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Retail

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Retail

James Koman

Brock wasn't the most intelligent of my friends, contrary to what the name Brock might lead one to believe. In all honesty, he was one of my friends whom I had tried many times to shake off, but like an old blind dog that has a habit of running into walls I couldn't help but come back to him for a little dull entertainment every once and awhile.

We had been friends since sixth grade. Our young, testosterone-filled newly-pubescent minds were instantly united by a love for Star Wars and things that explode. Our friendship carried over to high school, a time where I began to find enlightenment in the novels of Cormac McCarthy, George Orwell, and Leo Tolstoy, while Brock discovered Airsoft warfare. Naturally, despite the bonds we shared from our youth, we grew apart and made new friends, reuniting only for the occasional action flick or Indiana Jones marathon.

While I felt content to let this friendship fade to memory, Brock felt quite content to cling on to me just a little longer. Brock didn't have much of a future. He never played sports, his performance in classes lacked polish, and while he did manage to snag a girl before me, I wasn't exactly jealous of his choice. So as high school was nearing a close, and the halls were filled with explanations of which college one would be attending and what one wanted to study, Brock was left out of those conversations. He currently held an after-school job at Circuit City and had dreams of one day attending film school and directing a B-movie sci-fi film based on his Predator fan-art. He would go to community college for two years, and then transfer. However, he had no idea which schools offered programs in film and I generally cut the conversation off at that point. I would become too depressed to carry on.

I didn't speak to Brock after graduation night. There was a hurried "congratulations" as I ran off to celebrate with my Advanced Placement crew, while Brock made his way to

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a group of people I was pretty sure were only wearing cap and gown as a mild consolation from the school to cover up the fact that they'd be at summer school within two weeks. I didn't look back over my shoulder.

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During my first year of college, what was left of the friendship decayed to the occasional message through the Internet, hardly personal and only noticed a few days after being sent. From what I could tell from Brock's online profiles, his descent into all things brainless and unfulfilling (at least in my eyes) continued without slowing. A series of candid photo shoots with his dunce-friends back at home only gave me further reasons to completely sever the relationship and deny that there had ever been anything between the two of us: his girlfriend's dull stare through poorly self-cut bangs as she clings to Brock holding an Airsoft replica of some prototype military machine gun, Brock pointing to newly-installed cheap spinning rims on his maroon minivan, and an uncomfortably intimate close-up of Brock smothering his girlfriend's mouth with his lips, which would look malicious if one didn't know they were lovers.

We ceased messaging each other online only a few months into my college career. There were times when I nearly forgot about him, only to be reminded by his presence on my friends list on MySpace and the latest online quiz he had just taken (What Kind Of Lover Are You? Brock's result: The Flirt). Needless to say, I cancelled my account.

I found it funny how my attempts to sever my relationship with Brock felt frighteningly similar to a bad break-up with a girlfriend. And just like a bad break-up, it was entirely Brock's fault and not mine. While there's nothing wrong in enjoying male-interests such as guns, explosions, Scarlett Johansson, and action movies with vampires, these need to be balanced out with hard work, art culture, a strict hygiene regimen, and a decent haircut. Ultimately, Brock wanted to live in an adolescent fantasy, while I wanted to get a degree and work my way up towards a six-digit salary figure.

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Of course, you have to start somewhere in the business world. The summer following my first year at college found me at the customer service desk at a hardware store. Working retail at a large store is only fun because it pits the young college students returning for the summer against people in their late twenties to sixties with future plans and life stories so empty and depressing they suck all happiness from the air around them. My first day was uninspiring and dull. The next morning I buckled myself up for another explosive day helping senior citizens return the two extra screws they didn't use on their birdhouse. Yeah, I know, old people actually attempting to make their own birdhouse? Ha, like they can actually do things.

I was early so I marched purposefully to the break room and read an old magazine

until I had to punch in. I did a double-take upon entry.

"My God, Brock!" I managed to change my tone from terror to feigned pleasure. He hadn't changed in the year that I'd been gone. He had a military buzz cut, his skin was pale from too much online gaming, he was gangly from lack of formal exercise, and he wore large black boots which appeared to be from a military surplus store. His beady eyes opened wide as he shot up from his chair.

"Holy crap! Man, what're you doing here?" Brock exclaimed, rushing toward me. I stuck out a hand, but his bony arms wrapped me in a brotherly embrace which I awkwardly returned.

"I'm not doing any of that handshake stuff, it's been too long, buddy." I chuckled, but it came out as a throaty gargle. Brock backed off from me, jittery and shaking like a puppy expecting a treat.

