

## The Joker

“This is the epitome of stupidity. You realize that, don’t you?”

Willy can be so supportive in a time of crisis. He removes his thick-framed glasses, wipes them off of his white button-up, and shakes his head of precisely cut hair as he puts them back on. We’re sitting in an urgent care facility and I’m holding my finger up, tightly bound in paper towels. The doctor has kept me waiting for at least two hours and my head is getting cold with sweat again.

“Is the air getting less... you know, airey?” I ask, my eyes glazing over as I sway to the right.

“Don’t pass out again, Mike, or you might break something else! Sit down!” Willy helps me to the chair and I can’t help but think about what he said. Right after I cut my finger and wrapped it up, Willy walked my jelly legs to his car where I proceeded to falter and fall, my forehead breaking off his passenger-side mirror. At least, I *think* that’s what happened. Willy leans against the wall and crosses his arms. “I would say that a broken mirror would give you bad luck, but-”

“Luck is irrelevant to my life.” I tell him through half-closed eyes, and I lean slowly forward. Willy shoves me upright with one hand and keeps a tentative distance, just in case I decide to taste the linoleum floor. Over the quiet speakers, I’m surprised to hear the techno beat ‘Where’s your head at?’ by *Basement Jaxx*. How bizarre for a doctor’s office.

“Yeah well that *does* seem the case doesn’t it? So how the hell did you cut yourself so bad? I turned around for one second and the next you had the fountain of youth coming from your index.”

“I got distracted. I was... thinking.”

“About what? Something other than the knife?”

“I was thinking about... a girl.”

“Pff, then send her the bill.” Specifically, I was thinking about Carly. Carly is a really good friend that I’ve known for quite a long time. We like the same vintage music, we read the same crappy fantasy novels, and we’ve both seen the same three movies hundreds of times and haven’t gotten bored. Plus we both enjoy laughing at my misfortune. She’s one of my two best female friends. Recently however, I’ve been thinking about her in a different way. This isn’t a usual leap for me to make, like jumping the English Channel with a pogo stick, but I feel like she wouldn’t laugh, cringe, or slap me over the suggestion of her maybe possibly becoming my girlfriend.

Nah, don't be stupid. Like every other girl I've known, she only feels comfortable with being my friend. After all, I am Mr. Guy-who's-nice-to-hang-out-with-but-wouldn't-work-as-a-boyfriend. It *is* the role I've always played

The long-awaited sound of footsteps reaches the outside of our room and the door opens, revealing a scrub-wearing goatee with thick glasses. He strolls over to where I sit and looks me dead in the finger. "Hi, I'm Dr. Tone and that looks painful." He wheels a stool over and grabs my hand from its elevated position without any thought to the pain it might cause. He unwraps my finger and it has amazingly stopped bleeding. "Lets see here" he says as he grabs at my finger about the sliced knuckle and proceeds to spread open the wound as wide as he can, making my hand catch fire in pain and reawakening the red oozing menace. "Dang, I bet that hurts." Dr. Tone must have slept through his bedside manner classes.

He releases my finger and carelessly rewraps it in the paper towels, "So how did this happen?" he asks, looking at my uninjured hand for comparison.

"It was a freak whittling accident," I say.

"Oh, is that all?"

"No, not really," pipes up Willy, probably wanting to expose my stupidity more.

"Oh, right," I say, "My mind drifted to this girl that I know, and I lost my concentration."

Dr. Tone gives me a strange look, like the look a creep gives to a girl across the bar.

"No, not that," says Willy, "While his mind drifted into unconscious girly-thoughts, somehow the hand that was holding the knife was cut."

Dr. Tone's creepy glare slides off his face and his head turns to the side like a confused dog. "So wait, you were holding and carving with the knife in the same hand that was cut? You cut one of the fingers holding the knife?"

"This is so," I say succinctly. Personally, the shock of the moment has eliminated the ability to recollect any idea how the bizarre phenomena happened.

"Huh... that's weird," says Doc Tone as he swivels on his stool scoots toward the cabinets near the sink, and pulls out what I guess are the necessary items for my maintenance. "But, I guess impossible things happen."

What a profound paradox. Definitely didn't expect that from Doctor "Clumsy" who proceeded to pour abrasive soap in my wound, stab my finger twice with a numbing needle, miss-stitched two of my seven stitches, and wrapped my finger tightly in gauze at an awkward angle. "There you go, good enough to eat off of."

This statement's meaning eludes me.

