

An Even Temper

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September

The shopping cart slammed into the doorframe, causing a crash that pierced the silence of our apartment hallway. Crouched in the front basket, I held up my forearm to prevent my body from barreling through our front door.

"Monty, you idiot," I cursed. I took my keys from my pocket and thrust them into the doorknob, while Monty's hoarse laugh vibrated down the hall.

"Damn key," I snorted, fumbling with the lock. Still in the grocery basket, I opened the door and Monty ploughed us through. The shopping cart rolled onto our living room floor with me still in it.

"You nimrod," I stumbled out of the basket, "you woke up the whole building with your crappy steering." I crawled onto our sofa.

"It was your idea to take the cart in the first place," Monty said, his voice high and loud. "I can't help it if your fat ass weighs a ton."

"First of all, carts are easier to steer when you're not hammered," I shot back. "And second, it wasn't my idea."

We started arguing about whose plan it was to take the cart. Being jobless, university students living in an on-campus, three bedroom apartment, Monty and I stumbled home because we didn't have a vehicle. The cart was one of the strays left in the alley behind the pub we frequented. I hopped in at Monty's request to "drive me home."

"Next time I'll do the driving," I blew out a snot bubble as I spoke, sending us both into a cacophony of uncontrolled, intoxicated laughter.

The sound of the doorway opening in our suite hallway instantly put a cap on our fun. We knew we had gone too far, even in our drunken state.

"Can you guys please keep it down?" Dressed in gray boxer shorts and white T-shirt, Todd stood in the living room entranceway rubbing a hand through his ruffled, blond hair. He spoke slowly, as if it were very difficult for him to speak. "We all have class tomorrow."

"Yeah, we know." Monty grumbled.

"No problem, dude." I repeated, shaking my head as Todd walked back into his room. Monty glanced at me, and then, for whatever reason, we burst into another laughing fit.

October

While our three-bedroom suite provided a decent view of the campus, it also offered a breathtaking sight of the massive train-trestle bridge that towered over the river which ran along the university's east side. The bridge was a well known landmark, making university residence one of the prime spots to live in the city. As it happened, my two roommates and I were placed in our suite at random - none of us knew each other, and were assigned our rooms according to the preferences we chose on the residence application form. As the naive first year, dormitory graduates that we were, my roommates and I applied under the same category - quiet, studious tenants who kept regular hours. While that classification held true for Todd, it was a complete fabrication for Monty and I.

Monty and I were playing video games one afternoon when we should have been in class. The game was called Proven Guilty, a shoot 'em up in which the main character is a renegade gangster who has to battle police and rival gang leaders. It was violent, tasteless, and wholly addicting. As usual, we had the volume far louder than it needed to be.

"You're supposed to go into the building, you idiot," I chastised Monty as I watched his character fire rounds of ammo into the digital crack house, "not destroy it."

"I gotta finish this level," he said, his feet propped up on our coffee table.

Monty charged his man into the building and up the stairs. His mission was to kill an informant who was barricaded on the top floor of the apartment. He had to shoot his way to the top, dodging fleeing residents and rival gang members trying to stop him.

"I'm running out of time," Monty cursed, sitting up.

He stormed up the stairs, mowing down enemy gangsters in his path. The distant wail of police sirens became louder as he bolted up the building.

"You're gonna have a wave of cops waiting for you at the bottom," I laughed, taking a sip of my beer.

Todd came out of his room. His eyes were bloodshot and his hair was unkempt. He looked like he hadn't showered in days. We hadn't seen him since the night before.

"Toddy, you're still alive!" Monty shouted, not taking his eyes off of the screen. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Listening to you guys play this game," Todd answered. "Are those police sirens?"

"Yup," I nodded, glancing at Todd. He seemed nervous, agitated. He had been very withdrawn from us lately, hiding in his room for hours on end. I had assumed he was an early riser, leaving for his classes before Todd and I got up. His room was stone quiet, and there were a few occasions when Monty and I would pound on his door - sometimes to no avail, other times to Todd opening it, staring at us with a tense, stressed look on his face. I didn't think it was humanly possible to spend that much time in an enclosed space, but if one thing was clear, it was that Todd wasn't exactly human. He was a robot most of the time. Quiet, pensive, systematic.

"So what have you been doing in that room all day?" I asked him for the umpteenth time that month. "Sleeping? Studying?"

"Working," Todd answered, as he always did. He sat down on the couch next to Monty. "There's a lot of shooting in this game, hey?"

"Yeah, you wanna play?!" Monty cracked a smile. He just finished plowing through a barricaded bedroom door and obliterated the informant in a spray of bullets.

"No, thanks," Todd answered.

"There," Monty smirked, saving his game. "Now all's I gotta do is get out of this apartment building alive." To my surprise, he passed the controller to Todd.

"Here you go, buddy," Monty stood up. Todd looked just as stunned as I did. "Get me down to the bottom floor. Shoot anything that stands in your way. I gotta take a leak."

Todd looked dumbfounded with the controller.

"Start shooting," I instructed, sitting up, "X-button."

"I don't want to play," Todd replied.

"Move forward," I ignored him, "start shooting those guys!"

A wave of bad guys charged up the stairs, pummeling Todd with gunfire. He shot back, knocking his assailants down the stairwell, shooting up walls and windows as he did so.

He shot an elderly man as he was trying to escape the building. His screen flashed bright orange.

"I wasn't supposed to hit that guy, was I?"

"Doesn't matter," I said. "You only lose points. You gotta watch out for the cops. They're gonna barricade the entrance."

"Cops?" Todd grimaced. He was sweating.

"Cops, man," Monty came from the bathroom, and hopped back onto the sofa. "All you gotta do is blow through them and you'll get me to the next level."

"Here, take it back," Todd stammered, handing the controller to Monty.

"Keep playing - you don't got time to hand it back!" Monty yelled.

