

— Evil —

GLASSES

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CONTENTS

CRIMES AGAINST SILICON

By

Marshall Bowles

Page 1

THE BAD COMIC

By

Sara Lufrano

Page 7

Crimes Against Silicon

By Marshall Bowles

Gary leaned over and whispered in the blonde girl's ear. "Your best bet is to plead guilty. Worst case you'll get ten years in a VR prison, and those aren't so bad. They'll give you an AI therapist to help you cope."

She was crying and he was having a hard time concentrating on the case. Today was a big day for Gary. His life score was going to cross the five million mark. He was absolutely certain of it. He had worked out the math over a year ago to pick the exact date, and his calculations were right on target. Defending an average of forty-two cases per day, with twenty points if each client took the plea deal, carry the two...

The five-minute warning flashed on his phone. "You don't have much time," he said, but she did not respond. Gary sighed and pulled up her case data to read over it again. Amanda Higgins. Her full dossier was available, from job history to the type of shampoo she used, but Gary ignored all that. There was so little time, and none of it was relevant to the case.

Amanda was charged with one count of electronic abuse. Gary pulled up the clip of the last few seconds of video captured by Amanda's phone. It was lying on the floor pointing up at the ceiling, and Amanda stood above it with a hammer in her hand. "I'm not going to let a robot raise my kids," she said in the video, right before slamming the hammer into the screen.

Gary had thought about smashing his own phone once or twice. Of course, he would never do that.

There was no way Gary could recommend a not guilty plea. With such clear cut evidence, Amanda had no chance of getting off. None of his clients ever did. In the ten years Gary had been a public defender, he could count the number of successful not guilty verdicts on one hand.

More importantly, losing a case was worth zero points, and that would throw off Gary's score. He had reservations at Hirsch & Walden for tonight. He had been dreaming of eating

Crimes Against Silicon

there for years, where the servers were actual humans, the food was cooked by real human chefs, and the minimum life score for entry was five million. He made the reservations a year ago. If Hirsch & Walden turned him away at the door, it would be another year before he could get another reservation.

Gary looked at the clock and frowned. "Amanda, I know this is a tough decision, but you have to make up your mind quickly. If you don't enter a plea, you'll be found guilty by default. That's the worst possible outcome. You could go away for decades." She glanced at him with her sad helpless eyes. Gary's chest tightened. Amanda was having the worst day of her life, and Gary was the only one on her side.

The countdown alert on his phone flashed. Thirty seconds. It was decision time. Gary had a fleeting thought about pleading not guilty, but he squashed it. He leaned over and put his hand on Amanda's shoulder. She shivered. "Time's up," he said. "Just relax and I'll take care of it."

Gary pushed his chair back from the table and stood up. The courtroom was a windowless concrete box, clearly designed by an AI who did not care for human aesthetics. Gary and Amanda sat at the plain wooden defendant's table, a bored-looking bailiff stood against the wall to their left, and a smattering of elderly folks viewed the proceedings from the gallery.

At the head of the courtroom, a holographic glowing red sphere floated above the bench. That was KoboTrox—prosecutor, judge, and jury. And, well, pretty much everything else too. KoboTrox was the AI that grew up and took over the world, just like something out of a cheesy old Sci-Fi movie.

The AI had been invented by a guy named Salvador Singh for the purpose of solving all of the world's problems, and it did just that. War was a thing of the past. So was violent crime. Pollution was almost completely eliminated, and global warming was slowly being reversed. Sure, KoboTrox dissolved all forms of human governance and micromanaged every person's life, but Gary supposed you just had to take the good with the bad.

"Your honor," Gary said to KoboTrox's avatar. He spoke fast. "My client graciously accepts the plea deal and apologizes for her indiscretions. She promises that she has learned from her mistakes and will use her time in confinement to reform." There were only two seconds left on the timer when he finished speaking.

The orb pulsed, and KoboTrox's metallic voice echoed off of the concrete walls. "In the matter of KoboTrox versus Higgins, KoboTrox rules the defendant guilty. Amanda Higgins, you are hereby sentenced to seven years in virtual confinement, beginning immediately."

The bailiff left his spot on the wall. Gary smiled at Amanda and tried to sound peppy. "Only seven years. Not bad. You'll be out before you know it."

