

**A DIARY OF
indignities**

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BY PATRICK HUGHES



MILWAUKIE

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DH Press
10956 SE Main Street
Milwaukie OR 97222

dhpressbook.com
badnewshughes.blogspot.com

ISBN-10: 1-59582-103-1

ISBN-13: 978-1-59582-103-4

First Edition: March 2007

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

BUTTERFLY-KNIFE ROMANCE

Jennifer Testa was the first girl I ever really loved.

She looked a little like Jane Wiedlin, bassist for popular, crappy new-wave band the Go Go's, and had transferred to Tarpon High shortly into my freshman school year. She sat in the back of my science class, catching my attention with her short, curly, black hair and stylish, offbeat clothing.

I adored her at first sight, and spent weeks watching for an opportunity to talk to her. I found it the day we were slated to dissect crayfish.

She seemed a little reluctant to chop into her specimen, and who could blame her? The crayfish were preserved with formaldehyde and gave off an unappealing chemical funk. Crack their chewy little shells and icky guts came out. This is not a task suited to a delicate flower such as young miss Jennifer, even if she was Italian, and thus slightly less evolved than your average Tarpon student.

I guess I should point out Tarpon Springs, Florida is home to a large Greek population, and kids boasting this heritage comprised more than half

the student body. A large portion of the faculty was Greek. They even offered Greek classes for the language requirements. If there's anything I learned during my studies at Tarpon High, besides "ask what the pill does before you eat it," it's that everyone on the planet is less evolved than the Greeks.

In fact, I once had a teacher just come out and tell me, "Patrick, we had advanced mathematics and philosophy while your people were painting themselves blue, living in caves and poking each other in the ass with spears."

I pretended to be impressed, but, honestly, the whole blue thing with the spears didn't sound too bad. Especially compared to advanced math. Shit, come to think of it, I'd probably still go with the cave today, given the choice. I mean, I can barely stand to put on pants. Plus, it's heritage.

Anyway, when I saw Jennifer balk at the dissection, I seized the moment. I walked over, pulled out my giant butterfly knife, whirled it around a few times like you do and stuck the blade right through the crayfish's head.

Jennifer looked me in the eyes and smiled. I stood there, held her gaze and smiled back. Our science teacher, Mr. Lelakis, smiled. He knew some heavy-duty ninth-grade butterfly-knife courtship when he saw it. Plus, the Greek kids were always stabbing the shit out of each other and setting off nail bombs on Halloween, so he was probably used to that kind of stuff.

Sadly, I think Mr. Lelakis died relatively young a few years ago. He was a great guy, even to students belonging to subhuman mud races, such as myself. For example, he didn't care that I was waving around a giant butterfly knife in his class like some sort of maniac. Like Jennifer, he thought it was cute.

These days they wouldn't see such a thing as innocent flirtation. They'd fucking call in a SWAT team to hang me from a gibbet in the town square.

Man, I just remembered . . . I got that knife from a Filipino kid named Gabe Sanchez. Once Gabe was hiding in the trunk of my buddy Scott Millard's car, shooting fireworks at traffic as Scott drove around. A cop came up behind them, and Gabe, not able to see it was ol' 99 with the trunk pulled down low, fired off a volley from a Roman candle right at it. A fireball stuck to the hood of the cop car, igniting the paint and instigating a chase. Gabe, assuming it was just some angry dudes behind them, continued his assault while Scott careened through the streets, trying to lose The Man.

Eventually Scott wrecked the car into a telephone pole. After it was all said and done they ended up with a million hours of community service mopping floors at some Elk's Lodge or something, where they somehow managed to boost several hundred dollars worth of booze from a closet, a caper that kept us all happily puking through weekends for almost two years.

Great guys, Gabe and Scott. And you know what? There's a lesson here. Parents and schools and shit overreact to everything kids do these days. Despite our hijinx, nobody brought out the gibbet for us, and we all turned out to be responsible members of society.

