

Mr. Nice Guy Loser Man

“What is your biggest problem with the opposite sex?” she read from the list.

I enjoy these silly exercises. They’re one of the main reasons I love Interpersonal Communication so much. Just about every class we group up in a circle, stare at each other, and answer prompts like “What was your most embarrassing moment?” or “what would you do if you could read minds?” The other members of my small group share their answers first, each varying in eloquence and honesty.

“I’d have to say, basically... the way girls think different than from they act,” says the dude with the flattop.

“The way girls let stupid shit bother them,” says the guy whose name is Jim, Jerry, or something else with a J.

The girls’ responses are equally stereotypical. The girl I knew only as two-tone-skunk-head (nothing personal but, her hair honestly looked akin to Pepe le Pu) says she doesn’t like guys who ogle other girls when she’s with them. The other girl says, “Guys should be more polite and open,” as her lip ring flings spit across the table. “How about you?”

It’s my turn now. I decide to go with an honest answer instead of adding to this stagnant pool of clichés. “My biggest problem with the opposite sex is that they don’t find me attractive.” The others chuckle at this answer. The girls add a pseudo-sympathetic “Aww” afterwards. I need to stop inspiring pity.

Other groups are congregated in different parts of the room, and all of them doing the same thing we are. One person in a group near us has his headphones in, unmistakably blasting Beck’s ‘Fuckin’ with my Head.’ J-guy leans back, clearly bored of this assignment, and inquires what the others did over the weekend. Skunk-head and flattop both talk about a string of parties that they attended Friday and Saturday. Skunk-head outscored the rest of her sorority sisters in beer pong and flattop said he took a shot from, as far as he knew, every kind of German beer. J guy topped this by claiming that he vomited the entire volume of a garbage can. Last but not least, Lip-ring feels it necessary to inform us of every guy she grinded with... or on. I don’t know which.

“So which parties did you go to?” Lip-ring asks me this question. Part of me wants to make something up, but I don’t see why I should lie about such a frivolous question.

“I don’t really go to parties.”

“Never?” asked skunk-head, looking at me like I just said I never use my brain.

“No, not really.” I really didn’t want to go into the issue.

“Why not?” asks a girl from the group behind us. Despite the high amounts of makeup, which unfortunately made her look quite harlequin-esque, she couldn’t hide the look of fatigue around her eyes. Too many girls wear too much makeup. They hide how pretty they can be.

“I guess it’s mostly because I’m never invited anywhere and nobody tells me what’s going on.”

Her expression doesn’t change. “Well the next time I go to a party, I’ll have to bring you along.” Something tells me that wouldn’t happen. “You drink, right?”

Let’s see how she takes s’more truth. “No, not really.”

“Smoke?”

“Nope.”

She proceeds to rattle off a list of activities varying in legality, feasibility, and physical possibility; from everyday mayhem and debauchery to things that I wouldn’t feel comfortable uttering in a well-lit room. The list culminates in an activity that requires, if I understand correctly, a Polynesian goat, a bottle of 80-year-old Merlot, a turkey-baster, and a painting by Salvador Dali.

“No, I don’t think *anyone* could do that.” I say, feeling like a broken record for saying ‘no’ so much.

She looks somewhat defeated, “Well now I know why you don’t get invited to parties.”

“Oh Really?” I say, anxious for a professional partier’s diagnosis.

“Yeah, you’re no fun.” She says flatly.

Silence fills the air. A gust of air from the AC tumbles a paper-wad across the floor. I look around the room and notice that the other groups seem to have fallen silent since it was close to the bell. My group looks at me; the guys almost laugh and the girls look shocked. I look back at the harlequin and she has already lost interest and moved on to cleaning the lint off of her shirt. I have no snappy comeback, mean retort, off color remark about her appearance. Not that I ever thought of saying anything like that to anyone, ever. I really find it hard to believe that a girl who barely knows me can make such a concise sweeping statement.

