

# The Mallrats pt 2

By : Steve Balsky

Here is the second installment of the long story

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## The Mallrats pt 2

As he made his way along the aisles of shops, he eventually saw the red neon sign that read "Man's Best Friend" with the letters twisted amongst each other to simulate hand-writing. It was situated directly above the "Cineplus six" theatres, a common hang out for the young kids to catch the latest violent thriller on the weekend.

Mike instantly felt a warming in his chest. He even liked the location of the shop in the Mall; ground floor, far from the Food Court downstairs where Ace Stevens and his cronies may reside, close to the bike lot for quick escape if necessary - it was ideal.

He entered the store and detected the familiar scent of animal poop combined with the sounds of birds chirping and pups scratching their paws on the glass panels as they awaited potential owners.

He pressed himself up against one of the windows where a frisky, brown Cocker Spaniel eagerly waved his tail and lolled it's tongue at him. He tapped the window with his stubby fingers and the dog danced with delight in its cage.

Mike had longed for a pet to call his own, but his mother stubbornly refused for she felt pets were messy, smelly and were a pain in the neck to take care of. Mike insisted that the dog would be completely his responsibility, but she was steadfast in her decision. So the best he could muster was travelling to the Mall every so often and pay his respects to the animals housed there.

The store was oddly empty this day, usually there was one or two excited children coaxing their parents to shell out three hundred bucks for a new dog to take home.

Mike was lost in his world of affection. The dogs loved him and responded vigorously to his gestures. His attention was diverted from the dogs from the loud squawk of a beautiful multi-coloured parrot high atop its perch. Mike smiled and admired it's cascade of colours which blended into each other like a rainbow.

He was taken by the various screeches and noises from the other cages housing everything from guinea pigs to monkeys to newborn kittens. Mike was in his element here and thrived on every minute of it.

"Is that Mike Cromwell I see?" said a familiar voice from the back of the shop.

Mike looked in the direction of the voice and wiped his brow once again quickly to remove any adhering sweat.

"Yeah, Mr. Jobson. It's me."

"Mikey, my boy!" Mr. Jobson came out of the back office sporting his white apron emblazoned with a cartoon of Pluto the pup reading "Man's Best Friend" underneath it in bright red.

## The Mallrats pt 2

Mr. Jobson was a kindly 65 year old whose bald head shone like the hot sun of Fresno. He still had some remaining grey tufts of hair poking over his ears that complemented his thick grey moustache. Mike figured that if he had a beard to go along with it, he would be a dead ringer for Santa Claus. He was as portly and as short as Mike was. The two may have been mistaken for father and son at a glance.

Mr. Jobson had seen Mike many times in his store over the years but it was only within the last year they had started to talk.

"How's school, Mikey?" he asked, tussling Mike's Beatle cut.

Mike grinned, but Mr. Jobson could tell the grin was superficial and was more out of politeness than anything else.

"Fine. You know, the usual."

"Well for a boy who says everything is hunky-dory, you sure don't look it. I can see that frown around the edge of your mouth, y'know. I can see those worry lines buried in that forehead of yours m'boy. Now, don't insult your elders. What's bothering you, lad?"

Mike looked down at his grubby Nikes and figured that if anyone could understand his predicament, it was Mr. Jobson.

"Aw, the kids at school don't like me very much because I'm fat. They call me names and stuff and they threaten to beat me up."

Mr. Jobson thought for a moment and wiped his hands on his apron. Mike noticed he had some brown spots on his hands, like most old people did. His mom called them "liver spots" but he didn't understand why your skin had anything to do with your liver.

Mr. Jobson knew that Mike was the lonely sort of kid and could relate to the fact that he was the target of ridicule by his classmates. He himself had heard every "fat" name in the book, so nothing came as a surprise to his wizened ears.

"So, what are you going to do about it?" he asked Mike, grey eyebrows raising.

Mike shrugged. "Not much. I just sort of take it and try to let it not bug me, I guess," he replied.

Mr. Jobson nodded. "I see, but it obviously *is* buggin' ya, so now what are you going to do?" His Scottish brogue was oddly endearing.

Mike looked away from his friendly face and glanced upon a whimpering pup pressed against the glass cage. He said nothing.

Mr. Jobson put an arm around his sagging shoulders and spoke to him in a deep, authoritative voice like the father he never got to know.

"You know what to do with rats, dontcha?"

Mike looked into his friendly brown eyes and blinked with incomprehension.

"What?"

## The Mallrats pt 2

"Rats. Them furry rodents, you know?"

Mike laughed. "Yeah."

Mr. Jobson removed his arm from Mike's shoulders and wiped his sweaty palms on the apron once again. "Your friends sound to me like a bunch of rats, wouldn't you say?"

Mike was overtaken by a fit of giggling. That was the most perfect description of Ace he had ever heard. He was a rodent. A filthy, garbage-eating rat.

After his giggling died down, he simply grinned from cheek to pudgy cheek.

"Yes sir, I would say they are rats."

Mr. Jobson nodded his bald cranium up and down thoughtfully. "Okay, so you know what to do with rats, right?"

Mike ran his hand along his chin with thought. "I dunno... give 'em a piece of cheese and buy a big cat?"

Now it was Mr. Jobson's turn to laugh deeply. "No, I'm afraid cheese just isn't gonna cut it for a rat the size of a small child. Field mice, okay, but not these suckers."

The birds began squawking again and the animals rattled in their cages.

"So... what do you do with rats?" Mike asked.

Mr. Jobson's jovial expression turned fiercely serious for a second.

"You trap 'em and then kill them."

Mike gulped at the sound of his words and he was taken aback by Mr. Jobson's sudden seriousness. "How... how do you kill 'em?" he asked sheepishly.

Mr. Jobson's friendly smile came back once again. Mike was relieved. "Oh, I'm just kidding with you. I mean if rats were say.. infesting your neighbourhood, I would consider poison or something like that, but these fellers you go to school with just need you to stand up to them and teach them a lesson, that's all. Show 'em what you're made of."

Mike sighed and knew damn well he could never stand up to Ace Stevens. And if he ever did, the next day he would be seeing his mom in a full body cast.

Mr. Jobson saw how much his words were affecting Mike, so he decided to make light of it and change the subject.

