

1minutestories round 1



Munich, Prague and Szeged
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Paranoia in Train Station

text -- transcribed need to find

1minutetopic: paranoia in a train station
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Last revised: 11 December 2006

Dirty Orange

You don't want to check too often, but you are sure that the sinister-looking man with the black beard is looking at you. Staring at you. You glance up, as if casually looking at the clock above his right shoulder and shudder involuntarily when you see he is staring at you with a burning and penetrating gaze, as though he was trying to bore into your mind.

You look away quickly and tell your self you are just imagining things. But you can't sit here any more. You should get up and go some where out of sight of the man. Then maybe you can calm down a little.

Feeling that the strange man's gaze is weighting you down onto the hard orange bench, it seems that the plastic is becoming harder and your limbs and head are becoming heavier. In a moment of panic, you struggle to your feet. Not daring to look again in his direction, you turn left and start walking as nonchalantly as you can down the platform. You feel the two hot spots of his gaze burning in to your back, and you stifle the urge to scream. What are you going to do if he starts following you?

You don't walk too fast or draw attention to yourself. Running would only show fear, and fear just attracts them. So you force yourself to walk casually, straightening up and lifting your head. Walking hunched over like you were looks pretty weak.

You can still feel the strange man's presence. Your heart is pounding so hard that you are sure the other people waiting on the platform can hear it. As you walk slowly along the platform, you glance at the people around you. You pass a couple of grungy teenagers holding hands. The young woman turns and follows you with her dark gaze as you walk by. You are sure she can hear your heart pounding. And now, against your will your breathing is a ragged pant. You can't seem to get enough air.

You are walking slowly towards the vending machines, which you can not take your eyes off of because you can see the arm of a man standing on the other side of the machines -- the arm, the black jacket covering it, is eerily familiar to you. He is there, waiting for you just on the other side of the vending machines.

You slow your pace, although your heart beats even faster. You take one hesitant step. And than another. The man in the black coat swings toward you, staring at you with his evil black, burning eyes.

You stumble backwards, nearly falling, before you plunge into the crowd. They are all staring at you now.

You run hard, as hard as you can, away from the platform down the connecting hallway. You look behind you to see if he is still following you. You see a mother, bending over her child in a stroller. She and the child are staring at you with malevolence. Everyone is staring at you.

You continue to run, turning down an unused passage way. You run away from the crowd of staring eyes. All you can see in front of you is the dirty orange and white tiles of the walls, the grey floor and ceiling, humming with glaring fluorescent light. Orange and dirty white tiles, blurring together.

The passage way opens suddenly onto a room. You stumble to a stop, bend over and put your hands on your knees, gulping air, trying to catch your breath. The room is rather small, but glowing with the crackling neon light. You reach out to touch the cold ceramic.

You straighten and turn, dread filling your heart, to look at the passage down which you ran. But it is not there. The small circular room is closed: no passage way, no door. Just files of orange and white tiles. You spin around but you see nothing but orange and white, orange, white, orange.

You crouch down, covering your head with your arms. The room seems to be getting smaller. The walls are moving toward you. You scream, giving yourself over to hysteria. You scream until your lungs are empty and still the screaming goes on. You open your eyes and see an orange-white blur so close that you could reach out and touch it. The scream lowers in pitch and the orange and white blur slow. The train comes to a full stop, the brakes falling silent as passengers quietly board the train. You wait your until the others have entered the train and then you, too, board and slump into one of the dirty orange plastic seats and stare out at the ugly night gliding past the window.

1minutetopic: paranoia in a train station
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Romeo runs dry

I never should have let her go down to Cabo with those guys. I knew it! It's not that I don't trust her, but, well, with all the drinking and stuff... I mean when she says "friends" I know she means "a bunch of guys." This isn't good for her. It's not good for us! I can just imagine. She's so careless. I'll bet she even forgot to bring her swimming suit. Great! I knew she'll wind up playing in the waves in panties and a T-shirt... I'm not suspicious, but what do you expect will happen! I'm no fool, I know what guys want. I never should have let her go! Let's see... I just crossed the border at San Isidro I hope I can get there before it's too late! I guess I'll have to slow down in a couple hours. These Mexican highways are awfully dark at night. Till then, I'll put the peddle down. Damn it! I hope I'm not too late... I never should have let her go! I'll bet she catches herpes or gets pregnant or runs off with some guy! There's a sign... How far is Cabo? Twenty kilometer to Rosario? Hmm... How far is it from Rosarito to Cabo... Why does the car seem to be going slower... It can't be *that* hot? The peddle doesn't seem to do much. Shit! I hope the motor holds out!

Hey... wait a minute. The engine is dying NOW. No! No! This can't be good! She's gotta be in danger! I have to get there. SHIT!! The thing died. I can only keep it rolling a little... Oh, crap! Can't make it over the hill! OK, I'll park it here. Just perfect... a cactus patch! Come on, Start! Yes! Yes! It start... Oh no! Come on, baby, start! Start!

Romeo never did get it to start. It was a good ten minutes before he realized it was out of gas. Another twenty before he realized he had no gas can, and he actually managed to hitchhike to a far distant gas station an hour and a half later before he realized he left his wallet back home in Irving. In all the excitement of finding his passport, he had left his wallet on the counter.

He spent the whole next day trying to get back to the border where his parents had to wire him money and on Day 3 returned to discover that his car had been towed by the police. He got it back on Day 5 after spending \$350 on fees and finally made it to Cabo on Day 7 after a very long ride down the Baja Peninsula, only to arrive thirty minutes after Julie's return flight departed. By the time he had made it back to LA, he had lost his job and spent over \$750 on fees, tolls and taxes. His parents hadn't really recovered from the panicked collect call he had made on Day 2 from San Diego and generally considered their son a total loss. Julie had a great week with her friends Meg and Tina and had decided that Romeo was much too jealous, controlling and paranoid to warrant her time. She had planned to dump him even before getting home and hearing the 23 panic-stricken messages he had left her.

What is the moral of this story? RELAX! No one like uptight-stress balls. Oh, and don't forget you're wallet when you're going to rescue someone.

1minutetopic: prince charming runs out of gas in a small border town on the way to rescue the princess
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El Destino

Prince Charming, who doesn't like to perspire, is streaming with sweat. The uncomfortable thing, however, is that the streaming sweat is soon caked with dust and it feels like every pore on his body is filled with grit. The dot by the side of the road ahead has been increasing in size for the last forty minutes -- but he has not arrived yet. He tries to keep his mind focused on the dot and not to think about his aching feet and the sweat and dust and his lungs burning with the dry heat. But as he concentrates on the dot, it starts to swim. Maybe it is a heat mirage rising up from the blistering highway. Maybe it is his suffering heat stroke. He forces himself to focus on the black dot as it enlarges and swims before his eyes. Suddenly, several black dots are waving before his eyes and he has to blink several times to be able to focus again. When he stops blinking, he sees the black dot has taken the form of a large tree shading a small building. Prince Charming's heart leaps with hope and his pace picks up. After what seems like another hour, he is nearly at the building, which seems to be a small general store. There are three trucks parked out back and, as he nears, he sees, to his increasing joy, what looks like a gas pump at the far side of the store. With renewed energy (which also feels like his last chance), he jogs into the shade of the huge tree. The shade is black and suddenly he feels much cooler. Although there is enough residual heat on his skin, he realizes with dismay, that he probably has a sunburn -- his nose is probably already turning an unpleasant shade of red. He pauses long enough to catch his breath, and as his breathing becomes more regular, he hears the plinky, tinny sounds of mariachi music playing on a radio in the store. He mounts the steps to the narrow veranda and smiles at the crooked sign above the door: "El Destino". A rather grandiose name for a border town gas station, he thinks. As he enters the dark coolness of the store, he stands blinking again as his eyes adjust to the darkness. He looks around at the racks of chips and coolers filled with beer and sodas. The store smells slightly of dust and fried onion and bright streams of crepe paper flutter listlessly in the wake of a huge, slowly turning fan. The counter is occupied by a gigantic cash register which looks like an antique and countless jars and cartons filled with candy, matches, gum, lighters, firecrackers and maps. He doesn't see anyone, and politely waits a minute or two before trying to peer into the darkness behind the counter. The radio cackles and a deep male voice starts another Mexican song. "Uh... excuse me," he murmurs into the depthless cooness behind the counter. He hears a slight rustle, like the long skirt of a woman, but no one appears. He glances around once more, noting again the gas pump which he can see out the window, and a large head of a stuffed elk in the corner. Turning again to the counter, he asks, with a little more volume, "Hello? Anyone there?" Again, he hears rustling. The darkness behind the counter slowly begins to take the form of a woman. As if materializing from the dust of the room, she appears standing behind the counter. She is small and delicate but radiates a strength that the prince has never before seen in a woman. She leans onto the counter and her features become more distinct. She has a beautiful face and smooth brown skin that makes the prince think of rich coffee. Her thick black hair is pulled back behind her head and he can see strands of pure white streaming back from her temples. Her eyes are a deep, deep blue -- almost black -- and he feels

himself sinking into them as he gazes at her. They are the most appealing eyes he has ever seen.

"I didn't hear you pull up," her voice is smooth and deep and melodic, like a lullaby. The prince feels his heart melt and his manhood respond.

"I didn't pull up -- I walked up," he explained, shaking himself out of the trance-like state he had fallen into. He is conscious again of the radio music and the sound of his boots shuffling on the floor.

"Sorry, ma'am, if I startled you," he said immediately embarrassed because it is he who is startled.

"No problema," she sighed, "What can I get you?" She tips her head slightly to the left, her face filled with playful inquisitiveness. The prince feels he could cry with joy.

"Well, I ran out of gas a few miles back. And I'd be grateful if you could lend me a can so I could take some gas back to the car. I can pay for it -- the gas," he added hastily, hoping she didn't assume that he expected her to give him something for free. Why did he suddenly feel like a child? The prince looks again in to the woman's eyes, guessing that she must certainly be over forty, thinking these Mexicans age differently, you know. He is trying not to look her up and down, like the hungry dog he feels like.

"No gas today," she sighs.

"No gas? But, this is a gas station, right? I mean, I saw the pump outside."

"It's a gas station, mi amor, but we got no gas today," she says as she turns to come out from behind the counter toward him. In the brief moment when she is not facing him, he gets a good look at her profile. She is wearing a white T-shirt, jeans and cowboy boots. A large turquoise and silver pendant hangs between her large, shapely breasts. She is so beautiful, it takes his breath away.

"N- no gas? he stammers.

"No gas."

Snapping back to reality, the prince realizes he has fallen into the trance of her eyes again.

"Well, you see, I'm in a kind of a hurry. there's this princess I need to rescue -- today if possible. So you see, it is rather important that I get on my way."

"A princess?" purrs the woman, turning slowly, seductively towards him. She puts her hands on her hips and sways ever so slightly and suggestively that the thick braid of her hair swings around her shoulder as if on its own power to rest between her breasts. It dangles to her thighs.

"Is this princess of yours more beautiful than me?"

Dumbfounded, the prince blinks several times in rapid succession. For a moment he was sure he could see her dark brown nipples under her pristine T-shirt.

"I don't know. Sorry, ma'am, I've never seen her before."

“Never seen her before?” the woman rests one elbow on the counter and looking at him with an amused smile.

“No, but I am sure you can appreciate the urgency of the situation,” he said trying to focus on the fact that, although undoubtedly beautiful, this woman is probably twice his age and he probably shouldn’t be having such, uh, personal thoughts about her.

“So... perhaps you could sell me some gas from one of the trucks outside.”

“No gas in ’em,” she replied shifting her weight sinuously from one foot to the other. The prince wished that she would just quit moving since his erection was already so painful he was sure it was going to burst the band on his boxers.

“Gas truck comes on Thursday.”

“Thursday!” he whimpered, “But that’s tree days from now!”

Suddenly, without his noticing that she had moved, the woman was standing very close to him.

“Yes, three days. Long enough to relax a little. Maybe even enjoy yourself a little.”

She was wrapping herself around him and his skin felt like it was melting into her where they touched.

“Relax...?”

“You can always rescue the princess afterwards, no? Why not stay for a cool beer and relax for a while.”

Now, the only thought in his mind was a murmuring “yes, mi amor, yes” as he fell deeper and deeper into her dark eyes.

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Historical Betrayal

Everyone knows of the sinking of the Titanic off the coast of Newfoundland in 1912. Everyone has heard of the captain who was overzealous to make quick work of the maiden voyage, the poor handling and cold embrittlement of the ship, and of course the infamous iceberg. But almost no one living remembers the early imperialistic dreams of Canada and the Canadian navy's super secret weapon, code-named "Operation Ice Breaker" which was brought to a premature end with the death of 1200 civilians and the 25 crew members of HMI Shear Domination.

It all goes back to boundary and fishing rights disputes between mighty Canada and its fledgling neighbor to the south, the so-called "United States of America."

