

Heartbreakers

“Look at the stars.”

I had to say something to break the awful silence between us, even as something told me this particular silence was acceptable.

I heard her shift in the damp grass. I gently rolled onto my side, trying to ignore the shooting pain that had developed in my stomach, hoping it would go away—it wasn’t something I wanted to think about at a time like this.

“You can almost count them,” I said. “It’s such a clear night.”

She nodded her head and made some kind of noise in acknowledgement, looking up at the crisp October sky. I rolled onto my back again, not really caring about the warm dampness being absorbed by my shirt.

Would anybody find us out here? I wondered. *Probably not for a while, anyway.* We were lying on the edge of a trail, in the middle of an open wheat field. A huge forest was on our left.

My fingers began to move, almost involuntarily, to touch the hand of the girl next to me. Her fingers found mine and we held hands. For the first time that night, she turned and looked me in the eye. I couldn’t help but smile at her.

It’s funny how we end up in certain situations so quickly. The night started out simple. I decided to join some friends who had invited me along to a haunted forest ride, supposedly the best in the state, and they surprised me by bringing along a girl I had never met. Suddenly the night wasn’t so much about having fun with my without-a-care-friends as it was trying to appease my eager, match-making-friends.

“Rick, this is Betty,” they introduced us as I crawled into the backseat of my friend’s overcrowded Passat.

“Hi, Betty,” I had said, without missing a beat. I didn’t make eye contact at first as I sucked in my gut and squeezed in. I shut the door and looked over. Betty was next to me, and next to her was another couple of friends. I gave them a friendly wave.

“Betty’s from my psych class,” the driver announced.

At that point, I laughed. Not because it was particularly funny or because I was nervous, but because of her name. ‘Betty’ was a cartoon character, or an old woman who lives in a bakery—not someone I was trying to hook up with.

Then again, Rick is a name reserved for sleazy, overweight guys with bad haircuts. Hey, I didn’t choose it. Neither did she. I glanced over at her and nodded.

I'm not sure why I don't particularly feel comfortable around women. I was never a ladies man. It was just an accident that I ended up with my current girlfriend—I mean, my current *ex*-girlfriend—or, my *last* girlfriend. I'm not really sure what to call her. Either way, she was the one who pursued me, so I didn't have to work at it much. But I guess I was doing something wrong all along, because one night I came back to our apartment and found her crying. When I asked her why, she told me she had been seeing someone else for the last two months, and she was moving out.

Not very encouraging, especially after you've silently planned out the rest of your life and even spent some time secretly browsing around jewelry stores for that special ring. In the end, I supposed that was a big part of it—the whole silent, secret part. I made it a point not to talk to her again, so I can never be certain, but through my own speculation that's the conclusion I made. Part of me really doesn't care, because after such a betrayal, nothing I did would ever deserve that.

Nothing.

I get angry just thinking about it.

In any event, I need to admit, Betty was gorgeous. So gorgeous, that I don't even hesitate to use the word gorgeous. So gorgeous, that, of course, I had a hard time breaking the ice. Sure, it could have been the car full of people, but I'm sure it also had something to do with the fact that I wasn't ready yet. I wasn't ready to trust someone again—which surprised me, because you can only imagine what an average looking, single, lonely young man in his mid-twenties wishes when he lives by himself. But I felt weird—maybe even a little guilty—at talking to her, so I ended up being quiet the entire drive.

By the time we arrived, I wasted no time pulling the door handle. Everyone in the back seat spilled out onto the gravel parking lot. I stretched and flipped open my cell phone to check the time, less out of curiosity and more so I didn't just stand there looking like I had no life for the ten seconds it took everyone else to get out of the car.

I thought that I had already blown it with Betty for being silent the entire drive as I contemplated my own relationship problems, so I was a bit surprised when she walked right up to me after she got out and stretched.

“Expecting a call?” She asked with a yawn.

