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This lengthy horror tale I wrote when I was 20 years old (now 41) I have since re-visited it to update it and make things like streets, landmarks etc accurate and real. I was going to re-vamp the whole story but it has a certain "novice writer" charm to it, so I left the vast majority as is. Enjoy!



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THE MALLRATS

The sun shone its radiant beams down upon Fresno, California. Today was no different from any other typical Californian scene: bright out and hot enough to allow the half-naked roller bladers to shoot down the roads listening to their Ipods, couples strolling along with their lovers (same sex and otherwise) and countless would-be actors chain smoking Pall-Malls going from agency to agency hoping for their "big break". Life was operating as usual, including the scene at Fresno High School.

The large, metallic bell rang shrilly at promptly 3:30 pm signalling the exasperated students to turn off their minds from the seemingly endless stream of useless knowledge their teachers spewed out.

The kids streamed down the cement stairs of the school, running to their bicycles, busses or simply going home by foot. Most of the kids bore wide grins on their faces and walked with their chums and girl or boyfriends in small cliques, reviewing the current circulating gossip around school.

Mike Cromwell was an exception to the social norm. He walked by himself, clutching his blue Adidas bag with his left hand, weighed down by the multitudes of textbooks and notebooks he lugged along with him every day.

He was of medium height for a freshman fifteen year old, but was visibly overweight, with a large protruding belly that often lifted his shirts about a quarter inch from his belt line.

He was embarrassed by the fact that his mother would have to buy his jeans in the "husky" department of the Fashion Fair Mall's clothing shops while all the others kids were easily slipping into "slim fit" styles.

His brown hair hung in straight strands, making him look like a great Beatles impersonator, which unfortunately was not the current trend around the 2000's high school scene.

He regarded all the "hip" youths with their long curly hair, designer labels and cigarettes dangling from their lips with envy. He wanted to be "in"; part of the socially elite that either made or broke one's junior high school experience.

He sadly shuffled along the winding side streets thinking about Beverly Hocksetter, the beautiful redhead in his geography course that he had a crush on since the fifth grade.

He wasn't stupid enough to believe that she would <u>actually</u> go out with him, he with the husky jeans and cheap imitation shirts bought at discount shops; he the labelled "bookworm" who studied hard so we would have no trouble disciplining himself for the challenges of high school learning. No, Beverly was way out of his league.

She resided in the upper echelons of the social elite at Fresno High. Mike figured that when Beverly made it into high school, she would the type to be voted "prom queen" by the graduating class. She possessed the power to have any man she wanted and knew it.

So why the hell would she choose to go out with Bill "Ace" Stevens and his gang of idiot followers? The answer was simple enough: he was rugged, athletic and tough as nails. If you were looking for a fight, Ace

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was sure to take you on whether he was twice or half your height. He just enjoyed the essence of intimidation; he had it perfected to an art. The other kids were so petrified of him and didn't dare go against his wishes in any way. There was even a circulating rumour that he carried a switchblade knife on him and smoked pot from time to time.

Mike didn't doubt it, but his heart ached at the fact that Beverly was sucked into his lecherous talons like a fly on glue. His mother would always say, "If she doesn't want you, then she's not worth having, dear." That was nice and all, however it still didn't serve to douse the crush she had on him which burned in his gut every day.

Mike idly kicked a small pebble in his way and watched as it fell between the bars of a street grating to make an echoing plunge in the water below.

It was after the rock made its connection with the water that he heard the revving sound of the motor of the moped as it approached. He nervously peered over his shoulder to observe the oncomer. As Mike's luck would have it, "Ace" Stevens was riding his Tomos gas powered moped directly at him. Mike saw that his teeth were barred back in a half-snarl and his eyes read pure hatred. His short, black hair was wild with cowlicks pointing this way and that as he hunched over the handlebars like a hawk swooping down on its prey.

He's crazy, I swear he is.

Mike quickly darted to the side of the road, but as Ace flew by, he still managed to give a powerful shove to Mike's chest. Mike tumbled backward from the impact right onto his bulging schoolbag.

Ace stopped his racer with a screech of the tires a few metres ahead that left a black gash in the pavement. He pointed a long finger at Mike's fallen form and laughed heartily.

"Hey bookworm! Watch your step!" he hollared.

Beverly sat on the back of his bike seat and had her arms wrapped tightly around her boyfriend's waist. Her head shook with laughter allowing her long, red locks to undulate like a stream. The trace amounts of eye-liner she wore accented her green eyes to the point that they looked like gemstones. Her mouth opened to join her boyfriend in mockery of the hapless loser, sprawled on the pavement like a slug. Despite her cruelty, Mike still found her to be more beautiful than ever. His heart pounded against his chest with both fear and longing.