Despite the technological superiority of the Canadian para-military Mounties, several international disputes had been decided (by an underdog-favoring and biased, bleeding heart liberal ad hoc court in England) in favor of the more vulnerable United States. Some of the Canadians felt this to be a necessary concession to improve conditions in the US and foster its independence in order to stem the flood of illegal immigration northward into Canada. However many Canadians, flush with their successful conquest of the NW territories and the subjugation of barbaric hordes of rebellious whale-bone-ax wielding Inuit, felt it a great affront to their manifest destiny to concede anything, no matter how minor, to such a weak neighbor that, sooner or later, should surely be annexed.

Accordingly, at high levels pressure was brought to bear on coming up with a "final solution" for the liberation of their backwards southern neighbors from their abject squallier and ignorance.

Some of the less-advanced submarine technologies developed in Canada (then known as ewe-boats, as they had the general shape of bloated sheep) had recently been licensed to German enterprises for manufacture. The resulting German "U-Boats" were unable to compete with the impeccable Canadian quality, but they were much cheaper.

The Canadians, however, were saving the best for their own military enterprises. Secretly in their white-camouflaged, dome-shaped ocean-going laboratories, called Iguana-labs (or "igloos" for short) they had designed a super-secret prototype ewe-boat with a heat pump system (based on an alcohol producing fermentation process for primary energy) for warming sea water to create steam for ultra-quiet turbine propulsion, while depending on the freezing of seawater on the upper surface of the ship for cooling, and also for camouflage. Such a great amount of heat was required to create steam that large amounts of ice had to be created from the seawater to liberate the needed energy. The end result was a fully armed, iceberg capable of moving silently at speeds of up to 30 knots and diving below the surface or simply remaining completely hidden in broad day light. This prototype was to be followed on by a large production run of ewe-boats for the up coming conquest of North America which was to take place in the years of 1915-1917.

Initial testing of the ewe-boat HMI Shear Domination had gone quite well. It was capable of completely hiding itself beneath a ten foot thick layer of ice in eight hours, could dive

on a moments notice, and was equipped with a large, swordfish-shaped nose (the spear) for cutting the helpless fledgling navy of the US to shreds. The final test was to be a completely submerged voyage from Newfoundland to Spain and back. It was determined that a crew of no less than 25 sailors drinking continuously would be required to absorb all the byproduct alcohol from the fermentation required for the run. So as to not disrupt the cod fishermen, they determined to start the test on the night of November 11, 1912.

As HMI Shear Domination took off, the 25 brave souls selflessly drinking away, all was well. Being Canadian and naturally concerned for the safety of all, they had consulted all the shipping registries so as to avoid all traffic in their cross Atlantic voyage.

Unfortunately, the HMS Titanic was under full steam and 12 hours ahead of schedule when it hit, broad side by the HMI Shear Domination, immediately rupturing the “unsinkable boat” made by shoddy third world workers in the UK of substandard materials. Not willing to risk exposing their super secret project, the iceberg quickly retreated to its hiding place off the Labrador coast, rescuing none of the victims of the Titanic.

To avoid political embarrassment, the whole project was scuttled and further plans were abandoned. The proposed invasion was permanently put on hold as the Canadians were busy with World War I.

1minutetopic: truth about a historical fact
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Roanoke

“Roanoke” -- a word carved into an oak tree was all that could be found to identify the abandoned settlement. Any trace of human presence was already losing the battle to decay and weather. The houses, formerly occupied by hearty European settlers were difficult to distinguish in their disarray, now just mossy piles of logs. A few objects remained as attribute to the previous owners -- a button, a chipped cup.

It was these remaining objects that the new settlers found the most disconcerting. Whenever someone found a tattered sleeve or broken comb that was left behind from the first settlers, women would cross themselves involuntarily and children would awake later that night, screaming with nightmares.

The awareness of the vanished settlers was always with the new inhabitants. Like, ghosts, every unexpected event or unidentified sound was attributed to the evil power that had taken all those brave souls away. It was especially difficult during the long, cold hard winters when, half-starved and half-frozen, the new families huddled together for warmth and protection, never speaking of the lost settlers for fear of bringing evil upon themselves -- although everyone recognized the thought was the bleak landscape of their struggle to survive the cold Virginia winters.

If the previous residence of Roanoke had known how much distress their disappearance would cause their successors, they would certainly have been glad to leave an explanatory note -- something like “Gone south for the winter” or “Looking for a warmer place to live.” But no one had thought to leave a message and, in fact, as they played in the Florida sun on the beach under palm trees with their newly found native friends, they never even gave a thought to Roanoke or those who would arrive after them.

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Tough Love

They met serendipitously enough, jogging in Central Park, as Benny was taking a mid-run stretch, which he had heard would help with his stiff hamstrings. Just as he was bent over, he was broadsided by Willy, who was foolishly running while looking over his shoulders at some particularly tight buttocks.

Willy hit Benny at full speed and, as a result, bent forward and somersaulted, his feet describing a perfect semicircle over Benny's back. Other than being surprised, Benny was unharmed and, as his stretch position was as stable as a sawhorse, he hadn't even fallen over. Willy, however, had broken both ankles and was in terrible pain.

Both men were simultaneously apologizing and asking if the other was hurt. Willy, tears of pain standing in his eyes, laughed when the said the exactly same thing at exactly the same moment. Benny was completely disarmed by this spontaneous humor in a moment of real pain.

Benny took over and convinced a taxi driver to pull into the park to pick Willy up. He even accompanied the young man to the hospital to ensure that he got first class treatment. Willy's good humor in the face of pain charmed Benny and he felt somehow responsible for Willy's injury. He visited Willy while he was laid up in his casts and was amazed that Willy didn't seem to hold his misfortune against anyone. He visited several times -- just to listen to his warm, infectious laughter.

Willy was flattered and surprised by Benny's attention and concern for his comfort and was enchanted by Benny's habit of stopping to think thoroughly before answering a question.

Their affection for each other grew and Benny offered to help around Willy's flat -- do anything that could make it easier for him to get around on crutches. When he arrived with a box of tools in one hand and "homemade" cannelloni and a bottle of excellent wine in the other, Willy finally let himself start hoping that they might have a future together after his ankles healed. He was already in love with Benny's dark, dark eyes and luscious eyelashes -- like a boy's -- and endearing Italian accent. Willy sensed that Benny felt the same way about him, though he had given no signs one way or the other -- until they landed in bed with each other.

Afterwards, Benny rolled toward Willy, his face clouded unexpectedly. "What is it?" Willy asked.

"Well, it feels like I know you so well. But I don't. I don't even know what you do for a living. I mean, you don't know what I do. And I just wondered if it, you know, might upset you that you don't know. You know?"

Willy didn't know, but he was more than happy to explain in detail the work he did with emotionally disturbed children as an art therapist. At one point, he had to stop to wipe tears from Benny's eyes. "What is it?" he asked again.

"That's so beautiful, what you do. I mean, you help those little twisted kids. It's so beautiful!"

Willy was moved to the point of speechlessness.

“I’m so ashamed” sobbed Benny, “I’m so ashamed of what I am and what I do. It’s so... bad. And what you do is so... good.”

After hours of dedicated care and attention, Willy was able, with the use of crayons, colored paper and glue to ascertain that Benny was some sort of low-level thug for the mafia. It appeared that Benny had never actually killed anyone -- yet -- but he had done some rather irreparable damage to some fingers and knees.

Willy could sense that his new friend was close to a nervous breakdown and used all of his professional training and lots of love to get him back on his emotional feet that evening.

When Benny left his flat the next day, Willy didn’t really expect to see him again. He was pretty sure that Benny would go back to his job breaking knuckles and back into the closet and never think about Willy again. This left a hollow feeling in the pit of Willy’s stomach every time he thought about it.

Several months later, a contact from ExMaf, the ex-mafia relocation program, contacted Willy with Benny’s new address. And without a second thought, Willy joined him in Arizona where they opened a home for juvenile delinquents that was both very unconventional and very successful.

1minutetopic: mistaken love
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Mistaken Love

Life had been unusually cruel to Marco. In accordance with the law of conservation of fortune, life had been disproportionately kind to Penelope, princess of the small kingdom where Marco labored.

Princess Penelope was as fair and light as a fairy, so bright, in fact, that light appeared to erupt from her every pore. Her beauty was legendary: people walked for miles just to marvel at the amazing symmetry of her perfectly aligned teeth.

Marco, on the other hand, was cursed from the day he was born with a spring eye. He had been horribly pockmarked by a childhood bout with the chicken pox, and completely lost one arm in a horrendous agricultural accident involving a lust crazed bull. Orphaned at the age of three months, he had been raised by a stray dog until the age of seven when he was taken in by the local preacher. The benevolent padre allowed him to sleep with the animals and partake in the pig's slop in exchange for keeping the animals quarters swept clean. On top of it all Marco's teeth were so bad that cats were bound to hiss and arch their backs any time he smiled. He was, however, happy. He had his place in life, and it was a lot better than the gutter into which he was thrust while still a suckling.

Penelope had many suitors: men of learning and wealth, men of breeding and looks. All her suitors were strong and noble and could offer her anything she could imagine: cloths, riches, shoes, professional foot massages, pampering, and exotic foods in extravagant abundance. But somehow they all left her feeling cold, like the drizzle laden winds that whipped Marco's hair into his divergent eyes.

She knew of Marco, occasionally she would catch a glimpse of him while out riding her trusty steed Thumper. She would look down on Marco from over the barnyard fence behind the old church. Marco always knew when she was coming as she was preceded by rays of bright sunlight, the singing of birds, and the smell of sweet perfume. Marco would involuntarily look up, eye watering, to see if perhaps the sun had descended onto the barn, or if it was just Penelope riding by again. He invariably squinted and smiled, which inevitable caused Thumper to whinny and buck. Penelope felt something move deep inside her every time she saw this miserable creature laboring away in the muck of the barnyard. It wasn't just the horn of the saddle being suddenly thrust into her crotch by the Thumper's bucking, nor even Marco's repulsive smell, it was something much deeper.

As a woman, she could inherently see the inner worth of a person, and somehow at night all she could see was Marco, his selfless devotion to his simple duty, his contentedness, and she longed to feel the same.

The fateful day broke with torrential rains, and bitter cold winds. Marco, laboring in the muck, was twice as mud- and shit-spattered as usual, but only smelled about half again as stinky as most days. Marco felt the heat of the sun suddenly beat down upon his back, and turned, squinting and smiling, just in time to terrify Thumper with his gnarled, yellow teeth. Thumper tossed Penelope clean off his back, and high into the air. She came down in the slime covered arm of Marco, who gently placed her upright on a fresh pile of cow shit. She pressed herself close to him, panting and looking into his good eye.

“Oh Marco,” she admitted, “You have saved me! I can love only you. Take me, I am yours!”

Marco felt her warm, nimble body through her fine gown with his one hand. Her hard, fingerlike nipples thrust into his chest. Squinting he tried to look her in the face. “Sorry... I don’t dig white chicks.” And with that he dropped her into the mud.

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Scary Story

Josh and Ken had been good friends for a long time. They had met as young professionals shortly after college and had worked together for a time. Although they lived in different states now, they always kept in touch with frequent phone calls, emails and visits at least once a year. When they were together, they would often work out and maintained a very competitive relationship. Even when they were apart they were constantly comparing lap times on agreed upon swimming routines. Both of them liked this friendly rivalry, as it provided an impetus for further improvement. Ken, however, was a weaker swimmer and although he kept up a brave trash talk, he could never eclipse Josh's aquatic accomplishments. To compensate for this, he often challenged Josh to non-water challenges. While Josh was a bit of a risk taker, he was not the hiker that Ken was. So it went, each time they were together, they would swim to exhaustion, and Josh would taunt and torture Ken till they agreed on some other challenge, then, testosterone a blazing, they would charge off and do some other crazy thing, like repelling off the Golden Gate Bridge (for which they narrowly avoided being jailed). Both of them now had families and very domestic lives, and they always took precautions, and calculated the risks, but perhaps because their daily lives were so devoid of excitement the challenges got progressively more dangerous. The last time they got together they decided to climb Long's Peak in a snow storm in January. They eventually called it off after narrowly missing the summit and spending 36 freezing hours on the mountain. Of course each one blamed the other, but somehow Josh knew he had been the one who wanted to call it off the most. So after months of taunting emails he finally proposed skydiving, knowing Ken was deathly afraid of heights. It really wasn't that big a deal, they both had to take the introductory courses, but they agreed to do their first solo jump together. It was another several months before they had a date which was going to work for both of them, and only then did the fear start to creep into Ken's mind. It is one thing to say it, but when he imagined himself standing in the open hatch, unable to hear over the whipping wind, staring out at the earth below, only then did his stomach begin to knot up.

Naturally he never let on to his fear in the emails. He was determined to do it to show Josh that he was not afraid. Josh was smug and fully expected Ken to try to chicken out, then he could finally declare victory once and for all and let the rivalry die with him triumphant.