"So Mike, how's your mom doing?"

"She's fine. Yeah, we're both doing really well, thanks."

## The Mallrats pt 2

Mr. Jobson had never actually met Marge Cromwell, however sometimes on the weekend he would spy Mike and her walking in the Mall doing their chores and Mike would always wave ecstatically as they passed by.

"Well, son, I think you should be headin' home. You got school work to do, I'll bet."

Mike sulked slightly. "Yeah, you're right I should. Hey, thanks for the talk, though."

Mr. Jobson tussled his mop-top once again. "No problem. And you teach those rats a lesson." He pointed a liver spotted finger at him sternly.

Mike waved and made his way out of the shop back into the main aisles that contained the few shoppers. Mr. Jobson had been joking around, but somehow his words left a mark on Michael's mind.

*You know what to do with rats, dontcha?*

Was he joking? Surely he couldn't be serious about killing Ace Stevens. It scared Mike to think about it and what scared him even more is that he wouldn't care if Stevens did die or not. It was almost a *relief*.

Little did he realize, but as he was making his way back past "Aeropostale", "GameStop" and all the other shops, Ace Stevens and Beverly Hocksetter were travelling up the escalator from the Food Court sipping their chocolate milkshakes. Accompanying them were two other toughs that also made Mike's life hell at Fresno High. Stan Edwards, known affectionately by his peers as "The Wall" and Eddie Ramsey who was rumoured to have a father currently serving time in prison for murdering a man with his bare hands.

Edwards was a giant of a boy, standing 5'7" at the age of sixteen, a year older than Mike since he had failed the seventh grade. He was built like a Mack truck and seemed incapable of being knocked down.

Eddie Ramsey was the bipolar opposite. He was pencil-thin, almost emaciated, with dark, beady brown eyes that seemed too close to his nose. His entire wardrobe consisted of T-shirts of heavy metal bands. One day it was Pantera, the next day Ozzy Osbourne, but the images of dragons, fire and scantily-clad maidens in chains always were present in his apparel.

Upon sighting Mike, Ace broke out into a wide grin and pointed with his hand that enclosed the milkshake. His other arm was wrapped like a snake around Beverly's hip.

"Well, if it isn't Porterhouse! Eh, my shoes need polishing!â he called. The other boys howled and cheered the verbal onslaught.

Mike whipped back his head, terrified by the mere sound of Steven's mocking tone.

*And you teach those rats a lesson*

Despite Mr. Jobson's reassuring words, panic took over Mike's conscience and he bolted off towards the exit.

## The Mallrats pt 2

Stevens called out his name and he could hear the terrifying gallop of their running shoes behind him. He still had a fair lead, but he would have to give them the slip somehow because a boy of his weight surely couldn't provide them with a run for their money.

He quickly glanced back to see how far away they actually were.

He expected with grim humour to see a glowing sign saying "Killers in mirror are closer than they appear", and his twisted fantasy was not that far from the truth.

They were close enough that he could see Stevens' teeth barred in a snarl that he knew meant blood. Beverly was grasping his hand and running alongside him which made Mike's racing heart ache even further.

"Wall" Edwards was far behind, huffing and puffing and trying to push his huge frame as much as he could. He looked like William "Refrigerator" Perry running down the stadium for his touchdown. Ramsey was keeping up with Stevens, sneaking up along the outside just out of Mike's peripheral vision.

Mike was panting with fear and he felt for the moment like one of the bunny rabbits locked away in Mr. Jobson's pet store. He could see the exit doors in view and this motivated him to push his muscles to their maximum, creating a tight cramping pain in his thigh.

â American Eagle Outfittersâ , â Build-A-Bear Workshopâ and â Hot Topicâ stores zoomed by in a blur as he ran.

Ace Stevens was also breathing heavy, courtesy of his smoking habit, as he tried to catch up to the panicking fatboy. He had visions of how he would make that fat-ass pay for making him work so hard! He took the half-drunk milkshake and hooked his arm backwards as if going for a long football pass. He fixed his eye on Mike like a sniper through a target lens and then hurled the shake with all his might.

Mike saw the projectile flying towards him and swerved to his left and slammed into one of the exit doors. The door swung wide open under his weight, sending him sprawling on the pavement outside.

The flying milkshake did contact something, but not the target of interest. It connected with the glass of one of the closed doors, causing a flurry of brown liquid to spray everywhere like an exploded pop can. A large trucker wearing a hat which read "CAT power" on it was the recipient of a large dose of the flying shake.

He had witnessed the drink fly from Stevens' hands and promptly cut him off as Ace tried to make his way to the door.

Stevens had to slam on his heels to prevent colliding with the angry elder who's white shirt was now stained brown.

Beverly gripped his arm with fear for what would happen to them and Ramsey slowed down and tried to think of a way to weasel his way out of the situation. "Wall" Edwards eventually caught up, a sweaty mess by this point.

The irate trucker pointed a finger at Stevens and screamed, "Yo punk! You ain't going nowhere so fast! You gotta pay my cleaning bill!"

## The Mallrats pt 2

Stevens stomped his foot with fury and his burning eyes saw Mike through the glass of the doors making his way to his bike and frantically picking at the lock.

Stevens attempted to bypass the man, who promptly grabbed him by the neck of his Fresno High school jacket and jerked him back rapidly.

"I'm talking to you, boy!" he growled.

By this time Mike was on his bike and was pedalling like there was no tomorrow.

Ace Stevens was not one to be bested, least of all by a loser like Cromwell and when he saw him again, which he definitely would, there would be hell to pay.

Mike was sweating so bad on his Schwinn, his back felt like an olympic sized swimming pool. He had a cramp in side that felt like a dagger but he mentally blocked out the pain and continued to pedal as fast as his fat legs could carry him. A slight breeze had developed which pushed his bangs into his eyes that he frantically pushed away with one hand.

As he exited the parking lot, he had to swerve to nearly miss a beat-up Ford as it swung its way into the Mall. The driver, a grumpy senior citizen waved an angry fist out the window.

Michael kept looking behind him feverishly and once convinced he had evaded his predators, he slowed up a little and concentrated more on safe driving. He took a longer route home through side streets because he was less apt to be followed here.