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The first week of having a heavily-bandaged hand is a learning curve for what I can and cannot do. Writing, typing, eating, urinating, and other similar actions involving finite or specific use of fingers are severely impaired, and actions like opening doors and clenching my fist become irritatingly simple reminders of my dimwitted attempt at whittling. And yet despite my crippled finger, I manage to grab hold of an opportunity.

Carly calls and asks “So, how’s the finger, kid? I heard you almost lost it.”

“Yeah, I think it may have been better off if it did get away, then it wouldn’t have been associated with the rest of my lame ass.” She laughs, and then she casually asks if I would want to go to a costume party. I go weak in the knees and try to brace myself against the wall, only to recoil in pain and shake my hand vigorously in an attempt at relief. I don’t bother with silly questions about why a costume party was taking place weeks after Halloween; I just sputter out an enthusiastic ‘Yes’ and ask where it will be. She gives me a set of directions that utilize landmarks instead of street names, and then tells me the theme is medieval, and to dress accordingly.

When I hang up the phone, I call Willy and squeal the exciting news like a schoolgirl; firstly over being invited to a party at all, since that never happens, and secondly that a girl invited me and I didn’t just sit there brain-dead,

“Congratulations Mike, you’ve finally broken the social glass ceiling. You wouldn’t mind if I tag along, would you? I could be your wing-man.” I can’t say no, after all, he’s had the same troubles I have had with fitting in and making the party scene. Dear god, I think going to one costume party means I’ve entered the party scene. Plus, having an aviator as a wing-man can’t hurt.

. When it comes to costumes, I’m a big fan. I always go for the humorous and nerdy. Sometimes I go for the obscure comic book character that nobody will recognize, and other times I do something more of a visual joke; like a smoker who’s burned to death or a surfer with a shark on his leg. I figure I look weird enough without a costume. Advertising my dorkiness can’t be that much worse. Unfortunately the costume shop is picked dry, so I grab a simple knight outfit, a rubber sword, and a plastic shield. When I get the bundle home I realize how cheap I am. The suricoat just looks like a long red t-shirt the leggings feel like sweatpants, and the boot-tops look like slippers. I struggle to put my costume on an hour before Carly picks me up, putting a long-sleeve gray shirt on first to keep the crappy fabric from chafing my skin. It takes me ‘til I get all of it on to realize I don’t have a helmet. I turn the whole place into a yard sale trying to find a passable helmet material. Just as I put a small aluminum popcorn bowl on my head, the doorbell

rings and Willy steps in, dressed as the Burger King, complete with pantaloons and a burger platter.

“What are you supposed to be? A homeless guy?” Willy echoes through his thick plastic mask.

“Dude, I have a shield, a sword, and a helmet.”

“That’s a bowl.”

“It’s my helmet!”

“Okay, so you’re a *crazy* homeless guy.”

I open my mouth but nothing comes out because Carly has pulled up outside. She steps out of the car and walks toward us in a long medieval princess gown, and her hair all braided fancily. She comes up towards us and looks Willy up and down with laugh.

“So, you guys ready to go?” She looks over at me and eyes the bowl on my head. She looks me in the eye with a crooked grin. “Nice.”

Willy gets in the backseat and I sit in front. As we drive to the party, Carly and I talk about who else we know that we should expect to see. “I’m not really sure because it’s not really my party and I haven’t asked a whole lot of people if they’re going because I just got excited about getting to wear a costume. I know Anne said she’d be there, but I can’t believe she will because her and her boyfriend just broke up last night and she’s super upset about it. I guess she wants to take her mind off...”

Carly talks a mile a minute and it’s hard to get a word in edgewise, so I make a mental note to talk to Anne tonight, and try to cheer her up. Anne is my other favorite female. The difference between her and Carly is that I have always thought about Anne and I... becoming more than just friends. She’s been there when I felt like life wasn’t worth the breath it took. And though I wanted to tell her how I felt about her, I knew I couldn’t because she was a beautiful, intelligent, and charming girl and I was a toad-like comic book reading loser. I still am. Plus, she’s been in love with a spectacular guy. I wonder what happened.

I only for a moment stop and consider how absurd seeing the Burger King, a princess, and a guy with a bowl on his head must appear to anybody who should happen to notice.