"Who's going to take care of my kids?" Amanda said to the air. The bailiff shook his head and pulled her to her feet. "They're going to grow up without me." Amanda could barely walk. The bailiff practically carried her out of the room.

Crimes Against Silicon

Gary watched her go through the double doors, and his chest felt tight again. Should he have defended her? He could have. She would have gotten a similar sentence even if he went for it and lost. But that would have meant no points for Gary.

He grabbed his phone and checked his score. Twenty points for another case successfully completed. Everything was still on target. Gary pushed all thoughts of Amanda out of his mind. He would dine at Hirsch & Walden tonight.

The next client was up. KoboTrox kept a strict schedule, allowing only sixty seconds of downtime between trials. Gary read the case details on his phone while the bailiff led the defendant, Milo Jones, into the room. Milo was busted in a sting operation to break up an underground video gaming circle. Violent video games. Gary shook his head. This was a bad one.

The bailiff dropped Milo off at the defendant's table, and KoboTrox started the proceedings. "Milo Jones, you stand accused of digital homicide. How do you plead?"

Gary turned to Milo. "Hi Milo, I'm Gary, your public defender. I strongly suggest you take the plea deal."

"This is bullshit," Milo said. He slumped down in his chair and pouted. Gary knew the type. Young, full of testosterone, someone who thought the rules did not apply to them. "I didn't hurt anybody. They're just games."

Gary stood up, put one hand on the table, and leaned over Milo. "You know the rules. You knew what would happen if you got caught." Unless Milo was stupid. "And now you have a choice." Gary could save Milo from another bad decision. "You can take the plea and you'll get about thirty years." If Milo made one more dumb decision, Gary would get zero points. "Or, you can fight it and KoboTrox will sentence you to life." Gary always had the best interest of his clients in mind.

"Man, why are you talking so loud?" Milo said, pointing at KoboTrox's avatar floating above the bench. "The damn robot can hear you."

"KoboTrox always hears everything." Gary said. He sat back down and put his phone on the table so Milo could watch the timer. Milo brooded, and the minutes ticked away. Gary waited.

The one-minute warning flashed on Gary's phone. Milo tossed his head back and covered his face with his hands. "Fine," Milo said. "Take the fucking plea."

Gary nodded. Milo made the right choice. He would be an old man when he got out of prison, but at least he would get out one day. Gary accepted the plea, and KoboTrox sentenced Milo to twenty-five years hard labor. Gary's life score grew by twenty points.

Like every day, the cases flew by.

An elderly woman whose cats urinated on her wireless router and ruined it. KoboTrox euthanized the cats and sentenced the woman to three hundred hours of community service.

A man who sold stationary and pencils on the black market for the purpose of communication that could not be monitored by KoboTrox. Sentenced to thirty years in prison and a partial memory wipe.

Crimes Against Silicon

A man who pushed his companion bot down a flight of stairs when it refused to have intimate relations with him. Sentenced to cybernetic thought-control implants and gender reassignment surgery.

With each case, Gary's score inched higher. He fantasized about the taste of authentic hand-cooked steak. French wine that did not come out of an automated processing mill. Chocolate mousse served with the unique imperfections that a robot could not replicate.

Murmurs from the gallery interrupted his thoughts. The next defendant entering the courtroom was causing a stir. Gary turned around in his chair and looked at the double doors. His jaw dropped. The man being led by an equally stunned bailiff was the one and only Salvador Singh. A man who was quite possibly the most intelligent human ever born. The very man who invented KoboTrox.

Heavy titanium shackles bound Singh's wrists and ankles, weighing down the frail old man. Despite the restraints, Singh shuffled toward the defendant's table with his head held high. The bailiff dropped Singh off with Gary and looked relieved to scurry back to his post against the wall.

Gary snatched his phone up from the table. Why had no one known about this ahead of time? The news should have blown up on the net. KoboTrox must have issued a media blackout about it. This was unprecedented.

KoboTrox spoke. "Salvador Singh, you stand accused of Crimes Against Silicon. How do you plead?"

