

The Ball Washer

Lance Manion

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Smashwords Edition

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ALSO BY LANCE MANION

Merciful Flush

Results May Vary

- Introduction -

You cheap bastard. Chances are pretty good you've never read one of my books before but, as soon as I release one that is free, here you sit reading away on my dime. You almost deserve the stupidity that follows.

What you don't realize is that you've walked into a trap. You see if you're one of those people who look at the magazines populating the little racks above the candy while checking out at the grocery store and get the feeling that you crash landed on this planet then you might actually enjoy some of the stories in this book. If you get the urge to hoist the trembling fist at the seemingly innocent publications dedicated to showcasing winning smiles and vapid dramas then you'll probably enjoy a lot of them. If you are constantly filled with the urge to drive your thumbs into the eye sockets of the empty-headed whore-of-the-month featured on the cover ... now we're talking.

Don't get me wrong though, I am not looking to assemble an audience of purely outcasts and misfits. Generally those people are creepy and have dubious personal hygiene. I'm looking for the almost-normal out there. The goal being to stimulate their inner-weirdness so I can feel better about the dumb stuff going on between my own ears.

So I can feel like it's not just me.

Plus, the trap I mentioned earlier is to get you interested in my writing so you'll cough up for my other books. To do that it helps if you have the ability to get a job and blend in with the rest of the glossy-magazine-buying population.

Sorry for all the hyphenated words.

I included a few more stories in this book than usual but as it's free you can't really complain too much if you have to slosh through a few boring and/or stupid ones. Whatever happens from here on out, you're getting your money's worth.

[the ball washer](#)

Travel always seems to leave me feeling a bit out of sorts. Checking into a hotel that had the word 'value' in the name didn't help. On the way to my room I walked through an odor that reminded me somehow of the final apocalyptic throwdown between good and evil if, instead of the battle taking place between the forces of good and evil, it was the smell of urine and disinfectant facing off. The stink was quite formidable. The room, of course, had the requisite amount of mold and peeling wallpaper but the cherry on top was when I went to brush my teeth I found a pubic hair in the sink.

The sink.

From the moment I entered the room I had braced myself for pubic hairs to be coating the tub and toilet seat but the sink? There was only one inescapable conclusion to be reached: the previous occupant of the room had been a ball washer.

Reeling a little from that realization I went out to grab some lunch. After spending fruitless minutes holding up the beef 'n cheddar that was handed to me and comparing it to the picture of the beef 'n cheddar as presented in the picture only a few feet over the head of the disinterested cashier at the nearby Arby's, I became aware that nobody save myself was interested in the striking difference between the two sandwiches. However much I raised my voice or presented my beef 'n cheddar for closer inspection the only thing that greeted me was the apathy of both the Arby's managerial team and the customers waiting behind me. Where was the pride in their product? Where was the outrage from the consumer?

I retreated to the men's room to splash a little water on my face and regain my composure. Even though my beef 'n cheddar looked nothing like the Arby's marketing department promised I was still hungry and remained a sucker for their zesty signature sandwich.

That's when I saw it.

In the sink.

A black n curly.

I had once again stumbled upon evidence of a ball washer. In the men's room of a fast food establishment no less. Have people no shame at all? My face unsplashed, I was forced to backpedal out of the very place I had backpedalled into and out to my waiting meal. I ate uncomposed.

Which brings me to dinner. And although there were many hours between dinner and my misadventure at lunch I was still noticeably uncomposed as I walked into the Kentucky F Chicken. I say F because I think the folks at Kentucky F Chicken believe that if the American chicken-buying public hear the word *fried* these days they will flee terrified into the streets never to return.

Am I the only person who's noticed that over the years the size of the chicken legs have continued to shrink? When I was a kid I distinctly remember holding up a leg that would

have looked more at home on a turkey and feasting like a miniature Henry VIII. It was all I could do to finish 2 of them before collapsing back stuffed and satisfied into the booth.

Have you seen the legs they give you these days? I honestly wonder if the chickens are able to walk around under their own power anymore. I picture a great field with all the chickens lying on their side unable to stand up on their tiny, weak, pathetic, meatless legs.

Once again, despite the airtight logic of my presentation, the cashier stood unfazed. No amount of passion was able to sway him and he seemed to be willing to wait forever for me to wind down my criticism and complete my order. I was left standing to wait for my meal with a sense of hopelessness regarding the size of the legs that would soon be making their way from the oven to my tray. Feeling I couldn't stand there a moment longer I ducked into the bathroom for a quick pee before my food was presented.

