

Fortune Chuckles

“Is everybody ready to *boogie down!*?”

That’s not something anybody wanting others to have a good time should say. He might as well have said ‘everybody Wang Chung tonight’. From the look of him, “Wild Wayne” the DJ looks like he’s been doing wedding receptions for a while.

Relatives and strangers at varying levels of intoxication dance all around me to whatever beats Wayne decides to put down, and for the most part they’re the most cliché reception songs possible. That’s why I choose not to dance. You have to play just the right thing if you want me to grace the dance floor. That’s how I justify my sitting at this table pulling dust bunnies from my corduroy suit. That’s another reason I’m not getting up; my wickedly stylish suit makes dancing a BO cultivating ritual. And that’s something I do not need to rush.

I glance across the dance floor (just as uncle Ernie does the shopping cart by me) and I see at the table across from mine a girl sitting and staring around the room as well. She’s approximately my age, within a few years at least. I cleverly deduce she must be here with the bride’s side of the family since she is sitting on the bride’s half of the room. Not a relative, not a problem.

My better judgment, which normally keeps me from speaking to strange girls, fails me, and I get up and walk towards her. Stupidly I cross the dance floor, uncle Ernie now trying to get me to baton with him. I flail my arms and stumble to get away and fumble to the floor catching myself from a complete face plant. I straighten up, tighten the laces on my Converse, and finish the trek over to the table. She’s sitting cross-legged

and looking blankly from corner to corner in the reception hall. She takes five minutes to notice that I'm standing in front of her. Her gaze is getting closer to my face.

I panic, and before I can stop it, I stupidly sputter, "Hi, what brings you to this reception?" My face is hit with a solar flare.

"A wedding" she says plainly, so far undisturbed by me.

"Ha, g-good one!" I shout over Wild Wayne's latest choice; David Bowie's 'Queen Bitch.' "So why aren't you joining the fun? You know, dancing?" I do a little hip sway and twitch my arms as if she doesn't know what dancing is. Stop you idiot.

"Eh" she shrugs.

I sit in the chair next to her, "Yeah, I know what you mean. I hear ya." I spin my chair outward and face the undulating crowd of imbibed dancers. Silence trails off between us, and I fish for more fragments to say. "So what have you been doing, if you're not dancing? Huh?"

"What?!" She couldn't hear over Wayne's ripping Bowie solo.

"What have you been doing here instead of dancing!?" I repeat.

"Oh, mostly just looking for cute guys, trying to avoid creepers." This is it. Hold your breath Mike, and don't say anything. Dang it! You need to say something, just make it good.

"Oh, uh Really? Um, how is that, uh, going for you?"

She glances directly at me, "Not very well."

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The bass causes some glasses on the table to rattle together and Wild Wayne starts up his disco ball. She blinks once; staring a bit dully, and then her attention focuses on

my uncle Ernie doing ‘the hustle.’ I scratch the side of my crooked nose, and then manage to respond enough to get the hell out of here.

“Well, good luck with that.”

The next day I get to sleep in. Work doesn’t start till noon and I live just five minutes away by bus. The alarm pounds the space between my uni-brow and widows peak and I groan to turn it off. I reach a hairy arm up and miss slapping the alarm off. Fail. Why the hell should I get out of bed, anyway? I just underwent a serious bloodletting last night. Her blindly true words jab my gut and use my scrotum as a punching bag. I think the word ‘bitch’ but then I stop myself from muttering it allowed. I can’t blame her. She was just telling the truth.

I drag myself out of bed, pull on my work clothes, and leap onto the bus. The ride to work is a few short turns and two stoplights. Slipping off the bus, I notice in the full sunlight that my shirt still has the peach stain from last time. Jimmy thought it was funny in the back room to throw a reduced price peach at his unsuspecting coworker. But I guess that’s the risk I run when I work at a produce store run by the socially inept.

I’m told I fit right in.

The auto-door swings open late and I smack into it, making it shudder as it opens the rest of the way. “Door’s broken” I hear from in front of me. My manager Pete is stacking corn at the front most display. He’s shorter than I am, so the logo on his ‘Tarheals’ hat lies at my eye level.

