

Unpredictable  
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## Unpredictable

This was predictable.

“You have a problem,” I told the woman.

She was in her thirties, dressed in a pair of gray sweat pants, a navy blue T-shirt, flip-flops. We stood in a library parking lot, around noon. I made an elaborate gesture of looking over my shoulder, and stooped down to fix the cuffs on my jeans.

I gazed up at her. “Do you know what your problem is?”

She stood at the rear of a silver Mercedes, trunk open.

She was setting down a stack of books inside.

She had a wedgie.

I’d followed her out through the library’s front entrance, her feet clapping and smacking across the pavement, singing the repulsive notes of flip-flop music.

It was so predictable. Newtonian even.

$P = \frac{1}{2} \text{ society/age} + \text{ flip-flops} + \text{ vt.}$

Bending over the trunk now, she turned her head at my voice and raised her eyebrows over a pair of dark brown sunglasses. “I’m sorry, what?”

I pushed myself to my feet. “Are you asking me to repeat the question, or asking for my opinion?”

Straightening, she slammed her trunk lid shut with a metallic rattle of the license plate. She turned and frowned at me.

I was dressed as a cowboy: Wrangler blue jeans, spurred boots, white Stetson hat, a huge silver belt buckle. This wouldn’t be a strange picture in, say, San Antonio, Texas, but we were in the middle of a suburb near Chicago, Illinois.

“I don’t have a problem,” she said. “Maybe *you* have a problem.” Around her shoulder, a brown leather purse hung by a thin strap. She pressed it closer to her side. Her brows knit together and her frown deepened into a scowl.

“I have a problem? *I* have a problem?” My voice reached a crescendo. “Tell me what *my* problem is.”

I loved repeating things. If you repeated things often enough people had no choice but to look at you from a different angle. I threw my head back and screamed at the top of my lungs. My eyes went glassy, widening as far as the sockets would permit. My hat fell off.

Then I leveled my gaze with hers. She shot a nervous glance at her door handle. Her movements grew panicky. Kneading her purse, she swung her attention from my hat to the door handle, to the entrance of the library.

She flinched in the direction of her car, but instead turned and ran for the library. People don't realize how ridiculous they sound running in flip-flops. They look even worse. A security guard happened through the library's automatic doors. The woman shouted, waving her keys at him.

I knew this would happen, that she'd sprint for help. Her car started honking and flashing its lights. And yes, I predicted that too.

Ducking into my Honda Civic with its duct-taped side mirror, I sped out of there before anyone could alert the police. I simmered with disappointment. She could have laughed. She could have joined me in my scream. That would've been unpredictable. I would have been thrilled. Smitten. She could have kicked me in the balls. I'd have asked her to marry me - after uncurling myself from a fetal position on the ground. But no, instead she fled.

The more unexpected my behavior became, the more typical everyone's response.

I didn't bother going back for my hat.

\* \* \*

That evening the air had a damp chill to it, leftover effects of a thunderstorm. It felt groggy out, as if the whole world had just woken from a long day of booze and sex in a smoke-filled motel room. I stood in line at the nightclub. At the entrances of nightclubs you can spot the losers: they're the ones waiting in line by themselves.

I hated nightclubs. Other than expensive sex, I didn't see the point. It was like going to have a routine colonoscopy done.

Where was the magic?

Drunks all behaved the way you would expect them to. The off-kilter blinking of eyes, the clasp of shoulders and shouting in ears. Everyone trying to convince themselves of the fun they were having. Finally, a purpose in life: holler, drink, bob around, stop for a piss.

$P = m_2/\text{Heineken}^4 - IQ + \Delta\ddagger$ .

So mechanical.

An expansion pack for a life simulation game.

The club was loud. What would it be like to walk into a quiet nightclub? Now *that* would be a surprise. I wormed a path through the tables, past the bar and its row of bar stools.

I danced for a while.

I went around asking girls to dance with me.

I got rejected by all of them.

Too much competition. Every time I leaned my elbow next to an attractive girl, some guy appeared and leaned his elbow next to mine, asking the same one-dimensional questions I'd just finished asking. "You here with a boyfriend? You looking to have some fun? You live around here? You have a name? You want a drink? You want to dance?"

Piss off, wanker!

I wanted to snarl it in a fake Cockney accent. Sometimes I did. Sometimes I was thrown out by the bouncers as a result. They usually added a little punch to the mid-section, the bloody predictable bastards. It bored me, all of it: the punches, the reactions to my fake accents, the posturing around women. Every night at the club was the same old routine.

I felt alone in the universe.

"Hi," I said to a guy wearing a red rayon clubbing shirt and black designer jeans. Nice colors. He looked like he fell off a checkers board.

His hair was a crop of gelled spikes so long and sharp I wanted to skewer onions, green peppers, and beef medallions on them. He was trying to hit on a girl with enormous breasts. She also had pretty painted fingernails, but what man ever gave a damn about details?

He half-turned to me, eyelids drooping. "Hey," he spared, and turned back to the girl.

I stood there smiling, staring at him, a bottle of Sapporo Premium in my hand. The girl glanced at me, looked back at her suitor with thinly-veiled amusement. The guy watched me from the corner of his eye until he couldn't stand it any longer. Turning around, he looked at me the way someone with a mouthful of food might look at a waitress who'd just asked, "How is everything?" for the fourth time in a row.

"What's up?" he asked, swallowing his imaginary piece of food. "You need something?"

I didn't say anything, just stared at him with a smile. He gave a quick awkward grin and turned away again. This couldn't last for long though. After a few sighs he turned back for a third time, clearly pissed off, his eyes a concentrated pair of zeroes.

"Go stand somewhere else," he said.

I didn't budge.

I didn't say anything either.

I just smiled.

No harm in smiling was there? He turned back to his girl, lowered his head, and started fidgeting with a bottle cap. He muttered something to her and she muttered something to him.

"Let's go to another table," he suggested loud enough for me to hear.

How ironic, if unsurprising, that silence would elicit the same flight response as screaming at the top of my lungs.

I followed.