From the time it took me to flip my phone shut, put it back into the pocket of my jacket, and shift my glance upwards toward her, I decided she was being a smart-ass and was annoyed I'd have to deal with her for the rest of the night. Deciding this made me feel a little less guilty about not talking to her. It made me feel like maybe I wasn't just

really shy, maybe I picked up on some vibe that this was a really annoying girl that I had just dodged. But my mood changed when I looked at her and found out she was genuinely curious.

There's something about blowing off a girl, not saying much more than two words to her for more than an hour, only to have her still interested in conversation. Kind of makes a guy feel special.

"No," I finally said. "Sorry, just checking the time."

"Oh," she waited for me to start walking with her before turning around and following the rest of the group.

The silence overcame us. This was different, not like in the car where we could pretend to be listening to someone else's conversation. This was real—a direct, independent dialogue had been established, and the others were too far ahead of us to act as distractions.

"My boyfriend hates these things," she said.

What's that? I'm sure I had a surprised look on my face, even though I didn't miss a beat in giving a polite laugh and asking, "do *you* hate them, too?"

"They're okay," she replied, holding her hands in the pockets of her white, zipped-up hooded sweatshirt.

I cleared my throat. *What the hell?* "So, I didn't know you had a boyfriend."

"Yeah, we've been together for about three years." She looked at the ground and nodded the kind of nod you do to delay the onset of unease.

I just laughed. Laughed at the absurdity, the randomness, and the gall of my friends who set this up. I laughed because why not, who was I trying to impress?

Laughed because it turned out I really did care about impressing her.

"Where is he tonight?" I finally asked.

"I'm not really sure," she pursed her lips and looked at me, eyebrows raised.

I began to understand.

We made our way up to the ticket booth, which was essentially just a hole in the side of the barn. I had to bend over and shout through the Plexiglas that I wanted one ticket. While the cashier did whatever she had to do on her end, I surveyed the area—a big barn in the middle of nowhere. Near the top was spray painted the name of this place: *St. Lucifer's Forest*. It looked like it could have fallen over at any minute without warning.

The side of the barn was covered in artificial cobwebs, in which big orange gobs of light shone through. I wondered if the barn had any other purpose than just a large ticket booth in any other month than October.

After I received my ticket I walked a few feet over to peer around the edge of the barn, into the field that led to the haunted forest in the distance. My friends, including Betty, eventually caught up with me and we made our way to the line of people already waiting for the ride to begin. They were standing in front of an iron gate, attached to a long, white, wooden fence that stretched out as far as I could see in the dark field.

Moments later, another group of friends and a family of five arrived—a mother, father, two teenage girls, and what I guessed to be an eight or nine year old boy.

After a minute we heard the dull rumble of an old tractor approach. It had no headlights, but as it approached the lights of the barn we saw that it had two huge tires in the back, was painted red, and was being driven by an angry looking clown. It eventually came to a stop as the flatbed it was hauling lined up with the gate. The flatbed was covered in straw and hay that looked a little damp from the rain earlier in the day.

The clown driver stepped off of the tractor and made his way to the gate. He unlatched it and swung it open.

“Welcome to Lucifer’s Hay Ride,” he growled. “Tonight, you die.”

Betty gave me a playful nudge from behind. I turned my head.

He continued addressing the crowd. “None of you will make it back alive. If you do, come see me.”

Everyone shared some nervous laughter, and when the clown motioned for people to hand over their tickets and board the flatbed, we complied.

“Keep your hands and feet on the trailer at all times,” the clown announced. “Otherwise, I can’t promise they won’t be cut off!”

The eight or nine year old behind us laughed. When the kid approached to give his ticket, the clown put out a hand. I was climbing aboard the trailer next to Betty, but could still hear the clown. He spoke softly, addressing the boy’s mother.

“This is no place for children,” he said, surprisingly gentle.

The boy looked up at his mom with a look of disappointment.

“Oh, come on,” the mother said. “He goes on these things all the time. There’s no age limit posted anywhere.”

