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# Hurricane Party

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## The Hurricane Party

When some moron started hammering nails at eight o'clock in the morning, I could no longer sleep, but I couldn't wake up, either. I could only lay motionless as random details from my room entered my consciousness. The hammering started up again, louder than before, so I drug myself out of bed to see where it was coming from. It was that curly-haired yuppie next door. His wife was holding a piece of plywood over one of his new six-panel windows while he was nailing it into the window-frame. A hurricane was coming my way.

The coast, I had long since decided, was no place to be during a hurricane. In about two hours, my car was packed with everything I figured I couldn't afford to lose, and I was cruising the interstate inland to my hometown.

I had flipped off the radio and was listening to the hum of the engine when something occurred to me. On precisely this day of the month, four months ago, I remembered waking up with the worst headache of my life, laying in bed until two or so in the afternoon, and swearing that I would never touch alcohol again. Amazingly, I was true to my word. As a Mustang zipped in front of me and the driver flipped me off, I realized that my hometown was where I learned to abuse alcohol. It was the one place where I might not be able to just say no. When I saw my interchange, it was tempting to just keep driving right on past it. At the last second I swerved onto the off-ramp, cutting off a Mitsubishi behind me and nearly hitting the barrier.

On a winding state highway, my car plunged deeper into the heart of darkness. The landscape was starting to look familiar—too familiar. Memories resurfaced. Soon, I

would be engulfed in the time-honored customs of my hometown and unable to make rational decisions. I was repulsed, but there was nothing to do but drive on.

Around a final bend, my hometown unfolded before my eyes. I entered on the west side, crossed a bridge over a river into the east side, drove a few blocks, pulled onto a side street, and in an instant I was home. My father was in the garage.

“Well, well, it’s about time you visit the old man. How are you, son?” He walked over to me, limping a little, and put his arms around me.

“Fine, fine, everything’s fine, Dad. How ‘bout you?”

“Fine. Get you a beer?”

“No thanks, I’m trying to quit.”

“Good for you, son.” He looked at his bottle and set it down.

“Can I help you with anything out here?”

“I don’t know, let’s see. The pipes burst last week, and rather than fix the old pipes that ran under the house, I decided to run some new ones along the exterior. It looks like I have everything I need, except a two-inch nipple.” The second he said it, he regretted it.

“Well, I can’t help you there, Dad. Mine are only an inch-and-a-half, and that’s in cold weather.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you little wise-ass. Why don’t you run to the hardware store for me? Then we’ll have supper when you get back. Maybe you’ll see Hector while you’re down there. He was asking about you the other day.”

Hector was an old friend of mine. We used to drive around town drinking whiskey and coke. After several minutes at the hardware store, Hector appeared around a corner. He dressed even more like a street thug than I remembered.

“How can I help you, sir,” he said. His professional façade broke down when I told him I was looking for nipples. “Two inches? I’ve seen some noodle nipples in my day, but never two-inchers.” He spoke with a slightly exaggerated redneck accent, at once friendly and confrontational. “What the hell you doin’ here? How the hell you been?” He pulled a package of nipples off of a rack and gave it to me. There was a line at the register. He took a business card and wrote his number and address on it. “I’m off at 5:30. Call me around then. We’ll catch up on old times. Don’t forget your beer.”

“Right...about that.”

“Next customer!”

Later that evening, I was turning onto Hector’s street. Kids were out in front of trailer homes. I’m not sure what their games were, if any. A shirtless pre-teen with his boxers showing gave me a hard stare. I’m not sure if it was malice or curiosity. I’m not sure he was sure.

Hector’s place was one of the first houses after the trailers. His house was surprisingly large, two stories tall with a full-length porch. The paint was faded, one of the windows was cracked, the sidewalk was chipped and the steps were crumbling. Hector’s ‘70s model Dodge pickup was parked in the driveway.

Next to his house was a restored one-story model with fresh paint, new landscaping, and an ornament over the doorway. A man in his late thirties was hammering nails into a brand new fence between his place and Hector’s. The man with

the hammer walked towards me. He said, “You look a little lost. You don’t want to get lost around here. That is, unless…” he motioned towards Hector’s place, “…you want one of these fiends to crack your skull and trade your car for dope money.”