We park three blocks away from the party. When we get inside, an almost deafening blast of *David Bowie’s* “Golden Years” greets us. That *does* get me feeling groovy about the party. I start to swagger my legs and shake my arms, and Carly just looks over her shoulder and shakes her head with a giggle. The house looks like a mix between a renaissance fair and a *World of Warcraft* convention. I see knights, kings, and jesters knocking elbows with elves, battle trolls, and level three ice mages. Carly scuttles up to a group of fellow princesses and enthusiastically

encourages them into a group hug, and Willy, shoving me along, worms his way seamlessly through the crowd to his usual party post along the wall near the food. We reach the table and find a tall Viking with a horned helmet and a wooden stein devouring the platter of hot dogs. Willy, who's about as tall, sidles next to him and reaches for a bratwurst. The Viking looks at Willy scandalized, to which Willy looks him up and down and yells, "YEAH BOOOY! FLAVA-FLAV!" The Viking barks out a laugh and claps Willy on the shoulder.

Ping-Ping! Someone behind me is knocking on my head. I turn and see my friends Ryan and Marie standing behind me. I feel a nervous grumble in my stomach, because ever since they've started dating a year ago, I've rarely felt comfortable around them. It just gets awkward when they're all... being together and I'm there by myself. And for the most part, they almost exclusively hang out with other couples to do couple-y stuff and that leaves me alone on most weekends. But we're in costumes, and I can quickly get into character and interact with them as their characters. He's dressed undoubtedly as Link from Zelda and she is... a girl in a long dress with a crown and pointy ears.

"Good morrow, Link and, uh, Link's girlfriend." I say.

Marie smiles and retorts, "Hey, nice bowl. Are you Sir Progresso of the chunky soup?"

"Well said" I admit.

Ryan looks at my finger, "What happened? Trampled by a troll?"

I laugh a little, but before I can respond, Willy's voice comes through a stuffed mouth of brat and a plastic mask. "Nope, he almost cut his finger off with the hand that was holding the knife."

Ryan jumps at Willy's outburst, "Holy Crap, I didn't know that was you, Willy." After his second set of double-takes, he registers what Willy said, "Wait, how did you *do* that, Mike?" Marie's expression is asking the same question.

I still can't answer either of them, "Your guess is as good as mine. I'm still wondering how without coming here *on* a horse, I'm still here *with* a horse's ass."

"I can hear you." says Willy.

"I know," I smile, and I know he's smiling too. "Have either of you, lord or lady, seen the Lady Carly? I accompanied her here and now she's vanished."

Marie looks perplexed, "You came here *with* her? What does *that* mean, Mike?"

"I cannot say. Perhaps finding her could clear you of quandary."

Willy tries to choke out that he came with her too, but Ryan grabs Marie's hand and says, "Search, good sir, and be fruitful." I take his advice and start wading through the wizards and wenches to find Carly. I look back and see Ryan and Marie laughing at something Willy said.

Seeing them makes me feel sort of bad about how I've acted around them through their relationship to this point. I didn't exactly jump up and down when two of my good friends started dating and practically made me invisible. In fact, the first time I hung out with them as a couple we went to a midnight movie premiere. When it was over we crashed in the same room; just the three of us. Trying to make it less awkward, I sleep in the closet. I never said it was a good decision, just the one I made. Things were awkward from then on.

A flock of elves and a troupe of dwarves parts in front of me and I see a dragon with *Baileys* close-talking at a girl with wings. It's Anne, and she looks uncomfortable to say the least. The dragon keeps moving closer to her and tries to touch her. I stride towards her and I enthusiastically wave to get her attention. She looks at me with a plea in her eye. *Save me.*

I spring into action, "Knave beast! Get thee back from this maiden!" I brandish my rubber sword towards him and it droops pathetically. His long foam head looks down at the sword then looks up at me and shrugs. "What's your problem bowl-top?" he muffles.

He sounds ticked. Leave it to me to piss off a dragon drinking *Baileys*. Luckily for Anne, I would do anything for her; even get my ass roasted by a drunken lizard. "Listen Fafnir, I don't want to get in to a whole dragon and slayer thing with you tonight, but if you keep breathing on my friend here, I will be forced to smite you. And I'm in a smiting mood."

The dragon stares at me for a moment, but says nothing. What can you say to someone who says he's in a smiting mood? "Whatever" he shrugs. He turns and his wings smack me in the head, knocking my bowl loose. Anne grabs it for me and puts it back on my head. "Thanks for that. You're my hero," she says with an appreciative smile and knock on my bowl.

"What's a knight to do if not to rescue damsels in distress?"

She squeezes my arm and smiles at me. Her smile fades her face when she sees my finger. "What?"

My finger twinges at the attention and I give an abbreviated answer. She just shakes her head, "I'm just glad you didn't actually cut it off, you're going to do a lot of important things in the future, and you need all your digits."