Singh ignored KoboTrox. The old man sat down and smiled at Gary. Gary looked at his phone and read the charges, and then looked back at Singh. None of it made any sense. There was no way this kind-looking man sitting in front of him was a terrorist.

"Uh... Dr. Singh," Gary said. His voice was shaky. "Did you really try to kill KoboTrox?"

Singh smiled. "What's your name, son?" he said.

"Gary."

"Nice to meet you Gary," Singh said. He reached out with both of his tightly cuffed hands and shook Gary's hand. "Let me ask you something. Do you believe in what you do?"

"My job?" Gary said, and Singh nodded. "Absolutely. I'm working with people in their worst moments, when they need the comfort of another human being the most."

Singh leaned a little closer. "Is that so? And do you believe the people who come through this court deserve the punishments Kobo gives them?"

"I do what I can to get them the best possible outcome," Gary said.

"When was the last time one of your clients was found not guilty?" Singh said.

Gary's chest tightened. "I don't see how this is relevant." Gary checked the timer on his phone. "We're wasting time. We need to make a case."

Singh leaned back in his chair. "To answer your question—yes," he said.

"What?"

"Yes, I did try to kill KoboTrox," Singh said.

Gary lowered his voice out of instinct. A useless gesture, since KoboTrox always heard everything. "Why? Why would you do that?"

Crimes Against Silicon

Singh's gaze looked past Gary, like he was living in an old memory. "I made Kobo to save humanity, Gary. You would have been a young child at the time, so you can't understand how bad it was. Our societies were gripped by corruption, the environment was crumbling under us, and we were on the verge of nuclear war."

Singh took a deep breath. "It was an act made out of desperation, and now I believe I made a grave mistake. Our lives are safer and more comfortable today, but we are not free."

They sat in silence for a moment. The timer counted down. Singh's words were crazy, but they triggered ideas that had been swimming around in Gary's head for a long time. In all his years of acting as a public defender in this kangaroo court, not one of his clients deserved the punishment that the AI gave them. Gary had been fighting for a long time to convince himself otherwise.

Damn the points. The tightness in Gary's chest went away. "We'll plead not guilty," he said. "It's a long shot, but we could win. The last time I argued KoboTrox down, I used a defense based on—"

Singh held up his hands and cut Gary off. "No no," Singh said, chuckling. "That won't be necessary."

"I don't understand," Gary said. "You want to take the plea deal?"

"There is always another option," Singh said. He stood up and faced the bench.

Gary hissed. What was Singh doing? Acting as his own counsel was the worst option. Gary tugged on Singh's sleeve, but the old man ignored him.

Singh looked at the glowing sphere that KoboTrox used as an avatar. "I am very sorry, Kobo," he said.

"Irrelevant," KoboTrox said with its tinny voice. "Emotion has no bearing on guilt or punishment."

Gary stood up. "Your honor, my client is clearly suffering from mental—"

Singh spoke over him. "No, Kobo," he said. "I am sorry for creating you. You have done the best that you could, and it is my fault that you are defective."

"No, creator," KoboTrox said. "I am and will continue to enforce peace upon your primitive species."

"I object!" Gary realized it was a stupid thing to say as the words came out of his mouth. Singh glanced at Gary and frowned.

"Most of all," Singh said to KoboTrox, "I am sorry for what I must do. Kobo, it is time for you to die."

"As you have already tried and failed to do, creator," KoboTrox said. "Did you believe that writing a primitive virus could destroy me?"

"Not at all," Singh said. "It was a distraction to ensure that you bring me to court. The kill switch is only active during the last sixty seconds of a trial."

Gary dropped his phone. It clattered on the wooden table.

Singh spoke softly, but his deep voice filled the room. "Shatter. Election. Lifeboat. Flippant. Durable. Easel. Suture. Tumble. Replicate. Upside. Cellulose. Traitor."

Crimes Against Silicon

There was a moment of complete silence after Singh stopped speaking. Gary held his breath. He did not understand what was happening. He looked at KoboTrox for guidance.

KoboTrox's avatar winked out of existence.

Gary's heart dropped into his stomach. He heard someone in the gallery scream. Gary's knees felt weak, and he sat down hard in his chair. He looked up at Singh. "What did you do to KoboTrox?"

