

The Four-Day Weekend

Serdar Yegulalp

THE REAL REASON I BROKE UP WITH KAREN in May of that year, after something like three years of us sleeping in the same bed and eating out of the same fridge, had nothing to do with infidelity, impotence, conflicting marriage plans, or incompatibilities between our respective families or belief systems. It had to do with ranch dressing and an animated TV show named *Cowboy Bebop*.

As my friend Winthrop said at the time, “That’s so you—losing a girl over an anime.”

Karen and I hadn’t been married, but we might as well have been given how little we agreed on anything. Irony of ironies: we were both being “cautious”.

“I’m not so sure we should jump into it,” she’d said when we first tossed around the idea of moving in together. “I mean, we might be living together for a year and then realize we can’t stand each other.”

I didn’t mind her saying that, since the same logic worked both ways. I’d never been in a Really Serious Relationship, so I didn’t know what my own threshold for cold feet was likely to be.

One year after we’d met and a couple of months after we’d moved in together, I got the first hint about how things could go wrong. I overheard her as she sat on the back porch with her cigarette in her fingers and her phone against her ear, talking to her cousin in Portland: “You know, it’s one thing to talk about the man in your life being ‘young at heart’, and it’s another thing entirely to discover he’s gone out and spend a hundred and twenty bucks on a TV show that isn’t even in *English*.”

A), it was my money. B), it was subtitled.

Breakups are never about big things. They’re about little things that stand for big things, about how every tiny mistake is a symbol of the deepest dimensions of the other person’s failure. No one likes to have their face rubbed in their fuck-ups, but somehow the people closest to you do it best and most consistently. And why not?

Friends and lovers are closet sadists, and sometimes not-so-closet. They’ve had the most experience; they know exactly where to hit you so it not only hurts but bleeds and leaves a bruise.

So: anime and ranch dressing.

Anime. *Cowboy Bebop*. That was “my” fault: I was thirty-four years old and watching *cartoons* and reading *comic books* instead of shouting at football games and getting drunk with buddies on Friday nights. And worse, in her eyes, I had no defense for it. She found it doubly enraging that I would not only watch the stuff, not only *buy* it, but that I would *purchase a plane ticket* and fly out to some hotel where I would spend *three to four days* in the company of fellow “nerds” talking about it and savoring it. She was, in her purview, dating a thirty-four-year-old teenager.

Small wonder her favorite invective to shout at people was “Oh, *grow up.*”

“This is why I’d never have kids,” she said more than once, “because I’ve already got one right here.” No, no venom behind her words there, no sir. Not to anyone from the outside, who could enjoy a giggle or three with a line like that. But the dismay was there, dripping out like the juice that collects at the bottom of a kitchen trash bag.

And ranch dressing. Karen used ranch dressing the way other people used ketchup—she put it on French fries, on deli sandwiches, on everything edible that had a surface onto which she could spread it. It was like watching Jackson Pollock at work in the kitchen. To this day I can’t stand the smell or the taste of the stuff. When we didn’t have any in the house, she’d pester me about it—which was doubly annoying, because it wasn’t like she couldn’t stop off on the way home from work and pick up some for herself. I got very blunt about this particular fact at one point, something along the lines of: “What’s to stop you from picking it up on your own, when you know I don’t even like it?”

“That’s how couples *work*,” she’d say, and go from that into a whole lecture about how couplehood worked (she never said *marriage*, because that wasn’t really what we had anyway, as we weren’t married). It was all about how we each had to be willing to make sacrifices for the other. “I don’t give you any grief about your little pleasures; I don’t see why you should give me grief about mine.”

I wanted to say *Fair enough*, but I knew better.

Karen was not the first girl I had dated, but she was the first one I’d felt halfway comfortable with—at first, anyway. Even if she didn’t like my hobbies, she made me feel like she gave a damn about me. The first girl I had fallen head-over-heels in love with for about four

months, and then after discovering on closer inspection that she thought she was the reincarnation of one of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, I turned tail. After that I settled for "comfortable".

Falling in love is easy enough, like stepping out in front of a car when crossing against the light. Getting *comfortable* with someone—that's really rare. Karen was easy to be comfortable around. And if she gave me grief about "my little pleasures"—well, there was a part of me that felt like the grief wasn't completely unearned. Maybe there really was something wrong with a guy who was still watching cartoons at my age, who spent money to go hang out with other people who blah blah blah.

And maybe we just didn't click.

Saturday, May 12th. I marked it on the calendar.

The *Cowboy Bebop Remix Edition* had arrived in the mail. Thirty bucks from someone's fire sale on eBay; it wasn't even opened. I cracked the shrinkwrap, pried out the first disc, slotted it into the DVD player, and parked myself in front of the TV. It had been a long, hectic week and all I asked out of my life right then was two hours when I could savor something I enjoyed.

Halfway through the second episode, Karen came back from her doctor's appointment. And then she did the impossible: she parked herself on the couch, put her feet up in my lap, and started watching.

"Oh, hey," I said.

"What's this?" She nodded towards the set.

I told her, without shame. *Cowboy Bebop* was one of the few shows that I would have recommended to anyone who didn't know a blessed thing about them newfangled Japanese cartoons. It was, as the credits themselves said, "not Space Opera, but Space Jazz". It was a gang of mismatched bounty hunters racing around the solar system in a wreck of a ship—always looking for the next big score, always trying to rip off the rip-offs, all of them brimming over with gallons of cool to spare. For me, there was more honest-to-god cool in just the sight of Jet passing Spike Spiegel a cigarette in zero-gee than there had been in all of *Reservoir Dogs*.

And now Karen was parked on the couch watching it with me, and maybe it was possible that I'd been wrong (or, better yet, *she'd* been wrong) about her resistance to the whole thing.

"Is this the middle of the season or something?"

"This is the second episode, actually."

“So haven’t you seen this before?”

This from the lady who had watched every season of *The Sopranos* on DVD. Twice.

“This is a new DVD set, actually. They’ve remastered the whole thing, and it’s been a while since I’ve seen it.”

Karen’s feet shifted. “Is this in English at all?”

I switched to English audio and turned off the subtitles. I didn’t mind; I’d seen the original version in Japanese anyway, so this was a bonus.

“If they have it in English, how come you watch it in Japanese? It’s not like you speak the language.”

Sweat started to seep into the waistband of my pants.

“I like hearing the way it originally sounded,” I said. “And I kind of want to get exposure to it. You know I’m curious about that.”

“You know, you’ve said that in the entire time I’ve known you, and I don’t think you know any more Japanese now than you did when we first met.”

And how exactly do you know that? I squinted at her; I was now squirming inside. I’d seen this from her before, and from other people, too—when someone doesn’t want to get into something, so they dig up every feeble little nit-pick they can about it and throw it in your face. Why are they doing this? Why are they dressed like that? Why are they all speaking Japanese? Why aren’t you doing something more *important* with your life instead of watching this stuff?

It wasn’t the first time she had done something like that, but it was the first time I had to ask myself in all seriousness if she was finally deciding to raise the ante.

“You know,” I shot back, pushing myself up off the couch hard enough to send it out of position with a loud groan, “I don’t remember riding *you* like this the last time you sat down to watch *Desperate Housewives*.”

“I wasn’t *riding* you, Henry.”

“So what exactly do you call it when everything that comes out of your mouth is a snarky-ass comment?”

“Henry, if you don’t think I’m the same way with any of the shows *I* like, then you’ve got more of a problem than I do. It’s television. It’s not Shakespeare; it’s not God.” She shot a glance back at the kitchen. “Did you pick up the ranch dressing like I asked you to?”