“I don’t need to post it, because I’m telling you,” the clown said. “No kids.”

For an instant, the mother was going to argue, but looked behind her and saw the rest of the line becoming impatient. Eventually the mother decided she'd stay back with her child while the father and two teenage daughters went ahead.

The look on the kid's face at not being able to go was scary enough. Even so, I wondered what was so bad.

"Is it really that scary?" I asked.

"I guess so," Betty said.

After everyone else, about 20 people total, found a place to sit on the straw covered flatbed, and after the clown gave his speech reiterating all of the safety tips, we departed.

The tractor went straight at first, traversing almost the entire length of the white fence I thought went on forever. Then, it made a ninety degree left turn and continued down a trail that looked like it had been traveled over and over again by this same vehicle.

Ahead of us was the forest.

Nobody was really saying anything at this point, so I swung my feet over the edge of the flatbed and lay back into the straw. Betty turned to look at me and did the same.

"Look at the stars," she said, finally breaking the silence.

I nodded. "It's such a clear night."

"It amazes me every time," she went on. She paused a minute, and then inhaled as if she was going to give some kind of big revelation. "Sometimes when things get really bad I look up at the stars and start to count them. It really makes my problems seem so insignificant and small."

"You don't have to do that too often, I hope?" I asked.

"Didn't used to."

I thought the best thing I could do at that point was listen. "You don't seem happy," I probed, kind of trying to be a little blunt.

She sighed, as if my question made her think for the first time, even though we both knew she'd spent countless nights pondering the same subject. "It's not that I'm not happy. I just didn't really think I'd end up like this."

"Like what?"

"I'm not really sure," another sigh. I knew she was sure; she knew; she just didn't want to open up that much yet. "I guess I just wish I had more."

I shifted my weight a little, surprised that I was uncomfortable at the conversation. *This is ridiculous*, I thought. I was lying there with a girl I hardly knew, feeling some kind of responsibility for her happiness.

What's worse, I was thinking what role I'd play in helping give it to her!

We just met!

There's the male psyche for you, I suppose. We're always supposed to be able to fix things. I guess there is some kind of primal instinct in us that wants to protect women, too. Either way, it got me thinking about what exactly it would mean to "help" this girl.

I pictured the boyfriend she had at home. I wondered if he knew where she was the way *she* apparently wondered where *he* was. Maybe he was like me, just a little too quiet and reserved even in his own life, and his girlfriend had mistook that for some kind of distance and decided to fill the void in her life with someone else.

Even though I wasn't that someone else just yet, the idea kind of struck me that I could be. It put a pit in my stomach, not because I didn't want to, but because I knew what it would mean to him.

One night, he might come home, see her crying on the bedroom floor. Approach her. "What's wrong?"

She'd take a deep breath, lift her face upward, revealing red skin and puffy cheeks. She's open her mouth to speak. "I'm moving out," she'd say.

He'd stammer, utter the only word you can think of to say: "What?" That lump would form in his throat, and he'd start to pull at his clothes like he's suddenly no longer comfortable in his own skin. Why should he be? His home wouldn't be home anymore. His world would come crashing in on him.

It made me a little sad. I couldn't do it. Not yet.

I looked at Betty, and then back to the stars. I pointed upward. "There's the big dipper."

What else was I supposed to say?

Eventually, we approached the edge of the forest. Through the trees we could see small fires burning and strobe light effects. We began to hear cackles and screams.

Betty and I sat up. I pulled my legs back up onto the bed and sat with them crossed.

"Here we go," she whispered.

As soon as we crossed the threshold into the forest, things started jumping at us. Nothing out of the ordinary, and all a bit predictable. A guy in a Jason mask here, a man with Freddy Kruger gloves there. At one point, someone came at us and swung an axe that dug into the edge of the flatbed. I was a bit surprised, but figured maybe that was the intensity the clown used to justify making the little boy stay behind.

About three minutes into the forest, the chainsaws started.