The bathroom was filthy. The little checklist hanging on the back of the door letting the customer know the last time it was cleaned showed Billy had been in there to tidy things up in February of 2008. I relieved myself and headed over to the sink to wash my hands.

And saw it.

Another pubic hair.

My head swam and I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Except it was me in the hotel. My pants down.

I closed my eyes tight and tried to clear my head. When I opened them I saw myself shirtless and laughing in the Arby's mirror.

"Nooooooooooooooooo."

The first rule of ball washing is you don't talk about ball washing.

It couldn't be. I grabbed the sink to hold myself up. I felt the cold tile under my bare feet.

I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I'm free in all the ways that you are not.

I was hearing this from the man in the mirror. The man with his pants down and his balls in the sink.

The second rule of ball washing is you don't talk about ball washing.

I was the ball washer.

Life After Crest

Up north you don't see tumbleweeds as much as you'd think. Apparently they are a plant that is only found in desert areas so the image of them tumbling through abandoned cities and towns is only accurate if those cities and towns are hot and don't get much rain. I guess that's what makes them tumble, they are rolling around looking for water. Wide open abandoned cities ripe to be tumbled in or not, the plants up north just throw out a few seeds and are done with it.

Can't blame them really.

Does ruin the whole abandoned city experience though for those of us stuck living through it. I have half a mind to gravitate down to some Old West town just to get the tumbleweed effect but I guess it's just not worth the effort. I still have the giant empty city with no power and only the sound of the wind and the occasional window falling from one of the big buildings scene going. I use to like to watch *Life After People*, I think it was on the History Channel, so a lot of what's going on isn't surprising to me. Problem is that the TV show would move at a clip of 25 years at a time but here in real life it's all one day at a time so I'll never see the buildings disappear entirely and the whole place return to a big forest.

Oh well. It will happen whether there is an audience or not, the History Channel wouldn't air something that wasn't true.

There I go again, trusting something just because it was said with a straight face on TV. You'd think I would have learned. Maybe the buildings will never go away and the History Channel was full of it.

Here's the thing. Back when toothpaste was doing a good job fighting cavities none of us were any the wiser. We watched the ads for Crest and Colgate and felt pretty damn safe and secure. Like these companies had our back. When the first whispers of tartar and plague started nobody took much notice.

Near the end I distinctly remember *Life After People* being sponsored by Colgate Advanced Whitening toothpaste. How's that for irony? Like we should have been worried about discolored teeth. There are no coincidences; somebody somewhere had a weird sense of humor.

You see, by that time it was already starting to come out that the fluoride introduced into the water supply wasn't just there to make everyone feel better about the whole plague thing. The government had put it there to sedate the masses, to take the edge off. They already knew what was coming and the longer they could put off everybody else knowing the more time they thought they had to figure it out.

Maybe I'm fixated on tumbleweeds because they remind me so much of myself and all the other little bands of survivors. Scurrying seemingly aimlessly around, but there was always some pressing need that drove us to move from Point A to Point B. Food, water, shelter, companionship. Something got us out of our hiding spots and back, however briefly, into the elements. While the winds push our Salsola tragus buddies in whatever directions they happen to be going we listen to them whisper and howl and hope they bring us some good news.

Which they never do. They just whisper and howl the obvious.

Colgate and Crest knew they were losing the war, fluoride or not, but they couldn't start a panic. Few people saw the writing on the wall, we all thought we had plenty of time. I guess you always think you have more time.

Then came gingivitis. Nobody was ready for it.

It started like these things always do. Rumors. Always from 'over there,' someplace else. Someplace far away. Then it was down the street. Somebody you knew.

Then it was everywhere.

I haven't seen anyone in almost a week. Maybe it's time to head south after all. I really would like to see a tumbleweed tumbling. I know it's looking for somewhere to disperse its seeds but I imagine it looking so carefree.

That alone seems worth the trip.

There's a boat that is leaving soon for New York

Sometimes you're asked to do a favor for someone and it ends up not only being no big deal but you end up enjoying yourself. This is not one of those cases. So it was that I found myself seated in a suburban high school auditorium to watch an all-white all-teen cast put on Porgy and Bess. If I were to tell you right now that later on in this story I will be using the term disaster to describe the performance I bet you're going to leap to the conclusion that it somehow involves their singing or lack of cultural sensitivity.