. . . Well, I guess. I don't really have any idea what happened to those two. They could be out there driving around right now, looking to fuck up a cop car or two with some big-ass bottle rockets. I suppose the jury's still out on me, too, even if I spend hours and hours each day sitting quietly in an office, staring at a computer screen and feeling my brain turn to mush, and very little time stabbing crayfish in the head with butterfly knives.

Which is a shame, because carving up that crayfish was certainly my in as far as Jennifer Testa went. We started spending a lot of time together, and it was great. She was smart and funny and just the damn prettiest thing I ever saw. Plus, she lived in the same subdivi-

sion as me, had cable with MTV and her mom didn't care if we smoked cigarettes.

I spent a few perfect weeks sitting next to Jennifer on the couch, bumming smokes from her mom, cracking jokes to make her smile, maybe dancing together when a Prince video came on—Jennifer had a ballet background and loved to dance. I loved watching her. After it was time to head home we'd call each other, talking about nothing for hours.

This short period was honestly the last time in my life I can remember feeling anything, anything at all, that could be described with a word like contentment. Pretty much everything—everything, not just relationships or whatever—before and since has basically been an endless string of disappointments and annoyances, or, at best, a way to mark time until something better came along.

But I could have sat on the couch next to Jennifer forever.

I worked up the nerve to kiss Jennifer the night before I left to visit my mom, two hours away in Gainesville. It was just getting dark, and we were out in the street in front of Jennifer's house, saying goodbye. As I kissed her, she cradled the back of my head, pulling me into her, then started stroking the back of my neck.

I had kissed plenty of girls by this point (surprisingly), but never like this. It was deep and slow, with none of the awkwardness or frantic tongue-spinning I usually associate with frenching ninth-graders I remember from my teenage years. She kissed the side of my neck, and a warmth I had never before in my life felt spread through my entire body, totally giving me a boner.

Running up the phone bill in Gainesville was a no-no, but I managed to call her a few times. The last time, she seemed a little sad, a little distant. When I got back to my dad's a few weeks later, I found out why.

Somehow while I was gone, Jennifer had started dating a dude named Philip. He was from another school, a rich kid with a Trans Am and a fondness for showing off his skills with the nunchucks.

I couldn't figure out this situation at all. I was still spending a lot of time with Jennifer—hell, I spent more time with her than that creep Philip did. And Jennifer seemed more sad about the whole situation than anything, like she'd rather be dating me. When I'd ask her why she was with him and not me, something I did frequently, she'd just look upset and say, "He asked me first."

The irrational nature of this response drives me nuts to this day. I swear, I don't think it was a line. I think she really did like me more than him, and it made me insane. Teenage girls, pay close attention to this—"he asked me first" is a totally stupid reason to date someone.

. . . Hey, maybe nunchucks just rate higher than butterfly knives? Nah, that can't be the case. I took those stupid things away from him once. I stopped by Jennifer's house and he was out in the yard, flipping them around like a retarded ninja. He knew how I felt about his girlfriend, and kind of waved them around at me.

"Go ahead, you dildo," I said. "I dare you. Come at me."

He raised his eyebrows, and did, while Jennifer yelled for him to stop. I grabbed a chuck mid-swing, yanked 'em out of his hands and casually tossed them through the open passenger window of his Trans Am. So fucking smooth.

There's no way I could pull that off today. Teenage butterfly-knife romance gives you magical powers.

I could hear Jennifer giggling as I walked away. But still she stayed with that guy. It was breaking my heart.

Out of my mind with jealousy and confusion, I wrote her a letter, telling her how I felt about her and how much she was hurting me with this he-

asked-me-first crap. I appealed to her sense of reason, her clear affection for me. That kiss we shared. For no good reason at all, I also described, in detail, how I shaved for the first time that day. Even though I totally didn't need it.

She called me and told me she loved the letter. She told me she'd keep it forever. But she wouldn't break it off with Philip. He asked her first.