I looked down at her. “No,” I said, and I put in as much annoyance as I could fit into that one word.

The next time Karen said anything to me was over a day later, when she told me she was moving out. She’d been making up her mind over the course of the last month, and it was now clear to her that I just didn’t *value* the same things she did.

By that point I was grateful for little things. There was none of this painful nonsense where we had to go through our record collections and pick apart everything. She had her stuff in her room and I had my stuff in mine. Somehow, by some insane feat of luck, we’d landed an apartment with two bedrooms, and had kept our stuff from getting interlarded. That was a word I used a lot: *interlarded*. She’d always say, “Isn’t ‘mixed up’ enough for most people?” Maybe it was, but not to me. There was just something about the image that came to mind, like having all of our earthly possessions melting into some protoplasm . . . with the only way to separate anything back out again being a set of cookie-cutters that you could use to stamp out CDs, library books, pencils . . .

Once upon a time I could make Karen cackle like a witch at the cauldron by telling her things like that. Now she just rolled her eyes and made sidelong comments about how you could dress me up but not take me anywhere.

“Are you going to invite Winthrop to live here now?” she asked, not able to completely keep out the suspicion shading her words.

“No.”

“Well, it’s not like the two of you won’t have anything to talk about.”

God knows what she meant by that. It could have been anime; it could have been me commiserating with him about her. It could have been the fact that both of us were in our mid-thirties and (in her purview) were probably going to spend the rest of our lives surrounded by toys, books, games and four dusty walls. Forever out of the eligible-partner pool. “*I like long walks on the beach, vacations in Monaco, and doing eighty-five on the freeway with the top down; what about you?*” “*I like Cowboy Bebop and—*” *Slam.* You’d never even get to walk her to her car.

And the last time I dated someone else who explicitly identified themselves as a fan, I ended up sleeping in my car two nights in a row, but that’s a story I go out of my way not to tell people because it says at

least as much about my bad judgment as someone else's barking moonbat madness.

By that point, I was thinking about my own bad judgment quite a lot.

Karen took her stuff in three big shifts, each one lasting an evening after work. All along the way I dropped unsubtle little hints that I might want to talk to her again when she was calmer. "I *am* calm now," she insisted.

It took a lot not to say, gee, you sure don't *sound* calm.

AFTER KAREN LEFT, I felt like the caretaker of a hotel in the off-season. I no longer had to knock at our single bathroom door if it was closed (it had a tendency to swing shut on its own). There was suddenly that much more milk for my coffee, that many less things in the laundry basket, that much more room in the closet.

It wasn't comforting. It reminded me of an abandoned office space after a company has gone bankrupt.

And no more last-minute runs for ranch dressing, but the damn stuff had worked its way so far into my consciousness that the first time I went shopping after she was gone I bought two bottles anyway. At least I was able to bring them back and get a refund—something I'd never done before with groceries. The girl at the service desk kept looking at me sidelong: *You used to buy this stuff along with a carton of cigarettes all the time; what happened? You quit smoking and went on a diet?*

I worked from home for a software company that sold a program used to create community websites. As far as jobs go, it was probably as good as any out there: I could set my own hours, work from my own desk in my own house, and I didn't have to deal with stupid meetings three times a week. Once every couple of months I drove to a place out in the city where we had a summit that lasted about a day, and we got all the "face time" we needed there. For the most part, they left me alone to do my job, gave me a fine benefits plan, and paid me well. I couldn't have asked for more.

Without Karen around, I was reminded all the more that I spent my days holed up in a room in front of a computer with no one to talk to face to face. Days on end would go by when the sun would go down and I'd wonder why the house was so damn quiet. I'd turn on the TV and throw in something to liven things up—maybe an episode of

School Rumble, or something else I could laugh at without feeling guilty—but it never worked. The house was still empty, and I would be looking forward to the same thing tomorrow, and every tomorrow was going to be exactly the same.

The day after the last of Karen's stuff was gone was a Saturday. Winthrop would be at the shop, I told myself; I should go talk to him. It took a disturbing amount of effort on my part to get out of bed.

Then I remembered something I had done last year without thinking about it, something which might be the very way out we both needed. I woke up my computer, looked in my mail program's *Travel* folder . . . there it was. A hotel reservation, made last year and forgotten—one which hadn't cost me anything at the time, but which now was going to be more valuable than a bribable congressman.

I printed out the confirmation, stuck it in my knapsack, and threw myself into my car. It was time to turn things around.

WINTHROP'S SHOP HAS A SIGN: *MULTIVERSE COMICS*. Back when he inherited the store, he spent some of the money he had saved up and had the original and terribly ratty wooden sign replaced with this fluorescent-and-translucency thing that you could probably see from across town if you climbed up onto your roof. There used to be this generic superhero-looking dude on one side of it, throwing a fist in your face; the fist was almost as big as his head. One time some kid climbed up there and scribbled I MO PUNCH YOU! on the sign in dye marker. Winthrop didn't have the money to get the sign replaced so he just sliced out that part of it, and now the right-hand edge of the sign is nothing but prison bars of naked fluorescent tubing.

The inside of the shop has the same decrepit rattiness as the sign, and it's always been like that no matter what Winthrop tried to do with it. By the time he'd finished cleaning up one part of the store, another one had fallen into disrepair. Finally about three years ago he quit trying and just let everything sink to more or less the same state of dinginess. The fake wooden laminate on the shelves peeled off; whole square yards of carpet came loose; light fixtures stopped working. People came anyway, and his cash register kept ringing, but it was a depressing environment to work in.

It was doubly depressing for Winthrop, not just because it was his store, but because he had now taken up residency in the back

room. The only furniture was a futon bed, a foldable card table with a clock-radio on it, and a fluorescent lighting fixture that was mossy with dust.

I only went back there when I absolutely had to. Given that it was twenty past eight, I figured I needed to go back there and see what was up—after all, the front door was still unlocked and the shutter was up, but the lights weren't on and there was no other sign of him.

The back office door had a hand-lettered sign taped to it that I hadn't seen before: **ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE.** And below that: **(If you have already abandoned hope, please disregard this notice.)**

Winthrop—all six-foot-something, two-hundred-plus pounds of him—was face-down on his excuse for a bed (just a bare mattress on the floor, really) clad only in his undershorts. He didn't even have a sheet to cover himself with.

I nudged one of his bare feet with my own toe and he sat straight up screaming.

"Henry! *God!*" He wiped hair out of his eyes and goggled at me; I'd backed out through the doorway to the rest of the shop and had prepared to just run like hell. "Jesus, man, I'm sorry. My fight-or-flight kicked in."

I gestured out at the front door, throwing some of his dismay right back at him. "The whole place was wide open. I thought somebody was robbing you!"

"No, no, that's just me being an idiot. I forgot to close up last night—probably just turned off the lights out front but didn't shut anything else off." He stood up and winced, trying to find where he'd stashed his socks from last night; they were under the mattress itself. "And then I laid down and bam, I've got a case of missing time."

"You know, all it takes is one drive-by from the cops to figure out that you're using this space illegally, and there goes your lease," I said, leaning against the doorframe and watching him hop around on one foot while he pulled yesterday's grubby clothes onto his body. "How long do you plan on doing this, anyway? I've told you before, now that Karen's gone—"

"I know, I know. I just . . . we tried it before, remember? Before Karen? Remember how miserably that failed, how you ended up having to throw out two whole sets of dishes before I never washed

them? And you can tell from the way this place looks that I'm not gonna be any better this time."