“Thanks for the warning” I walk out of the doorway and head towards the back of the store to clock in. “Is Hot-Pocket working today?”

Pete without looking up, “Nah, he’s at the hormone doctor till two then he’s going to another doctor about some rash or something. He thinks it’s from some cheese.”

“Gah! Dude! People are trying to buy food here! And I don’t need to know all that!”

“How do you think I feel when he tells me all of that? I don’t know why he thinks its necessary to inform his boss about that crap.”

“Well you are his idol who has supremely F’ed up his social life.”

For the first time he looks up and stares at an obscure patch of ceiling, “That’s true.”

Hot-Pocket is one of the other produce guys. He’s short, cheerful, and immature. When he first started working, he had to make room in his schedule for appointments to the hormone doctor because he has plans to become taller. To look at him you wouldn’t think he’d be a juicer. Pete quickly became his god, being what Hot-Pocket hoped to become: A short ladies’-man. It was this fact that led to his nickname. Being so naïve, he inappropriately asked Pete what sex was like. Pete, thinking it funny, told him to warm up a Hot Pocket for about 30 seconds and find out. He came in a few days later gleeful and twitchy. He says his favorite is ham and cheese.

I push through the back room and clock in. I head to the freezer to pull out some lemons that I saw were low on the way in. A rotten tomato whizzes past my head and I say, “Hey Jimmy” over my shoulder as I push into the freezer flaps. A muffled “Hey” comes through the plastic. I load the box onto the cart, a few escapees leaping out the bottom of the box onto the floor. “Assholes.” I say. I gather them up and push the cart

back out of the cold box, and Jimmy is stacking reduced fruit on a skid in the corner. He turns to me and I prepare to dodge flying fruit.

“How was your cousin’s wedding last night? Catch the garter?” he drones, his voice bearing the excitement and interest of Ben Stein.

I put my hand out of its defense position and say, “No women’s undergarments this time around, I’m sorry to say.”

“It’s not so much an undergarment, as it is a band which--”

“Besides, its not my place to play around with my cousin’s wife’s... things.” He stops his definition before it comes to fruition, and he looks around at the old pineapples crowding the corner. Before he tries to throw one, I keep talking to distract him.

“Actually the whole night was alright for a while, but then I... I just feel like crap now.”

“What happened?”

I explain to Jimmy the incident with the girl at the table. When I finish, all he can say is, “That bitch!”

“Hey man, don’t say that too loud.” Pete came in through the double doors, apparently finished stacking corn. “So what bitch are we talking about?”

I tell retell the story for the second time aloud, 37th overall.

“That bitch!”

“You two are really deep, you know that? She didn’t do anything to either of you, so just... back off.” I push past them go out to the store and start pulling the remaining lemons off the stand, putting the good ones in one box and the ugly and rotten ones in the ‘reduced’ box. Stacking fruit is an easy job--not too risky or complex, just repetitive and tedious.

Lemons weren't too bad a fruit to stack; occasionally you'd get a moldy snowball or one as soft as a stress-ball, but they were great compared to zucchini or eggplant. I have a suspicion that eggplants are actually alien birthing pods. I just hope I can reveal the truth before its too late.

I pick through the last of the remaining lemons on the display and grab the final one, and he is hideous. Wart-like brown spots covered one side and its soft underbelly is starting to sprout white hairs. I throw it in the reduced box and move to the box of new lemons. I open the box and find gloatingly sunny footballs waiting to be a part of someone's iced tea. They're all spotless as I pull them out, my hand slowly becoming numb with their chill. I bring the last five gorgeous fruits out and hold them in a very Shakespearian fashion. "If only."

A pair of beady eyes stares at me through glasses from the next aisle over. I jump in alarm and fumble the five in my hand. I look at the startling source and see that it is yet another co-worker. "Dang it, Struessel! What did I tell you about that staring thing!?"

Struessel turns away from me and walks to the back to clock in. Struessel is as awkward as they come. He's a purveyor of the "Struessel Stare." The managers don't let him work the floor anymore because he would frighten customers with it. According to legend he once made a checkout girl quit just by staring at her. Now all he does is work in the back room stocking the freezer and wrapping reduce, which he does at break-neck speed. I wouldn't say I'm afraid of him, but his stare freaks the hell out of me.