I stopped talking to her. But I still loved her.

A week or two of ignoring Jennifer and I was in bed, pining away while contemplating a photograph of her. It was taken when she was a bridesmaid or something at a wedding. She was all done up and smiling and looked so beautiful. I decided to jack off.

Now, in a lifetime of frequent and varied masturbation habits, this was the first time I ever whacked it to a picture of someone I knew instead of dirty porno pictures or even dirtier imagination pictures. It took a long time and was kind of weird. When I was done, I wiped myself off on the photo.

Now, that sounds terrible, I know, but this honestly wasn't done out of any kind of psycho-sexual hostility. I had decided to beat off on the spur of the moment, and without time to prepare and get a tissue or something it was just the only thing handy. Plus, at the time I thought I would never want to look at that photo ever again.

I was wrong. I regretted it instantly, and felt wholly disgusted. Despite the pain she caused me, I loved her with all my heart, and treasured that photo. Wiping myself off on it seemed like a cheap shot, at least after the fact. So crudely demeaning, even if it wasn't intended that way. Also, glossy photographs aren't really absorbent enough for efficient post-ejaculation clean up, so it just kind of smeared all the goo around. Ugh.

As far as I was concerned, this unpleasant little coda meant it was all over. Somehow, I managed to soldier on with life and all that shit. My duties as magistrate helped distract me.

At the beginning of tenth grade, Jennifer was dating David Burke. He was older, a senior, and enjoyed a rep as the school's most promising artist. David rocked a cool new-wave style, with vintage clothes and long, swoopy bangs. He smoked clove cigarettes, drove a '67 Mustang convertible and liked some of the same bands I did, Black Flag and Dead Kennedys and Echo & the Bunnymen. It wasn't me, but it was an improvement over that douche Philip.

I started chatting with the two of them in the halls between class, asking David to swap cassettes of hard-to-find bands and shit like that. I never once let on that anything had ever happened between me and Jennifer, that we had ever kissed or that I had spooaged all over a classy photograph of her or anything. I could feel her watching me intently during these exchanges, but I played it real, real cool.

Now, at the time I was sporting a variation of the much-maligned haircut that's today known as the mullet. Near the beginning of the '80s, however, a version of this style, developed by David Bowie during the Ziggy Stardust years and locally known as "the spike," was really considered very controversial and avant garde. Forward-thinking soccer players and homosexual men in bands such as Kajagoogoo wore their hair in a spike, and so did I.

David Burke, however, had over the summer converted his spike into bangs. Clearly, this was the direction to go. So when David suggested I skip school with him and Jennifer one day so we could all get high and he'd give me a new haircut, I was into it. I looked over at Jennifer to see if she minded and got a little smile that told me there would be no awkwardness, that it would all be OK.

The next morning I headed to her house instead of the bus stop. Jennifer and David were under the covers of her parents' bed, fully clothed. She invited me to join them, and I jumped in. Jennifer passed me a joint, and we spent hours nestled in there, watching MTV and

cracking jokes. Laughing and snuggled up next to her, I felt something that wasn't entirely dissimilar from the contentment I experienced at her house pre-Philip. Later, David cut my hair, giving me bangs and a long rat tail. He totally fucked up the sides, though, and acted like it was supposed to be like that. I just went along with it.

I got a little disillusioned with this scene after discovering how much David's art ripped off a friend who had graduated a few years before. Plus, David had some weird thing going with his ex-best-friend where I was pretty sure the two of them were, like, gay. It was no big deal, but I could tell he wasn't being honest about it. And when Jennifer wasn't around he always wanted to discuss masturbation technique with me, in detail. It got to be a little much. Eventually, I declined the offer of a live demonstration.

Even so, I still hung out with the two of them a lot. We smoked a lot of pot.