Todd reluctantly started firing through the doors, sending the cops scattering behind their pixelated cars. He peppered the squad cars with bullets, smashing the windshields, frame, and engines. The wails and screams from the wounded police officers were overly exaggerated by the game's sound studio.

I smirked at Todd. He looked so damned uncomfortable it was hilarious.

"Shoot that pig!" Monty yelled, pointing to an officer that was radioing for help. "He's calling for back-up. Do him, now!"

Todd started firing, sending the officer running. Monty's hollering didn't help - it just made Todd more of a basket case.

"Come on, Toddy!" Monty shouted, his voice a mixture of teasing and anger. "He's getting away."

"I can't do this." Todd stopped, throwing the controller down on the floor.

"What the -?" Monty looked up. "Careful with that, this system's expensive."

"I CAN'T PLAY ANYMORE!" Todd screamed. "I DIDN'T WANT TO PLAY IN THE FIRST PLACE, OKAY?" The veins in his neck protruded like earthworms.

"For frick sakes," Monty shot back. "What the hell is your problem?"

"Take it easy, Toddy," I said, glaring at him. "You don't have to play if you don't want to."

"It's a stupid, stupid game," Todd turned back to his room, and slammed the door as loud as could.

Monty and I looked at each other with a mixture of confusion, shock, and disgust.

"What the hell was that about?" Monty glared at me, shaking his head.

"Beats me," I answered, wondering what kind of fruit loop we were living with.

November

The school year was turning into a disaster academically for Monty and I, despite the fact that both of us did well in our first year of general studies. Neither of us had to work very hard that year, as our courses turned out to be a review of our Grade 12 classes. So it was no surprise that we transferred our poor work habits to our second year, pre-management program, which was costing us dearly. Monty failed all of his midterm exams, while I had barely managed to keep my head afloat by cramming the night before. We were living for the moment, completely oblivious about the future.

I was beginning to realize the same could be said for Todd, even though Monty ribbed him for studying 24 / 7 in his room. I wasn't so sure. The guy rarely attended class - I was certain of that. While Monty and I were admittedly being idiots - going out to the bar on a school night, avoiding class because we were either hung over or, worse yet, because we played video games all night - Todd, on the other hand, never left his room. He rarely showered or used the bathroom - only at the oddest times in the morning did I ever hear him out in the kitchen or the living room. We finally decided to throw the guy an olive branch. At 3:30 AM, one Thursday morning, Monty and I pretended to go to bed, then snuck into my room to see if Todd would come out of his. Sure enough, twenty minutes later, like a raccoon surfacing from its den, Todd came out into the common area.

"What's that yahoo doing?" Monty whispered. "It's four in the morning?."

I shrugged, just as mystified as Monty was. But there was a particular reason we needed to make peace by this weekend. Together, we tiptoed down the hall. We found

Todd standing in the dark, staring out the living room window at the train bridge. I gave the signal with my fingers, three, two, one, ...

"HI TODD!" We screamed, hopping over the couch.

"WHHHHAAA," He spun around, his eyeballs popped out of his head.

Monty and I burst out laughing.

"Oh dude, we got you," Monty snorted. "You gotta see the look on your face."

"You guys scared me stupid." Todd replied, grabbing his heart. For half a second, I thought I saw him crack a smile.

"What were you doing, man?" I asked him. "You're staring out into space."

Todd turned his head towards the window.

"I was just looking at the bridge," he said.

"Right," I replied. The moment was awkward. Todd's silence made it even more difficult. Within seconds his usual drab, cheerless demeanor returned like a boomerang.

"Hey, we're having the Curlies over next Friday" I told him. "Why don't you party with us?" I could feel the weight of Monty's glare on me. He personally couldn't stand Todd's guts, but even he saw that we couldn't host a party without at least extending an invite to the guy.

Monty's concern, of course, was well-founded, because the Curlies were the hot girls that lived one floor below us, and we didn't want Todd creeping them out. Monty and I had been working all semester on getting these girls to party with us. One day earlier, we met them at the bar. We flirted a bit, but were floored when the leader of the pack, a brown-haired bombshell named Sherry, announced that she and her roommates would come over for a "toga party". Monty and I fell off our bar stools at the announcement.

Sure, come on over, I said to Sherry at the time. Todd was the furthest person on my mind at that point.

"So what do you say, Toddy, boy?" Monty slapped Todd on the shoulders. "Hot girls. Tons of alcohol. A kick butt Toga party. Wanna take part?"

"I,...guess so," Todd answered. He didn't sound terribly thrilled, but it was the response we wanted.

"Man, I love this guy," I gave Todd a hug. I felt like I was hugging a dead tree.

"Boys, we are gonna get some action this weekend," Monty put his arms around us. "Now will someone tell me what the hell a toga party is, anyways?"

The next evening the Curlies came over dressed in white bed sheets draped around their shoulders, chests and hips. They brought the movie Clash of the Titans with them and a bottle of ouzo. The idea was to "celebrate" Greek culture and to act like authentic Ancient Greeks. We had no clue how to do that, but when the girls ordered us to dress up in our bed sheets, Monty and I bolted to our rooms. We were back in five minutes, though our togas were no-where near as sophisticated as the girls'.

"I don't think I'll do that," Todd stammered. He was dressed quite fashionably for the evening - a clean pressed, white shirt and tan slacks that suited his slim, lanky figure and feathered blond hair.

"Oh come on," a girl named Colleen begged. She was pudgy, but she had a cute-baby like expression to her. "I'd love to see you in a toga, you simmering Adonis."

The girls and Monty laughed at the suggestion - Todd simply smiled. I knew there was no way in Mount Olympus that they were going to get him in a toga.

"I'm already wearing white." Todd kept an even temper, successfully deflecting the pressure off of himself.

