man was like or what he would do.

Allison was inside the house, hidden from him behind these walls. Terrence hurried up the steps and pushed the doorbell button. He waited and listened. Nothing. No sign of anyone at home. Terrence rang the doorbell again and counted to ten. Still nothing.

He opened the screen door and turned the doorknob. The front door opened and he stepped into the darkness.

The only light in the house was flickering blue light from the television. Terrence stood in the living room, standing on a green rug littered with beer cans and empty fast food bags. He cringed at the smell of decay and rotten food scattered about. How Allison could ever stay here was beyond the scope of his imagination.

"Who the hell are you and what are you doing in my house?" a voice called.

Terrence looked over to the corner of the living room and saw a silhouette of a man sitting in an armchair in the corner. A stack of garbage surrounded him. The flickering television revealed a face covered with uneven stubble and tired, saggy eyes. The silhouette held a bottle in his hand and he took a swig from it.

"Are you Darkow? James Darkow?" Terrence asked.

"So what the fuck do you want, then?" the man replied.

Terrence held his calmness. "I asked you a question. Are you James Darkow?"

"Yeah. What's it to you?"

"I'm asking the questions here, Darkow," Terrence said.

"Only they call me Jim." He stood up. "I don't let strangers tell me what to do, Mister. You weren't invited into my house, so what the fuck is your business here?"

Jim stepped into the light of the television, close enough for Terrence to get a good look at him, and saw a man who hadn't showered, shaved, or changed clothes in a week, but Terrence thought he could see what Allison was attracted to underneath the stubble and the greasy hair. It was in Jim's eyes and the way he stood tall with command in his steps. He knew Allison liked that in a man – she'd fell in love with it in Terrence – and he was able to see it in Jim now, but realizing this made him feel ashamed.

"I'm here for my wife. She's been calling me from here. I'm taking Allison home."

Jim looked at Terrence with a dumbfounded look. "Calling you? Shit, you're cracked, Man." He paused to take a swig of Jack Daniels. "Where she went, she won't be needin' to make no phone calls."

"What are you talking about?" Terrence asked. "Make some sense, *Jim*."

Jim walked around Terrence in a circle. "So you're Terrence, the husband who couldn't live up and couldn't get it up. Yeah, she told me about you. Told me lots about you."

They were face-to-face. Jim saw Terrence's cold, tired stare and he laughed.

“Don’t test me, Jim. Don’t you fucking push it. Just get her out here and I’ll leave you be. I should kill you for taking advantage of my wife and taking her from me, but I won’t. Not if you do what I say.”

“I don’t believe you, Man,” Jim said. “Your wife was good pushin’ and you couldn’t keep it up for her. Blows my fuckin’ mind.”

Jim didn’t see it coming when Terrence pulled the .45 out and knocked him in the skull with it. The bottle of Jack crashed and spilled on the floor. Jim’s hands went to his head and he fell. Terrence noticed the blood running down Jim’s forehead in the glow of the television. He pointed the pistol at Jim.

“I told you not to push it. I’m not fucking around here, Jim. Make no mistake.”

Jim looked up at him with blood in his eyes. “She doesn’t want you back anyway.” He laughed. “Go ahead and shoot, you dead fuck. Do what you will, but she ain’t comin’ back to you.”

Terrence fired the pistol. The shot hit Jim in the shoulder and he grunted. He put round after round in Jim, the shots entering his body like rocks entering water. Splash and silence. He fired the gun until it was empty.

Terrence felt the fire of adrenaline leave his body like a levee breaking and he sunk to his knees, never taking his eyes off Jim. Cold shivers grabbed him and he breathed hard, sucking his breaths in through clenched teeth. His heart beat like a thousand hammers hitting steel in a factory. He dropped his head to the floor and shut his eyes, trying to get the image of Jim’s body out of his mind.

*Have to keep moving, he thought. Have to find Allison.*

Terrence willed himself to his feet, keeping his eyes diverted from the corpse on the floor. He stumbled through the living room, his hand covering his mouth. He began to feel better when he got to the dark hallway of Jim’s house, but he felt a sensation of eyes watching him from behind the furniture and the walls. This place was empty, he knew it, but thoughts of human suffering and death entered his mind. He didn’t conjure up these thoughts on his own. They were fed to him. He knew it.

The house was dark, lit up only by the glow of the television. As Terrence walked further into the house, it became a tunnel of degradation. Walls were battered and chipped. He walked into the hallway and saw three doors there. A musty smell invaded his face, suffocating him. His first reaction was to withdraw from the hallway and back away, but he couldn’t. Not yet.

“Allison,” he called. “Allison, where are you?”

No response. Terrence went to the first door and opened it. A bathroom. The toilet littered with year-old piss stains and a brown ring in the bowl. The shower curtain was torn with maroon streaks running across it. Terrence could only guess it was dried blood. He plastered his sleeve over his nose – it didn’t do any good in blocking out the smell of human waste – and stepped out, shutting the door behind him.

The floorboards creaked beneath his feet. Terrence felt chills run up and down his spine with each creak.

Behind the next door, there was a bedroom. The only peculiarity about it was that it was clean and smelled fresh. The bed was made with fresh sheets and the walls were painted in a dull pink color. He guessed the paint job was only about a year old. There were red roses in a vase on a restored antique dresser and the carpet was vacuumed. Contemporary abstract



paintings of bright colors hung on the walls. The shades were up on the windows, and Terrence saw the snow blowing outside.

He was about to move on when he noticed something bright on the nightstand beside the bed. Terrence entered the room and reached for the switch. The light came on, and he went towards the object on the stand.

Allison's wedding band.