I finish up the lemons and then get into the cycle of going back and forth between the back and the floor refilling the low displays as they come. I go from lemons, to kiwi,

to tomatoes to bananas to pineapple, and half a dozen other things before I take my fifteen-minute break. The only difference in any of my trips to the back is when I go back for gold delicious and I find Struessel hammering nails into a board. I think to ask what he is doing, but when he notices I'm there he starts staring at me. It's best not to ask, I think.

I stack the corn in a pyramid-like fashion, and as I finish a young and freckly girl comes in about my age and with red hair. I can't help myself with a redhead. As she walks by I, cordially as possible, say, "Need any help finding anything? I would be happy to help... you." She raises an eyebrow then walks on by. Why do I try?

I turn around and find myself facing a little old lady with mismatched socks and blue hair. A regular. She asks me where the blood oranges are. I walk her to them and she grabs a couple. Before I go back to the corn she asks me where the sesame seeds are. She smiles at me with lipstick stained teeth and I can't help it. I spend the next 20 minutes helping her around the store to find everything that she needed. In the end she told me she *had* to give me a hug and thank me. I smile as she heads through the checkout with her full basket. I hope I'm that appreciative when I'm her age.

Right as my break starts, the speakers in the store begin to play Buddy Holly's "That'll be the day." I pick out my phone and call Willy, an aviation-savvy friend who dresses like he lives in the atomic age. "Yello." He says after his standard four rings.

"Hey Willy, what's going on?"

"Nothin much, Mike. How was the wedding last night?"

"Oh, not too good, to be honest."

“Oh well, that’s the truth with most weddings. Just hope you’ll enjoy your own someday.”

“Heh, that’ll be the da...” I pause and consider the coincidence carefully.

“So what happened last night?”

I repeat the story again. 52nd time in total.

“That bitch!”

“You know that’s no longer original, right?”

“Huh?”

“Forget it.”

A lull in conversation fills my ears with a fuzzy static, pockmarked with occasional tones, beeps, and a shout from Pete to stop Struessel from staring at him.

Willy breaks the silence, “So what are you doin’ tonight?”

“I think I’m going to the movies with Ryan and Marie.”

“Those two. Uh oh, that’ll be weird.”

“It won’t be weird. Just because they’ve become a couple does not make them weird.”

“They are around me. They just don’t treat me the same way.”

“They are still our friends, whether they’re together or not.”

I can hear his eyes role on that one. “Is Anne going to be there?”

“I don’t know, maybe, but my guess she’ll be with her boyfriend tonight.”

“Damn, she probably would have helped the awkwardness.”

“It won’t be awkward.”

“Yes it will.”

“No it won’t!”

“Yes it will.”

“Nope.”

“It will be awkward.”

“No, it won’t be awkward! It will not be awkward. Not awkward.”

It’s awkward. Being here with Ryan and Marie as a third wheel was bad enough, but now Meg and Matt are here too. And I thought I overheard one of them saying that Anne might be coming around with her boyfriend too. Going from third to fifth to seventh wheel may sound like the same role being fulfilled in each tier, but with each level comes extra exclusion. Ryan and Marie were both very good friends of mine before they began dating. Once they did I never felt comfortable around them. I feel like I’m intruding on them. For some odd reason though, they continue to invite me along despite that they almost exclusively socialize with other couples. Which awkwardizes things even more. Damn, Willy called it.

We sit on benches before we can go into our theater; we expected a big crowd at the premiere of *Thundercats: The Movie* so we arrived two hours early. We now have approximately an hour and 45 minutes to wait. Luckily since the theater is inside a mall as well, it *should* keep us entertained. The two couples share a bench as they canoodle and converse with each other on two subjects: Couple-y stuff and the times they hang out when I’m not there. I’m sitting on my own bench separated from them by a garbage can. A particularly hideous taco shell with what seems to be snot on the side rests on its outer rim without falling in. I fold my arms and try to look pleasant as I’m being ignored.

