

SOMETHING SPHINX

On the eighth day of her arrival she ate my cousin Jimmy. Ate him up! Jimmy's last words were not the best last words, but I guess unless you have some type of schedule you don't know *what* your last words are going to be.

"Oh man" Jimmy moaned "Mom's gonna' kill me. I don't believe this shit..."

The real tragedy was that Jimmy was a math whiz and had just been granted a full scholarship to North Carolina State. He was also a good, off the bench shooting guard. Man he would have played in the ACC. But not now. And Jimmy's mom would never get the chance to kill him herself. The Sphinx saw to that.

No, Jimmy's mother-my Aunt Lorraine-would most likely kill me instead. I could see it now; "Aunt Lorraine. Mama sent these strawberries over and a Sphinx ate Jimmy while I stood there and watched. Here's one of his Chuck Taylor's."

My own last words then death by aunt.

When the Sphinx spat out one of Jimmy's shoes, she lay there staring at us, just like she had done every day since she had taken over the Macedonia Baptist Church Youth Basketball Court in Columbus County, North Carolina. Our ball, *our brand new ball*, lay mid-court where she dared any of us to so much as touch that Spalding globe.

She ate Jimmy just like she had eaten my other home boys; one a day if we couldn't answer her stupid riddles. And obviously we didn't because part of the deal that she laid down was that if any of us answered even one of her stupid riddles, she would fly up and impale herself on the spiral of our church steeple. Then we would be rid of that foul, hateful bitch.

The Sphinx also ate one of us if we attacked her. She ate one of us if we refused to play her riddle game or if we really pissed her off, and pissing the Sphinx off was not a hard nothing to do. Our coach said that having an evil entity to deal with was no different than having a mother-in-law. Coach was Baptist so the pint of bourbon he waved around while he lectured us was sloshing around the bottle in a small brown paper bag where he kept it hidden.

"You boys don't have it so rough. Just wait. Once an Endora puts her talons in your ass, you're though." It wasn't much later that I remembered Endora was Darren Stephens's mother-in-law on Bewitched.

Coach was building steam. "The first thing that fat ass mountain of negativity will do is shrivel your manhood. Then she'll vilify your best efforts on an hourly basis."

Coach was up and pacing now. He was screaming at his wife's picture on his desk. Screaming and red faced. "That soul sucking harpy is going to leech every ounce of joy and dignity you can muster and in the end; she'll fricassee your testicles. SO DON'T COME TO ME WITH YOUR SPHINX PROBLEMS! YOUR ISSUES HAVEN'T EVEN STARTED YET!"

As we backed out of his office, Coach managed to pull himself together a little. "Not that I'm bitter. " He took a pull from his paper bag "My door is always open to you guys. Hey, you fella's don't think I'm a failure, do ya?"

Anyway, the Sphinx ate my cousin Jimmy. Guts and all. I suppose the medical term is viscera, but I'm a little upset. I'm gonna' miss him. I mean all she left of Jimmy was a *shoe*. In a day or so she would leave the other partially digested and now disgusting Chuck Taylor, along with one or two finger bones, in an ever growing pile of Sphinx poop just off center court. The Sphinx, at least the one that plagued us, is not a clean beast. She stinks to high heaven and has the table manners of a warthog. She smacks too-*really loud*.

Jimmy went out brave though. Like all of us, he loved basketball and enough was *by-God* enough. So he gave it a try. It didn't help that Cindy Jo, his hottie of a girlfriend, was there. I guess he felt his pride was on the line. Maybe he was just showing off.

The Sphinx watched Jimmy approach and turned towards him. She had the face of a woman. A very pretty woman. Actually a famous one. We found out later she could sort of morph herself into any image she chose. Our Sphinx looked exactly like Wendy Williams from The Wendy Show. She knew it too. All day long she would lie, sprawled on our court as if she *owned* it, which as she pointed out, she pretty much did. She lay there giving off her stench, asking her daily riddle and cursing the Sons of Adam.

And to top it off, somewhere in her travels, she had picked up Wendy's signature "*How YOU doing*"

I can't begin to tell you how much she irritated us.

