

# **#\$@%ing Read Me!**

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This is not exactly the beginning of the story. I'll give you that later.

There is no rule saying that stories have to start at the beginning, is there?

I mean, the Bible has done pretty well with "In the beginning..." But that always seemed a little too on the nose for my liking.

You know?

So let's start here...

We were in one of those doctors' offices -- the ones that are set up to be soothing. Piped in elevator music. Soft lighting. Plants. Weird fountain thing in the corner that just makes you want to pee. Constantly. Yes, it is supposed to be soothing.

But it never works.

I didn't even notice myself drumming on the armrest. Melissa did.

She grabbed my hand and gave me a dirty look. She was even stunning when she was angry.

"We've been sitting here forever," I whined. In a manly way, of course.

"Brandon, it hasn't been that long," she replied, reading her magazine.

"You didn't make me wait this long to get you into bed when we first started dating."

Now looking at me. "Are you calling me a whore?"

"Nooooo. Of course not."

I turned to the elderly gentleman sitting next to me -- who was seventy-five years old if he was a day -- and gave him the "a little bit" sign.

I started whistling but caught myself. I picked up the clipboard that was on the table in front of Melissa.

"Last time I filled out one of these, I couldn't find a spot to tell them about that pain in my ovaries," I whispered. "You know the one?"

Melissa took the clipboard out of my hand and put it back on the table.

"Dude, how old are these magazines?" I asked, as I scanned the available reading material.

"They aren't *that* old," she almost hissed.

"Wow! Check this out," I said excitedly. "Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger are showing us their Y2K shelter. Man, I hope those two crazy kids can make it work."

I crossed my fingers and smiled at her. She didn't even look up.

I glanced around the room. A thought struck, as they occasionally do.

"Hey, Melissa."

"Hey, what?"

"That elevator music... I think it's Mötley Crüe."

"What?," she asked.

"Mötley Crüe. The Crüe!"

She listened for a few moments.

"That's Brahms."

"Brahms? Did he play bass for The Crüe?"

"I'm going to need you to stop talking," she said forcefully, as she went back to her magazine.

"It's 'Dr. Feelgood.' They are playing 'Dr. Feelgood.'" Good choice, I suppose."

Melissa ignored me.

I started singing and, of course, not at all along with the music.

*"Rat-tailed Jimmy is a secondhand hood. He deals out in Hollywood."*

"Stop."

*"Got a '65 Chevy, primered flames. Traded for some powdered goods,"* I continued, holding an invisible mic. As one would.

"Stop it."

*"Jigsaw Jimmy, he's runnin' a gang. But I hear he's doin' OK."*

I held the invisible mic out to the elderly gentleman, who didn't miss a beat.

*"Got a cozy little job, sells the Mexican mob packages of candycaine."*

I was floored.

"That was awesome, Old Dude."

Melissa grabbed my mic hand and pulled it down. She glared at me.

"Did you see that?" I asked incredulously.

"Be-have!"

"I'm sorry. Hey, where do you think this doctor went to school?"

Old Dude went back to his Sudoku.

"I don't know," she replied. "Why do you want to

know?"

"I just don't think we should take the word of some dude who went to someplace like... Arizona State."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. No Sun Devils, I say! Their football team blows." I pronounced "blows" as if it had fourteen *o*'s.

"You want to pick a doctor based on the strength of the football team where they went to school?"

"You don't like?"

"You are driving me crazy."

A nurse arrived on the scene.

"Folks, the doctor will see you in a few moments," she said with a smile as she picked up the clipboard from the table. I resisted telling her about my past ovary troubles. I'm a bit sensitive about it.

"Can boyfriends go in too?" Melissa asked.

"Of course," the nurse replied and started to walk away. Then she turned around and added, "The Doctor went to John's Hopkins. But, his son goes to Ohio State, if that makes you feel any better."

"Hmm," I hmm'd, relatively satisfied.

I could see the color actually drain from Melissa's face as , once again, the reality of the situation hit her. She turned to me but I was already looking at her. I gave her a wink and then a smile.

A simple wink.

A simple smile.

And she couldn't help but smile back. I'm pretty adorable, really.

She knew what I'd been doing. While I do hate waiting -- and Arizona State -- this little show had been for her benefit. I would have done everything short of a striptease to keep her mind off of what was about to happen. I probably would have done a striptease too. And by "probably," I mean most likely. And by "most likely," I mean... I was already wearing the pasties. Kidding.

Probably.

I am a giant pain-in-the-ass goofball. But I am *her* giant pain-in-the-ass goofball, and she loves the crap out of me. Most of the time.

I leaned over and kissed her on the top of the head.

"I still think it's The Crüe."

She giggled in spite of herself and a little snort escaped.

The nurse returned. "Dr. Chase will see you now."

We were led down a dark hallway to the doctor's inner office. I allowed Melissa to enter first. We each took a seat in the empty room.

I took her hand. She managed a weak smile.

I leaned in. "I love you."

"I love you," she replied, her voice choked with emotion.

A side door opened and the doctor entered. He was in his fifties. Grey hair. Tall. Gave the impression of confidence and competence. He was wearing reading glasses and opening a file.