“Thanks for your assessment,” I say to no one

Class ends, so I retie my allstars, smooth out my grandpa’s Bowling Shirt, check my corduroy fly and head to lunch. In all, I appear like a reject from “That 70’s Show”. I switch on *Marvin: The Manically Depressed iPod* and he begins his melancholy metronome. I want something more up tempo, but still a little deprecating. I hook myself up with Johnny Jenkins’ “I Walk on Gilded Splinters.” Now I’m grooving. Music has always been something I cherish and devote memory to. And most of the memory, along with any style I have, is devoted to music

and trends that predates M.E. (My Era). Music keys us into the rhythms of the universe. And you never know when the right song will come along and crystallize a situation.

I still find it hard to believe somebody could just say that to someone. What does she know about me? For all she knows, I could have a deadly allergy to grains, and that's why I don't drink.

Besides, I'm such a crazy weirdo on pure air; it would be dangerous to the general population to add anything else to the mix.

Still, I have to wonder if that's what other people think about me. Do they think I'm no fun? How could I ask them?

As I'm walking out of Simmons Hall and head to University Centre, the campus around me explodes in a flurry of frantic students rushing off to their next class. Many of them, like me, have their headphones in too. Some of them bob their heads, and others have a rhythm to their step. Personally, I try to keep from full out dancing. A good idea since I wouldn't want to make myself more embarrassed and stressed than I already am.

In the zigzags of college students in front of me, I almost miss a familiar pair of silhouettes that almost merge into one fat one. My friends Ryan and Marie have recently started dating, and this simple action has both made them happy and me uncomfortable. Not that them being together makes me uncomfortable... all the time.

They almost walk straight past me. "Hey you two!" I say as I pop my headphones out of my head. "What's up?"

Ryan turns, and pulls Marie along. "Hey Mike" said Ryan. Marie simply gave something between a smile and smirk in greeting. Marie and I used to be great friends, so this new greeting kind of stings. A few seconds pass in which I look at them, Marie takes interest in Ryan's Adam's apple, and Ryan looks at me as if I was a three-legged dog.

Why do I feel like this? These are my friends; two extremely fortunate friends of mine. Why can't I just be happy that they're happy? They are the same two people I always knew; they just have a new set of priorities... that I am no longer a part of.

"So, how've you been?" I say. Ryan gives a weak smile and nods his head, Marie continues to avoid eye contact, but at least moved from Ryan's Adam's apple to his shoulder, which she kisses.

My mind races around the basement of my brain trying to find that misplaced file cabinet labeled 'Small talk'. "So what have you guys been..." she kisses his cheek, "been up to?"

"Not much, school, working, hanging out." Ryan keeps it concise, and then turns his attention to Marie. All I can say while they exchange skin cells is, "Yeah, that's good."

This goes on for a few staggering minutes, during the course of which I look to see if my shoes were tied three times, and I am bumped into by passing students a total of five times. They finish up and stare at me. Ryan looks at my face, and Marie comes surprisingly close to my face, her gaze resting on the space over my pocket, which had the embroidered name of the previous owner. Silence.

That's it; I'm ending this before it gets REALLY awkward. "Well, I guess I'll see you later,"

"Later Mike" says Ryan, and he turns to go, and Marie, turning with him, gives me the same crooked mouth movement she did in greeting.

I continue on my way to University Centre, and I try to forget this latest installment of awkward run-ins. I head through one of the sets of double doors into the food court in University Centre. And instead of focusing on trying to find Willy among the endless sea of students who were filling the hall with a roar of conversation, I can't stop thinking about the two former friends I just left. Why did they change toward me when they started to date? Did I somehow change toward them, or is it just because they don't like me anymore? Are they avoiding me or trying to push me away? Did they get the memo that I'm no fun?

I shake off this unpleasant notion and think 'happy thoughts'...

Damn. I'm at a loss for positive thinking. That's a bad sign. That's the state I was in before I had ever met Anne... Hmm. Now why didn't I think of that before?

"What are you grinnin' at?" comes a voice over the roar of the diners around me. Well if it isn't my buddy Willy with his PF Fliers, white button down shirt, thick poindexter glasses, and architecturally accurate haircut; he looks like he's fresh from the 50s.