"Who'd have thought you'd be working here!" The words sounded jumbled coming from my lips as I tried to mask the disappointment and leave only my surprise exposed. I had spent a year trying to separate myself from this kid, and now I'd have to work full-time with him for three months. Fan-frickin-tastic.

"Look man," said Brock, "I've got to clock in, so I'll talk with you later. Oh man, is this nuts! But awesome, man! I don't want you to think I'm disappointed. We've just got some catching up to do!"

"Yup." I said. Brock ran off to start his shift, and suddenly I realized that I needed to start breathing again or I'd pass out. The air smelled off microwaved lunch, cigarettes and broken dreams as it passed through my nostrils.

I felt like I had cement blocks on my feet as I marched into my position at the service desk. It was still early so I didn't have any customers to fix. I surveyed my surroundings, and to my disappointment Brock was waving excitedly to me from five checkstands away. My lips resisted twisting up into a faked smile. An older female cashier with too much make up and thin, wiry black hair stood guard on another register, which Brock used this as an excuse to abandon his own register, race up to me and spark conversation.

"Whoa man, you're on Customer Service!? They still won't let me near that position!" he burst.

"I… just asked…" I muttered, but he didn't seem to hear me.

"This place sucks. Even more than Circuit City. And Longs Drugs. Even Longs let me ride the forklift."

"You mean 'drive' the forklift?"

"Holy crap, dude. College! How is that!? What're the parties like? I went to this party the other weekend, and these girls were kissing each other!"

"I usually just hang out with my friends when I'm not studying. Frat parties aren't—"

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"Judy, one of the managers, I'm pretty sure she's a lesbian. Too bad she's butt-ugly, ha!" Brock held up his hand for a high-five. The sound of our palms hitting sounded more like a balloon deflating.

"What's wrong, man? You hung over? They don't care if you're hung over here. They still make you come into work—what the hell is that!?"

Thank God, I thought, a customer. It was an old man who looked purposeful and completely lost at the same time. At least Brock had run off to his register to leave me alone with my work. However, I completed the return in two minutes and found myself the center of Brock's attention once more.

"...and so then I dove from around the tree and tagged that guy in the head with one shot. One shot! Usually it takes me like, three shots before I get it dead on. You play Airsoft at college?"

"No, Brock. I've never played it."

"You have a girlfriend, man? It's almost mine and Bianca's second anniversary. I'm taking her to Hurricane Harbor 'cause I'm getting her a new swimsuit."

"No, Brock. I'm single right now."

"Ho ho ho, one-night stands! You're a player!"

"No, Brock. No."

Our reunion carried over to our lunch break in the backroom. As he explained to me why our other boss sucked, I noticed the Galactic Empire symbol from Star Wars tattooed on his upper arm. A cold chill fell over my body. I desperately needed to take control over this conversation.

"So, uh, what are you doing, Brock? Are you taking any classes?"

For once he was silent.

"I...dropped out of the city college." His shield of toughness lowered. "I decided it just wasn't a right...fit for me, so I'm working full-time while I figure things out." He fell silent for the rest of the day.

The following week I was growing tired of playing along with Brock. While he tried to siphon tales from my college experience that mimicked what he had seen in "Old School" and like films, I found it hard to hide my collegiate aura.

"Come on, man! Don't you have any fun!?" yelled Brock incredulously.

"I do, buddy. But I study, participate in clubs, and volunteer, too. It's not a party. That's not how life works." Shortly after, Brock was yelled at by a manager for eating candy off of the register display.

Two days later, "Hey man—"

"Just don't talk to me. For like, two minutes. I really don't want to talk about my

college 'failures' to another failure. Get off my back. Get a job." I was surprised that I had actually said this, rather than just thought it. I also found it interesting that I was now staring at the ceiling and the warm, oddly comforting taste of blood was filling my mouth. Ow, my nose hurt.

Brock had just punched me in the face. He wasn't the most intelligent friend I had once had. He lost his job the next day, and I never saw him again.

In the doctor check-ups that followed to heal my nose, I had one of those shocking realizations that you never admit to anyone but yourself if you can admit to it at all. In the stress of my college career I had grown to admire the life that Brock had embraced. It was the life of pleasure, of no consequence. I wish I had friends who were too stupid to correct me, I wish that I could perpetually live in my childhood fantasies, and play cops and robbers until the day I die. No classes, no responsibilities, and a girlfriend that would cling to me no matter my status.

Brock wasn't very intelligent. His attack lost him his retail job. And I heard he broke his collarbone in a car accident shortly afterward from driving through a red light while spreading sauce on a Taco Bell burrito. I didn't send him a "get well" card. I attempted to use words and diction to justify the direction my life had been heading. Brock's cultured art of punching was far more real.

Whatever, I just hope my nose heals straight.

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