

## My Dear Acquaintance

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Bernice was reluctant to negotiate with me. Her giant ape of a sidekick held the monstrous wooden structure barricaded shut with no signs of letting up. The gate divided me and my best friend. I tried every trick in the book I could conjure up at the time, even offered to pay them with my lunch money. But nothing could seem to stop their reign of terror. I could hear Zach screaming for dear life on the opposite end of what *seemed to be* a colossal barrier preventing me from entering Bernice's yard and saving my best friend's life. He was trapped by the two girls who obsessively dreamt of us. Home-made posters of us plastered their walls, kissed with that repulsive red lipstick you can buy at the corner store for under a dollar. They collected our stray hairs off of our sweaters at school and probably sniffed them at night for all I knew. Even at school, we'd be minding our own business, and they would constantly pinch and tickle our underarms while we backed away cringing with repulsion. They were bound to kidnap one of us eventually. The point is they were bat shit crazy.

Zach was a goner. I could see little through the crevices of the fence, but I knew he didn't have much time left. I could see the girls caressing him, and pretending to kiss him, as he was tied up with a jumprope on a green plastic chair at the far end of the yard. The smirk on Bernice's face grew larger as time progressed. She looked over at my helpless, disgusted scowl through the little hole in the fence and winked boastfully as if she'd already won. I knew I had to do something soon. I couldn't let him cross over into the other realm yet. The realm of "cooties," the realm with barbie dolls and easy-bake ovens, the realm that had *girls* in it. Everybody knew that was the worst thing that could possibly happen to you. He wasn't ready for that yet. More importantly, I wasn't ready for that yet.

The girls' mother called them into the kitchen, without spotting the atrocity that was happening right in her own backyard. Sprinting over from my only vantage point, I grasped the rusty handle of the gate and pulled with all my might. I pulled in remembrance of all the castles Zach and I had built out of sheets, protecting us from the evil on the outside for a short time. I pulled for all the times we'd captured tiny insects and magnified them until the sun sizzled them into a fiery death on the soon-to-be blood stained pavement. I pulled as each haunting thought passed through my mind, as

each memory tore through my head. And as each second sped by, my anxiety thickened under my skin. I pulled as if I'd never see my best friend again.

Not even the slightest budge. The door was sealed shut with a few planks through the backside of the handle. Not even an 8<sup>th</sup> grader could manage to get through this prison of 2 by 4's. I ran to the far side of the fence where Zach was being held captive. As I rounded the house, I heard the faint voice of the mother through the slightly cracked kitchen window saying something about lunch being made. This bought me some time, but not much, judging by the size of Bernice's elephant accomplice. I knew that if I had any chance of salvaging what was left of Zach's dignity, I had to act quickly and I couldn't do it alone. I knew I had to round up the troops and I knew I had to do it fast. I finally reached the other end of the endless fence where Zach sat, entwined on the other side, in plastic and paralyzed.

"I'll be back for you," I whispered through the fissure in the fence, "I promise." And then I sprinted off into the distance to call in the cavalry.

I ran next door to Jonathan's, or "J-bo's," house; a sixth grader's humble abode. He was closest thing I had in range with a phone line. He didn't care for me much, or any other fourth graders for that matter, like the vast majority of sixth graders. I knew this was going to be difficult, but luckily I had an in with him. I had let him borrow one of my Nintendo controllers less than a week ago, not to mention he was one of Zach's older brother's closest cronies, so he agreed to sit down and talk with me. Out of breath, I poured out my lungs about the savagery taking place right next door. He chuckled in my face like I was naïve or something.

"You guys don't like girls yet, huh? Well let me tell you a little bit about them..." He then proceeded to go on this whole *schpiel*, while I looked anxiously out the window. My eyes wandered down into the kitchen of the demon's house as they slobbered down their meals at a preposterous rate. I didn't have time to hear this idiot babble on about something I knew *wasn't* true. I told him I needed to use his phone and he looked at me perplexed. "You don't like em' now, but wait a couple of years... and get back to me" I didn't have the patience nor the stature to argue with this kid. He was a solid four or five inches taller and had about 20 or 30 pounds on me. I didn't waste my time which was becoming more and more scarce by the second. I bolted out the door mid-sentence to find someone, somewhere who would actually help me save my best friend. The clock was ticking on my comrade's innocence.

