

## Parachute

“Why'd you buy a parachute?”

“Uh.”

The real question is why I'm wearing it while my feet touch the ground. It's not like I'm evading any serious trouble by wearing the thing all the time. If someone shoots me in the back it's gonna go through the chute—my spine is still going to be what stops the bullet. If I fall flat on my face, the pavement is still going to push my nose into my brains.

It took me a while to find out where one can even buy a parachute. I ended up finding one at the thrift store. The clerk goes, “I hope you don't plan on using this thing for parachuting.” He called it “parachuting” instead of “skydiving.” I didn't know that was possible.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, this was used by an elementary school to entertain the kids. Y'know? They all grab part of it and place a bunch of balls in the center and, I don't know, watch them bounce around? Don't you see all the patchwork? Probably not the best thing for parachuting.”

“That entertains the children?”

He didn't have an answer for me. He just kept on pontificating about the dangers of “parachuting” with a used parachute.

“It's okay,” I informed him. “When the time comes, I'm sure I'll be able to put it to good use.”

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In the grocery store, Pabst won't stop putting cartons of orange juice into the cart. He thinks he's being funny, telling the same joke he's been crackling about since he was six years old.

“Come on, Mimosa. A backpack full of orange juice is so much better than carrying around a stupid parachute.”

“Parachutes don't spoil.”

“Ah, Mimosa.” He tries to put another carton in. “Ah.”

It's not a nickname. For whatever reason, my parents decided to name me after a cocktail. They could have gone with Earthquake, or Zombie, or Tom and Jerry—how cool would that be? Hey, what's your name? Oh, y'know, Tom and Jerry. What? Two names? Yeah. I'm cool like that—but they had to choose one of the most effeminate sounding cocktails. It's not that I have a problem when it comes to breaking the gender barriers when it comes to monikers, but, really? Mimosa?

Although it could have been worse. They could have named me Dirty Girl Scout. Or Hanky Panky.

Or Orgasm.

Pabst's name is real, too. His parents were sick and tired of everyone thinking that they had some connection with the Pabst Brewing Company that they legally changed their last name for their son's sake. They didn't want him suffering the same plight.

“We have to do this,” his father told his mother. “Every employer asks me why I omitted my time spent with the company. They never believe me when I tell them that there's no relation.” His father liked to think that this was why he never really accomplished any worthwhile vocational feats, but his wife knew otherwise. Had he not fathered her child, she

probably would have left him. Instead, she respected the fact he always worked at least two no-college-degree-required jobs for the sake of his family.

As far as I know, Pabst's father had two high school degrees.

“What are you going to do now?” the grandfather probably asked his son at the commencement ceremony.

“I don't know. I think I'm going to go back and earn a second degree.”

It's something. And something is usually better than nothing. At times I think that the serial killer contributes more to society than the idle worker in a dead-end job—at least the serial killer is evoking emotions in his society. Who do you remember? The face of the local mass murderer or the teenager who prepared your submarine sandwich?

Hopefully I'm wrong. Hopefully, by the end of it all, the sandwich artist is more accredited than the perpetual strangler.

Anyways, when Pabst's parents finally changed their name, which went into effect about a month before their only child's birth, they decided to name their son “Pabst” in remembrance. People would occasionally ask if he was named after the brewing company, but no one ever thought he had any association with the brewer.

And thus he became Pabst Yuengling.

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My so-called friend puts another container of orange juice into the cart. People always talk about settling when it comes to marriage partners, but you never hear anyone talk about settling when it comes to whom you hang out with.

Last resort friends.

“You know you want it. It's got extra calcium.”

He's been making Mimosa jokes—one joke, actually—since we met in the first grade. He used to offer me his orange juice box at snack and giggle. How a first grader knows what a Mimosa is is a question I don't want answered. But, now, whenever we go out, he starts the night off with a Mimosa. Most establishments laugh at the request, but carry the necessary ingredients and mix one for him anyways. I try to counter his order by asking for a Blue Ribbon, but most places don't carry the one ingredient that's necessary, which is why I'm always insisting that we go to some seedy tavern or the local bowling alley.

