



THE PROJECTIONIST

BY LAURA MURREN

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There’s this guy in my neighborhood that just disgusts me. He follows me everywhere, dogging my steps—it seems like he’s waiting for me around every street corner. I don’t know how he always seems to find me and I don’t know where he came from, but he is really starting to get to me. He’s ‘that guy,’ that guy you don’t ever want to befriend, because once you do, you can never get rid of him. It’d be one thing if he were just a harmless, annoying loser, but it feels like more than that. He’s not just annoying, he’s untrustworthy—it always feels like he’s trying to see into your dirty laundry. There’s an underlying nastiness in his every move; you always feel like he’s planning and scheming against you, trying to use you to his advantage. You don’t like him, but you know it would be useless to just tell him to fuck off.

But I wish he would just disappear.

I went to a whore for the first time not too long ago. She seemed sexy at first, but about ten minutes into our conversation she completely flipped out, saying that I was a piece of shit and that just looking at me was making

her sick. She said she would never, ever sleep with me, even if her life depended on it.

“And considering the pigs I’ve slept with,” she had continued, in her nasally voice, “that’s saying something.”

She was being really bitchy, and, not gonna lie: it shocked me a little bit. But I got over it pretty quick, because normally the ladies love me. I could hook up with any one of my girlfriends whenever I want. All I have to do is dial the numbers and they’ll come running. She’s a whore—I can never be worse than her. And I told her so. I told her to go put cream on her vaginal warts and walked away.

Her name was Denise. What a lousy whore name. She couldn’t’ve been very good; otherwise she would’ve had a sexy name like Candy or Jasmine, or April. So I took the money I had and went to an ice cream shop across the street from her filthy, disease ridden apartment.

But the ice cream was ruined by the fact that this disgusting guy showed up at the very same ice cream shop to get some ice cream. Lucky me. He asked me if I liked the vanilla ice cream, and why didn’t I get the rocky road? Because Rocky Road Ice Cream is The Best Thing ever; it’s better than all the other ice creams. He knows the guy who invented rocky road ice cream, and his family takes trips every so often to go see the rocky road creator’s estate on an island in the Caribbean.

I listened, knowing it was a lie.

As much as I wanted to ignore him, or tell him to go away, I couldn’t do it. I don’t know why; I mean, I guess the guy hasn’t done anything to me, so in reality, I have no right to hate him. But I can’t shake the disgusted and annoyed feelings I get whenever he’s around. And he’s always around. Whenever I want some peace and quiet, he shows up almost instantly.

I finished the remainder of my ice cream and left the spoon and plastic bowl on the bench I had been sitting on. The wind blew the bowl off the side. I walked down the street, heading back towards my one-bedroom apartment. On the way home, I ran into Chandler.

“Yo Yo, Chandler, what’s goin’ on, man?” I asked.

“Fuck off, man,” Chandler said.

“Right on, buddy, haha! Fuck you too, man!”

Chandler and I have a little game we play. We insult each other, but then he always comes over and plays video games. I’ve known him for like six months. He’s my best friend.

“Ok, call you later, Chan-o!”

He flipped me off without turning around as he walked away. Chandler’s such a dick, but I love the guy anyway.

I continued on to my apartment. The disgusting guy was coming

at me from across the street, telling me to wait up. I pretended like I didn't see him and ducked in to see my good friend Jason before heading home. It was convenient because he lives on the first floor of his building. Poor, lonely bastard hardly ever comes out. He'd be thrilled that I'd thought of him.

I knocked on his door. I heard some rustling around, but no one came right away, so I knocked again.

"Hey Jason? It's A.J.! Hey man, you in there?"

I heard shuffling much closer to the door, but still no one answered.

"I know you're in there man, open up. It's A.J., dude! Yo!"

Jason's a really shy guy. He's very reclusive and can't handle very many visitors. He likes to pretend like he doesn't like people, but I know he's just desperate for human contact. I knocked a few times more, because I know it just takes a little coaxing before he gives in to his true feelings.

I proved to be right when he opened the door a few minutes later.

"Hey," Jason said, with no feeling in his voice. I felt so sorry for him as I looked at him; he suffers from severe depression. Probably does cocaine or something. I think I heard that somewhere.

"You busy?" I asked. "What's goin' on? I was just around the neighborhood, figured I'd drop by."

He had opened the door only a crack, so I had to push past him a little to get in. I walked into his kitchen and sat at the table.