"Why do I need a reason to smile?" I sit down at the table and unpack my lunch. The unmistakable sound of Joe Cocker's "With a Little Help from my Friends" somehow wafts to my ears through the clatter of voices. He's already digging into his lunch of what I presume are the leftovers of his turkey dinner last night. He even has a little Tupperware for his cold soggy stuffing. I cringe at the thought. "I like smiling. I think if more people walked around smiling people would be happier in general."

"How's it gone for you so far?" said Willy through a mouth full of fowl.

"Well the guys mostly think I know them so they give me a nod of recognition, and the girls look at me like I tried to lick them."

"I warned you about that Mike. Lickin' strange girls isn't a good idea."

I grin. "Is it so wrong?" My mind shifts gears. "Why do girls think I'm some sort of creep when I smile at them. I'm just trying to be a nice guy."

“I don’t know.” He takes a gulp of his coffee, and I cringe again (turkey and coffee?).
“Maybe they think yer flirtin’ with them, badly.”

“I’m not though. At least not all the time.”

“Well how do you come on to girls? Maybe it’s a similar thing.”

“I don’t even KNOW how to flirt, Willy. My non-existent relationship record should be clear indicator of that.” There’s a long stretch after this in which we each ingest a few bites of our lunches. Willy might be mulling over what I said, or he could be lost in thoughts of flying contraptions, as he’s prone to do. But the silence is broken when I decide to open the vents and slam the table, making others around Willy and I jump and choke a little on their lunches. “Fuck Orlando Bloom! He gets hundreds of girls he doesn’t even know to fall in love with him and I can’t get one girl I know to like me!”

Willy looks at me blankly, takes off his glasses, cleans them on his shirt, and says, “Oh boy, *this* conversation again? What else are we gonna cover? The no-parties talk?”

“Come on, Willy. You’re in the same fix I’m in.” He can’t deny it.

“I can’t deny that, but I don’t need to talk about it all the time. I’d rather just ignore it and wait till it goes away.”

“But the longer we wait, the less experienced we are in comparison with guys our own age.” On more dismal days, I foresee myself in my forties still struggling to approach women. “In a jungle of relationship Chimpanzees, I’m a monkey. Everyone else has opposable digits and social skills and I’m still hurling my poo in a mixture of frustration and boredom.”

“Thanks fer that pleasant image, Mike.”

“You’re welcome. You know Willy, I can’t honestly see a girl being physically attracted to me.”

“Neither can I”

“But I guess I can count that as a blessing, because it means my personality will be what attracts them, and that will bring in the best girls.”

“But not the pretty ones.”

“Says you. I look at the eyes, man. That’s where you judge beauty.”

“You like eyes? Okay, whatever. I’ll stick with my asses and boobs.”

“Eyes are the windows into the soul, man. That’s where true beauty lies.”

“Okay stop droppin’ that philosophical stuff on me.” He looks at the table to his left and spies a girl that looks straight out of a frat boy’s fantasy. But since Willy’s a flyboy, I guess she’s close to his fantasy, she would just need to be in a pinup posture and printed on the side of a bomber. All I saw was another pretty girl with way too much makeup on. “So how do you

intend to only attract the ones with this internal beauty and completely avoid these spiritually dead beauties, again?"

"My sophisticated sense of style, a dash of charm, and don't forget the fact that I'm *grotesquely* ugly." This is, or rather was, fact to me. I used to look in the mirror and see everything that was wrong with me. I did that since third grade; an assignment we had asked us to draw and write a description of ourselves, and by the time I was done most people would say it resembled Quasimodo. I no longer think *as* negatively about myself, but I still have some residual habits leftover. Most of my friends however, have grown tired of these sentiments.

"Shut up, Mike, or I'll rearrange yer face so that it might match yer expectations."

I snigger as I take a bite of my sandwich. I always laugh when Willy says stuff like this, reminding me how far I've come in terms of liking myself. I've spent more time hating myself over anyone else. It didn't make sense to hate others when it was me who was the problem. But, thanks to Anne, I changed.

Willy continues while I internalize, "They say confidence is key, which is sore news fer you. You need to feel good about yerself if you want somebody to like ya."