“Listen.” I want to grab him by the ears, but I'd have to brush away his hair to do so, and that's a bit more forward than I want to be. I park the cart so some old lady buying thirty boxes of raisin bran can pass by and it makes me wonder why shopping carts don't have turn signals. Pabst is still gnawing away at the mystery meat one of the grocers was giving away as free samples.

“It doesn't make sense,” I told him. “If you end up liking the mystery meat, how do you know what to buy?”

“Because it's free.”

I push the cart into Pabst's knees so he'll stop checking out Aunt Jemima. She's not some life-size cardboard cutout, but some middle-aged housewife staring glossy-eyed at the soup display. “Listen,” I say again. “We can buy cranberry juice, apple juice, grapefruit juice—Juicy Juice—whatever you want, but there's no fucking way I'm buying orange juice.”

“We can't do grapefruit juice.”

Little Debbie has replaced Aunt Jemima. She's buying thirty cans of cream of mushroom while talking to her mother-waiting-in-the-car through a cellphone (a.k.a. the industrial-strength

umbilical cord). It makes me wonder if mother's made their children carry around telegraphs eons ago. Was there texting via the telegraph?

Dot-Dash-Dot. Dot-Dot-Dash. Dash-Dash-Dash. Dash-Dot-Dash.

R u ok?

Or even sexting?

Dot-Dot-Dash. Dot-Dash-Dot. Dot-Dash. Dash-Dash-Dot-Dash. Dash.

U r a QT.

Whatever. I know one thing for sure. You couldn't record thirty second clips of barbershop quartet performances with your telegraph. The Michael Richards of the late 1800s would never have gotten caught. Although, in all fairness, the Michael Richards of the early 2000s would have been part of the majority. The Michael Richards of the late 1800s would have been a comedian demeaning people of all races in his audience.

I forget where I am until Pabst nudges my arm. In my daze, he was able to slip five cartons of orange juice—all with extra pulp—into the cart.

“I bet she has a friend for you.”

As I re-shelve the cartons I watch Little Debbie fill her little red basket to the brim. Maybe she's a girl scout and thinks that she'll have more success selling cans of soup than she will boxes of Samoas. Either way, Pabst should be ashamed of himself—there's no way she's in her twenties, or thirties if you're Pabst, and just looks extremely younger than she actually is—but he's already contemplating an offer to buy a can of soup from Little Debbie so that she can make a slight profit, which will put her one dollar closer to that bus trip to the aquarium, all in hopes that she'll come back to him in ten, fifteen years later, when the age difference doesn't mean that much anymore, and declare her love for him.

“Why can't we do grapefruit juice?”

He sighs. The Pillsbury Dough Boy is taking some of Little Debbie's cans of soup so that, together, they can walk through the fifteen items or less line. He's on his cellphone, talking to his father-waiting-in-the-car. It makes me wonder what father's were like before the Internet, when they actually had to sit their sons down and explain “the birds and the bees,” as they used to say. Now, fathers, if they're even present, have to explain to their son that the sex he's seen on the Internet is something completely different from so-called reality.

The Absurd and the Beads Talk.

Again, Pabst's tangents bring me back to the grocery store. This time, the cart is as I remembered it. Pabst's stare is too busy cooking a hole through the back of the Pillsbury Doughboy as the little mascot helps Little Debbie unload her cart onto the conveyor belt.

Pabst's coughs, bringing him back to the space in front of the line of refrigerators.

“Because of the anti-depressants.”

“You're on anti-depressants?”

“Nah. But I'm thinking about it. You're not supposed to mix grapefruit juice with anti-depressants. I want a full detox before I try those things out.”

I don't know what's more confusing, the fact Pabst wants to use anti-depressants recreationally or the fact grapefruit juice and anti-depressants don't comport.