The evening began with us drinking ouzo and watching Clash of the Titans. Todd drank only water and seemed content to simply watch the film. Halfway through it, however, the rest of us were so giddy that our noise level drowned out the movie. The girls had brought out a deck of cards and we started playing games like Horseman and War. Todd was compelled to play, but looked like he would rather have finished the movie. Monty and I were starting to get light-headed, but

we didn't want to lose control so we paced ourselves. The girls, however, kept drinking and by midnight were completely hammered.

"Okay, boys," Sherry challenged, "Strip poker, straight up."

Todd, Monty, and I looked at each other wide-eyed.

"If we draw high," Sherry continued, "you Adonnisess... flash us. You draw high, we flash you."

Monty and I tried our best not to smirk. Todd looked mortified.

"You're on," I replied, shuffling the deck. I had a little trick for cutting cards that I used to kick Monty's butt in Blackjack.

I drew my card and passed the deck to the girls so they could draw theirs. We threw our cards down on the table at the same time. I had a Queen, the girls had a Jack. They cackled like a peep of wild chickens.

"No fair, you cheated," Sherry shouted, slurring her words.

"A deal's a deal." I held up my hands. "We were going to respect our end of the bargain."

"I'm sorry girls, he knew my trick," Sherry slurred. The girls laughed hysterically. "That's okay, we're honorable women, right?"

The three ladies stood up, and started undoing the backs of their togas. "Let's get this over with."

Monty and I looked at each other, flabbergasted by our sudden and unbelievable luck.

"On three, girls," Sherry started the count - they seemed playful about it. "One, two,-"

"Stop it!" Todd stood up, holding his hand out. He seemed in a panic. "You girls stop it right now. Tie up your dresses."

Monty spun around as if he'd been pinched in the back. "Dude, what the hell's the matter with you?"

I couldn't believe my ears. I looked at Todd with bullwhips in my eyes.

"These girls are drunk." Todd said. "We're taking advantage of them."

"No, we're not." Monty threw his hands up, "they offered to do this." He looked around at the rest of us with pleading eyes. "It was their idea!"

"We were okay with it," Sherry glanced to the other girls, suddenly sobering up.

They sat back down on the couch, tying up the backs of their togas.

"I don't believe this," Monty dropped back down on the floor, looking as if he had just been robbed of his firstborn.

We sat in silence for a moment - the chill in the room made it difficult to speak.

"This is not right, we can't be using women like that," Todd's face was flush, and he charged straight to his room, slamming the door.

"I think we better go," Sherry replied. The girls got up from the couch. There was nothing we could do to make them stay. The damage had been done.

Monty looked like he was ready to strangle someone.

"That's it," he lashed out at me, "I'm done. I'm so done with that guy!"

December

We managed to get through the semester together, though the tension in our place could be cut with a knife, especially during those few instances when Todd actually surfaced from his room. Monty never forgave Todd for stopping the girls, who left immediately after his blow-up, and never talked to us again. I wasn't too thrilled with the guy either, and gave him the cold shoulder when I saw him. Monty was more embittered than I, and he often brought out the worst in me. We used little tact in complaining about Todd, often doing so openly in the living room, knowing full well that the guy was hiding one wall away.

"Todd, throw out your flippin' food," Monty shouted as he rifled through the fridge on the Thursday before finals started. "You got crap in here that, I swear, is six months old!"

"Just imagine what he's got in that room of his," I jibed, goading Monty along.

"You know what?" Monty took the bait. "I'm turfing it. It's all going!" He took an armful of items out of the fridge and began dumping them in the garbage.

I looked over my shoulder. I could tell Monty was getting carried away, throwing out Todd's dry goods from the cupboard, which obviously hadn't spoiled yet.

"There!" Monty proclaimed loud enough for the entire floor to hear, "now we can stock up for next semester."

The door to Todd's room shot open, and he came thundering out.

"Excuse me, Monty," Todd was clearly upset, but his words were careful and controlled, "I would appreciate it if you didn't throw away my things."

"And I would appreciate it if you would act like a decent human being and clean out the fridge once in a blue moon."

"Now, Monty," I quipped, "that would mean the guy would have to come out of his room more than once a day."

"I know you guys have your issues with me," Todd replied, "but you have no right to throw away my dry foodstuffs."

Monty threw his arms up. "Foodstuffs? Dude, what the hell are you, an astronaut?" Monty was completely missing Todd's reaction. The guy was red in the face and he was fumbling for words. Either he had been holed up in that room for too long, or he was going to explode, I couldn't tell.

"Half of the crap I threw out isn't edible anyways," Monty challenged. "I would call it more stuff than food."

"You still had no right to throw it out." Todd answered back. "I could complain to the Residence Assistants."

"The RA's don't even know who you are. The crap I threw out would have gotten you arrested for contaminating our suite."

Todd suddenly looked as though someone had pulled a gun on him. Monty didn't notice his expression, but I did.

"What do you mean by that?" Todd swallowed.

"Come on, man." Monty rolled his eyes. "You had perishables in the fridge that had perishables growing on them. That stuff's bacteria, you know? You're

spreading mold around the fridge, contaminating our food, possibly the entire apartment. You're like a terrorist, for cripes sakes. Pretty soon the cops will have you on their Most Wanted List."

"Shut up, that's stupid," Todd replied. I was surprised by the look on his face. The guy looked like he thought Monty was serious. I decided to jump all over it.

"They're gonna bust your ass, Toddy." I goaded. "I mean, you're holed up in that room all day, you miss most of your classes, you're growing bacteria in our kitchen. You fit the perfect profile for a terrorist. The university has probably got you pegged right now. Government agents and campus security are watching your every move."

The guy looked petrified. I just laughed. I wanted Monty to look at the expression on Todd's face, but he was busy scrounging in the bottom cupboards.

"That's stupid." Todd repeated, going back to his room, locking his door.