On that fateful day, Ken was full of jokes and humor as usual, but he was somehow paler than normal, and his mouth always felt like it was dry no matter how much he drank. They were both suited up, checked out and loading into the plane when Josh said, "You know if you don't want to do this you don't have to. I wouldn't blame you."

Ken responded, "Are you going to do it?"

"Of course!"

"Well than I am too.

"OK... Just don't pussy out in the airplane... If you puke I am gonna make you clean it up!"

"Dude, you only wish!" Ken's knees were going weak, but somehow he found solace in the strength of his own voice. After they were airborne, he went on.

"Hey, Josh! I'll bet you can't hold out as long as I do!"

"What?" he yelled over the engine noise.

"I'll bet you pull your chute out first... you can't hold it as long as I can!" Ken called out.

"Dude, that's bullshit! We're jumping at 5000 feet and it is not safe to pull lower than 500, and you know that! We're BOTH gonna pull at 1000 feet and that is it!" Josh answered academically in a voice that was stern and scolding.

Ken's ears had started to ring. He was feeling numb like he had been drinking and had tunnel vision... nothing seemed to be real except his own voice which he no longer seemed to control.

"You're gonna pull first... you can't hold out as long! Chicken shit! You're washed up and old now!"

Ken's voice seemed to carry on all by its self.

"Three minutes," called out the captain. "Get in position to jump!"

Josh moved towards the door but Ken jumped in front of him. Josh said, "Come on, I'll show you how it's done!"

"Like I'm gonna take your sloppy seconds! I can jump before you and you'll *still* pull before me!"

Ken's world had narrowed down to a bright spot at the center of his field of vision. He felt warm despite the wind from the open door and he couldn't hear anything at all. He was about to lose consciousness when the jump light went green and Josh pushed past and jumped out the open door. Ken, reached out to stop him, but missed and fell through the door tumbling uncontrollably through the air. Josh had assumed the proper skydiving posture and was gliding smoothly down at a stall speed of 120 miles per hour, as he checked his altimeter, 4750 feet. This gave him about 30 seconds till he'd hit the ground, but he'd be pulling his rip cord in about 20 seconds and floating down. He looked up and noticed Ken tumbling uncontrollable, rolling and twisting in the air. This was very dangerous and disorienting, but Ken was only beginning to sense what was happening, so low was the blood pressure in his brain. Josh watched for several more seconds and it appeared that Ken had perhaps lost consciousness. He was falling like a rag doll, 3500 feet!

"That bastard better not be playing with me," Josh thought. He looked down at the rapidly approaching green fields. The air was getting imperceptibly warmer as he thought of Ken's wife and kids and then his own. No, no, they would never forgive him if he did not do everything in his possibility to get Ken back down on the ground in one piece.

3000 feet!

Josh slowly maneuvered towards Ken. He knew it was risky as they could wind up hitting each other hard if he approached too rapidly. Ken meanwhile had started to realize he

was falling, tumbling out of control, 'though he was so light headed he wasn't sure if he was dreaming.

At 2500 feet Josh was getting close, but it took till about 1700 feet for him to catch Ken by a foot and stop his tumbling. He pulled Ken close and looked at his eyes which were rolled back and went to grab Ken's ripcord. One last look at his altimeter showed them to be just passing 1000 feet, perfect time to pull. Just as he went to yank the chord, Ken suddenly sprang to life and grabbed Josh to him by the shoulder straps.

"Hey, Josh!" he screamed, with an inhuman look in his eyes, "What'ch doing?!"

Ken suddenly had an iron grip on Josh and seemed to be snarling. Josh struggled to pull the cord but he couldn't do it while Ken held tight. He glanced at his altimeter: 800 feet!

"Ladies first, pal!" Ken yelled into the wind. Josh was not sure if Ken was joking or if he was really determined to wait for Josh to pull his own cord, at any rate the time had come so Josh shoved Ken to get away. But Ken didn't let go. Josh fought to release himself from Ken and in doing so they began to tumble. He could not break free!! He tried everything he could think of but Ken had locked on to him like a man afraid of drowning. Josh got one last look at his altimeter. It was now showing around 450 feet and just getting into the red zone. Josh felt he had no other choice and head butted Ken, braking Ken's nose with his own forehead. With this Ken spun away, Josh not noticing the red of blood on his face and his rolled back eyes. Josh pulled his chord at about 400 feet and was just able to slow enough for a fairly hard landing. Spraining an ankle and breaking his watch.

As soon as he stopped rolling he looked around for Ken's chute but none was to be seen. The people at the drop site seemed confused; one of the jumper's chutes had failed to open. Josh was limping around, asking for Ken when he heard somebody yelling. Everyone rushed off behind some scrub oaks and Josh began to feel oddly disconnected as he limped along to see what was up.

People were all standing round a crumpled mass of nylon and canvas. It was the badly distorted remains of Ken, slowly leaking blood into the dust. People looked to Josh.

"What happened?"

"I.. I don't know... he wouldn't let go..."

"What"

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah, I think I hurt my ankle," Josh aid, wiping something cold from his brow. He looked at his hand and it was bloodied.

"Let me look at that" said an older lady with medical training. "That's odd. You're not cut. Where did this blood come from?"

Josh couldn't say anything. He was not sure what had happened. He was just joking around with his friend Ken... they were supposed to eat at his house tonight... with his wife... and kids... An ambulance came and then the police.

Josh was never charged with anything but he never sleeps more than two hours without waking up feeling like he is falling.

1minutetopic: scary story
Contributor: **Horizon Gitano**
Last revised: 11 December 2006

Saving Her Soul

Down by the docks, it was dark and deserted. Between some of the buildings, you could make out broken bottles and busted out windows. But around most of the buildings it was so dark Marci had to feel her way along the wall. She was confident and knew the way, having come this way many times before and, the first time, in broad day light.

As she stepped through the debris, scuffing wadded newspapers and stumbling over unidentified twisted metal objects, her senses would become very keen and her heart would start to pound. She was not afraid, But this evening she was breathing quickly, her palms starting to dampen with sweat. She had come this way so many times already, she could not understand why she was so on edge this now.

Her co-workers at the bar where she mixed drinks were always trying to talk her out of using this short cut through the docks. Marci just laughed at their concern. When she took the bus, it took thirty minutes longer than the taking short cut -- longer if the bus was late. If she waked to save the fare, it took over an hour to go along the well lit and peopled streets that her co-workers recommended. Taxis, of coarse, were prohibitively expensive.

By taking her short cut, she was out of the bar, past the harbor and in her bed in less than twenty minutes. Marci loved her sleep too much to consider her other alternatives.

But tonight was different. She ignored the urge to run and slowed down, trying to listen more carefully as she inched her way through the darkest and narrowest passage way. This was the worst part, so many recesses yawning between the buildings, so many large, bulky objects that anyone could be hiding behind.

Suddenly, she felt a wave of dread pass through her as she sensed that someone -- or some thing -- was nearing her from behind. She was sure of it. So sure, that she made no pretense about turning and facing whoever or whatever was rapidly approaching.

She turned slowly, her arms by her side, palms turned forward. She balanced on the balls of her feet and pivoted. She saw a huge, dark silhouette looming in the passage. It was so dark, it seemed to draw the darkness from the night.

Marci's senses suddenly went wild. She could hear her heart pounding like someone was beating an empty oil barrel with a hammer. And she could sense its breath so acutely it seemed to blow a draft around her as it inhaled and exhaled. With a rush of disorientation, she experienced the feeling that she was sliding towards it. Or perhaps it was gaining in size. Suddenly he was in front of her, standing over her. And just then, he opened his red, glowing eyes. Marci felt heat in his gaze and heard a leathery rustle, as though huge, black winds were unfolding at his back.

As he opened his mouth to speak, the smell of sulphur stabbed her nostrils. He spoke with the voices of ten thousand daemons.

"I have come for your soul."

Although she felt she was caught in the center of a hot suffocating vortex, Marci could still stand her ground.

“Well, I am afraid you are wasting your time.”

The dark angel seemed, if just for a split second, a bit puzzled before he bent his head back, belching fire and a wicked laugh.

“Ha, ha, ha -- I have come to take your soul. Resistance is futile.”

“No, it’s not,” retorted Marci, standing squarely with her fists on her hips and her elbows sticking out from her ample trunk.

“You don’t have a chance with me, you big bully. So why don’t you go back to the hole where you came from.”

This time, the apparition did not hesitate, the frenetic hot vortex sped up, building a wall of distortion that was causing the buildings around them to shimmer and melt.

“Your God can not save you now. You are...”

Before he could continue, Marci yelled above the roaring, searing wind blowing about them, “I DON’T believe in no God.”

“What?” It seemed the vortex was swirling a bit less violently now.

“I don’t believe in no God.”

“That’s a double negative. Do you mean you believe in God. Or you do not.”

“NOT!”

“What? Not what?”

“I do not believe in God. OK? So I don’t expect no one to save me.”

The devil seemed about to ask another question, but Marci cut him off. “No one is coming around to save me. I don’t need saving because you are going to turn around now and leave -- without my soul.”

The devil let out a hideous, terrible roar that Marci knew was meant to frighten her. But it was just a stalling tactic, and she noticed that the temperature was dropping again towards normal.

“Go on now, nasty old devil. Get outta here.”

“But I must have your soul!”

“I ain’t got one.”

“What?”

“I ain’t got no soul. So there ain’t nothing for you to steal, you see? So you just turn your red ass around and get out of here.”

“You mean you have no soul?”

“That is what I said. Do you see any soul attached to me? Hell, I can’t even clap to a steady rhythm.” She smiled at her little joke, but seeing that this was just confusing the devil even more, she started to wave him away, saying “Shoo, shoo!”

“But, but...” stammered the devil, stepping back. “How is it that you have no soul?”

“Don’t know. It just slipped away one day when I wasn’t using it. It ain’t been back, and I ain’t never missed it. So you barking up the wrong tree, mister. Now, move it!”

The devil tried to regain his composure with a few screeches and a couple bolts of eerie lightening. But it was clear that he was running the risk of looking like a fool if he persisted. With a resigned sigh, he turned and flew away into the night sky.

“Fuckin’ Satan,” grumbled Marci, inching her way again towards her home. “Always wasting decent, hard-working people’s time when they just want to get to bed.”

1minutetopic: scary story
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Last revised: 11 December 2006

Genesis of Dogs

- 1 On the first day, God created the world and tossed it like a ball into the universe. God's dog chased after it and upon reaching it chewed it thoroughly.
- 2 Thus the mountains and valleys were created and the oceans and lakes of spit clinging to it.
- 3 On the second day, God created all the things of the earth that dogs need: cats to chase, trees and bushes to pee on, smaller mammals to eat and stinky things to roll in.
- 4 God's dog went into the world and moistened the first tree as a sign to all dogs that would follow as to how to observe the law of dogs.
- 5 On the third day, God created masters for dogs. And He said unto the dogs "I have created masters to feed you and take care of you, for playing with you and for comforting you. And I decree, you shall not bite the hand that feeds you."
- 6 The dogs looked upon the masters and saw that they were good.
- 7 And the masters rejoiced, saying "Good dog, good dog! What a good dog you are!"
- 8 On the fifth day, God and his dog rested by taking a walk and playing fetch with the moon.

1minutetopic: dog creation myth
Contributor: Shannon Frances
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Spot the First Dog

Cats, of course evolve from rats. They really are quite similar and even their names sound the same. Dogs, however are a special case of divine-intervention evolution. The predecessors of dogs, or wolves (or coyotes as they prefer to be referred to in the less domesticated circles) were large bear-horses called *Protolobus kininus*. The original *Protolobus kininus* slimmed down and learned how to effectively use mind control on the chattering monkey-like hominids cohabitating the planes, making these *Homo erectus* provide food, shelter and attention to the early *kininus*. There upon came a division between all previous *kininus* and the new breeds. The gods, realizing the superior intellectual capability of the *kininus* awarded them the most coveted position of "Guardians of the ?? of Earth" and granted them their own unique genetic branch: *Luipis kininus modernus*. The first such "dog" to have the new DNA code was granted a fitting name of "The center focal point of all the dominions of the Earth" or "Spot" for short. All subsequent dogs, weather they be the "go-it-alone" wolves and coyotes, or the human-controlling modern dogs, can trace their heritage back to this original Spot.

Spot was a noble beast of such wide ranging diligence and vitality that he and his offspring eventually taught their chattering-monkey companions to build more effective shelters, and later generations of spots actually oversaw the erections of such great works as the pyramids. Their hominid companions so greatly revered their canine masters that they erected great statues to them. (Spot in Egyptian was pronounced *Spynx*.) In their unbound arrogance, they even fancied themselves to be descended from the great Dog god, which they often depicted as a hominoid with a dog's head. Since these times, dogs have been faithful and humbly executing their duty of guarding the dominions of Earth and their hominoid mascots with such success that the world is currently being over run with these chattering monkeys. Be warned that it has been predicted that the original Spot will return again one day to restore balance to the Earth, and modern dogs will rise up against their increasingly numerous mascots, and feed on their flesh and once again make the world safe from humanity.