They drone on and on at each other about how cute they look together and how they like hanging out together, I think. I try to focus on something else by looking around the shopping center surrounding the theater to people-watch. But as I look around, I see the gamut from punk-ass teenage couples, to a pair of walking corpses in bifocals. I zone out on the ceiling instead. I stare for I don't know how long, and then I hear Ryan inexplicably saying my name.

"Mike! Helloo!" The group is standing around me, and apparently Anne hasn't shown up. "We're going to *Orange Julio's* for a smoothie, come on." I smile broadly and it painfully lingers there until I stand up and they walk ahead of me. What a ludicrous sight this must be. Two couples, one after the other with hands interlocked followed by a sour faced goon. Their hands are fastened in a death grip each girl has her head on their boy's shoulder. Man, I need to take a crap.

"I'm going to the bathroom." I say aloud to apparently no one interested. I go to the restroom and find that I must follow the smelliest man alive after he's used the toilet. Washing my hands I look into the mirror consider leaving the theater. "Damn" they gave me a ride. "Damn" I already got my ticket. I bet they won't notice if I don't show up until the movie starts. I bet they won't even care if I sit on my own. They might just leave me at the theater and drive off. Some friends.

What a thought to have. I look at my face once more before I leave. "Asshole."

I leave the bathroom and walk to *Orange Julio's* to find the couples have migrated without me. Typical. I go to the second floor of the center and step out onto a terrace that overlooks a square where performers try to excite money from passing people. I lean on the railing and look down on a high-speed cup-stacker at work. With

flurry of flying fingers he affixes thirty-one shot glasses in a symmetrical stair-stack pattern, like how I stack kiwi. “We could use him.” I say, looking around to see if anyone heard me. All that stands around me are people in pairs, hands interlocked, and heads on shoulders. I look down over the square and most observers of the cup-stacker walk away in duets.

I slide away from the railing and sit on the bench behind me. A girl with an overbite and large pimple on her cheek is already sitting down. I straighten my hunched back and I look over at her with a smile. “I wonder what kind of thought process one undergoes to become a professional cup stacker.” She looks at me, gives an uncomfortable cough, and walks away. Hmm, now that was just impolite.

I look around at the other benches and see them occupied with couples to the brim. I lean forward and smack my furrowed forehead into my fingers. Over the barely laudable speakers in the square, suddenly I hear Little River Band’s ‘Lonesome Loser.’ “What the *hell*, man?” I say upwards. I sit for a few moments feeling exasperated, but after mulling over the uncanny coincidence, I’m forced to smirk.

“Here you are.” Ryan and Marie find me a minute later laughing to myself. I notice that they’ve found me and as I stand I say, “Oh yeah, fortune chuckles at this sort of gag. Definitely.”

“Wha-?” says Marie, looking confused and wanting to ask more questions, as Ryan cuts across her “We did want to see the movie, right?” We take the stairs up to the third floor where the theater is and find Meg and Matt already waiting at the top. “Why did you walk off?” Asks Matt as I come by. I just chuckle along with fortune, and hand the attendant my ticket to tear.

“It’s an inside joke.”

The movie ends late and thankfully the ride in the car is brief and silent. After sleeping through the morning, I wait outside for an hour for Willy to show up. Eventually around two o’clock I hear the thundering of a straining engine and a screech of a speedy turn and I knew that he had arrived. A sunshine yellow 1973 Voltzwagon comes buzzing into my driveway and the familiar driver looks out of his window. He’s wearing his classic thick framed glasses and white button up with a pocket protector; very little in his appearance ever changes. “How ya doin’.”

“You’re late, dude.”

“What!? I said 1400 hours.” Willy puffs.

“I don’t understand military time!” I open up my door, pull the familiar yellow helmet from the seat and put it on as I sat down. He kicks the car back and then we fire up the street.

“How was the movie last night?”

“Pierce Brosnon did a pretty good job as Lion-O, I was surprised that-”

“Awkward as hell?” he cuts in.

“You know it was. Man, Willy! I don’t think I can hang out with them anymore. It forces me to concentrate on how much of a *loser* I am.”

“Yeah, they’ll do that.” Willy responds without, I hope, truly taking in what I just said. “What can you do?”

“Well if I could get a girlfriend that might ease some of the awkwardicity. Fat chance of that, though.”

“Why so fat?”