"Where the hell did he go?" Monty rose up. He was chewing on a mouthful of crackers. "I thought he was going to bill me for his food, or something."

"Ah, don't worry about him," I joked, turning back to the TV, "he's hiding from the government."

Three days later final exams had arrived, and reality came crashing down on Monty and I. We had four exams spread out over the week, and weren't ready for any of them. Monty was in worse shape than I. While I got by on my first three, Monty tanked his. He decided to not even write his last one, choosing instead to leave early for the holidays.

"I ain't gonna pass it anyways," Monty reiterated. "Yeah, I'll be taking that course again." He wanted to be home for a Christmas Cabaret that evening.

"I'll see you on the academic probation list next semester," I joked, watching him zip up his suitcase.

"Oh yeah!" Monty held up his hand for a high five. I slapped his hand and laughed, but deep down my heart sank. I knew I was in trouble. I was, at best, going to scrape by with passes in my courses, and my parents were going to behead me once they saw my grades. To make matters worse, I was not ready for the last final, in Business Administration. I had done no work in that class all year, and was sitting somewhere between 40 to 50%. I needed to pull off a big

time mark to salvage the credits. Thankfully, I had two full nights to study for it. With Monty gone, I was poised to get a lot of work done. The key would be to buckle down and do it.

"You're here for two more days," Monty patted my shoulder, "sucks to be you, man. Have fun with the reverend down the hall."

"If I ever see the freakin' guy." I chuckled. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen him in three days. He definitely would have had exams - though I wasn't sure which ones.

"Whatever," Monty waved at Todd's door in disgust. "I could care less about that bozo. The guy may as well be in monk school for as many social skills as he has."

"Have a good Christmas, man." I waved, not responding to his comment. Watching Monty leave, it no longer felt right to badmouth Todd, as the reality set in that it would just be him and I for the next two days. Without Monty around, and with me planning to study 24 / 7, our suite was poised to be dead quiet and it would be inevitable that I would run into Todd at some point. I thought it would be best if I just kept my mouth shut for the time being.

I sat down that evening in our dining room; my binder notes spread across the table. A couple of times I thought I could hear movement in Todd's room. For all I knew, the guy finished exams early and had gone home. But this was Todd, so chances were he was probably in there.

I got hungry around 9 PM, and had been studying steadily since 4 PM, easily the most work I had put in all semester. I had tons more to do, my lack of effort for the previous four months was catching up with me. The more I studied, the more I realized how much I didn't know. I also realized how much I hated business admin, and my program overall. Why was I management major? To make lots of money, like Monty planned to do, I guess.

I needed a break. I got up and used the bathroom. After I left the biffy, I placed my ear up against Todd's door. I had been sitting at the table for five hours and had not seen Todd once. I knocked on his door.

"Hey Todd, are you in there?" I called out. "I was gonna order some pizza or something. You want in?" I paused. Nothing. "Are you alive in there? Or are you gone for the holidays? I never know with you."

Feeling like an idiot, I went back to the table. The guy had obviously left, and had not bothered to say goodbye to Monty and I. No surprise there - how the hell the three of us were going to survive together in the Spring was beyond me. But that

was next semester's problem - right now I looked at my mess of homework on the table and could feel the stress pulsate in my temples.

It was going to be a long night.

The next morning, I decided to go for a walk. I was up until midnight and was so sick of studying that I just needed to get some fresh air. The thought of being cooped up all day repulsed me. A faint garbage-smell caught my attention when I walked past Todd's room. Did he have something rotten in there? Probably, knowing the hermit that he was. He likely left it there on purpose to punish Monty and I for the noise we made all semester.

God, the guy was making me stir crazy. Part of me still wondered if he wasn't still in that room.

I thought about knocking on his door one more time, and realized I was just as loony as he was. I decided to leave and went for my walk.

I'm going to fail this exam. I rubbed my forehead. It was ten flippin' o'clock at night.

I had been very inefficient with my studying, probably because I realized I didn't have a prayer. I finally shut the TV off, when I found myself watching stupid game show reruns instead of reading my textbook. My exam was tomorrow morning, 9AM sharp.

I dallied for another hour, finally finishing my notes on centralization when I heard it - a clear and undeniable thud against the living room wall. I leapt up like a guard dog.

"Todd!" There was no mistaking what I heard. I was not crazy damn it! I immediately went to his door. "Todd, I heard that bang against the wall. Are you in there?"

There was no logic to anything I was asking, but I knew that turkey was in there.

"Okay, Todd, this ain't normal behavior," I chastised, pounding on his door, "crap man, you've been in that room for a frickin' week. What the hell are you doing in there?!"

Nothing. No response.

The garbage-smell.

It was worse now that I was up against his door. The guy couldn't be dead in there, something made that noise. Was he in trouble? Maybe he was having a seizure. Maybe he had one a while back. Christ, I didn't know what to do.

"Todd, are you sick? In trouble?" I asked, realizing that if it was a medical emergency, standing behind a locked door, asking questions like I was doing, was pretty senseless.

I threw my hands up. "Okay, Todd. I don't know what you're doing, but you're not right in the head, or something." I started pacing the hallway, then proceeded to kick his door, hard. When it felt like I broke a toenail, I stopped. He was in there, right?

"I'm going to get the RA," I threatened. "For all I know you're dead in there. This isn't good, Todd."

I bolted out of the suite and banged on our RA's door. Jacen Burns was an older student, late 20s, with scruffy hair, bloodshot eyes, and facial stubble that suggested he was in exam mode as well. He was dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, having anticipated a quiet night on the final evening before the semester ended.

"You're Jeremy, right?" He asked.

I explained to him the situation in our suite. I didn't realize how ridiculous it sounded until I actually had to describe it out loud.

"Okay, that's your roommate,...Todd Redel, huh?" Jacen read over the tenant list. "I don't think I know him."