As I scrambled out the front door, missing a stair and nearly castrating myself on the wooden banister attached to the railing, my body hit the pavement hard. Not only that, J-bo's dad

had just finished trimming the hedges, so thorns and pine needles that lay scattered on the ground pierced through the left side of my body. I lay helpless, and a bit disoriented. My vision was blurry and I had that feeling of paralysis, the one you feel every time you've beaten yourself up pretty badly. Shortly after regaining my composure, I stood up, brushing the excess dirt and pine needles off my chest. I plucked the ones that stuck through my soot-covered jeans, as the pine wounds bled in tiny spots. By the time I had finished this procedure, I turned to see Zach's older brother, Reggie, sashaying towards me with his new cell phone to his ear.

"Where's my brother?" He grumbled at me as he yelled back to his mother's blaring squeak on the other line. "Mom wants him home for dinner." I begged him to put down the phone so I could relay the horrifying news.

"He's been taken," I whimpered.

"By who? I'll rough em' up so bad they won't know what hit 'em!" Reggie shouted at me as if I'd done something wrong.

"The girls next door," I said frantically, "We need to do something, we gotta get him back."

At

first he looked puzzled, with a similar look that J-bo had given me less than ten minutes before.

"Come on!" I shouted with despair.

"These girls? Do they like you or something?" Reggie said.

"Of course they do! They took him hostage!" I screamed, "We're running out of time!"

"Well, that's what little girls your age do, buddy."

"Are you kidding me... What is wrong with you! They're holding him hostage! He's in their backyard! Hello? Are you nuts? Is everyone crazy? He's *tied up*. With jump-rope. In their backyard. Alone."

"That is a little weird..." Reggie said.

"Thank you!" I sighed with relief, "I have a plan, but we're going to need some back-up."

After finally convincing Reggie that something wasn't right, we both knew we had to do something quickly and we took off. We decided to split up. Each of us covered one side of a street that *seemed to* stretch across the entire state of Pennsylvania to enlist our soldiers. Banging on doors, knocking on windows, ringing door bells, we were flying from house to house. We recruited a few of the regulars. Jimmy, Joey, and Johnny were the first because they lived the closest and could give us the largest amount of combined "boypower" (manpower for boys) in one household. Along with the "J's," came the redheaded twins, Ricky and Ryan, who were the fastest runners this side of

the Susquehanna. Most of the regulars came out and supported the cause, except for one. A boy named Cameron, who barely ever came out of his house except to go to school. But I knew we needed every boy we could get for this plan to work.

It was beginning to get dark. I had no idea whether or not Zach was still alive. Bernice, along with the rest of *them*, was ruthless. The smell of lip gloss and loss started to linger through the evening air. I knew time was running out. At the very end of the street, we all scurried along up to the oldest and most run down house we could've ever imagined, where the loner resided. Cracks cascaded up and down the sides of the concrete asylum which crept up to an unstable, lop-sided, pointed roof. Spiders and other vile creatures crept in and out of the cracks with each step on the pathway's loose stones that led up of to the door. The inside of the house was deprived of light. It looked as if the family had never owned a single lamp, or even a light bulb for that matter. What was lit was illuminated by the light of candles that seemed as old as the house. Basically looked like something straight out of Frankenstein.

Cameron, the boy who lived in this house, consistently played with string. He enjoyed yo-yos, and other little thready things. He seemed to have an obsession with knots, and tying them. From what we had gathered through observation at school, he was an odd boy who never said too much. We all agreed that his weirdness and creepiness was parallel to that of his house. Although, his binding abilities were the final piece to the puzzle in my head.

All of us boys hardly ever spoke with Cameron before this fateful day. On the occasion that we did, it was mostly just us ridiculing him for his odd personality and lifestyle. I don't exclude myself from that generalization. He would run home crying to his parents because we'd force him to kill a bug or whatever other sadistic idea popped into our immature, little thought processes. I don't blame him for hiding in seclusion for the majority of our childhood. We did some horrid things. But when worse came to worse, we were all there for Cameron when he really needed us. We were all there for each other. Always.