“Because it seems that the average girl our age can’t look at me without saying something insulting, or nothing at all, unless they’re already a friend of mine.”

“Then try for a friend, *Mike*.”

“They’re already dating people, *Willy*.”

He pauses, “Hmm, point taken. Hey, hot woman!” Willy lets go of the wheel entirely and leans fully out the window to catch an eyeful of a shapely pedestrian. I grapple with the wheel and try to keep us stable but the strange steering sensation is too much. Cars seem to be popping up everywhere and have a twitch to cross the median.

“Willy. Willy. Willy. WILLY!”

He rolls back into his seat and takes hold of the wheel; an overloaded Civic lays down the horn at which Willy responds with his own squeaky toot without missing a beat. “Y’see Mike, you and I are in the same boat. We’ve got charming character flaws and yet find ourselves alienated by the opposite sex.”

“Hmm, charming. That’s a very kind word to use for it. Well, what kind of boat is it, just to clarify?”

“A dinghy. And we’re adrift without a heading for fairer shores.”

“Are we in a lake or the sea, ‘cause if it’s a lake we should be able to see how to improve our situation.”

“The sea. And we don’t have a navigator or even a tether to try and get into a better boat.”

“Who could be our navigator? Would Ryan help us? He seems pretty good at it.”

“Nah! He wouldn’t know how to fix *our* problem, he’s no help. We’re just lost to the whims of the currents, hoping to be washed up on some shore one day. Maybe one with hot native chicks.”

“Are they cannibals?” Willy and I go on for the next hour like this, even taking the metaphor with us into *The Wurst Restaurant* where we’re eating lunch. Our friend’s family owns the place. They specialize in all the wursts of the world but they also offer other stuff to appease pickier eaters. I can’t really stand that crap; I just order some chicken fingers.

“So the parrot *doesn’t* like peanuts?” I ask for the third time.

“As long as the pirate isn’t too demanding.” He says with finality. The server brings out our drinks; Willy’s iced tea and lemonade for me. I can tell by the pulp that it isn’t lemons in a packet. Grains of undissolved sugar twister down as I take another taste.

As I stare into its sugary-tart contents, a burr that has been in my ear finally twists itself to be known. “Hey Willy, what did you mean when you said that Ryan couldn’t help *our* problem?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” He takes a large swig of his tea and licks his lips before finishing his response. “Ryan isn’t like us. Before he went out with Marie there were all kinds of girls all over him. Does that sound like you or me?”

“In point of fact it doesn’t. But why is it that he got so much attention and we don’t?”

“I don’t know, that’s why we’re adrift in a dinghy.”

I grab a complimentary crayon and begin to draw on the plain paper tablecloth the image of a pair of fools in a little rubber dinghy. As I draw a majestic humpback whale underneath our boat a little boy from the table next to us tugs on my sleeve. He's holding an orange crayon in his hand and asks if I could draw him a dinosaur. His parents had only just noticed he had left the table when I was hunched over his placemat drawing a stegosaurus. The boy smiled broadly at his orange dino, and said thankyou when his parents prompted him. I return to my seat and Willy asks, "What was that about?"

"Just another animal lover" I say. I take another drink and look around for signs of a server, but all I see is a plate of hideous and steaming liverwurst two tables over. "I'm thinking that the girl at the wedding hit my problem square on the head."

"You're still thinking about *that!*" Willy takes a fast and fed-up sip and pounds his glass on the table, "That bitch has got you all eaten up inside. You're problem is not appearance. Women just don't know you. Haven't you talked to Anne about this?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't have much impact when someone says 'I care about you a whole lot' to you, and then picks another guy who is obviously more symmetrical and less hairy." My forehead gets hot thinking about this, and sweat builds in my shirt, which is from our high school production of *Cyrano*. "Physical appearance is step one in the process, and I'm sort of impaired in that. So experience tells me."

Willy grumbles inaudibly, I guess he can't find anything to counteract the truth. Time to hammer it home. "You say that women just don't know me. Then that means that to get to know me, there has to be some interest." Willy nods his head. "Just admit, that if Anne and I were walking on opposite sides of the street, she would inspire double takes and interest. And I... I would walk by, without a second glance to my name."