Yeah, I don't either. I felt like saying. I didn't even know that was his last name.

The two of us went back to my suite. It was quiet. We approached Todd's room.

"Todd," I called through the door, "Our RA is here. You gotta come out, man."

I thought I could hear rustling on the other side, but I wasn't sure.

"Yeah, Todd, look, uh, ..." Jacen stated, "you can't hole yourself up in there that long. It's not healthy, ... I, ..." He looked at me with a bewildered expression. It was obvious that this was new ground for him too.

"I've got a master key," he said, removing a chain from his pocket, "I'm only supposed to use it for emergencies, but I guess I could open his door to see if he really is in there, then close it up again."

I knew this was a big step, but I was positive of what I had heard earlier. "Do it."

He toggled with the key. The door opened slightly, then stopped abruptly as it hit something hard and heavy.

"He's got the door barricaded," I said. "I think it's his desk."

"Something's not right here." Jacen braced himself against the door, and began to dig in his heels. He was a big guy, well built, and I could tell his curiosity had gotten the better of him. "I'll push from the bottom, you go from the top."

"Todd, we're coming in," Jacen announced, as the two of us pushed the door, forcing the desk that was blocking it to slide against the rug. We had gotten the door open far enough that he and I could slide between the desk and the wall. Right away, I noticed that the room was cold - I could feel ice-chilled air blowing from the window against my skin.

"Did he leave the window open?" Jacen cursed. "It's freezing in here."

It was then that we noticed the garbage smell - pungent and powerful.

"Whoa, did something die in here?" Jacen complained. I slid out from behind the desk first, and couldn't believe what I saw.

"What the hell?" Jacen emerged behind me.

There was no one in the room, but it was a horrid, horrid mess. The floor was covered with paper, books, clothes, pop cans, Ziploc baggies with food crumbs in them, empty jam jars and tin cans that hadn't been rinsed properly - all of it discarded in random piles throughout the room.

"God, what kind of wingnut do you live with?" This was our RA talking. "No wonder's it smells like manure in here, all this rotten food."

He started sifting through the bags on the floor. I was too busy trying to register everything I saw. Stuffed inside his closet, was a large, heavy duty plastic bag, tied up and stacked on top of a white box.

"Fric buddy," even Jacen started bad-mouthing Todd, "ever hear of a garbage can?" He grabbed the bag and shook it. Clunking, swishing sounds came from it, like plastic milk jugs banging together. Jacen's nose scrunched up. "Jesus, this bag, it smells like disinfectant,...it's been sprayed,..."

"Oh, wait a minute," I warned. The sudden realization hit me like a knock-out punch. The bag wasn't sitting on a box, but a portable camping toilet.

It took Jacen a full second before he realized it to.

"Arghhhh," he cursed, shoving the bag back into the closet.

"What the hell was this idiot on?!" He shouted. "This bag is full of canister waste! He used the closet as a toilet?!"

I didn't know what to say. I felt like I had been tasered.

"Why the hell didn't you and your other roommate report this?" Jacen glared at me.

"Hey, we didn't know," I threw my hands up. "Don't blame us."

"Your roommate never leaves the room for weeks on end. You never see him get out to use the bathroom? What you were you guys thinking all semester?"

Obviously we weren't. Is the answer that immediately popped to mind. All we did was get drunk, watch sports, and play video games. Thinking hadn't been our strong suit.

"Todd was a hermit," I fumbled for a better response, "but we had no idea he was doing this." It was the truth, but I couldn't help feeling like a heel.

"Whatever." Jacen kicked a pile of papers at my feet. "This place is a flippin' mess. I gotta contact the house manager and bring him over here. He's going to want to have a long chat with this Todd character."

"I'm not sure where Todd is," I responded, "I thought he was here. I heard noises from this room."

"You heard the wind rattling the curtain rod," Jacen grumbled, shutting the window. "The guy's lucky there weren't water pipes above his bed, they'd of bust for sure with this cold air coming in. I'm calling the manager."

Jacen wedged himself between the desk and the wall.

"Are you guys gonna evict him?" I don't know why but I found myself concerned for Todd - anybody who lived like this deserved to be evicted, no questions asked.

"Evict him, put him in a straight-jacket, I don't know," Jacen answered. "We may call campus security. This guy has to be on drugs, to live like this."

I watched Jacen slither out the room. I hadn't even considered the possibility that Todd was a druggie, but somehow I didn't think so. He was too clean-cut and uptight. I knelt down and sifted through some of the papers piled on the floor, expecting to find study notes or assignments. Instead I found a pile of drawings, doodlings mostly, of the train bridge, which Todd would have seen from his window. He seemed to be fascinated with the bridge, drawing pictures of it from different angles. I had no idea what any of them meant.

On top of his desk, there was a stapled booklet of lined paper. The first page was a cover - an assignment I assumed, until I read the title, composed in bold faced, handwritten letters.

To the RCMP
Official Defense Statement of Todd G. Redel
Dated: December 10th

I flipped through the pages. They were loaded with Todd's handwriting, it appeared to be an actual letter to the RCMP. The booklet must have been thirty pages long - I started to read it from the beginning. The writing started off as neat and controlled.

Dear RCMP or To Whom it May Concern,

I know it is proper procedure, and within my best interests, to not make a statement before talking to my lawyer. However, I would like to state that I am innocent of ALL charges against me. I am not a terrorist, nor have I harbored any bacteria or dangerous substance in our refrigerator or cupboards. I have kept to myself in my room. NO ONE CAN ACCUSE ME OF CONTAMINATING ANY OF THEIR THINGS. IF THEY DO, THEY ARE PLANTING EITHER FALSE EVIDENCE OR MAKING FALSE STATEMENTS AGAINST ME.