Almost on cue, Hector stepped out onto his porch in a white wife-beater tank-top, Raiders hat, beer in hand, grinning like a jackass.

“Oh, I see you two are friends,” said the man with the hammer. “In that case,” he raised his voice so Hector could hear, “try to keep it down tonight. Some of us have jobs to go to in the morning.”

“Sure will, Skippy,” replied Hector, his redneck tone more patronizing than ever.

The man with the hammer mumbled something. I think it was, “Sure you will you lousy prick.”

“What?” Hector roared back at him. “You wanna try me with that hammer?” The man with the hammer strode to his front door, flipping Hector off behind his back. “Yeah, you better build a fence!” Hector watched the door close behind the man with the hammer, then turned to me. “You want some of this, too?” He threw his arms out from his sides like he was ready to throw down. Then he smiled broadly. “Well ho-ly-shit, you made it.” He extended his hand and proceeded with some elaborate ghetto handshake. It was very awkward.

The porch, covered in a film of dirt, was littered with cigarette butts and stray beer cans. There was a low table with some lawn chairs, also covered with a film of dirt. He downed the last of his beer and brought out two more from the kitchen, each covered in a frosty layer of condensation. I had to explain that I didn’t drink anymore.

“So you really gave up beer?”

“That’s the way it looks.”

“Not even a taste?”

“Not even a drop.”

“Christ.”

I decided to change the subject. “How’s everything in the ‘hood?”

He was staring dejectedly into the distance. “Shit.”

“What do you mean, shit?”

“Same old shit, that’s all. I should have got the hell outta this town a long time ago. You had the right idea. I’m surprised you came back to visit, even if it was just to run away from a little storm. O’ course, you won’t even have a beer with me. When the shit hits the fan, you’ll probably be too good for this country. You ever think about moving to Canada?”

An old, familiar frustration started coming over me. “Here we go,” I said to myself. “Well,” I leaned forward to get up. “It was nice seeing you again, but I think it’s time...”

“Where do you think you’re going? Sit down. I’m just giving you a hard time.”

I eased back into my chair. I wasn’t getting away that easily.

“I know the city made you all sensitive and po-lit-ic-ly cor-rect.”

I had to concentrate on letting my blood cool, relaxing the muscles around my mouth and forehead, loosening my jaw, taking deep breaths, all without looking conspicuous. “Can we change the subject?”

“I’m just trying to get you to loosen up a little, and have a damn beer.”

“Well, I’ve made up my mind, so unless you want to drop it, I’ll be on my way.”

“Alright, alright.” He made another trip to his fridge to get another beer, then came back. I don’t think you understand the seriousness of this situation. Do you realize that men, excuse me, men and *women*, are laying down *their* lives to protect *your* freedom?”

“So then it’s my duty to drink beer?”

“It sure is. I don’t suppose you heard about Smitty.”

“Who?”

“Smitty. ‘bout yea high, dark hair.”

“Oh, Smitty. What about him?”

“Smitty? Never mind.”

“Okay?”

“Smitty’s dead.”

“Dead, how?”

“Marines, Iraq, roadside bomb.”

“Da-mn.”

“Yeah, pretty fucked up.”

“Da-mn.”

“Don’t pretend like you care or anything. I know what you’re thinking—‘better him than me.’”

“Better him than me? That’s a little harsh. Who are you to talk, anyway?”

“All I know is, if Smitty found out you got hit by an IED, the least he would do is drink a beer in your memory. That’s just common respect. You can’t even show a little respect for where you come from. You’re not half of what I took you for. You’re

nothing. On second thought,” he grabbed the beer off the table, “you can’t have my beer. For all I care, you can take that foreign piece of shit rice-grinder of yours...” He flung the bottle, end over end, in the direction of my car.

“Hey!” The bottle shattered against my fender.

“...and drive it into a brick wall.” He stared off down the street with an irritated look on his face. He glanced at me. My frustration must have shown. The foreign car was a particular sore spot with me. “What the hell you waiting for?”

I stood up, took a few steps, kicked the sole of my shoe into the wooden floorboards, looked at the neighbor’s fence, at the brand new dent in my Toyota. “Aw, for hell’s sake, give me a friggin’ beer.”