I nod, though I don't really get what she's saying. I guess she's just oblivious to my loser-osity. Speaking of my pain made me think about hers. "So, uh, how are you feeling?"

"Well better, now that there isn't a creeper all over me."

"That's not what I meant. Anne, I heard about you and..."

"I'm fine. I'm better."

I don't believe her. "That's awfully fast work. You sure?"

She pauses. "Maybe."

“Well if you ever come to a sturdy conclusion and you aren’t alright with it, you know who to call.”

She thanks me without saying it. “I just don’t want to think about it right now. I’d rather have fun. Hey, I heard that you’re here with Carly. What’s that like?”

“That’s what they tell me.” I crane my head around to try to catch a glimpse of an enthusiastic and animated princess in braids. A wizard and a jester, wearing a disturbingly tight leotard, shuffle to the right and I get a view of the food table. I see Carly laughing and talking with Willy, Ryan, and Marie. Anne and I walk over just as Willy begins to speak after a long contemplative pause. “Well, just to satisfy my curiosity, I would...” he stops as I walk up.

“What are you talking about?” I look at him and point my sword threateningly.

Willy looks at the other’s smirking faces and then turns back to me, “Uh, yeah. We’ll just leave it at ‘yeah.’” I don’t understand what the hell is going on. I turn to Carly and point my sword at her. “I’ll get the truth out of *you* later. And where have you been? I’ve been trying to find you.”

Her face gets excited, “Oh! Oh! I went and talked to George and Katy and found out we’re in the same major, and then I danced with witch and an orc. Oh! There was this guy in a hat and he had horns and he was a Viking and he had a sweet wooden stein with a sweet lid. I asked him where he got it and he said his uncle had it so now I don’t know where to get one.” She is doing her excited bobbing up and down that she does when she has fun.

“How about I make you one.” I say, truly intending on crafting a wooden beer stein.

She raised her eyebrow and looked at my finger disbelievingly. “Yeah, don’t hurt yourself.”

“No worries about that,” says Willy moving next to me, “if he goes through with the project, the last thing I would do is trust this kid with a sharp tool.”

Handing me the chisel, Willy says, “Go nuts” and walks to the other side of the yard. Two weeks ago I had made a kind of a promise to Carly, and now, I’m making good on it. Willy has taken me over to his parents’ place where he has a large fallen maple limb that seemed due for sculpting. He hacks off a small section of it, and hands it, a chisel, and a hammer to me. He’s going to build a fire in his pit while I chisel away,

The first strikes seem the most hazardous, the chisel more adept at sliding when struck. Once I get a slight edge into the heart of it, a satisfying splinter clings to my ears. I work from the center out, bringing hunks of frayed matter out when I get a good solid whack in. I work up a sweat fast but it’s cold out, and it just cools the space on my forehead and temples. It looks pretty

ugly for a long time, like I'm trying to chew it out. But slowly, working through the knots, I hollow out the center of the branch. I stand happily astounded I didn't hurt myself. I blow into it like a Nintendo cartridge and cabin scented dust sprays my face.

"Not Bad." Says Willy over my shoulder. The fire is crackling merrily behind him. "Now you get to use this." He hands me some sandpaper. "Don't want her to get splinters in her lips."

I trot over to the fire, have a seat and jam my left hand in the cup and begin to twist the sandpaper around. The abrasive walls tear at my cold and dry skin. I look up briefly and see Willy staring at the stein I'm working on, looking somewhat sad.

"You know Mike, you really have got it lucky when it comes to the ladies."

I look around to see if there is someone else named Mike there with us. Why would he say such an absurd thing? "Willy, what are you talking about? You're talking to the guy who has been trapped in the relationship abyss all of his life. As I recall, you have had a girlfriend before, whereas I have not. I'm freakin twenty man!"

"You could have been lucky if you would have applied yourself to presented situations. Remember that girl in 'Good Get.' She almost didn't charge a guy for a TV over you."

"What are you talking about, " I shake some dust loose from the cup, "situations only arise when a girl has true interest in you. That girl probably thought I was funny-looking. Which is ok, 'cause I agree. And even if any girl ever had genuine interest in me, I wouldn't have the slightest idea that she did. I mean, how do you pick up on that sort of thing?"

Willy feeds a few pine logs in and we get a blast of refreshing holiday-scented heat. "Girls let you know they like you by wanting to talk to you, hang out with you, and stuff. They act excited to see you and they smile and stuff. Them's the signs."

"How do *you* know all of this. You Rudolph Valentino or something? Got ladies out the back door for you?" The inside is getting smoother.