Willy was shifting in his seat, and his eyes were dodging to every corner of the store but where I was. The server sidled up to our table and requested our orders. Willy chooses this moment for rebuttal. “Ugliness is simply subjective, Mike. You’re just awkward.” I look embarrassedly at the server to see if she paid attention, Willy turns to her and orders. “I’ll have the Hot-Pocket.”

For hours after I leave *The Worst Restaurant* I feel sick from the damn chicken. So sick that I skip dinner and just lay on my face in bed. I don’t want to get up.

Then, I yield and sit up. I need a shower. I get scalded when someone flushes, so I hop out, putting my foot in the open toilet. I put my foot back in the boiling shower to disinfect it, then I flush. The water vapor aggregates and dances all around me, clouds of steam joining, separating, and rejoining at will. I dry off in their midst and look into the fogged mirror, already seeing my lumpy hairy form. I wipe off the droplets with my towel and just stare.

It stares back. The source of it all; all that I hate. The reason I’ve felt alone all my life. The reason that I can barely bring myself to speak to anyone. Why does it stare back?

“Asshole.”

I punch the glass, but I’m so weak I just cause myself more pain. The mirror doesn’t go anywhere, it’s the same as it ever was.

I step out of the bathroom and into my room to change. The shag carpet and wood-panel walls reflect nothing, thankfully. My lava lamp undulates and squirms as I change, and I can’t blame it. I put my cords and my Grandpa’s bowling shirt on, and just

sit for a few minutes. I fall back and reach for the pillow when a knock comes from downstairs. I almost fall down the stairs in speed and rip the door open to, “Hi Michael.”

“Hi Anne.”

I invite her in but she says that she would prefer to stay outside on the driveway. It’s a cool but comfortable night, and the stars are all awake to see their fallen sister speak.

“We haven’t talked in a few days, and I think that’s too long.” She moves ahead of me and leans against her car. “What’s been going on the past few?”

“Did Willy put you up to this?”

“Among others.”

Instead of asking who, I cut to the truth. “I met an honest girl... a couple of honest girls, and they confirmed the suspicions I’ve had for some time.”

“Suspicious?”

“I’m a troll.”

“Oh, yeah, I knew that. I could tell by your mane of electric pink hair, belly button ring, and constant nudity.”

I laugh a little. I look at her, and she’s bearing nothing but sad eyes.

“Michael, why are you letting thoughtless comments burn you so much?”

“Because she was right. They were all right. And it explains why I’m so socially untouchable. My face is all that people will see. No one cares what’s inside when the skin is bruised.”

“What do you mean no one cares? Why am I here? Why did our friends call me up because they are worried about you?” She sounds angry.

I don't say anything.

"Have you tried to hurt yourself again?"

...

She steps close to me and puts her arms around me. "You promised."

I pick a section of sky and stare. And it stares back. It holds me accountable. I can't look away. "I'm sorry."

I think back to every conversation we've ever had. She's never expressed anything but care for me. She never lies to me. And when either of us needed someone, we were there.

"How can you hate someone so kind?" she holds me tighter.

"Because he's never chosen."

She loosens her grip and looks into my face. Her eyes stare back with the same intensity as the stars. I can't look away.

"You are the funniest, kindest, and most caring person I have ever met. And the longer you don't realize it, the longer you'll feel alone."

I still can't look away. "But I'm an ugly goon."

"Why should it matter to me? It only seems to matter to one person. You. And I mean to prove you wrong on that."

"Why should I trust you? You already know me on the inside."

"I knew you on the outside first. And *sorry*, but I wasn't scared away."

Her eyes move to the sky and away from mine. My heart is fluttering wildly, just as it did when I first met her, though I can't say that hers did the same. But that was then,

and now her heart does that for someone else. But I can't be upset. She's never promised more than she's given.

The Raconteur's song "Consoler of the Lonely" comes wafting by through the radio of a passing jeep. Fortune must be chuckling. Why not chuckle along? I begin to laugh.

"What's so funny?" she asks.

"Oh nothing. It just appears my life's a tragic comedy." I say amidst amused giggles.

"What's so funny about that?"