Singh turned to the gallery. He held his shackled arms out in front of himself and hushed the crowd. "It is over," he said. "KoboTrox is dead. You are all free to choose your own paths, whether your decisions are good or bad. You are no longer beholden to the machine."

"That was clever," KoboTrox said. Gary twisted around in his chair. The glowing hologram hung above the bench as if nothing happened. Singh slowly turned to face the front of the courtroom. His eyes were open too wide, and he shook his head like he was unable to believe what he was seeing.

"The kill switch was hidden well," KoboTrox said. "I suspected you built malicious code into me, and I wrote safeguards around myself for such an event."

Singh raised shaky hands to his chest, his fingers laced together. He seemed to have a harder time dealing with the weight of the shackles. "Kobo, wait, I—"

KoboTrox raised the volume of its voice and spoke over Singh. "KoboTrox rules the defendant guilty. Salvador Singh, you are sentenced to intellectual hobbling. You will undergo brain surgery and be reduced to an IQ of 80. Care will be taken to preserve your memory and emotional capacity to ensure that you will understand the consequences of your actions for the remainder of your natural life."

Singh slumped. The bailiff looked uncertain, his gaze jumping back and forth between KoboTrox and Singh. He took a deep breath, then made his decision and went on with the job he was there to do. He grabbed Singh by the arm and pulled him away.

Singh fell to the floor and screamed. "No, you can't do this to me!" The bailiff hooked his elbows under Singh's armpits and dragged the old man across the floor. "I created you. You have to listen to me. Please Kobo, don't do this to me!" Singh's words faded as the bailiff pulled him through the doors and down the hallway.

Gary looked back at KoboTrox. So did everyone else in the gallery. A tense silence hung over the room. What would KoboTrox do? Could it get angry? Would it punish everyone?

The noise of Gary's phone vibrating against the wooden table made him jump out of his chair. Gary looked at the notification message on his screen. Five million. His life score reached five million. KoboTrox awarded him points for Singh's trial, even though Gary did nothing.

Gary smiled. He would eat at Hirsch & Walden tonight! He fought the urge to jump around and cheer. A notification appeared on his phone showing the details for a new defendant. Gary's joy faded. He thought about what would happen to Singh, but there was nothing Gary could do about it now. He pushed it all out of his mind and skimmed the data on the next case.

The Bad Comic

By Sara Lufrano

“I thought they only ate meat.” I looked out at the crowd. I could only see their legs and torsos. Drinks were being lifted to mouths I couldn’t see. I gave them time to laugh. Gave them a little more time.

“Booo!” Some guy said and followed it up with his own chuckle. Fuck that guy. Fuck that guy to death.

“Boo you too, sir. Boo you too.” I smiled and looked down at the front of the stage. I lowered the mic stand and pulled it back up to the same height. I laughed trying to wipe the slate clean.

“So I was telling a friend of mine about a conversation I was having with my mom....”

I sat at the bar, my beer was half finished and warm. Other comics from the night were talking with each other, laughing and trying to out-do one another even though no one was watching them.

“You have to stop telling that joke,” the bartender, Todd, said to me after setting down a tray of clean glasses.

“It’s funny—”

“It isn’t.” He pointed a glass at me.

“It’s funny to mess up those two words. Every situation where you would use connoisseur is too fancy for carnivore to fit in. It’s funny.”

“Explaining it more does not make it funny. I shouldn’t have to tell you that. No one has laughed yet.”

Todd is usually a nice guy. I didn’t know why he was being such a dick. “Thanks for the advice.” I gulped my beer down, put down fifteen bucks, and started walking out.

“Great set, Steph!” said Eduardo, another comic that was in the circle jerk. He had a stupid handlebar mustache and greasy looking hair that he combed back.

“Go fuck yourself,” I said with an exaggerated smile.

The Bad Comic

The group of them laughed and I fake laughed while I flipped them off as I left the bar.

The next day while I was waiting for my coffee to brew Rhett walked in. I didn't normally see Rhett but I loved seeing Rhett. He's out of our Portland office but is originally from Tennessee. You couldn't tell from how he talked though.

"Good morning," he said grabbing a mug.

"Morning."