"I have connections and resources for this stuff. Just trust me on that. And think about it, Mike, there have been quite a few girls that have acted this way to you and that really *did* like you. What about Laura, the dancer?"

A girl from high school that reportedly wanted me to ask her out. Pure poppycock.

"Or Ashley?" Another girl from high school, and she was always calling me on the phone, wanting to hang out. Meh, maybe an outside chance its true.

"Or Sherry the nature nut." She wanted to go hang out at the park. Just the two of us. All the time. Oh *crap*.



“Or the Lisas.” Each of them always greeted and said goodbye to me with hugs. Extended, overly long, and close hugs. *Oh*, what did you *do* to me, Mike?

“Get the picture?” Willy looks sufficiently satisfied that his point is made. I sit in silent sanding for a minute or two.

“So you *knew* these girls liked me. It was a fact? Why didn’t you tell me then?”

“I did! You said you didn’t believe that they could.”

Sounds like something I’d say. “Oh... Oh, Dang it!” I throw my hands in the air and the partially made stein flies off. I pick it off the ground, check it for cracks and sit back down.

“Man! What kind of ass am I? I bitch and moan about being lonely and unlikable, and the source of all my own problems is my own dementia. You know the movie ‘The Jerk’ with Steve Martin? Well they should make a movie involving my life, and they’ll call it ‘The Idiot!’”

“You aren’t an idiot, Mike. You’re just... oblivious.”

I sure feel like an idiot. Sanding resumes, and I press harder out of frustration. “Well, are there any others I should know about? Or did my likeability drop off after high school?”

“Um, well... as I see it you have at least two in your life right now.”

My head jerks towards him and I look him in the eye. No bluff. “Two? Who?”

“Carly, for one.” My mind twitches in surprise. “She liked you a long time ago. And as far as I can tell she still does. I mean, it just makes sense if you look at it clearly. Look at how she laughs at you.”

I think back and recall a hundred different occasions with Carly. One stands out. I went with her to a graduation pool party, and when I got there, I felt a little out of place and unwelcome for some reason, plus I didn’t want to take off my shirt, so I didn’t get in the pool. She jumped in immediately, but when she saw that I wasn’t getting in, she threatened to get out and push me in, but I just sat there. Then she crossed her arms on the edge of the pool, sat her head down, and stared up at me. The way she was staring up at me... A smile is smeared onto my face at the notion. Just might be true. But the ‘Loser Mike’ raises his hand and speaks out a doubt. “Nah, she laughs at me for the same reason everyone else does; I’m a goofball, the weirdo of all of us. I’m the joker.”

“Ahh, but that means you’re a smoker, you’re a midnight toker who gets his lovin on the run.” He sings the last bit.

“Only you would bring up Steve Miller at a time like this.”

“Whatever you say, ‘Pompitous of Love.’”

Despite ‘Loser Mike’, I can’t help but think that it’s true. She does smile a lot around me, and she has wanted to hang out with me since... well, always. I guess impossible things can happen. My mind throws back to what was said earlier. “You said two.”

“Well,” he pokes the fire with a stick and a few latent embers spit up their tongues, “who’s the other girl in your life who likes to talk with you and stuff?”

I blank briefly and I gaze into the slowly smoothing cup. Then a synapse that was sleeping gets elbowed. “Anne?” I don’t even believe it when I say it. “Ha!”

“Whatever you say, but who has dominated your anytime minutes recently?”

I had talked to both Carly and Anne heavily recently. Anne decided she wanted to talk about her breakup the day after the party. She cried. She really couldn’t describe how it happened. “He just fell out of love with me” she said. I didn’t get how that could be. I did all I could to help her through it, even staying up all night on the phone. By the end of the night my ear felt like it was micro-waved. She was worth it. But I don’t agree with Willy’s assessment; she was a friend in need, and I was there for her. Does she like me more than a friend? Nah.

Carly and I had also been talking heavily. “How’s the finger?” was usually how she started. We talked mostly about our lives (dreams, goals, thoughts on the job market, recycling), and she even invited me to another party on New Year’s Eve. We even went to a movie one night. I came close to putting my arm around her, but chickened out.

“You see? You really are a lucky SOB.”

I think about how long it’s taken me to realize these potential truths. I look him in the eye, holding my wrapped finger up. “*Sure.*”

When I finished carving the stein and added a sweet swiveling lid, I put some food-safe stain on it, stuck a bow on it, and waited for the day I’d hand it over. I was shaking with excitement and anticipation. I really wanted to see her face when she saw it. When the day arrived, Willy and Anne came by and gave me their presents. Willy gave me a book with supposedly the 2548 best things ever said. “No sane man will dance ~ Cicero.”