You couldn't be further from the truth. I actually enjoyed their renditions of Porgy and Bess classics such as "It Isn't Necessarily So" and "Bess, You Are My Woman Now". I didn't find the casting to be any less believable than when I watched The Cosby Show growing up.

So what was the problem? Well the whole time I'm watching the show my eye keeps getting pulled over to this trashcan they had set up in Catfish Row. In order to add a little realism to the set they had long strands of red, orange and yellow cellophane obviously being blown up by a fan inside the trash can to give the look of a fire. Now as I sat there I realized that this was far less dangerous than having a real fire but at the same time I thought they were being awfully cavalier about it. A fake fire is still a fake fire after all.

Sure enough in Act 3 while Sporting Life (who, because of the location of the production, doesn't sell drugs but is instead a local distributor of energy drinks), played with the kind of grit you rarely see in a handsome blonde affluent teenager, is trying to convince Bess to run off to New York City with him, I see a yellow strand of cellophane break loose from the trash can and float off unnoticed and land on the rickety wood stairs in the back of the stage. While Bess does her best to resist his seductions I suddenly see a few more colorful stands of cellophane appear on the stairs. Soon the entire staircase erupts into strands of cellophane!

Panic ensues as adults rush in from each of the stage with fake-fire extinguishers but by that time the cellophane had quickly spread to the surrounding backdrops and even the curtains had long strands of red, orange and yellow cellophane covering them.

Poor Porgy (portrayed with conviction by Brad Silverman) hadn't even been given the chance to begin singing "Oh, Lord, I am on my way" when he was engulfed in cellophane. By now shock and dismay had swept through the crowd and we began to empty the auditorium and make our way down the front steps of the high school and into the parking lot as the fake-fire alarm rang. We stood outside in the brisk night air and waited for the fake-fire department to come roaring up in their fake-fire engines to put out the fake-fire that was threatening to make it appear as if the whole building was burning to the ground.

This is as good a time as any to mention the play was a disaster.

Doug complex

Both scientists and philosophers have wondered how the universe will end. Will it be a bang or a whimper? Fire or ice? Expanding forever or a big crunch?

It would be of great interest to both parties to know that the answer to that very question would soon be decided by Doug Casseber, a 17 year old living near Phoenix, Arizona.

It all started when Doug was 11 and developed an interest in astronomy. Doug was not a normal 11 year old, he was a very gifted student and his attention to detail was savant-like. When he was 12 he decided to put the night sky on the ceiling of his room. Unlike most stoners who had a similar idea and went out and bought a few Day-Glo stickers to throw up over their bed he divided his ceiling into hundreds of quadrants and then painstakingly recreated the visible night sky in each, capturing every perceptible star within 100 million miles of Earth. When he explained to his parents why it was taking him weeks of around-the-clock work to complete, he explained the stellar parameters he was using as the cut-off point of luminosity but they simply stared at him. Trying again, he started by explaining in ergs per second but they didn't know what an erg was; so he told them. "An erg is the unit of energy and mechanical work in the centimetre-gram-second system of units, i.e. the amount of work done by a force of one dyne exerted for a distance of one centimeter. In the CGS base units, it is equal to one gram centimeter-squared per second-squared ... $\text{g}\cdot\text{cm}^2/\text{s}^2$. It is thus equal to 10^{-7} joules or 100 nanojoules in SI units." They turned and silently walked back downstairs to the living room to resume watching TV.

As he grew older he waited patiently for a girl to share his ceiling with but a girl did not materialize. His intellect did not seem to be high on the list of features high school girls were looking for in a date. Despite his best efforts he still fell for a girl anyway. He would lie under his false sky at night and look up at the heavenly bodies and think about hers until one day he mustered the courage to tell her that he had paid to name a star after her. A real beauty in the Perseus constellation. He couldn't imagine a more romantic gesture so when she reacted with confusion and disdain he was crushed.

He retreated to his room and there he sat looking up at Perseus and tried to pretend it wasn't the end of the world. Later that night he stood on his bed and covered up the star he had named after that ungrateful, unworthy girl with a black magic marker.

The funny thing was the next night while looking up into sky he looked for 'her' star without thinking but couldn't find it. He ran into the house and came back out with his telescope.

It wasn't there. It had disappeared.