"Hello," he said quickly.

He placed the file on the desk and took a seat.

He began flipping through pages.

"So, I have the results right here," he said without looking up.

He seemed to be double- and triple-checking.

The water cooler gurgled in the corner of the office. Melissa jumped a little. I squeezed her hand.

A clock ticked loudly on the wall behind us.

The doctor finally lifted his head and looked at us over the top of his reading glasses.

"OK. This is the situation... it *is* cancer."

Her eyes were glossy. Her breath caught in her throat. She was no longer in the room.

I grabbed a notepad and pen off of the doctor's desk.

Dr. Chase explained the situation.

Melissa blinked, as if trying to focus on what he was saying. It didn't seem to be helping.

I wrote furiously. Words like "ductule," "lobule," "metastasize," and "mastectomy" filled the page. I glanced over to see if "mastectomy" had gotten through to Melissa.

"My office will call with follow-up information on the surgery. But, with your family history, we aren't going to waste any time," Dr. Chase said, mostly to me, as he closed the file. "And we can expect a fairly aggressive plan as far as treatment goes."

He stood up and put his hand on Melissa's shoulder before leaving the room. She didn't notice.

We sat. My mind raced. Melissa trembled.

That fucking clock ticked.

After a couple minutes of this, I took her by the hand

and helped her to her feet.

We walked slowly out of the office.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I'd never seen her look so... small.

She leaned against me in the elevator. She didn't say a word. Or blink.

We walked to the car. As I unlocked her door and opened it for her, she looked up at me. A tear started forming in her left eye. It rolled over the lashes and quickly down her cheek. Both eyes filled. Her lip quivered, just slightly.

I pulled her into the biggest, strongest hug that I could without fear of hurting her. The movement of her shoulders was the only real hint of her silent sobbing. She squeezed me back. Hard.

I'm not sure how long we stayed there. Though I am quite certain that we could have stayed there for months and I still would have never come up with the right things to say.

And I'm a writer.

I wanted to convey exactly to what degree I had her back. I wanted to let her know that I would be there for every single step along the way. I wanted to let her know that I loved her like nobody I had met before.

I wanted to do all that, but instead...

“Even though it is *my* turn, I suppose that I can let you pick the restaurant for lunch.”

She half-laughed. Well, a quarter, maybe.

“OK,” she said. “But can we order take-out at my place instead?”

“Of course,” I replied. “And we can have anything you want... except for Chinese. I had that for lunch yesterday.”

She did laugh that time. A whole laugh.

I brushed her hair out of her face.

The drive home was quiet and uneventful. Well, except for almost getting sideswiped by a city bus. And that wouldn't have been a huge deal except for the fact that this was my brother's car.

I don't own a car. Being an unsuccessful, and largely overlooked, writer does not pay as well as one might think. I could buy a car but I'd have to live in it. Granted, size-wise that would be a lateral move, at worst, from my current apartment.

Actually my brother wouldn't have cared if the bus had scraped every bit of paint off the side of his new car. He's great. And he's pretty mellow.

My mother likes to tell a story about how when he

was a baby, due to some crossed parental wires, my brother spent the better part of a day in a crap-filled diaper. And didn't say a word. Conversely, she says, if I spent more than five seconds with a single drop of moisture in mine, I would scream as if my Huggies had been full of snapping turtles.

But that is all hearsay.

Still, Leo makes Matthew McConaughey look super uptight. His wife, on the other hand...

People say that his wife and I don't get along. That's not exactly true. I mean, I did once call her a "dirty pirate hooker," but I immediately felt bad. I felt bad for besmirching the good name of all those hard-working dirty pirate hookers out there who were just trying to put food on the table for their dirty pirate children.

I tolerated the woman at first. Mostly. But she made the mistake of talking smack about Melissa early on. Referring to her as "too goody-goody to be for real." She mocked Melissa's charity work. When we first started dating, she'd call Melissa "Melanie" or even "Melody" on occasion.

This is why I only ever refer to my brother's wife as "my brother's wife." Or something worse.

Enough about her. She is but a bit player in this story. Thankfully.

On to more pleasant things. The story of how

Melissa and I first met is kind of cute.

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It was nine months earlier. (Actually it was eight months, two weeks, and three days earlier.) I was on a disastrous date. I'm sorry -- the Hindenburg was a disaster. This was so much worse.

We were at a trendy restaurant, which featured a bar popular with folks meeting up before a night on the town. Sneeringly suited men with too much product in their hair, liquoring up women with too little fabric in their dresses. You know the type of place.

Three seconds after my date told me that "Dane Cook is a serious and talented artist," I excused myself from the table to go to the bar, ostensibly so that we wouldn't have to wait for our drinks. Though I was giving just as much consideration to running out the door and jumping into the river.

I strolled up to the bar and loosened my tie, searching my mental Rolodex of excuses for getting out of that situation:

"My dog's in heat."

"My aunt is sick."

"My dog is sick."

"My aunt's in heat."

Clearly I wasn't at my best.

I got the bartender's attention.

“Two white wines and a shot of tequila, please.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her.