"So what's up with you, Jason? What've you been doing?" I knew he wanted me to ask him how he was doing so he could tell me how badly he was doing. He's always trying to tell me his problems.

"Pretty good, how 'bout you." Again, there was that lack of feeling in his voice. Well, if he isn't gonna get help for his depression, there's not much to be done about it.

"Oh, I'm doing great," I said. "I got laid by this hot chick today named April! Man, she is soo into me. She's so damn fine too. I just wanted to fuck her, but I think she wants a relationship or something. But I don't want to give up all my other pussy." I almost felt bad telling him about my good fortune, since he probably hadn't been laid in a while, but in my glee I didn't care.

"Uh huh." Clearly he was upset or jealous that I had gotten some. I know for a fact he hasn't gotten laid because no one would get with a depressed cokehead. He needs to go to rehab or something.

"Yeah, so," I continued, looking around. "You got any alcohol? I'm broke but I wanna drink."

Jason's eyes became hooded and glazed over. Obviously this was

what he'd been waiting on all day. Poor guy; my visits are the only thing keeping him going.

"Um, I don't really feel like dr—"

"Oh, come on, man! I'll pay you back, I just really wanna drink today! How can you refuse me after all the shit I do for you! Who took you to work the other day?"

"You did, but that was like three weeks ago. And that has nothing to do with—" "Dude! I helped you out! I can't believe you're gonna forget about it at such a convenient time!" I looked at him hard. He knew it was true.

"I'm not forgetting, but I really don't feel like drinking. I have to go to work."

"Come on! Just one drink! Jason: come on."

He stared around the kitchen.

"Jason! Come on! Dude, I have to have some alcohol today, and I'm broke! I really need this! Come—"

"Fine." He got up and went to the fridge and grabbed two beers, handing me one when he came back.

"Man, I hate this kinna beer, dude," I said, cracking it open and taking a big gulp. I don't know why Jason always has to get shitty alcohol.

I finished the six pack—it doesn't matter because he owes me. Big time. He knows it too, that's why he wouldn't say anything about the beer and the fact that I haven't paid him back yet—he wouldn't want me to have to start going down the list of things I'd done for him. I wouldn't do that though, unless I had to, because I'm not one to bring up past issues and shove them in people's faces. Friends just don't do that to friends.

I had been lying on the couch for about 20 minutes, after I'd shot-gunned all the beer, when Jason started getting up and messing around with things in the house. His cell phone buzzed occasionally, signifying that he was getting text messages. I vaguely wondered who would text him; I thought the only time his phone rang was when I called him. I turned on the T.V.

I was happily watching music videos when out of nowhere he says, "Hey man, I really gotta do some housework, and I have to go to work in about thirty minutes, so..."

He trailed off. I looked at him blankly as he poked his head out like a turtle, expectantly, his eyes wide with assumed comprehension. He was looking at me like we shared some telepathic bond or something.

"So...what?" I asked.

"So, I guess you need to...probably...leave..."

Bastard. After everything I do for him!

“Why?” I asked. “You don’t want me here or something, Jason?”

“No,” Jason said, sounding tired, “that’s not it. I really do have to go to work. Normally you could stay longer, but I have to go.”

“So can’t I just stay until you leave?” Damn, I was only trying to help the guy out; I know how lonely he is. He just wants to live in a world of misery, I guess.

“Uh...I really have to take a shower and clean a little bit...”

“Oh, well, I don’t want to be rude. I mean, if you want me to leave, just say it. I’m not gonna get upset or anything.”

“Ok, well I need to get busy here.”

“Ok, fine, I’ll go. See? Easy as that. No big deal. All you have to do is just let me know,” I said, walking toward the door.

“Ok, talk to you later.” He shut the door behind me.

That had been a pleasant visit. I think I greatly improved his chances of living another day. Sometimes I almost get tired of having every person figured out.

I left his apartment building feeling very tipsy and turned the corner of the final block to my own apartment, whistling to a made-up tune.

“Yo, what’s up, A.J.!”

It was the disgusting guy again. I thought I’d shaken him off, but apparently our lives were star crossed on this day and here he was, more disgusting than ever.

“Not much,” I said, feeling suddenly drained, my buzz fading away.

“Yo, what’s up? You headin’ back to your apartment?” The very sound of his voice made me want to wash the slime off my arms and legs, and then punch him in the face and say “Fuck you!”