He felt assured that he would be alright for the remainder of today, but what about tomorrow at school? He imagined that Stevens, Edwards and Ramsey would be waiting for him before and after school possibly with that sharpened switchblade knife Stevens was rumoured to carry. Anyway you slice it (pardon the pun), he was in deep trouble and he contemplated acting sick to get out of attending.

But he then realized if it wasn't tomorrow, it was the next day or the day after that. Guys like Ace Stevens did not forget and did not mellow until they were satisfied that the score has been settled.

He wheeled the Schwinn up to his familiar driveway and parked it carefully by the side of the house. He wiped his face over and over with his shirt to conceal any excess sweat his mother might question him about. He hated keeping things from her, but this was a situation he would just have to deal with himself.

*You trap 'em and then you kill 'em.*

He opened that heavy wooden door which by now felt like a hundred pounds in his weak state. He walked right by kitchen and directly into his room where he promptly closed the door.

"Michael, is that you?" he heard his mother ask through the door. She was still wearing her pink dress uniform following her work shift from Denny's with a button reading "Ask Me About Our Slams" written on it.

"Yeah mom, it's me."

## The Mallrats pt 2

"You okay honey? You weren't gone very long. Is everything all right?"

"Yeah fine... I gotta lot of work to do."

"You're sure you're okay though?"

"Mom! I told you I'm fine. Mr. Jobson from the pet store says hello."

"Oh, well isn't that sweet of him." Her comment sounded a million miles away.

Michael opened up his heavy bags and pulled out his algebra textbook. He figured he would get some work in before he went to bed to try and get his mind off the day he would have to face tomorrow.

He worked fairly diligently until 10:30 and figured he had better call it a night if he wanted to have his wits about him tomorrow.

He changed into his pyjamas which were getting small and had their elastic waistband cutting into his gut. He quickly brushed his teeth and kissed Marge good night and told her not to worry knowing damn well that she would anyway.

He lay in bed staring at the ceiling with his arms folded behind his head. He had no appetite for dinner now.

*You know what to do with rats, dontcha?*

He looked at Indiana Jones and the Terminator. They would know what to do. Just rip through school like the Red Army is what they would do. Trouble is, Mike had no whip or machine gun or skills whatsoever to beat his enemies with.

*You trap 'em and then you kill 'em.*

He felt his lids getting heavy as he thought of his heroes and eventually he entered a sleep that was far from comfortable.

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There he was in the Mall, all by himself and it was in the early hours of the morning. All the shops were closed and dark inside and all one could hear was the endless hum of the lights that burned twenty four hours.

Even the "Man's Best Friend" light was out as Michael made his way towards the escalator. Something was drawing him downstairs, in the direction of the Food Court.

His worn Nikes stepped onto the escalator whose steps magically appeared from nowhere and gradually elongated themselves like a bellows so he could step down. He recalled his childhood fear that a monster lived in the escalator and if you so much as missed your step, you would be sucked down those small cracks between steps and mangled in the machinery.

He had no weapons with him to speak of; it was the same scenario as it had been earlier this evening. He just *looked* confident. There was a bizarre aura about him that radiated power to ward off his enemies.

## The Mallrats pt 2

As he made his way down the moving stairs, he turned left and entered the food court area. He could read the signs for the Cineplus Six cinema the Mall housed. A poster of the Hugh Jackman was erected, showing Hugh at his best armed with a huge arsenal of automatic weaponry.

As he started at the poster, Michael caught the flash of some bright object in the corner of his eye. He snapped his head in its direction, causing his bangs to swish back and forth like windshield wipers.

There, standing atop one of the eating tables was Ace Stevens by himself. None of his cronies were there to speak of. Even Beverly was absent.

Michael swallowed deeply but did not run despite the building fear inside him.

Ace smiled, exposing his brown stained teeth. The Lucky blue jeans he wore were torn, exposing two bloody scabs on either knee. His hair still had their trademark cowlicks, making him look a little like a mad scientist.

In his right hand he held the famous switchblade knife Michael had only heard of. The blade was at least six inches in length and the tip was so sharp it looked like it could slice through the plastic tables effortlessly.

Ace's tongue poked through his dry lips in an almost erotic anticipation of the damage he was going to effect Michael's way. He leapt down off the table and faced Michael being separated only by about three tables. His eyes were red but not the kind of red from lack of sleep. These eyes had red pupils that could only be the result of some demon spawn.

He now grasped the knife by the hilt and pointed it in a downward direction, ready to carve the Thanksgiving turkey.

That was all Michael could take. He turned quickly and ran back toward the escalator. He heard Ace's steps behind him, dangerously close. He scrambled up the escalator, careful to mind the cracks so that the machine monster wouldn't gobble him up. Ace was hot on his heels and he leapt, more like dove, onto the steps and rammed the knife into one of the steps, catching the bottom hem of Michael's jeans.

Michael screamed with horror and yanked his foot forward violently, causing a large tear at the hem. He then burned up the steps as fast as he could until he made it to the top. Looking back down he saw Ace, lying on his front on the rising steps like a cat ready to pounce. The Switchblade knife was now between his teeth and he reminded Michael of those pirates from those old Errol Flynn movies his mom loved to watch. His eyes were redder than burning embers.

Mike ran down the aisles of shops screaming for help and only receiving the eerie hum of the lights in response.

Once Ace made the top, he casually removed the knife from his mouth and hollered, "Hey keener! You read 'Lord of the Flies' didn't ya? Well, let's kill the pig and spill her blood!"

He waved his knife in the air as he ran down the aisle in hot pursuit.

Michael reached "Man's Best Friend" and plastered himself against the closed door of the shop. Tears rolled down his fat cheeks and he yelled until his throat ached.

## The Mallrats pt 2

The store was completely vacant inside, including the cages that housed all of the animals he loved so dearly. No one to help him now. It was just him against his fears.

Through the reflection in the glass of the door, Michael could make out Ace approaching, with his arm cocked back the same way it was when he hurled the milkshake. He grabbed the knife by the blade and threw it with all his might while Michael sobbed hysterically.