"I like myself fine, that's not a problem. I like me... sort of. It's just that I can't seem to find a girl that likes me too."

I can tell Will's finally getting tired of this conversation; he squeezes the bridge of his nose, closes his eyes, and sighs loudly; the telltale sign. "Stop stressin' the girlfriend thing! It'll happen eventually. Just be patient and stop thinkin' about it fer five seconds and it might not bother you."

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

"How Do you catch a girl, Willy? I've considered hooking a fifty to a fishing line and dragging it along." I hear Joe Jackson singing his song "Is she really going out with him" above me.

The glasses magnify the eye roll. "They're girls, Mike. Not fish." This is a distinction I should trust him on; he does fish a lot.

"Oh Yeah? Well how come when a guy loses his girlfriend they say 'there's plenty more fish in the sea'?"

Willy sits thinking about this for a bit. "You may have somethin' there." Aha! I've caught his interest.

"Meh, that realization doesn't help me very much." I take a look around and notice that a tall gangly guy with the grittiest mustache I've ever seen just sat down and put his arm around a cute little red head a few tables away. "If it's true, it's clear I'm no bass master."

“That show sucks.” Willy is trying to be supportive. I think. “What kind of fish are you lookin’ for anyway? Bluegill?”

“Bluegill? Are you kidding me? They’re mindless idiots that swallow everything.”

“Huh, interestin’ take. What about a Catfish?”

“No thanks. They’re eccentric bottom feeders that prefer it when it’s dark.”

“Shark?” Now things are getting interesting.

“Do I look like I’m in the same league as a shark? They’re beautiful but dangerous.”

“And ultimately uncatchable. Let’s see.” Willy’s investing some brain cells now, I guess bringing fish into it was the clincher. “Marlin?”

“Too Sporty. You know how un-athletic I am”

“Halibut?”

“Too Stuck-up and expensive.”

“Remora?”

“Too Clingy.”

“Salmon.”

“Too Smelly.”

“We’re talkin’ about girls, right?”

I have to consider this. “I think so.”

“Mike, if you’re so set on catchin’ a girl, you’ve got to quit bein’ so picky.”

“Me? Picky? Girls are the picky ones, at least the pretty ones are.”

Willy either didn’t catch my joke or didn’t think it was funny. “Hilarious Mike.” Never mind, he got it. “Having a girlfriend isn’t the most important thing.”

“You sound like Ryan.”

“What’s he got to do with it?” Why did I bring up Ryan? I recall the previous encounter we just shared and it deflated the fun of the conversation. But Willy knows what its like too; he’s been almost completely forgotten by them. We’ve determined that we’re ostracized until we have female counterparts.

“Oh Ryan always tells me that having a relationship isn’t the most important thing. It’s probably true, but that’s easy for him to say, he has somebody. He’s right in some degree but he shouldn’t talk like he knows what it’s like to be me; Mr.-Nice-Guy... Loser... Man.”

“He *always* tells you this? Do you get to see him often?”

“Yeah, but he’s with Marie all the time now. And its not that I hate that they’re together, I just feel like I lost two friends. You remember what it was like hanging out with Marie before they started dating; we could bomb around in your beetle for the day and then go and watch the

sky at night. And even to an extent now, when they're apart it's close to how it used to be. But that rarely ever happens." I stare at the shredded remains of my sandwich. I was so busy talking, griping and complaining I didn't really enjoy it. "I actually just saw them before I came here. Though it's a struggle, I will say this; I am getting quite good at being the awkward third wheel of the group. Or the fifth wheel, if the case may be."

"Sounds lovely." If by lovely, you mean painful to sit through, then yes. "Well he *is* right, you know. Havin' a lady isn't important to being complete. In fact, if you need one to be complete yer way off course. Just be happy and single for now, and don't be so stressful. Women can smell fear, after all."

"Too true." Willy's right. That must be Ryan's secret. I think about how lucky Ryan was to find someone who's so enamored with him being him. Of course luck isn't the right word. Fortune is.