There was almost a glow around this woman. I am not sure if it was the way the lights in the place were hitting her, or if I was developing cataracts. I was completely transfixed.

She was like golden promise.

She noticed me noticing her and flashed me an adorable little smile. A smile that seemed to sneak up on her. I have no idea what my face looked like, but I am guessing that “suave” wouldn't describe it.

I'd love to tell you about the cut or style or designer of her outfit. I'd love to. But I'm a dude. The shirt was red (with some print), it gave a slight glimpse of cleavage, and it was the hottest thing I had ever seen.

“Holy crap.”

I am still not sure if I said that or just thought it.

The bartender putting the drinks in front of me stopped my wondering. I downed the shot of tequila and gave him the “Dude, one more of those” finger. He poured it and I quickly shot it too. I requested one more and put my money on the bar. He filled it up.

“Good date?” a female voice asked from off to my

side.

“Please let it be her,” I thought.

I turned slowly and saw her smiling.

“Score!” I thought. That time I made sure just to think it.

“It's been... an experience,” I offered.

“First date?”

“Blind date, even.”

“Ouch. Those can be rough,” she said with an expression of sweet commiseration that almost made me need to take a seat.

“I suspect that at some point doctors removed her spleen so that they could have extra room to jam even more evil into her.”

“This is Gina. I'm Melissa,” she said, extending her hand.

“Hi Gina... Melissa,” I responded, taking Melissa's hand. For a moment -- only a moment -- I considered kissing it. “What are you ladies up to this fine evening?”

“We're heading to a work party,” Melissa answered, looking at my date, as I tried to memorize her voice. “You want to come with?”

“More than you'll ever know,” I replied, probably too quickly. “Wait... you two don't work in a meth lab, do you? Screw it. Never mind. Let it be a surprise.”

I inched closer to Melissa.

“I hate to interrupt,” Gina, well, interrupted. “But what about her?”

We all looked at my date. She was fixing her hair or putting a hex on the maitre d' for seating us at a table that made her “bad side” visible to people walking by the restaurant.

“Oh yeah...” I had completely forgotten about her. “I'll handle it. One sec.”

I grabbed the two glasses of wine off the bar and started towards the table. Three steps into my trip, I stopped completely. I spun around and returned to the bar. Melissa and Gina watched me curiously. I placed the wine glasses on the bar and quickly downed the third shot of tequila.

I grabbed the wine glasses and was off again.

I arrived at the table and placed them both in front of my date. I whispered in her ear. I gave her a salute... for some reason. And then I got out of there. Quickly.

“What did you say to her?” Melissa asked, as she

and Gina got up from the bar.

“I told her that I left my herpes meds at home.”

“That would work on me,” Gina replied.

“I was kidding,” I assured them. “I have my Valtrex in my pocket.”

Melissa and Gina looked at each other for a moment before turning and heading towards the door.

“Kidding! I'm kidding,” I yelled after them. “I only know that name from TV commercials. Seriously! Hey, wait up!”

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As soon as we arrived back at her apartment, Melissa pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and plopped down on the couch.

She spun the phone around in her hand.

“You can wait and call her later,” I offered.

“That'll only make her angrier.”

“Surely she'll be able to put that aside and realize this is about you.”

“Brandon... you've met my mother, right?”

She had a point.

Melissa took a deep breath and started dialing. I gave her some space and went to the kitchen. I genuinely felt that her mother would sense that I was in the room, and it would only make her angrier.

Her mother blamed me for a number of things, including, but not limited to ruining her daughter's life, global warming, the Kennedy assassination, *Baby Mama*, and country music that sounds confusingly like rock music.

She'd probably risk having me killed, if Donna Karan made prison jumpsuits.

As I made a cup of green tea for Melissa, I thought back to when I met her mother. I didn't make the greatest of first impressions.

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Melissa's mother, Catherine, lives in the suburbs.

Reluctantly.

She spent thirty years in the city. No one knows how her husband finally convinced her to move to a lovely house in the suburbs. My guess is that she was swayed by its close proximity to a portal to hell.

Maybe that's just me.

All of Catherine's closest friends still live in the city. And quite a soul-sucking collection of Chanel and

self-importance this group is. None of them are as rich, beautiful, or powerful as they feel like they deserve to be.

You can guess how enjoyable this makes them to be around.

Catherine and her friends have a book club. You know, if you replace “book” with “wine” and “club” with “apooloza.”

Since Catherine would never, ever dare make her friends hire the sherpas and buy all the equipment they'd need to make their way to the suburbs, she hosts “book club” every sixth Wednesday in Melissa's apartment.

This is like clockwork.

Usually.

Ever since we started dating, I've used Melissa's apartment on Wednesday afternoons (other than book club days, as Catherine uses the afternoon for “prep time”) to grab a shower after playing pick-up basketball nearby.

Due to a botched “elbow job” (yeah, I don't know what that could possibly be either), “Cissy” had to drop out of the book club hosting rotation. Everyone moved up a week.

Catherine failed to inform Melissa. Thus beginning a catastrophic series of events!

Not really.

Catherine just saw my wiener.