Spinning around, he shoved me and yelled a string of obscenities that would have made a truck driver squirm. Beer splashed out from my bottle and soaked the front of my shirt, but didn't wash the grin off my face.

A bulldog appeared at my elbow. Orange shirt, bold white letters spelling STAFF across his back.

"What's going on here?" he barked.

"Good boy," I said. "Heel."

What happened next? No surprise, *that's* for sure.

He opened the exit doors with my face.

In the parking lot, I gripped my abdomen, still smarting from the bulldog's fat paw. I climbed to my feet. Fell back down. The world spun around me. A rogue pinball, I careened across lawns and streets, ricocheting off trees and parked cars. I stopped every now and then through false alarms of vomiting, and at last I reached my apartment complex: its glorious, potholed parking lot, rats, and vandalized trash dumpsters.

I howled into the night. A lone wolf.

My cry carried across the empty parking lot, resounding off red-bricked walls. Moths flew around lamps. Their wings tapped on the glass, the only sound I could hear. Everything smelled of dirt and decay. If only I could have sprouted my own moth wings and flown through the

buildings, entering each sleeping person's head. If I could journey through their dreams, where everything is wild and marvelous, sometimes terrifying, but always, always, unpredictable.

I sat down to rest on a curb broken in half by someone who didn't know how to park. The world was full of curbs broken in half. I was a good example of one.

Why was I so miserable?

Why had the beauty in ordinary things grown elusive?

Why did I go around looking for astonishment?

Imagine a universe full of people with questions just like mine.

"Hey," an Asian girl said, sitting down next to me on the other chunk of curb.

"Hey," I answered, a bit startled. Probably not as startled as I should have been. "What are you doing here? It's two in the morning."

She gave a furtive nod.

Actually, I remembered it being two o'clock when I drank my last beer. I had no idea what time it was then, only that the sun hadn't risen yet.

She blew a large pink bubble, chewed it down to size, and popped the rest of it inside her mouth.

"I thought I heard a stray dog," she said.

"Sorry. That was me. I was trying to be a wolf."

She studied me as if trying to determine the color of my aura. "Your eyes have too much sadness in them to belong to a wolf. And besides, there aren't any wolves left in Illinois."

"They have wolves with sad eyes in zoos. Maybe I'm one that escaped."

"Nah. Wolves escaped from zoos don't have sad eyes."

Her hair was dyed both blonde and brunette. She had a pale face. It reminded me of the moon reflected over the calm surface of a pond. She gazed at me with dark eyes, warm and intelligent. I didn't recall ever seeing a visage that intriguing before. I wanted to reach across and touch her to see if ripples would form.

"What am I, then?" I asked.

"Nami!" The dark figure of a man stood at the entrance to one of the first floor apartments. "Get back in here."

She stifled a yawn without turning around.

"Is he your boyfriend?" I asked.

She raised an eyebrow. “Ew. That’s my *dad*.”

“Sorry. It’s dark. I’m a bit under the table too, if you know what I mean.”

“You say sorry too much. You don’t have to. I knew you were drunk. That’s why I came out.” She looked over her shoulder and watched her dad go back inside.

I opened my mouth, felt my breath escape. She came out because she *knew* I was drunk? What was going on here? “I-I don’t follow,” I stammered.

“I’m allergic to alcohol so I can’t drink, even when I desperately need to. Like right now. Who knows? Maybe if I sit next to you it will rub off on me a little.”

I could have asked her why she wanted to be drunk, what she was trying to escape from. I already knew what I was trying to escape from. Maybe she fled from the same thing. Maybe that’s why I didn’t ask.

Instead I said, “You’re pretty.”

My brain had turned into a pile of colored alphabet blocks.

She stopped chewing her gum and peered at me, examining my aura again, or whatever it was that interested her. Then she smiled. “Simple and sweet, I like that. Thank you. You’re pretty too.”

I leaned over like an oaf, hugged her, and kissed part of her mouth. Her body felt warm. I smelled lotion and tasted melon-flavored Chap Stick.

She slapped me hard across the face.

It stung, and I recoiled from her, mouth yawning, my mind constructing some kind of response like, “Why did you do that? I’m *drunk*, remember? I can’t help it.”

But she leaned back and smiled. Then, leaning forward, she clasped her hands around the sides of my face. She drew me toward her and pressed her lips against mine. I wasn’t sure where I was when she finally let me go.

But I knew it wasn’t where I was a moment before.

“Unpredictable,” I whispered in reflex.

I shared a few more silent breaths with her. At last she rose, ran her fingers along the side of my face, and disappeared into her apartment. I stood up, fell down, stood up again, and somehow stumbled my way back home.

I never saw her again after that. I couldn’t remember where her apartment was. What was her name? It wasn’t Nami. I just invented that for her later. But it didn’t matter.

In the end, the only thing that mattered was that I met her.



## Jake's Mom

Holly inspected the outside of her son Jake's white Toyota pickup for dents or streaks of paint from other cars, and then used her spare set of keys to get in. Running her hand inside the glove compartment and beneath the seats, she felt for condoms or drug paraphernalia, but all she turned up was a stack of paper napkins and some ice cream coupons.

Either Jake was behaving like a lamb, or getting darned good at hiding things.

The fabric on the ceiling hung down and brushed against the top of her head. She peered over her shoulder. Crumpled pop cans littered the back seat, but she didn't spot any beer labels in the mix.

"What are you doing?" Jake asked, startling her.

He stood next to the car in black jeans and a Radiohead T-shirt, hands stuffed in his pockets.

She ran her fingertips across the dashboard and showed him the dust. "This car is a mess."

Jake frowned. "Stop spying on me."

She got out of the car and closed the door. "Would you pick up a girl with your car looking like that? I'd be embarrassed."

"Me and Keith are going to the show tonight." He followed her to the mailbox at the end of the driveway.

"You have to eat dinner first."

"What are we having?"

"Stew and salad."

"Erm, I'll pass. There's pizza at the theater."

Holly slammed the mailbox shut.