Please let me address the other charges against me. I have not murdered any police officers, nor have I wished to. The violent video games were played by my roommates, NOT me. That's not entirely true, I did play once, but as soon as I saw that police were being shot, I STOPPED PLAYING IMMEDIATELY. In addition, I would like to state clearly that I did MY BEST to stop the girls from downstairs from taking their clothes off, and that I DID NOT want to take advantage of

them. If you need me to say sorry, I WILL. I AM VERY SORRY OF ANY CRIME, I MAY HAVE COMMITTED. I DIDN'T DO SO WILLINGLY,...

The letter just kept rambling, and the more Todd wrote the messier it became. It would have taken him hours to write it. I scanned the remaining pages. I counted fourteen times where he repeated the phrase "PLEASE DON'T PROSECUTE ME, I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WRONG."

I couldn't believe what I was reading. None of it made any sense. Was Todd that insecure? Did he really think we were serious about him getting arrested for having moldy food in his fridge? Monty and I would have been in solitary confinement for the moldy cheese and week-old leftovers we left in the fridge. But Todd seemed to be obsessed, and downright freaked out, about it.

A knock on our suite entrance jarred my attention. I raced to the door, expecting to see Jacen, or the house manager, ready to barge in. Instead it took me a minute to register who the pudgy, young lady was standing in the hallway. It was Colleen, one of the Curlies from the suite directly below us.

"Hi, uh, can I help you?" I asked. My head was still rattling from the past hour.

She had a look of concern on her face. "I was just wondering if your roommate was all right? I didn't know what was going on."

"Roommate?" I asked. "You mean Todd?"

"Yes, Todd," she replied. "Did he come back yet? He had to have hurt himself."

"What do you mean?"

She looked at me like I was some kind of idiot. "I was studying in my room, and all of a sudden I see this guy land flat on the ground, right in front of my window. I opened it and asked if he was okay, and he said that he was, but I could tell that he was limping. He said you guys were just fooling around, but then took off through the parking lot."

"When was this?" I asked. "I don't know about him ever doing that."

Colleen gave a surprised laugh. "Jeremy, he did it tonight, ten minutes ago!"

"He was here!" I shouted, slapping my hand against the door. I wanted to pull the hair out of my head. He was in the apartment! He had jumped out of his window when I went to get Jacen. He must of thought I was going to get him arrested or something.

"Which way did he go?" I asked. By this point, she must have thought I was nuts.

"He headed north, towards the coulee trail," she pointed out our living room window. At the base of the building, I could see the break in the snow where he landed. There was a haphazard track of footprints that led past the parking lot and into the coulees that surrounded the University.

"I don't why he would have went that way at this late hour," Colleen shrugged. "He didn't have anything with him, not even a jacket. It's freezing out, and the only place that trail leads to is the river."

I peered out the window. He would have jumped about twenty feet. If he was limping, he probably sprained or broke his ankle.

Jacen rapped on the suite door. "I've contacted the house manager, he's on his way."

"I don't think Todd's coming back," Colleen said. "He looked terrified."

I quickly explained Colleen's story to Jacen, filling in the blanks for both of them.

"Christ, he's gonna freeze if he went down to the river bottom." Jacen said. "Are the cops gonna have to send out a search party for this guy now?"

"No," I interjected. "I'll go after him." I gazed out toward the train bridge, draped along the dark horizon. The only light that surrounded it came from the faint moonlight that emanated over the cityscape.

"I know where he's going," I swallowed.

The cold, midnight air bit at my ears and cheeks. For the first half-hour, I didn't notice it as I trudged along the coulee trail, but I soon cursed myself for not bringing a hat.

At least I was smart enough to bring a flashlight. The spots along the trail that didn't have lampposts were pitch black. The one thing that kept me going was that I could clearly see Todd's tracks in the snow. He appeared to have sneakers on, which would have been awful to wear in the ankle deep snow he was walking in. The guy didn't have one item of winter clothing. Colleen packed me a plastic bag with a ruffled cashmere sweater we found at the foot of Todd's bed and a pair

of mitts she had to get from her room. I wasn't sure how cold it was - it was in the negative teens for sure, but with the wind chill it could have been in the -20s, in which case Todd could face a real risk of frostbite or hypothermia.

The real question was what would he do at the bridge? The more I thought about it, the grimmer the outlook. If the guy was that freaked out that he was going to get arrested, would he go to the bridge to jump? He would fall thousands of feet into the icy river, in which case it wouldn't matter if he'd gotten frostbite or not.

The very thought of it compelled me to move forward. I started to jog, not caring that my lungs hurt. As the guilt about the way Monty and I treated the guy brewed inside of me, I couldn't bear the thought of letting Todd hurt himself.

A feeling of loneliness crept into me as I made my way up the slope to the bridge. The thing was massive, and quite intimidating up close. This was one of the largest trestle bridges on the continent, and at 1 AM in the morning, I was about to walk on it. What the hell was I doing?

I forced my way onto the track. My legs tingled when I heard the river flow beneath me, and that the only thing stopping me from dropping into oblivion were the wooden ties I so delicately treaded on.

Of course, the suggestion of death brought in another possibility that clung to my mind like a burr. What if a train came and I was too far from either end? I would be as helpless as an overturned turtle. Fric, Todd, where the hell are you, you SOB? .

It didn't take me long to find him, once I had the gall to actually look ahead of me and not below. I shined my light down the long, welded bulkheads that enclosed the track. Standing in the center was Todd, looking directly at me - his eyes wide. He looked red in the face. His arms were folded but he wasn't shivering - he looked more agitated than anything. As I walked closer, I realized what I thought to be a deer-in-headlights expression on his face was actually something else - anger.

"Get that light out of here, Jeremy," he spat at me. His voice was high, wounded.

"Todd, what the hell are you doing?" I asked. I got to within ten feet of him, and knew I should go no further.