“Yeah, I am, but I wasn’t really planning on—”

“Cool, then you mind if I come hang out for a lil’ bit? I wanna chill out.”

He’s clueless.

Obviously he had no idea that he wasn’t being invited back to my place. Why wasn’t he getting this?

“Sure, you can come over for a while.” I wanted to kick myself. But I just didn’t feel like arguing with him.

I sped up my pace, with the great idea in mind that I could out run him to make him leave, I guess. I practically sprinted up the two flights of stairs to my apartment, but it still didn’t throw him off. He kept up with me stride for stride, breathing only as hard as I was and running only as fast as I was. When I reached my door, he was still right by my side, standing too closely.

I unlocked the door. It crossed my mind that it might not have

been the smartest thing to let him know where I live. Nevertheless, in he came. He entered the house even before I did. I don’t even know this guy.

He walked into the living room that doubled as a bedroom for me on most nights and plopped down on the couch.

“Thanks for lettin’ me come over, man. I really needed to chill out somewhere for a while.”

Though it was clearly a lie to anyone who was truly listening, I said, “No problem.”

He looked around. “Nice place, dude. I just moved into a two-story house about a month ago. It has a pool and a three-car garage. But this is nice here, what you have. You gotta see my house though, it’s amazing. I throw awesome parties there all the time, it gets so crazy! Last weekend I held a five kegger there...you shoulda come, man, it was freakin’ awesome!”

“That’s awesome,” I said jealously, wishing he would shut up. I sat down on the couch to play some video games.

He looked at my Play Station 2. “Nice,” he commented. “I’ve got an Xbox 360 Elite, but I also have older stuff like that too.”

“It’s not really that old,” I said.

“No, but, well, you know what I mean.”

I really didn’t know what he meant. “I got this when it first came out, dude,” I said, annoyed.

“Yeah...but that was like a really long time ago, wasn’t it? I always get the newest stuff.”

I didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“So do you have any food? I’m starved!” He said, eyeing my kitchen.

I looked at him, incredulously. He looked back at me as if he didn’t know he was being unbelievably rude and demanding.

“What?” he asked, looking shocked.

I wanted to kill him! But instead I just said, “Nothin’, man.”

“...So,” he said, after a moment, “do you have any food? I am so hungry, man.”

This was almost just too much. He comes in my house—uninvited. He sits on my couch—unsolicited. Now he’s asking for my food too? I found myself thinking suddenly of Jason; I wish I could just go over to his house or something. Too bad he was at work now.

He got up and went over to the kitchen area. “You have bread here, do you have any turkey? I love turkey sandwiches.”

“Yeah, have whatever you want,” I said, putting my face in my hands. I just wanted him gone.

I walked into the bathroom, closing the door.

“Dude, what are you doing? I’m takin’ a shit!”

He was in the bathroom sitting on the toilet. God! I just wanted him to leave. I looked into the mirror at myself; I could still see him on the toilet behind me.

I walked out of there and into my bedroom, slamming the door.

“So man, lemme tell you about this chick I hooked up with the other day.” He kept talking from the bathroom but it felt like he was right next to me. His voice was grating harshly on my eardrums; every time he breathed it felt like my own breath, and each one got shallower and shallower as the pressure of his presence wore on me.

“Yeah, I showed her a good time, kinda broke in the new bedroom if you know what I mean. But she won’t quit calling me! She wants my sack pretty bad.”

His lame-ass story made me want to vomit; that guy couldn’t get pussy if his life depended on it. He’s disgusting, and he is incredibly unattractive. He has this huge teddy bear nose and little tiny slits for eyes, and hair that is way too big, even for his fat head. He’s overweight too.

“You seen Angela lately?” he asked, still in the bathroom.

How does this fuck-up know Angela? I asked myself. Had we been hanging out for that long?

“Man, she is so fine. I could have her in five minutes if I wanted a random hook-up, but you know...”

“Uh...I dunno know about that,” I said, my anger rising.

I could get with Angela anytime I wanted, but she would never get with a disgusting creep like him...would she?

“Dude, trust me. I could have her. But frankly, I don’t know if I wanna hook up with her. That’d open up a can of worms I don’t even wanna get into. She’d be on my sack so bad after one time that it wouldn’t even be funny.”

The feeling of nausea was stronger now. This guy’s perception of reality was sickeningly distorted.

I had to get away from him. Maybe I’d call someone and tell him he can’t come.

I went into the living room and picked up my cell phone.