Jake trailed her into the house. From the corner of her eye, she caught him biting a fingernail. Bangs draped over his eyes and acne dotted his chin.

"Can I have some money for the ticket ... and dinner?" he mumbled.

She moved into the living room. In the corner, her husband Steve sat behind his desk, clicking a mouse and zoning at the computer screen.

"Here's the mail." She dropped the stack of mail onto the coffee table.

Her husband blinked, and his finger rolled over the scroll wheel on the mouse. Holly waited. She leaned down, picked the stack up, and dropped it again.

“The mail,” she said.

“Yeah.”

Jake hovered at her elbow. “Twenty dollars should be good enough.”

Holly sighed and turned around. She moved past Jake, bumping him with her shoulder.

“Would you get out of my way?”

In the kitchen, the burner hissed and sizzled. Chicken broth bubbled, spilled from under the lid and down the side of the pot. She lowered the flame then went to the sink to run water over a colander of potatoes.

Jake leaned against the wall. He jangled the keys hanging there on hooks. “I’ll come home right after the movie is over. I promise.”

“You promised the same thing when you went to see the war movie. Instead you went to Miss Slut’s house.”

An image flashed through her mind: the girl with the stuffed bra and silver braces, her mouth always chewing gum or smirking. Holly refused to allow her in the house again.

“Jeez, you don’t forget anything.”

“Don’t use our Lord’s name in vain.”

“Jeez is a name?”

Holly removed the potatoes and lined them up on the cutting board like stones on a train track. “I worry myself sick every time you go out.”

She drew a knife from the top drawer.

Steve shuffled into the kitchen, went to the fridge, and grabbed a can of beer. He shuffled back to his computer, pulling the tab on the way.

Holly pressed down on the knife harder than necessary and chopped the potatoes into cubes. Thwacking sounds rebounded off the kitchen walls. The phone rang.

“I’ll get it.” Jake leapt for the receiver.

Holly strained her ear, listening in on his conversation, but he fled from the kitchen and took the phone with him upstairs. Her shoulders sagged.

A few minutes later, Steve returned to the fridge.

She heard the beer can open and bare feet dragging across linoleum. “Another one already?”

In the living room, the swivel chair creaked beneath her husband's weight.

"How nice," she said through the wall. "Did you clear the table yet?"

No answer. Cutting another potato, she slipped and sliced the knuckle of her index finger. She ran water from the faucet and rinsed the blood away.

"I have such a wonderful family," she shouted. Tears welled in her eyes.

"I'm catching up on the news," Steve replied in neutral baritone.

Sucking on her knuckle, Holly stepped into the living room. She stared at her husband's back, at his waist, much fatter than it was when she married him.

"I suppose you'll be catching up on the news for the rest of the evening?"

Steve angled his head and aimed a lazy, sidelong glance at her. Then he turned again to the computer screen, to the endless blocks of text, headlines, and glowing white backgrounds. He tipped his beer back.

She went into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet for a Band-Aid.

Jake's footsteps thundered down the stairs.

"Got any money, Dad? I'm leaving for the show."

Holly stormed out of the bathroom and snatched her purse from the kitchen table where dirty glasses and an empty pizza box still cluttered the surface.

"Here. Just take the money." Her hand rifled through her purse. She pulled the cash out and shoved it at Jake. "Just take it and go."

He clutched the bills to his chest, and his eyes narrowed in confusion.

"I should have had a daughter," she muttered.

Jake threw her a hurt expression, and then turned and slunk away. "Bye, Mom."

The front door closed behind him. She didn't return his farewell. Instead, she pursed her lips and went to scrape potato cubes into the boiling pot.

\* \* \*

Steve turned the computer off just in time for dinner. Soon after they started eating, Holly felt her anger dissipate. Her gaze strayed to an old birthday card Jake had drawn for her. A magnet held it on the refrigerator. The card depicted a sweet moment they'd shared: mother and son flying a kite, the mother trying to catch her son's hat, swept off by a sudden gust of wind.

She turned to Steve. "I shouldn't have snapped at him."

He stared at her and chewed his food.

She shook her head and heaved a sigh. "I love that boy so much. I worry about him. I can't help it."

Steve pondered the tablecloth for a while then shrugged. "He's a good kid."

"I know it." She set her spoon down and dabbed at her eyes with a napkin. "And I made him feel bad."

He reached across the table and patted the back of her hand. "I'm sorry too. No more news tonight for me. Okay?"

She nodded and tried to smile. "After dinner I'll stop at the store and get him one of those coffee cakes he likes so much. He'll forgive me then, don't you think?"

\* \* \*

Holly waited in line at Smith's to cash out her items. In front of her, a tiny infant squirmed beneath a bundle of clothing and blankets. His eyes were open, perfect little circles, taking in everything and understanding nothing. She felt warmth spread across her chest and the urge to lift the baby up, hold him close.

Yesterday, Jake was that infant. He'd been born two months premature. She could still see his miniature wrinkled hands grasping at the air, could smell his red infant skin, hear the squeaks in his breathing beneath the glass of the incubator. She felt another pang of guilt.

On her way home, twin fire engines and an ambulance shot past, sirens blaring, lights flashing. They headed north, toward the mall and the cinema complex.

Toward Jake.

She shook the thought from her head. Half the city lay north, they could have been going anywhere. Nothing to worry about. Jake was safe.

Wasn't he?

\* \* \*

Holly burst through the front door with the groceries. "Why aren't you paying attention to the news?"

Steve had just woken. He lay on his recliner with his feet up, a book opened across his chest. He gazed at her helplessly. "But you said--"

"Forget what I said, it doesn't matter what I said, I need the remote right now so shut up and give it to me already! JESUS H. CHRIST!" The bags of groceries spilled out of her arms.

She turned the television on, already tuned to a news station. *LIVE* floated at the top left corner of the screen and *Breaking News* lay at the bottom right. An inferno raged in the background as a female reporter spoke off camera. Holly caught only part of it.

“... people trapped inside the burning theater.”

She crumpled to her knees and shouted “NO!” over and over again then clawed her way back to her feet and scrambled toward the front door.