The Sphinx, of course, had the body of a lion. A big one too. More like a liger. She had scary, huge claws that were covered in filth and excrement. Her claws were also encrusted with the decaying flesh of her victims-her *Jimmy's*. The Sphinx sported the wings of an eagle and her tail, which had a life of its own, was that of a serpent. Some type of viper or maybe a mamba. We learned *really fast* to avoid that tail.

As Jimmy came near her, the Sphinx pursed her lips and tossed her head of hair. I swear to God, it was Wendy *up and down*.

"How YOU doing, vile offspring of man? Are you ready for my riddle less than worm?"

I don't know how Jimmy stood in there. The breath of this creature would drop a bull elk at about two hundred yards. Then Jimmy did something really cool. He took one of those Kung Fu stances like Lawrence Fishburne did in *The Matrix* and curled his fingers in that *come here and get your ass kicked* motion.

"Ask away ugly" Jimmy the brave.

It was a hell of an act of defiance in the face of that monster and we loved it. We all broke into whoops and cheers. Little Tony, from the *back* of the crowd of course, yelled "You got balls Jimmy my man!"

But our yells were cut short. The Sphinx picked up the basketball-our *brand new ball*-retracted one of the claws on her hand and set that ball to spinning just as good as Pistol Pete or Curly Neal could have.

"Not this one" she sneered.

The Sphinx has a talent for *uncanny* mimicry and that come out sounding exactly like Anthony Hopkins in *Silence of the Lambs*. Her voice caused the hair on my arms to stand up. I could see Jimmy gulp even from where we stood, which was, believe you me, a *healthy* distance back. Suddenly I wanted to stop him. I even fantasized about taking his pace, but I could never-*would never*-be that brave.

She fixed an eye on him and came with the riddle. "Tender hands make it grow. Yet it must be beaten to be eaten."

"Er...let's see..." Jimmy faltered.

SCHNIKT! The Sphinx popped her retracted claw. "Is that your final answer meat sack?" Regis Philbin from hell.

Jimmy was desperate. "Grapes damn it!" Jimmy shouted.

I have no idea what he was thinking. Maybe the old Lucy Show. That episode where Lucy and Ethel stomped the grapes in those wine vats. Whatever he was thinking, it was wrong.

"It's wheat you *snack*." She said it even while she was pouncing. I had to look away. Jimmy was my cousin.

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When she first flew down and landed on our court, we were in the middle of a game. We were grouped at one end and when I rebounded, I looked for an outlet pass. David broke away and was headed for the other goal when-out of nowhere-this big assed, evil, hussy landed smack dab on top of him.

She intercepted my pass and proceeded to eat David-right in front of us. We stood there silent and open mouthed while she announced herself and went over the rules. Her rules!

“How YOU doing?” She came right out of the gate with the Wendy thing. “I am a Sphinx. Not the only Sphinx, mind you, for there are certainly more of us. Perhaps you’ve heard of my more famous Aunt, the Sphinx that conquered Thebes? Her real name was Mildred”

She paused and cast a baleful and expectant look our way. But we were dumbfounded. Who the hell had ever heard of Thebes?

“Illiterate maggots” she bellowed “Have you read nothing of Greek history? No? HA! I bet you can tell me of the things you watch so mindlessly on your televisions. Oh, I’ve looked through the lighted windows of the homes of men at night. Drive!! Look how low you Sons of Adam have fallen. Wal-Mart, smart phones and Honey Boo Boo. These are the depths of your knowing. In times past, men read. They studied. They had *discourse*.”

She was pacing and had nothing but contempt for us.

“This is how Oedipus, that mother-fornicator, was able to defeat my proud Aunt. He *out-witted* her.”

Still nothing from us. We were Zombies.

“I sense that will not be a problem here.”

There is no sarcasm like that of a Sphinx. She spat out David’s braces “Do any of you know of which I speak? By the God s” she roared “YOU ARE NOT WORTHY. HEED MY RULES!”

Like it was our fault You Tube didn’t show stuff about Thebes.

At first we tried distraction. I tossed a cat at her-*sue me*-while Big Mike made a play for the ball. She disemboweled him with a dew claw. Or maybe the word is eviscerated. Either way-she ate him. That bitch ate the cat too.