We traveled into a clearing, where the tractor pretended to stall. Everyone on the flatbed was laughing and exchanging looks. Three men wielding idle, running chainsaws came out of the woods that surrounded us. They wore ski masks and flannel shirts.

The clown on the tractor turned around. "We're stalled!" He announced.

As the chainsaw men approached, there was laughing behind us. Evil laughing, like someone going mad. I turned to see what was happening. Someone in an alien mask jumped out of the brush and ran toward us. Everyone was smiling.

When I turned back around, I noticed another group of people with axes had made their way toward our "stalled" vehicle.

"We're being swarmed!" I said, over the roar of the chainsaws. "Pretty intense." Betty quickly furrowed her brow and nodded, then looked back at the action. She pointed to something in the distance.

"Look, that person's on fire!"

I laughed. This place went all out.

I fixed my eyes on the clown, wondering what role he'd have in getting the tractor up and running again and hauling us back to safety in the nick of time. Except he wasn't "fixing" the tractor at all. Someone was handing him an axe.

Someone on the flatbed jumped to their feet. Others did the same, starting to yell things like "holy shit, holy shit, holy shit!" My eyes darted around, and I had a smile on my face trying to figure out what was scaring them so bad. The men with chainsaws had them raised, as if they were going to attack.

In the instant it took me to realize the chainsaws still had their blades, one of them plunged directly into Betty's chest. The sound of ripping flesh, her flailing body, and the bogged down chainsaw motor are not something I care to remember.

I sat there for a moment, legs crossed, as the man with the flannel shirt wrestled the chainsaw out of her.

The chainsaw eventually stalled out. The man holding it jumped onto the flatbed and stepped on Betty's stomach, yanking upward, trying to get the blade free. Eventually he got the blade started again, somehow, and cut his way out through her shoulder.

For an instant I thought someone was splashing me with water, but I realized it was the blood spurting from her body.

Someone grabbed me. I didn't look at who it was, because for some reason I knew someone was pulling me out to safety. I looked at

Betty one more time. She stared back up at me, her jaw moving up and down involuntarily as she struggled for air and tried to call for help.

Betty—the girl from my friend’s psych class. Betty—the girl whom I just meant and had impure thoughts about, fantasies about rescuing her from her disappointing life. Betty—whose name was suddenly beautiful, whose boyfriend would come home and grow concerned when she didn’t come back.

I’d like to think she was dead by the time I got off the flatbed. That way I don’t really have to think about how I looked back and saw her reach out for me with the one arm still attached. I also don’t have to think about the man who approached her with an axe and buried it into her face while her helpless gaze was still focused intently on me.

No, I don’t have to think about that at all.

The blood was rushing through my ears at such a force that I couldn’t really hear what was happening. Someone was still grabbing my arm and pulling me through the forest, and after a minute or two I was able to see that it was one of my friends.

He eventually tripped on a log and fell onto his face. I fell over him.

“What the *fuck*?!” He yelled. His face was wet with panic, white as a ghost.

We both spun around and looked back, still lying on the ground. The flatbed was now completely swarmed—like a pack of starved lions jumping on a passing gazelle.

Every now and then a limp body would fall from the bed. The knot in my stomach moved into my throat and eventually made me cry.

My friend turned to me and put both of his hands on each of my shoulders. For an instant I thought that this is what it must feel like to be in the military, under fire. The heat, the intensity. He was crying, too.

“What’s going on?!” He said. He clenched his eyes. “What the fuck just happened?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but was too choked up to get anything out. When I tried a second time, someone dressed in flannel and a Jason mask appeared and wrapped a noose around my friend’s neck.

His eyes darted from me, up to his captor, and back to me again.

“Get off me!” He yelled. He tried to swing his legs and kick the man in the knees, but the man was too quick. I heard him laughing through his mask.