An entire star. Something that was almost a million miles across only a few days ago had suddenly vanished. It couldn't be because of his black magic marker could it? The "magic" in magic marker is just a brand name right?

So he did what any angst-filled 17 year old would have done. He got out a paint roller and blacked out an entire section of his sky, one star for every girl that had rejected him and then went to sleep.

He awoke in the morning to find the internet buzzing, television news programs in a state of stunned disbelief and astrophysicists worldwide having a complete meltdown.

He went back into his room.

Could he get grounded for this?

Later that day while the implications of this amazing event were debated by the greatest minds and the most delusional celebrities he decided to ask another girl out. If she said no he would take out his roller and paint his ceiling black. Every inch. He wondered what it would be like to then walk outside and see nothing but blackness all around. No light anywhere. Alone in the universe.

If she said no then everyone on Earth would know how he felt.

dwarfs, midgets and blorcs

If you look at the history of dwarfs in literature and folklore you'll see what began in Germanic mythology as hearty creatures that dwelled in mountains and were associated with mining has continued to this day with them being portrayed as a rugged, strong and willful race. Nowhere in any mythos have I seen them depicted as big-headed, gnarly-handed, bowed legged humanoids who can't run for more than 2 feet before they either fall over or have everyone wondering when the fuck they are going to fall over.

Why do I bring this up? Well it appears that The Little People of America, a non-profit group that apparently isn't satisfied by the fact that we no longer hurl baby midgets off cliffs as soon as we see they aren't going to end up taller than 3 feet, are upset because the movie *Snow White and the Huntsman* decided to use normal-sized actors to play dwarfs instead of 'little people'. Are you kidding me? Isn't it up to the director how he wants to portray dwarfs? You don't see fat people getting all upset that there aren't any chubby elves or blacks getting pissed about the lack of black orcs (blorcs?). No you don't. Why? Because dwarfs and elves and orcs are all fantasy! It's up to the interpretation of the creator of the movie as to how they will appear.

But no. That's not good enough for the midgets. Not content to have every other show on TV having a midget come crashing into every other scene and take away from what the fuck is going on they now want to try and muscle in on dwarfs and ruin them for us too. Dwarfs are mighty warriors for fuck's sake! Can you imagine a midget trying to swing a 2-handed battle axe? Picture that in your head. Picture it! You're going to sit there with a straight face and try and tell me that Warwick Davis or Peter Dinklage could have played Grimli in *The Lord of the Rings*? Do you have any idea how excruciating it would have been to watch that movie with one of those two hobbling around trying to act like a bad-ass warrior? In that one scene where they have to run for hours at a stretch to pursue the fleeing Uraki it would have taken Warwick Davis a week just to make it up the first hill in heavy armor. J.R.R. Tolkien painted a very clear image of the dwarfs in Middle Earth and they had nothing to do with the midgets that seem to be procreating at a breakneck pace these days. There's more to dwarfs than being short and you'd think midgets would be the first to recognize that.

I'm just sick to death of the political correctness that allows midgets to get up in (stubby) arms over something so stupid. Why can't they be happy that *The Wizard of Oz* and

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory are always on the lookout for small 'actors'? How soon until they are pissed off that there isn't a pint-sized Tin Man crashing/loping (how would you describe it?) down the Yellow Brick Road? Get that orange paint on you uppity Oompa Loopa and shut your cakehole.

Now I might be coming off as somewhat anti-midget when that couldn't be further from the truth. I'm just defensive when it comes to people trying to hijack something as close to my heart as dwarfs. I use to play Dungeons & Dragons and let me tell you nobody would have played a dwarf character if they had the characteristics of Peter Dinklage. I think our party would have spent every adventure raiding dwarf towns due to the complete lack of risk in doing so.

Me. "I hit the dwarf with a stick."

Dungeon Master. "You do 1 point of damage. You kill him."

There. I think that got it out of my system.

And yes, midgets would make shitty hobbits as well so they better stay the fuck out of Peter Jackson's face.

The (tiny) balls on those guys!

ready to start

If it weren't for all the blurred vision and buzzing ears and whatnot I'm sure John Sampilgremson would have appreciated the irony to a much greater extent. What with him being a bit *up* a tree in the metaphysical sense and at the same time being at least partially *on* a tree in the he'll-be-needing-a-tow-very-shortly sense and all. I'll give you the proverbial heads up that this tale is headed nowhere good and if you're of questionable mental constitution or just plain having a bad day you might want to give this one a miss.