Bear brought his Daddy’s twelve-gauge, and unloaded on her from about twenty feet away. Pellets just bounced off her smelly hide. So when she was napping, he snuck up real close and put the Remington up side her head. That’s when that serpent’s tail of hers whipped around and bit Bear right on his trigger finger.

Within seconds, Bear turned blueberry blue and collapsed on the ground with foam coming out of his mouth. He lay there trembling and we couldn’t help but think that he looked like a rabid Smurf. When the Sphinx woke from her nap, she appraised Bears body like it was a gift.

“How thoughtful” she said. Then she ate him.

“*Snack* you very much” she would say as one by one, we failed to answer whatever riddle she handed us. And every day she would eat one of us. At this rate, we wouldn’t have enough left to play a game of horse.

And the Macedonia Baptist Church elders were absolutely no help. None whatsoever. Our basketball court being taken over by a Sphinx was just not a priority to them. They had their hands full with the Minotaur. The Minotaur had taken over the baptismal pool and was using it like a day spa. The Minotaur’s first move was to debauch the wives and daughters of the church elders. He made those gals his devoted sex slaves and they were oblivious to all duties other than lying with him and satisfying his every lusty need or petty whim. I can’t count how many he sent back and forth to the store, fetching R.C. Colas, Moon Pies and bundles of sweet grass.

Phyllis, who always hung with us and was an awesome pick and roll specialist said that those women had become *enthralled*. I think she was right. They sure seemed fascinated by the Minotaur.

It would be fair to say they had become the beast’s groupies.

“It’s not fair” cried Deacon Jones “In his *thrall* or not, my Gladys hasn’t made potato salad since that walking, bovine Johnson first befouled our baptismal pool-may the Good Lord see fit to render him limp.”

So the elders had their problems and the riddles of the Sphinx just kept on coming.

“All in armor never clinking. Always wet, never drinking.”

OK, the answer, which is fish, seems obvious now. Especially to those of you who have read *The Hobbit* and remembered Bilbo’s deadly game of riddles deep within the Goblin cave. But we lost Rossie to that one. Jeffrey bit the dust when he messed up on a riddle we had learned in elementary school; what is red and green and goes round and round?

“Frog” Jeffrey said, but he lost on a technicality.

“Wrong boy! The answer is a frog in a *blender*” The Sphinx threw back her head and laughed. Then she ate him. After she ate Jeffrey, she spent twenty minutes on a showcase dribbling routine the Harlem Globetrotters would have envied. With our *brand new* ball!

I hated that Sphinx. And not just because she was eating my friends either. I didn’t like that smug attitude of hers. You could just tell she *loved* being smarter than us. Modern day riddles. Riddles from the ancient world. It didn’t matter because we always tanked. She got one of us a day and she had a blast doing it.

The Sphinx was having the time of her life. What soft and easy prey these new world boys had proven to be. Since Thebes there was no way she would try to take any city near Thebes or in Greece for

that matter. Not because she feared retribution by a descendant of Oedipus, for there are none-*the line of Cadmus dying in that accursed land*. But over there lived on the sons of sons of the heroes of old. There were men of God there too, and with them you could never be sure of the outcome when she engaged them in the *game*.

The Sphinx had been flying for longer than she had ever flown when she saw the basketball court and all those healthy, tasty young me. She stopped, ravenous with hunger, and eager to play the *game*. The riddle game that was so important to her kind. The dance of death she did with riddles had been etched deep within her DNA and had been her passion since first breath. It had been eons since she last indulged herself and she was eager to be sated. These new world boys had proven just the diversion and the *sustenance* she needed.

On her eleventh day of terrorizing the court, she ate and killed a rather tall young human named Terry. He was a virgin. Virgins tasted different. Not exactly sweeter, but *different*. She ate him because Terry did not know that a woman's sex-*her portal of pleasure*-was a trap for man in early life, a bringer of life in mid-life and a source of wisdom in the blooming years.,

The Sphinx sat there all fat and sassy. Truth was, she was getting fatter and sassier every day. And we were just about out of options. It was Phyllis who suggested what proved to be our way out and I don't know why we didn't think of it before.