1minutetopic: dog creation myth
 Contributor: Horizon Gitano
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The Underdog

Though the railroad had long since been abandoned the tracks still served as a physical barrier between the two communities of Parkerville. The "North Side," as the section East of the tracks was called, was a prosperous, clean cozy little neighborhood full of soccer moms, Wonder bread and mayonnaise. The so-called "South Side" which lay to the West of the tracks was the proverbial "wrong side" of the tracks; it was much poorer, rundown, housed all of the non-English speaking inhabitants of the town and via miracle of town planning also contained the only porno shop and all three liquored stores in Parkerville. While roughly 60% of the street lights were dark at night on the South side, if one on the North side failed to light up, a crew would be dispatched to fix it the next working day.

One day, Dishauna , one of the younger residents of the South side was walking along the tracks with her mother noticed a veritable parade of minivans piloted by painted middle aged women carrying uniform clad children.

"Mama, where all them kids goin'?"

"They goin'a play soccer," her mom answered.

"Mama, how come we never go play soccer?"

"You wanna play soccer? Well then you go on and play soccer."

"It isn't as simple as that, ma'am," an older man tried to explain to her later that day when she brought Dishauna over to the big grassy field on the North Side.

"She doesn't have any training, she doesn't know how to play and besides," he said looking at her plain clothes and unpainted face, "You'd have to get her a uniform, and, you see, there's an entry fee of \$50."

"You sayin' my little girl can't go play ball with those other kids 'cause she ain't been signed up?"

"Um, well, yes."

"Then how 'bout we sign her up right now" she said tapping her finger on his clipboard.

"Well, you see, I'm afraid our roster is full for this season... Perhaps you could try again next year?"

Dishauna knew she wouldn't be playing with the other kids, but she didn't cry... She was already used to disappointment.

"Perhaps you can take that clipboard and shove it right up your ..." she stopped, eyes wide, nostrils flaring and looked down at Dishauna, who tugged at her hand, "Come on mama... Let's go."

She gave a look to the man that remained with him for months, turned and went back over to the South Side with her daughter.

Her ire had not subsided later that day when she got together with a bunch of her girlfriends.

"Say what? They won't let Dishauna play with them just 'cause she's from the South side" You talkin' crazy, girl, they can't do that."

"Oh, Lordy, they shore can, the got their excuses... and they ain't nothing we can do," she said definitively.

Ida Mae Brown was older than dirt. In fact, it was said that the gods had consulted with her on th color of dirt. She had seen it all and knew that when that much womanhood got in motion, nothing can stop it.

"Oh yes there is!" she said in a voice like old leather of the seats in a car forgotten in the back of a barn.

"What you talkin', Ida Mae?"

"I'll show ya," she disappeared into her decrepit house after what seemed like an eon came back out with an old faded red wash cloth. The women looked and wondered if it was finally time to put the old girl down.

"Yaa!" she said triumphantly, "that's what I'm talkin' about."

They all looked at each other and back at her.

"What you talkin'"

"What we gonna throw in the towel?" The women laughed. Ida Mae looked stern at 'em.

"What? You young ones can't read? Look at it," she finally held it out for all to see. It was a child's T-shirt with the number 8 on it and the letters SSSC.

"What's SSSC?"

"South Side Soccer Club. This was my Tyrone's, bless his soul, he wore it back when we had our own soccer team way back before they shot Kennedy."

The women instantly caught on and soon the new SSSC was borne. The women divided up the tasks of administrating the new club, and got busy notifying the appropriate youth league athletics coordinator. It was past the new team registration date, but after forty five minute lecture by three of the more generously proportioned "sisters" he agreed to let them officially register as the games had not yet been started, and there were an odd number of teams in his district. With the addition of SSSC, they informed him, he won't have an idle team each week. The enthusiasm was shared by the kids of the South Side who were more accustomed to kicking tin cans through broken cement block goalposts than the manicured lawn of the North Side McWhite Field. Soon they had a team. Not all of the kids had talent but they all got to play together, even Dishauna.

To play in a real game, however, they were going to need real uniforms.

"I been looking into it and it's a racket if ever I seen one. You know how much they charge for one a them jerseys? Forty five dolla! That jus plain robbery," the women in charge of procurement said.

After discussing it with the "soccer sisters" as they took to calling them selves, they figured out that they could buy the material and make the uniforms themselves for about \$4 each. A couple of the ladies got to work and by their first game day the kids really looked the part with their bright red uniforms. The sisters were rightfully proud of their

work and their kids as they took the field. That didn't last long, as the best three players the South Side had were expelled within the first fifteen minutes for "unfriendly play" and eventually South Side went down 15-0. Dishauna, however, was so delighted she couldn't stop smiling, and chasing after the ball all day. The soccer moms of the other team passed rather rude disparaging comments about the South Side, the kids and the sisters about liberally. The sisters were determined to make a better showing next time. All week long, instead of "Get your ass in her before your supper get cold" it was "Get out there and learn how to kick that ball!"

Raul, Carlos and Mohamed (the three kids who had been given the red card early in their first game) were forced to watch videos of professional sportsman techniques and were lecture on etiquette and the rules of play till their whole heads went numb.

That weekend they were back on the field and the opposing team, having been given a heads up about how bad the South Side was were looking for an easy victory. Play started with all South Side fingers crossed, and progress in at least three different languages. Raul got kicked out half way through the game but Carlos and Mohamed's fathers who had actually bestirred themselves this weekend, explained that they would have to find new accommodations if they got kicked out, and both finished the game with only verbal warnings. It was a much better game, but the South Side went down 5-2. In the classic Hollywood tradition, the South Side kids practiced harder and formed lasting bonds of meaningful relationships with their comrades in the thirty-second-long "training" montage film clip, with just enough footage to show Dishauna score a goal to tie their second to last game of the season. As the film slows again to real speed the kids, seemingly more mature take the field for the final game against their neighbors from just across the tracks, the North Side Norsemen. To add superficial tension, hatred of the North Side families, and additional empathy for the SSSC, the annoying older man with the clipboard from the first scene reappears and tells the sisters that in order to qualify for a second season, the team has to win at least one game. In the do-or-die match there are lots of slow motion shots of sweaty kids with determined expressions on their faces doing amazing footwork, seriously cheering "sisters" and smug soccer moms. Of course the game comes down to a grueling 2-2 tie with seconds left and one of the Norsemen seriously injures Mohamed in an illegal move, which doesn't get seen by any ref. Raul is called upon to take the penalty shot, the thing that he most fears, and in a stunning slow motion shot managed to turn the tide by actually banning the shot off the goal post and making the goal. The south side wins 3-2, their only victory and a major upset. Cut to soccer moms yelling and berating their children and lots of multi-culti smiles and hugs.

Is this the end? Of course not!

The municipality determines that as South Side has a youth league sports team, their tax assessment needs to be updated and based on the proximity to the North Side ups the land tax rate by 500%. This is a shock and more than the families can handle, but rather than declare defeat, they migrate en masse to Mexico, where they have many connections and set up their own athletics equipment manufacturing "Sough Side Sports Company" and sell soccer shirts for 1000% profit. The kids all keep playing soccer and some wind up on World Cup winning teams, but NOT for the USA.

1minutetopic: sport story
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Last revised: 11 December 2006

Getting a Goal

“You know what we need? A goal.”

There was no response, which irked Russ because he was really starting to recognize that this idea was particularly brilliant. He decided to repeat himself, just in case the guys were spaced out the first time he said it. Taking a moment to disentangle himself from the bean bag in which he had been lounging, he stood up. To steady himself, he grabbed the back of the lazy-boy chair in which his buddy Steve was passed out. He surveyed the dimly lit room, focusing hard through the double vision. Slowly he took stock of the inert bodies of his friends in various states of semiconsciousness scattered about the dark room.

“Hey, guys!” he shouted, “I got a idea!”

Some one lying in the hall way -- an unfamiliar voice -- shouted back “Shut the fuck up, you mother fucker”!

Russ swayed a bit and decided he was too unstable on his feet to swivel around and find out who had called him a mother fucker. He was going to flip the guy off, but he noticed that he still had a beer in the hand that he was not using to steady himself. He didn't want to set the beer down to flip the guy off because the chances were pretty high that he would forget the beer was there and kick it over.

Just then, he realized that the object slowly rolling over on the couch was talking to him.

“What?” he said to be polite.

“What do you mean by goal?” It was Rhup. Good old Rhup. You could always count on him not to abandon you when you were down.

Russ wanted to answer, but needed to sit down to focus on the question. So he carefully navigated to a chair near the couch.

“What did you ask?”

“Dude, you said we need a goal. What did you mean?”

“Oh, yeah!” Russ was glad that Rhup had reminded him of his brilliant idea before it had been completely forgotten.

“Yes. We need a goal.” Russ nodded seeing the wisdom of his own idea again.

“OK. What kind of goal?”

“Well, I was thinking, here we are, bright intelligent young guys in the prime of our life. You know what I mean?”

Rhup was now actually sitting up, something he rarely did. And he did look like he knew what Russ meant.

“Yea,” continued Russ, “here we are in the prime of our life. And what do we do? We drink and party all the time.”

Rhup nodded in acknowledgement and waited for more with a look that could have been interpreted as anticipation if it weren't creased by the lines the couch had pressed into his face.

"Do we go to our classes? No. Do we learn new things? Do any of us have girlfriends? No. In fact, we spend all of our free time here in Hank's mom's basement and do our best to destroy our brain cells."

"Yes we do!" affirmed Rhup with a blurry nod.

Russ's eyes narrowed to try to determine if Rhup was sober enough to remember any of this the next day. But he didn't want to let this distract him, because he was on a roll.

"Do we want to spend the rest of our lives this way?"

Rhup nodded, so Russ added "No! We don't!"

"We don't?"

"No, fool! Do you want to wake up tomorrow and be forty years old and realize that you have spent the best years of your life sitting around drunk in your underwear in Hank's mom's basement?"

"No, dude. I do not want that. Definitely bad."

"Right. Definitely bad. So we need to get ourselves out of this rut. And to do that," here he paused for impact, "we need a goal."

"A goal. Definitely, dude."

Happy that Rhup had understood the brilliance of his idea, Russ lifted his beer to clink bottles with Rhup. But he saw that Rhup didn't have a beer bottle. So he downed the last swig of flat, room-temperature beer and shuddered.

"So... what do you mean by goal?" asked Rhup, his expression of near anticipation had not changed.

"Oh, yeah. You know, a goal that we could all get excited about and use to get out of this rut. Something good and wholesome. Like saving the environment."

"Don't recommend that, dude," Rhup shook his head. "Prof Danna was telling us just how complicated the environment is. Eco-niches and all. And it is not a task for the likes of us."

"Well, I meant saving the environment figuratively. I, personally, don't care much about the environment. I meant like for example. An example of a goal."

"Oh." said Rhup, who now looked as if he was pondering the most appropriate goal.

Several minutes passed.

"You know, something that gets us motivated to get out there into the world." Russ feared that the brilliance was starting to dim because he couldn't think up a good example.

"Like that movie where those retarded kids learned to play basket ball?" asked Rhup.

A wave of affection for Rhup came over Russ. He was a buddy you could count on.

“Yes! Exactly! We need a goal like those fucked up kids had. Like making a basket ball team. That would be good for us. Exercise and all, you know. And it would get us out of Hank’s mom’s basement.”

“Yes it would, dude. It definitely would.”

Russ was happy with how this was progressing. He figured it wouldn’t be too hard to figure out how to put together a team -- people did it all the time. They would need uniforms and basket balls, of course. And they would need a court and to learn the rules. How hard could that be? They could put Pum in charge of learning the rules, since he managed to pass second semester calculus even though he was not sober single day of the term.

But before the planing could progress, Rhup mumbled, “But maybe not basketball.”

“Why not? It’s brilliant!”

“Because none of us are exactly athletic. We would just get our asses beat and be back here with a vengeance licking our non-jock egos.

Russ had to acknowledge the truth of this. But, just because basket ball was not the answer, it didn’t mean the rest of his idea was not brilliant.

“OK. You’re right about that. But it doesn’t have to be basket ball. It could be something less demanding and yet wholesome.”

Rhup nodded and said “You the man!”

Russ went to clink bottles with Rhup again, but remembered in time that Rhup didn’t have a beer. Instead, he went to take a swig, but the bottle was empty. So he set the bottle at the end of the couch, taking care not to knock over any of the other bottles standing there.

“Something like basket ball but easier so we wouldn’t suck at it.”

The two young men thought in silence for a moment.

Russ realized he must be sobering up because his thoughts kept wandering from the subject at hand to the girl in his o-chem class. If he learned any thing about organic chemistry this year, it would be due to that girl and her nice fuzzy sweaters.

