

The Animal Cracker Incident (Part 1)

by Anthony M. Powers

I sit on the cement stoop outside of our dorm. Colin flicks his cigarette and stuffs his hands into the pockets of his sweatshirt.

"I'm goin' in," he says.

"I think I'm gonna smoke another one," I say, not looking back at him. I hear him take out his keys and unlock the door. I light another cigarette and wonder if she's going to walk by. I look down Alumni Way, the brick path that used to be a road running through this side of campus. I squint towards Tower Hall, where she lives. There are a few people walking in my direction, but Katie isn't one of them. I take a long drag of my cigarette.

If anyone knew what I was really doing, I'd feel like such a creep.

Then again, it's not like this is a daily occurrence. I don't sit outside the dorm every single day waiting for her to walk to the CDR, which is in the student center, which is the next building over from my dorm. I'm not a stalker; I just want to see her. Besides, we've been spending a lot of time together lately. I mean, that's gotta mean something, right? And it has to be clear that I'm flirting with her. Right? Girls pick up on that sort of pretty quickly. Besides, I haven't seen her since we've been back from winter break.

A cold gust of wind blows right through me. I should really be wearing a winter coat instead of just a hoodie with a suit coat over it. It is January, after all.

I look up from the ground and see Katie walking into the Student Center.

Fuck.

Why the hell wouldn't she say hello? I mean, she had to have seen me sitting here. Right?

...Fuck.

I get up and walk towards the front door. As I do, I look to one of the stone pillars where Colin and I had written the words “Living to Die” in ash with the butts of our cigarettes a few weeks before. It makes me think of when Alex came down to visit.

We'd sat outside the dorm, like we always do, and Alex saw the writing.

“What is this?” she asked. She looked from the pillar back to me with a grin on her face. She'd dyed the bangs of her dark brown hair suicide blonde. My heart jumped inside my chest. I almost died every fucking time she smiled at me.

“I think it pretty much speaks for itself,” I said, exhaling smoke.

“I'm guessing you guys are responsible for that.” I nodded. “Well it's not really true though, is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“It makes it seem like you have nothing to live for. We both know that's not true.”

She leaned in and kissed me. Her lip ring pressed against my face and sent a shiver down my spine. She'd gotten it since the last time I'd seen her, and I still wasn't used to it. Then again, maybe it wasn't the cold metal of the piercing, or even the crisp autumn air, that gave me a chill.

Thinking about that makes me ill. I still can't get away from the old memories, even here, even now. And I hate myself for that.

I pull out my keys and walk into the dorm. I should be going to get dinner with the rest of the freshmen who have no choice but to have meal plans from that god-awful excuse for a cafeteria. When I went home for winter break, I'd freaked most of family out with how much weight I'd lost—around 30 pounds or so over the span of just a few months. My mom was especially worried.

Fuck it. I can always eat tomorrow.

Although if I go to dinner, maybe I could run into Katie “on accident.” I don't understand why she didn't even say hello.

Jesus Christ, I need to stop this. I really need to swear off of women or something.

At least I'm making progress, I think. I mean, I know Katie and I really like her. Focusing my affections on her is better than carrying on like I did in November. I'd started drinking pretty heavily, not to mention doing something I never have before: sleeping with girls I barely even knew. I mean, literally sleeping with them though. I haven't... well... you know...

I'm still a virgin.

Maybe that's why those girls didn't want to stick around. Especially that Lauren chick. She turned out to be a fucking trip. One day, I'm drunk, smoking a cigarette outside the dorm, and she comes up to ask us if we've seen some guy who apparently lives here who I've never even heard of before. The next, she's giving me a lap dance in my dorm room.

Seriously. A lap dance. I wasn't aware that college girls gave lap dances, but apparently it happens. Or it happened to me at least. I was pretty freaked out at the time. Not that I'm complaining. But then with an ass like hers grinding against me, you'd never hear me complain.

After a few nights of random make out sessions, the next thing I know she's calling me at all hours of the night, balling her eyes out over God-knows what. I decided to respond to this girl in distress in a way I'd never responded to one before. I stopped answering her calls, and eventually blocked her number.

I heard she transferred schools.

Do I feel good about any of that? Not really. But I seem to find myself asking over and over again, why should I care? That's something that's never happened before. But I'd be lying if I didn't say I kind of liked it.

But I'm done with being that way. Like I said, I really like her. I kind of feel like I'm stalking her, but I'm really not. We just have a lot in common: we're both English majors, we love cheesy horror movies, we enjoy making fun of people behind their backs. I mean we were spending a lot of time together before winter break. Not only that, but most of the time we just lounged around my room, talking and listening to music under the green Christmas lights that

were wrapped around the top bunk of my bed (I slept on the bottom bunk). We even made out a couple times. Plus, we talked online almost every day over break.