Regardless, it's time to go, even though I still need to find the frozen burritos, the mint toothpaste, the discounted Easter decorations, and last month's issue of Rachel Ray's magazine that allegedly has a killer recipe for apple dumplings.

As the security guard questions the contents of my backpack, Pabst is chasing down Little Debbie.

“You can't open it,” I tell the guard. “It's just a parachute.”

He looks at me askance, wondering which kind of crazy I am. The crazy that steal or the crazy too insane to steal.

“Why do you carry around a parachute?”

“Just in case.”

I catch up with Pabst's halfway across the parking lot. He's holding a piece of paper in his left hand.

“It's the license plate number,” he tells me.

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For the rest of the summer, Pabst's can't stop talking about Little Debbie. Like lambs, we follow her trail until we're only ten paces behind her as she steps into the large, brick building for the first day of school. Just before she steps through the front doors, the Pillsbury Dough Boy pops out from nowhere and opens the door for her. I can feel Pabst's stern look beside me.

Ms. Hickenbottom, their teacher, doesn't mind our presence, but she's not too fond of our snickering whenever she says her name. Everyone in the room thinks that we're someone else's alternative-lifestyle parents, but are too afraid to ask. No one wants a lawsuit.

“To the rug!” she orders. “And bring your bags!”

We all sit down in a circle and place our backpacks in our laps. Ms. Hickenbottom sits in the big yellow chair in front of the chalkboard and completes the circle.

“Shame on you!” She notices Pabst's empty lap. “Did you not bring anything for the first day of school? How are you going to play 'What's in Your Bag?' with us?”

Pabst shrugs.

“You there.” Ms. Hickenbottom nods towards me. “What's in your bag?”

I start to unzip the bag but she yells at me.

“No. No. No. Let the other children guess.”

I don't know why she asked me what's in my bag when the other children are supposed to guess, but I learn just how stupid little kids are.

“A monkey!” some kid shouts out while he scratches himself shamelessly.

“Nah,” I tell him. “It's...a secret.”

Ms. Hickenbottom leans over and whispers in my ear. “It's not,” she takes a long pause.

“It's not...pornography. Is it?”

“Uh.”

The girl directly across from me opens her bag and starts eating the pretzel sticks whoever cares about her packed.

“Judy!” Ms. Hickenbottom yells.

“Judy” ignores her because even I know she's not “Judy.” She's Rebecca. The real Judy decided to skip the first day of school.

It's hard to tell what Ms. Hickenbottom is upset about. The fact the girl she thinks is Judy has ruined “What's in Your Bag?” or the fact the fake Judy is eating snack at an inappropriate time.

Regardless, Pabst and I are able to sneak out while Ms. Hickenbottom goes to the closet for the dustpan and broom to sweep up the pretzel crumbs and salt crystals. He's making no ground on Little Debbie.

It's not as bad as you think. Pabst is the last man on Earth who'd resort to pedophilia. But after years of failure, he's decided to apply his knowledge of pop psychology to his so-called real life.



“If I can start when they're young,” he's told me. “By the time the age difference doesn't mean anything anymore, I'll have them eating out of my palms. I just have to start manipulating their brains when they're too innocent to defend themselves.”

Okay. Maybe it's worse than you thought.

A lot worse.

As we leave, I'm able to pass Rebecca a note that says “It was a parachute” but she won't be able to read it until the fourth grade when she finally learns what the word “parachute” means.

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A few days later I convince Pabst to meet me at the local bowling alley. I'm already drinking my second Pabst when he shows up.

“What's in your bag?” I ask. He's carrying a purple backpack embroidered with flowers.

“A monkey.”

I think he's joking but then he unzips the bag, just barely, and I can hear the “Ooh-Ooh Aah-Aah”'s coming from within.

“Holy shit.” I ask for another Pabst even though the one in front of me is still half-full.

“I got the idea from that kid the other day.”

