

The Animal Cracker Incident (Part 2)

by Anthony M. Powers

It's the next day, maybe around 5:30 or so.

It's already dark out, and even though it's January, I'm still not used to it.

I'm sitting around the main lounge of the dorm with Colin, Drew, and some other assorted people. I'm not really paying attention to the conversation. I'm still pretty hung over from yesterday.

Ben had sold me a water bottle full of liquor for 5 bucks. He'd mixed a bunch of different shit together, including some 151, cinnamon schnapps, and raspberry liqueur. I'm not even sure what I'd had to drink, but I drank it straight all the same. I still feel hung-over. At least I think this is what it feels like to be hung over. It doesn't happen often.

It probably goes without saying I didn't make it to class today.

"What do you think, Anthony?"

"What?" I ask, looking around.

"What do you think?" Colin asks slowly.

"Oh, um... what's the question?"

Everyone laughs.

"Have you seriously not been listening to this entire conversation?" Drew says. He sounds frustrated with me, but I know him well enough by now to know that that's just how he acts most of the time. Like you're the asshole. Or maybe that's just how he treats me.

"We're all starving, so we're trying to figure out what to do for dinner," Colin says. "How do you feel about Chipotle?"

"Chipotle?" I ask. "There aren't even any of those in Springfield."

"There's one in Dayton," Colin says. "It's only like 20 minutes away."

Pause for dramatic effect.

"Let's do it," I say. Drew groans.

"Let's just do everything Anthony wants to do," Drew says.

"So what?" Colin says. "Do you not want to go now?" Drew looks at him, acts like he's going to say something, and then exhales and hangs his head.

"Alright let's go," Drew says.

Everyone starts getting up off the couches and chairs and putting their coats on. I stand up and stretch. As I do, my cell phone starts to vibrate in my pocket. I pull it out and check the caller I.D.

It's Katie.

I look around and everyone's watching me.

"Hold on a second," I say. Drew groans and flings himself back down onto a couch. I walk to the other side of the room and answer the phone.

"Hello?" I say.

"Anthony? It's me. Are you at your dorm right now?" She sounds flustered, out of breath. She sounds like something's really wrong.

"Yeah, I'm here. What's going on?"

"I need to come over"

"Um, yeah. Yeah, alright."

She hangs up before I can find out anything else.

I turn to the group and everyone's looking at me again. Colin is standing closest to me.

"So I'm guessing you're out?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say. "Something's up."

"Who was that?"

"It was Katie. It sounded like something was really wrong." Colin gives me a questioning look. "She's on her way over here. Just go without me, I guess."

"Alright," he says, shaking his head.

I walk to the front door and wait there for Katie, although I have no idea where she's coming from.

In more ways than one.

I see her walking past the student center. Her pace seems hurried. She doesn't look like herself. There's definitely something wrong.

I let her in and she doesn't say a word. As we walk through the lobby, where my friends are still milling about, she looks around at them with wide eyes. She almost darts up the stairs. I follow closely behind.

We get to my room and I unlock the door. The Christmas lights are still on. She throws her coat on my chair and sits down on my bed. I sit next to her. She looks like she's on the verge of tears.

"Katie, what the hell is going on?"

"Did you see the way they were looking at me?" she asks.

"Who?"

"The girls downstairs. They were giving me the death stare."

"What are you talking about?"

"I... I don't even know," she says, her voice cracking. She hunches forward. I put my hand on her shoulder.

"Katie." She doesn't look up. "Hey, c'mon. Talk to me."

"I'm just... too fucked up," she says. "I was over at someone's house, and we were smoking all day." She doesn't mean cigarettes. "I was trying to keep up with everyone else, and then all of a sudden, everyone started laughing, and they were laughing at me, and Scott told me I looked like I needed to leave... so I left." She looks up at me and smiles weakly. "I'm sorry, I just... I didn't know who else I could call."

"It's alright," I tell her. And I mean it.

"I feel like my bones are melting." Her arms are wrapped around her body tightly, like she's trying to hold herself together. She's shaking; I can hear it with every breath she takes.

"Is it okay if I just lie down for a little while?" she asks, forcing that meek little smile again.

"Sure, sure. Do you need anything? Do you need some water, maybe something to eat?"

Nothing about who I am has prepared me to deal with something like this.

What do you tell a girl who thinks her bones are melting?

I walk over to a shelf where I keep my food and start rustling through half-empty bags of chips and packets of Ramen noodles. Katie starts to giggle behind me. I turn to look at her. She's sort of cuddling with a pillow my mom bought me that looks like a box of Pop-Tarts.