The theater engulfed in flames was Jake’s theater.

Steve caught up to her, not stopping to put on his shoes. “I’ll drive.”

\* \* \*

Holly ended her eighth call to Jake’s cell phone, waited a few seconds, and dialed his number again. “He’s not answering.”

She wiped tears from her eyes and her fingers came away black with mascara. Her eyes darted wild and unfocused.

Steve threw a nervous glance. “Maybe they were seated near the exit.”

“Please be quiet, will you? I can’t hear.”

It was only Jake’s voice mail again. This time she left him a message to return her call. She dialed a different number. His friend’s house.

“He probably turned the phone off so it wouldn’t interrupt the movie,” Steve said.

Holly held her palm out. “Mrs. Sawyer? This is Holly, Jake’s mom. Have you seen the news yet? About the fire? You have? He is? He did. Oh, thank God. But what about my Jake? You haven’t. I see. Well, that’s a relief to hear. Thank you. We’ll talk later. Bye.”

She dialed Jake’s number once more and folded her phone up.

Steve frowned. “Well? What did she say?”

“Jake never stopped by to pick Keith up. Keith was in his living room playing video games when I called.”

“So, he’s not at the theater.”

“For a moment, I thought,” her voice trailed off.

Steve shook his head and started to turn the car around. “I don’t like being in the dark as to his whereabouts. But at least he’s not in that fire.”

“Aren’t you going to stop by the theater, just in case?”

“What for?”

She glared at him until he nodded.

\* \* \*

The fire still raged when they turned into the mall's parking lot, flames and thick smoke hemorrhaging into the night sky. Firefighters sprayed the fire with hoses, but the water hissed into steam as soon as it touched anything. Holly and Steve waited in the car, watching.

"Thank God Jake's not in there," Holly said. "Those poor souls."

But then her gaze stalled on a white Toyota pickup, sitting in the parking lot across from the movie theater. Through the windows, she noticed the fabric drooping from the ceiling.

Jake's truck.

She tumbled out through the door. Pushing her husband's arms off her, she staggered across the parking lot.

Jake's first car. The one she'd promised to buy for him one semester if he could get straight A's on his report card. He'd failed math, but she let him have the car anyway.

She wasn't as successful breaking free from the grasps of the police officers. Everything sounded far away. She nearly fainted more than once. The asphalt lay beneath her face, cold and wet. Tongues of fire lapped at the theater's walls and roof, and sparks got sucked up into the sky.

Impossible for anyone inside to survive.

Police officers wrestled with her, either holding her down or holding her up; she couldn't tell. She struggled with them for what seemed an eternity, but then Steve stepped in and thrust a cell phone against her ear. Over the clamor of radios, jets of water and flames, a timid, young man's voice spoke on the other end.

"Mom?"

Her Jake, with news playing and girls shushing each other in the background.

"I'm in trouble, aren't I?"

## Illinois Corn

Picture a small town in west-central Illinois near the Iowa border, where time stands still. The town is a living museum. Red-bricked streets run past preserved Victorian mansions. White picket fences border spacious front yards. Families have children. Dogs are big enough to require leashes. Glass jugs of sun tea brew on front porches, and tire swings hang from backyard maple trees.

I get nostalgic when I think about it. I remember the mail boxes with last names like Skaggs, Schmitt, Purvis, Donnelly, Schaeffer, Krueger, Anderson. I see the main street where the adjoined brick buildings have aged over a hundred years. Concrete hitching posts still line the sidewalk where townspeople used to tie their horses, and Mom and Pop shops somehow survived the Wal-Mart at the far north end of town.

The town's engine is fueled by three major industries: farming, cattle, and trucking. It survived the collapse of manufacturing that killed so many similar rural towns throughout the North East. And as long as Americans still need soybeans and corn, beef and shipping, this place should survive for many years to come.

But it has its problems.

When I lived there we didn't have a Blockbuster video store, or a bowling alley, or a YMCA. The roller skating rink had been closed for remodeling, for the last eight years. A century-old theater played one movie at a time, weeks after its national release date, and a large county fairground provided entertainment once a year. No Starbucks. No shopping malls, arcades, go-karts, or miniature golf courses. We didn't have anything like that.

What we did have though, were our fists.

The fights were arranged nearly the same way every time. One boy challenged another by stating he could beat him up. The challenge was met when the other boy answered with, "No you can't."

In simple towns, simple rules.

The fights often took place in the alleyway behind the High School, sometimes in a park, or in the back of a school bus. For me, most occurred in the middle of a cornfield.

I can't say what spurred the fights. Was it the humid summer heat? The reverberating buzz of cicadas? The increased activity of mayflies and mosquitoes in the shady areas? I want to believe that it was some external factor.

The corn swept past us. Furiously we pulled the tassels from the stalks, our hands and forearms red with paper cuts and rashes from the leaves. This activity was called corn-detassling. Its purpose was to remove the pollen from certain rows of corn so that cross-pollination could occur. I never cared how it worked, only that I could make a few hundred dollars in a short amount of time doing it.

We stood in baskets attached to an arm attached to a tractor. The tractor rolled at a brisk pace down the rows. Our job was to pull out any tassel we came across. 70% of the tassels were already removed earlier by machine. We were paid to extract only the ones the machine had missed.

The tractor stopped early one afternoon. We leapt from our baskets and slogged to the edge of the cornfield where our water coolers awaited us. With half a day's work still ahead of us, we were supposed to use the time to eat our lunches and rest. But we had other plans.

We guzzled water, letting it run down our chins, further soaking shirts already drenched by perspiration. Thirsts satiated, we disappeared back into the corn. We found a clearing where the stalks had been knocked flat. Clinging black mud weighed down the bottoms of our shoes. It was everywhere: on our clothes, under our fingernails, in our hair, smearing our knees, calves, and ankles like greased axles.

All around us wafted the fragrance of fertilizer and healthy green corn, and the music of rustling corn leaves.

Fight ambience.