I finish the second Pabst by the time the bartender hands me my third. I swallow the first swig from the new can. “What the Hell are you going to do with a monkey in a backpack?”

“Hey. You carry around a parachute. I'm gonna carry around a monkey.” He chuckles. “We've all got our baggage.”

I ignore the pun and start admonishing him. I feel like the prick from the thrift store. “But you have to feed monkeys.”

“So,” he says. “It's not any weirder than carrying around a parachute.”

“Parachutes don't shit.”

The bartender overhears our conversation and walks over to give the worldly advice all bartenders think they have.

“Can I make a suggestion?”

Neither of us says anything so he continues.

“Why don't you switch bags for a day or two and see what happens?”

Pabst orders a Mimosa. He turns to me as the bartender finds the ingredients. “I don't know. Sounds too much like a stock sit-com plot.”

The bartender pours Pabst's Mimosa and looks at me. “Why do you carry around that piece of fabric anyways?”

I don't have an answer for him.

“Just in case.”

He pushes the glass closer to Pabst. “And you? Can you justify your monkey?”

Pabst just downs the Mimosa and asks for another.

“Give it a try and report back to me.”

The bartender walks away and forgets Pabst's second Mimosa. I finish my third can of Pabst.

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In the parking lot, Pabst looks for his car and remembers that he doesn't have one.

“Oh right,” he says to himself. He looks at me. “I guess I'm thinking too much about parachutes and monkeys.” He presses his toes into a tiny pothole and I think, what if the ground suddenly collapsed and swallowed him whole? What would happen if we're standing on a fault

line and there's an earthquake, and he falls for hours? He would need the parachute so that he could enjoy the ride as he descended into Hell.

And what if a giant python were to slither across the pavement? I'd have to feed him the monkey to escape in one piece.

And then I start thinking about other things that I should probably carry around with me. A scuba suit for the second coming of the Biblical flood. Boxes of spaghetti in case I'm in a pinch and I need to build an edible house. A CD mix in case an impromptu dance party breaks out.

But there's not enough room in my bag and my back can only carry so much weight. Sacrifices need to be made.

So I exchange my parachute for a monkey.

"It'll be an experiment," he says as he hands over his bag.

"Just don't fall down," I tell him as I hand over mine.

"Yeah," he says. "Don't..." He can't think of any scenario in which I'd need the monkey.

Which makes me happy. Maybe parachutes are better than monkeys.

Only time will tell.

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Next morning, I call Pabst.

"I've got an idea."

We decide to ignore each other during these experimental times. We don't set any end date, and leave it up to fate. When our paths cross again, we'll return each other's bag and discuss what happened.

Neither of us mentions the bartender who suggested the idea.

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Three days later and I already miss my parachute. Clerks ask me “How's it going?” and I scream “I've got a monkey on my back!” They brush me off as another rude customer and then I go “No! Seriously! I'm not being clichéd. Look!”

And then they call security.

But no guard will take my monkey. No one wants that headache.

Things were easier with the parachute.

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I try to teach the monkey how to play chess, but he keeps using the pawns to clean out his ears. I try to teach him sign language, but he just picks his nose. I'm weary to try to teach him anything else because I'm afraid of what orifice might be involved next.

So I just carry him around with me. Instead of cleaning out the backpack whenever he relieves himself, I just buy a new one.

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It's been years. I've wanted to look up how long monkeys live for but I'm afraid of the answer. I'd starve him to death, but then I'd have a dead monkey—and I need him breathing to get back my parachute. So now I'm that guy buying bunches of bananas in the grocery store, hoping he doesn't run into anyone he knows. You can defend yourself as much as you'd like, but once someone sees you pushing around a cart full of bananas they'll never be able to look at you directly in the eyes.

Outside the grocery store, I run into a little girl selling girl scout cookies but she's not wearing the uniform.

“Are you in the girl scouts?” I ask her.