At the two week mark, we brought in The Brain and put him up against that arrogant, evil bitch.

Every school has at least one braniac and Brian "The Brain" Sanders was ours. He was the kid everyone always wanted to sit next to during test time. Not even our teachers at West Columbus High School would challenge him on an answer. The Brain could have taught their classes. He was that smart.

As you can just picture him, Brian-at fifteen-and being a total braniac was kind of nerdy. He was a little over weight too, not fat, just sort of pudgy. And of course he was asthmatic and never went anywhere without his inhaler.

Naturally, The Brain didn't want a damn thing to do with helping us.

"Why should I help you guys?" The Brain asked. He was polishing his glasses "You never pick me on a side to play in any sport. And let's face it; being referred to as 'The Brain' while it is a compliment to my intelligence, sets me apart and ostracizes me. It's causing me to live a traumatic and painful childhood during these, my formative years."

That's how The Brain talked-with words like ostracize and formative. Man, we just had to have him take a whack at that flying meat grinder. But we couldn't pool enough money with our sad allowances

and part-time work money to buy him as The Brain made money hand over fist, tutoring other kids. And our vows to include him in our sports were met with a stare as empty as our promises were.

No, what got The Brain to agree to take on the Sphinx was a thing that has motivated man since the beginning. A *glorious* set of tits. The downfall of us all.

If Eve hadn't been toting a healthy rack, I doubt Adam would have ever rolled over like a puppy. To put it mildly, Jimmy's gal, Cindy Jo, had the best breasts in our entire school. Those babies were real head turners. Show stoppers.

Though still tore up about Jimmy, after much pleading on our part, Cindy Jo agreed to go on sort of a date with Brian. She even agreed to let him get to a *pre-defined* first base. So the little turd drew up a contract. Now I just want you to try and imagine a contract allowing a grope and feel. This was what we had to deal with because of that damned Sphinx.

Cindy Jo objected to the first draft, which she felt constituted far *more* than first base. So we had to rush back over to The Brain's with her counter proposal. This in turn, sent Brian to complaining about her very *limiting* conditions and half minute of actual field time. Finally-three amended contracts later-it was agreed that they would double date with me and my girl Jenna. First to Sonic, as Brian had a weakness for their cheesy tater-tots, then to a movie where Brian "The Brain" Sanderson, at the Stardust Drive Drive-In over in Whiteville, would get to go all the way to first base.

First base, in the amended and carefully scrutinized-*by all parties*-contract, consisted of a hand on Cindy Jo's breasts for a *maximum* of two minutes. The terms specified that this was to be an under-the-shirt, but *bra-intact* fondling. This was Cindy Jo's safeguard thought up by one of her girlfriends. The trade-off was that it consisted of either / or breast and did allow one quick under-the-bra squeeze.

I could just envision the little fella' groping and wheezing, his glasses fogged up, his erection pup tenting for days after.

Anyway, that's why The Brain agreed to go up against the Sphinx. He was motivated by a shot at first base. You would be to. Cindy Jo had some most awesome and spectacular hooters a girl could have. I believe they would have motivated a priest. They sure got a fifteen year old to go up against the hellish nightmare we were sidled with.

Riddle time for the Sphinx was at three P.M. every day. On the dot! She was as punctual as she was hateful, so by two fifty eight and still no sign of The Brain, we were sweating like sausages in a broiler oven. We knew that if no one stepped up to the plate and tried her on a riddle, she would just fall on one of us at random. Everyone was giving me the evil eye because I had sort of brokered this deal.

I was pretty sure whose mouth they would shove the apple in.

With seconds to spare, we heard Brian huffing and wheezing and pedaling up on his bike. He dismounted and bent over. The Brain was gasping for breath while we gratefully surrounded him. There he was, Brian "The Brain" Sanders, our pudgy, asthmatic paladin. I could have kissed him.

"Sorry guys" he had caught his breath "I had to help a guy I tutor online. He's pre-law at Duke and was in a panic. I know I'm cutting it close, but he pays *actual* money and the new World of Warcraft expansion DVD is coming out and I needed the extra cash."