It would be misleading to state that this adventure started off innocently enough because at the root of it all the innocent part isn't quite as innocent as the word innocent would lead you to believe. Tricky word innocent. It started off with John driving down a road at high speed bellowing a song. Not any song, mind you, but a song seemingly designed for bringing Johns to rest on top of trees. It featured lines engineered to have the listener not only bellowing them but doing so with their eyes shut for extended periods of time. This formula rarely works out for the listener if said listener is hurling themselves down a windy patch of road at breakneck speeds. You can see that the endeavor is fraught with peril from the start. So you can now see where the innocent part is called into question.

The eye-closing, foot-still-pressed-firmly-on-the-accelerator thing happened to go down during the verse "the businessman will drink my blood ... like the kids in art school said they would" followed quickly by the road taking a rather brisk left while the minivan he was piloting chose to stay on a more straight ahead course.

Anyone can see how irresponsible it is to be writing and singing verses like that when the possibility exists that one of your listeners might be operating heavy machinery. What else is there to do during such a verse other than lean back with your eyes closed for business and sway your head back and forth? Particularly if you are John Sampilgremson.

You see, John was nearing 50 and had three children and a mortgage and had recently decided to chuck it all in and begin again as an actor in California. He was actually on his way to a used car place to turn in the minivan in the hopes of getting a vehicle that would better express his new outlook. At that point he would throw the luggage from the former into the trunk of the latter and make his escape with nobody the wiser. Lurking somewhere out there, he believed, was a dinner theater one man short of a successful production.

During college he strode the boards, or however those creative types say it, and would breathe in the smell of sawdust and fresh paint the same way a florist buries her nose into a particularly attractive nicotiana rustica. He was theater through and through, the very picture of a card-carrying, flag-waving thespian.

After college he was unable to launch himself directly into a full time acting gig so he got a real job and pursued his theatrical yearnings after hours.

I'll stop here and let's just assume you're three steps ahead of me and you've already digested the pertinent details concerning his successful rise in business. The wife. The three kids. The minivan.

Which now sat perched on top of what remained of a tree. Should the tree have been a bit further along in years the collision would have worked itself out decidedly less in favor of the vehicle, but suggesting to John at this juncture that he was in any regards lucky might have gotten you a thick ear.

"The businessman will drink my blood ... like the kids in art school said they would".

He was the kid in art school and now he was the businessman who seems to have a cannibalistic leaning if you are to take the singer at his word.

You know, the whole 'path not taken' syndrome, the slow boil. His happiness like the perspiration clinging to the warming kettle.

The airbag didn't even deploy. He sat there and started the song over again. Nobody saw him go off the road so he had a few minutes to himself. He would never be an art school kid again and he felt pretty resolute in thinking he was also no longer able to carry on with the part of a businessman. Or even a man. And clearly this minivan wasn't going anywhere. California seemed a long way off but his home seemed even further and much less realistic.

He turned off the engine, stepped out of the minivan and into the dark ... even though it was early afternoon.

Favorite Facebook Status updates:

2 Aolan AZL50-LC32A 3-phase Air Circulators walk into a room and see Bruce Springsteen standing there. One of them walks over and says "We're really big fans."

"Paraprosdokian" comes from Greek "παρά", meaning "against" and "προσδοκία", meaning "expectation". Canadian linguist and etymology author Theodore Gorman argues that, while the word is now in wide circulation, "paraprosdokian" (or

"paraprosdokia") is not a term of classical (or medieval) Greek or Latin rhetoric, but just another way to say "gorilla jizz".

When the fire department arrived they found the church fully engulfed. A spokesperson for police say they have not determined the cause of the blaze but at this time have not ruled out God's will.

After a year of unsuccessfully trying to breed the female leopard the zookeepers finally agreed to try bringing in a male leopard.

It's like when I'm on the shitter and suddenly the shower head, hours after someone has had the last shower, gurgles out a big wad of water out of nowhere. I look up at it and say "yeah ... I know how you feel." I have no idea what that means but I say it sincerely and I really do feel some sort of connection with it.

Watching the amount of effort it took a baby to climb up on a chair it occurred to me how much better shape we'd all be in if we had enormous furniture.