Russ forced himself back to the main topic. Something like basket ball, but easier. Rugby, the first thing that came to mind, was obviously inappropriate. Damn, he was stuck on that rugby idea and couldn’t get any further. All he could think of was rugby and that girl in his chemistry class. The nice, fuzzy o-chem girl.

Russ snapped out of it when Rhup said “Like ping pong or something like that. That would be easy for us.”

That was it! It was brilliant! Russ had known it all along!

“How hard could it be to organize a ping pong team?” Russ asked rhetorically. “We don’t even need uniforms, right. We just need a table and lots of those little white balls. That’s it! And some paddles and wham-bam, thank you ma’am, we have a goal!”

Oddly Rhup was not nodding and saying “You the man, dude,” as Russ expected.

“Come on, Rhup. You gotta admit it’s brilliant!”

“It is brilliant, dude. It is brilliant, all right. But I was just trying to think how many men there are on a ping pong team. I mean, how many guys are we any way? And is that enough for a team?”

Russ was trying to imagine all the guys standing in a line and count them, when another streak of genius hit him.

“It doesn’t matter, dude. We just have lots of back up members just in case someone gets sick or has a test or something. So we can have as many guys on the team as we want. We all practice together and sometimes some guys just sit in the dug out like in base ball.”

“It’s brilliant, dude.”

Russ decided that they definitely had to clink beer bottles for this, so he got up to get a couple of cold beers from the fridge. When he got back, Rhup was dozing in a sitting position. Russ gave him a good shove to wake him up and handed him his beer.

“Alright, dude. To ping pong,” toasted a very satisfied Russ.

“To ping pong,” said Rhup with an expression that approximated anticipation.

And with that, the clinked beer bottles, to Russ’s increased satisfaction.

They drank in silence for a few moments.

“Hey,” said Rhup, digging in the pocket of his shirt. “I gotta joint. You wanna smoke it with me?”

Russ nodded, knowing the smoke would amplify his current feeling of satisfaction and well being. Goals are a good thing, he thought as Rhup lit up. Very good indeed.

“Do you think we should wake up the guys and tell them?” Russ started out of his reverie. with a sudden sense of urgency.

“Nah,” responded Rhup, passing the joint. “Wait until they sober up. They’ll be able to focus better anyway.”

“Yea. You are right. You the man, Rhup!”

The smoked peacefully away and then drank a few more beers before heading off for their afternoon classes, happy and content with the world.

1minutetopic: sport story
Contributor: Shannon Frances
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Missing connection

Bud and Janet lived in a town near the North Carolina – South Carolina border. Bud and Janet were a nice couple by all accounts. Nothing spectacular, actually really unremarkable, but in most of their friend's own self-centered little worlds, they seemed to nicely fill their only little niche of "our friends, Bud and Janet." Even Bud and Janet themselves felt their relationship sufficiently satisfied the minimum requirements of a "boyfriend-girlfriend" roll and questions of looking further simply never arose.

In fact, the only thing that seemed to indicate that the two were perhaps not destined for a life-long union was the fact that whenever they made plans to meet at any thing other than the normal times and places, (typically Bud's house after work weekdays and Fridays). They seemed to be better at wandering around in the wrong place or at the wrong time, or simply being just out of site of one another, each one waiting for the other to call or make a move. Usually when this happened they would wait around for half an hour, or maybe two, figuring they just and the time wrong. Sometimes they would finally find one another, other times they would give up and make it another day. At first it was really frustrating, but by now they were more accustomed to it.

That's why it was no big surprise for Bud when, after waiting one hour at the Greenville NC airport Janet failed to show.

Maybe I got the wrong day? No, she called me... when was it? Yesterday? I think it's today... What is it, yeah Saturday, I didn't work today... Maybe I got the wrong time? ..! Nah! I'll just bet she missed her flight.

He sucked down an overpriced beer and watched girls, his favorite pass time when in this situation, while he waited.

Janet had been patiently waiting at the airport at Greenville SC for over an hour and was starting to get upset.

"I called him to remind him just this morning! I can't believe he's not here! He must have forgotten the time..."

She sat in the airport café sipping overpriced coffee and casually flirted with the server.

"Got stood up?" he asked with a sly smile.

"Oh, this happens all the time! He's probably just got the time screwed up."

"No problem," he purred, "You can hang till we close in another hour and if he doesn't show, I'll drop you off."

"Oh, thanks... But I'm sure that won't be necessary," she said, brushing her hair aside and smiling.

"Maybe a glass of wine while you wait? It's very good."

"Hmmm..." she thought *NO!*

"Yea, OK."

Why did I say yes?

Bud's eye had long since caught site of the attractive middle-aged woman who had arrived and kept looking expectantly for her ride, but had been waiting for quite a while now. She was not spectacularly beautiful but had a nice body, and was maybe a couple of years older than Bud. Many other prettier women had come and gone, almost always accompanied by a man, and some how Bud started to feel attached to this woman.

"Ride didn't show?" he asked.

"Excuse me"

"Your ride? Hasn't shown?"

"No... not yet..." she said not wishing to urge on a strange man.

"Mien either... Uh, I mean I'm supposed to pick up someone and they haven't shown up... This always happens!"

The woman thought his avoidance of the use of the word "girlfriend" was deliberate, but there was something about his deadpan, matter of fact explanation that put her at ease.

"Yes... I'm here to collect my son from his father," she said, stressing the last words, "He's just so..."

"Lame?" Bud offered. She finally cracked a smile and laughed, looking him in the eyes.

"Yes! He's so damn irresponsible. He always winds up doing something like this."

"Yeah, guys can be such pigs. Why don't you call?"

"I did this morning... but I I guess you're right," she said looking for a pay phone. Bud whipped out is hand phone and passed it to her.

"Here. Talk as long as you need to, I'm not going anywhere.

Loraine had never used a cell phone, and he showed her how, talking low and calm, her hand in his as he dialed the number for her. She liked his manner, warm and confident, and she blushed, then turned away to talk quietly into the phone. Of course, he had thought it was Sunday that he was supposed to bring the kid by. At any rate, it was too late now for her to make the return flight wither son, so

"Why don't you come on over tonight?"

"I'll be *here* at 8:00 in the morning and you best have him ready to go!" she said closing the phone. She was angry that he would cause her such inconvenience just in the hope of getting her in bed. Bud had not heard the conversation but it was easy enough to guess what had happened.

"Shh..." he said, "Don't worry... Here... first, let's get your flight straightened out. Then I'll give you a ride." He accompanied her as she got the tickets changed to the following day. She felt relieved that he approached the situation so calmly and kept her moving. She really appreciated the help in the face of such frustration. It was better than crying which

is what she always felt like doing when she felt powerless. Bud put an arm around her and said, "Here.. I'll give you a ride... hell, I got nothing going on and you've probably never seen the local sites. How 'bout I show you the town?"

She knew she should not take advantage of his kindness.

"No... I... I can't," she said.

"OK,," he said, shrugged and smiled and started to walk away. He got about ten steps when she said, "Wait. Wait."

He turned puzzled and she came forward. "Your phone!" she still had it in her hand.

"Oh, it's OK. You can keep it!" Bud said shrugging his shoulders.

"Uh, excuse me?" she asked.

"No, I'm kidding. Thanks." He took it and pulled out his key. "Kind of like it was meant to be," he said jingling the key and slowly steering her towards the exit.

He didn't mention Janet the whole evening and she didn't ask. The both genuinely had a really great time and were genuinely surprised when she spent the night, both of them snuggling on the couch.

After half a bottle of wine, Janet followed Enrique back to his place and they had wild sex in the shower, on the dining room table and the sofa. That was Enrique's favorite combination and his nearly weekly pastime. His lame job at the airport café did have its perks.

Bud and Janet floated apart soon after that and their friends never could understand why.

Bud and Lorain dated off and on for a while and her self confidence grew. Eventually she remarried and had two more kids by a man who was a model father to her three kids.

1minutetopic: missed connection
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
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Café Vision

A cold wind blows new fallen snow around the grey stone façade of the old building. The café's ornate brass lamps shine brightly through the glass panes of the window, so old that they distort images as they pass into the grey day. Inside it is instantly warm; a shudder frees you from the cold you wore outside. Everything exudes a clam, warm serenity, as the odor of coffee reaches for your nose. The tables are of a tasteful style, and still in good shape despite many decades of service. Everything has a comfortable warm feel to it. Even the white ceramic cups and dishes bear witness to their age with fine surface scratches and occasional chips. All about is the low murmur of happy conversations as people savor and stretch out the experience as long as they can. Mostly women come here in pairs. They're usually older and, except for those making a tragic fashion statement, are uniformly overdressed for anything but a café gossip session. The only men present are humoring their female companions or openly gay. Heterosexual men fear cafés, it underscores their inability to satisfy or even comprehend women; they feel useless in this environment.

The server is pleasant enough to your face, and takes your order with only a slight hint of impatience, but talks badly about all of the customers, saying hurtful cruel things about them when back in the kitchen. He hasn't yet spit in someone's food, but that day will come. Until then it's all smiles and pleasantries in front of the customers.

The coffee that finally arrives has a fancy foreign name to establish an exotic image of happy backwards natives and lush green hills with waterfalls. No mention is made of the large multinational corporation which owns the farms and pays the workers so little they'd strike if the police didn't beat and arrest them every time they talked of it. It's all "Java" and "Cappuccino" here. It tastes harshly bitter, but can be swallowed with enough sugar and milk (which of course you have to ask for, because real coffee drinkers, like beer snobs, prefer their beverage as harsh and caustic as possible to differentiate themselves from the rabble who drink it with such abominations as milk in it). Once you finally dilute it enough to be palatable it only lasts a couple of sips because the size of the cup is so small, they had to be specially manufactured just for cafés. If a real restaurant were to try to serve anything in so small a cup the clientele would surly laugh, and probably throw the diminutive cup at any server who dared claim that it was intentional to assault the paying customers with such ridicule. Perhaps kinder customers would simply smash the toy cups to avoid furthering the joke.

New comers to cafés might accidentally order a bakery item to have with their miniscule cup of dark, bitter muck. Biscotti is an Italian word for "little brick" which is what these invariable stale, bread looking cookies most closely resemble. Virtually inedible on their own, one is usually forced to soak them in the coffee for a good long time to soften them up. This, however, is a little like trying to soften up a mattress by peeing on it: it results in a mess and quickly depletes the Barbie doll sized coffee. After wasting a full two hours wondering what other people get out of going to a café, you finally ask for the bill, and receive the fastest service and brightest two-faced smile of the day. When it shows up you instantly understand why cafés exist, even if you can not understand why people actually patronize them. You just spent \$15 on something that could neither satisfy

hunger nor thirst of a modest sized rat. Just down the street you could have had dinner for two, maybe three people for that sum. In the slum-like tenement that houses the hundreds of “Juan Valdez’s” who run the aged and smoky equipment that bags the coffee beans that same \$15 would have supported him, his wife and their malnourished children for three weeks. But how much of that \$15 do you think trickled down to him? Less than 1 cent; much less.

Putting your coat back on and disappearing back into the grey you remind your self that’s why you left the ticking package under your seat.

1minutetopic: cafe vision
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
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Life during wartime

Woke again to the sound of gunfire. Sun's almost up, but still no electricity. At least they've got the water back on now. It really sucks when there's no water. You can always carry enough for food, but washing and bathing is a real pain. Some things are easier to get used to than others. Distant gunfire doesn't bother me at all any more: you know where it is going on and you just stay away. What I really hate is coming back home if it is late and dark out, you usually know where the action is, but when you see fires up ahead on the road it's hard to decide what to do... maybe someone's set up a check point, maybe a vehicle has got hit.. Maybe a bunch of soldiers are just keeping warm. Are they gonna stop you? Can you sneak around? If you do, how far out are they in the field? Better to stop and hide or go back? Try to find somebody to ask. Food... That's bitch, too. It's so damn hard to get food. What little there is is always getting "appropriated" for some army... We eat a lot of weak soups. I miss peanut butter and fresh bread and beef. But there's no money and nothing to buy anyway. There's lots of work to be done, with all the destroyed buildings and things, but no one wants to risk rebuilding till it's all over. And anyway I gotta be careful if I'm out working and some army decides it needs more men, I'm gone. Don't know how I'm managed to stay out of it so long...Just lucky, I guess. I don't give a damn about the war. I don't believe a word anyone says about it either. I got a gun, but I'm saving that for when they're coming up the stairs.. 'Till then they'll have to do it all on their own. I just don't get how you can convince all these dumb kids to go shoot something up so easily! None of these kids are really anyone's enemies. They're just kids! It's those psycho megalomaniacs that run things that are the enemy. Nobody's my enemy 'till they are right here and ready to kick in my door.