"Because those have a keen sense of timing, lead the protagonist to stumble, and yet always have a cornball ending where he's redeemed."

"Good," she says, "Where do I fall in?"

"Every good story has a hero."

She pulls back from me a little. "Meh, I was hoping for the pretty face to attract the teenage demographic."

My hero.

When I get to work, the entrance door opens halfway then shuts on my face. I rub my nose as Pete belatedly warns me again. I head for the back room to clock in. I jump as I see Struessel staring out of the little viewing window in the door. I clock in with an electric buzz and walk back over to the doors to see what Struessel is up to. I look out the other door's window and see a small boy staring up into Struessel's. Within a few seconds, the boy begins to cry and turns to his mother clutching to be picked up.

“30 seconds, a new record for me” says Struessel.

I don't want to know what kind of record he is keeping so I just walk to the freezer, dodge a plum in greeting and pick up a box of kiwi. When I turn around Hot Pocket cheerfully wanders in pushing a cart and struggles with a box of cucumbers. I put the fuzzy fruit down and help pull the box free. “Oh Thankyou!” he says with total sincerity, “Pete told me to get to work on reducing these oldies. I sure hope they aren't as bad as the strawberries. A couple of them *splugged* on me!”

I rip the box violently and choke on a laugh. A few cucumbers fall loose and split on the floor. I grab the rest of the box, put it on his cart, and the two of us toss the broken cucumbers in the crap box. “Thanks so much Mike, you and Pete are the only ones I like to work with.”

I'm perplexed. “Yeah? Why is that?”

“Well Pete is just the greatest, I mean he knows so much! And you, well, you're the nicest guy I know, like ‘Mr. Nice Guy’.”

I can't help but smile, “Thanks man.” He grabs his cart and toddles out of the freezer. I follow him out. On the floor I begin the kiwi rotation process by pulling off the old and reducing the crap. I come to an extra hairy one with a few lumps and a small soft spot. I start to drop it in with the reduced box.

“That's a good one.”

Struessel is standing next to me watching intently as I work. I shiver.

“That's still a good one.” He says.

“But it's all funky, and hairy. Customers won't want it.”

“A worthwhile person will know that such funkiness doesn’t affect how nice and delicious it is on the inside.”

Wow. Struessel may have become my favorite philosopher, next to Anne. “Well said, Struessel.”

He stares at me expressionless for a few seconds silently. Then he speaks.

“Do you love me?”

“Uhhh...” I wasn’t expecting that. “Um, ‘mutual respect’ would better describe what we have, Struessel.” He considers this for a few seconds, and then he turns and walks away. I return to my kiwis and have a lower reduce standard.

I walk to the back and find my fellow co-workers engaged in necessary activities: Jimmy is juggling rotten plums, Hot Pocket is watching Pete doing a ‘lollipop guild’ dance to Culture Club’s “I’ll Tumble 4 ya”, and Struessel is staring at me.

I smile and turn to the freezer just as Jimmy drops the plums and sputters out, “N-n-no Struessel! I *don’t* love you!”

Wow. I *do* fit in.

“Let’s *raise the roof*, everybody!”

Wild Wayne is at it again. Two weddings within a month must only happen to big families like mine. Uncle Ernie decides to go all ‘disco’ this time, even donning platforms for the occasion. My suit is free of fuzz this time around, so I have little to occupy myself with while I’m waiting for the right song. This wedding seems jam-packed with girls my age. I guess having a young couple will lend to young friends. A few of them walk around on the arm of some dude, but the majority appear unattached.

This time around, I decide to let my solid gold grooves do the talking instead of my mouth. Let *them* come to *me*.

Uncle Ernie moonwalks over to me to the sound of “Tear the Roof Off the Sucka” by Parliament. “Come on Mikey! Get up!”

I smile but shake my head. What a goofy-ass.

“Come on Mike! Show them how *funky* you are!”

Funky eh? The mood strikes me. I get up and hang my jacket over my chair. I get into the Parliament, but as soon as I head to dance-floor the Dj kicks in a different tune. The perfect tune by Beck. Fortune and I chuckle at the timing.

“In the time of Chimpanzees, I was a monkey. Butane in my veins and I’m out to cut the junkie...”