We entered the clearing and a circle of bodies formed. The adults couldn't see. Don't ask me where they disappeared to during the lunch breaks. Perhaps to form their own circle somewhere else in the cornfield. Maybe they were smoking the marijuana that grew with stubborn abundance on the outskirts of town. In any case, we had our circle, composed of girls and boys, all recent arrivals to puberty.

All equally disturbed.



A moment later two boys stepped into the ring and plodded towards each other. In the center they collided, traded blows, fell wrestling into the mud and trodden corn stalks. At last, one mounted the other and pummeled him into submission.

One guy did the victory strut. The other sat with mud smeared all over his face, wet spikes for eyelashes, blood streaming from his nostrils. The girls, meanwhile, squealed with ecstasy regardless of who won or lost, even if the loser was a boyfriend. Boyfriends were temporary at that age anyway.

The girls were aroused by the spectacle, I could see it in their flushed cheeks and burning eyes. In the way their tongues flicked out to wet their lips, and by how they pressed their hands across their breasts to calm their thumping hearts.

I was there almost once a week, sometimes more often, and was almost always a participant due to the unwritten rules which insisted that the more a boy fought, the more he would be challenged.

I was beaten the first time, strangled from behind into unconsciousness. I awoke later with a katydid crawling across my face, a clump of mud clogging my left ear. Through the corn, the clouds floated by in the dispassionate blue sky. I crawled to my feet, ignoring the next brawl already in motion. Clearing out my ear, I staggered through the crush of animated bodies.

Out of the corn, back to my water cooler.

I collapsed and lay on my back in the grass and weeds, listening to the cicadas, to the distant shouts of the combatants. Why had I agreed to trade blows in the first place? Didn't know the other boy that well. Didn't have anything against him. We liked the same girl, but I didn't like her *that* much. I hadn't tried pursuing her. She might have liked me, but I wasn't keen enough to notice. It didn't matter. What mattered at that particular moment, was that I was a loser.

Rebecca Olson was there that day, not at the fight, but at the break area with the coolers. She sat with her knees drawn up close to her chest, arms hugging them.

She possessed a level of beauty that made my body ache just looking at her. She could have been a seraphim angel: hair the color of corn silk, tiny freckles around the contours of her face. She was further along in her sexual maturity than the other girls. Her breasts were fully developed and large even by adult standards, but she was a kid; she still went without a bra.

I stared at her the way all adolescent boys stare, boys who haven't been chastised enough yet to know better.

She'd just finished sneezing and her eyes watered. The bottom of her nose flared pink. She must have been allergic to the pollen from the corn tassels. No surprise; a lot of us were.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

I looked at her without answering. Since when could seraphim angels talk?

"You have blood all over your shirt," she said. "You have some on your face too."

"I was in a fight," I muttered, my voice an irregular pitch.

She reached around to a box of tissues sitting next to her, pulled one out, and held it toward me. She reminded me of all those Disney cartoons where Snow White or some other princess holds her hand out for a bird or butterfly to light upon. This warm atmosphere surrounded her. It was such a contrast to the pit I had just clawed myself out of.

I wanted to slide across the grass and lay my head down on her lap.

My nose was sore. I didn't remember getting punched there. The victor must have struck me while I was lying in the mud unconscious.

She produced a granola bar from her pocket and extended her hand. "Are you hungry?"

"No, I'm fine. Thanks."

She held the granola bar between dainty finger tips and I immediately regretted my answer, having lost a chance for my fingers to touch hers. She smiled and put the granola bar back into her pocket.

"I'll probably eat it later on the bus ride home."

At 4 a.m. every weekend for six weeks in the summer, a yellow school bus shuttled us from our homes to the cornfields. The rides were rarely peaceful. Often, a spontaneous fist fight would erupt near the back. The bus driver would glance in his rear view mirror, and for the rest of the trip, act as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on.

My next fight happened a week later, a near replay of the first match. It was the same guy who strangled me the first time, and sure enough, he tried strangling me again, the chickenshit bastard. This time though, I clenched my fist with his balls inside.

It was my first victory, but it felt the same as defeat.

Dizzy and nauseous, I walked a tortuous path to the edge of the field, where once again I found Rebecca Olson. She sat with her water cooler and a box of tissues. She handed me another to clean my face.

By then I was in love with her.

But it was a lonely, secret kind of love. She didn't have a clue. I was awkward and gangly and ignorant to the mysterious world of women. My world consisted of playing Commodore 64 games on floppy disks, collecting baseball cards, reading comic books, and watching Kung Fu movies.

Rebecca may have been a loner during lunch breaks at the cornfield, but in school she joined a large circle of friends. In contrast, I had a circle of friend. That is, I had one friend by the name of Bobby Wojiechowski. Other than Captain Picard of Star Trek, I was Bobby's only friend too.

I don't know why Bobby didn't have any other friends (it may have been his habit of greeting everyone with a Vulcan salute). But I knew why I didn't. I'd moved from a neighboring town in the third grade. This practically made me a foreigner. The other boys' parents didn't know my parents. I played against this town in Little League championships instead of for it. Unlike everyone else, my Kindergarten teacher wasn't the beloved Mrs. Pulaski.

That summer, Bobby reeled in a girlfriend. Her name was Beth. She was the ugliest girl in four neighboring counties, but it didn't matter; she was still a girl and Bobby was getting laid. Meanwhile, all I had were the ladies in the underwear section of the Sears catalogue. I was growing desperate.

\* \* \*

I had nothing socially in common with Rebecca. No inkling what to do with her, if by some miracle she ever went on a date with me.

For ideas, I spied on the girl that lived in the house next door. She was a senior in High School, but all she ever did was sun bathe and talk on the telephone. In the end, I resolved to do whatever Rebecca wanted: make charm bracelets, practice tumbling routines on the blue gym mats to the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack, play spin the bottle. *Anything* to be near her.

Summer ended and I'd emerged victorious from eleven of twelve spontaneous cornfield brawls. But I was still no closer to the heart of Rebecca Olson. By the time my sophomore year had commenced, I was an avid writer of poetry.

No surprise that she appeared in every one of my poems.