It's cold... Wouldn't be so bad but everything I own is dirty and I got all bundled up to go out and try and find some food. I don't think there's an apple or berry within twenty kilometers of here that I haven't already picked. Still I suppose I might dig down through the slush and mud and see if I can find any more potatoes from that one field hidden off in the forest. I suppose one of the worst things is the boredom.. There's pretty much nothing to do all day but complain, worry and scrounge for food. I guess I should make a vegetable garden... Only problem with that is some body always steals the stuff before it's even ripe... Maybe if I put I up on the roof where they couldn't see it. Yeah. If this thing isn't over by next spring, that's what I'll do make a garden up on the roof... Till then it's off through the snowy woods to the potato patch... You know this life really isn't so bad... At least the air is fresh.. What's that? Smells like smoke? I thought it was snow blowing through the trees.. Wait... there's lots of foot prints... too many.

"Crack! Crack! Zzzzzzzzz!" I hear bullets whizzing around me I turn to run, but feel a burning sensation ripping into my chest and my face falls into the snow. This really sucks I think as everything fades.

1minutetopic: life during wartime
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
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The Service Industry

Mustafa hated his job. At least that's what he'd tell any one who cared to listen. He worked in a romantic little resort village high in the mountains. Despite the remoteness, or more likely because of it, it attracted amorous couples year round. The couples were not exactly older, but few except for the women could be considered young. In fact from a distance Mustafa could usually tell whether a couple was "official" or "unofficial" as he liked to the "boss-secretary" or "professor-student" pairs he'd often see.

Ostensibly he was a waiter at the small open air cafe, but he was also a part time souvenir salesman, one-man tourist information center, postal service, local historian and occasionally he even served as a pharmacist, offering condoms, Viagra, lubricating oils, whip cream or even aspirin and band aides as required. As the village was too small for a real pharmacist and the need for his "services" varied from "urgent" to "requiring immediate attention" the markup was quite good, and Mustafa was doing a booming business.

In fact, Mustafa made pretty good money, so his claims of "exploitation" found no firm ground to stand on. Probably his only real complaint was the same clientele from which he made his living. No, he didn't mind the stupid questions, or even that they had all been asked a million times before. Actually he quite liked making up "original answers" as he called his responses. The question "How old is this town?" might receive answers such as:

It's not. It was built to look like an old villa for a large budget Hollywood film by prison laborers only five years ago.

or

According to recent archeological studies conducted by the national ministries of antiquities, hunter gatherers had used this spot as a summer hunting camp since the post thoracic period.

or

Most of the buildings you see here were actually begun by a minor feudal lord in 1525, but owing to his death in a duel with his youngest son over a woman, construction was discontinued until 1652 when they were promptly completed as a public works project by otherwise unemployed renaissance painters and sculptors.

or

My great-great grandfather Mustafa began building this villa when, at a young age, he inherited a fortune from his grandfather Mustafa, and were only finished when I was a

boy, but by then the family had gone bankrupt from the generations of construction, so now I am but a humble servant in my great-great grandfathers dream.

The last one was true. Not because it actually happened, but rather because it was bound to get him the biggest tip.

Mustafa considered his role as “tour redirector” especially critical to the balance of mental health in the world. When someone asked how to get some where they really didn’t want to go, he would often redirect them to somewhere they would be happier. Thus visitors looking for a particular hotel were directed to whichever hotel he figured they’d be happiest at, and a lot of people got sent to the waterfall just outside of the village. Near sunset romantic couples got directed to the bench at the overlook, and of course no one ever got sent to the Chinese restaurant, because they use MSG, and that just isn’t right.

The aspect that he found most dislikable in the clientele was their tendency to pick on a “menial servant” in order to puff themselves up in front of someone they were trying to impress. One might automatically think this would be the man in most cases, but about half the time it was actually the woman. He didn’t mind when someone of considerable wealth acted the part or demanded good service, after all that was his job. But when some middle manager tried to look tough in front of the copy room girl by busting Mustafa’s balls, that’s where he drew the line. Just as everyone knows that secretaries really run the business world, Mustafa knew that he, in his humble position as server was responsible for maintaining the harmony of the whole village. Messing with him was like peeing in the water supply: it might seem like fun at the time, but eventually you’ll regret it, like as soon as you get thirsty. When someone got in Mustafa face he felt justified in changing not just the course of history, but also the future.

One day a couple came into the cafe after enjoying a wonderful sunset from the bench at the overlook.

“There’s no canopy walk out there!” thundered the fat man as soon as Mustafa came over to the table.

“Oh, I am so sorry! Did you not see the Y in the road past the stables?” Mustafa asked with feigned shock.

“Yes, and we took it to the right, but it stopped at a cliff.”

“And did you not see a beautiful sunset?”

“Yes we did.” Said the woman putting her hand on the mans arm as if to restrain him.

“Well then you have won! The canopy walk is closed after 3:00 and it is overpriced any way. So... what will it be?” he said winking at the woman and pulling out his pen and pad.

“Well!” huffed the man, as he grudgingly began to look at the menu.

Mustafa took their order and disappeared into the kitchen, returning a moment later with their drinks.

“I am so sorry sir, but it appears that we are out of the Salmon today. May I suggest the Chicken Salad? It is really very good, and not quite as fattening.” He said smiling, knowing that the Salmon was good and in stock, and what they called “Chicken Salad”, while it was edible, was probably the most fattening thing on the menu.

“No you may not!” said the man in a huff grabbing at the menu that Mustafa held just tightly enough to make the man tug on it twice before he finally got it.

“Very well, sir, what would you like?” he said rolling his eyes, and winking at the girl again.

“I’ll have the...” his eyes scanned up and down the page, but kept returning to the chicken salad. “I’ll have the... fried chicken with cheese sauce.” It was basically the same thing as the chicken salad, but without the 5 or 6 spinach leaves. “And make it snappy! Were tired being kept waiting!” There were only two other couples in the cafe and Mustafa could easily handle four times as much without keeping anyone waiting.

“Well, you know, I only have the one set of legs, and two of them are kind of tired out...” The woman laughed spontaneously and the man looked at her with a disapproving glance. “But I assure you that I will personally slap the cook with the other one if I catch him doing anything but cooking.” He said waving a hand in the air, causing the woman to chuckle again.

“You will slap him with WHAT?” said the man who’s face was starting to turn red and looked pressurized like an over inflated balloon.

“Well, I will use my hand, of course! What do you usually spank with?” Mustafa said with an expression of nearly genuine perplexion, as he turned and disappeared into the kitchen.

“I’ve never been so insulted!” the man said to the young lady in a hushed voice.

“Then you must not get out enough!” Mustafa called out from the kitchen when he correctly judged the man had said it.

Mustafa was cordial as usual throughout the meal, and wasn’t too obvious about serving the salmon to another table. Near the end of the meal the man excused him self to use the bathroom, but instead went looking for Mustafa. He now had a much more pathetic expression as he explained “Me and my, oh, lady friend, were going to need some...”

“Protection?” asked Mustafa with a sly grin.

“Uh, yes, and maybe... do you have anything that will make me, uh, you know...”

“Perform?” offered Mustafa. “Yes. Yes. I have just the thing... But we do not have the blue Viagra, only the white ones... they are only half the strength, so I’ll give you two.”

“Make it four.”

“Ok...”Mustafa said, raising his eyebrows “But I only have the two white ones... I’ll give you two yellow ones as well.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The yellow ones are slow acting, so maybe you better take them soon.”

“Ok. I’ll take the yellow ones now and... uh, how much for it all?”

“Not including dinner? Let’s see...” he pretended to do math in his head “I’ll give you three...” he looked over at the girl “better I make it six condoms and the four Viagra... that’ll be \$20.60... make it \$20 even.”

The man wanted to complain, but thought this would hurt the “big man” image he was trying to cultivate with himself, so he just paid.

“Wait right here.”Mustafa fetched out six condoms, two sleeping pills and two salt Pieter tablets and returned. “Now take the two yellow ones in the bathroom, and pretend to be peeing. Better yet you are almost done, might as well take them all.”And with that the man went into the bathroom with a broad smile. It was almost as big as the smile Mustafa had as he strolled over to the woman waiting alone. “So... How is every *thing*?”

“Oh, fine thanks.”

“Please let me know if there is *anything* I can do to you... to make your stay here more... pleasurable? I may be a humble servant, but you know it is my job to make sure the clientele are *completely* satisfied.”

“Ehem...”uttered the woman as she straightened her dress.

“You see that window over there?” he said pointing to a small bungalow window overlooking the cafe. “That is my room... If the light is on, then I am up.”He said with a smile that made his eyes squint.

“Well...”said the man as he returned to the table.

“Time to get back on the clock. See you later.”He whispered to the woman as he motioned for the man to be seated. “Any desert? We have some really sensuous cherry cheesecake?”

Of course they ordered two and spent another half an hour in the cafe, mostly wasting time waiting for the cake or the bill. In the end the man tipped Mustafa a measly 3%. “He doesn’t even deserve that!” said the man, yawning. “Oh be nice. I thought he was sweet.”The young lady answered back.

She would be saying much more flattering things about Mustafa, yelling them in fact, later that night while her boss slept off his frustration alone in the hotel room. She returned at around noon the next day to collect her things and say good bye to him.

Perhaps it was his guilty conscience, the man kept telling him self. Now that he had discovered his impotence to anyone but his wife, he never dared to stray again. And when the young lady became the boss she made sure that everyone under her, no matter how menial their job, was treated with respect.

And Mustafa? Well, he just patted himself on the back for a job well done, and kept right on saving the world, one customer at a time.

1minutetopic: the service industry
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
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Living Free

As Phil Barker crossed through the grounds towards the Living Free building, he was quite impressed by what he saw. They must be doing well, he thought as he glanced at the spacious, well-tended formal gardens, with statues and benches placed throughout in a restful and artistic manner, and the huge sandstone structure that reminded him vaguely of some sort of European castle. As he neared the entrance, he could see through the enormous glass doorway a woman in an apricot uniform standing at the door as though she was waiting for him.

By the time he arrived at the door, she was already holding it open for him, greeting him with a pleasant low voice "Welcome to Living Free Corporation!"

She was an attractive girl who looked to be about 24 to 26 years old and quite neat and professional. Phil mused vaguely that such a girl would be described as having "clean limbs" in a Victorian novel. She was smiling up at him, as though she had been waiting in happy anticipation for his visit all day.

"My name is Nancy, and I will be your guide through the entire Living Free Process." Her smile made him feel flattered – a bit like when his young female students stare at him with open admiration – although without the embarrassment he usually felt in that situation. In fact, he was feeling quite at ease, fresh and at peace with his decision to come here today.

"If you would like to follow me, Dr. Barker, I'll take you to a consultation suite, where we can get you settled in and answer any questions you might have before your consultant gets started."

Phil was mildly surprised that she knew his name, since he had not made an appointment. However, his position at the college often put him in the situation where he must speak with complete strangers who knew his name and thought no more about it.

She tipped her head slightly to one side in a way that implied "if that's OK with you." She smiled again and Phil caught a whiff of her perfume – a scent he could not identify but heightened the sense of her youth and enthusiastic professionalism. He nodded and followed a few steps behind her to have a view of her shapely bottom as they crossed the doorway and through the adjoining rotunda.

Phil glanced around enough to notice that, although there was no one else to be seen, the large empty space seemed friendly and somehow inspiring, with plush carpets and huge sprays of flowers and decorations tastefully arranged on the periphery. Quite a show, especially if he was the only client today, as he appeared to be. They walked down a broad corridor that reminded him of hallways in expensive hotels, multiple doors on either side. Nancy opened one of the doors roughly at the middle of the hall and held it open for him to enter. It was a comfortable room, spacious and well lit yet intimate. A generous sofa and three chairs were set around a low table and looked inviting and cozy. The colors were intense but at the same time calming. Phil had expected something more like a doctor's consultation room and noted with pleasure that this was the sort of

room that anyone would feel comfortable in, whether rich or poor, male or female, young or old. He nodded approvingly.

Nancy was indicated that he should choose seat with an inviting gesture. As he sat on the sofa, she said, "Please, Dr. Barker, make yourself at home here. Do not hesitate to ask for anything you might like. Perhaps you would like coffee or tea to get started? Maybe a bath or a relaxing massage?"

He indicated that coffee would be nice and Nancy tapped something on the pad that he had not before noticed she was carrying.

"When you are ready, your consultator will begin your consultation to find out the details how we can help you. But before I call her in, I would like answer any questions you might have about Living Free Corporation or the Living Free Process." With this she leaned forward, ever so slightly, as to better hear what he might have to say. He felt a flush of warmth at her attention.

"Actually, I found your information site very complete and I really don't have any questions at the moment. Also, a colleague purchased an attitude adjustment about a year ago, and I can see with my own eyes the result. He used to be a quite nervous little fellow, and now he seems to be absolutely glowing with life."

"Oh, I am so please to hear that!" said Nancy flushing with genuine corporate pride. A quite knock at the door was heard and a young man in a smart bell-boy like uniform delivered very unobtrusively a coffee service to the table.

"I do not mind telling you, that it is the best benefits of working at Living Free to hear that we have helped our customers," she continued as she poured his coffee, and when he indicated he didn't want sugar or milk, handed the cup to him.