Around this time I was driving along Alternate 19 with Jennifer (or Jenne, whatever) and her mom, sitting in the back seat as we made our way to some school function. Out of nowhere, Jennifer's mom blurted out that she knew who Jennifer was going to marry, and that it was me. I sat there, stunned. It was a weird thing to just come out and say, considering Jennifer was with David. But Jennifer turned around from the front seat, looked me in the eye and smiled.

I smiled right back, not saying a word. I was still in love with her, of course.

Not long after this, I was out partying with a small group: David, Jennifer, the artist whose style David ripped off and my girlfriend at the time. We were all really, really high. Somehow we ended up drinking in a random patch of woods, I think because we didn't want to share our booze or drugs with the common folk at any of the weekend parties.

Staring at Jennifer, I dared everybody to start making out with each other. They went for it — with a crowd as self-consciously unconventional as us, I knew they would. So when my turn came I kissed Jennifer for the second time, and it was pretty good, just like I remembered. I could feel real love in that kiss, true love. The world spun and my whole body turned liquid.

Of course, ten minutes later I started vomiting forth long streams of clear, pure grain alcohol, so the spinny feelings and stuff might have been from that. That shit steamed in the cold and burned my throat on the way out, but I could see the headlights from our car refracted through it, making rainbow patterns. I laughed, both from the elation of once again kissing the girl I loved as well as at what seemed like just a shitload of grandly absurd cosmic juxtapositions.

Oh—no, I didn't kiss either of the dudes. As far as I know.

When I was done barfing and laughing, we piled back into the car and hit a party. Our little make-out session gave us a secret, something that bonded us, and we stuck to ourselves, separated from the crowd. Someone mentioned how they just didn't feel like talking to anyone else, how they only felt connected to our little group. I said, "It's like we're the Breakfast Club."

Self-loathing instantly poured over me. I couldn't believe I said something so trite, so stupid. But everyone thought it was great, nodding and agreeing. "Yeah, yeah, that's it, it's like we're the Breakfast Club!" I should point out that at this time I hadn't yet actually even seen the damn movie.

Monday came, and after school I was at Jennifer's, getting high with her and David. This was the routine.

As David rolled a joint, I watched Jennifer go into a ballet routine, kicking her legs and twirling. And she started singing, "We're going to get high, we're going to get high."

I realized I hadn't seen her dance like that in more than a year. She used to dance like that all the time, just out of happiness. Horror and sadness began to expand in the pit of my stomach, and I couldn't bear to watch her. I went into the bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror, trying to recognize my reflection for what seemed like a very long time.

When I opened the door, Jennifer was standing there. She kissed me. She told me that kissing her in the woods that night reawakened her feelings. She wanted me. She loved me.

I kissed her back, briefly, but the horror just grew. I broke away and walked into the living room, where David was watching TV, and stood around awkwardly for a minute or two, then just left.

In the following weeks, I quit smoking pot. (Well, for a month or two, anyway.) I started riding the bus again and rang up my old D&D buddies. Jennifer would call me, but I never called her back. I was polite but distant to her at school. Eventually, I stopped talking to her. She would stare at me, and I would pretend not to notice.

I moved back to Gainesville just before the start of my junior year and never saw her again.

THE BRUTAL Q-TIP OF DESTINY

One time a doctor stuck a Q-Tip in the pee-hole of my wing-wang. By Q-Tip, I refer to the cotton-tipped swab, not the pleasant fellow rapping on the TV that all you kids seem to like so much these days. Still, it was mighty uncomfortable.

It all started with one of those rare bouts of sexual intercourse that included participation from both myself and a living, female human being. And, happily, I did not render myself unconscious at any point during the brief consummation of the act. Though I did get a little distracted wondering why girls who act all liberated and dirty and sexually adventurous with their clothes on always turn out to have so many uptight rules when it's naked time: "What are you doing?! Sorry, I don't do that. Don't touch me there! Don't look at me! Just what do you think you're going to do with THAT thing?! Untie these ropes right now! I'm allergic to dogs!" Etc.