In a situation like this, you would think that you’d fight back and knock down anyone messing with someone you cared about. But I

couldn't. I just sat there and watched as the air was cut off from his lungs. His eyes burned into mine—but I knew better this time. I looked down at the ground until his legs stopped kicking.

Things were calm for an instant. The waves of blood rushing through my face seemed to subside for a moment, and I could hear. My nose and eyes were clear now from my crying, and I felt energized.

I sprung to my feet, but not before the man with the noose pulled out a machete and took a swing at me. The tip of the knife nicked me on my side as I turned to run.

If you were watching me from afar, you may have guessed that I had been trained to escape situations like that, the way I was running and jumping through the forest. I'd leap over a log, swing from a branch, all the while looked back to make sure I was escaping the danger.

I ran for what seemed like hours, but what was probably only minutes. Either way, I ended up along the ruts that made up the road the tractor took to get into the forest. I slowed to a walk when my abdomen began to throb, and I looked back, breathing hard.

Nobody followed me.

The pain in my side told me why. What I thought was a runner's cramp turned out to be much worse. The machete had done more than just nick me. I peered down and tried to see how deep the gash went. I buried three fingers before I went any further.

My legs grew tingly and I collapsed.

I rolled onto my back.

My breathing slowed, and a warm puddle of blood was quickly forming around me. The loss of blood pressure was probably the only thing that enabled me to hear the soft cries next to me. I thought it was a wounded animal at first. Turning my head to see what was there I found that, in a way, I was right.

I recognized her as one of the teenage siblings of the eight year old who was refused a ride. A knife stuck out of her chest. She noticed me, and we both sat there silently for a moment, listening to each other breathe. It seemed as if she was trying to turn and look at me, but was in too much pain to do so. It didn't surprise me—the knife looked long and sharp, as if it went right through her and into the ground.

"Look at the stars," I said, my gaze going upward. I had to say something to break the awful silence between us, even as something told me this particular silence was acceptable.

I heard her shift in the damp grass. I gently rolled onto my side, trying to ignore the pain in my abdomen.

"You can almost count them," I said. "It's such a clear night."

She nodded her head and made some kind of noise in acknowledgement, looking up at the crisp October sky. I rolled onto my back again, not really caring about the feeling of warm blood being reabsorbed by my shirt.

Would anybody find us out here? I wondered. *Probably not for a while, anyway.*

My fingers began to move, almost involuntarily, to touch the hand of the girl next to me. Her fingers found mine and we held hands. She turned and looked me in the eye. I couldn't help but smile at her.

I turned back to the stars, my breathing eerily slow, and began to count.

St. Lucifer's Massacre

Last suspect identified in haunted ride tragedy where patrons were sold tickets to their own death.

by Bethany Stratham

ARBOR FALLS, MI – Police have finally apprehended the last suspect in a case that has gained nationwide attention and is quickly being called one of the worst terrorist attacks in the country.

Having the last suspect in custody has not only put many minds at ease, but has solved the mystery of how, and why, this tragedy occurred.

“We were sick and tired of how our culture operates,” suspect Terrence Goldman, 20, said on Tuesday—three nights after the attack took place. “We wanted to teach people a lesson that there are consequences to how they live.”

The haunted ride was essentially hijacked at the beginning of the night, when a group of employees arrived and killed both managers on duty. After executing most of the remaining staff, they telephoned acquaintances who arrived on the scene dressed as classic Halloween monsters. When patrons started to arrive, they were none the wiser.

“The staff was a little rude all night,” Lynn Prior said, who is the mother of two teenage victims. “We just thought it was part of the game.”

In a bizarre twist, Prior and her son, whose name is not being released, were spared when Goldman had a turn of heart.

“I couldn't kill a child,” he told police.

From about 8:00pm until approximately 10:30pm Saturday night, the suspects murdered approximately 60 people using things such as axes, machetes, and chainsaws. Some victims were tortured. One victim was doused with gasoline and burned alive.

Each suspect has admitted their involvement in the crime. It is expected that they will serve life prison sentences.