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He awoke with the sickly feeling that he had wet his bed. As he drew his sheets slowly back, he was pleased to see that he had not, however the sheets were drenched with sweat from his horrific nightmare.

Michael reached over for his watch on the night table and pushed the tiny light switch in the upper left hand corner. The quartz display read 2:45 am.

He took several deep breaths and tried to get himself back to reality. This whole situation was clearly getting out of hand. All he had to do was think logically and things would work themselves out.

Maybe Stevens wasn't as bad as he seemed. After all, Stevens was just another fifteen year old, just like he was, right? He didn't believe in demons or anything like that, so that option was ruled out. Perhaps Stevens was just one of those guys that was "mad at the world" and if they sat down like gentlemen and talked this whole thing out, there would reach a happy ground together. Yeah, and monkeys might fly someday too.

*Who am I kidding? Mike thought to himself. This guy is psychotic and wants my head on a stick. I don't know if he actually means to kill me... but he might. He might want me dead and that scares the shit out of me. Not unless I get to him first.*

He decided that this was more than enough thinking for one night and rolled onto his side to catch in some more winks before his alarm would ring at 7:30 for school tomorrow. He only prayed he would not have recurring dreams.

Michael didn't again reach slumber until about 3:50 am after which he did not dream at all. He was able to subconsciously suppress his fear so as not to interrupt his sleep that was so critical for his proper mental functioning.

The annoying beep of his digital watch awoke him once again and he felt as if he had a hangover. His head throbbed dully and his stomach had a slightly queasy feeling to it.

He slowly tumbled out of bed and rubbed the crust out from the corners of his eyes. He entered the washroom and ran a cold towel over his face for some quick revival to face the big day ahead of him. If there ever was a day to be alert, this was it. As he shook the cobwebs of sleep past away from his head, Mike tried to recall the dream he had been rudely awoken with in the middle of the night.

He knew it had been terrible and he remembered the sweat simulating urine in his bed, but that was about it. The horrid images of Stevens and his switchblade knife with red eyes were gone. He did not recall the

## The Mallrats pt 2

screams, the chases and the barrenness of the shops. It bothered him to no end for he knew he had dreamt something, but what it was exactly was a mystery.

After washing himself up, he went back into his bedroom, got out of his pyjamas and slipped into another pair of husky jeans. The weather outside seemed radiant as usual and so he slipped on a no-name brand t-shirt his mother was so fond of purchasing and made his way to the kitchen.

There was a note for him on the table. It read, "Toast and cereal on the counter for you. Love you always, Mom."

Michael grinned and turned to the counter. Sure enough, his mother's makeshift breakfast sat waiting for his consumption, prepared just before she left for work one hour before he awoke.

He chomped on the cereal at the table and tried to recall his dream once again. As he thought, his eyes idly scanned the kitchen. They drifted past the microwave oven, the refrigerator (which still proudly displayed crayon drawings from his infancy) and the Mixmaster appliances.

When his gaze met the appliances, Mike did a double take. Something on the wall jogged a memory in him. He scanned the area once again only this time in super slow motion to take in every detail he could muster.

There attached to the wall was a complete knife set. They were all razor sharp with broad, black hilts so the user could get a nice firm grip.

*Kill the pig and spill it's blood*

Mike got up from his seat and withdrew the longest and sharpest of the entire set of six. He remembered seeing an advertisement for these knives on television once. There was a Japanese chef that had called them "Shun knives" and he had claimed that these knives were capable of cutting through anything from raw fish to leather shoes.

Mike thought of Bruce Lee wielding two of these knives and flashing them around his bare torso to the utter bewilderment of his foes like only he could do.

Without really thinking, Mike placed the knife into his schoolbag, carefully hidden by his heavy textbooks as an added precaution.

*It's either me or them*

He wiped his lip clean of its milk moustache and gathered up all of his belongings in the Adidas bag. It was bulging like usual, but somehow the knowledge of the knife at the bottom made Mike feel as if it weighed a ton.

He locked up the house and began his walk to school. He prayed that he didn't run into Stevens and company along the way which was not likely to happen considering they were often late for school anyway.

On his walk Mike began to think of Beverly like he usually did. He thought about what she would be like if she married Stevens and spent the rest of her life with him. Her glowing red hair was reduced to filthy straggles and her otherwise perfect features wrinkled and sunken with age. She was so thin she seemed

## The Mallrats pt 2

anorexic. Mike further envisioned her madly chain smoking cigarettes and watching the television while Stevens sat in the other room sharpening his switchblade knife with a belly that made Mike's look like a swimsuit competition winner.

He shook his head to rid himself of those thoughts, but new, more disturbing ones took their place.

Vignettes from his nightmare flooded his memory and he now vividly recalled Stevens jamming that blade just beyond each of his foot and how he had leapt with the agility of a panther off the foot court tables.

He also noticed his gait had picked up as if he was in a walk/jog that he often saw the seniors on his street engage in from time to time.

*Calm down. You have nothing to worry about yet, Mike thought to himself. Just wait. You still have a whole day of school to get through. Out with the bad thoughts and in with the good.*

He kept this steady gait up all the way to school and was fairly successful at keeping his demons at bay for the time being.

He walked by the bus stop that just unloaded a pack of students, glum and sleepy-eyed as they faced another boring school day. There were other walkers that joined the entourage and Mike managed to blend into the student body traffic unnoticed like always. The mass of kids rounded the bend to the grounds of Fresno High where others came from various other directions by foot, bike or drop-offs from parents on their way to work.

Mike kept his cool but still couldn't get the nagging presence of the kitchen knife in his bag off the brain. When his classes got underway, he was able to absorb himself into the material and forget his troubles.

He sat through history, calculus and biology with little difficulty but during lunch Stevens doubtlessly would be present outside in the area of the school the student's had dubbed "smoker's corner". He also dreaded his afternoon which consisted of English, social science and geography which he had with Beverly. He figured she would take mental notes on him and report to Stevens so they would be waiting for him at the end of the day. His stomach began to churn and he had no desire to eat the derivative cafeteria food over his lunch hour.

He left the class with the others and as he made his way down the stairwell to the cafeteria, he stopped by a window and peered outside to observe the scene at smoker's corner.