Who to call? Jason’s at work. I could call Chandler....

I hit send on his name (Chan-O).

No answer. I called again. Still no answer. I decided to send him a text message (“What r u up 2?”); he was probably in the shower or something.

Then I continued going down my list. I decided to call Angela. I hit ‘send’ on her name, Angie Boo.

“Whatcha doin’, man?” He had just come out of the bathroom.

“Nothin’.”

No answer from Angela. I tried her again. No answer. Well, third time’s the charm.

“Hello.”

“Hey, Ange, don’t sound so happy to hear from me!” I joked.

“What’s up.”

“I have a question for you,” I began, teasingly. I knew it would arouse her interest.

“Mmkay.”

“Do you like...sushi?”

There was a pause. “Uh, well, yeah...why.”

“Would you like for me to take you out tonight, to eat sushi?”

“No thanks. I’m broke.”

“Ange—I got it. Don’t worry about that.”

“I’m busy. I have a lot of work to do.”

“Oh come on, you can make it out for a couple of hours! A.J.’ll show you a great time, I promise.”

“I really can’t.”

“Come on!”

“I can’t.” She sounded mad. Poor thing, she doesn’t handle being broke very well.

“What if you get your work done?”

“It won’t all get done,” she said.

There was a long pause. I waited.

“Look,” she said, “if I get my work done, I might give you a call.”

“Aight, then,” I said coolly, “Talk to ya soon.”

I hung up. Of course she’d call later.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“Just a really good friend of mine.”

“Was it a chick?”

“Uh...yeah it was,” I said.

“Was it Angela? Oh shit!” He suddenly realized his forgotten turkey sandwich, and hopped up to retrieve it.

Then he came back. “So? Was it?”

I sat back and looked at the ceiling, trying to stay calm.

“Was it—”

“Yes! It was Angela. Why?” I hated it when he questioned me. It was so intense, like he wanted the answer for a particular reason of his own.

“Oh. Oh man. Sorry,” he said, his hands up in the classic surrendering pose, “Sorry dude, about what I said earlier. I didn’t mean it.”

“What are you talking about?” What was he talking about?

“Dude...when I said I could have her...me and her, we’re just friends. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“Wha?—look, I’m not ‘with’ Angela, ok? Well, I mean, we kind of—”

I thought back to the time I had kissed Angela at a party. She wasn’t that wasted, I don’t think.

“—Had a thing, at one point, yes,” I finished. “I mean, she really likes me, but I’m not after anything.”

“But you guys used to mess around? Do you still like her? Why were ya’ll talking to each other? You’re wanting to hook up with her again. Did ya’ll, you know, fuck, or anything?”

“Uh, well,” God, I needed out of this apartment, “I dunno know if you’d call it fucki—look, I gotta go. I think I’m gonna go see one of my friends now.”

“Cool. Can I come?”

“No...it’s a personal friend.”

“Angela?”

“Uh ye—no, this is someone else.”

“Who?”

Ahhhh!!!!

“Look, I really have to go! So you just need to leave, ok?” I was getting very, very angry all of the sudden.

“Damn...geeze...well if you want me to leave...just say it, dude.”

“I want you to leave!”

He looked around the room, apparently hurt. I didn’t care, I just wanted him gone.

“Ok then. Well, if you don’t want me around, then...I won’t bother you anymore.”

“Look—” Wait, why was I trying to stop him? I found myself almost telling him that he wasn’t bothering me.

“Look, I gotta go,” I said instead.

He got up and was out of the door in a split second.

Suddenly my phone rang. It was Rachel, this fat-ass ginger chick that has a huge crush on me.

“Hullo,” I said, trying to sound annoyed; I love leading her on.

“Hay A.J.! Wudder you doin’?”

Ugh. She sounded too happy to be talking to me. Getting her in bed would be too easy, but I don’t like to think about that.

“Workin’ on some stuff,” I said.

“Can I come over?”

“Hmm...” I said slowly, knowing she was waiting with bated breath at the other end of the line, “I dunno, Rach, I gotta lotta work to

do here....”

A knock at the door.

“Dude, A.J., you still home?”

The disgusting guy again.

“You know what, I’ll just come over to your place,” I said. “Be there in about ten.”

“Okay, see you soon!”

I ended up eating dinner at Rachel’s place—she makes some killer pot roasts, and she loves to cook for me anyway.