"Winthrop—" If there's any god listening, I thought, please don't make me regret this. "—I'd rather you were in my house making a mess than out on your ass with no business and no place to live at all. And I'm going to keep saying this until I'm blue and keeling over."

He yanked his shag of curly black hair out of the back of his T-shirt collar. "Can you keep an eye on things while I go get naked and wet? We'll talk about this when I get back."

I nodded. It was Saturday; it wasn't like I needed to be in front of a computer. No, I thought, taking up the spot at the front of the store; instead, I'm going to sit behind a cash register for my friend. The fact that he trusted me enough to run a cash register in his store and not skim from it—well, given how long we'd known each other, it didn't surprise either of us.

Two doors down the block was the health club, where Winthrop showered and changed and even occasionally worked out. The owner knew about Winthrop's situation and, as far as I could tell, was trustable—he'd been buddy-ish with Winthrop's foster parents—but I knew that was no guarantee of anything. Winthrop grabbed his war-surplus duffel with the rest of his clothes shoved in it (there was also a coin laundry a few blocks away) and gave my shoulder a slap on the way out.

I got caught up on my reading, something I hadn't had the motivation to do since Karen had blown up at me in the first place. Winthrop was always fine with me reading from whatever was on the shelves so long as I didn't mess anything up, but he didn't want anyone else seeing me and "imitating my example" whenever possible. Most of the time, I just broke down and bought whatever it was looked interesting enough to read—I didn't want to pressure myself into chewing through a given book in the time it took to read it standing up, whether in Winthrop's store or anywhere else. He gave me wholesale price on most everything if I wanted it—probably figuring even if he just broke even on me, it was that much more money he had in his register at any given moment. It wouldn't be the first time he'd benefited from my charity.

Most of what I pulled off the shelf while Winthrop was in the health club was what I called "filler manga"—stuff you read to kill the days until the comics you *really* want show up. The last few times I'd

been in the shop, I'd filled my time with *Naruto*—thirty volumes and climbing, and me only on book fourteen or fifteen. A good series, maybe even a great one—definitely a popular one—but it wasn't one I was going to drop money on when I could just warm a chair in Winthrop's shop for a few minutes and get caught up. All while waiting for new books that *really* mattered: *Vagabond*, or *Berserk*, or *Monster*.

Karen: "With titles like those I keep thinking, what are they, stories about serial killers?"

Me: "No—*Vagabond* is a retelling of the story of the legendary swordsman Musashi Miyamoto, and—"

Another conversation that had never happened.

I put *Naruto* #16 down and felt a splitting headache coming on. It was not good when the very things that I was supposed to be savoring were simply reminding me all the more of the things I was trying to stave off. The headache wasn't just irritation; it was the fact that once again I'd walked out of the house without eating anything. Idiot.

To my amazement, nobody came through the door until the last few minutes before Winthrop showed up again. When they did, I breathed a silent thank you: anything to get my mind off what I was doing (i.e., nothing). The two kids who came in were about fifteen or so, their faces and shirt necks dripping with sweat. They smelled like they'd been running a marathon, and they wiped their hands all over most of the *Naruto* shelf. I was tempted to warn them, *You put any of your ballsweat on those books, you're buying them*, but it looked like *Naruto* was what they had come in for anyway. Books five through nine, and something else called *Engine Room* that was in shrinkwrap. An adult title: the cover showed too much skin for it to be anything but, and the shrinkwrap was the clincher.

"I'll need to see proof of age before I can sell this to you," I said, holding up *Engine Room*

"Aw, fuck," the other kid said (the one not actually buying anything). "Toleja this would happen."

The first kid sighed and slid out a driver's license. He was indeed eighteen, although only by a few months.

"You, uh—" I looked back and forth between their faces, flashing a smile, then settled back on the first kid. "You're not buying this for anyone else, are you? 'Cos technically, that's against the law."

The first kid scowled and reached to take back the books and his license. The other kid looked away, huffing noisily between his teeth.

“How old is he, anyway?” I said, still grinning.

“I’m like *fifteen*,” the other kid brayed, “and I *know* about Tab A going into Slot B already, so just chill with that bullshit.”

“Okay, okay.” I snapped open the register. “That’s the nightmare of every comic-book store owner, you know: some irate mother kicks the door in, waving an adults-only title, shouting, ‘How dare you sell this filth to my son?’”

“I think with my mom, it would be like, ‘godless filth,’” Kid A said.

“So what’s the opposite of godless filth? A Jesus porno video?”

The things that run through your head when you’re in a glum mood.

They were still laughing and counting out their change when Winthrop banged back in through the front door, hair damp and a fresh shirt billowing out around him. He hoisted a McDonald’s bag—there was one just up the road on the other side of the street—and grinned.

“You didn’t eat this morning, right?”

“How’d you guess?”

“You’re always a little dark around the eyes when you come over here first thing in the morning and you haven’t eaten anything. Looks like you haven’t slept, either.”

“Hey, Winthrop—lemme get one of your fries!” The “legal” kid said this without even looking up from the pile of coins in his hand.

Winthrop swatted him on the back of the neck with a roll of paper towels that had been sitting on the edge of the counter. “You’ve got enough change there to buy three whole servings of fries.”

They buzzed off, bitching all the way out like we’d asked them to crawl to Schenectady and back again on their hands and knees. I got to work on my Big Mac while Winthrop tore off the outermost paper towel on the roll, sniffed it, and made a face.

“Fuckin’ kids these days smell like they’re being fattened up for the kill. Must be the diet.”

“Yeah,” I said, swishing a bitten-off corner of my burger in barbecue sauce. “All that fast food and grease and salt. You *know* it can’t be good for them.”

I waited until Winthrop had tucked into his Quarter Pounder a bit.

“Karen and I are about as quits as it gets,” I said.

Winthrop continued chewing, uninterrupted.

“The handwriting was on the wall for you, wasn’t it?” I went on.

“In Helvetica seventy-two-point bold,” he mouthed around his burger. “You two were, uh, not an apples-to-apples comparison, to put it one way.”

“I knew that.” I unwrapped my second burger and looked at it, like I was expecting the damn thing to chime in with its own smart-ass remark. “I did a great job of pretending that particular fact didn’t exist. And now I’d like to put all this as far behind me as I possibly can.”

“EastCon?” he said. “You’re gonna go after all?”

I nodded, even if it was more resigned than determined. I gotta start *somewhere*, I thought. Now take the next step. “I’m going to EastCon this year,” I said, “and you’re going with me.”

EASTCON’S FULL NAME WAS *The National East Coast Convention For Eastern Popular Culture*, but EastCon was less of a mouthful. For just south of twenty years running they’d been a place where once a year, typically in early August, people like me made a pilgrimage to Baltimore, Maryland to meet other people like me: folks who had a fascination with the staggeringly diverse popular culture from a little island nation on the extreme far side of the free world.

The first year, you could have fit everyone in the convention at a long picnic table. The entertainment was a guy at the piano, a Laser-Disc player hooked up to a battered projection TV, and a popcorn popper. Two decades later, they were filling one of the biggest convention centers in the Northeast. Estimates for how many people would come over the course of the four-day weekend ran into the forty to fifty thousands.

An anime convention isn’t a “vacation.” It’s better and worse at the same time. Worse, because most of the time it involves even more hassle than any package cruise, weekend jaunt to Vegas or Greyhound stint to Disneyworld. Better, because I’d rather go to an anime con than all three of those put together.

You look for a convention near you, with “near” being a flexible term that could mean anywhere from twelve to six hundred miles. You find one happening during a window of time where there are no birthdays, anniversaries, family holidays, or anything else that might kill the fun—not unless you’re one of those lucky bastards who can get

away with celebrating a birthday, an anniversary, a family holiday or anything else of that ilk *at* a convention in the first place. Such people do exist, you know, and simply have to live with being targets of my ever-increasing envy.