In my writings she assumed the gentle counterpart to the savage creature within me. She acted as a panacea, alleviating all the angst I felt inside. I drew a hundred portraits of her and threw them all away. I couldn't do her justice in art, no matter how I embellished it. Every film romance I watched, every love song I heard, was about me and her.

The fights didn't end with summer vacation.

High School provided bigger crowds and greater opportunities for alley matches. Even on the rare occasion when the police were called, they didn't reach us in time. The town had four police officers and three of them were overweight dumbbells who couldn't keep their shirts tucked in.

After each fight I thought of her and how she'd stayed away from the cornfield brawls. How she'd steered clear of the violence. She was a woman with a tender heart. I loved her for that more than anything else. She made me feel ashamed of myself, and with every victory I felt weaker.

One day I vowed never to fight again. I made a promise to myself that I would no longer be what Rebecca was not. Instead, I would imitate the compassion she'd displayed during the summer when she offered me tissues for my wounds.

But first I would beat Tony Smith to a pulp.

Tony: big and soon to be fat, head full of gelled hair soon to be balding, a noisy jock soon to be ignored. I wanted to turn him into either lasagna or a flesh version of a Picasso painting. Tony was on the football team because his dad was friends with Coach's dad. They picked him for the tight end position over me, even though my hands were better. Tony couldn't catch for shit.

I should have hated Coach -- who was also my P.E. and Social Studies teacher -- but Tony was easier to hate. In truth he hated me first. He hated me before we competed for the tight end position. He hated me because he knew I had a crush on his girlfriend.

That's right -- Tony was Rebecca Olson's new boyfriend.

I didn't want to kill him at first. I just wanted to challenge his ability to eat with anything other than a straw. But then he stood near my locker and started French-kissing Rebecca. Now I officially had to kill him. Part of me felt outrage that Rebecca would date that fat greasy-haired creep. Another part of me was encouraged.

If she would date him then why not me?

On Friday between bells, Tony tripped me in the hallway, inciting a riot of laughter. Even the freshmen laughed at me. Rebecca was the only one who didn't laugh. She just kind of gave Tony a look that said: *why did you do that?*

My heart's yearning for her burned even more intense as a result. I took my time getting back on my feet, picked my books and folders up, gathered the essays and math homework that had spilled out, dusted off my pants.

Grinning with intentional malice, I said, "See you after school, Tony."

"Bring it." He puffed his chest out and extended his arms in some kind of perverted scarecrow pose.

By the time the final bell rang, the entire school had received the news and I worried the teachers would catch wind of it. I overheard people whispering about who they thought would win the duel, and I kept hearing Tony's name. Predictable. Few of them were there with me in the cornfields. These were the jocks, the sons and daughters of accountants and lawyers.

Among them only Rebecca knew.

I half-expected her to stop me, to free me from the vicious cycle of violence and testosterone. I wanted her to talk me out of it, to pull me into a closet and press her mouth against mine, between breaths, assuring me that I didn't have to prove anything. In my fantasies, Tony had already forfeited his chances with her due to his bullying nature.

She never approached me. I left the school with nothing but a roll of nickels tucked away inside the closed fist of my right hand. A small group followed behind and we crossed the football field. All of us had mowed grass clinging to our socks by the time we reached the alley.

A massive crowd waited. Any time a fight involved a football player it garnered the attention of most the school.

Tony was famous for smashing a beer bottle over a college student's head at a party in the eighth grade. He was trying hard to emulate the atypical High School athlete: the bad boy, the jock who also smoked cigarettes and engaged in fist fights.

I didn't pay any attention to his reputation. I wanted only to end his harassment of me in front of my beautiful seraphim angel, Rebecca.

Tony stood in the alley waiting for me with his hands hanging at his sides, striking a gunslinger's pose. Despite my anger, I grew afraid. The chants began:

"Kick his ass!"

"Knock him out, Tony!"

"Break that faggot's nose!"

Most of these loud, inciting vermin had never engaged in a street fight their entire lives. Most never would. I hated them and their thirst for blood, their cowardly passion for the depravity of two human beings reverting to brutal, atavistic origins.

I wanted to cast a spell on them. A spell that would send them all into a frothing, mindless frenzy; they'd all start pounding each other into mush like in a zombie movie.

"Let's go, shitface." Tony raised his fists and took a hesitant step towards me.

I lowered my head and lunged at him. My shoes crunched gravel underneath.

The fight had begun.

Something metal flashed in his right hand. A knife. He swung it downward across my face. Missed. His momentum carried his shoulder into my chest. I didn't give him a second chance. He tried raising his forearm but I reached underneath and brought my fist up with the roll of nickels. A single powerful blow. Knuckles connected with chin.

That was the end of it.

His jaw caved in like paper-maché, and he fell forward sliding past my shoulder, landing on his face with a dull thud and a poof of white dust. The knife lay harmless on the ground beside him next to a couple of his teeth.

A silenced crowd. One punch? They couldn't believe it. All the inflated hype surrounding their champion had proved to be precisely what it was. Murmurs of disappointment, vows to get even; eventually they dispersed with Tony in tow.

Losers. Whether or not they all later grew up and went on to be successful lawyers and accountants like their parents, to me they would always be losers.

I turned to leave one of the easiest and grimly satisfying fights of my life, when my eyes made contact with Rebecca's. The horror I felt that she'd been there to watch was beyond measure. But what I saw on her face was the hardest blow I'd ever taken up until that point. In her eyes, the worst possible defeat I could ever have suffered.

Lust.

My victory over her boyfriend had aroused her in perhaps a way she'd never been aroused before. Chest heaving, breaths escaping in pants, lips divided in a perverse cherry-tart smile, she stood there and waited for me. Slender fingers brushed the blonde of her bangs back behind her ears.

She took a step closer. Timidly, she reached out her hand and touched my shoulder. I recoiled from her with a look of dismay on my face as if she'd just pricked me with a poisoned needle. And in a way she had. The image I had of her as a gentle and caring fairytale princess was forever poisoned. Violence stoked her passions, just as it did everyone else's.