"Fatso, ain'tcha gonna say something to your woman here?" Ace taunted.

Mike avoided their eyes and tried to get to his feet.

"Just a minute here. I ain't finished," Ace continued. "If you like a girl enough, aren't you gentleman supposed to kiss her feet? Huh? Isn't that what you fuckin' nebs are supposed to do?"

Mike ignored him and had almost made it to his feet when Ace violently kicked out one of his top-siders and knocked Mike back on his bottom again.

"Pork-chop! Maybe you're deaf too! I said, kiss her feet like a good slave!"

Mike looked up at him and he began to feel his eyes swell with fluid. He fought the urge to sob in front of Beverly and this caused the part of his eyes closest to his nose to burn.

Ace held up his hands as if he were refereeing a championship hockey game.

"Okay. Am I gonna have to beat the shit out of you too?"

Mike's eyes widened at the threat. "Nnnnno..no.. I'll do it," he stammered.

He then closed his eyes and swallowed with shame. He neared his pudgy face towards Beverly's brown sandals that had rings of dirt around the rim.

He pursed his thick lips and quickly planted them on the tip of shoe that smelled of a sickly mixture of leather, grass and extinguished cigarettes. As soon as his lips made contact with the shoe, both Beverly and Ace cackled with laughter that echoed in Mike's mind over and over. Michael could swear that for a fleeting second, Beverlyâ seyes shone red.

"See you later, rump roast!" Ace hollared, kicking his speeder into gear once again and tearing down the road.

Mike wiped his lips with the back of his hand in thorough disgust. He spat into the grass and gathered his schoolbag. Some of the other kids from school were laughing at him across the street as he dusted off his jeans. He tried his best to shrug it off, but his pride was wounded and that was baggage he just couldn't shake. The tears soon started flowing down his full cheeks.

He then began the good 30 minute walk home from school, not looking behind him and trying desperately to put up an iron wall between himself and his cat-calling peers.

Mike's house was typical of the Californian suburbs on West Pasa Tiempo Avenue. A modest, two bedroom bungalow with overhanging eaves troughs that were lodged with leaves and shit from raccoons as they danced on the roof every night. The pink bricks seemed almost permanently stained with age and the sides of the green carpeting covering his verandah were slightly curled at the edges from moisture build-up.

Mike scurried his way up those same steps and opened the screen door which he had to jam open with his hip while he attempted to open the heavy wooden front door. The door itself was white with new paint chips falling off every day, exposing the decaying wood beneath. He rapped on the door with his knuckles, hoping his mother would have the television turned down low enough to let him in so he wouldn't have to fumble about in his husky jeans for the key.

After a few seconds of waiting, the door did thankfully open as Marge Cromwell greeted her son that she so deeply loved.

Marge was a hard-working single mom, doing the breakfast shift at the Dennyâ s restaurant from 6:00 a.m. â 2:00 p.m.at 1746 West Shaw Avenue, open 24 hours, smiles are free!

She was certainly attractive, but was by no means a knockout. She had accumulated bruises on her buttocks from the cheeky all-night truckers that tried to pinch her ass as she hustled their â 20 minutes or freeâ meal deals to their awaiting chops.

Her shoulder-length brown hair was tied back into a ponytail showing streaks of grey running through. At forty years of age, she wasn't old by any means, but she showed subtle signs of the aging process. The early creases of "crow's feet" formed along the edges of her eyes and her previous svelte figure was growing slightly plump in the middle. She wore so much blush and eye-liner that Mike comically compared her to a parrot or clown.

Marge was wearing an ugly polka-dotted apron that had been a gift from her husband years ago before he decided to leave her and their little boy high and dry. Marge felt some sentimental value for that apron since it

was one of the few items her skinflint husband Carl had splurged to buy her in their stormy marriage. Paradoxically, she also felt malice towards the same apron as it secretly revealed Carl's ideology that women were meant to be domestic slaves and not a hell of a lot more than that.

She had been very "anti-men" for years after her split, when Michael was at the tender age of three. She had argued with Carl over and over again not to fight in front of little Mikey, but Carl would argue and say that Mike was too young and "fuckin' stupid" to be aware of the circumstances surrounding him. Marge disagreed vehemently, feeling that every harsh word from his mouth silently penetrated Mike's mind and soul, not matter how underdeveloped it was at the time. Just another rung in the ladder that ultimately led to their downfall.

Marge had vowed to stay away from all men, grouping them all into the same category of "chauvinistic assholes" however as she got to nurture her little boy and see him develop into the fine, upstanding youth he was today, she regained a new faith in the male species.

She bent down and placed a wet smooch on Mike's reddened cheeks. She noticed that his eyes had a red luster around them as if he had just gone swimming in a vat of chlorine.