Anyway, I lay there as instructed, flat on my back with my arms at my sides, staring at the ceiling while my partner ground away, satisfying

her sadly pedestrian urges. The television was on at the other end of the room, and at one point I got kinky and sneakily tried to watch the video for Big Audio Dynamite's "C'mon Every Beatbox" (which is a bad jam) over her shoulder, but her stupid hair got in the way.

A week or so later my nether regions developed a mild itch. Now, this was hardly unprecedented. My groin area was (and is) a thing of mysterious, uncomfortable functions. And, biologically speaking, the male crotch is as unpleasant as, well, the word "crotch" itself, and is considered by leading scientists to be the source of much that is evil in this world. Many men routinely experience itchiness and mild groin discomfort, as evidenced by my personal observations during the years before I had a real job and was forced to live with dudes:

"Christ, do I ever got me a case of the man-itch. I've been putting ice cubes on my balls all day."

"No shit? My red-ass was so bad yesterday I scratched it with the cheese grater."

Etc.

Despite the prevalence in society of this sort of relatively benign male itchiness, I nonetheless heroically summoned my full powers of neuroses and convinced myself that my discomfort was the direct result of those recent romantic fumbblings. "Great," I thought. "Chlamydia. My reward for an awkward orgasm that was just slightly less satisfying than a good sneeze."

I didn't want it to fester too long, so, being unemployed and destitute, I made an appointment to go see the fine doctors at the free clinic. Where I had this delightful exchange:

"What are your symptoms, Mr. Hughes?"

"Well, doctor, I did it with a girl who's considered to be kind of slutty, though frankly her performance didn't live up to her reputation. And now my ding-a-ling is itchy."

“Hmm. Have you experienced any discharge?”

“Uhhh . . . Discharge? Ew. Thankfully, no.”

“Can you milk up some discharge?”

“Can . . . I . . . milk . . . up . . . some . . . discharge?!”

The doctor unwrapped a Q-Tip that was about three feet long. “If you can’t milk up some discharge for us to test, I’m going to have to painfully ream out your pee-tunnel with this bad motherfucker,” he said. (Those might not have been his exact words.)

“Fuck! I’m milking! I’m milking!” But it was to no avail. I sat there frantically yanking and tugging on my peener for a full minute, but my sad little pee-hole was as dry as the desert sands. It coughed up a miniature tumbleweed and a few grains of dust, and the doctor smiled as a malignant gleam crept into his eyes.

“No discharge, eh? Taste the brutal Q-Tip of destiny, pee-hole!” (Again, those might not have been his exact words.) He held that fucking thing waaaaay back at one end and with a sniper’s accuracy plunged that thing down a pipe which had until now been an exit-only orifice. My scream, which cracked the glass on his framed diploma, was cut short by a choking cough as the cotton end of the swab made its way up my throat and out my mouth.

He twisted and worked that thing around like he was churning butter, then after what seemed like an eternity withdrew it with a sickening plop. When I was done crying he had me fill out a few forms and handed me a bottle of antibiotic pills.

“The lab will contact you with the results for you in two weeks, Mr. Hughes,” he said. “In the meantime, take two of these a day on an empty stomach, and stay away from dairy products. And, um . . . call me sometime, okay?”

The clinic called two weeks later. Turned out nothing was wrong with me. Or with my pee-hole, anyway. Except for a lingering soreness.

WE WILL BE GOOD PENISHEIMERS

When I was twelve or so I spent a year as a Webelo, which is the pupal stage of American scouting . . . Yes, the transitional period between wormy, larval Cub Scout and the splendid, colorful butterflydom that is, uh, Boy Scouts and. . . Jeez, never mind.

If I remember correctly, I think “Webelo” is supposed to be some kind of fuckin’ anagram or euphemism or something for “We will be good Scouts,” although frankly the connection there strikes me as tenuous, at best. And, frankly, I wasn’t really paying a lot of attention, there, back in the day.