When Cameron lost his dog, Scout, we all joined in on the search party. We made posters and signs, and scoured the neighborhood for this mutt for days on end. Although we acted like we didn't care about Cameron, and that we were forced to help by our parents, we secretly cared. We cared a lot. Despite the fact that he was strange, he was one of us. That's the thing. We all had each other no matter what. The unspoken pact of "the street."

As we approached Cameron's house, we noticed there were no cars in the cobblestone driveway that accompanied the dark chamber. Hesitant to touch the massive medieval fortress door, one of us finally mustered up the courage to knock. We waited for a minute, then another, and then another. There was no answer and the sun had almost completely slipped away.

“Let's just go,” Johnny said. “It's getting late. We can do it without him.” We all had to be home at 8:30 sharp, and judging by the light we had less than an hour left to save our brother. Half of us had already missed dinner, so our parents were probably already worrying. We had to move on without him.

We ran back toward the lair of Bernice and her sidekick from Cameron's house. I looked back at the demon shelter and noticed, out of the periphery of my eye, a small figure in the second floor window that grew smaller as we moved further down the street. The figure stared as we sprinted away, and then dissipated into the distance. It may have been Cameron, or my mind playing tricks on me, but either way I didn't have time to go back and look.

We neared the fence where Zach was enslaved, but were stopped in our tracks. We couldn't move. We watched from the bushes with utter hopelessness and paralysis, as cars rolled up to Bernice's house. From each car stepped another of the enemy, each more disgusting than the last. They were multiplying by the dozens, all carrying duffle bags and pillows.

“What is this? Some kind of sacrificial ritual or some crazy shit?” one of the boys in the back muttered. “Are they gonna *eat* him?” cried the youngest of the “J's.” I heard echoed whispers from the back of the bushes of our stake-out: “Holy shit, *holy shit, holy shit.*”

This was the fight. The armageddon. The be all and end all of our little prepubescent lives. We all knew what we had to do.

“If we're gonna lose one of us, all of us are going,” I said, standing by my vow to save my best friend.

“I don't know man, there's a lot of them,” one of the boys said.

“I can't believe you guys,” I muttered. “Our best friend is incarcerated, lying out like a piece of meat for them, and all you can do is stand by and watch? He's always been there for us.” I stepped out into the center of the circular tribe and pointed to Johnny. “Remember that time you got caught in the fence between my backyard and the neighbor's with the two giant bullshits of dogs? Who was there Johnny? Zach was.” I continued to persuade as I did a full half circle and

turned to Ricky. “Ricky, remember when you fell off the roof of old man Goldstein's garage and hurt your ankle? What happened then?”

“Zach pulled me through the alley in between the garages so Goldstein couldn't bash me with his cane...” He shamefully proclaimed.

“Exactly. The point is he's been there for all of us at some point or another and we owe him this.”

The boys stood silently. They had never heard me speak so passionately about something. I normally stood passive, but I wasn't being robbed of my best friend before I hit twelve. I wouldn't be able to make it through my adolescent years without him. At last, they agreed and we separated. I sent a few of my special ops unit to locate Zach and report back on his whereabouts, health, etc. Johnny, along with a few other boys and I, crept up to the side of the house. We peered through the side window that was slightly cracked.

Little chuckles and giggles pierced our ears, pink exploded our eyeballs, our stomachs grew nauseated with the sight of teddy bears flying through the air. We weren't from the same planet as these things. The stench of cheap perfume and cleanliness overwhelmed our nostrils. They were so disgusting. There were thousands of them, crowding the tiny room, plotting to destroy Zach.

“Okay girls, let's get ready,” Bernice said as they slopped the lipstick that covered the posters in their rooms all over their piggy lips. They dabbed themselves with a little more perfume and powdered their mole covered distorted faces to make themselves look more like members of the human race. It was time to take action.