Anne also gave me a book. It was *The Giving Tree*. In it she added colors and wrote in my name wherever it talked about the tree. Wherever it talked about the boy, she wrote in ‘the whole world.’ When she handed it to me, she told me that I have so much to offer the world, and that I have already changed hers. “I don’t want you to feel bad about yourself anymore. It’s bullshit. You are so amazing, so funny, and so kind. And every day you don’t realize that, it’s a sad day. Don’t have any more sad days. Because you matter to me.” She gives me a long hug

and leaves. I flip through the book several times; sometimes reading, other times thinking over what she said. Then, it comes. A new realization.

*I'm worth it.*

I meet up with Carly when she pulls up to my house. She looks at me and she can tell there's something different. "I need to run and get my sister some goldfish." How bizarre, but whatever. I jump in the car and thrust the stein at her. Her mouth drops wide and she reaches for it bouncily. The first thing she says is "You didn't hurt yourself, did you?" She hugs me around the neck. She can't believe I actually made it for her. Then she reaches in her backseat and heaves a newspaper wrapped lump at me. I tear through it and uncover a heavy ceramic mask. I had never thought of receiving something like this. "I bought it in Mexico! I thought it was way cool so I smuggled it back up here and decided to give it to you."

I don't have a whole lot to say. It's a moment of complete and genuine surprise. She stares at me anxiously so I just smile and say what I think, "It's big, it's heavy, it's fancy. Awesome." She seems equally pleased with my reaction. We zip to the pet store, and while she scoops up the fish, I peer at a snake terrarium. For some reason, I decide to talk to him. "You're sweeter than people give you credit for, but the people who do are the smart ones. The fearless ones."

Carly comes over with a bag of disposable pets and urgently tells me she needs to get them home. I want to say something to her now, but my time will come at the party. I'll speak the truth.

Willy comes over later that day, and we amuse ourselves with quotes from the new book. "Here's one," I say, "Groucho Marx: 'I never forget a face, but in your case, I'll be glad to make an exception.'" We both laugh heartily at that one. When I quiet down, I invite Willy to New Year's party. Then I tell him of my plans to tell Carly how I feel.

"Damn, that's huge." He looks genuinely surprised, like I just showed him a Twinkie the size of a bus. "What's given you the balls?"

I close the book of quotes, and I lean forward. "I've realized that I'm not a loser."

"What the?" Willy is almost speechless.

"I know, its *weird*." He opens his mouth, possibly to ask how it happened, but then he just laughs to himself and punches me in the shoulder.

"Well I'm happy for you Mike. Perhaps you've finally cured yourself of you're stupidity." I laugh, and I hope he's right. "I wish you luck on your whole profession of love endeavor. I'll need to find me a lady at the party because It'll kinda suck once I become the extra wheel. Like things were with Ryan and Marie and you."

He says it, and I take a second to think on it. I feel my stomach churn.

“That’s no good, Willy. I can’t let that happen. I can’t stand that feeling. Quite frankly it bites.”

The cold bites at my face as Willy and I walk toward the front door of the party. I open it, and a blast of body heat gives me some relief. There must be fifty people visible just inside the small foyer. Some are standing around with plastic cups in their hands and others were swaying to whatever song was playing at the time. Right now I hear *Beck*’s “Beercan.” A dude throws a plastic plate directly into my head. I receive no apologies.

“There certainly are a lot of ladies here.” Willy looks around, and sees almost a solid wall of the fairer sex. Some of them look familiar. I recognize one as the girl from the costume party who dressed as Xena and stole my helmet to eat popcorn out of. I sidle behind Willy.

“The fish in the sea are plentiful, I just hope I have the right bait. Got any money or chocolate?”

“Well Willy, if all goes well tonight for both of us, we could be double dating in the new year.” Instantly a vision of Willy and I, dressed in black suits with coat tails, top hats, and canes, escorting Carly and another girl to a fancy dinner, only to spontaneously breakout in an elaborate dance number like Fred Astaire. This vision entertains me until someone bumps into me and I realize that Willy has disappeared into the crowd.

Right now I hear “She changes like the Weather” by Nic Armstrong clicking from the speakers. It’s a sixties sound so for good measure I bust out the ‘Batusi’, and put Travolta in *Pulp Fiction* to shame. People all over the place have confetti-poppers and noisemakers, and it seems every time one of them goes off it’s either aimed at my ear or fired into my eyes. I take it with good humor though; I just move their drinks around when they aren’t looking. I try my hand at being a beer pong referee but people don’t appreciate my careful observation of rules and fouls. Or my whistle.