"I didn't take advantage of those girls," he pointed to me, "you and Monty have to tell the cops that. I stopped them before they took their clothes off."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Todd, I -"

"I don't have anything growing in the fridge, or anywhere else!" He rambled. "You bloody guys lied to the RA and to the university. So help me God, if they come after me for that I'm getting you guys subpoenaed. I'm not a terrorist, and you know it."

"Todd!" I cut in, raising my voice. "Come on, let's get off this bridge..."

"You'll testify for me, right Jeremy?" His voice dropped to a begging plea. "You know I was in my room all that time. Even if you guys go down, you won't drag me with you, right? I trust you way more than I'd ever trust Monty."

"Todd, nobody is getting arrested," I said.

"No, no, no," he smirked, shaking his head, "you guys set me up. You put security on my back, you had the university send warning letters, you had the police stake out our place. Monty's probably told them that all I do is play Proven Guilty, shoot cops, and make bombs in my room. He's probably on the other side of the bridge with the cops right now, isn't he? This is all one big set-up."

"Todd," I just wanted to shake him, "right now Monty is sitting in a warm, bar-room back home drinking a flippin' margarita!"

"I fit the perfect profile for a terrorist." Todd said to me. He backed away.

"What?" I asked.

"I fit the perfect profile for a terrorist." He repeated. "You told me those words, Jeremy. You said so yourself."

His words hit me like an uppercut. I had told him that when Monty and I were teasing him about the bacteria in the fridge.

"Todd, I was just kidding," I pleaded, "I didn't mean anything by it."

"I stayed in my room," he pointed at me. "I stayed so they couldn't nail me for anything."

The guy had me speechless. This whole thing was so incredibly sad.

"I'm not getting arrested, Jeremy," Todd proclaimed. "I'd sooner die than go to jail."

"Don't be stupid, Todd," I said, speaking with a soft, sympathetic demeanor. "I am so sorry for that comment--"

"God, WHERE THE HELL IS THAT TRAIN!" Todd screamed at the top of his lungs. He broke out into a wild pace on the tracks. "I JUST WANT THIS TO END, I'M FREEZING ALREADY!"

"Todd!" I walked towards him, trying to be careful, because I could see he had snapped. The cold was getting to him. "Todd, let's go."

"The cops stopped the train," Todd wagged his finger at me, "didn't they? They plan on charging the line. Busting me right here? They're getting you to stall me. They're giving you a plea bargain, so they can get me."

Man, where was he getting all this nonsense from? "Todd, no," I shook my head, "there's no one hiding on the end of the bridge. I'm here alone." I reached for his arm.

"Don't touch me!" He slapped my hand away. "You're the reason they're after me! You and that damn Monty turned me in! I'm not going!"

He charged for the side rail, and leapt on top. He threw his left leg over the edge. I grabbed his right arm, yanking him back to the track.

"Get off me!" He yelled, as he tumbled onto the ties. He was off balance, but used his momentum to shove me backward. I tried to resist, dropping the bag of clothes in order to get a grip on his arms. He charged forward, planting his feet like a linebacker and fighting me like a wildman. He was unbelievably strong, screaming as he thrust his shoulder into my chest, shoving me backwards. I tripped over the metal rail and landed on my butt. I lost grip on the flashlight, which fell through the ties and down into the abyss below.

I shot up, but Todd was back on the bulkhead, sitting horseback on the railing. I stopped when I saw the hesitancy in his eyes. At least I hoped it was hesitancy.

"Do me one favor, please." He said, and didn't wait for my reply. "Tell my parents that I'm sorry I didn't call them. That I'm sorry for everything."

I didn't know if I should charge him or not. He looked at the river below. I hoped it would unnerve him. He swayed to the right. My God, he was going to do it.

"Todd, it's against the law to attempt suicide!" I shouted. "Christ, man, they'll bust your arse over it. If you don't die, they'll prosecute you immediately. A minimum six month incarceration!"

It was a pathetic, last ditch effort on my part. I had no clue where the words were coming from, but he shifted slightly to the middle of the railing. I caught his attention, so I went with it.

"You better hope you get it right, man," I continued, "because if you don't, the rescue squad will fish you out of the water, charge you with attempted suicide. Lock you up and put you away."

"They can't charge you for attempted suicide." Todd responded.

"You wanna bet?" I said boldly. "Jump off of the bridge. Go ahead and see. The cops are already down there in rescue pontoons. They know what you're trying to do. They shut down the tracks, just like you thought. We saw through your plan from the get-go. Of course, if you don't jump, they can't charge you with attempted suicide. And technically, since you haven't done anything wrong, no suicide charge is going to stick."

The words kept coming out of my mouth. I could see Todd was trying to comprehend what I was saying in that messed up brain of his. The struggle with his mind was every bit as pronounced as his struggle against the cold weather.

I could see that he didn't want to jump. I approached him slowly. He dropped his head into his right arm, and slumped forward. He burst into tears.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," he sobbed.

I grabbed his arm and helped him down. He dropped to one knee in the center of the track. I reached for the fallen bag, and helped him put on the sweater. I put the mitts over his chafed hands. The skin on his face was red and pasty. He was a mess of tears and mucous. I helped him stand up. His sobbing stopped, but his sniffing didn't.

"Come on, Todd," I said, putting my arm around him. "Let's go home."

It took us an hour to return to our apartment, where Jacen, Colleen, and the Housing Manager were waiting. Todd and I didn't talk the entire trudge home, instead we kept our heads low, trying to shield ourselves from the wind. We walked slow to compensate for our lack of light, and Todd's limp.

"I was just about to call in a search team for you two," Bill, the housing manager, said to us in the doorway. I was relieved that he said search team and not police.

"Todd was in the cold, longer than I was," I said. "He should see a doctor."

"Absolutely," Bill agreed. He was a tall man in his late thirties, heavysset, with wire-rimmed glasses. "I'll drive him to the emergency unit, myself."