"Since you have visited the site, then you know that you will receive a thorough consultation about your wishes and a through explanation of your options and the procedures available for you. Most procedures can be performed on the same day, if you like, or scheduled for a more convenient time."

"Also, I would like to point out for emphasis that the consultation is free of cost. Should you decide to purchase a Living Free Procedure, you will be informed in full of any pre-procedure research, should any be requested, as well as any aspects of post-procedure guidance or actions that are recommended. The complete details of the financial transaction will be available to you before you sign the purchase and, once the purchase has been signed no further costs will be incurred for the agreed procedure, even for post-procedure guidance or actions not included in the original agreement that you deem desirable. If you are not completely satisfied with any Living Free Procedure, our money-back guarantee includes not only the cost of the procedure but compensation for any inconvenience you experienced as a result of the procedure."

"You must be very confident of your procedures to offer a guarantee like that!" Bart sipped his coffee, noting that it was brewed perfectly. Coffee was the one consumable item for which, for him, quality was more important than quantity. And this was excellent coffee.

“Oh, we are, Dr. Barker! Living Free has not had a single request to invoke the guarantee in the six years that I have been working here. We are not miracle workers, you know, we can not guarantee that you will make more money or force anyone to fall in love with you – we can not change any of the external aspects of your life. But we can guarantee you the sort of internal environment you would like. And in this area, Dr. Barker, we are the experts! But of course, you would not be here if you did not think we could help you, would you?”

Phil smiled and settled a bit more deeply into the sofa. Clever, her congratulating him on his discussion to come here before he had even signed anything. It would make anyone feel more confident.

“Shall I call your consultator now, so you can get started right away?”

“Yes, please.”

Again, Nancy tapped her pad and smiled up at him again.

“I will leave you with your consultator. When you are finished, I will take you through the next step, what ever you decide to do. If you should need me at anytime, you can call me using this.” She handed him a small pad similar to hers and pointed to the single button above the display. “Simply tap here.”

A knock sounded at the door and Nancy rose to let in an older woman dressed in a white lab coat carrying a rather large pad.

Turning back to Phil, Nancy introduced them. “Dr. Barker, this is Dr. Bechel, your consultator. Remember, do not hesitate to call me if you require anything. Enjoy your consultation!” She left the room, closing the door discreetly behind her.

“Dr. Barker, it is a pleasure!” the woman extend her hand to take his with a warm and firm shake. Phil, who had risen as Nancy went to open the door, sat as Dr. Bechel sat, realizing that there must be someone in the building who was using the time since he entered the building to pull up his public information and formulate an initial profile on him. Maybe even since he had visited the information site. This woman was most likely hand picked for him as the best match as a consultator – she exuded a sense of professionalism and precision and, simultaneously, of warmth and safety. He was glad she was a woman: he wasn’t quite sure if he would be comfortable with a man, and yet she was too old and maternal to be the object of any sexual interest. Yes, these people certainly did know what they were doing.

“What can Living Free do for you today, Dr. Barker?” She was watching him with a sort of reserved interest.

“Yes, well,” Bart sat forward resting his elbows on his knees with his fingers extend and touching – his let’s-get-down-to-business posture, “Perhaps it will be easiest to explain if I describe some of my recent experiences.”

“Do continue.”

“A few months ago, in summer, I was riding with a colleague of mine who had offered to take me in his car to a conference at which we were presenting papers. It was pleasant weather and we had gotten an early enough start that it was daylight and I could enjoy

the view. At one point we drove by a small grove of trees by the side of a small stream. And as I looked at those trees, I was overcome by a memory that was so strong it seemed more real than reality. This was the memory: one summer when I was 14 or so, I was out riding bikes with a neighbor girl that I secretly considered my girlfriend, although she was two years older than me and I had never said anything to her about my feelings. We were taking a break to eat some peaches that we brought with us and sat under some trees by a small stream. We talked for a while about nothing in particular."

Here he paused, losing himself in the memory again. "I remember one moment in particular. I was looking at her while she was staring out over the stream. She was so lovely. The late afternoon sun was shining on her hair and she seemed so perfect. I felt a profound sense of gratitude for simply being near her."

Phil's gaze focused on Dr. Bechel who seemed to be caught up in his memory as much as he was. "This memory was so strong I could even remember the taste of the peach and the stickiness of it on my hands and chin. I was so young and innocent. What I felt was like a kind of pure love that was free of expectations or any need to possess or change. Untainted by disappointment or boredom. It was a moment of perfect harmony and acceptance.

Phil almost added "You know what I mean?" as his 14-year old self might have, but Dr. Bechel was murmuring, "What a beautiful experience!"

Phil blinked a couple of times to dispel the memory.

"And then, a few weeks ago, I was sitting in a hot bath, trying to soak out the stiffness from straining my back by lifting a heavy table." He hadn't meant to mention the part about his weak back and glanced at Dr. Bechel to see if there were any signs of disapproval. Seeing none, he continued, "And another memory came flooding back to me. I had just been to my advisor to plan out what advanced courses I should take for my degree. We discussed what I had done and what I planned to do after I finished school and he recommended some courses and professors. At the end of the interview, as he was shaking my hand he said 'You are a bright young man, Barker, and you have the focus to make a very nice career for yourself. I'd wish you luck, but you don't need my wishes.' I was elated by his confidence! I don't remember much visually about that encounter, just his words, the handshake and that I felt like I was floating as I walked across the yard to my dorm. Here was a man I admired and respected who was confident I would be a success.

"As I sat in the bath, remembering and musing, I realized that my life has already happened. I have done everything I set out to do. I became a professor myself. I built a career. I married – not the neighbor girl, but a girl not unlike her. I had traveled, and published and bought cars – all that I had once aspired to do and all with moderate success. Yes, I am a professor, albeit at a small liberal arts college and not a big university. Yes, I was married, but divorced with no children.

"Now, I don't aspire to anything. In fact, I am more or less marking time until retirement. And after that, God knows what I will do with my free time. I am too old and fat to attract any women except the too easily impressed coeds in my freshman classes. Not that I

would consider getting myself into a sexual harassment case like that. Besides, they all seem like children to me now.“

Dr. Bechel was nodding in a way that showed she could appreciate the unpleasantness of his situation. Phil sat back again into the sofa.

“I have had a good life, actually, and I would not like to trade it in for another one. It is an acceptable, comfortable life. But it is missing that spark I felt when I was young. I don't want a different life, I want my old one back. That is, I would like to experience my memories, memories like the ones I described to you, more often and for longer periods of time. Just sort of fill the not-very-interesting parts with the pleasant moments of my life.“

For a moment, neither spoke, as though they were digesting all that had been said.

“Well, Dr. Barker, yours is a rather unusual request, but I am confident we can help you.” She smiled a calm, understanding smile. “We have several tried-and-true procedures for bringing memories back. We might be able to use these memory enhancements with a combination of mood adjustments and suggestion therapy. Given the uniqueness of your request, I would recommend some follow up consultations for any fine tuning that would be necessary. These additional visits would naturally be included in the package price, regardless of how many you would like to arrange. I do not expect that you would require very many, however, since the treatments use all-natural materials to adjust what already exists in your life and brain.“

She tapped her pad for a few seconds and then looked up again at him.

“Just one question for clarification. You would, if I understand your request completely, like to maintain your current level of functionality?“

Phil had heard of people who had signed over their entire financial resources to Living Free to spend the rest of their life blissed out on endorphin-overdoses in a quiet private room in some complete-care Living Free facility. Some high-tech, first class opium den. He shuddered at the thought.

“Yes, yes. I'd like to keep living my life the way I always have, continue teaching.“

“Just enjoying your pleasant memories more often and for longer periods of time,” Dr. Bechel voicing his thought for him.

He nodded. Yes, this was going to work, he thought. She understood what he wanted and know how to make it happen.

“Fine. It might be most efficient if you sign a release on your existing medical history, so we can optimize the procedure for your individual biochemistry. I would like to walk you through the various options and the implications for post-procedure actions. We might decide to do one or two tests at the laboratory here, to see if there are any synergistics we can take advantage in combining treatments. I am assuming that since you studied chemistry, you would prefer a more technical presentation of the material, is this correct?“

He nodded, leaning back and crossing his legs comfortably in front of him. Yes, it was a good decision to come here, he thought, as the doctor continued with her explanation and he sank deeper and deeper into a state of satisfied relaxation.

1minutetopic: service industry
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Last revised: 11 December 2006

Navigation

Evet Hayir was a stranger in a strange land. Well, actually he was born in a tiny village overlooking the town he was now standing in, but he was raised from the time he was a small boy in the capitol far, far away. It has taken him two days by bus to get to the town, not because the distance was really so great, but the rural roads in this part of the country were bad, and the buses that plied them even worse. Though he could speak the language, he felt like he was on the other side of the planet. He felt desperate, deserted and inexplicably lost. He had come to visit the village of his birth to tell his aunts and uncles of the death of one of their sisters, his own aunt, who had also lived in the capitol. He was really not looking forward to this trip, as he had almost never met his aunts and uncles, and was really quite content studying back home at the university in the capitol. "Why can't you go, or send Yedi (his little sister)!" he pleaded with his father. "I must stay and work so you can continue to go to school, and Yedi is a girl! You know it's not right to send a girl out into the country. Evet, tomorrow you will go."

"But how will I know how to get there?"

"Evet! It is not like you are going to the other side of the world! Just ask anyone from the town, they all know us there."

He knew it was useless to argue with his father: the more he resisted his father, the sterner he became.

"Eh... Hallo. Can you tell me where is El Shehir?"

"We don't have alshazir."

"Uh, no, you misunderstand. El Shehir, it is a place, a small village, I'm trying to get there."

The shop keeper stopped sweeping for a second to look Evet in the eyes. "You from the capitol, are ya?"

"Yes, uh, well actually I was borne in El Shehir."

"Then how come you don't know where it is!" And with that he returned to his sweeping mumbling off colored comments about "fancy people from the capitol who don't even know where their roots are".

Evet was not dumb, but he sure felt that way now. He had even brought a compass, which of course was useless as none of the streets went straight for any longer than it took to squeeze past the tightly packed walls in the city. After that the path was free to express its true nature, which was apparently like that of the hair of the black people he had seen. Evet imagined that a map of the city would look like one of those decorative carvings he had on seen on the mosques where the interwoven words became like a web or a net. He had also brought a map drawn by his father. It reminded him of what a child might draw: it wasn't like a proper map at all, but then his father never had finished school. He tried to ask again down the road at a shoe vendor's shop.

“Hello yes...”

“Hello. How are you?”

“Um, I'm fine... Well, no. Actually I'm lost.”

“You are not lost, you are right here! So, anyway what can I get you?”

“Yes. Yes, I'm trying to get to El Shehir, and...”

“El Shehir, eh?”

“Yes! Yes, El Shehir” he said hope welling up in his heart.

“How are you going to get there?”

“Uh, well I'll be walking I suppose.”

“Well then you're going to be needing a good pair of shoes aren't you! I've got just the thing.”he said disappearing in to the back of the stall. Evet was still hoping to get some useful information, so he waited patiently.

“There. Try these on.”the shop owner said presenting him with some slightly used army issue boots.

“Uh, no really I don't need any shoes. You see, I just need to know how to get to El Shehir.”

“What? You don't like? I get some different ones...”

“No, no... I've no money.”he blurted out trying to get the shop keeper to forget the shoes for a minute.

“No money! No money? How do you expect to pay for the boots? Ok, I give you a good price. How much you want to give for 'em?”

Evet walked away down the street feeling somehow cheated.

“Ok, Ok! I give you for \$3!”the shop keeper called out. Evet shuddered at the thought that these boots were probably taken off of the body of a dead soldier about his age, and are now for sale for \$3. “Ok, \$2!”the shop keeper was now a half a block away and shouting down the narrow lane.

Evet walked back to the edge of town where the bus had dropped him. *It is so hot and dusty. How can anyone live here!* There was an old beat up Lada (Russian car) sitting on the side of the road. The man inside was looking at Evet. As he passes the man called out “Hey, where you going?” Evet stopped.“I'm going to El Shehir.”he said in as strong a voice as he could muster.

“Ok, get in.”

“You know where El Shehir is?”

“Sure, I'll take you there. Ten dollars.”

“Excuse me?”

“You from the capitol, yah?”

“Well n... Uh, yes. Yah I am.”

“Ok, for you I make a special price, \$10, get in, let's go.”

Two days of riding on the bus had cost about \$6, and he knew El Shehir could only be a few kilometers away from the town because his father always told him stories of walking up and down the hill to get there. “Uh, I think I'll walk.”

“You know where it is?”

“No, not yet.”

“It's too far to walk. Come on, get in.”

It was tempting, but he knew his father would beat him if he wasted \$10 on a taxi ride... and he really didn't trust the taxi driver. “No, I'll walk. Which way is it?”

“No, no, too dangerous to walk.”

“Which way?” Evet said defiantly.