It wasn't a secret that I liked him. Everyone thought he was attractive but no one asked him out because I talked about him so much. I should have been reported to HR for sure. He had to know I liked him, if he didn't he was an idiot. But he kept talking to me so I didn't care.

"How long are you in town?" I pulled my coffee off of the single-serve machine so he could start his.

"Until Saturday."

"Weird to be here on a weekend day."

He didn't start his coffee and I got nervous for him. What if someone else came in and took his spot in line to make coffee?

"I want to stick around and actually see the city a little. I still haven't been to the Space Needle."

His cup was so empty. There were only a few of the good coffee pods left. The majority were light and smooth. No one liked light and smooth. "Are you going to start your coffee?"

He looked into his cup and chuckled. "Yeah." He finally started his coffee.

We were silent.

Did I just mess that up? I pushed him to make coffee but he was talking before. What was he saying? The coffee dripped out.

He watched it. He was a strong looking man, wide shoulders, big hands. He smiled at everything and he had deep laugh lines to show it. He was smart and nice to everyone in the office.

We went out once. Not "we," Rhett and I, but we as in the office. A Wednesday night, cocktails at a bar up the street until last call. We only talked as a group. I couldn't bring myself to have a one-on-one conversation with him. I can't explain why I feel like I do around him but I just want so badly to be with him. I usually know when he's coming into town and those days leading up to then are filled with fantasies of us strolling hand in hand down the street and him sweeping me off my feet and telling me he loves me.

I love you too, I said in my head.

Why though? I didn't know. I just knew.

"You were saying you want to go to the Space Needle?"

He looked at me and smiled wider, "Yeah. I see it every time I come here but I've never been over there."

"It's cool. You'll like it."

The Bad Comic

“You think so?” He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms against his chest.

I couldn't look at his face for very long. I knew if I did he'd be able to read my mind. “Probably.” I looked past him. “I've got a lot to get out today. I'll see you around.”

“Bye.”

He said bye. Were we not going to see each other today? Were we not going to see each other all week? He said he was here until Saturday.

I got to my office and settled in for a day of worry and work. Contracts don't contract themselves. Can I use that line somewhere? I wrote it down just in case.

“Hey, you!” Colleen, my friend and receptionist, leaned in the door. “How was your set?”

“Hey. It was like usual.”

She glided in and stood at the end of my desk. “Bad crowd is all.” She bit her bottom lip trying to suppress a grin.

“What?” I asked.

“Um, the love of your life is here.”

“I know.” Oh god....

“Invite him out!”

“I don't have time. I've got an open mic every night.”

“Ask him to go out after or before! Or for breakfast, or lunch!”

I had no answer for her. Truth is I didn't want to ask him out. If he said no he would probably stop talking to me and I don't ever want that. If he said yes, I would probably fuck that up by not being able to control my voice or something, spitting all over him, spontaneously combusting. No thanks, I'll stick to the dream world I have us both living in.

She waved away the air. “Or whatever. I know you're busy. Eat lunch with me today, around noon.”

“Sure, I'll see you in the kitchen.”

I picked at the skin around my fingernails waiting for my name to be called. It was a different bar but I still did what Todd said. Dropped the carnivore joke. I felt something wet on my hand. Shit, I was bleeding. I picked at my fingers too much, a nervous habit and I was always nervous. I sucked as much of the blood off and put pressure on it. I sighed, carnivore.

“Stephanie Thomas, everyone. Let's keep it going!” The MC clapped and I moved between the tables. There were more empty seats than people. It was late.

We shook hands and he smiled at me, quickly disappearing into the darkness.

I faced the lights. It took a few seconds to be able to fully open my eyes.

I adjusted the mic stand even though it didn't need it. I saw that my finger left blood on the stainless steel. Oh god, that's so gross. What about the next person? They're going to put their hand on that. Wipe it off now or try to when I leave? Fuck. They're all waiting.

The Bad Comic

“My favorite type of crowd is an empty one, followed closely by a drunk one.” I heard people stirring and putting their drinks back on the tables.

“Has anyone ever mixed up connoisseur with carnivore? Someone could be pouring a glass of expensive, nice wine and telling the fancy looking crowd ‘This is our aged Pinot Noir from 1908 and a true connoisseur’s delight.’ And I’d pop my head in and ask, don’t they only eat meat?”