His heart sank as he viewed Edwards, Ramsey (complete with Black Sabbath concert shirt) and Beverly all together and laughing, although their merriment was not directed at him.

Mike turned his head right and saw a group of kids making their way over to one of the small trees that graced the lot of Fresno High. There were others there already, observing the same thing Beverly and company did.

There was Ace Stevens with an object in his right hand that resembled a can of deodorant or hair spray. He was hollering at the growing crowd and they laughed and cheered him on. He then produced his Bic lighter from the front pocket of his faded jeans and flicked it's flint. A small, orange flame arose and Mike shivered with fear for what was to come.

Ace aimed the spray can just like he had the chocolate milkshake

## The Mallrats pt 2

*and the switchblade knife*

and pressed down on the trigger. The spray emanated out of the can in a linear mist and once it contacted his lighter, a brilliant blow torch was born. He sadistically ran the flame down the entire trunk of the tree, singeing leaves in his way to ash. Mike could see the bark of the innocent tree smoulder and turn charcoal black.

The crowd roared their approval and Ace went for another round. Beverly, Edwards and Ramsey had drawn themselves closer and joined the ever-growing mob.

Mike saw that some other kids had drawn around him at the window and pushed him aside with comments like "Get lost wimp!" or "Don't you belong in the library, winner?"

Ace cackled with mirth at the destruction he was causing and revelled in the attention he was receiving. To the older kids he was a god, to the younger kids and "losers" he was a nightmare.

He then did the most unusual thing. Ace dropped down to all fours and began to chew....no actually *gnaw* on the burnt bark of the tree. He thrashed his head backwards with every bite, not even stopping to spit the raw tree bark off to the side. He seemed to *consume* it.

Mike was now pushed to the back of the window crowd and had to stand on his tippy toes to get a partially obscured view of the fiasco below.

Soon enough, the show was over as Mr. Donaldson, the school principal, stormed to the front lot. The kids dissipated in all different directions, scurrying like mice.

Beverly, Edwards and Ramsey likewise took off as Donaldson hollared at Stevens and demanded he stop. Stevens threw the can to the side of the road and started running away but Mr. Donaldson maintained a hot pursuit.

Mike was silently cheering the scene because if Stevens was caught, he would doubtlessly be suspended if not expelled, which would put him momentarily off the hitlist.

The kids at the window did not bulge, engrossed in what was sure to be the gossip of the school year. This further put Stevens in the "men of legend" category.

Mike swung his head in between the shoulders of the various onlookers as he saw Mr. Donaldson grab Stevens by the neck of his t-shirt and shake him vigorously. The can that was now on the side of road Donaldson snatched up. He could see spittle fly out of Donaldson's lips as he lashed out at Stevens.

Ace didn't even seem worried at all. He had the same sarcastic grin on his face that he had when he first began the school year. Donaldson lead him back to the school office, still grasping his neck firmly like some kind of bizarre wrestling hold.

Mike was overjoyed. Finally something at this school went his way! A cause for celebration! Revenge of the nerd!

## The Mallrats pt 2

He still had Edwards, Beverly and Ramsey to contend with, but with their leader incarcerated, they were not likely to harm him.

His stomach settled gradually and he made his way down to the cafeteria where he bought himself an egg salad sandwich and contemplated the classes for the afternoon.

His classes for the second half of the day went by smoothly, but he still had a mild paranoia about facing Beverly in geography. It wasn't the usual butterflies he got when viewing her beautiful features but more of a fearful paranoia that she would sic Stevens on him and laugh as he squirmed under the blade.

He made his way into the classroom and drifted to the back of the class, far from his typical seat in the second row. The teacher they had, Mrs. Jackson, sometimes called out names for attendance while other times she just did it by visual inspection. Michael prayed she did the latter, allowing him to possibly survive the class in anonymity, as unlikely as that sounded.

Beverly sauntered into the room late and drifted into her seat at the side of the room near the door where she could make frequent washroom trips if the material bored her as it often did.

As Mike's bad luck would have it, Mrs. Jackson did call out the names as she did the majority of the time. When she called out his name, he sheepishly responded just above audible level and Mrs. Jackson had to strain to see him.

"Michael? Is that you way at the back?"

"Yes ma'am."

"That's certainly different. Are you okay?"

"Yes ma'am. I'm fine."

He noticed Beverly shift in her seat to face him and glared at him with a look that read trouble. Her third, fourth and fifth fingers curled back while her index finger pointed at him ominously simulating a gun. Her thumb triggered the imaginary weapon and her stony gaze didn't falter in the least.

Mike felt the bullet rip through his chest and the churning sensation in his stomach made a triumphant return.

He then saw Beverly open her three ring binder as Mrs. Jackson began her speech on developing countries.

Mike tried his best to hang onto her words, but his attention kept returning to Beverly as she hunched at her desk and was oddly enough writing things down in her notes. This was a first.

He then saw her rip out the page discretely and fold into a neat little package.

She leaned over to the girl beside her, Pam Reiser, and slipped the note in her hands, all the while pointing at Mike. Mike was frozen in his seat, petrified by the contents of the note. He imagined it was a warning that he

## The Mallrats pt 2

could not leave the building unless he was in a bodybag.

Pam looked at Beverly as if to say, "You want to give a note to him? Have you gone mad, woman?" but nonetheless she dutifully passed on the note. The message passed through several other hands discretely whenever Mrs. Jackson would turn her back to scribble notes on the chalkboard.

The boy in front of Mike, another quiet one by the name of Tony Parazono, held the note behind his back and whispered, "Hey, man. It's for you. Take it."

Mike hesitantly extended his hand to accept the note when he noticed they were trembling badly. His bladder was full and ready to explode. He snatched the note from Tony and placed it in the pocket of his husky jeans without even reading it.

He raised his hand and as soon as Mrs. Jackson turned her back he said, "Ma'am? Can I be excused to use the washroom?"

"Of course Michael. You're sure you're alright? You look a little pale."

"Oh.. it's just a touch of the flu or something I think. I'll be alright," he nervously tittered. He left his desk and made his way up the aisle, avoiding eye contact with Beverly. He knew she was looking at him because he could feel her malicious stare penetrate his soul. His palms started to sweat.

