

## MISSING PIECES

By Jonathan Goorvich

"I wish just once that he would come back and say, 'David, I'm sorry, but you *DO* have testicular cancer.'"

Brandon took a long, slow drag from his cigarette.

"You think that would help?" he asked.

"It's better than going back every month *THINKING* I do," I told him.

Brandon stared at me. "Is it?"

Two months later my balls were removed. I didn't get the prognosis I had hoped for, rather, I had them removed as a precautionary measure. Brandon came to visit me the morning after the procedure.

"So what's going to happen when you think you have brain cancer?" he asked while removing the plastic lid of my lunch tray.

"Do you think I have brain cancer?"

He took a bite of my egg salad sandwich and paused after chewing once or twice.

"Word of advice," he said with his mouth full. "Next time you're in a hospital in Tijuana, don't eat the egg salad."

We were in Tijuana because American doctors wouldn't perform the surgery that eased my nagging and potentially fatal psychosomatic disease.

Brandon spit the partly masticated mouthful out on what appeared to be green Jell-o suffering an identity crisis- not sure what form of matter it wanted to be- liquid or solid.

"Do you think I have brain cancer?" I asked again.

He poked at the coleslaw and I swear it poked back. "You'd think they would serve tacos and salsa," he said. "Weird."

"I think this procedure will change my life," I told him.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. No more worrying."

"Good. That's good."

Brandon sat down on the edge of the bed. "Can I see the, um... the aftermath?" he asked.

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"Come on."

"No."

He picked up a Spanish Sports Illustrated, flipped through it with his thumb as if it were a flipbook and threw it back down on the bedside table.

"I spend last night in a brothel," he told me. "I love having balls."

We spent one more night in Tijuana, then went home. It's hard to sit in a car for four and a half days wearing a diaper that is protecting your swollen... what would you call the absence of testicles? Non-testicles? Anti-testicles? Antesticles? Whatever. You get the point. We drove to Mexico because I am afraid to fly. Yes, I know that statistically car related fatalities are much more common than airplane crashes. I know that scientifically and logically flying is very safe, but emotionally an airplane is the deadliest form of transportation. Except a shark, but who rides a shark?

I settled into life sans testes quite nicely. When the worry of cancer entered my brain, I couldn't help but laugh it off. I was, for the first time in a long time, enjoying life, enjoying living. I went to the movies, I read great American literature, I wrote poetry, I picnicked in the Botanic Gardens, I thought about eating Persian food.

"I'm happy, Brandon," I told him on the phone one night.

"Nice. Gotta go."

*Click.*

My love life was in full bloom as well. I had started dating a girl with Alopecia. Her name was Alicia. Brandon laughed at that one for weeks. She didn't mind that I don't have testicles and I didn't mind that she didn't have hair. It was a nice arrangement. Her problems, on the exterior, are much worse than mine. That fact alone brought me comfort and made her a joy to be around. I wouldn't tell her that specifically, though.

After a while, I took Alicia to meet my dad. We met at Barry's Place. If I'm going to eat out, I will only eat at Barry's Place. I trust that place.

My dad's a tiny man with a big, grey, bushy mustache. He speaks with a voice so low and deep it's like thunder, and sometimes just as scary.

"I have to tell you, Mr. Ostermann," Alicia said to him, "you have raised a wonderful son."

"Vwat ken you possbly see een heem?" my dad asked Alicia. He's from Hungary- which quite possibly explains the accent *and* the question. Four minutes, eighteen seconds. A new record had been set for the longest time Dad could go without ruining an evening out.

"I'm sorry?"

"He wants to know what you like about me," I explained  
"Nut vvat! vWY! Vwy cood you liek heem? Hees no man!"

Alicia looked at me.

"Um... Not what. Why? Why could you like him? He's no man."

Alicia and I were seeking counseling together. A support group. Dr. Herb White was teaching us and eight others to love ourselves and each other in spite of and because of our differences- physically and psychologically. Dr. White is most likely responsible for Alicia's response: "Mr. Ostermann, a man with no testicles is still a man. A man worthy of giving and receiving love."

Oh boy.

"vWAT! Hoo has no tvesticles?"

I hadn't told Dad about my surgery. Seeing as he was a Holocaust survivor, he really has no tolerance for, well, alternative medicine. Or, in this case, counterfactual emotional problems in general.

"I haven't told him, darling" I whispered to Alicia.

"He didn't know you had cancer?"

Yikes. Okay, so I told Alicia that I had really had cancer. A white lie. But the C-word isn't used lightly around my dad. My mom died of cancer fourteen years earlier.

"Hoo has tha cancer? Daveed?"

"No one, Dad."

"Were you ever planning on telling him?"

"Daveed has no cancer!"

"Oh boy."

"David?"

"Daveed, yoo deed not hav tha cancer, yes?"

"Um."

"David?"

"Daveed?" my dad, for the first time in a long time, looked concerned. As if he had almost lost another family member and not known anything about it. I looked into his eyes, then down at the numbers tattooed on his forearm. I felt nothing but guilt. And shame. I wish there was an emotion called shilt... or guame... then I could have just said that I felt nothing but shilt (or guame), and you would have understood the complexities of my emotions. I'll write to Webster's. Anyway...