It was the last time I ever engaged in a fist fight. It was the last time I ever loved Rebecca Olson. The strongest of glues could not repair the fissures formed in her once-splendid alabaster wings.

\* \* \*

My family moved us away near the end of that same year. The corn stood over six feet tall. The little town lay quiet and peaceful on the surface, looking the same on my departure as it had on my arrival. A living time capsule. People still sat on their porches rocking in bench swings, children bicycled across the streets, baseball games drew crowds. Nothing at all had changed. Nothing, that is, except me.

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## The Exterminator

The morning came and Henry performed his regular routine up until the point where he was supposed to leave for work. He glanced at the oven's digital clock display. 6:20 am. The bug man had forty minutes remaining to arrive and perform the job. He sat on his recliner that still smelled brand new. The material contained Microfiber and would never stain. That was the pitch the furniture salesman had used on him. Henry could count on one hand the number of times he'd sat in the recliner for an extended length of time.

On the coffee table, between him and his 55" flat screen television, lay seven remote controllers, of varying sizes, lined up side-by-side in a neat row. He selected the silver one closest to him and turned on the television. A female news anchor, wearing a head microphone, spoke into the camera from inside a traffic helicopter. Her spiel proved as predictable as the sunshine-forecasting weather man. Heavy traffic and accidents all across the valley.

What else was new?

He went to pour himself a second cup of coffee, but he'd only made enough for one. He opened the blinds above the kitchen sink and peered outside. No bug man in sight, just the teenaged boy next door on his way out for school. The boy wore a tense expression on his face and jeans three sizes too large. His baseball hat faced sideways, ala Gomer Pyle.

Henry moved through the living room looking for things to pick up and put away. Everything had already been picked up and put away the night before. He thought about vacuuming. The track marks from last night's vacuuming still zigzagged across the carpet. He pulled open the blinds on the sliding glass door to the back yard. He killed the TV, and the house fell silent. Each swallow, each stretching tendon, amplified in his ears. He opened the back door a crack to allow in some noise.



His yard was hardly bigger than a sand box. Little more than a plot of gravel surrounded by a block wall and a few oleanders with pink and white blossoms. The yard used to have a lawn, but rising water bills forced the previous owners to tear it out. Mineral deposits stained the walls where sprinklers used to overshoot the grass.

Palm trees lined a sidewalk on the other side of the wall, and beyond them a busy street grew busier with each passing year. The tops of vans and pickup trucks shot by at random intervals, a continuous hollow roar of tires on asphalt. He felt jealous and anxious. Those automobiles carried workers on their way to work, on their way to their perfect lives. He felt his life standing still, his raft hung up on a rock while everyone else's cruised unhindered downstream. Inside, the room dimmed and brightened from the intermittent sunlight filtering through the palm branches.

The weeds in the yard were already picked and the oleanders trimmed to precision.

He imagined papers piling up in his basket. The coffee parade going on without him, someone else getting the last cup in the pot. He pictured the boss glancing at his splendid wristwatch. Leslie wringing her hands and wondering how to finish all the work he normally siphoned off her desk. One hour wouldn't make that big a difference, he tried assuring himself. The company would survive.

At 6:40 the doorbell rang and gave him a start, like waking to an alarm clock with the volume turned up too loud.

He unlocked the front door and pulled on the knob, prepared to address the bug man in the most demeaning tone possible; berate the man as tardy, unprofessional, inconsiderate ... and whatever word means the opposite of impeccable. Finally, he would demand a full refund. Or at least free service. After all, this stupid bug man had cost him several hours of work.

The door resisted. Since he always left through the garage, the front door had only been opened on rare occasions. The weather sealing made a deep sucking sound. As soon as the door wrenched free, he puffed in his chest and pointed an accusing finger at the young woman standing on his welcome mat.

Woman?!

Sure enough, in stiff khaki slacks and a green windbreaker, a dying ant emblazoned above the breast pocket. She held a shiny brass canister with a tube and nozzle, and her eyes pierced him like a pair of pennies caught in sunlight.

His accusatory finger fell with the hand it belonged to and retreated into his trousers pocket, a scorned dog fleeing to its cage.

A bug woman! Who would have thought they even existed?

The anomaly appeared to be in her late twenties and smelled of bug spray and cinnamon. She chewed gum and her teeth flashed white, betrayed by a small space between the incisors.

“Hello, Henry Pluck.” She extended her hand. “I’m Rosa Santana.”

He had a strange feeling, from the moment she said their names together, that his life would never be the same again.

\* \* \*

Rosa wore the expression of a person anticipating the overdue punch line of a bad joke. Spraying at the back of the house first, she moved at a slow, measured pace. The pesticide came out as a fine mist and the sunlight formed a patch of iridescence.

“It’s unusual for the cockroaches to come out this early in the year,” she said. “April is when they start multiplying in earnest.”

Henry followed her. “I must have a bad case of them.”

“Have you ever had your yard sprayed before?”

“Not last year.”

“That’s why. All your neighbors probably had their yards sprayed, and the roaches fled to yours. A refuge of last resort, if you will.”

She held the nozzle steady and aimed at the base of the wall. Arriving at a corner, she sprayed up along the crevice to the top. Every few minutes the can ran out of air, and she would bend over and twist the handle, pumping it until satisfied.

“Are you looking at my butt?” she asked, during one of these occasions.

“What?” He felt his heart leap and his face grow hot. “Of course not! Why would you ask a question like that?”

What he really wanted to know was: how the hell had she caught him?

He adhered to the Three Second Rule of Discretion whenever observing a woman’s backside: Ass for three seconds, palm trees, ass for three more seconds, over to the neighbor’s yard, back to ass for three more seconds, and so on. Then his mind strung together the three second intervals so he could view a full thirty second image at length, without fear of recrimination. Sometimes the image lasted less than thirty seconds, sometimes longer. It depended on several factors. But

to the external observer, it appeared his eyes were innocently wandering, focusing on nothing in particular, least of all a woman's butt.

Somehow though, Rosa spotted him.

He summoned his hand back out of his pocket and pointed at her in mock indignation.