She was annoying as usual, boring me with stories of her day, and who was in it, and what they were talking about—so I saved her the embarrassment and talked about my day, a subject that would make everyone happy.

“...Yeah, this chick was pretty amazing, lemme tell ya. Blonde hair, green eyes, olive skin! Sexy slender curves....”

Rachel was looking around the room as if in thought. “She’s prob’ly a slut, though, I mean, thank about it A.J., you just met ‘er and ya’ll’ve already had sex? I hope you used pertection...”

“Yeah, you’re right. And of course I used protection, I mean, come on!”

After the blonde slut we moved onto Jason.

“...I’m pretty sure he’s a coke head. I think that he was trying to clean it up before he came to the door, and that’s why it took him so long.”

“Oooh, really? He does coke? Well, I think I heard that somewhere. He looks like one, and he’s soo depressin’, ya know? Just never in a good mood! So you really think he ain’t been laid in a while?”

“Oh. Positive. You should’ve seen how jealous he was when I was talking about the blonde girl.”

There was a flash of something in Rachel’s eyes.

“Jealous? He’s uh real jealous person, ain’t ‘ee?” she asked.

“Yeah, he’s always wanting what I have, lemme tell ya. Every time I get something new he just gets this look on his face (It’s soo funny!) like ‘I am so jealous.’ It’s great!—But yeah, he is super-jealous.

“Oh yeah, I saw Chandler today,” I said suddenly. “He wants to hang out tonight.”

“Chandler? Really? Are ya’ll gowna hang out?”

“I dunno, Ange wants to chill, so I may not be able to. Let’s call Ange and see what she’s doing.”

I hit send on “Angie Boo,” and waited, looking around the room as I listened to the ringtone. Rachel had plopped back in her chair and

had her arms folded.

“Hullo.”

“Freeman!” I said her last name.

“What’s up.”

“What’re you doin’?”

“Working.” There was a long pause. “What are you doing,” she asked.

“Oh, you know, hanging out. Me and Rachel were just sitting here, feelin’ so good after the roast she made. You really missed out. Just calling to see if you wanted to come and partake in some card playing with the two of us.”

“I don’t think so,” she said, “I’m, uh, still working.”

“You need some time to relax,” I said. This girl can be so difficult sometimes. I tell you, I have the strangest friends.

“I don’t—”

“Angela. Come on. You know you want to. You need to get away from your work for a minute.”

There was a long silence.

“What card game are ya’ll playing.”

45 minutes later, Angela finally made it over to Rachel’s place, looking slightly disgruntled, probably because I’d been spending time with Rachel and not her.

“Hey guys,” she said.

“Yo Yo,” I said, uninterestedly. Keeps ‘em wanting more.

“Hay girl,” Rachel said sweetly.

“So, are we gonna play cards?” she asked, with a cheerful note in her voice.

“Hmm...yeah, in a minute,” I said.

Angela sat down on Rachel’s couch, not saying anything.

“Anyway,” Rachel continued, “A.J. and I’ve been talking about Jason and what a cokehead he is. The other day I saw heym comin’ out of the gas station and ‘ee was lookin’ rough. He is so damn depressin’, you know? I mean...” She said, giggling a little.

“Um...why would you say that?” Angela asked suddenly.

“Say wut?” Rachel seemed a little shocked.

“Say that he’s a cokehead. Where’d you get that shit from?”

“It’s troow!” Rachel said, looking to me for support.

“Oh yeah,” I said, “he’s a cokehead. Trust me. That kid’s hooked on some shit.”

“Uh...I’m pretty sure he’s not,” Angela said, sounding annoyed.

“No, he is,” I said. Who would know better than me? I’m his best

friend. His only friend.

An hour later Angela got up to leave, looking angry.

“Where ya goin’? We were just about to play some cards,” I said.

“I’ve gotta get back to it,” she said. “See ya.”

I watched her leave, feeling annoyed. I think she’s bipolar or something.

This morning I woke up and went into the bathroom to take a piss. Then I went into the kitchen to get some water and—

“Sup dude?”

He was on my couch watching my DVD’s.

“Uh...” I was temporarily lost for words. What in the hell was he still doing at my house?

“What are you doing here?” I said.

“Well, good morning to you too,” he answered, affronted.

“No, seriously, what are you doing here?”

He looked at me with wide eyes for a moment, then looked away, snorting indignantly. He too seemed at a loss for words.