Then you look for suitable co-conspirators. This is optional, but recommended, for a variety of reasons: you can split hotel bills, carfare, cabfare, mealfare and any other kind of fare multiple ways, depending on how many other victims you can rope into going along with you. Granted, it often means bunking four to a hotel room, side-by-side with someone you've only belatedly discovered has a sleep apnea problem loud enough to bore holes in masonry—but hey, think of it as a way to recapture all those “let's camp out on the living room floor” adventures you had as a kid. Only now you're doing it as a (so-called) adult, and you have even less of a way to justify it to anyone who's not along for the ride.

Then come the endless phone calls, the raiding of credit cards for frequent-flyer miles, the scouring of travel websites for crazy one-day-only bargains. Enduring the hold music for the hotel where the convention has half-rate room blocks reserved, biting off all the fingernails on one hand and wondering if all the rooms are already taken. The week before, where you realize all the travel-size toiletries you have are either dry as bone meal or long past their sell-by date. The night before, where you pack and pace in circles and make lists and cross things off lists and drop off to sleep wondering if you've indeed covered all the bases: did you print out the list of manga you wanted to hunt for in the dealer room? The airline tickets? The call-ahead for the shuttlebus?

Then the flight, or the drive—the hours of waiting, moving, and waiting again. The stomach-quaking little moment when you finally step up to the check-in desk at the hotel with your hair sticking to your forehead and hope that the computer didn't burp and delete your reservation along with a dozen others. The luxury of a shower and fresh clothes. The dizzying sight of the convention schedule, printed in a typeface small enough to pass for what's at the bottom of most legal forms.

The crowds.

The video theaters, where people press themselves in shoulder-to-shoulder to catch a glimpse of something amazing that won't be seen for a long time yet, if ever, like a comet making its once-every-

fifteen-years appearance. The labyrinthine line to the dealer's room, snaking against itself dozens of times to pack thousands of people into a space about the size of a small gymnasium so they can wait to get into a space the size of a very, very large gymnasium. The dealer's room itself, which is Christmas and birthday and a visit from your crazy Uncle Carl from overseas all rolled into one, where the \$400 you took out of the ATM is slimmed down, then slimmed down again, then replaced with credit cards already so dangerously close to blowing out (and then, finally, blown out after all).

The friends you haven't seen in years. The friends you've yet to make; the friends you make by talking to the people in line behind you and in front of you. The artists lined up at their tables, faces close enough to their paper as they trace and color and fill in lines for \$20 a commission, pencils moving as if they're all playing back a tutorial in slow motion. The blasting roar of a concert. The thumping bleat of a rave party.

The complete lack of sleep.

The sore feet and knees. The torn pants seats, the frayed costumes.

The bursting trash barrels.

The slow ride home.

Then you collapse, unpack—in that order—and get ready to do it all again next year. Because you know you will. Because there's always a part of the space behind your eyes that's going to be replaying those moments again and again until you finally go back there.

“YOU'RE GOING WITH ME,” I REPEATED. Winthrop almost let his mouthful of burger fall to the floor.

“With what money? Last month in this place left me *dry*. This is the only meal I'm gonna have today.”

“Winthrop,” I said, and put as much steel as I could mine out of myself into my voice, “I'm not going to sit back and watch this happen. You are going as stir-crazy in this shop as I am in my house. You can get someone to cover for you if you have to. That kid Alex does a good job, you told me as much. We can split the hotel—hell, I'll cover the whole thing. That's it: it'll be my treat, all of it. Because I can't stand to see you—” (he was now raising his hands defensively to his face) “—sinking into the same misery that I'm sinking in. We *both* need this break.”

Winthrop's hands slowly descended to the countertop. He exhaled the breath he'd been holding and knocked a pencil to the floor. It rolled under the broken Coke machine, probably to join dozens of others stuck there.

"You said last year we were burned out," he said, "and I agreed with you. I *am* burned out. I'm burned out on everything. I'm burned out on running this rathole, that much you knew. And to think I thought this would be a good idea."

"Dude, that's so not your fault and you know it."

"Oh, I know, I know. I'm just never gonna stop lamenting it, I think. But you know what the worst part is?" He gestured around. "Enjoying any of this isn't even on the menu. The way things have gotten, I don't even *read* anymore; I don't even watch anything anymore. I've just . . . I've gotten to hate the sight of all this stuff, and I don't *want* to be like that."

"Then you've got all the more reason to do this," I said, and I underscored every word as best I could. "Me, I'd rather try and do *something* that I know is supposed to be fun than sit here and do nothing and pretend I'm not in pain. Okay? And I want you with me, because you're my friend and you deserve better."

He let out a snort. "The two go together?"

"Yes," I laughed.

"What did you mean by, 'you know it's supposed to be fun'? That to me sounds like burnout, too."

"It's—" I mopped up the last of the special sauce with a French fry. "It's the kind of burnout you get when you're trying to enjoy something and you feel like there isn't anyone else in the world to enjoy it with."

"Oh, gee, thanks."

"I didn't mean it *that* way. Hey, c'mon—you said yourself you're having trouble just kicking back anymore. That's two of us. Let's get out there and recharge our batteries the way we know we've both wanted to for a long time."

This was something the two of us had done to each other, back and forth, as far back as I can remember: for issues like this, one of us could speak the other's mind, and we'd almost always be right on target. It was the kind of thing that other people told me they saw between brothers, but it formed between any two people who'd been tight for a long time. Each of us knew what we wanted. Sometimes it

just took one of us to come out and say it in a way that the other could pick up on. Like now.

“This whole trip is my treat,” I said. “I insist.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Don’t ‘nuh-uh’ me. My treat!”

“I’ll ‘nuh-uh’ you right to my grave. We’re splitting the tab for this down the middle. Meals, car, hotel, everything.”

“Oh, no! Not the hotel room!” I pressed my hands to my face in mock horror. “Not the *gas*! I—I might even have money left over to *tip room service* if you do that.”

“Exactly.”

“Oh, come on, that was *one year* I forgot to leave a tip. And you ride me about it for how long?”

“That year there were *five* of us in one room, and we left behind a Keith Moon-sized mess, and you spent all your cash at the five-dollar comic table. Speaking of hotels, I have one question—how exactly do you plan to get a hotel room for a convention that attracts anywhere from twenty-five to thirty thousand people a year, and sells out every hotel within a five-mile radius?”

I held up the hotel confirmation note and almost didn’t plug my ears in time to ward off his shriek of orgasmic joy.

“How in the name of sky-high *fuck* did you get that?” he gushed.

“I signed up right after the end of last year’s con, remember? It didn’t cost me anything to book a room then, so I forgot about it.”

“Where do I sign up to get your kind of forgetfulness?”

“Same place you get my bad luck in women, unfortunately.”

“No, I think I already got that from you. —And don’t even *talk* about a con being a possible place to meet eligible soulmates. Half the girls you meet are underage, and the other half have issues. Hell, not issues; they have whole *subscriptions*.”

“Okay, okay.” I closed up what was left of my meal and bagged it, grinning. “I’ll just pitch it to you this way. Five days of no cash registers on your end, no midnight pages for emergency hotfixes on my end, no staring at four boring walls. Just us, the hotel, the convention center, the single biggest dealer room on the east coast—okay, maybe that’s not a draw for *you*—a bunch of screening rooms running all night long, a video game pavilion the size of a parking lot, and good times as far as the eye can see. How’s that grab you for a pitch?”