I gaze randomly at Willy's watch and I panic; for through his watch's many other functions, such as metric/standard converter, altimeter, and a mechanism to find one's weight in oil, you could also tell time. And the time said I was late. "Holy frijoles, man! I have to get to class!" I get up and hastily put my mess into one pile.

"Well, this was charmin' as always. We'll have to do this again sometime, old boy. Just call me when you get out of class and we'll discuss these burnin' matters again."

"Yes, let's." I toss my garbage away, throw my backpack on, pop *Marvin* in for the brief trip, and start to roll out.

"By the way, I like the shirt today, Art." I like it too. My Grandpa Art was the Fun Grandpa. He took me bowling, swimming, biking, canoeing, and all other manner of activities that I now enjoy spending my time doing. It's a shame that most people find tossing plastic balls into beer-laden cups more fun. I guess I've been brought up for unpopularity.

I hurry to class and navigate streams of students like a slalom skier. Class will start in a few minutes and I can't be late again. Marvin's pumping me along with Roy Orbison's 'Dream Baby.' I skip up the steps and reach for the door when it opens on me and I almost crash into Anne.

"Anne! Wow, fancy meeting you here!" I say with total enthusiasm.

Anne was, and is, the girl. A short time back when I consumed with self-hatred and depression, she was the one hope that remained. She was the only one who treated me with respect. When I saw the entire world as a dark place full of hate, apathy, and misery, she proved me wrong. She was the only one who was kind to me. And when I had lost all hope in people

and in myself, she gave it back to me. Just knowing there was at least one person around like her was enough. That's why I loved her so much.

But she loves someone else. "Hey! I was hoping to run into you," she says to me, looking right in my eyes, "do you have time to talk now?"

I don't, quite honestly, but I'll make time. "Sure," I say, and I forget my class, "what's on your mind?" We move away from the doors and sit on the benches in the sun.

"You probably don't want to hear about it, and you might say it's silly to ask you about it but I really want your advice. I'm having some trouble with my boyfriend. It sounds stupid, but I need to talk to someone about it. Even if it's just to make me feel better."

Her boyfriend's a really nice guy. He reminds me of a far more successful version of myself really. I still haven't figured out his secret to success. It might be that fortune smiles on him and laughs at me. "Stupid? No way. You can have relationship problems if you want. And you can even talk to a relationship *guru* like me about it." She laughs musically. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"I don't know, it just feels like I'm not as in love with him anymore." I can tell by looking at her that this is really bothering her. She has spent hours telling me how much she cares about him. "I look at him and it's just... not the same. Some of my friends say it's a sign that I should break up with him, but I just can't. I don't want to leave him. And I wouldn't want to hurt him like that. Somebody else told me that we should 'take a break', whatever *that* means." She looks away from me momentarily, though I can't tell at what. Then she looks back looking sadder. "What should I do? I'm really worried right now. I mean, what is this saying about me; that I can go from zero to love and then back without a real reason?"

This is it. This is where I make my choice. What kind of guy are you? Do I tell her to dump him and try to make my move, or do I try to help her reconcile with him. For a few seconds, the question lingers, and then I come back to my senses. He makes her so happy. Happier than I'll bet I could possibly make her. And who am I to sacrifice her happiness for my own. Though being hers would make me happy, her being mine couldn't make her feel the same way. Her happiness matters more. I owe her my life. And all she deserves is the best and most joyous life possible. I want to do all I can to ensure that. She *is* hope.

Hope is what we all need. "I understand why you're so worried, but I don't think this feeling you're having is a sign to do anything drastic. So when did this not so 'love' feeling come over you?"

Her sadness splinters into a smirk. "I'd say it happened once we moved into our apartment. I've been spending almost all my time with him and just about no time with anybody else, actually."

"I see. Well I think one thing that you need to do is spend some time apart. You hang out with *other* people. Don't 'take a break' or anything, you just each need time to yourselves. Heck, you could even spend some of that time hanging out with me. That is, if you can bear it."

"That'll help, I think."

"You can't always be physically together, time and life just don't allow that. And if you still have trouble, you need to talk to him about it." She looks at me as if I just told her she had to go dig up corpses and give them a makeover. "He's an understanding guy. He'll want to talk it out. And you shouldn't be nervous about it because you know how much he cares about you."