“Wow,” he said finally. “Wow. So it’s like that? I mean, I can’t believe you’re acting like this. A friend can’t sleep over at his friend’s house? Goddamn. Damn, A.J., I thought we were tighter than this.”

Where does this guy get off thinking we’re friends?

I walked back over to the kitchen to get some water. “Do you want me to make you some breakfast?” he asked.

“No,” I said through gritted teeth.

“I mean, wasn’t she acting weird?” I asked Rachel over lunch this afternoon. I had invited her and Jason to eat with me at a bar-be-cue restaurant down the street from my apartment.

“Oh yeah. I mean, I don’t wanna be mean,” she said tentatively, “but she was bein’ uh bitch last night.”

I looked at Jason. “I mean, I know you don’t know Angela that well, but if you did you would understand what we’re talking about. I mean, she’s bipolar, so it’s expected, but it doesn’t make it any less unpleasant.”

“I down’t know why you hang out with her,” Rachel said to me, folding her arms.

“Well, someone’s got to, I mean, I feel sorry for her, you know? Bipolar with no friends...I just wanna help her out.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Rachel replied thoughtfully, “I feel bad for ‘er too. Yur such a good person, but I cuin’t hang out with her all the time.”

I took a sip of my water. I looked over at Jason.

“What are you smiling about?” I asked.

“Nothin’,” he said.

“You know what we’re talking about, don’t you?” I gathered, starting to laugh. Jason knew Angela too, and you didn’t have to know her very well to understand her personality. Angela could be a bipolar bitch and Jason had obviously already been clued into this.

“Look, I gotta go,” Jason said suddenly, dropping some money on the table.

“Where you goin’?” I asked. (“Awww!” said Rachel.)

“Work,” he said.

“...Thought you were off today?”

“They called me in—welp, see ya later,” he said over his shoulder in a cheerful tone—an awfully odd tone for a depressed cokehead that just got called into work.

We watched him walk out the door, then looked at each other.

“Gotta feed that drug habit,” I said.

Rachel laughed loudly, and couldn’t stop for a moment. Some people turned their heads in our direction.

She started getting on my nerves, so I paid our bill and told her I had to go. I walked down the street toward the video game store.

Jason had been acting weird. Wonder what was up with him.

Where could he be going? It wasn’t work, that’s for sure—

“Sup dude?”

I closed my eyes, trying to calm myself.

“Hullo,” I said dully.

“Oh my god, dude, I just had the craziest shit happen to me! I was hangin’ out with this chick, and, she wanted to suck my dick—in the middle of the restaurant! I was like ‘No way!’

“So, she got mad at me. Whore.” He snorted derisively.

“That’s great—”

“And then, she starts pulling at my pants and I’m like ‘Whoa, bitch’ and she tries to slap me, so of course I push her down and shit, so this guy comes up—big guy—and thinks he’s gonna get into it. He pulls her up, and—I mean, I’m not gonna go out like a little bitch you know?—so I was like ‘Dude, back off.’

“And he was like ‘Fuck you.’ So I jumped him and beat the shit outta him, man! It was so crazy. But you know, I mean, that’s how I handle things.”

“Don’t you have a job or something?” I knew the story was completely made up.

“Huh? Oh—yeah, I own a little recording studio. I make a lot of

money doing that. So anyway—”

“Look, I kind of just wanna—”

“What about you? Don’t you have a job?”

“Of course I have a job.”

“Well, what do you do?”

“Make money.” I paused then added, “Lots of money.”

Yeah, I make lots of money. People are always asking me for favors, or to borrow some of it. That’s what sucks about being rich. People try to use your money all the time, and then they don’t want to pay you back. Then you have to make them pay you back.

“So, whadda you think Jason was up to? He was acting really strange...don’t you think?” He was looking at me from the side in a way that annoyed me; I knew he just wanted to see my reaction.

“I dunno...how do you know about that...”

“Talked to Rachel. Me and her are good buddies. Do you think he’s gonna get drugs? I think he is. In fact, that’s probably exactly what he’s doing. Going to get coke, I bet.”

Well, he was more than likely right. I’m surprised I didn’t figure that one out a little quicker. I mean, what else would make a depressed cokehead cheerful? And the lie about work, I mean, it’s not like he’s all open about his drug use. I could’ve smacked myself in the head.

Just then I saw Jason.

Sitting in a coffee shop.

With Angela.

Now this brought me to a dead stop. What was she doing there? With him?

Was she a cokehead too?