“They’re in the fridge. Bring me one, too, while you’re at it.”

There was more alcohol than food in Hector’s kitchen. Popping a bottle, I decided to have the first drink alone in the kitchen. I felt the cold glass on my bottom lip and the first drops that fell onto my tongue. In themselves, these drops were innocent, could do no more harm than a few drops of water. En masse, it’s another story. It’s more than just a chemical reaction; it’s a release of something within me that has been lying dormant, like a hibernating bear. Whatever it was, it sat high up in my abdomen, or low down in my chest, in a compartment of its own. It was warm and fuzzy, a little heart-wrenching, like a sort of divine agony.

“What the hell are you doing in here?” Hector clapped me on the back. I nearly spewed my second drink, which was much larger than the first.

“You scared the *hell* out of me.”

“You gonna nurse that all night? You’ve got some catching up to do.” I tipped mine back again, resigning myself to fate and deciding to enjoy myself along the way.

We sat on the porch, drinking steadily. People passed by in cars, on bikes, walking. El Caminos were thumping rap; pickups were blaring metal. Excitement was building. An old Chevy pulled up. The front seat passenger had thick shoulders, and his head was shaved. The backseat was filled with three younger passengers. They all looked like Latinos of sorts. The stereo was playing cumbia. I could tell from the steady bass rhythm: doom—doom doom doom—doom doom doom. They sat in the car a few minutes, then the bald one got out. Hector met him next to the car, ghetto-handshaking with gusto. The driver popped the trunk. He and one of the rear passengers hefted a case and two twelve-packs of beer. More cars pulled up in a constant succession.

As the party grew, everything became a blur of faces, staring, ignoring. Finally, I had to get out. I pushed my way through the front door, and followed my shadow out to my car, weaving around revelers. I turned the key to unlock the driver’s side door, almost home free, when I heard a short, sharp shout. “Charley!” Hector was on the porch, arms out to his side, beer spilling to the ground, his bald friend looking on. He was shaking his head as I walked back to the light. “Charley, Charley, Charley... You weren’t trying to sneak away, were you?”

“Hell no, brutha.”

“Where’s your beer?”

I looked at my hands. “Good question.” So much for clearing my bloodstream of alcohol. Hector led me back to the kitchen where I saw a familiar sight. One kid was holding up a bright red funnel with a five-foot piece of tubing clamped to the tip, all parts

from the hardware store. Another kid was on his knees, beer pouring out the end of the tube straight down his throat. “Remember this?”

“Oh, the beer bong.” There was still two inches of beer in the tube when the kid on his knees pulled it from his mouth, beer pouring a trail down the front of his shirt.

“That brings back memories.”

“You’re next, Charley.”

“No, not me.” It didn’t take long to coerce me. That was just the beginning. Hector made sure there was a beer in my hand at all times and that I was drinking it. Then a bottle of whiskey came down from the top of the fridge, and I knew I was in trouble. When I came out of the kitchen, good and drunk, Hector’s bedroom door opened. Smoke poured into the hallway. Half a dozen kids were passing around a pipe and a water bong. Like a smoggy city in a valley, the clearest air was towards the ceiling. Fortunately, none of the potheads tried to twist my arm.

At the front entranceway, a skinny kid bumped into me rushing into the house. “Move, move, cops!” The door was shut and locked, the blinds were closed, the music turned down low. Those in possession of drugs were stealthy and secretive, darting from one room to another, or out the back door.

One of the last to enter was a girl with a colorful pair of converse sneakers. She had healthy calves and smooth legs, and a skirt hung above her knees. Immediately I recognized her face. Ruth Turner. I had broken up with her years ago. She had been pruned out of my heart, totally weeded out until there wasn’t a trace of her. At first, I acted like I didn’t notice her, and just watched out of the corner of my eye as she headed into the kitchen. But before long, her feminine essence had wrapped all over me like vines

and blinded me, so that all I could see was her. I don't know if it was the beer or the whiskey, but suddenly I was overcome with attraction.

