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As Marbles Go

It was a few days before the big game when Henry Aaron Lopez lost all his marbles, about halfway through his morning class, Introductory Zoology. They hit the floor together, as one big cymbal smash, and then scrambled in every conceivable direction. He had suspected something horrific was going to happen. College was affecting him, bending his spirit, in much the same ways that high school had. No, it was not different, and nearing the end of what was a grueling first semester, after listening to one professor after another go on and on about insects and what so and so was *really* saying and how to train a dog to salivate and whatever, the rubber band finally snapped. It was time itself that finally did him in. Time got slower, minutes lasting much, much longer than Henry Aaron knew they should. And then, the clock actually stopped for him altogether, and he felt as if he would be forced to sit still throughout eternity and learn about amoebas—single-celled organisms that floated, like him, helplessly through time and space.

Henry Aaron began to doubt he would ever see the end of the class, and even if he did, there were only more and more classes waiting for him. The truth was he could spend the rest of his life waiting for hours and days and years to end, and he probably would. He would spend his life waiting for it to begin. That realization created a tiny explosion inside his head, unlocking it, and his marbles spilled out onto the floor. Some of them bounced over to where all those cute girls in wool sweaters sat. They had never noticed Henry Aaron, as he ogled them from the back row, and they still did not, snobs to the end. Even as his mind machinery lay exposed at their feet, all they could manage was to be disgusted that a boy so inferior to them had had such a horrific accident so near them. *What is his problem anyway?* A few marbles kept dribbling and spinning and then hopped down the long trail of stairs, for what seemed like forever and eventually rolled right in between the professor's polished shoes, amid gasps from the class. The professor glared at Henry Aaron above his eye glasses and then aggressively kicked the marble, a small green one, off his stage. The entire class broke into laughter, embarrassing what was left of Henry Aaron

as he gathered his books and abruptly headed for the exit, slipping on several marbles on his way out, each fall invoking more laughter.

Two campus security guards stood in a knee-deep snow drift, bracketing the prone body of a young girl. She was face-down, arms and legs askew, each one pointing in a different direction. She appeared to be the victim of a sniper.

"Please, Miss. We do not want to have to forcibly lift you."

"What is the problem, Miss?"

Ajeeba finally answered them, but since her face was embedded in the snow, it was muffled and neither officer understood.

"What?" the older officer asked, impatiently.

Ajeeba theatrically rolled onto her side and both officers unintentionally recoiled at her ethnicity.

"I am just worried about the big game," she told them in a thick Middle-Eastern accent. "Do you think we are going to win?"

An hour before, Ajeeba had been fine, on her way to molecular biology, on her way to medical school, on her way to everything her family wanted her to accomplish. It was that damn marble. It was off to the side, seated in a groove of the sidewalk. She could have easily missed it. She raised it to her face and looked deeply into its polished purple surface. In the marble's reflection, Ajeeba could not avoid seeing herself, how different she was from everyone else. She saw herself as *they* saw her, as a pariah. Her stark loneliness was reflected back at her, and it injured her. She could see her family far away, fourteen hours by plane, laughing because there were so many of them in one small house. She saw another Christmas she would spend without them...without anyone. The marble showed her all the lonely places in America: libraries and single-occupancy rooms, coffee shops and laboratories during football games. With a whimper, Ajeeba had flopped lifelessly into the snow as if shot.

From his dorm room, Henry Aaron watched Ajeeba collapse. It indeed appeared as if someone had shot her. But when she did not move for a great while, he became bored again and returned to his project. He had his own problems. Without any marbles, there was little to stop Henry Aaron anymore, and he decided to begin focusing his energy on making his roommate Rob become afraid for his safety and move out. Rob was active in student government and often brought like-minded students into the room to discuss things like current events and their futures. Henry Aaron simply could not take *those people* anymore. He took a step back and surveyed his work, black paint dripping from the ceiling.

He had used almost all of it, the paint he had bought earlier in the afternoon, the hardware store his obvious first stop after losing all his marbles in Getner Hall. He had slopped it around, everything drowned beneath a deep ebony semi-gloss—the television, the comforters, even Rob’s expensive polo shirts were now ruined. Henry Aaron collapsed into a bean bag chair, freshly painted black. He was exhausted but pleased with himself. The greedy absorption of light by the dark paint made the room surreal to him, as if he were an astronaut floating in outer space, as if he were inside a black-hole vacuum from which there was no escape. The fumes began affecting him. He breathed them in deeply, satisfied yet still a little hungry for revolution. He made a mental note to buy more paint.