"Oh Todd," Colleen said. "Your ears."

I couldn't tell in the dark, but in the light I could see what she was referring to. Todd's ears were bright red, waxy, and nearly double their original size, as though someone tied an elastic band around them.

"Yeah, they're frostbitten," Bill said. "Todd, let's go to emergency, okay?"

Colleen expressed concern about my own ears, but I insisted I was fine. I kept covering them as I walked, whereas Todd's had been exposed most of the night.

Bill escorted Todd to his SUV. Todd seemed defeated, listless. He had the demeanor of a criminal on trial - speak only when spoken to, while everyone else in the room decides what to do with you.

Part of me felt like I should be going to the emergency ward with him, to give the guy support. But the reality was that we were not friends. I had gone out to get him because I felt partially to blame for him going out there in the first place.

Instead, Jacen, Colleen and I watched as Todd left. From the living room window, we could see Bill walk Todd to his SUV, and drive him out of the parking lot.

"Bill's been through his room," Jacen said, "he figures the guy has bigger problems than just poor sanitary skills. Not everything is working upstairs, if you know what I mean."

I made a feeble smirk at Jacen's banal attempt at humor. He obviously had an inkling of how true his statement was.

"Bill said he was going to phone Todd's parents." Jacen finished.

I nodded. That was a good idea. There was no way in hell I could have explained this to Todd's family.

"Well, this has been a fun night," Jacen joked. Neither Colleen or I laughed. "I'm going to bed." He said with a sigh.

I looked at the clock. It was 4:03 in the morning. I had a final exam in five hours.

Colleen and I spent the next three hours talking about Todd, and everything that happened that evening. I pulled a box of hot chocolate out of the cupboard, and wound up drinking five cups.

The exam went worse than I thought. I tried studying after Colleen left, but nothing went in. I probably should have tried to get some sleep, but I was worried I wouldn't wake up in time. I was too wired to sleep anyway.

As I sat in the lecture hall, I cursed myself for not doing any schoolwork all semester. I was okay with the first page of the exam, but that was it. For the last six pages, I thought about nothing but Todd - I couldn't get the guy out of my head. I could still hear his high-pitched wail on the bridge. The fear jolted my heart, as I recognized how close I came to watching him jump over the edge. I handed the professor the exam booklet.

Yeah, I'll be taking that class again, Monty's words echoed in my head.

The funny thing was, the thought didn't bother me the way it should have. I didn't care anymore.

I returned to my suite. There was a message on my voice mail when I arrived home from Bill. Todd had been admitted to the hospital for exposure, and they also confined him to the psychiatric ward. Bill gave me explicit instructions not to enter Todd's room.

January

I arrived at our dorm at 10 AM. Todd's father was waiting for me in the lobby of our building. The holidays were a blur to me. I spent them in solitary confinement; the only thing I attended was a New Year's Cabaret that I didn't enjoy. The one place I needed to be was where I currently was - back at our dorm, ready to face Todd's family.

"It's Jeremy, right?" Todd's father shook my hand. He was a lanky man, professional looking, with grey hair and glasses. "Thank-you for everything you've done to help us."

"Yeah, no problem," was all I could muster. I didn't feel like I had done anything. Bill had called me over the holiday to say they would be fumigating Todd's room, and that Monty or I needed to be in our suite when Todd's family came to move his things out. I contacted Todd's dad immediately and told him whatever day he needed to come, I would be there in a heartbeat.

We entered the suite. Whatever was deemed salvageable by the fumigators was placed in plastic bins, which I had purchased and left in the suite. Todd's father insisted that he repay me for them, but I told him not to worry about it.

"You know, Bill told me you harbor a lot of guilt for the way you treated Todd," his father spoke as we started stacking the bins, "but you shouldn't. Todd's delusions controlled his behavior. There was nothing you could have done about it. You didn't know Todd had schizophrenia, nor did we. We're still trying to figure out what to do."

There. I was glad that he acknowledged it. I found out secondhand from Bill that Todd had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. I immediately looked it up on the Internet, and read for hours. Everything about Todd's behavior started to make sense - excessive paranoia, delusions, irrational thinking, fear of persecution, withdrawal from daily activities - everything Todd was, wrapped up in nutshell. Todd had had an acute episode, and was expected to have a prolonged hospital stay because of the suicide attempt. Needless to say, he would not be our roommate in the Spring.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I replied, shaking his father's hand. "Please wish Todd the best for me." I had nothing else to say. I hoped that was good enough.

That evening Monty returned to our suite. He was shocked to see Todd's room cleaned out.

"What happened to the Al-Qaeda operative?" He asked. I couldn't help but smirk at the reference, but forced myself to keep a level head. I told Monty everything.

"No way," Monty laughed, "the guy's schizo? So we actually had twelve roommates instead of one?"

"No," I answered, "that's a misconception about the disease. Multiple personalities are pretty rare. Most schizophrenics have trouble distinguishing their own thoughts from reality. They suffer emotionally as a result. A lot of it has to do with chemical imbalances in the brain, though nobody knows for sure."

"Whoa, slow down there, Dr. Frasier Crane," Monty looked at me wide-eyed, "you're losing me in all that psycho-babble."

"It is a mental illness," I reiterated, emphasizing the word illness.

"I'm just looking forward to having a normal semester," Monty shrugged, "where I can stay up late, play video games, and watch a woman undress without Pope Benedict worrying that we're all gonna burn in hell."

"Yeah," I nodded, fumbling with my pencil.

"Hey, the Management kick-off is tomorrow night," Monty said as he walked to his room, "what time do you want to go? Since we're taking the same classes again, we might as well go to the same opening day party, right?"

I didn't answer him right away. I wasn't sure how he was going to respond when I told him that I had dropped out of management, and instead enrolled in the first year psychology program, with a focus in social work.

I really did hate business management.

A free audio version of this story can be found online:

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