As soon as he stepped in the hall, Michael made a mad dash to the boy's washroom a few doors down. Fortunately the blue-tiled washroom was vacant so he made his way into one of the stalls and locked the door.

He sat down on the toilet with the seat down and unfolded the letter like it was holy parchment. His hands were still trembling and he took three deep breaths before reading the contents.

The words on the note were simple and to the point: The Mall. Tonight, 11:00 p.m. All will be resolved.

In a sense Michael was let down. He expected to read some blood-curdling death threats or obscene descriptions of how they were going to bury him in the ground. He re-read the words slowly again and tried to read between the lines.

*All will be resolved.* Did that mean that Stevens was willing to sit down with him and talk to reach an amicable agreement? Not likely. He could do that any time, so why choose a Mall that closed 1 and a half hours before their scheduled meeting time? No, that wasn't their intent at all. Mike figured that their "resolution" consisted of beating him to a bloody pulp if not taking his life altogether. That would certainly resolve things permanently. On the other hand, how did they know that Mike wouldn't show them a thing or two and they would be the ones to suffer the "resolution"? The simple answer was that they didn't, but it was highly unlikely one frightened, plump kid could hold his own against the four biggest toughs in school.

*Show 'em what you're made of*

Mike contemplated not showing up at all and taking the note to principal Donaldson and getting them all expelled indefinitely for threatening him. That route however, would do more damage than good. If he didn't show, these characters were likely to be even harder with him the next time their paths crossed. Furthermore, if Mike blew the whistle on him, they might get expelled for the moment, but they weren't extradited from

## The Mallrats pt 2

Fresno. They would be hot on his trail one way or another and then the repercussions would be much more severe.

He began to visualize Stevens with that knife blade between his teeth slinking up the escalator to skin his hide as more of his dream flooded back. Those red eyes, those definitely were not human.

Michael knew he would have to show up and would have to hold his own against them if he wanted to put his fears to rest once and for all. He also felt deep down that his father, wherever he may currently reside, would have wanted him to do the same thing as well.

He folded the letter back into its little package and returned to his geography class. He slipped back into his seat at the back of the room and more or less daydreamed the rest of the class away and how he was to prepare himself for the ultimate confrontation.

The bell signalling the end of the school day sounded and Mike hardly noticed. He just sat in his chair and thought, oblivious to all the students gathering their belongings around him. His dream-like state was broken once Beverly appeared at the front of his desk.

She looked stunning, with her long, red hair organized into a long French braid that twirled down her shoulders. Her green eyes looked straight into Michael's as she whispered, "So what's it gonna be?"

Mike looked right back at her despite the several warning signs that were firing off in his brain at the moment.

"I'll be there, but how do we get into the Mall? I mean, it is after hours isn't it?"

She made a cock-eyed grin that made his blood chill. "Leave that to us."

She then narrowed her eyes slightly. Mike thought that was the sexiest thing he had ever seen. She briskly turned her back and walked out of the room without looking back.

Michael got his books together slowly and then walked up the aisle towards the door.

"Michael," Mrs. Jackson called, "You're sure everything is alright? You've been acting a little strangely today."

"No ma'am, everything is just fine," he smiled and turned out the door.

Jackson shrugged her shoulders and gathered up her papers for the day.

Once he got outside, his eyes scanned the crowds of kids for any signs of Stevens. He couldn't see Beverly, Stevens or Edwards. He managed to spy Ramsey, with his "Megadeath" cut-off t-shirt hopping on his bike and pedalling off.

He slung the heavy Adidas bag behind his shoulder, still keeping the knife hidden there in the back of his mind. Looks like he wouldn't have to use it today, but tonight he wasn't too sure.

His walk home was fairly uneventful without even the occasional cat-caller swooping by on their bicycles. It was the first walk in a while where Mike could stroll along and enjoy the weather without fear of having to

## The Mallrats pt 2

kiss someone's filthy shoes. He did worry a little just where Stevens was and what he was plotting. He expected to see him and his followers appear from behind a tree in an ambush, but at the same time he also figured they would wait until tonight at the Mall.

He made it home unscathed and actually a little relieved.

"Mom?" he called, unzipping the Adidas bag.

"In the washroom, dear. I'll be out in a minute," Marge's voice called.

Mike smiled at his luck and ran to the kitchen where he carefully placed the large knife back into its appropriate spot.

The washroom door opened and Mike hurried out of the kitchen, hoping she wouldn't notice.

"How was school today Michael? Better than last day?"

"Oh, yeah. Much better. They left me alone. No worries," Mike said charmingly.

He then spoke to her at long lengths about school positively to calm any reservations she may have had about his state from their previous evening's run-in.

â Ah well, boys will be boysâ , she sighed, removing her Dennyâ s outergarments. â Have you had a look at this? Itâ s quite scary.â

*Scary?* thought Michael.

She handed him a copy of â Fresnobeeâ , the communityâ s regular local newspaper. â Look right thereâ , she indicated with a red pointed fingernail, â Psycho killer stalks Fresno communityâ . Honey, I know you donâ t run in bad crowds, but please be careful. You donâ t know whatâ s out there.â

*Oh yes, I do,* thought Michael. He perused the article. â The mangled body of Sharise LaRye, 15 was found outside the Fashion Fair Mall yesterday,â the article read. â The body could not be identified initially due to the extent of physical mutilation, however Ms. LaRyeâ s identity was confirmed by dental reports forthwith. Apparently she had been smoking pot with her friends outside the Mall food court, specifically *Mexicatessen*, but within its perimeters.â

Michael read on, â A cohort, Sally McGovern reported some sort of â hairy beastâ approaching the two girls. McGovern ran away immediately and got away unscathed, however LaRye was not as fortunate. Funeral services will be held tomorrow at the Fresno Funeral Chapel, 1136 A Street, Fresno, California.â

After the read, he sat down to Marge's prepared meal of recycled beef stew and roasted potatoes. As he gobbled down the food with a renewed enthusiasm (despite the grisly article), Marge's eyes focused on the knife-holder.

"Oh there it is! I thought I had misplaced my carving knife!"

Michael stopped in mid-chew.

## The Mallrats pt 2

*Oh God don't think I took it, just don't please... don't*

"I could have sworn it wasn't there before because..."