I finished my beer and went to the kitchen, where Ruth was mingling. She had a familiar smile. She was always so genuinely friendly, somehow, but she looked a little haggard from too much partying. She looked at me, surprised.

I broke the ice. "I didn't think you still came around here."

"Well, it just sort of grew on me, so I keep coming back."

A solid wedge of nostalgia was being hammered into my core, constricting my breath.

"Care to step outside?"

"Sure."

It was all too perfect, all too tragic. It was as though all we needed for the fulfillment of our undying feelings, all the universe needed, was this chance encounter. Her hand hung motionless at the touch of my fingertips, passive, vulnerable. We walked hand-in-hand into the backyard and reclined on the ground. Her curls were strewn around her head. Dimples formed around her mouth, her skin shown white in the moonlight. She stared deep into the blackness of the night sky. I stared at the pupils of her eyes, black disks, the gateway to her secrets, this angel of the universe, servant to a mysterious order. With her, life was relevant, it meant something. I didn't know what it was, but its truth was clear as day.

Our lips met. I opened my eyes. She opened hers. She brought a cigarette out of her purse and lit it. Grey smoke billowed into the blackness. The cigarette passed from her small fingers to mine, then from mine to hers.

I heard footsteps on the grass. Two police officers were approaching the back door, but they didn't seem to have noticed us.

"Stay low," I whispered. "When it's clear, we'll run to the alley."

The police were positioning themselves next to the back door when suddenly it flung open, and kids just poured out in ones and twos. The police tried to plug the gap, but they were overwhelmed. They ordered kids to stop, but no one listened, so the police just apprehended at random. We hopped a low fence and joined a crowd that was jogging down the alley. Headlights appeared at the end. "Cops! Run!" Some bolted to the left, some to the right. Dogs barked fiercely, but all was quiet to our left, so we went that way.

We emerged with a group on the next street. Folks were on their doorsteps in bathrobes, shaking their heads, telling everyone to go home. "It's 2:30 in the morning. Don't you know the storm is on its way?"

Two runaways headed up the street. One was black, and the other was dressed like an anarchist militant. "Come with us," said the anarchist. So we did. There was an aura of fugitive camaraderie. We were jovial and defiant, like suffering fighters in some lost cause. I supposed this was how people were drawn into revolutions.

We rounded a corner and headed down another alleyway. At the first garage that didn't have motion sensors, we followed the anarchist into the shadows. Then he pulled a plastic baggie from one of his many pockets.

"Weed?" I said to Ruth. "Here? Now?"

"No, not weed." The anarchist held up the baggie so we could see, but all I saw was a dark mass. "Psilocybin."

“Oh,” I said. “Who would have thought?” I figured this must have been fate, so I accepted a cap like providence and chewed and swallowed the nasty-tasting thing as quickly as I could. Then we just stood there for a while, talking about the strange way drugs have of bringing people together. I don’t know when exactly it did start working, but I was definitely tripping when the hurricane started dragging its fingers across my hometown. Sheltered by the garage’s eave, we watched as a prolonged gust of wind picked up, flinging dirt, debris, and rain showers down the alleyway. It was frightening, but we were protected by the garage, and by the virtue of us just being who we were.

When the gust died down, the anarchist sprang up and led us onward. We were back on the street beneath the shifting skies when we came across this huge tree that was lying on its side. By this time I was having a very hard time maintaining composure, and the tree wasn’t helping. Its roots were torn out of the ground, standing up vertically with bits of sod hanging off of them. While there was definitely something tragic about that tree, for some reason I thought its uprootedness was hilarious and could not control my laughter. It made perfect sense to me at the time, but when I looked around, everyone was staring at me. They didn’t appreciate the humor.

“We need to get a move-on,” said Ruth. The others didn’t say anything. They just looked very nervous. Somehow, the worried looks on their faces made me laugh even more. I couldn’t help it. There I was, conscious of our predicament and utterly helpless to get myself together. With them, I regarded myself with disdain. But still there was that part of me that laughed back at them in defiance.

Then they pointed to the sky behind me. That's when I turned and saw the black mass that was bearing down on the town. Violent gusts of wind, torrents of rain, and brilliant flashes of lightning were coming directly our way.

I choked on my breath. That's really when the trip turned kind of bad.