“Hell, no.” She says. “Those little bitches sell cookies at \$5 a box, but I know they'll go for at least seven. You're lucky I'm selling them for six. Now either buy something or step away from my table! Banana freak.”

I notice her parents standing behind her and they just smile at me. And then I realize that her parents are Little Debbie and The Pillsbury Dough Boy from years ago, all grown up. They don't seem to care about my bananas.

“How...are you?” I ask in a tone that conflates how you'd ask a stranger and how you'd ask an old friend you haven't seen in awhile.

They're silent. Upset that their daughter is selling the competition's goods.

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Later, as I'm taking the monkey for a walk, this woman runs up to me.

“I know what's in your bag.”

She walks behind me and starts to unzip my backpack.

“Thank you for teaching me what the word 'parachute' means when I was six.” I feel her smile behind me. “It changed my life.”

And then I feel the monkey bite her.

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I give up. It's Armageddon without my parachute. I return to the bowling alley but the space behind the counter is empty. I drum on the bar while I wait.

“Where have you been?”

I think it's the bartender but the hand that grabs my shoulder belongs to Pabst.

“How's it hanging?” I ask.

My pun eludes him because it's not really a pun. It's some weird, desperate allusion to my parachute.

He's barebacked.

Pabst's looks for the bartender but doesn't seem disappointed. He looks hydrated. Sated.

Whatever that means.

“What happened to my parachute?”

Pabst's sighs. “It was worthless, Mimosa. Pointless. I still don't know why you carried that thing around.” He reaches for the saltshaker. “Now where's my monkey?”

I pull the bag out from underneath my chair and slide it over.

“Thanks.” He reaches for the peppershaker.

I want to reach for something but all that's left is the napkin dispenser. Most of them are soaked with some concoction of leftover liquids. I try to make conversation.

“So what else have you been up to?”

“We finally took over the brewing Pabsts.”

“Oh.”

“I'm surprised you didn't hear about it. There were a lot of causalities. I had to do things I never thought I'd have to.”

I can't tell if he's joking because I don't watch the news and you never know with Pabsts.

He continues.

“I ended up marrying Ms. Hickenbottom.”

“Oh.”

He grabs one of the drier napkins. He drapes it over the saltshaker and makes the dispenser disappear. It turns out he had just slid it into his lap, allowing the napkin to resume the shaker's form as he pressed the cloth flat onto the bar.

The magician continues his vocal misdirection.

“I thought I'd one up my father and re-enroll in elementary school. I'm the only person in the history of mankind who earned two elementary school degrees.”

“They give you degrees?”

“I don't know. But I earned more than just a degree by going back.”

Pabst places the saltshaker back onto the bar and starts mixing the two containers in front of him. I watch as he fastidiously pours a few salt crystals into the peppershaker and shake the peppershaker ever so meticulously so that only pepper flakes fall into the salt shaker. It's brilliant.

“What else did you 'earn?”

The bartender returns and I order a Mimosa. Pabst's orders a Pabst's. I can't tell if the bartender recognizes us without the parachute present.

Pabst's finishes his beer before talking again. “I found true love and the Pabst's Brewing Company is slowly taking over the world—all because I went back to elementary school.”

“Uh.” I grab one of the wet napkins and try to think of something to do with it. “Is that why you just ordered a Pabst's?”

“Yup. It's like reinvesting profits.”

Pabst's snaps at the bartender and tries to order another round.

“Sorry. That was the last Blue Ribbon.”

Pabst mutters incoherently and storms off.

The bartender turns to me. "Another Mimosa?"

"Sure."

He walks to the back wall and when he opens the fridge I can see box after box of orange juice. He mixes the cocktail and slides it over to me.

"On the house."

As I finish my second Mimosa the bartender walks into the back room. He's quick enough so that when he finally returns I still have a little bit of drink left. He places a gift-wrapped box next to my glass.

"How'd it go?" he asks.

"Huh."

Now I'm the one who doesn't remember him. Now I'm the one who's thinking too much about parachutes and monkeys.