Mike's eyes widened. "Maybe the phone rang and you got distracted and.. and then just forgot about it!"

"No..nobody called..." she continued.

"Maybe your eyes are going on you as you get older," Mike interjected, hoping she would take the bait. He knew age was a sensitive issue with Marge.

"Michael! I'm not old! I'm merely aging. I'm not there yet, young man!" Her false sternness soon dissolved and she beamed at her boy. "I haven't seen you eat like that in a long time!"

"Yeah well, I'm getting my appetite back I guess," he replied, silently relieved that she temporarily dropped the subject of the knife.

"Good. Good. I'm glad." She beamed as her pride and joy finished up the remaining scraps off his plate.

"I'm going to do some work now. Got a big math test coming up," he stated, wiping his mouth clean with a napkin.

"Alright then dear. I won't disturb you." Marge tended to the pile of dirty dishes that had accumulated in the sink over the past few days. In her mind Michael didn't seem as dejected or bitter as he was before. She figured that the kids at school must have let up on him like most kids do after a while. Their attention spans are so short they'll pick on a new target in the blink of an eye.

Michael on the other hand, was putting on the performance of his life. If his mother knew what he was up against she would probably have a coronary. He figured the less she knew about this, the better. He quickly placed his dishes in the sink and made his way to his room to plan out his route of attack.

Sitting at his desk, he thought out the scenario. he had to be at the Mall for 11:00. It would certainly be locked up for the night by that point, so they were probably looking at the parking lot as a meeting place.

Nonetheless, he had to escape his own house first. His mother had to be well assured that he was deep asleep by that point. It was 7.5 miles from his house on West Pasa Tiempo Ave to get to the mall on 645 West Shaw Avenue. That would be a good 45 minutes of cycling which would mean he would have to leave his house at 10:15 p.m. maximum. He figured he would have no problem getting Marge to believe he was hitting the sack early because of his fictional math test the next day. He hated lying that this, but there would be a lot more trouble if he told her the truth.

In terms of artillery, he still had the kitchen knife which he could easily steal again once Marge retired to the den for her evening date with the television set. He would need more than just that, however.

*I would consider poison or something like that*

Mike shook his head to rid himself of Mr. Jobson's advice and focus on the practical matters at hand.

## The Mallrats pt 2

Time went by and Mike still couldn't come up with anything that seemed remotely feasible. No guns, no swords, not even a lousy bullwhip like Indiana Jones carried. He glanced at his wristwatch. The digital face read 9:45 pm.

He left his room momentarily and announced to his mother that he was going to get a good night's sleep before his big test tomorrow.

Marge waved him off distantly, completely engrossed in the tail end of "America's Most Wanted".

Mike quietly slunk into the kitchen and approached the knife rack.

He grasped his hands firmly around the handle of the knife and withdrew it from its spot, careful not to make a single sound.

*What is it like to plunge this into another human being?*

*It's him or you...*

He figured he would be smart and place the knife blade side down in between his belly and the waistline of his jeans. Then he came to realization that should he encounter a spill on his bike or any kind of trauma, he could say goodbye to his internal organs.

Instead, he put the knife into a knapsack he had received from McDonald's many years ago.

The knapsack was a sickly orange colour with red straps that bore the friendly slogan "Have a McHappy Day".

*I wonder if Stevens will have a McHappy Day when I stick it in him?*

He sat in silence on his bed, watching the minutes go by like molasses. He heard his mother turn off the television set and enter her bedroom, a few doors down. He knew what the rest of her routine was for the night. She would slip into her ugly nighties, light up a cigarette in bed and idly read a chapter or two of "Darling Tessa" or some other trashy romance novel.

The clock read 10:15 pm. She must figure that Mike drifted off a long time ago and he felt strongly she wouldn't check on him for the rest of the night.

He had opened his window fully, allowing the mild breeze of the Fresno evening to filter in. He could see his bike propped up against the side of the house. Even though it was only a 10 foot drop from the window to the grass below, Mike tossed both his pillows on the ground outside to quieten his landing.

He then sat his large bottom on the window sill. His dirty Nikes dangled from the ledge while the cool air lapped at his knees the shorts he wore exposed. He started to get the same queasy feeling in his stomach, but fought it mentally as best he could.

He reached back onto his bed and hoisted the knapsack up and over so it landed a few feet from the bike with little noise. He waited a few seconds to see if his mother would enter.

## The Mallrats pt 2

When he was convinced that she was engrossed in her novel, he took in a deep breath and leapt off the ledge. He sailed in the air for less than a second, and landed on his feet on the two pillows below, followed by a quick roll on the grass. The force of the impact drove the pillows into the dirt and he figured he would have to come up with some snazzy excuse to his mother for the soiled pillowcases.

Fortunately sounds had been at a minimum and he was confident he had performed his actions unnoticed. He stood up and tried to get the grass stain off his legs by wiping a saliva-moistened hand over them.

Mike nervously looked over his shoulder to see if he had caught any unwanted attention and scooped up his knapsack. After slipping his arms through the two straps, he climbed atop his beloved Schwinn and sped off into the night.

The wind tussled his mop-top the same way Mr. Jobson had, much to his chagrin.

Michael pumped his legs like he never had, causing burning tangs of pain to shoot down his thigh. He started to sweat even though the temperature was lower now than it was during the hot Fresno Days.

The Schwinn darted along the vacant side streets like a green flash of light. Mike glanced at his watch. 10:40 pm and he was more than half way there. Right on schedule.

The further he travelled, the more his confidence wavered, and quickly. His mind was screaming for him to turn back and avoid the dread that was certainly in store for him at the Mall. Nonetheless, those legs kept pumping, drawing him closer by some morbid sense of hope.

Images kept flooding the troubled youngster's mind; everything from Mr. Jobson to Ace's red eyes to his mother's kindly smiles as he ate.

The black sign with the intertwined roses approached in the distance as Mike furiously pedalled along the barren road.

10:57 pm. The Schwinn soared into the lot and under the cement overhang. Mike searched all around for any signs of Ace. The lot was desolate. There weren't even any cars from the maintenance teams that waxed the floor or cleaned the windows. Nothing.