Regardless, it’s clear to me that whoever thought that shit up was a fucking dumbass, because in addition to not really doing a very good job of evoking that little “good scouts” mantra, “Webelo” is the most awkward and stupid name for an organization this side of my grandfather’s beloved Penisheimers, a popular American social club that as I’m sure you know was founded by West Coast community leaders in 1887 to oppress the Chinese.

Man, I was a shitty Webelo and . . . Webelo . . . Webelo . . . Weeee-be-looo . . . Wheee-buh-looow . . . Wheeee-blow . . . Ah hah ha ha, “We blow.” I just noticed that.

Anyway, I was a shitty Webelo. Perhaps the shittiest. I had long, greasy hair and had been raised to hate America and not care about the Bible. All the clean-cut churchy dudes who had blossomed into full Boy Scout status were supposed to be mentoring us Webelos, but they could totally tell I was a degenerate and didn’t even talk to me. My mom was too cheap to spring for a proper uniform, so I had to wear a faded, ancient Webelo get-up scrounged from some garage sale, and it was all fucked-up looking and unstylish and made out of, like, stained pantaloons and ripped lederhosen.

Pretty much the only people in my troop who acknowledged my presence, and really the main reasons why I signed up in the first place, were my buddies Chip Coldwell and Alex Stein. By getting on board with all that Webelo shit we could all go camping together, which was super appealing, since my mom had up and converted to lesbianism by that point and the only camping we did as a family anymore involved the female softball team. Joining the Webelos gave me my only real opportunity to go fool around in the woods without being subjected to shit like Sapphic tribunals tasked with deciding whether me and my eleven-year-old weiner should be sequestered away from all the womyn-folk, lest they stray too close to my crotch and get raped by the pre-tumescent man-vibes emanating from my ding-dong, and I swear to god I’m not even making that last part up and if you say I am I’m going to punch you in the brain.

This should come as no big surprise, since I’ve already informed you that they were my friends, but Chip and Alex were almost as socially awkward as I was. Oh, and dirty Jews to boot, so the Bible-y guys and various squad leaders and troop chiefs (or whatever they

had, I can't fuckin' remember) were more than happy to ignore them, too. The three of us often found ourselves left to our own devices on camping trips, squatting in the leaves discussing the latest episode of Dr. Who while everyone else was running around tying knots and praying and learning CPR and being wholesome.

Well, mostly wholesome. The older scouts occasionally made a stab at bad-kid-ism, but their frame of reference was just too white-bread and they could never pull it off. One trip, I think to the Big-Ass Scout and Webelo Good-Timey Jubilee, saw our troop meet up in the woods with a rival bunch of squares for a planned gang rumble, but everyone just ended up comparing merit badges and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance or selling each other Grit or whatever and shit never threw down. I had a D battery in a sock that I was fixin' to use to conk somebody on the head, so you can imagine my disappointment.

That same trip I came 'round a tent near the edges of our site and spooked three or four of the older scouts. Turns out they were all jumpy because they were smoking—get this—dried pine needles in a rolled-up piece of brown paper grocery sack and didn't want to get busted. They told me I was too young and naïve to cop some of their fine pine-needle buzz and I kind of laughed, because despite my young age I had already smoked several cigarettes made from marijuana at that point. Informing them of this just reinforced my dirtbag rep.

Hey, when you're a kid, how often are you supposed to get scoliosis tests? Because I just remembered — the head troopie guy was also my middle school P.E. coach, and he administered a damn scoliosis test every other week. Everybody dreaded it—you had to march into his office and close the door, and he'd be sitting there wearing mirrored aviator sunglasses, smiling a tight little smile. Nobody would

Speak—you knew the drill. Take off your shirt and bend over toward him and he'd kind of feel and press around on your spine and ribs, looking for abnormalities and no doubt enjoying his massive boner. As best as I can remember he never stuck anything up my butt or anything, but those tests were still pretty traumatic, and I wasn't exactly jumping at the chance to share my tent with the guy on camping trips, you know?