They were laughing. High on coke, of course. I slipped inside the shop. They didn’t even notice me, high as they were. I sat at a booth near them, but didn’t announce my presence.

“...Are you serious? Haha. Oh my God! I cannot believe him! Wow, you know, he is really annoying. I really kind of hate him, Jason. I’m sorry, I try to be his friend, but...I just don’t like him. I hate him. He’s like this...”

“...disease.” Jason finished her statement darkly.

“Yes! And once you catch him, you can’t get rid of him! And it’s like, he has no idea. He’s so clueless about life. You give him the cold shoulder, and he only comes on stronger. Be nice to him and he thinks he’s got some kind of power over you. It’s disgusting how he uses people.”

“He’s so self important!” Jason said through gritted teeth. “He only talks about himself: how great he is, how much he has, and yet, he constantly takes everything that I have. He claims to have all this stuff,

all this money, but then he'll come to my house and say he's broke—"

"I know! He's always calling me, asking me 'out,' and he's always saying that 'he'll take care of it,' but I know that's a flat-out lie, 'cuz I've actually been out with him twice, and both times, when he paid, he announced the bill so loud I thought the cooks could hear it."

"And it's like you said, you just can't get rid of him. There's nothing you can say, there's nothing you can do. The other day I acted like I wasn't home, and he just kept on knocking. Knocking and knocking until I thought I might go crazy. And you know what? I let him in just so the knocking would stop."

"And the lies, man! Is there anything true that comes out of his mouth? I think he really thinks that what he's saying is the truth though, I really do. I think he believes it."

"He needs to be shot." Jason laughed at Angela's statement. Angela did too. "...Haha, I'm just kidding, but seriously, I do wish he would disappear or something. I mean, who would miss him? I really can't think of anyone...."

"Me neither. I mean, do you think he has even one friend? One person that actually likes him? One person that would, you know, be there for him?"

Angela smiled ruefully. "No, Jason, I don't. The man is despicable. Everyone I know despises him. Oh, well, except Rachel. I guess she likes him."

"Yeah, but she's in the same boat as he is...."

"I mean, how can he be so clueless? How can he not know that everyone hates him, everything about him? How can he go through life, doing the things he does? How can vermin like him be allowed to live?"

Wow. I just sat stunned.

It was like they were speaking to me. It was as if they were speaking through me. I felt exactly the same about that asshole. He never leaves. He takes everything you have. He talks about himself non-stop and all of it is a lie.

I almost laughed out loud.

"Hey guys," I said, smiling.

They looked to see who was calling, not fully aware that someone was talking to them.

Angela spotted me and a look of surprise flashed across her face.

"Sup," she said.

Jason turned around, and the same look showed for an instant on his own face. "Oh hey," he said.

"Well, well," I said, walking up to their table, "thought you had to work?"

"Uh...."

"It's ok, man. I know what's going on."

"Really?" He didn't seem convinced. God, he has no idea how obvious it is!

"Oh yeah," I said, looking out the window, squinting at nothing across the street as if I were distracted. "But—I know how worried you are about keeping your 'secret' under wraps"—I winked at Angela—"So I'll keep your—secret—safe. In fact, maybe I can even help you out with it if you're ever in a bind."

Jason looked confused. I chuckled inwardly. He can't believe I know about his drug problem.

"You too, Ange—just call me anytime, sweetie.

"Oh, and by the way: I heard everything you said."

They just stared.

"Look, man—" Jason began.

"Hey, don't worry, I'm not mad at all. Please! Like I care! Actually, I totally agree with you. I'm just saying I'm glad I'm not the only one."

Both their eyes were wide. They had no idea I felt the same way? I must be quite the enigma to these poor people.

"Look, I gotta get outta here, I got a busy day, but call me later or something and we'll chill."

I walked out of the shop. The two sat in silence, looking at each other.

"So what's up with them?" the disgusting guy asked.

I looked at him. God, I felt sorry for the bastard. Thinks he has friends. Wonder what it must feel like to be constantly vying for attention, friendship and status. I almost feel bad for hating him.

"Oh, you know them; they're just high on coke and all that."

"Well, they didn't seem too happy to see you."

I smiled sardonically to myself. You try to be nice to this guy and it just bites you in the ass. "You don't even know what I could say to you right now, dude."

He flashed me a look of false surprise, quite out of character for him, I thought. "Oh, sure. Look, man—not my fault if they don't like you. They like me, though. We hang out a lot. But hey, they aren't that cool. I enjoy your company. But they sure do make me laugh a lot."