"Sweetheart! What's wrong? You been crying?" she asked, slipping a comforting arm around his round shoulders as the large front door closed.

"Aw mom... it's the kids at school. They're picking on me again as usual."

Marge's eyebrows started to crinkle with worry. "They didn't harm you physically did they? Because if they did I'll phone their mothers personally and..."

Mike held up his hand as if stopping traffic. "Oh no, mom. They didn't beat me up or anything like that... it's just that.. I dunno.. I wish I was cool like them." Besides, their mothers wouldn't give shit if you called or not, he mentally added.

Marge ran a tender hand through his mop-top hair.

"When you get to be rich and famous, which you will be, we'll see who cares about cool then. I think you're cool and anyone who really gets to know you will think the same thing too."

Mike smiled to please his concerned mother but deep down he was well aware that no-one, at least at his school, would make the effort to get to know him.

He then turned away from her and made his way into his room, with the heavy bag of books slung over his shoulder like Santa with all of his gifts.

He heard Marge's high heels click all the way into the kitchen to go back to preparing his dinner which, at this point, smelt like a bizarre mixture between pot roast and liver n' onions.

He lay on his back on his single bed which groaned slightly under his weight. He placed his arms behind his head as he reclined and idly gazed at the retro posters of his heroes plastered on his wall.

There was Harrison Ford in his Indiana Jones garb, thrashing his whip like a ring master keeping the treacherous Nazis at bay. How he longed to be as cool as Indy. He would love the chance to use that whip on "Ace" Stevens' exposed buttocks. He grinned at his mental fantasy and relished in the revenge.

His eyes then drifted to the second poster showing a bare-chested Bruce Lee with parallel streaks of blood along his torso from an encounter with a worthy adversary in "Enter the Dragon". Mike then imagined his own protruding belly transformed into rock-like muscle, capable of dishing out punishment to his enemies through a mastery of the martial arts.

Finally there was his ultimate action hero, Arnold Schwarzenegger in his "Terminator" get up, kicking-ass with his fully automated submachine gun armed to the hilt. He imagined himself behind those tinted glasses riding a motorcycle instead of his Schwinn ten-speed with rusting spokes.

Mike often thought of his estranged father and wondered if he was like any of the heroes watching over his room. He had only a vague recollection of what the man looked like since his mother had discarded the countless photos taken of them shortly after the marriage dissolved. All she ever said of him, excluding the endless poisonous insults, was that he was a successful advertising executive. Based on this information and his own mental image, Mike doubted strongly that his dad was any type of macho swashbuckler, but probably resembled a neurotic accountant type like Woody Allen. He sighed and figured that if he took after anyone in this family, it was this nebbish persona he had built around his father.

Life was certainly not like it was in the movies, but Mike had a faint wisp of hope somewhere in the recesses of his heavy frame that retribution would be his some day in some way.

His thoughts were interrupted by the high-pitched call of his mother indicating dinner on the table. Mike felt that it was much too early for dinner, so he quickly glanced at his digital watch and found that he had fantasized close to two hours away, as the grey quartz numbers read 6:00 p.m.

He rolled off his bed and sauntered into the dining room, stomach somewhat churning at the thought of another one of his mother's horrific "mystery meat" meals that he had to eat completely to spare her feelings.

Mike idly ran his fork in between the hunks of meat bathed in the steaming brown sauce on his plate as Marge nervously wiped her hands on her apron.

"Honey, I'm really concerned about you. Maybe.. I dunno.. maybe you could see someone about your problems and..."

Mike angrily glared at her from her plate.

"Oh, so now I'm crazy, is that it? Why don't you just say "psychiatrist" or the "looney bin" while you're at, eh mom?"

"Michael.. I didn't mean it that way at all. You're not crazy at all. I just think maybe someone could..."

Mike threw his fork on the plate with a clatter. "Maybe what I need is maybe.. a <u>father</u> or something? What a novel idea, huh? Yeah, sure, maybe that would give me some guts to stand up to those assholes that bug me at school! You didn't think of that when he had one foot out the door, didja?" The veins in his neck were bulging out and his pulse was racing. He felt a rush of adrenaline course through him as he unleashed his anger.

Marge averted her eyes and looked sadly at the tiled floor of the kitchen.

"Mike... your words hurt me more than poison. You know I would do nothing to harm you. I love you very much." A tear trickled down her cheek, forming a black streak of eyeliner.

Michael was instantly aware of his harsh words and he found himself needing to fight back tears as well.

"Mom.. I'm sorry I didn't mean what I said..."

"YES YOU DID!!" Marge screamed between sobs. "YOU MEANT EVERY WORD!" After a few heavy breaths, she calmed down a little and continued softly, "I just wish you were happy with your life. That's all I want for you."