His eyes narrowed; he felt anger and surprise on his face his face as he picked up the ring. It was made out of seven karat gold with a diamond jutting out of the top shaped like a snowflake. He held it in his fingers, felt its weight – not much there. As it sat in his palm, he wished there was some spiritual form of Allison in the ring that would make it heavier, make it a challenge to hold. But its weight remained light, and he thought of how easy it would be to lose.

He pocketed the ring and backed out of the room, shutting off the light and slamming the door. Shakes ran through him like out of control trains and felt himself sweating. Terrence thought about sinking to the floor, trying to accept his defeat even though he knew that would never happen. He saw himself killing Jim with the gun, the abandoned wedding band and the dirty bathroom with its curtain of dried blood and realized that their marriage, when it was in its unbalanced state of argumentation and cheating, was never as bad as this place.

Terrence leaned against the dirty wall and collected himself. He thought about going back and getting the gun where he'd left it in the living room but he realized that he didn't feel any safer with it. The isolation creeping up on him was an invisible predator that couldn't be defeated with guns, but with the hardening of the human heart, if only for a small period of time.

Wiping his forehead on his coat sleeve, he walked down the hall. The third door was at the far end. He approached it and stopped, trying to figure out what might be behind that door.

He sighed, took a deep breath and held it when he opened the door. A tall, dusty staircase awaited him. He saw recent footprints in the dust on each step. A foreign smell greeted him at the foot of the stairs that was a combination of every rotten smell he could imagine combined into one. His sleeve was over his mouth as he started up the steps.

"Allison?" No answer.

When he reached the top of the steps, he saw an old telephone sitting on a small table in the corner. The next thing he saw was the body of his wife, stripped naked, skin white as heavy fog.

He went to her, struggling to keep on his feet for six steps. He sunk to his knees and hovered over her, trying to cry. Nothing came, as if his reserves were dry and he had nothing to show. He took his jacket off and covered her up as well as he could. Her hand was cold when he took her hand.

Terrence got caught up in the four walls, ceiling, and floor around him. It became the world for the ten minutes he was in that room. The air was still and decayed the moment he entered the room, and it stayed that way until he touched her hand. He held it and thought about the nastiness of the place and the way she was left after death.

A light breeze rushed at him. The breeze smelled fresh, as if it came from a different place.

A light flickered from nowhere, but it had to be a trick of the eye. He looked back down at his wife, not caring about the light any longer. *It was certainly a figment of my imagination*, he told himself. Touching her hair made him think of the last good time they'd had, in the living room that night after the movie.

And then a quick surge of warmth spread through her dead hand.

This was no trick of the imagination. He let go of her hand, not wanting to feel the coldness of it any longer.

Turning around, he looked at the phone sitting on its isolated table. It was an old black phone with a plastic wheel to dial the numbers. Its plastic casing shined and there was no dust. He was stricken by the fact that the phone wasn't connected to the jack. The cable was on the floor.

Terrence felt the cold invade him when he thought of the phone calls. She had been dead and yet she'd been calling him every night. He thought back to what she'd said only an hour ago on the phone about being in a room with only a telephone. She was here, dead, but she was somewhere else, too.

"Allison, where are you really at?" he asked the room.

No answer. She was in some other world with a telephone, and he was the only one she could call. Tomorrow night at 8:01 pm, she'd call him.

His head rushed with ideas. He felt blind, felt himself being carried by some response system hidden inside him. Terrence had to get Allison's body out of here and take it somewhere safe. Then, he had to prepare for her call.

\* \* \*

7:59 pm. Terrence is at the kitchen table with the cordless phone. He's taken a shower, dressed in jeans and a button-down blue shirt. His hair is combed and he's taken the liberty to shave. Allison won't ever come back, he knows that, but the call will be the last contact he will have with her. He needs to be refreshed for her, even if she'll only notice it in him by the sound of his voice.

8:00. The storm has dwindled down to light falling snow. He hears a snowplow drive by and sees the living room bathed in blue for a moment from its flashing lights. Terrence is ready. The whole experience has taken a sleepless night and a long day to sink into him. Not enough time to get over it, but long enough to accept it.

8:01. The phone rings. Terrence hits TALK and holds it to his ear. "Allison," he says. "Yes, Terrence. It's me. I knew you'd find me."

"I'm sorry I couldn't do it sooner," he replies. *Her voice sounds shaky and emotional*, he thinks.

"You did only what you could, Terrence. That's enough. It has to be enough...for both of us." She pauses. "This is going to be my last call."

"Did a door appear in the room, Allison?" he asked.

"Yes," she replies. "When I leave this room, we'll never speak again. It'll be the end, Terrence."

"Yeah," he mutters. "I just have one question, Allison. One question and then you should go."

"What is it?"

"Why every night at 8:01?"

There is a pause on the other end. "That was the time when he did it. When he locked me out of my life for good. I'm sorry for being vague; I just can't bear to say it. Words about death are so harsh."

Terrence stares at the linoleum floor for a second. "I love you, Allison."

"I'm afraid I can't say it back to you, Terrence. You'll understand everything when you reach...well, when your time comes. But I have to go, Terrence. I have to walk through the door. And when your time comes, I hope there's a place we can meet. I hope we can start over."

A single tear comes down his cheek. “Goodbye, Allison.”

There is a click on the other end. Terrence sets the handset down on the kitchen table and thinks about her words, hammering on them, trying to keep them. Her words have to stay with him until the end. If he never remembers anything else, he has to remember these words, try to figure them out.

Outside the house, the storm recedes like a curtain being pulled open. With that, the world comes gradually back into focus.

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