“I’d hit it.”

“Like the fist of an angry god?”
“Like the fists of fuckin’ Voltron, bro.”

IT FELT WEIRD PULLING INTO THE PARKING LOT of the comic shop at oh-dark-thirty in the morning (6:41, to be precise), and seeing Winthrop standing out in front with a single duffle bag on the ground next to him. The inside lights were off. I felt like he’d just robbed the place and I was his getaway accomplice.

“Alex has keys for the shop?” I called out, stepping down from the driver’s seat and taking his bag.

“Yeah, I ran off copies for him a week ago. Good grooving Jesus, this thing’s *huge*.” He hoisted himself into the shotgun seat, tilting it back until it was almost a bed and stretching out wide in it. His bag fit in the space directly behind his seat, in blatant violation of FAA regulations. “How much extra is this costing us?”

“Nothing, remember? They gave it to me only because there was nothing else on the lot that was the right size.” I fiddled with the rearview, but it was next to impossible to see out the back of the van even with no one else sitting there; finally, I gave up and just used the side mirrors to make sure I wasn’t backing into some loon walking his dog.

“You’ve got some wacky luck, you know that? I’m guessing this is, like, reverse karma payback retribution for when we blew a tire on the turnpike that other year.”

“Oh, god. Don’t even remind me. No talking about blowing out tires when I’m driving something this big.” I wasn’t even sure why I was fussing so much when the streets in every direction were deserted. It’s practice, I told myself; I’m getting into good habits with how I needed to handle that car before it really started to matter. That or I’m just getting started early on my daily paranoia cycle.

“So what’s our route?” His last word turned into a yawn.

“Long Island Expressway to New York City, then the Lincoln Tunnel. There’s a McDonald’s right along the way, so we can stop there for breakfast.” Winthrop was like me: get him up early enough and he didn’t even get around to thinking about food, or wanting it, for at least an hour. “Then on to the New Jersey Turnpike, down to Tommy and Lisa’s place.”

“Then back up in the morning and on to Baltimore.”

“Correctamundo. You packed your toothbrush, right?”

A pause. “Fuck,” he laughed. “Well, that’s why God invented Walgreen’s. That’s where Tom works, anyway, right? I bet he could get an employee discount.”

“Yeah—save a whole sixteen cents off the cost of a toothbrush. Goodness knows that’ll go so far in the dealer room. You could buy, like, a whole stick of gum.”

“Well,” Winthrop grunted, stretching once again and then lying there limp as uncooked bacon, “I gotta say, it didn’t really hit me until I got up this morning and packed that I’m going on the closest thing to a vacation I’ve had in almost two years.”

“And the last time you did anything like that, it was with me.”

“Turn that one around—the last time *you* did anything like that, it was with *me*,” he laughed. “You’re the one who took, like, two personal days in the five years you were at that last job. And no sick days.”

“I took off more than that. I had weekends, too,” I said lamely. Winthrop was talking about my stint with a local company named Motionator; I’d been a programmer there before landing my current work-at-home gig. “I took time off for things as I needed to. And, well, I didn’t *get* sick.”

“You ride me all the time about how I need to take it easy and relax and not work so hard, and the whole time you’re the guy who would sooner drop dead than use up a sick day so you could skip out to C.M. Patterson Campus on a Friday to check out LI-Con.”

“LI-Con sucks on Friday. You know that. Things don’t really get moving at that convention until Saturday. Friday it’s just the old-school leftovers—the *Star Trek* refugees, the guys who still bitch about the Ralph Bakshi version of the *Lord of the Rings*.”

“I’m—just—making—a point.”

LI-Con was a local convention, one of the first I’d attended, which had been in its death throes for years on end. No one ever had the nerve to declare it wholly dead, but they kept trotting out the same tired old firehorses every year to dwindling crowds. The fact that it was held on one of the more decrepit college campuses in the area didn’t help, either. The whole show had all the cheer of a costume party being held in a minimum-security prison. I didn’t go back after the first year.

“I’ve never been the kind of person to think about taking time off until someone comes up to me and says, ‘Hey, let’s do this.’ That

was probably a big part of the reason I got into con-going—a forced vacation that has nothing to do with a holiday or anything like that.”

“What is it with you and holidays anyway? You say ‘holiday’ like other people say ‘cancer’ or ‘Nazi’ or ‘Gundress’. You weren’t always like this, either.”

The local road we were on slowly twisted until the sun was rising right behind us.

“I just don’t like official ‘holidays’ anymore,” I said. “I don’t like the idea of someone telling me, ‘All right, now it’s time to celebrate along with everyone else doing the exact same thing.’ I want to have fun in my *own* way.”

“Ah, which is why you’re driving down to Baltimore with three other people. So you can go and do what *thirty thousand* other people are all doing.”

“Yeah, because you know how much I hate mindless conformity. I want to be an *original*, just like everyone else.”

“Seriously, though—don’t you think there’s something just a *little* ironic about all that? You say you don’t want to be a crowd-follower, and here you are, on your way to find a crowd.”

“It’s not like that. I don’t think it’s ever really been like that. It’s more like—” I fired up the windshield wipers to scrub off a stray splotch of bird poo that had probably landed there sometime last night. “I’m *in* that crowd, but I’m not *of* it. It’s like I can be among them and be—I guess ‘comfortably anonymous’ is a good way to put it? I don’t have to be cool, or interesting, or even *do* much of anything. I can just be among a whole bunch of other people who are interested in something I’m interested in, and I don’t have to argue about it or prove my favorite show is better than anyone else’s. I can just—*be there*.”

“Zen in the Art of Fandom.”

“Well—sure, why not?” I was grinning.

He’d been joking, but joking or not, he’d hit that particular nail hard enough to flatten it. That *was* really what it was all about—being a peaceful part of something bigger without it all being totally mindless. I’d never been able to suffer anyone else’s idea of “getting away from it all”—the one time I’d been to Six Flags I’d gotten a sunburned nose and some kind of stomach bug that didn’t go away for almost a whole week. Another trip to Disney World ended about as badly, and after that Dad had decided big family vacations just weren’t

worth wasting money on anymore. I spent a long time trying to convince myself I wasn't embittered, just that I'd been compelled to look for something different—and this was it.

The highway into the city was predictably deserted—even the cash lanes for the tunnel were bare. I remembered how Dad had often made his commute at this hour, albeit on the other side of the city, and how the whole thing probably seemed about as bleak to him as it did to me. For what felt like hours there wasn't even any sun, and then it rose and pierced the sky behind you: *Hi there!* Then the flashing orange-and-black interior of the Queens Midtown Tunnel, and then the city itself, and for the first time that day my heart really swelled. I'd lived in the city proper for all of a year and a half and had hovered around its far fringes for as long as I could remember, and even though I'd spent that whole year and a half jammed into an apartment that was about as comfortable as sleeping in a milk crate I was just happy to be in that place. It had the same sense of undiscovered adventure as Winthrop's basement room—so many things hidden away that even Winthrop himself didn't know they were there. There was no better way to pass a Saturday afternoon, or a whole lifetime of Saturday afternoons, or just a whole lifetime, period, than to dig in that cave and see what filled your hands.

I fired up the MP3 player. Priorities: I'd almost forgotten to pack everything *else*, but the little 30GB Toshiba player in its rubber travel case had been one of the first things I'd brought out to the car. The first *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* soundtrack came booming out of the speakers and made us both sit up a little straighter and bob cheerfully in place. There weren't five other albums in my collection that I could play straight through without skipping a track.