Luther looked like a ghost. It was near midnight, the day before the big game, and he was out jogging, running circles around the baseball field, breathing hard, puffs of frozen-breath exhaust trailing from his nose and mouth as if he were a steam train chugging along. He was almost done, breaking into what he called his *cool down*, feeling better when exhausted, when all he could think was *I need oxygen*. Then it happened. The giant sea of marbles had been steadily gaining on him, but he could not hear them approaching because he was listening to AC/DC on his Walkman, and he had the volume all the way up. The moment he decelerated, they caught him, ambushing him from behind, washing over him, blurring his vision and taking control of his powerful legs. He immediately broke with his steady rhythm and then began sprinting like a stalker across the oval, seemingly possessed. He hurtled the park benches that he found in his way, one after the other, as if he had run hurdles before, which he had not, gaining momentum with each one. As he cleared the last of them, the heel of his shoe gently scraping the top of it, he almost collided with a dark, shadowy figure. Then Luther instinctively careened towards the interstate like a hub cap that had gone flying off its car. In his last moment of clarity, he wondered what that guy had been doing lurking in the darkness and why all the benches had been painted black.

Henry Aaron watched the lunatic in the ROTC sweatsuit disappear in the distance, giving him a hateful expression and a middle finger. Henry Aaron had had to hurl himself to the ground to avoid being run over and had spilled the last of the black paint all over himself. He sat on the icy ground looking like a cartoon character, black paint dripping off his head, rolling off his cheek, splattered as blood on the white landscape. “Holy shit,” he said.

In the strong moonlight, Henry Aaron’s eyes glinted like they were on fire—star-

tlingly attractive, glowing black marbles. But his eyes were always that striking, even in broad daylight. In fact, if a cute girl in a wool sweater had ever really looked into his eyes,

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she would have fallen deeply in love. But they never did. Nobody ever looked into Henry Aaron’s eyes.

He grimaced, remembering how miserable he was. He glared at the cold, stone statue of the seed sower, brightly lit, perched majestically at the main stadium entrance, waiting for the crowds, the big-game crowds that everyone always talked about. All eighty thousand of them would walk past that statue the following day. “Hey!” he called to it from across the oval and then gathered what was left of his paint and walked towards it.

Luther, still running at a good pace, merged onto the interstate, heading south, although he was oblivious to such details. He was and had been thinking about a girl, devastated.

“What?” he had asked her, spinning and falling into a chair, unintentionally wrapping the phone cord around his neck.

“Luther, don’t make this hard on me. I still care about you. But I love Rod, now.”

“What?”

“He’s on the football team. He’s not a starter, but he is really good. He—”

“What?”

“Don’t be a jackass, Luther. Why do you want to make me hurt like this? Why do you want to make me feel like I’m a bad person? Do you hate me?”

“What?”

“If you are going to be sarcastic, that is it.” And she hung up.

“What?”

That phone call had turned Luther into a ghost. After that, each day became worse than the one before. Luther skipped a few classes, more and more, and then stopped going to classes altogether, thinking how odd it was that *everything* could go to hell so quickly. He marveled at how fragile his life really was and then stopped returning his friends’ calls, the ones that were worried about him, anyway. He began drinking and thought that really helped. The trajectory continued for a month, until the Koreans that owned the local liquor store knew him by name and applauded each time he appeared, until he gained so

much weight his clothes would not fit, until gradually his emotions turned from despair to self-loathing. And then, at what he would call his *rock bottom*, he started jogging again. *Baby steps*, he told himself, and things, bit-by-bit, were getting better, back to normal. He would have been fine too, if not for those damn marbles. They had gashed open the wound again. Luther passed a sign saying Dallas was 200 miles away, but he did not see it for the raging, marble-fueled fire that continued to burn inside him.

The University of Oklahoma campus became quiet, except for the howling winter winds, which whipped discarded party flyers into tornado-like orbits, and the scurrying footsteps of a mad man, high on paint fumes. The big game was a noon kick-off, and most everyone had tried to go to bed early. The next day would be so important that most could not even fathom how important it would be. Everyone needed rest. The Sooners were favorites and expected to win big on their way to the National Championship. The entire campus snuggled in against the cold, dreaming of bombs and quarterback sacks and after-parties that would last until the next morning. It was a time of great anticipation. And it was a home game. Nothing could go wrong.