I catch up with Willy and find him talking with a short brunette. He sees me and motions me over. He puts his hand on my shoulder and says, “Hey Beth, this is my friend that I was telling you about.” I smile and nod in greeting.

“Oh, the one with the equilibrium problem?” I look at Willy sideways and he smiles imploringly. “How often does it affect you?”

I collapse. “It comes and goes” I say from the floor.

I get up, dust myself off, salute Willy, and shuffle in between people to try to find Carly. I keep running into the same guy three different times. For some reason he is naming people after

breakfast food. He calls me 'Frankenberry.' I finally see Carly and wave across the room to get her attention, but she only gives a tired wave back and returns to her other conversation. My smile stays glued on but I just stand there with no real thought. I walk towards her and before I get to her she wanders off into another room, without a backward glance.

Two hours later and I've spent most of the night chasing her around, and I've only talked to her twice so far. Both instances were just superficial chitchat. I try to wait 'til she isn't talking to someone else so that I can get her on her own. I'm lost. She's acting as if she doesn't care that I'm here. Why would she invite me at all?

I get a tap on the shoulder, "Hey Mike." I turn around and see Ryan and Marie smiling at me. "How've you been?"

"I've been g... Actually, things haven't been so good."

"What's wrong?" asks Marie. I stand there, thinking I want to tell them what's been happening between Carly and me but I stop. I look at the two of them, my friends, and I can't help but feel awful. Ever since they started dating, I have reacted horribly to it. I felt awkward around them, I didn't talk to them, and I acted like I was the victim. Whenever they expressed their feelings for each other, I would clam up and dislike it. When they started dating, they spent more time with themselves and other couples, and I felt left out. When I was with them, I felt invisible. Was I jealous? Maybe. Was I selfish? Absolutely.

"Heh, remember when I slept in the closet that one time?" They sort of laugh in response. "Heh, yeah. That was awkward. You notice how I've been a lot more awkward around you lately? Ever noticed that I don't exactly look at you the same or talk to you the same?" Neither of them speak, they just follow my words as they leak out. "When you guys started dating, I felt like I lost two friends. Stupid, I know, but I felt left out, left behind, and like I didn't exist to you. Whenever I would be around you guys and you would be all kissing and on each other, I would feel bad. Not that I wanted to be kissing and on you guys or anything. It just felt like it was another way for you guys to ignore me."

They still say nothing. "I see now that I've been selfish. I looked at you guys and saw a mirror. I saw your relationship, and I made it about me. I only saw your relationship, and made it appear to be leaving me with less. I'm thinking 'what an ass,' am I right?" They don't react. "Your relationship is not about me at all; it's about you two. You guys are so lucky, mostly because I am *not* involved. I didn't lose friends, I just gained a relationship to admire. And I want to be happy for you... I am happy for you. Because you are my friends, and I'm so... so grateful for that. And...I'm so sorry."

They stand silent, the party moving around all of us carelessly unaware of anything. Marie starts, “Mike, I— “

“Listen, I don’t mean to lay this on you tonight. You two to have fun. I just... really wanted to tell someone the truth tonight. And I guess it must be you.”

I walk away. I find Willy, being pleasantly amused by the guy who likes breakfast. Willy is ‘Eggy.’

“How’s fishing?”

“A nibble here and there I think. How about you?”

“She won’t talk to me Willy.”

“What the hell? Why not?”

“She just walks away from me and finds other people to talk to.”

Willy squints at nothing in particular, maybe just the situation, “She’s a social creature. Maybe outside of the party will give you luck, you just wait and see.”

He could be right. Tomorrow I’ll call her, and I’ll keep doing it until she wants to talk. It’s not the end of the world, just a start, actually. Besides, it can’t be too long.

Six months into the new year and I have not heard a single word from Carly. It’s not for lack of trying; she’s just never returned my calls. With that, my mind wanders into the uncharted regions and I create different eventualities as to why. One scenario has her becoming extremely tied up with work and school that she simply has no time for anyone, even me. Another has her realizing that I like her, and she freaks out and doesn’t want to speak to me. Maybe she thinks I’m a nice guy, but not boyfriend material. Or maybe she is in love with someone else but didn’t have the heart to break it to me. Maybe she’s dead? A horrid thought. Maybe she never liked me in the first place. Nah, that’s just ‘Loser Mike’ talking. But, all of these possibilities mean nothing, because none come from her. I know she has her reasons, and I have to respect that she wants to wait to reveal them. I’ve always respected her.