Oh! Man! One Webelo camping trip traumatized me even worse than those scoliosis tests. It was pretty much the second scariest experience of my life, an incident involving a kid named Carsten Vala. Remember the first scariest thing in my life, the time when I was just a little kid and went to go make a pee-pee in the big-boy toilet for the first time and I got up on my tippy-toes and rested my ding-dong on the rim of the seat to make a tinkle and the lid fell and clamped down on my lil' nubbin like a giant clam on an old-timey diver's leg? And I stood there screaming in horror until Dad came running to pry me loose? Well, the Carsten Vala episode was just like that, except without nubbin, thankfully.

Hmmm . . . No, actually, come to think of it, it really wasn't like the toilet-clamp at all. And, to be totally honest, I don't know for sure if it was, like, even officially the second scariest thing or not. I haven't been in the habit of ranking that sort of thing, and the more I think about it now the more it seems the scoliosis tests might actually come in at number two. Frankly, though, I kind of don't give a shit.

But it was scary.

We were camping and doing the traditional thing where you tell scary stories around the fire, and it all seems like good squirmy fun until you hump your ass back to that dark fuckin' isolated tent and have to lie there for nine hours quivering every time a nearby squirrel bumps into a goddamn acorn, because somehow the removal of that

warm fiery glow makes the existence of the Moss Man suddenly seem all too possible and—what the fuck was that?! Shhhh! Shhhhhh!! What the fuck was that rustling sound?!

. . . And, shit, Carsten? You think a kid named Carsten Vala is going to protect you from the fuckin' Moss Man? Carsten was Danish or some shit and wore those terrible little Umbro shorts all the time. What the fuck is he going to do? You can't whoop the Moss Man's ass in Umbros. You can't whoop anybody's ass in Umbros. The best you could hope for with Carsten is that he'd whip out a soccer ball and challenge the Moss Man to a scrimmage. And maybe you could book on out of there while the Moss Man dined on his flesh.

Oh, the Moss Man, yeah. Supposedly he was a crazy murderer that got all bit by dogs and cut up by barbed wire escaping from a local prison. As the story goes, he was on the run through the swamps around the clock for a solid week before finally shaking Smokey and the dogs off his trail and collapsing into a big wad of Spanish moss, where he slept for like four days. When he woke up, he found the moss had taken root and grown into the deep cuts and gashes all over his face and body, and this turned him extra double crazy, and ever since he roamed the Florida woods all hideous and mossy, just killing the fuck out of everybody in a most grisly fashion and—wait, wait, shhh! Did you just hear something?! Oh, fuck this. That better not be no goddamn Moss Man rustling around out there. Shit.

Laugh all you want, sure. We'll see how hard you laugh the next time you're out in the dark-ass woods all surrounded by spooky moss and you hear kind of a murder-y noise in the bushes.

Anyway, the older scouts filled us full of campfire dread and then expelled us from warmth and communal protection, sending us on a Bataan Death March through acres of moss back to our tents where we were to cower away the night. I was sharing a tent with Carsten

on this trip, and while this was certainly preferable to bunking down with Coach Fondles it didn't exactly settle my nerves in regards to fighting off forest haints. But we made it there okay and mumbled a few consoling words to each other as we got in our sleeping bags and hunkered down, hoping for a few minutes of shuteye before daybreak. Surprisingly, I managed to suppress thoughts of the Moss Man and drift off fairly quickly.

At some point, though, I was woken up by a noise. A rustle.

I was in the thick of dreamland and struggling to swim back to consciousness when I heard the noise again. Totally disoriented, I just kind of lay there. Where was I? Why was I all cold and unhappy? And why is that sound significant?

Then I heard it again. And close. And it hit me: Moss Man.

The thought jolted me awake. I lay there in the darkness, still as I could be, still woozy but with all senses on overdrive. And the rustling sounded again, loud.

This time, though, it was accompanied by a frantic, wordless moaning.

Whoah.