He pulled up to the iron rungs to park his bike just like the previous night.

Fresno was silent and this gave Mike chills down his spine. He saw Ace's trademark Tomos moped chained up. Beside were two other racers that Mike didn't immediately recognize. He could imagine that they belonged to "Wall" Edwards and Ramsey. The knowledge they were inside gave Mike an uneasy feeling and he considered turning back.

*Do you want to be labelled a coward for life?*

"Screw it," Mike said aloud and slipped the tire into the iron grating.

He didn't lock up his bike as conscientiously as he had before, this time only winding the chain once around the front tire and loosely around the body. He turned toward the main entrance and saw that the front doors were oddly enough wide open.

## The Mallrats pt 2

Mike knew the Mall closed at 9:30 pm. and most of staff took off to their homes by 10:30 the very latest. The gaping door beckoned him forth and he knew then and there that Ace was inside waiting for him.

As Mike approached the door he saw that it wasn't opened normally but wasn't exactly pried open either. It was more like door had been chewed open. As strange as that sounded, the door had serrated edges near the locks all around with mangled shards of metal protruding as if some animal had come along and taken a hearty sample.

But what kind of animal had that kind of power in its jaws or intuition to break just the lock portion alone? And what about the alarm system? Why were bells not ringing or lights flashing?

The only thing that Mike could see as he peeked in was the dim emergency lights that came on whenever there was a power failure. Whatever was in there with Ace had wiped out the main electrical supply and possibly the circuits controlling the alarm system as well.

He knelt down and pulled out the carving knife from the McDonald's knapsack.

*Have a McHappy Day*

He placed the blade between the waistline of his jean shorts and the side of his thigh as opposed to the front like he had originally intended. He felt the cold steel against his bare leg and this gave him the desire to urinate badly.

He entered cautiously, holding his breath. He could feel his heart pound against his chest with fear of the unknown as a trickle of sweat danced down the side of his red cheeks. The quartz display of his digital watch read 11:00 p.m.

The Mall was disturbingly barren. There were no signs of life present anywhere and the only sounds he heard were the sounds of his Nikes on the tiles and the annoying hum of the emergency lights. He walked down the exact same aisle he had before in silence.

There was the Union bank with its "Ask Us About G.I.C.'s" banner hanging outside. He could also see one of the screen savers active on the dormant computers as multicoloured pyramids floated on the console.

Swallowing deeply, he ventured further on up the aisle. He passed by the clothing store "Aeropostale" and regarded the faceless mannequins with anatomically correct nipples poking through tight black shirts in the display window.

His hand glided to the hilt of the knife exposed from his right thigh, expecting danger every step he took. Finally, he no longer could stand the maddening silence and he called out, "Is anyone here?" in a voice cracking with fear.

Initially he was greeted with the same stony silence but as the seconds ticked by he began to hear some faint high pitched sounds in the distance. They weren't screams of pain or fright but more like fine crackles from a short wave radio or something.

## The Mallrats pt 2

He started to feel very uneasy and decided he was way out of his league here. All he had to do was double back to his bike, ride the hell out of here and try his best to avoid the gang on future days. Leave the hero business up to guys that were more suited to it, like Bruce Lee or the Terminator.

He zipped by "Abercrombie and Fitch" and the Union Bank.

*Just a few more steps to salvation that's all there is just a few more steps*

but when he looked for the open door, he saw a poorly demarked object standing in his way.

The thing (for lack of a better term) stood much taller than himself with a large, bulky frame. From the dim light he could barely make out the large rounded shoulders and widely spread legs like a quarterback about to make a tackle. He could make out fine prickles stemming out from the creature's outline that resembled a carpet-like coating.

The silhouette of two pointed ears poked ominously upwards like small radar antennae and he saw two ruby-red dots staring at him that must have been its eyes. Mike's fears magnified when he noticed it's large frame heaving up and down rhythmically as it sized him up. This was a living, breathing creature that was definitely not of this world that looked...well...looked a lot like "Wall" Edwards in fact.

He noticed that the creature dragged a large object beside it that looked a lot like a human form. A dead human form. The limbs hung limply on the tiled floor, head hung down in terminal slumber.

A metallic object on the upper breast of the corpse's shirt caught Michael's eye. It was badge reading "Fashion Fair Mall Security".

*Holy shit, it killed the guard! Whatever the hell it is killed the guard! What about the other security staff? Probably dead too. Are they the ones that killed the LaRye girl and **mutilated** her? No way out! Ohmygodohmygodohmygod!*

Mike stifled his scream and realized that there was no exit for him now. He made a b-line from the front entrance and rapidly scooted down the inactivated escalator away from the beast.

He could hear the slight swishing sound of its fur as it clumsily dragged its way towards the escalator in pursuit. On all four legs!

Mike's breathing increased to a pant as he hurried down the steps and felt the urge to vomit.

*Oh God please make me escape the escalator monster please don't let him chop off my legs Oh God why am I doing this?????*

As he moved swiftly down each step that annoying shrill sound

increased in intensity. It wasn't a radio. No, not a radio at all. It was like a language... a form of communication between the other were-beasts inhabiting the Mall after hours.

Mike could contain his fear no longer and as he reached the bottom of the escalator, he screamed.

## The Mallrats pt 2

"IS ANYBODY HERE? HELP ME! SOMEONE PLEASE HELP ME!!!"

The large animal thankfully stopped at the top of the escalator, preventing any access back to the main floor. Its red eyes gleamed with ferocity. Mike could see fine wisps of steam coming from its snout as it exhaled.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?!?" he shrieked. "WHAT HAVE I DONE?"

He then burst into tears, ashamed of himself.

*Indiana Jones wouldn't act this way, would he? Yes, but you're not him, are you? Shutupshutupshutupshutup already!*

Now locked in the lower Mall level, Mike made out two new well,...human-sized *rats* ...really in the ominous darkness, similar to the one at the top of the stairs. One of them was thin and lanky with much longer pointed ears on either side of its skull. It held its arms out at its sides like a sumo wrestler ready to grapple. It really didn't have hands but rather hair-covered claws with long pointed needles for nails. Despite the poor illumination the emergency lights provided, Mike could make out a long poi

## The Mallrats pt 2

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