God I hate this guy.

I really hate this guy. Keep cool. Just keep cool.

But now my cool is slipping by the second. I really hate this guy.

"When do ya'll ever hang out?"

He's looking at me, sensing he has gained the upper hand. "Every moment I get that they aren't being bothered by you."

This is giving me quite a chuckle. If only this guy knew. He is the most hated guy in the whole city. All my friends hate him.

“So, you wanna know what they really think of you?”

“I do know,” he says.

“I’ll tell you, man, what they really think of you.

“They laugh at you. They laugh at the lies you tell. They laugh at how you see yourself. They cringe at your approach, or just try to block you out.”

“They hate you. They despise you. Angela actually used the word ‘despicable’ to describe you. They think you are a disease, a sickness that they can’t get rid of. They marvel at your cluelessness.”

I am inexplicably angry, and he seems to be unaffected. This is only pissing me off more.

“Do you hear me? They talk about how CLUELESS—how SELF-ABSORBED—how senselessly INFLATED you are, how you take EVERYTHING that anyone has!

“THEY THINK YOU’RE A LOSER! A FUCKING LOSER! THEY SAID—”

God, I’m yelling at the top of my lungs. People are staring. I have to calm myself. I’m taking deep breaths.

“They hate the fact that you exist. They said someone needs to kill you,” I hiss—so full of anger—“and that if you did die, no one would miss you.”

He’s silent. I stop walking—I’ve only just realized that I was. I turn away from him, to look at myself in a shop window, but all I see is his reflection looking back at me, smiling slightly.

“And what do you think?”

“I totally agree.”

He says nothing, and we stand frozen, me staring into the window at his reflection, and him back at mine.

“Jason is fucking Angela.”

He said this quietly, insidiously.

“What?”

“You heard me. Jason is fucking Angela. Your precious little ‘Angie Boo.’ That sick obsession you have with her? It’s just that. An obsession. Pointless and one-sided. Oh, but—you look like you didn’t know.”

Is it that obvious? It can’t be...how can something be obvious if it isn’t even in existence?—

“Oh, what a surprise! A.J. is clueless about something! HA! Who do you really think they were talking about, A.J., hmm? Since I seem so much more informed than you; makes you wonder....”

As I’m watching his reflection it peers off to the side, squinting, apparently trying to see something far off in the distance.

“They were right,” he’s saying, “someone does need to kill you. God, you’re a loser.”

All the sudden I’m whirling around and running for my apartment. He’s crazy...he’s a lunatic.

They’re right. Someone does need to kill him. And they’re right: who would miss this bastard? Does he have any real friends? NO!

“Where you runnin’ to?” He’s breathless, matching me stride for stride.

I can’t speak; I can barely breathe. The air is closing in around me—the air tainted with his breath and sweat—with his very existence—Sharing air with him is becoming physically impossible—my breathing is shallow, hollow, laborious—

“Just saying, they don’t seem to like you—never—wanna hang-out, do they? I mean—I’m the only—guy—you ever really—see—I don’t even like—you that much, man—”

Shut up shut up shut up shut up SHUT UP!!!

Running up the stairs to my apartment—gun’s under the mattress—gotta load it—only take a minute—his blood gushing—see him fall in surprise—looks at the blood, looks at me—eyes wide, so wide—falls—falls—eyes wide—so wide—in shock—finally getting a fucking clue—too fucking late—

Opening the door, running to the room—hear my breathing and my anger, nothing else—see his lifeless body on the floor—want it to be real—just want it to be real—just want it to be over—

Now I whip around, the gun is pointed at his head.

“Whoa, man, hey—”

“SHUT UP! Just shut up!” voice so high—“I hate you! Hate you! You disgust me! I hate being around you, you worthless fuck! God! I would rather be with ANYONE but you!

“I hate you! Do you understand how worthless you are? Do you understand how much everyone FUCKING HATES YOU? DO YOU?”

I look at him now, and I’m crying with anger. I’m going to kill him. And he is staring back at me, just as angry, his tear-stained face identical to mine.

I punch—and punch—and hit—and hit—my hands are bloody—hit—and hit—just keep on hitting—his face is broken into a thousand pieces—wish it would make him go away—won’t go away—have to do it—point the gun—have to do it—so disgusting—pull the trigger—so-disgusted—with—that—face—in the mirror—so dis—