"What's so funny?"

"Your bed has black sheets... and a Pop-Tarts pillow." She laughs with a wide grin on her face. Seconds later, she's back to looking scared. I continue digging through my food until I find, buried underneath everything else, a large plastic jug of animal crackers. I grab it and sit down on the bed next to her.

"Why don't you try to eat something? Maybe it'll make you feel better."

"I don't want anything," she says. She looks like she might fall asleep. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

"C'mon, they're animal crackers," I say. "Everyone likes animal crackers. Sure, they're not the kind with frosting on them, but they're still pretty decent." I open the jar. She staring off into space, which I can assume isn't good.

I need to do something to distract her.

I pick up one of the animal crackers and study it closely.

"See, now what the hell is this?" I ask. I show it her. She looks at it out of the corner of her eye, and then looks away again. "I mean the body structure seems to implicate that it's a tiger, but it's a fucking animal cracker! It's not like it can have stripes, you know? So my next guess would be a lion, but it's clearly not a male lion since it has no mane. I guess all I can really tell is that it's some sort of jungle cat."

She's still looking at me out of the corner of her eye, but she doesn't look away this time.

"Roar," I say as blankly as I can. She giggles, but just a little. I pick up a different cracker. "Oh, now this one. This is obviously an elephant, considering it has a trunk, but it is the saddest elephant I have ever seen." I hold it out to her so she can have a better look. "Look at it, there's almost no detail whatsoever. It looks like it has a flaccid penis growing out of its face." She laughs. I pick up another one.

"Ok, this one is either a buffalo or a bison or something. To be honest, I wouldn't know the difference anyways. But look at the label on the jar; apparently, these are supposed to be circus animals. Have you ever heard of a buffalo being in the circus? It's stupid. Unless buffalo's have some sort of hidden talent that I'm unaware of. I'm severely unimpressed by the animal cracker company's lack of creativity."

She's completely watching me now.

Just keep her from thinking her skeleton is dissolving. I grab another one; this time I get lucky. This one seems to have evaded it's intended form, considering it's an indistinguishable blob.

"Oh, now check this guy out. I can't even begin to guess what the hell this is supposed to be. A manatee maybe? But then look at this thing sticking out the front. I think it's an arm or something. Manatees don't have arms. I don't know, I am at a complete loss on this one."

"I think it's supposed to be a bear," she says, smiling.

"Some bear. Although, I guess if I saw this thing running towards me through the woods, I would be pretty scared." She laughs again. I hand her the cracker and she eats it.

She eats a few more and I sit there in silence.

"Are you feeling any better?" I eventually ask.

"A little bit."

"Is there anything I can do? Do you want me to leave you alone? Cause you can rest here as long as you want."

"No," she says quickly. "Stay. I just need to lie here for a little while longer."

"Alright, well what do you want me to do?"

She scoots over on the bed, leaving room for me next to her.

We lay there in silence for what feels like a really long time.

Eventually she sits up.

"Okay," she says. "I should go." She's up and putting her coat on before I can even respond. "Thanks. I'm... I'm really sorry."

"It's fine. If you need anything else, just let me know, I guess."

"Thanks, Anthony. Bye."

Then she's gone, like she wasn't even here to begin with. I sit on my bed for a while, staring at the wall, trying to figure out just what the hell happened. The only conclusion I can come to is that she only came to me because she knew I wouldn't have anything better to do, she knew I'd help her, she knew I was safe. But I bet if I was sitting outside of the dorm again tomorrow, she'd still walk by without a word.

I go back downstairs. Colin and Drew are sitting in the lounge, watching a season of Arrested Development on the TV. I plop down on one of the couches and sit with them for a few minutes before anyone says anything.

"So how was Chipotle?" I ask.

"We didn't go," Colin says.

"What? Why not?"

"Dude, act like we'd go without you. Besides, it's not like you were ditching out on us or something like that. What was all that about by the way?"

I turn onto my stomach and bury my face in the couch.

"I have no fucking idea!" I scream into the cushion.

"Keep it down out there, please!"

I perk up and see that the door to the R.A. office is open, but I can't see who's inside.

I look around at Colin and Drew who are both trying to hold back laughter.

"Smoke break?" I whisper.

Without a word, all three of us get up and walk to the front
door.

My stomach growls.

Those animal crackers were all I had to eat today.

Oh well.