Mike stared down at his half-eaten plate of food. He had no appetite at all to finish his meal. He picked up his grey windbreaker that was draped over the chair and slipped into it.

He went up to Marge and placed a soft kiss on her moist cheek. The feeling of her pancake make-up mixed with tears as it contacted his lips made Mike sickly think that he was kissing a rock with moss growing on it after a rainshower.

"I'm gonna go to the Mall to try and calm down a bit. I need to forget about school."

His mother nodded in agreement. "Yes.. yes I think that would be good for you as well. Be careful on your bicycle."

"I will ma," he said as he closed the front door. Mike then made his way around the side of the house where his green Schwinn bike was propped up. It was nothing compared to "Ace" Stevens' Tomos gas powered moped with sparkling chrome finish, but it still got him from A to B despite its rusting spokes and lack of flashy gears.

He placed his heavy bottom on the black leather seat which had small tears in it from use over the years. Mike felt the tires sag under his weight which served as a mental reminder to inflate them again with his hand-held pump they had stored in the garage.

He flicked up the kickstand with the heel of his soiled Nikes whose previous whiteness used to shine as bright as the Fresno sun but were now reduced to a dull, brown colour reminiscent of his mother's meals.

He started pumping the worn pedals with effort to propel himself off the driveway and through the weaving side streets that would ultimately lead to the Fashion Fair Shopping Mall.

As he pedalled furiously, he knew that going to the Mall wouldn't totally relieve his conscience of the problems he experienced with his peers. In fact, going there would probably augment it. The Mall was the prime hangout for students of Fresno High to smoke their cigarettes or generally hang out, while he stayed in the confines of his room and focused on his studies like the good boy that he was. There was a good chance that Beverly and Ace Stevens would be there, usually in the Food Court area, downing chocolate milkshakes and intimidating any of the younger kids from Fresno High they caught milling around their "territory" as it were. Paradoxically, the Mall contained his only solace from those pressures: the "Man's Best Friend" pet shop.

Michael loved that shop, seeing the cuddly faces of Cocker Spaniels pressed up against the glass houses that enclosed them, aching for a master to love them that they could love back. Seeing those animals reminded Mike that there were others in the world striving for affection other than himself. They were his allies in his quest for the "Almighty Acceptance" that was so lacking in his life.

There was no judgement calls here; the pets would take on any owner whether you were 1000 pounds or a mere twig. They didn't care how you looked or dressed or smelled or what kind of bike you rode. It warmed Mike's heart knowing this and fuelled his drive to reach the Mall as soon as he could. His hefty legs pumped vigorously, pushing his bike to the maximum and causing beads of sweat to form along his straining brow.

His Schwinn coursed down the streets like a green bullet and since he was a tad overzealous, Mike had to slam on his brakes to avoid running through a red light at the busy intersection of North Maniposa Street and Shaw Avenue.

He could see the lights of the Mall in the distance. He figured that he would have about another five minutes of riding before reaching the spot outside the Mall containing the rusty bike racks to lock up his Schwinn.

The light turned lime green and Mike continued his furious pedalling, inches beside the cars in the lane. He felt his chest heave and his pudgy cheeks reddened from his efforts.

He could see the Mall logo approaching on the large black backboard. Two letter \hat{a} Fa sa in lower case calligraphy with the caption: "Fashion Fair Mall: over 150 shops for your convenience" jumped out at any passer-by. Mike steered through the immense parking lot which was about a quarter full at this time of day. His Schwinn whizzed by the parked cars and under the huge concrete covering the lot for those nasty rainy Californian days. He passed by the huge "Macy's" department store doors and reached the general Mall entrance with the same \hat{a} double Fa logo hanging overhead.

He slipped the bike's front tire into one of the iron gratings near the main doors. He then carefully unwound the long chain that was wrapped like a serpent around the body of the bike. After slipping it through the rusty spokes and around the frame like Christmas wrapping, Mike put on the finishing touches by snapping the lock shut, convinced it was now steal-proof.

He wiped his sweaty brow with the sleeve of his grey windbreaker, leaving a trail of moisture along its surface. Hooking his thumbs through the belt loops of his husky jeans, he hoisted them upwards, feeling them encroach mildly on his genitals.

He then marched through the front entrance of the Mall, brown eyes darting around to detect the whereabouts of any potential predators.

The Mall wasn't particularly busy in the middle of the week, but picked up on the weekends and pre-holidays. There were mothers pushing infants in rented strollers, an elderly couple walking peacefully hand-in-hand and several kids slightly younger than Michael running madly for escalator to reach the GameStop location.

Michael glanced at the various stores and services he passed: Union Bank, Abercrombie and Fitch, Aeropostale and Lucky Jeans.

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