"I guess I can bring myself to do that" although the expression on her face didn't say that.

"It'll be fine. Just keep a clear head. In the words of Douglas Adams, 'Don't Panic.'"

She full out smiles at this and a wave hits me. I forget about everything that I've been griping about. So what if I don't go to parties. So what if I don't have a girlfriend. So what if I'm a third wheel. She's happy, and that's all that matters.

"Panic? Me? You've got the wrong girl." She stands up, so I do too. "Well, I need to head off, I can't miss my next class, and I've been late too many times." She gives me a hug and somehow I feel even better than I already was. "Thanks so much. You are the relationship guru. I knew I shouldn't have listened to those girls last night. Most of them tend to dump at the slightest sign of trouble and move to the next one. Not my style." She turns to walk away but stops and says, "Oh man, I can't believe I've taken your time to talk about my problems, I didn't ask you how you were doing. What's up with you? Any issues?"

I don't want to tie her up with my stupid issues. "Oh, don't worry about me. Sounds like you've got stuff troubling you without my two-bit cares."

She eyes me for a few seconds, but then she says, "Okay, for now. See you later, and thanks again, Michael."

She's the only person that I allow to use my full name. "Bye Anne." I sit back down on the bench. Going into class late barely crosses my mind. I'm there for a few minutes before I get out my phone and dial Willy. It rings his standard four times before he picks up.

"Yello?"

"Hey man, what's up?"

"Nothin', just drivin' home. Shouldn't you still be in class?"

"Anne needed to talk, so I listened."

“Oh yeah? Well what was so important?”

“She needed some help with her boyfriend.”

I can almost see his wide-eyed expression. “And you helped her? Jeez! Why didn’ you just let the problem persist, they might’ve broken up?”

“She wouldn’t have been happy if that would have happened, now would she? Plus, they say truly loving someone means setting them free.”

“So you love her still? Really?”

No question. “Yes, I do. You don’t have to be with someone to love them, in fact love shouldn’t have that kind of restrictions.” I let Willy chew on that for a few minutes of static.

“You might say I care a bit about her boyfriend. He doesn’t even know how much I try to help them out.”

“Well done Cyrano, well done.” I’m surprised, what a good reference. “Say bass master, I just recalled that you never did tell me what kind of fish you *were* lookin’ for.”

Before, I knew what I didn’t want. I think through my zoology repository and come up with a clever and honest answer. I’m rather proud of myself. “An angel fish.”

“Gag me” I hear over the airwaves. “That’ll certainly give me indigestion. So what are you doing tonight?”

“Willy? It’s a Friday, and--”

“Right, right, I’m talking to you. I don’t know what I was thinking. Well, had an idea...” Willy launches into a detailed plan, which involved dinner and zany adolescent hijinks.

“What do you think?”

“Sounds good Willy, I’ve had enough of this wallowing in boredom stuff. I’ll see you tonight I guess.”

“Later Mike.” Click.

The rest of my time before that evening is a blur of sitting and waiting for classes to end, a slow ride on the public bus that smelled like foot, nodding my head to the funk/soul/raggae band The Black Seed’s ‘Sometimes Enough.’

At six, Willy pulls up in his 1973 yellow Beetle, which sounds louder than a bull dozer but only slightly faster. There’s no one else in the bug, which is disappointing since Willy said he was going to call everyone in his phone. I grab my bag of tricks and head out to the car. I open the door, pick up the yellow racing helmet off the seat, take the enormous white beard out of my bag, and put them both on. I get in and with a kick we jolt out of the driveway. “Ready, old

boy?” Willy says, and he pops a tape into the cassette player, and immediately a Spike Jones polka begins to blast. We spin out of my street and take the scenic route to the restaurant.

When we get to the restaurant, we come to such a sudden halt that I crack my head on the dashboard. “Don’t scratch the dash!” Willy shouts. Disoriented, I get out of the car and start jogging for the door, but then Willy shouts from behind me, “Hey!” I twist and fall flat on my back. I lie there until Willy comes over and looks down on me. “You going to wear that while you eat?”