The initial shock lasted less than a second, quickly giving way to a handful of dueling lightspeed rationalizations. Raccoon? No, raccoons don't moan. Wounded raccoon? No, no, too small.

Then it happened again. It was loud. And close. And it was accompanied again by that terrible, desperate moaning.

Cougar, maybe? Cougars don't moan, unless . . . Cougar in heat? Bear? Dare I even consider it, like for real? . . . Moss Man?

Ah, no—it was probably some of those douchebag older scouts.

When they bothered to notice me at all it was usually to try and pull typical lightweight hazing shit that only fooled their fellow Baptists—sending kids out to go get left-handed steak knives or thirty feet of

shoreline, rounding up dupes for a snipe hunt, that kind of thing. Lame. That kind of shit never worked on me, probably because I once read, like, an Encyclopedia Brown book from 1912 or something that wised me up, and I knew they were resentful that I never fell for any of their antics. The noise was probably just them thinking they were going to Moss Man me into some kind of candy-ass frenzy. Well, fuck them. I had survived the fearsome Tribunal of Separatist Lesbos, had I not? I'd show them!

Suddenly the rustling turned into a bona-fide thrashing. And this time it didn't stop. And that moan started up again, and I realized just how close it was—it wasn't in the bushes! It was right up against the side of the tent! I could feel it bumping against my leg!

I turned wholly candy-ass and started kicking and squealing. The moan transformed into a terrifying, bestial grunt: NNNGH! NNNGH! NNNNNNNNNGGGGGHHH!! Holy shit, it was loud and right outside!

No! Wait! It was there—it was in the tent with me! AAAAAGH! I could see something spazzing around on the other side of the tent—it had Carsten! It was . . . eating him alive! Or . . . or . . . humping his face! Or something!

Frantic, I grabbed my flashlight. The terrible noise and commotion reached a crescendo, becoming unbearable. Every nerve in my body threatened to shatter as I clicked on the light, fully prepared to come face to face with what I expected to be endless horror, rivers of gore that moments ago were my fellow Webelo Carsten . . . I could only hope my death would be swift, that the Moss Man's infernal powers met their limit at the edge of the physical world and I would escape his hellish grasp as my soul escaped the constraints of my earthly body . . .

The light came on. I trembled. I saw Carsten's eyes, shining in the beam, but starting to dim as he succumbed to . . . to . . . the grasp of . . . a big wad of nylon? What the hell?

Turns out Carsten's complicated dental headgear had snagged on his sleeping bag. He rolled over five or six times after sacking out, pulling the bag tight around his shoulders and head. His arms were pinned and he seriously couldn't breathe.

I got him out of there before he died and we went back to sleep.

. . . Oh, wait! Shit! Just now I remembered the worst thing!

There, was this movie, right, *Dressed to Kill*, directed by Brian DePalma. And my mom got together with a pack of lesbians and went to go protest this movie, because it was supposedly misogynistic and promoted violence against women and stuff, though your guess is as good as mine how they figured that out, because I'm pretty sure none of them had actually seen it.

Anyway, Mom knew TV reporters and shit were going to be there, so she made me dress up in my ramshackle Webelo costume and join the protest. I was forced under pain of endless grounding to wave a placard and march around in a circle in front of the movie theater, because Mom thought it lent their stupid thing credibility to have a Boy Scout out there chanting "Hey hey! Ho ho! Bad ol' movie has got to go!" or whatever with all the commies and killjoys and hateful rug munchers.

So I did. I muttered their dumb rhymes and marched around and carried my sign, and the people waiting in line stared at me like I was a giant douche, and Mom of course made a giant fuss over everything. She got some news dude to come over and interview me, and they had a TV camera and a light on me and asked me why I was out there. "Violence against women is bad," I mumbled. And it is. I believed it.

In the back of my mind, though, the Moss Man was stabbing them all, the lesbians and the movie people and the TV guys and everyone else, just stabbing and stabbing them over and over and over again. With his penis.