That's not stalking.

...Is it?

When I get to my door on the second floor, I realize I've left my cigarettes on the stoop.

"Son of a bitch," I mutter to myself.

I rush back down the stairs and out the door. As I grab my pack from the stone slab I'd been sitting on earlier, I look up to see Katie directly in front of me. Her striking red hair is stuffed underneath a worn, wool stocking cap and the snow on the ground makes her skin seem even more fair than usual.

"Hi," she says meekly. Her bright blue eyes shoot into mine, unblinking. It feels like she's looking right through me.

"Hey, Katie. How's it going?"

"Fine. Are you busy?"

"No, not really. What's up?"

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure, c'mon in."

I unlock the door and we walk up to my room silently side by side.

I really should have seen this coming.

I open the door and Ben, my 6'8, basketball player roommate, is sitting at his desk in a wife beater and gym shorts. He hears me opening the door and automatically cranks up his music and starts singing along. It's some rap song from the 90's that I only recognize because I've heard him play it before. I clear my throat. He looks at us and his eyes bulge out of his skull. He quickly turns his music down.

"Sorry, bud," he says. "I figured it was just you."

"Would you mind giving us the room for a minute, Ben?"

We've only been roommates for a couple of months (as my first roommate, Jim, had moved out because I was "creepy"), but he can already read me pretty well. He can tell by the look on my face that

I'm not sexiling him. He stands up without a word and turns to me with an understanding smile on his face. He gives me a hug. I can't help but smile and roll my eyes as he does.

"I'll be in Colin's room," he says, walking out the door.

"I'm gonna go put my dick on him." He closes the door behind him. I chuckle slightly, but Katie still has a stoic look of her face. My smile vanishes. I sit down on the edge of my bed and she sits down next to me, a safe distance away. We sit there in silence for a few minutes. I finally break the silence.

"Well, what did you want to talk to me about?" I ask. She sighs.

"I need to be honest with you," she says. "I know how much you like me, and you know that I like you, too... but... I just... I don't think I can do this."

"We're not doing anything," I say. "We're just hanging out, spending time together. I don't see why it's such a big deal."

"But it is a big deal." She sighs again. She opens her mouth to say something, but only sighs once more. She looks me in the eyes and it feels like she's on the other side of the planet instead of the other side of the bed. Her eyes say it all. But I'd still rather hear it from her.

"Just say it, Katie. Look, no matter what, we can still be friends." She looks away. "Is there someone else?" Another long pause.

"Not just one," she says. "But it's not... It's not you, you know?" I stare off at the opposite wall. "It's this one guy, he's a really good friend of mine, and he's having a really hard time right now. He's trying to get off drugs and... well he needs me." She puts her hand on my arm, and I look down at it like it's a snake biting down, hard. "He needs me more than you do."

I don't respond for a while. There was a time when I probably would have started sniffing, whimpering like a kicked puppy.

But not this time.

My jaw locks and I start grinding my teeth without realizing I'm doing it. I can feel my brow furrow, my face becoming almost expressionless.

It's like something inside of me is dying and I could feel it finally letting go.

I tell myself I saw this coming. I tell myself it doesn't matter. I tell myself... fuck it.

"Well," I finally say, "that's a drag... But I totally understand." I feel myself choking up on every word, but I force it down. I can't tell if she notices. "I still want to be friends though, okay?"

She nods silently.

She might want to say something else, but I do her a favor and cut her off before she can.

"Well, I'll see you around, okay?" I plaster a fake smile on my face. It's something I feel like I'll be doing more often from now on.

Katie gets up and walks to the door. I follow her. She stops in the hallway outside for just a second and looks back at me.

"Later," I say.

"Bye," she says in a voice like a whisper.

She walks down the hallway and she's gone.

I leave the door open and sit back on the edge of the bed. I take out my cigarettes and put one behind my ear. I'll let her get well enough away from the dorm before I go outside.

Suddenly Colin bursts into the room followed closely by Ben, who's laughing.

They were probably watching for her to leave and figured I'd need cheering up.

"So I'm sitting at my computer, listening to music," Colin says, "and the next thing I know I look behind me, and there's Ben's dick on my shoulder!"

Ben laughs hysterically and Colin punches him in the arm.

"So what happened anyways?" Colin asks.

"Oh, you know," I say. "The usual." Colin must notice the cigarette behind my ear.

“Smoke break?” he asks. I nod. Colin walks out the door but Ben, who doesn't smoke, stays where he's standing. I go to walk by him and he gives me another hug.

“I love you buddy,” he says.

“I love you, too, you silly bastard.”

I walk out the door, but before I pull it shut, I pop my head back in.

“Hey, do you have any booze?”