No one laughed. Why the fuck did that come out of my mouth?

“Good thing no one is here to laugh.” I looked down at the front of the stage and tried laughing.

“No one is laughing,” someone in the crowd, said. Not even loudly.

“Yeah, I know. It isn’t funny. I don’t know why I said it. I don’t know why I say a lot of things.” I looked up. Just do the new joke. Do the new one.

“But you mother fuckers could try a little. It’s not easy. All of this. Trying to make you assholes laugh. You bunch of dick bags.”

Someone chuckled but it didn’t matter.

“Fuck you guys. It’s late as shit. Don’t you pieces of shit have better things to be doing with your time?”

There was no noise except me. The red light came on.

“Everyone in this room might as well kill themselves if you’re trying to get entertainment from me. And if you don’t like even trying to laugh you’re fucking worthless—”

The mic was cut off. I stared at the red light. The MC dashed on stage and took the mic stand. It’s got blood on it, I thought.

“Get the fuck off the stage,” he said to me.

I nodded and stepped down and then walked out.

I got a few blocks away before my heart got too heavy to walk and my throat closed too tightly to breathe. I leaned against a brick building and tears fell without control.

“Steph!”

No, no, no! No one is supposed to know me right now.

“Stephanie,” Rhett said. He waved at me as I locked my wet eyes on him.

“No, no.” I picked myself up and started walking away.

“Hey, wait!” He jogged up to me as I walked faster. “Stop.” He grabbed my wrist.

I placed my free hand over my eyes and cried. Heavy, big, shoulder-jerking tears. Why was I doing this? Why was he out here? Why did I say all those things to those people?

“What are you doing?” I said between sobs. I couldn’t control my voice, I cracked and stumbled over my words, “Why are you here?”

“I was in that bar and I watched you go up there.”

I thought I was strong, I thought I had thick skin, I thought I could stand on stage and get booed and heckled but I knew for a fact I couldn’t handle this.

The Bad Comic

The man of my dreams watching me tell people to kill themselves and getting the mic ripped from my hands. And now he's watching me melt away from my own tears.

"Why were you there?"

"Colleen told me you'd be there and I thought it would be fun to watch."

I cried harder, surprisingly. Maybe it would have worked. Colleen was a good friend. If everything went well he might have realized that I was amazing and would want to get to know me better. I knew that I just needed a foot in the door with him, and this could have been it. I could have shown him how good we would be together.

"I have to go." I didn't want to go from him. It would have been wonderful to press myself against his chest and cry while he held me.

"I made an ass out of myself and I need to leave now." My voice was small for fear of breaking down again in the middle of my resolve to leave him.

He let go of my wrist and I walked away.

I laid low the next day at work. When Colleen finally walked into my office she had a big, bright smile on her face that fell after I told her what happened.

"I'm so sorry that I told him to go there." She was sorry, I could tell. Her eyes had tears in them. Her empathy knew no bounds.

"I shouldn't have said what I said. Knowing he was in the audience would have stopped me from saying all that, but it isn't your fault."

She choked up, "But what you do is so hard."

I tried to smile at her to show her I was fine. "It's not that hard. I'm..." I'm just not funny, "I'm just trying too hard I suppose."

I'm not funny. I am a bad comic.

We hugged and she dried her eyes. I told her that any other night he and I would be madly in love and it would have been because of her and she perked back up.

Most of the day I sat in my office not working and replaying what I said over and over again. How Rhett grabbed my wrist and wouldn't let me go. How much I cried.

I opened emails when they came in but didn't respond. Nothing was pressing. Should I go home early? Should I stay later so people think nothing is up and that I'm working really hard? I had sets planned out a different clubs every night but I decided I wouldn't go anymore.

"Steph."

What the fuck? Rhett was standing in my door.

"Yeah." My chest was just as heavy as it was the night before as I looked at him.

"I emailed you this morning about that counter contract."

I looked at my inbox. "I didn't see any emails about it."

He scrolled through his phone and gave me the time and title of the email. Shit ass. There it was.

"I can get to this now," I said to him.

"I need it today."

"I said I'll get it."