"Just open the box."

I untie the ribbon and rip open the fabric that surrounds the cardboard box.

"It's a parachute," he tells me, as if I couldn't tell. "Never been used."

"Thank you?"

He smiles and walks back into the other room.

I finish my second Mimosa and wait for my third, but the bartender never returns.

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I step outside and it's the Apocalypse. Fire and brimstone. Just as predicted.

The only difference is that it turns out the Four Horsemen are actually the Four Giraffemen. One of the giraffes has the back of Pabst's underpants in his mouth. The ground beneath Pabst's hanging body is wide open and pulsing. Black smoke rises out of the hole.



Around the neck of the same giraffe is the monkey. It's hard to tell from this angle, but I think he's wearing my parachute.

One of the other giraffes grabs the back of my collar. When he finally lifts his neck I notice the monkey gripping the ripcord of my old backpack.

I put on my new parachute as I watch Pabst fall into the Earth. The monkey hovers above him as my old parachute slows his decent. By the time the little creature finally reaches the Earth, the ground has resealed itself. The murderous Giraffeman trots away.

When it's my turn to fall, I can barely see the opened ground beneath me through the smoke. I deploy my parachute just after the giraffe relinquishes his bite and I fall safely onto the Earth—the heat and vibrations of the ground slightly tingling the bottom of my feet through the soles of my sneakers.

The smoke finally clears and the monkey hops over to me. He initiates the hug.

I don't know who taught him that. I can't tell if he remembers me.

The monkey grabs my hand and we walk side by side. He takes off my old parachute, refolds it into the bag, and offers it to me.

I remove the one the bartender had given me earlier and offer it in exchange. While I put on my original parachute, the monkey eats the bartender's gift and starts to choke. I try pulling the fabric out of his mouth but it's a magician's trick gone awry—I keep pulling and pulling at the string of multi-colored fabric until it's finally out of his mouth, but by the time I reach the other end, the monkey has stopped breathing.

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It turns out the only other people who survived the Apocalypse were Little Debbie and The Pillsbury Dough Boy. The recent events have somehow made them look even more like their corporate logo doppelgangers.

They're standing over a plate of Rachel Ray's apple dumplings, wondering whether or not they should eat them.

"I don't recommend it," I say. "I'd search for other food."

They ignore me.

I don't know if they remember me. I can't tell if they're just malnourished-engendered hallucinations.

"Well," I say. "It doesn't look like I'm needed here."

And I leave the two alone so that they can restart the human race and do things right. I'm confident that they'll leave the plate of apple dumplings to rot and that the descendants of Little Debbie and The Pillsbury Dough Boy will do a better job than the descendants of Adam and Eve.

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When I finally pass away, God asks me why I'm still carrying around the parachute. I have a feeling that I've been here before.

"Y'know you don't need to worry about falling," he says. "If you do trip, the clouds are pretty soft and fluffy."

I remember him saying that the first time I was here.

God pushes me aside to debrief the next person in line.

I've definitely been here before. I don't know if God remembers me.

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People keep asking me why I'm carrying around a parachute.

“Just in case,” I tell them.

This one gentleman comes up to me and thanks me.

“What for?”

He smiles. “I spent my entire life making other people's sandwiches until I was murdered by a serial killer. God tried to cheer me up by informing me that the serial killer was burning in Hell, but I remained rather jaded.” He turns around and shows me his knapsack. “It's a tiny fish bowl and a couple of bottles of salt water.”

“In case you ever stumble upon a flopping fish?”

“Exactly.”

As time passes, I see more and more people carrying around backpacks. I find out that someone is carrying around a toaster oven. Some one else is carrying around several pairs of sunglasses.

Another person is carrying around a midget, who, in turn, is carrying around a box of crayons.

Something grabs my shoulder. I turn around and God shows me the new backpack He's sporting.

“What's in your bag?” I ask Him.

He laughs. “It's...a secret.”