“Ok, ok! \$8.”

Evet started walking down the road.

“\$6!” the man yelled after him.

Evet pulled out the map and looked at it again. There it was, the same cartoon drawing of a little group of giant houses on a hill side and the town down below in profile, with a squiggly line connecting the two. He looked up at the town and the hills around it. Suddenly he saw it. There, high up on the hillside behind the town, was a small group of roofs, and from this point the town actually looked kind of like the drawing. He felt a wave of relief wash over him. An old man was walking by driving a donkey cart full of straw. “Excuse me sir, is that El Shehir?” he asked pointing at the houses. The old man looked at him with an expression of surprise, and made a vague sign waving his hand towards the hill. “El Shehir. El Shehir, can't miss it.” and continued right on by.

While that was by no means the confidence inspiring affirmation he might have liked, at least he felt for once like he was on the right track. The village appeared to be about 3 or four kilometers away, and maybe 500 meters above the town. Evet figured it shouldn't take more than two hours to get there. He hoped to make it there before sunset because he really did not like the idea of being stuck out here in the dark. *But which is the road there?*

On the road he met a woman carrying bags of bread and vegetables and he asked politely “Excuse me, ma'am, I'm trying to get to El Shehir... do you know which road goes there?”

“Just go straight.” she said, pointing vaguely off towards a side path into town. Evet could not understand which way she meant. “I go straight down that road there, and straight that way?” he said pointing as precisely as possible. “Yes, yes. Straight. You can't miss it.” she said and briskly walked on. “Thank you!” Evet called after her, feeling like it was one of those niceties that he had learned which really didn't count for anything. He walked down the path for about 100 meters before it ended at a large wall. *Can't miss it? Straight?* He shook his head. He decided to just make it through town first. Left, then

right. That path ends at a right turn. Right then first left. Oops, dead end. Back out, and keep going to second left... At least it was cooler here in the shade of the narrow corridors between the mud-stuccoed houses and shops. Most of them were one or two stories tall and a lot of them had balconies hanging over the path. If opposing houses had balconies, they would practically touch over the middle of the path. It was impossible to tell where he was in the town, and he tried to use the sun to help guide him. Sure he could have pulled out his compass, but he was too embarrassed to do that. "City boy needs a compass just to get through the town!" he imagined them saying. *Would they even know what a compass was?*

Finally he could see a row of olive trees at the end of the path. *I must be getting close to the end of town now!* He could see that his path terminated at a small road at the edge of town. Above him on the hill was what he thought was El Shehir. *But which way should I go, right or left?* A hunched man walking with a stick came slowly down the road towards him. "Hello. Excuse me sir, do you know which way leads to El Shehir?" The man stopped and squinted up at Evet. "Where are you from?" he asked.

"I'm from the capitol, but I'm going to El Shehir."

"From the capitol, éh? Long way!"

"Yes, yes. It has been two days so far. So do you know..."

"I once went there. I was a boy then... about your age. Yes siree, long way." he cut in.

"So, El Shehir, is it that way... or that way" Evet asked point up then down the road. The man looked both ways as if he was trying to remember where it led. He pointed up the road with the stick, then down the road. "Is it that way?" Evet asked.

"Yep. It's that way." the man said still pointing the stick.

"Ok, well... Thank you."

"My pleasure." said the man. Evet walked off uneasily leaving the old man still wanting to discuss how things have changed since he was a boy and a thousand other things. "Have a good time in the capitol!" he called out. *Oh great! Does he think I am trying to go to the capitol?!*

The frustration of trying to get navigational help from the locals was relieved by the pleasantness of walking along the open path on the hill. He was never really sure if he was going the right way, of even if this was the right hill, but at least now he was surrounded by trees which occasionally shaded the path, and the air was filled with the smell of oranges and pine needles. The rocky path twisted and wound, splitting in two at every possible opportunity. He kept taking whichever branch appeared to be the most traveled, or in the direction he thought he should be going, but since he left the hunched old man he hadn't seen El Shehir. A goat herder had yelled "Straight. Just go straight. Not left, not right... you can't miss it!" between whoops and whistles to his flock. *At least he didn't ask me where I'm from. And he did seem to know where El Shehir was.*

He had been walking along quickly enough, but lost a lot of time at intersecting paths deciding where to go, and it was starting to get late. *Soon the sun will be setting. I must go faster. I must get there before the sun sets!* He continued on, higher and higher. Left,

right, then left again. He started to stumble more and more with his fatigue and haste. At a group of huts he saw a woman and a child up on the side of the road bundling sticks for fire wood. "Eh, excuse me." he said wiping the sweat from his face. "Is that the way to El Shehir?" he asked pointing up the path, hoping for some reassurance.

"No," the woman said plainly. The child looked at him curiously. Evet felt like crying. *Have I been on the wrong path the whole time?* "Well, is El Shehir back that way?" he asked pointing back down the road.

"No. Where are you from?" the woman asked suspiciously. He thrust his arms up into the air in frustration and walked to the side of the road facing outward. "El Shehir." he said as he took a deep breath. Just then he heard the sunset call to prayer and noticed the town far below.

"What is your name?" she asked him.

"Evet." he said. *What is wrong with these country folk?* "Evet Hayir."

"Oh! Well then, you are home!"

He had finally made it to El Shehir. Within a half an hour he was bathed and sitting down with long-lost aunts and uncles, all asking a million questions at once... but somehow their questions didn't bother him as much anymore.

1minutetopic: Navigation
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Last revised: 11 December 2006

Superstition

“Bug in the salt?” Tre asked Faith.

“What?”

“Did you find a bug in the salt or something?”

“No... Why?”

“Oh, well do you make a habit of wasting salt?” he said pretending to pick some up and toss it over his shoulder, just as she had.

“Oh, that! No. That’s just a habit... It’s for good luck.”

“So... if I chuck the whole shaker full out the window then I’ll win the lottery?” he asked sarcastically.

“No! Haven’t you ever heard that if you toss a pinch of salt over your shoulder it brings good luck?”

Tre was a realist. He was logical and also one of those people who noticed when others contradicted themselves, and always felt a need to find out why. What was the real truth? Why did they say ‘A’ and then later ‘B’? Which was it ‘A’ or ‘B’? Faith was, like most people, much more willing to accept inconsistencies in others, and never even noticed them in herself. She found Tre to be hard-edged, but she liked it. At least she tolerated it well. “No.” Tre said, “Until now I had never heard that waiting salt was good for anything. Do you touch wood for luck as well?”

“Oh, well... yes. I mean sometimes I do.” She admitted.

“So, say you have a splinter in your hand... does that count?”

“No. Its just... just a...”

“A superstition.” he said making fun of the obviousness of it.

“Well, yeah. I guess.”

They would get together like this once or twice a week. It was never really anything planned, more spontaneous, and they’d chat, like today, or go to a movie or perhaps just cook and eat together. People thought they might be a “couple” thought they never were. Tre somehow fulfilled a need in Faith. Perhaps it was his sense of accountability. He often wound up drilling her on some aspect of her beliefs and, in a way, made her grow. Tre thought she was hot, but more importantly he couldn’t understand how an otherwise seemingly rational person could hold such untenable ideas without questioning them critically. Through understanding her he hopped to better understand humanity at large, and the crazy and inconsistent things people always did.

“So what if you kept a wooden bead on a necklace? Would that count?”

“No! I think the idea is that you have to reach out and touch some separate object of wood.” she tried to rationalize, knowing it would be hopeless.

“Like this table?” he asked.

“Yes. Like the table.”

“Even though it is a simulated wood grain Formica?”

“Is that made out of wood?”

“Its a type of plastic, made from petroleum, which might have some carbon from an ancient tree...” he said egging her on.

“No. I don’t think that would count.”

“So. How does it work?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I suppose it is like connecting with the aura of the tree when you touch it.”

“The dead tree’s aura?”

“Listen, I don’t make the rules!”

“No, you just follow them without understanding them. That’s why it is a superstition!”

“Well, I’m not the only one! Don’t you have any superstitions?”

“Nope.”

“You have no superstitions?”

“Nope. I must have skipped line when it came to ‘irrational beliefs’.”

“So you’d golf in the rain?” she said going on the offensive.

“Nope.”

“So you are superstitious!”

“Nope. Golf courses are flat, and a man standing on a flat plane with a lightning rod in his hand makes, well, a pretty good lightning rod. You are statistically much more likely to be killed by lightning golfing in the rain than not golfing in the rain. There is a logical scientific explanation for it, so it is not a superstition. Besides I don’t golf.”

“Well there must be some reason that everyone, except for you of course, does believe in superstitions.”

“Yeah, cause they have been taught to by superstitious adults. It’s like racism, or religion, or Freudian psychoanalysis: you get tortured with it by your parents or teachers, and later you hand it down to your children, understanding or not.”

“That’s a pretty big leap of... I mean it’s one thing to say that... Ok, I was never tortured with religion or superstition of Freud, but I’ll admit I do ‘believe’... well I don’t know if that is a good word for the superstitions, but I do ‘partake’ in them, yes.” “Have you ever forwarded a chain email?” he said with mocked accusation, pointing his finger at her and squinting his eyes. She looked down with mocked shame, “Yes... Yes I have. Guilty as charged.”

“It is the same thing. It is like a virus. The email, or superstition, or religion, or whatever has a story that is just interesting enough to get copied. Its interest can be in the form of

a story that's funny, or heart wrenching or just possibly on the verge of believability by enough people to get passed on. If it is easy to pass it on, and the if potential 'danger' of not passing it on is large, than rather than think about it critically, people just hit the forward button, and Viola! We have all the major religions of the world, and people are afraid to step on cracks in the side walk." Faith didn't really follow all of it, or even believe it, but she liked when Tre got wound up like this. It was a little like watching fireworks.

"Wait, wait. You're claiming that all of the worlds religions, the thing that probably half of the world holds to be it's most precious and defining characteristic is nothing more than..."

"Spam." He said.

"Spam?" she asked.

"Basically it is spam. Either some one is trying to get you to buy something, as in the case of nationalism or religion where you're supposed to lend support to the leaders, or they just want the free advertising you provide by promising you some false hope, again like religion 'Believe and you go to heaven', or emails 'The one millionth person on the forwarding list gets a free kiss on the butt from Bill Gates!'. Of course there's always the negative reinforcement method: 'Believe or burn in hell', 'Forward or you will die', 'Touch wood or... or else'."

"Ok, I see what you are saying, I just don't believe it." she finally said defiantly.

"Wait, wait! You are willing to believe all that... uh, stuff, but not what I'm saying? What I'm saying doesn't require belief, it is fact."

"Fact? Ha! How is it factual? It is just your belief." she said triumphantly.

"It is like genetics. You 'believe' in genetic selection don't you?"

"Well..."

"Survival of the fittest? Weeding out of the sick and genetically inferior? Evolution?"

"Yeah, ok, I'll accept that as fact."

"Ok, so only the fittest pass on their genes, and the weaker ones don't get copied as much, so naturally in later generations there are more copies of the 'fitter' genes, and less of the weak ones."

"Yeah, ok, but how does that prove that the emails, I mean the superstitions, are just... spam?"

"Well if we have a million crack monkeys writing stupid emails 24-7 and sending them out to everyone they can..."

"You mean the Internet." she agreed.

"Exactly. The Internet is a perfect genetic laboratory. An ideal place for exploring sociology. Some of the stories will get re-forwarded because they're funny, or just believable enough, or people are worried about the consequences of not forwarding them..."

“Ok, and the lame ones don’t get copied.” she said resigning herself to the fact that she finally did see his point.

“Yeah, so eventually only the ‘fit’ messages get forwarded, and become self perpetuating... And how many of the original 1 million emails was actually true?”

“None.”she said with a large breath out.

“Exactly.“

They had a lovely lunch, not mentioning superstitions again until their way back to school. To prove a point during their walk Tre stepped on every crack in the side walk, walked under a ladder, and even broke a mirror. Ok, maybe it was only a small piece of a mirror, but he smashed it into about 1000 pieces. They both laughed, and Faith really felt like she was somehow growing as a person. Unfortunately crossing the last road Tre was hit by a bus and killed instantly. But the day was not a total loss, after all Faith had learned a valuable lesson, that suppressions are all just a load of bunk.

1minutetopic: superstition
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Last revised: 11 December 2006

Notes for the first round of 1minutestories

Round 1 took place between December 2004 and January 2005.

Contributors to round 1:

- Horizon Gitano
- Shannon Frances

The following topics were contributed in or on the way to Prague, Munich or Szeged:

- Paranoia in the train station
- Prince charming runs out of gas in a small border town on the way to rescue the princess
- The truth behind an historical event
- Falling in love with the wrong person
- Scary story
- The object
- Dog creation myth
- Sport story
- Missed connection
- Things to do with french fries -- or -- How french fries saved my life
- Character description of a cafe
- Effect of war

The following topics were contributed later in 2005:

- Service industry
- Navigation
- Superstition