I get up off the doormat and feel my head. “Point taken” I pull off the helmet, take off the beard, and put the helmet back on. I put my beard in my pocket and we both head into the Italian restaurant. I get funny stares from a few people when I sit down and put a helmet on the table. Willy, at one point, knocks over the salt, so he throws gobs of salt over his shoulder to counter-act the bad luck. The guy behind him looks like he has bad dandruff now. When we finish our dinners I challenge the busboy to a thumb war for who clears the table. He keeps saying “No Soldiers,” even when we leave.

Leaving a generous tip to the waitress that put up with our antics, we fire up the polka machine. We rattle windows and nearly set off car alarms as we make our way to Commonwealth Mall. The place is set up like any other shopping center. On one side of it you have the wholesaling grocery, the cheap movie theatre, the Sprawl-mart, and a dozen other storefronts that run the gamut between dollar stores and nail salons. The other side is the main mall that has all the major department stores revolving around the central hub: the food court. We go over to the wholesale grocery and marvel at the size at which some people are prepared to buy food: Loaves of bread that are six feet long, boxes of fish-sticks that could feed a large village in Ghana, and jars of mayonnaise bigger than your head.

We walk around for a half hour and buy nothing. We’re loiterers. Then we move on to Sprawl-mart, where we entertain ourselves mostly in the movie section. We stroll up and down the aisles and point out each of the straight to video titles that are sure to be packed with bad scripts and worse acting. I am fascinated by all of the Sci-fi Channel productions that were released in the same year. “Fascinating, is it not? 2004 was the year that Sci-fi produced 14 movies including “Zombie Death Squad” and all four of the “Fish of Death” movies.”

Willy finds the Steven Seagal titles far more fascinating. After looking through almost all of them, he turns to me and says, “You know, if you take the words ‘kill’, ‘death’, and ‘the’, and alternate them with ‘to’ and ‘way’, you can come up with the title of pretty much every single Steven Seagal movie.” My sides split.

We move our madness over to the main mall, where we first hit up Toys-4-Kids and have a tricycle race through the action figure aisle. I win by default, since a female action figure that I can only describe as “Super-Hooker” distracted Willy. “Why couldn’t I have had toys like that?”

“You should take into account that at the age when we played with action figures, we didn’t have the same view of girls as we do now. Plus, a boy having a girl doll was just strange back then... not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

We head to the back of the store where we could find outdoor toys, like footballs, hockey sticks, and Frisbees. I grab one of the ring Frisbees and Willy and I toss it back and forth at the back of the store. Willy tosses it to me and, for no reason at all, I heave it overly hard and it goes sailing over the aisle and out of sight. Willy instantly turns and walks away from the aisle and I shunt away too. We never hear the crash of falling merchandise, the PA call for security, or the wail of a struck child. I firmly believe that the object passed into a wormhole located between aisles four and five; the Block-o aisles.

Before we call it a night, Willy decides he wants to go into Good-Get to try and find a movie he wanted. We go in and wander among the shelves of CDs, DVDs, PCs, and all other manor of electronic acronyms, trying to act interested in buying something. The PA plays OMC’s ‘How Bizarre.’ How ‘One hit wonder.’ As Willy scans the back of a *Spike Jones Greatest hits* CD, something that had been plaguing my mind all day finally resurfaces.

“Am I no fun, Willy?” I ask.

“What?”

“Am I boring? A girl in class today said that I was no fun, and that was why I don’t get invited to parties and stuff.”

“That bitch.” A startled man one aisle over covers the ears of his seven year old and walks over to the Disney section.

“Well she spoke honestly, Willy. Hell, I’m starting to think she was right. I don’t drink, I don’t smoke I don’t... do something strange with a goat and a turkey baster. I’m... a dull dork.”

Willy looks at me like I just told him that God is actually a Twix Bar. “Yeah, sure. Yer going to look at me with a yellow racin’ helmet on your head and a beard in your pocket and say that you’re dull?”

“I know I’m weird! I’m just no fun to hang out with.”