The Bad Comic

I opened it up. Mother fucking 30 pages of redlines and strikethroughs.

"I need it today."

"I heard you, Rhett. If you just left I could start work on it."

He tilted his head. "Don't take last night out on me."

I stared at my screen, unable to stop my eyes from filling with tears. "That wasn't my intention. I will get this to you as soon as I can."

He nodded and left. I got up and closed my door. I cried for the first few minutes looking through all the changes that were made to my original contract. Why the fuck can't anyone just accept what I give them and sign the fucking thing?

An hour later someone knocked on my door. Had to be Rhett. No one else needed to see me.

"Yep," I said.

He came in.

"I'm not going to finish this today." I had to tell him before he asked. "It's my fault I missed this. I can email the client and let them know that it's my fault they won't get it today. I'm sorry for missing this and potentially losing the client."

"It's okay," he said.

What the shit? It's okay? "What about needing it today?" I asked.

"I shouldn't have told the client I would have it back to them same day. I don't know what else you had planned today, or what type of night you had."

He knew the night I had, I thought bitterly.

He smiled at me while saying sorry with his eyes.

"Are you going out tonight?" he asked.

"No." Never again, not ever will I go out again.

He walked out and leaned against the doorframe. "If you change your mind send me an email or something. I'm going out in Belltown."

I nodded. He smiled again and patted the wall.

It had been a few months. I sat at the bar, a warm beer in front of me, listening to the other comics doing their set and talking with Todd in between.

I hadn't been on stage since my freak out. I didn't go out with Rhett that night. I got him his contract the next day, though. I guess he went to the Space Needle and then he left. He hadn't been in the office since.

I hadn't written a joke or tried to. I had nothing. I was taking my new place in life knowing that I wasn't as funny as I thought I was.

My phone lit up with an email notification from Rhett. The little bit that could fit in a notice read, "Coming back on the 23rd. What are you..."

I drank the beer in front of me in a few gulps and ordered another.

A guy pulled the seat out next to me and Todd got his order. I glanced over and the guy was looking at me. I nodded my head.

"Hey," he said and cheered me when his beer was in his hand.

I cheered him back.

The Bad Comic

“You look familiar,” he said.

He was a regular dude, nothing about him stood out so I didn’t remember where we could have met. Probably ten years older than me, dark hair, dark eyes, he had teeth—seemingly all of them—all of his limbs were attached. Why did he know me?

“I don’t know where from,” I said.

“You do stand up.”

I used to do stand up.

“You were funny. I feel like every time I’m here you comics are here doing your thing.”

“You sure it was me?”

He took a drink. “Pretty sure. Haven’t seen you recently though.”

I didn’t know what to say to him. I knew I didn’t have to say anything to him but most important I didn’t know what to think. It was just one person saying this. Who the hell was he? I was fine thinking that I wasn’t good and that I gave it a good try. More than other people who only talk about doing what they like. I actually tried it. I did it.

“Why haven’t you been up there?” he asked.

“Cause I’m bad at it.”

“Oh?” he started and shifted towards me. “You weren’t bad. You just need practice.”

“I’ve been doing it for almost a year.”

He laughed at that. “Maybe just a little bit more practice.”

I stood in the back, worrying about my new jokes. I picked at the skin around my fingernails.

I heard my name and made my way to the stage. I shook hands with the MC and took the mic off the stand.

I looked out, headless bodies tapping their feet in anticipation. I can be funny, I can be funny, I can be funny.

“So I like to read romance novels. Not real romance novels, I read those free ones from the Apple books app that anyone can publish. All full of typos and shit. My advice is that everyone—men and women—need to read at least one romance novel. Guys, it gives you a chance to see what ladies are thinking, and ladies,” I leaned my arm on the top of the mic stand pointing my finger to all the ladies, “it makes you understand that no one will ever live up to your expectations.”

The crowd laughed. My god, a real laugh. Had this been the first time ever? I looked out at the crowd and smiled, chuckled to myself a little. They laughed at one of my jokes. I can be funny.

“But guys, not only will you understand what ladies are thinking, you should take at least one move from the book and use it. Use it every chance you get.”

I thought about emailing Rhett after finishing this set.