"Here's the thing," I explained. "I don't have cancer Dad."

"But?" Alicia asked in avid interest.

"But... I... Well, I *DID* have a form of cancer. If by 'cancer' we mean 'irrational fear' of cancer, cancer... But you understand."

"Vwats dis bullshit?"

Nobody said anything for what felt like an eternity. But as Einstein said, sitting on a hot stove for one second can seem like one hour... that's relativity.

"So now you heev no bolts becuz you are crazy?"

That was surprisingly astute. How was I expected to respond?

Before I knew it, Alicia slapped my face, Dad spit in it and I was left alone with a fifty-eighty dollar check to pay.

I sat in quiet self-pity on Brandon's couch. Potato chips crunched from God knows where every time I shifted my weight, wondering when exactly my life started its pathetic decline.

"I'd say when you first even entertained the possibility of chopping 'em off. Yeah. That's when your life started going down hill."

Was he reading my mind?

"Were you reading my mind?"

"Yes."

It was amazing that he had the ability to do that while playing NFL Blitz on his Playstation. That made me wonder.

"Can I ask you something," I asked him.

"No."

"Do you think it's healthy for a thirty-eight year-old man to play videogames all weekend?"

"I said no, you may not ask me something."

"You could be a little more compassionate," I told him.

His attention was on the game. "YOU could be a little more compassionate! It's ten and four right now!"

"What?"

"I'm not going to explain football to you again."

I was getting a little angry. I require plenty of attention. I stood up, walked over to Brandon's forty-seven inch television and unplugged the surge protector that housed power to the TV, Playstation and popcorn machine he stole on what was his last day working concessions at Cineplex 8 twelve years ago. With a zap the game faded into a tiny white dot.

"What the fuck Dave?!" He stood, challenging me.

"This isn't a joke!" I yelled. I hadn't yelled in a long time.

"Ok. Jesus. Ten and four means ten yards to goal on the fourth..."

"I'm not talking about football!"

"Then what the fuck are you talking about?" he demanded.

I didn't know how to respond. I started to cry. I'm a little embarrassed to admit that, so please take it for what it is. Brandon sighed.

"David, what the hell gave you the impression that your life wasn't yours to lose?" he asked.

Ouch. That stung a bit.

"Ouch. That snug a bit."

That thought came out wrong, but my nose was snotty from sobbing. It was literally a faucet of mucus. Not pleasant.

"Here's a lesson that you can learn from me, your best friend, your only friend." He sat down. "As you pointed out, I'm a thirty-eight year-old man who plays videogames all weekend. And that's just the tip of the iceberg, David. I've survived two failed marriages, a liver transplant- thanks booze! I can't hold down a normal job, I'm addicted to porn- and not just porn porn- I'm talkin' clowns, fists, trombones, a donkey here and there- the sick shit. I've been smoking so long I cough up black. I have a bald spot shaped like Africa." He was getting sweaty. "I have a daughter I hardly see- and when I do, she's hysterical the entire time. I have a tiny penis that has made me insecure my entire life. I called my sister a cunt six years ago and we haven't spoken since. I didn't visit my parents while they were in the hospital because it depressed me too much. *IT* depressed *ME*? Ha!" He laughed. "I live in a shit-hole apartment which, as you may have noticed, is littered with broken potato chips."

"Wow." I was taken back, but I had stopped crying. Brandon didn't look well.

"Damn right wow!" He rose again, angry. "And you know who I blame David? You know who got in my way all these years?" he asked, breathing heavily. "You know who I blame?"

Was he asking me or was that a hypothetical?

"Um... are you... are you asking me? Or..."

"Jesus fucking..." His expression turned to a bright red grimace. "Ahhhh!"

Brandon dropped dead then and there. He had a simultaneous heart attack and stroke. I had no idea it was even possible.

Needless to say, not many people attended Brandon's funeral. In fact, I think his bowling team, his AA sponsor, a female trombonist clown, the life insurance agent and myself made up the gathering of mourners.

As I walked from the graveside to my car, with my head down, careful not to shake hands with any member of the menagerie of cretins, I noticed Brandon's sister Brenda. I hadn't seen her maybe ten years. She's beautiful.

"David?"

"Brenda. I'm sorry."

"What? You killed him?" She joked, trying to make light of a heavy situation, her smile thinly veiling her pain. I may have killed him, though.

"No." I lied.

We looked at each other for what was probably five seconds, but felt like another decade. Relativity.

"How have you been?" she asked.

"I had myself castrated," I told her.

"I'm sorry?"

"I had myself castrated. And it wasn't an effort at population control or anything like that. I think it was an attempt to avoid anything that would hurt me, if that makes any sense." I had no idea why I was being so candid. This all just spilled out of my mouth. It felt good. "I'm pretty sure that it was an entirely selfish and wholly illogical attempt at happiness."

"Um... did it work?" she asked.

I took a deep breath.

"No," I answered her. "Not at all."

She became uncomfortable.

"Well, David, I have to go pay for all of this, you know? It was good seeing you, I know how much you meant to Brandon."

"Yeah."

"I hope you're trying alternative methods to find what you're looking for," she said as she left.

"I'm trying," I told her.

I stood in the cemetery for a while, then went home.