Leave it to Winthrop to put a fresh landmine under the tracks of my train of newly-pacified thought.

"Didn't you try to get Karen into anime at some point?" he said.

Squirm. "I *tried*. I didn't get very far."

"Well, what'd you try her out on?"

"What with her into stuff like *The Sopranos*, I figured she might be interested in *Ghost in the Shell*, but—"

"What! No, no no no. Use the brain God gave you, man. *Stand Alone Complex* is for people who're into things like *24*, or *CSI*. Gritty high-tech crime stuff. Someone who's into *The Sopranos*, you turn

them on with, I don't know, *Kaze no Yojimbo*. Maybe even some gun-crazy shit like *Black Lagoon*."

That was one of Winthrop's little skills, one he'd honed for a long time and one he was proudest of: his sixth sense for people's tastes. He could listen to someone talk about what they liked or didn't like, someone who'd never seen anime or read comics in their entire life—then get them hooked on a series based on what they were already inclined to enjoy. "Give me a *Sex and the City* fan," he said, "and after one day they'll be hooked on *Paradise Kiss*. Give me a *Conan* or *Lord of the Rings* lover, and he'll walk out clutching a copy of *Berserk* like it was the Bible."

"Okay, I've got a bet for you," I said. I had a smile, a sly one and getting slyer.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Very simple. If we meet a newbie at the con, and you get a chance to talk to him, you do your stuff. If we can get him to buy something, or watch an episode or read a book or whatever, anything like that as long as he's *exposed* to it, at the con—then I buy you dinner one night instead of us splitting the tab. And I don't mean hot dogs; I mean *dinner*. Your choice."

Winthrop was silent for so long I had to throw a glance to make sure he wasn't sulking. No, he was just shaking his head slow, with that broad, angry grin he got when he'd been one-upped. "And you *know* I'm not gonna turn down a chance to lure fresh meat over to the Dark Side."

I shook my head. "Oh, *hell* no."

"Okay, rules. First off, does this mean I need to actually *scout* for a newb?"

"Well, no, not really. I mean, I figured at some point we're going to be in the line for the dealer room or in badge pickup or something, and there'll be someone within earshot who's obviously new to the whole thing. Something like that. It's not like you have to roam the floor with a butterfly net."

"Dude, there's been *more* than a few times when I've wanted to do exactly that."

"Looking for dates?"

"No. Evicting otakuin."

The less said about otakuin, the better, I thought. Best not to jinx the fun we were having by mentioning something that gross.

“So are you up for this?”

“I’m up for it.”

We knocked fists and hooked pinkies right there in the front seat, although I was careful to keep at least one hand on the wheel. I didn’t even care that the rules were loose enough that Winthrop could probably weasel through on a loophole. It was my way of taking something as simple as treating him to a meal and dressing it up with a kind of ceremony—a way of making it special the way the whole con was special.

That’s what we need to be doing with our lives, I thought. Take every little mundane thing that happens, whether it’s changing out the headlights on your car, or writing the bills, or just walking out to the mailbox. Take all of that, then find some way to make each bit special from the inside. That’s all anime had been about for me, anyway: making life something a little more colorful than what we’re given. Even if it’s just taking the gray and making it pastel, that’s that much more color than there was before. We all do this in different ways; this is just how I do it. Just give me my one little bright spot, that’s all I ask.

I sat up a little straighter in the driver’s seat and felt happier than I had in a long time. Even the sight of New Jersey’s dockyards on my left (and the grimy refineries on the right) seemed cheerful. Winthrop undid the wrapper on his other bagel and opened his mouth wide enough to fit the whole thing in.

WINTHROP HADN’T BEEN THE ONLY GUY in the seventh grade who collected comics, but he was the only person I’d met who had a comic collection and didn’t mind loaning it out to people in installments. He was a big kid then like he’s a big guy now—broad across the shoulders, ham-boned in the thighs, curly black hair. People later compared him, pretty accurately, to Peter Jackson. Back then, he put together every sentence like someone, somewhere was getting ready to give him a hard time about what he said—except maybe for me.

The first time I came over to his house, we detoured through the grocery store to buy Oreos and milk. “This way,” he explained, “my mother can’t give me any grief about emptying the pantry on her.” He kept the Oreos in a cabinet in his room, and when he opened it up I saw something like five two-liter bottles of Mountain Dew sitting side

by side. I almost knocked one over; he blurted “*Oh shit!*” and rescued it barely in time from spewing all over the floor. The caps on the bottles were all loose, and when I gave him a confused look he explained:

“I can’t stand carbonated drinks. They make me gag. Mom buys the Dew by the case, and the only way I can drink it is if I let it go flat. I just got these yesterday, so by tonight I’m thinking they’ll be ready to go into the fridge.”

He had a single bottle of flat Dew already getting cold in the fridge, and whenever he poured himself a glass of the stuff he dunked his Oreos in them. I thought that was the most disgusting thing I’d ever seen in my life. “The milk is for cereal,” he insisted. “Only cereal.”

Disgusting as it was, it was also a weird little thrill to meet and become friends with someone whose diet consisted mostly of artificial food coloring, sugar, and starch—and who was not only willing to loan me the four-issue *Wolverine* miniseries but *proud* to do so. It meant there was someone else *he* knew who could read it and talk about it with him.

It took me about a year of being friends with Winthrop to get the feeling that he didn’t have the best relationship with his parents. His grades were pokey, sure—Bs and Cs, and the occasional D, much as mine were—but whenever his folks were around the only time they ever talked to him was to ask him if he’d done something. Trash taken out? Garage floor swept? Rat traps in the basement cleared? His father looked most like him; his mother was tall and skinny and had ugly lank hair that hung down past her shoulders, and I had never once seen her smile.

The not-quite-there-ness of his parents came to a head one year when they vanished completely. When Winthrop was seventeen, he came home from summer camp (their idea, not his) to discover his key didn’t fit the front door anymore. On peeking in the window and seeing the living room barren of furniture, he panicked; he had to yank out an ill-fitting window screen to crawl inside. Everything in his room—his computer, his comic book collection—was exactly as he’d left it, but the rest of the house was a tomb. On the kitchen table was an envelope with about six hundred bucks in it, all in twenties, and some loose change—the sort of thing someone would get when they cleaned out their bank account, which as it turned out was exact-

ly what his parents had done. They'd skipped town without him and left him enough petty cash to maybe get through the month. The house had to be auctioned, and Winthrop's parents had a warrant out on them for abandonment, but he wasn't convinced they'd ever turn up. He believed they'd gone to Brazil, since that was where his mother had relatives. Or at least she'd claimed to.

Somehow Winthrop managed to keep it all a secret from me for almost an entire month. Every time I brought up the idea of going over to his place, he threw a new dodge my way: "We're repainting," or "It turned out they had to replace this whole section of wall when they were repainting, so it's kind of a mess." Finally, he caved in one afternoon and led me to his house, which I just walked around for minutes on end, staring into the windows. Once when I was much younger this neighborhood kid who routinely made trouble killed someone else's dog and dumped him on our front porch. The sight of the empty house had the same ugly, paralyzing, this-is-not-supposed-to-be-happening feeling as the sight of that dog carcass lying there with its black-and-pink mouth cracked open.

Winthrop ended up living with Paul Toblonsky, the guy who owned the comics / games / baseball-card store in town. Paul—tall, soft-spoken, heavily bearded, always smiling, kind of a hippie leftover type—had been friendly with him before, and had hired him for part-time summer work in previous years. Winthrop moved into Paul's house and lived in the room that Paul's wife had used as a study before she'd died about six years earlier; Paul himself wasn't in great shape (he was pushing sixty and had already had bypass surgery), and when Winthrop moved in Paul felt like he'd gained a son back. His biological son had moved to California and was now a professional surfing instructor; he hadn't talked to his father in years.