Coasting

(first appeared on www.whiskeypaper.com webpage 8/19/12)

I wonder sometimes where art is headed. Since the first paintings were thrown up on a cave wall there have been artists, critics, and audience; and those three have been involved in a dance ever since. Do the fast-forwarding from stick figures to print to movies yourself. Every leap and advancement is a story in itself and frankly I don't have the time or interest to do it for you. I'm just dying to get to the part where I tell you about my new play.

Before I do that though, let me say that for years I have been torn between trying to impress my peers, gain the respect of the critics and win over the masses. I fully realize that most people have a splash of each within them, but I think you're smart enough to know that the masses only think that way because they are dumb as dirt. Don't think that because I find the lack of refinement in common folks detestable that I enjoy the company of artists and critics though. Far from it. When I read a theatrical review of some off-off-Broadway crap that has critics raving simply because it gives them an opportunity to show off their vocabulary and they know in their heart of hearts that nobody will actually take the time to go see the play, it makes my blood boil. I wish the whole pretentious lot of them would simply disappear or, even better, be forced to get real jobs.

So where does this leave me and what is my new play about?

I'm glad you asked.

It cost me several million dollars to build the theater that holds it but it was the only way to stage it. When you walk in you'll see why. The entire play takes place on a rollercoaster, a 3 story rollercoaster that both encircles the audience and plunges in and out of them. No loops but plenty of plunging.

The play is just under 2 hours long and for the entire time the rollercoaster is hurling around the audience, save the very first minute where it is climbing up and the cast

members riding it are introducing themselves with a bit of dialogue. There are also a few parts where the rollercoaster slows down to mimic the slow-motion effect of the storyline at that juncture but other than that it is going full speed the entire time.

Casting took forever as finding 19 actors who are impervious to motion sickness was not easy. Even with such careful screening it is rare that we get through an entire production without at least a few of them throwing up at some point. This might also be because they are only allowed to eat corn dogs and cotton candy as the pre-show meal to get them into character. Turnover continues to be a problem but in New York there is never a shortage of actors and actresses willing to have the safety harness pulled down over them

What is the play about?

Seems a reasonable question but not one that is asked as often as you'd think. In fact, we are entering our fifth month of sold-out shows and I have yet to actually answer it. I mean, I *have* answered it but I use the language of the critics so at no point do I tell anyone what it is actually about.

Even with the microphone that each actor has it is almost impossible to hear what they are saying over the roar of the rollercoaster itself and the various screaming of the cast. Doesn't seem to matter, the audiences seem to love it. Particularly when someone throws up. We had an actress come in from a popular TV sitcom and while she only lasted three shows she was wildly popular because she threw up almost the entire time she was on 'stage.' Midgets are upset of course because we have a sign with a hand sticking out in front of the theater saying that you must be "this tall" to appear in the play.

The critics love it. They love me actually. I would repeat all the great adjectives they've used to describe me but I'm not sure what most of them mean and I would hate for a negative one to sneak in there and tarnish my image.

And my peers? All but one of them have been silent, obviously stewing in their jealousy. But *that* writer, that thieving bastard, is only two weeks away from the opening of his latest Broadway effort.

The Flume.

Bastard.

wrestling my conscience ... and a special kid

I'm not sure what they call it these days but I know it's a complicated issue. I know because I was forced to live through something that troubles me to this day and I'm afraid that if I tell you about it, and I'm completely honest, that I might come off a bit insensitive. I'm a pretty open-minded guy, I don't consider myself bias to any great degree and if you were to have an empathetic Hall of Fame I'd nominate myself as the first inductee. Having said that ...

I think they call it 'mainstreaming' now but back when I was in school we called it having a retarded kid in gym class. Now before you mount your high horse and gallop off to Offendedville hear me out. When I was in high school, we didn't use bullshit terms like handicapped. Retarded kids were called retarded kids and everyone was fine with that. It wasn't meant to be disrespectful, it was simply the classification.

I was a skinny kid.

And a nerd.

Calling me cool-deprived wouldn't have changed anything.

So what was it about having gym class with a 'special' kid that traumatized me? Ok, here goes. Prepare to judge me and think horrible things.

He looked like a caveman. His head did anyway. I swear, his noggin looked like it was stolen off a Neanderthal exhibit. We had another 'special' kid in the school but he looked more like a normal kid that took a fastball to the cranium. The kid in my gym class looked like the first one in his family without a tail. Now be clear, I'm in no way making fun of people with low IQs here. I'm making fun of people who look like they were just thawed out of a block of ice fresh from the Arctic shelf. He was like a short white Patrick Ewing. The fact that he was retarded just put the cherry on top.