She straightened, glowering at him, but then her face softened and broke into a smile, and she laughed through her nose. "I'm just messing with you, man!"

He returned the laugh, perhaps a little too nervous, a little too soon.

*What the hell?* His mind tried regaining its composure. He waved, took a mental bow to the crowded bus stop, and scrambled back onto his allegorical bicycle. Rosa looked at him and laughed some more. He might have marveled at how pretty her face looked when she laughed, but he was preoccupied with how red his own must look.

"Oh my God, you're face looks like a stop sign," she said, confirming his suspicion. "Sorry to embarrass you."

She returned to her job, trying not to laugh, and finished spraying the perimeter of the back yard. Next, she sprayed along the top edge of the wall.

"Cockroaches are so ubiquitous in the valley that everyone sanitizes them by calling them *water bugs*." She squinted against the sun. "Don't you find that amusing?"

"I thought there were both cockroaches *and* water bugs."

"Nope. Just cockroaches and bigger cockroaches."

"Good to know."

She spoke in succinct English, enunciating each word as if savoring a piece of gourmet chocolate. In fact, if not for the loud, smacking manner in which she chewed her gum, he might have likened her to a university professor.

She began her lecture. "I won't spray inside your house. The ones you see in there actually live outside. By spraying outside where *they* live, we prevent them from coming inside where *you* live." The nozzle clogged. She unscrewed it, tapped it and screwed it back on. "I sound like an infomercial don't I?"

"No, that's pretty interesting. Keep up the good work." He made a fist. "Fight the good fight."

Rosa smiled, squinting again. When she squinted, she did it with only one side of her face, her lip curling up at the corner. "You're funny."

He was used to being called things like prompt, reliable, sometimes quiet, but funny was not the typical depiction. If people ever laughed at him at parties, they waited until after he left the room.

“How long before the poison sends them back to Washington?” he joked.

She didn’t laugh.

“About a week, but eventually it wears off. You might want to call us back in a month. Sometimes the poison doesn’t work. ”

“Why is that?”

“Cockroaches are resilient little creatures. They’ve been around for four hundred million years. They’ve adapted, in fact *benefited*, from mankind’s proliferation. Ironic don’t you think?”

“What is?”

“That of all the animals in the world, the kind man hates most happens to be one of the most abundant.”

By far the strangest bug person he’d ever met in his life.

“You’ve got one on you,” she said, offhandedly.

“Hm?” He glanced down at his leg. A large brown monster, with hideous wings and antennae, clung to the side of his pants leg. By the looks of it, it was either gnawing at him or fornicating with the pants fabric in an attempt to spawn half-cotton, half-demon offspring.

He shrieked -- a humiliating note, something more apt to come from a schoolgirl with a ferret caught in her hair than from a grown man – and after sweeping the insect off with the back of his hand, he leapt back to clear a safe distance.

Apparently, he was funny again, as Rosa struggled to catch her breath from laughter.

“That’s an American cockroach,” she said between gasps. “They fly.”

The cockroach didn’t fly away but instead retreated with ungodly swiftness into the oleanders.

Rosa took a deep breath and fanned her face, waiting for him to regain his composure. “So. What do you do?”

He held his hand up to shield his face from the sun. “I work for a title and real estate company. I work on HUDs and closings and stuff like that.” His gaze darted around his legs and ankles.

“What else do you do?”

He shrugged. "That's about it, I guess."

She chewed her gum and waited with that strange expression, the one that expected him to finish his joke. After perhaps realizing no punch line ensued, she nodded. "So when you die, the epitaph on your grave marker will read: Here Lies Henry Pluck. He Worked for a Title and Real Estate Company on HUDs and Closings and Stuff Like That."

"Something like that, right?" she asked.

He blinked at her with the surreal notion that he was watching himself blink at her. He stood apart from himself, witnessing with shame the other man named Henry, who, like an imbecile, stood opposite Rosa in stupefied silence. Don't just stand there blinking, he shouted at his other self. He was a boxing coach in a corner of a ring whispering urgent instructions to his fighter. Protect your left! Watch the jab!

"Yes, something like that." He had the sudden feeling of an old deflating balloon.

"That sucks."

"Alright then. What's going to be on *your* epitaph?"

An imaginary crowd applauded. The tables turned. Now the challenger was against the ropes.

Rosa's face beamed with delight and she squinted at the sky, selecting her answer as if she had one already prepared for this very occasion.

"I won't have a grave marker when I die. Therefore my epitaph will be scattered throughout the desert. You'll see it in the rocks burned red in the setting sun. You'll hear it on the wings of the migrating raptors. You'll smell it on the evening primrose and honey mesquite. Most of all," she paused with a sentimental sigh. "Most of all, you'll feel it upon the velvet-soft pelt of the lonesome coyote."

Henry collapsed to the canvas. The crowd gasped and the referee began the countdown. *Stay down kid*, someone shouted (in a voice uncannily like Burgess Meredith's). *Don't get up*.

He didn't.

Instead his mouth said, "That's beautiful. Did you make it up?"

"Yes, I did. Thank you."

She continued her work, and a moment later, Henry signed the invoice on his patio table. Rosa tore off a yellow copy for him to keep. She reminded him, once again, that should the cockroach problem persist after one week's time, he could call her office for another treatment, no extra charge. Folding the pink copy of the invoice in half, she tucked a pen into the breast

pocket beneath her jacket. She hefted the spray can. Rather than exiting through the house, she used the side gate at the backyard, turning before leaving to extend her hand. He took it: a strong hand, the flesh warm and slightly calloused.

“It was a pleasure meeting you today, Henry. Thank God it’s Friday, right?”

From that moment on, he loved the phrase.

He said goodbye and felt the sadness a graduating college senior feels when parting with an old study partner. Though unable to rationalize why, he felt the handshake as inadequate. He said thanks and watched her load her equipment into the back of the pickup truck. And he stayed outside in that same spot, long after her truck had disappeared around the corner.

## About the Author

Bryan lives with his family in Las Vegas, Nevada. To learn more please visit him on the web at:

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