I called my boys over to me, all of us sweating from running around in a panic and trying to get everything set up. Ricky and Ryan, the two fastest runners this side of the Susquehanna, we're handed two cartons of eggs we had quickly stolen from Zach and Reggie's house earlier. Johnny, Jimmy, Joey and Reggie all lined up along the backside of the fence near the lowest point. We heard the back door crack, and stopped. They piled out like a swarm of bees from a hive into the backyard and descended upon Zach's body. Bernice, the queen bee, stood confident with her capture, designed to feed the whole nest. I told Ricky and Ryan to run around to the front of Bernice's lair with the eggs and start pelting the windows and yelling at the top of their lungs to create a distraction. As they began to bombard the front of the house, the mother called the girls in.

“Ahhh... A retaliation effort,” Bernice snickered from inside the fence as she fled into her house. Now was our chance.

The “J’s” and Reggie lined up and formed a human pyramid near the lowest point so I could climb up and hop the fence. There was one problem. The fence was four times the size of all of us and I could hardly reach a third of the way up. I brought a jumprope to grapple myself over, but none of us could tie a knot like Cameron could. We tried repeatedly lassoing the top of the picket fence, but the twists in the knot kept coming undone. I fell to the ground numerous times. Almost out of energy, I knew I only had a few tries left within me. I tried to make each one count, but each time I failed. As I kept trying, I heard a faint voice behind the fence resembling my comrade that I had once known. It seemed like I hadn’t heard Zach’s voice in days. “Hurry...” he cried.

The brief distraction of the machine gun eggs had only worked for a moment, and then half of the girls ran out the front door. The rest of us boys, saw Ricky and Ryan speed by, followed by half the swarm. We prayed for our brothers, fearing that we’d never see them again. Then suddenly the back door crashed open. It was Bernice. Her face was covered in egg and she looked *pissed*.

The rest of the

insects pushed through the door, re-entered the backyard and headed for the edge of the fence where Zach lay. We struggled atop each other, climbing for our dear friend’s life. We clawed at the other end of the fence. All hope seemed to be lost.

Out of nowhere, an egg flew and hit Bernice right on the side of the cheek. It was Cameron, standing tall and proud like the great savior, on the ridge near the fence. The beasts ran over to his side, scratching and screaming through the fence holes. Cameron ran over and grabbed the jumprope and quickly forged a knot that looked somewhat like a soft pretzel from the mall. He threw it over the top of two of the pickets on the fence and stepped on the human pyramid. He hoisted himself up quickly to the top of the fence and sat. I climbed the mountain of boys and grabbed his hand. I pulled myself up and we dropped to the other side of the fence, immediately regretting our decision.

The thousand-girl army charged at us, training bras flailing. We grabbed Zach from the chair and quickly ripped the cord that encased him. Zach, with the life almost entirely depleted from him, pulled himself up and said, “Just go man, just leave me. Save yourself,” just like the movie we had seen together last week.

“No, I’m not leaving you,” I said. The girls now enclosed us. Cameron and I grabbed Zach and tied the jumprope around our waists as if we were scaling a cliff. Cameron threw the line to the top of the picket fence again, and we started to climb. We climbed for our lives. I was on the bottom.

Just as we reached the summit, I lost my footing and the cord snapped. The weight from my body tore right through the cheap plastic. I fell to the ground and looked up. I saw my brothers at the top of the fence, watching me in fear. I nodded to them and told them to go on. I felt drops falling on my face from the top of the fence, maybe tears from my best friend's weakened eyes. You know that feeling of paralysis after you really screw up or hurt yourself that I was talking about before? That was an understatement to how I felt now. The girls surrounded me and swarmed.

*Lost in a sea of kisses...*

Weeks went by. Eventually they got to them too. The boys never really got together much after

that. Ricky and Ryan got sucked into the trap as well as did the oldest of the "J's." We saw each other from time to time, but not too often. Not as much as we'd all have liked. Months went by, and we slowly grew further apart, and the rest of the boys gave in. We all had girlfriends now, we had *more important* things to do. But despite all this, Zach and I still remained friends for awhile. Years went by, and slowly, even he faded away into his own life.

Today, we're both out of college. He's got a steady girl; I've got a steady girl. We're both looking for jobs and places to live, thinking about our lives and the future to come. We hardly speak. I guess that's what happens. Life gets in the way sometimes.