About a month after Winthrop's twenty-third birthday, Paul had a massive stroke. His left arm was dead weight, his legs about as bad; there was no way for him to get around outside of a motorized wheelchair. There wasn't enough money coming in from the comic store to pay for all of this, and there were no savings left worth speaking of; they'd all been burned up paying for his wife's own care before she'd died. They sold the house (it was in ghastly shape—the people who bought it tore it down to the studs and rebuilt it), moved into a nasty little apartment about two blocks from the store, and hung in there for about another year. And then Paul himself finally died, and after

spending the night in my house and crying and smashing bottles on the cement floor of our garage (and gouging out a piece of his thumb in the process), Winthrop realized he was now the owner of the Multiverse Comics and Game Cards store, and also the bearer of all its unfulfilled debts.

He'd learned how to muddle along thanks to Paul; he'd run the place with him side by side for years on end. He loved the store, but through it he'd come to love Paul as well—Paul with his goofy-looking oversized pipes and his slippers shaped like Chewbacca's feet and his George Takei way of saying "Oh, *my*," very serenely whenever something went horribly wrong. He was exactly the person I could see as a dad for Winthrop—Winthrop who burst into the room waving the thing he'd picked up on the way home from school the other day, Winthrop who seemed to always be pointing in all directions at once when he talked, Winthrop who had a full neck beard and mustache when most of the rest of us couldn't even grow peach fuzz.

The first time Winthrop and I both got drunk was the day after Paul's funeral. It was the two of us, my mother—she came more out of a sense of obligation to me, really—and a fat, sad-looking fellow named Herb Clouse, a retired electrician who lived next door to Paul. Herb shared lunch with us afterwards and said that Paul was about the only person who ever took him seriously when he told people he'd never had a girlfriend, never been married and wasn't gay. Winthrop and I drove back home in my car; Mom headed off to work directly from the cemetery after giving Winthrop a quick-and-dirty hug.

When we were twenty-three and twenty-four, the fact that Winthrop not only worked at but *owned* a comic book store—despite how he'd gotten there—had a coolness to it that rubbed off on everyone else we met. Then the coolness faded, along with sense of total opportunity that came with being young. The horizon of the world became a tunnel that you could touch the walls of by just stretching your arms out. And now that I was thirty-four and he was thirty-five, the tunnel had narrowed down to nothing more than a drainpipe that we had to crawl through single-file.

But somehow, through it all, there was light ahead of us, never getting any brighter but never quite getting any dimmer, either. For everything else that seemed determined to go wrong, we had each other to make things right.

ASIDE FROM THE RESTAURANT IN THE HOTEL ITSELF (which was pretty good; I'd eaten there last time we were here), there was a place that was directly kitty-corner from the convention center, on our side of the block, a Mexican joint called the Burrito Factory with a great reputation. Anyone who ate there wouldn't even be able to *look* at a Taco Bell again for the rest of their lives, or so the story went.

"So—eat, then maybe step outside, see how bad the line is for badge pick-up," Winthrop ruminated out loud as we stepped out of the elevator on the hotel's ground floor. "It's cooled off a little, hasn't it?"

I suddenly wasn't listening to him anymore.

I've had, for as long as I can remember, a kind of sixth sense about certain things. If I go into a room or wind up next to someone in public where something bad is happening—an argument is about to break out but hasn't started yet, for instance, or the aftermath of one—I can feel it, like someone spraying me with a water bottle. It hits me right in the gut.

The second we stepped out of the elevator I got hit right in the gut, harder than I had been in a long time. Harder, maybe, than when Karen walked out.

To one side of the lobby was a little lounge area—a circle of couches, a couple of tables. Next to one of the couches was this one woman who was standing with her arms dangling at her sides and this *look* on her face. She wasn't with the con; it was something you could tell at one glance. To use the ugly, prejudicial term: *mundane*.

This woman, staring at a spot on the wall where there wasn't really anything to stare at, seemed like someone who had just been slapped. For all I knew, she might just have been.

"Winthrop," I said quietly. "Hold up a sec."

We stopped walking, and I got as good a look at her as I could without coming closer. She was pretty—she had straight black hair in a bob and blue eyes, almost like Theda Bara although not as broadly vampy. That and any coquettishness she might have had was gone right now: her eyes were all too wide, and tears were starting to run freely down her face like someone had left a faucet slightly open. She smeared away one of the tears with the backside of a balled fist.

No one else in the whole lobby was paying her the slightest attention.

I'd sidled that much closer to her in the minutes she'd stood there, looking at nothing, while about three other guys, all fans, eased themselves into the other seats in the lounge area. One of them unpacked the single biggest notebook computer I'd ever seen in my life, set it up on the table between them, and fired it up. *Fansubs*, I thought; they were watching some show that hadn't been released here yet. Someone had boosted a copy of it onto the Internet, with English translations thoughtfully supplied by some anonymous party. Eventually she, too, woke up to the fact that there was someplace to sit nearby, and she dumped herself into an armchair like spaghetti sliding out of the colander.

I stood over the girl for I don't know how many minutes before I finally found the nerve to ask the dumbest possible question.

"Are you all right?"

"No," she choked, and pulled her head up from her knees; her jeans were going dark and wet where her face had been pressed into them.

"What happened?" I said.

"I'm *screwed*, is what happened."

One of the other guys watching the computer screen looked up briefly, but two seconds later his attention was back on some guy unleashing a wave-form of power to incinerate a wall of enemies.

"—Do you want to talk about it?"

The words turned to shit the minute they came out of my mouth. No, she probably doesn't want to talk about it, you nitwit, I thought. *Definitely* not talk about it with someone who walked up to her two seconds ago in a hotel lobby. Grow the brain that God gave you.

She dragged her fingers in a V shape down past both sides of her nose—another way of wiping her face—and blinked over at the computer screen near her. Looking at it, but not seeing it; I knew that expression pretty well. She was probably someone who had been at the hotel before all of us *weirdos* had descended on it, I thought.

"I'm Henry," I said, "and this is—crap, I think he's back there." I shot a look back across the lobby, where Winthrop stood with the most confused look I'd seen on his face in a very long time. "The guy who was with me back there, that's Winthrop. We were just walking by and we saw you, and . . ."

“And you got worried,” she finished. She actually managed a smile while saying that. “That’s . . . well, that’s really sweet of you. But I’ve got to figure out how I’m gonna get back home now.”

“What happened?”

“My ride decided to leave without me.” She waved a hand and winced. “I don’t want you to have to hear this whole story . . . please, I fucked up. This is my mistake.”

“No, it’s OK. Listen, are you hungry? We were just going to get lunch, and I was thinking we could treat you or something.”

Her expression didn’t change. Behind me—well, more to the side, really—I could sense Winthrop stepping in slowly, like he was approaching a stray cat that he didn’t want to scare off.

“It’s OK, we’re not trying to do anything stupid. We’re here for the convention.”

“The convention?” She repeated back the words like they weren’t English.

I decided a full-blown explanation wasn’t worth the trouble right now. “It’s a . . . movie festival, sort of,” I said.

She did that two-fingered face rub again, then slowly unfolded her legs from against her chest and stood up. “I’m Diane,” she said, bobbing her head. “And you were . . . Winston? I’m sorry.”