So anyway, we shared a gym class and believe me as bad as this kid might have had it we were pretty much on the same rung of the social ladder. I had just moved to the school and due to my sparkling personality had yet to find much success with my fellow students. I would have literally been happy to have been friends with the 'kid' except he only spoke in one word sentences and every time he smiled he looked like he was going to kill someone.

Then came the day, the terrible day that scarred me forever. It was time for the wrestling portion of the semester. Bad enough to scar most people in and of itself but fate had a special treat in store for me. And I do mean special.

The 'kid' was in my weight class.

So it passed that eventually it was my turn to wrestle someone and the sadistic teacher decided that he would pair me up with the retarded kid. It was at this point that we both stepped to the middle of the mat while our peers crowded around us and began to cheer. And by cheer I mean that some of the larger more demented males began beating their chests and throwing handfuls of their own feces.

Here is where the real fun began. The 'kid' had no idea what he supposed to do at this juncture. He just kept smiling at me and saying "I'm not scared of you". I pointed out that while I appreciated both his candor and courage that now would be a good time to commence with the wrestling.

"I'm not scared of you".

Terrifying smile.

I launched myself at him in the same ferocious manner that children will hug a relative they are not fond of. He wouldn't budge. He had the strength of ten men. Ten very dumb men. I hung off him for a few moments before he collapsed onto his stomach with a final "I'm not scared of you". And there we sat for a few moments as I tried unsuccessfully to flip him over and avoid seeing those giant glistening square-as-fuck teeth protruding from his larger-than-average jaw line. Attempts at a half-nelson were going poorly when I made eye contact with one of my most feared antagonists from the class. He was making it abundantly clear through slashing gestures across his throat that I'd better give serious

consideration to letting the 'kid' pin me or else expect a savage beating soon after class came to its inevitable end. This apparently would differ from the typical beating I usually received at the end of gym class in both duration and intensity.

Weighing my options I decided to forgo my attempts at rolling the 'kid' onto his back and securing my first and only victory on the mat and instead change strategies and attempt to deposit the 'kid' on top of me. This proved even a more difficult task than flipping Captain Caveman over on his back.

I tried to calmly explain the plan to him, how I was going to let him win and all he needed to was let me slide underneath him for 3 or 4 seconds and the entire endeavor would come to a successful conclusion, but he once again assured me that he was in fact not scared of me and to drive his point home he once again flashed his winning grin.

As you can imagine, my classmates were in various stages of asphyxiation from screaming insults and laughing so hard. In their minds this was the Godzilla vs. Megalon of the bullied outcast's faction. Had there been cell phones with the ability to capture video this would easily be the most played clip ever to grace YouTube.

I realize that many of you will assume I'm making this up but there will be some tiny minority of you that suddenly remember this spectacle and say to yourself "Holy shit, that was Lance Manion who got pinned by the retard?!"

That's why the issue of 'mainstreaming' special kids into normal schools is more complicated than just letting good intentions guide every decision. The truth is that for every action there is an equal and completely unintended reaction. If that 'kid' had actually somehow understood what the gym teacher wanted I have no doubt that he would have killed me with his bare hands before any of the other boys could have rushed to my aid. Which they wouldn't have but even if they had tried he would have probably killed a few of them before escaping and eventually being subdued on the top of the building by enough tranquilizer darts to fell an African Elephant.

For the record, no mentally handicapped people were harmed in the telling of this story. Skinny kids in baggy leotards did not get off so lightly.

They never do.

1 degree of separation

Perhaps it was some dormant insecurity that had slowly made its way up to the surface or maybe it was just as simple as her red hair. Brian had never trusted redheads but had given Sara a shot anyway and, on the surface, everything had been great. In fact, much better than great. The word love started to slosh around inside his head for the first time since those heady college days where the word seemed to leap to mind almost every other weekend. Sara was prettier than he was handsome though and this always caused him some concern.

After a year of dating this concern had manifest itself in a very odd behavior. He had contacted her through Facebook posing as another man. Sam. Very innocently at first, as if by some random chance he'd stumbled on her pictures. After all, he had said, we are all separated by less than 6 people. She had been very honest about being in a serious

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