Willy just shakes his head. “Mike, yer a regular riot. So what if some girl says you’re borin’ because you don’t do what she does... and in some cases thankfully so. You have fun

doing things you like, right?” He’s right I can’t deny that. “You can’t deny it Mike. You have fun your way and they have fun their way. To each his own, and all that.”

I nod in agreement, and think over what he said. Makes sense I guess. Why not? I begin to say something to him and then I feel my pants vibrate. I take my phone out of my pocket and see Anne staring up at me. I eagerly answer.

“Hey!” I say.

“What’s bothering you?” I’m shocked at her intuition.

“What do you mean?”

“Today, you sounded like something was on your mind, but then cast it off. What’s wrong?”

I look up at Willy and sort of turn away to try and disguise what I say. “Am I no fun?”

“Aww! Come on man! Why do you need a second opinion?” Willy is exasperated.

“Is that Willy?”

“Yeah, we’re hanging out right now.”

“Oh, then I won’t keep you long.” I explain to Anne about the girl in class. She listens patiently until I’m done.

“Michael, in all the time I have spent with you, I can honestly say that I couldn’t find a more fun and *funny* person to be around. Nobody else I know can turn a dull conversation into one to remember.” Apprehensions melt away. “You’re so sweet and full of... awesomeness. You care so much, maybe too much about other people. And you do because of your wise wit. You make me laugh without even trying. Never think for a minute that you’re not wanted around.” Huh, I’m starting to feel sorry for the people who don’t hang out with me.

I wait a few seconds to regain my grasp of my own words. “Why can’t more girls be like you?” I say through a smile I almost think she can see.

“Oh, if there were more girls like me around I wouldn’t be as special, right?”

“You could never not be special... So why do you think Ryan and Marie exclude me from stuff?”

“Them? Well, sorry to break it to you Mike, but you aren’t going to be there first thought when they want to spend time with someone. It *is* their relationship.” Before I can say anything, “And don’t be concerned with the relationship thing anymore! I’ve told you enough that it all comes down to you liking you. If you can like yourself, then so can someone else. And it won’t be too hard for them to, by the way.”

It's at this moment that I look up and become aware that one of the girls working at the checkout lane is looking over at me. A cute freckled red-head. She's smiling, but trying to hide it. I hear Sublime's 'New Realization' rolling through my ears.

"Are you going to be okay, Mike?" I hear Anne say. Being so distracted, it's only when I smile back and the girl gets nervous and looks away that I can respond.

"Yeah, I think so."

"You think?" she asks.

"I am, Anne." For the first time today, I believe that I'm okay.

"Well, I'll let you know when I'm free to do something, Mike."

We exchange goodbyes and hang up. Willy is already through the checkout line and I rush to catch up to him. And as I walk past the register, I do the only thing that I can think of. I wink, and she smiles and looks away. I stand up straight, place my helmet on, and head for the bright yellow Bug. Willy looks at me as I get in with a '*she told you everything I said was right*' expression on his face.

Monday is yet another interpersonal group session where we ask each other about hypothetical situations. I'm asked what kind of dog I would be. After barking like a St. Bernard the question about what people did over the weekend pops up. Flattop studied for a Philosophy midterm most of the weekend. Skunk-head went to the pub on Saturday to see her boyfriend play in his band, *The Rotten Stains*. J-guy built a tower of cards and then beat up his roommate when he fell on it. And lip-ring finished writing her unnamed novel about a girl who becomes a psychotic killer.

"Charming premise. Did you do much research?" This joke falls flat, or just on deaf ears. They ask me about my weekend I actually have something to say. "Well Friday I went out, dressed in a bunch of beards, and had a tricycle race. On Saturday I paddled on Lake Loren in my kayak, and Sunday I spent most of the day with my niece and nephew."

The J-guy and flattop have an expression of 'wtf' on their face when I mention the beards, and lip-ring and skunk-head both give me an "Aww" when I mention my niece and nephew.

"I've never kayaked before." Came a familiar voice from behind me. I turn towards the harlequin girl and was surprised to see most of her face and very little makeup.

"Really?" I say. And then it hits me. "You know, you look really nice today."

She smiles. It's good to see that she's not such a bad fish after all.