“Winthrop. It’s OK. I’ve been called everything from ‘Winston’ to ‘Windom’ to ‘*Wilhelm*’. Henry here just gets called ‘Hank’ every now and then, so of course I’m jealous. He just gets to have his name mangled in a nice, conventional, *doctrinaire* way.”

Diane’s laugh was thin and shaky, and ended in about the same breath as when it started, but at least it was a laugh. A laugh, a smile—not too bad, all things considered.

“So where are you two from?”

“New York,” I said. “Long Island. But don’t hold that against us.”

“I’m from Rhode Island, originally. Now Massachusetts. I was down here for a wedding, and . . . things got messed up.” She rubbed at her eyes as we stepped right out into the sunlight.

“Who was getting married?” I asked.

“Who got married? A friend of mine—well, someone I *thought* was a friend.” She shook her head and slapped her hand at the air. “It’s not important. I just want to forget about the whole thing for a little bit, if that’s okay.”

“Well, if you’re stranded here in Baltimore, it is kind of important, isn’t it?” Winthrop was doing his best to sound like he wasn’t prying, either, but there were only so many ways you could say something like that and *not* sound like you were prying. He hadn’t found one of them, though.

I put out a hand in front of Winthrop—*easy, boy*—and repeated my earlier offer: “Did you want to come get something to eat? You looked like you could use it.”

A moment, and then she followed us, her suitcase trailing behind her like a broken toy. I thought briefly about offering to carry that, or even have it stowed in our room, but decided against it. She still wasn’t comfortable with us, and there was no Sailor Moon to wave a magic wand and change that.

Diane blew out her breath and pulled herself quickly to the side when a car veered in from the street to pull up in front of the hotel. Her suitcase almost tilted over when she did that; I stepped in real quick and used the side of one foot to keep it from keeling.

“So, who was getting married?” Winthrop said. He was trying to kick-start where we had left off, but I just winced. *If she doesn’t want to talk about it, she doesn’t want to talk about it*, I wanted to tell him. There was no point in lecturing Winthrop about anything, though; he was old enough to make his own mistakes, friend or no friend. Yes, god love ya, Winthrop, I thought, but you have to learn to let some things happen by themselves.

“Well. The real short version,” Diane said, giving her suitcase an extra-hard tug, “is, I came here with my boyfriend. I was in the bridesmaids’ party. I got into an argument, I said some stuff I really shouldn’t have, and now my boyfriend, my friend, and most everyone else at the wedding who knows me, they don’t even want to talk to me anymore. And that’s really about it.”

She looked back at us with an expression: *If this is how it’s going to be, don’t even bother.*

“Okay,” I said, before Winthrop could shove his foot any deeper into his throat. “If it’s not something we need to know, that’s fine. People just worry, you know?”

“Yeah. I know.” She turned away once more and realized she had been leading us in our walk, when it should have been the other way around. “Where were you guys going to eat?”

“On the other side of the convention center, there’s this huge food court in a mall.” I pointed. “A few blocks over that way. Everything you could think of short of sushi—no, wait! They have that too, now, don’t they?”

“They just added the sushi place last year, that’s right.” Winthrop injected a little more “for-show” enthusiasm into his reply than was the norm.

Diane’s face didn’t change. Not a sushi person, I thought, and maybe also she doesn’t want to seem ungrateful.

“Like I said—they have everything,” I added. “That and it probably won’t be too crowded right now. And we can do badge pickup on the way back.”

Despite having the suitcase with her, she walked quite fast; she managed to keep in step next to me. She’s like me, I thought; she double-times it everywhere. That or she’s just terrified about being left behind and doesn’t want to show it. Winthrop also kept up, huffing a bit—he didn’t deal well with the heat at all, but he was willing to put up with it for a little bit if his reward was an air-conditioned food court the size of a gymnasium.

The convention center itself, all white struts and silver glass panes, had a steady traffic of people flowing in and out the main entrance and up the six-lane stairwell. There was no pressure to make the pilgrimage inside just yet; the line to get inside was still wrapping around the side of the building. And there were people already in costume on the day before things even got started—here and there, like a row of pigeons sitting on a phone wire with the occasional cockatoo or parrot (or peacock, or bird-of-paradise) among them.

My attention wasn’t on them. I’d be seeing them through the whole of the weekend. It was Diane’s face I was looking at. She was having trouble looking where she was going, as she kept turning her head every time a new costumer-player walked by.

“You said this was a film festival?”

“Sort of. —You know what ‘anime’ is?”

“It’s those Japanese cartoons, isn’t it?”

Here it comes, I thought. “That’s right.”

“So they’re dressing up like—what, the characters from the shows?”

I felt sweat that had nothing to do with summertime heat. “They dress up, they put on skits, and they even have contests for best

costumes.” I checked her face again; she was still listening, as far as I could tell. “There’s a lot more to it than just that, though. Dressing up is just part of the fun, and not everyone does that.”

“*I’m* not doing that,” Winthrop shrugged. “I’d *like* to do that, but I can never think of anything that works!”

“I was going to do Black Jack, actually,” I said.

“Wait, when was this?”

“I was thinking about it, on and off. I just never wound up getting everything together in time. It’s an easy costume, too.”

“Easy? The hair, the scar?”

“The hair’s a wig, and the scar—dude, it’s not like I have to build props or anything. Easy is relative.”

“Okay, who’s Black Jack?” This from Diane. “He sounds like a hitman or something.”

“You’re close,” I laughed. “He’s a black-market surgeon who practices medicine without a license.” I dropped my voice a bit and ended up emulating Mister Voice-Over, without quite realizing I was doing it. “They say he can work miracles . . . for a price . . .”

“So what’s this about the hair and the scar?”

I raised my hands to my face, as if about to demonstrate, then thought better of it. “How about this—if we see someone else dressed up as Black Jack on the way to the food court, I’ll buy Winthrop his meal.” I shot a look back at him; Winthrop looked like he was all for it.

“What’re the odds?” she said. Good god, she actually smiled when she said that.

Winthrop arched an eyebrow. “You’d be shocked. I might lose this one bigtime. The way this crowd is, we could see fifty Narutos and not one Black Jack.”

Nobody explained who Naruto was. Maybe she already knew.

The convention center was a lot larger than I remembered it; there was this whole extra block that was had to cover before we reached the stairs to the mall skyway. Those stairs were these disgusting cement things that looked like something you’d see in an inner-city high school; there were splotches on the first landing up that looked like they could be urine or vomit or both. I was reminded of that photo of a bum sleeping in the doorway of a church.

Winthrop took Diane’s bag from the rear—there was a carry handle back there, as it turned out—to keep her from having to drag

the thing up the steps. Well, I thought, at least *one* of us hit on that idea. A sentence came to mind, like a ready-made slogan: *Be chivalrous, not oblivious.*

The skyway itself to the mall was thankfully in better shape than those stairs. It wasn't crowded, but there were a good number of convention-goers either coming from the mall or falling in step in front or behind us.

"How many people are coming to this thing, anyway?" Diane looked bewildered; I think she was genuinely unsure of the scope of the event.

"About . . ." I hesitated.

". . . thirty thousand?" Winthrop jogged ahead and held the door for us. "They're guessing more, in total, since there are plenty of people who only get day passes and don't actually buy badges for the whole weekend." He waved us into the mall with a smile. "After you, lady and gentleman."

"Jesus," Diane said, looking back over her shoulder. For a moment, I thought she was looking at me. Then I realized she was looking at what was *behind* me—the white bulk of the convention center, and more importantly, the dozens of people walking back and forth on the belt of concrete we'd just crossed. She looked like someone who wanted to run, but wasn't sure which direction to run in. That was familiar, I thought.

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