Beyond her, life has gone on for the greater. Ryan and Marie are still my friends and they’re grateful and thankful for my honesty. I promise to them, and to myself that I won’t let the situation get awkward, because it has no need to be. “So no more sleeping in closets.” Ryan tells me while wagging his finger and laughing. “No promises” I say.

Willy has undertaken a new project that he wants me to be a part of. “It’s a wooden downhill racer! We’ll be haulin’ ass down a steep hill, banking around hairpin turns, and there’ll be nothing between us and the ground but a little bit of rubber and some plywoo... Hmm. Tell

you what. How would you like to drive? We would be better off with only one person in the car anyway.”

“As long as I get a helmet, some goggles, driving gloves, and pilot’s jacket.”

“That can be arranged.”

I pull a fist pump. “Then let the insanity begin.”

And Anne is the same girl I’ve always known. My Hero.

I got my stitches out ages ago, so I decide that I want to try my hand at whittling again. It’s a skill that I’ve always wanted to have, plus I’m really bored. I pull out the lump of maple I had been using months ago and start carving. I keep my focus on the knife’s edge, and every time it moves to touch the wood my right index finger prickles anxiously. “Relax little guy” I say as I wrap my fingers on the knife firmly. I strip and gauge at the wood consciously and focused. My eyes sort of glaze over and then my mind wonders if Anne would be free to hang out later... Sharp pain. Ah *crap*.

I run to the faucet and let my left index leak under a cold tap. Before I get too pale, I dial Willy but he doesn’t answer. I mash on the keypad aimlessly trying to call another potential rescuer. “Damn you, opposable thumb. Evolutionary leap, my ass!” Somehow I dial Anne, and almost before the words are out of my mouth, she’s in the car and on her way. When she arrives I’m on the floor doing some strange calisthenics routine with my arms. “Keeps the blood flowing,” I slur as she lifts me off the floor and helps me wrap my finger up, the left index this time. She shuttles me to the car and I slump in helplessly as she buckles me in. I sit so limply that as she buzzes through traffic, shifting up, down, and side-to-side to get me to urgent care, I jerk to the right and smash my face into the window. “Ooh, Sorry!” she shouts quickly.

“Huh?”

“For smacking your head against the window.”

“Window?”

We arrive and I don’t have to wait to get to a room, but once in the room the waiting game begins. I sway on the paper-covered counter and move in and out of awareness. The speakers faintly spit out ‘She loves you by *The Beatles*, and my swaying gets more rhythm.

“Oh Mike, somebody’s always got to take care of you.” Anne says, shaking her head but smiling at the same time.

“It’s nice to have someone to do that.” I fall forward and she catches me but doesn’t readily let go when she sets me right. “You know all that stuff that went down with me and Carly? How she won’t talk to me?”

“Yeah,” she’s still holding me up. “I’ve talked to her recently, you know?”

“What?” I perk up and try to look her in the eye but crack my head on her chin. “Sorry. I uh, what did she tell you?”

She rubs her chin a bit. “She told me that she could tell when you gave her the cup you made, she knew you liked her and probably wanted to get into a relationship with her.”

I pause a little, still held up by her. “Who knew a relationship with me was such a frightening thought. She liked me though, right?” She laughs a little.

“Hmm... Not especially.”

“Huh.” What a joke. I’ll bet all of Willy’s other theories on those other girls are BS too. “I can see why she freaked out.”

She speedily talks us out of this hole. “She was afraid to tell you all this, so she just ran and avoided talking to you. She admits it wasn’t the best way to deal with the situation.”

“Hmm... I guess that’s alright. as long as she’s happy. Well now I can look Willy in the eye and tell him that I now have nobody who likes me in my life.”

She pulls back from me and looks me in the face. “You think that nobody likes you right now?”

I blink a few times. “Nope, nobody. No suitors.”

She smiles and exhales a laugh. “That’s funny.”

The door opens and Dr. Tone comes in with a grin on his face. “Hello Again! If you wanted to see me again you could have just visited.” He sits in his stool, wheels over to me and reaches for my hand. “Let’s see the damage, huh?” As he unwraps my hand I faintly notice that Anne is staring at me... all staring-ly...

“AAAHH!” Dr. Tone just ripped my wound open wider than it was cut before.

“Bet that hurts” he says. Ass! He really isn’t very good at being gentle with his patients. He just bumbles his way through without really seeing the truth of anything.

He is *so* oblivious.