Ajeeba watched the sunrise, hugging herself against the bitter cold in the Subaru she had bought but never seemed to drive anywhere, looking through a small circle she had excavated in the thick ice, so thick the car looked as much like a submarine as a vehicle. Once again, she turned the key and pumped the gas pedal, praying, her eyes shut tight. The engine popped and then exploded into its weak, four-cylinder grind, frost and smoke belching out all around it. Ajeeba took a good look in the back seat, making sure she had not forgotten anything. She had packed it all. She was leaving forever. As the car warmed, she hugged herself again, pawing at the ends of her knit cap until it covered her gigantic ears.

She was just about out of town when a young, Spanish-looking kid, dressed all in black, ran in front of her car and jumped onto the hood to avoid being run over. Ajeeba braked hard, locking up the tires, and the pair spun several circles together. He looked dangerous as their eyes met through the widening, defrosting circle in the windshield, black grease smeared all over his face. Ajeeba screamed. After the Subaru came to a stop, the kid jumped down and continued running as campus security closed in from all directions. When they finally had him cornered, he pulled out two cans of spray paint from a pack and began discharging them, too far away to get any paint on them. Still, the officers jumped back, but then, as one, surged forward and tackled him, his entire person disappearing under a pile of bulky security. This was a very odd image for Ajeeba to witness,

and it stuck with her as she merged onto the interstate.

“And I’m the terrorist?” she asked herself out loud, laughing. The boy’s expression had put her in a pleasant mood, or maybe it had been his eyes.

Luther was staggering more and more, sometimes even staggering over the line and onto the interstate. He was more than ready to collapse and wondered why his legs continued to walk forward. *Gosh, it’s cold*. He thought he might be dying and hardly bothered with putting his thumb out anymore. Nobody seemed interested. But then a small car that looked almost like a submarine pulled off the interstate just in front of him, slipping a little and then coming to a stop. A skinny girl with really, really dark skin exited the car and ran up to him as if she were very frightened of something. She took her cap off when she got close, and two gigantic ears flopped into the bitter cold, morning air. Luther thought her skin color was magnificent. He had never seen a girl that color brown before, that beautiful. Luther started thinking about hot chocolate.

“Where are you going?”

“Where am I now?”

The girl reached out and touched his arm, and the heat must have shocked his system because his legs finally stopped working. Luther spun and fell onto the road like he was dropped from the sky. The girl shrieked and followed him onto the ground, crouching next to him.

“I am going to take you to the emergency room.”

“Will they have hot chocolate there?”

“Sure they will. Will you help me get you up?”

Luther did not help. Ajeeba put her arms under his shoulders, trying hard but not making any progress, her face moving exceedingly close to his. He closed his eyes and put his nose into the long, flowing dark hair that seemed to be everywhere, breathing deeply. Her hair smelled like coconut shampoo. She must have understood what he was doing because she stopped trying to lift him, tilting her head so that their heads nestled together more comfortably. They stayed like that for several minutes, until he finally noticed that she was crying.

Just before game time, the capacity crowd looked toward the darkening clouds. It was not supposed to rain. At the exact moment the kicker raised his hand, indicating he was about to start the game, a thunder clap erupted, and a dense storm of brightly-colored marbles began to shower upon the stadium, as if a rainbow had melted and was dripping from the sky. The spectators lifted seat cushions and programs above their heads but did

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not leave their seats. The PA announcer did not even mention it, nor did the network crew or the radio play-by-play man. The mascots for both teams struck comic poses in defiance of the hard rain of marbles. Cheerleaders stood on top of other cheerleaders and remained there, their arms pointing skyward, even while being pummeled about the face, some suffering nose bleeds, one even losing a tooth. The football coach stood his ground too, calmly using his playbook to protect his head, ordering his players not to leave the field. This was the big game and, *damn it*, they were going to play, marbles or no marbles.

Inside the Subaru, Luther and Ajeeba watched the downpour, marbles crashing off the hood and windshield, denting the metal with tiny divots, cracking the glass in a few spots. “Fucking marbles!” they screamed.

The officers escorting Henry Aaron fled when the marbles appeared, abandoning him on the steps to the administration building, his hands still cuffed behind his back. He collapsed to his knees as the marbles found him, but then quickly rebounded to his feet. He ran through the storm like some bizarre, bound chicken, crossing the entire campus, heading straight for the stadium, smiling for the first time in years.