Then that *wonderful* little nerd smiled up at us "Plus, I have a date and real men don't go Dutch" Even Cindy Jo could hear the pride in his voice, though she pretended to look away. I have to admit, Brian's comment sort of touched us all.

Just then the air seemed to change. That's when it got old west. *Spaghetti Western* old west. Our crowd parted and suddenly *it was on*. The Brain and the Sphinx. I swear I could hear the Sergio Leone music playing from *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*. Actually, I did hear it. Someone in back started to whistle the theme. It was sort of contagious.

Brian was walking towards the Sphinx and without turning his head or taking his eyes off of the beast, he said "Can the movie music"

The Sphinx squared off against The Brain and came with the dead on Wendy imitation. "How YOU doing, you portly and insignificant half-man?"

This did not stop Brian's approach and that angered the Sphinx. She loved it when her intimidation-*her timmy*-worked. She roared at us. "IS THIS THE BEST YOU HUMANS CAN MUSTER AGAINST AN IMMORTAL SUCH AS I? HOW DARE YOU SEND THIS VIRGIN WHO HAS YET TAKEN BLADE TO CHIN-WHISKERS?"

"Put a sock in it, you repugnant, odiferous skag." Brian's voice cut through her protests.

The entire playground was instantly quiet. There didn't seem to be an ounce of fear in Brian. Neither in his voice, nor in the way the little nerd stood before that unholy monstrosity. I know it was The Brain who was looking up-but it didn't *seem* that way. For the first time, I think her feathers were ruffled.

The only sound to be heard in the silence that followed was the hiss of Brian's inhaler as he tended to his asthma. Then Cindy Jo started to cry.

"Oh my God! He's so brave" she sobbed. "And cute. Maybe *second base* isn't out of the question."

Some of us crossed ourselves and a small gust of wind created a whirl of leaves that skittered across the playing court.

“Maggot. Insect. Puny man-child. Yours will be a very slow death. I believe I will begin by rubbing a fine pepper sauce on your toes and nibbling them off while you watch.” And with that, the sphinx let out an ear piercing shriek. That shriek was like nothing we had ever heard. I was pretty sure someone soiled themselves. All of us were poised on the verge of fleeing for our lives.

But not Brian. He stood in the wind of her noise and foulness and waited calmly until it ebbed. That’s when The Brain did the *ultimate*. He yawned. He gave the affected; *exaggerated* yawn of someone bored to tears. “Ask your riddle so that I may be done here and the world rid of you, you malignant, septic, festering bane to nobody.”

“Child” the Sphinx shrieked.

“Has been” The Brain countered.

That did it. The Sphinx slammed her foot on the ground and suddenly she was all business and the voice of Alex Trebek from Jeopardy. “Your answer must come in the form of a question, you corpulent offspring of weak seed. Prepare to die on the heels of your incorrect response boy.”

The Sphinx moved to within inches of Brian and looked down at him. We could see the blood red fury in her eyes. A long line of drool hung from her fangs and we could hear the click of her claws, each talon a good five inches long, as she moved her bulk over Brian. The Sphinx asked The Brian her riddle.

“Two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, onions on a sesame seed bun. Now what am I, you soon-to-be-repast?”

The Brain didn’t even hesitate.

“What is a Big Mac? You rancid blot on existence.”

“YES!” we all crowed.

“NO!” The Sphinx shrieked “I did not say *pickles*. I distinctly said two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, onions on a sesame seed bun. Get ready to say hello to Mama’s gullet you gnat. The Big Mac song clearly puts pickles after cheese and before the onion.”

She reared back on her haunches and began to do a victory dance. Our hearts sank. Each of us was playing that dammed jingle in our heads, and sure enough-*pickles*.

But Brian ignored all of this. He reached into his pocket and pooped open a small box of Tic-Tacs. Sliding a few into his mouth, The Brain calmly told The Sphinx exactly what time it was.

“It is you who lose, you courier of charnel house halitosis. You recited *some* of the theme song from the original Big Mac ad campaign jingle, which yes, does include pickles. You may rest assured that I noted the omission of said condiment.”

“Exactly short-life. This means that I am the victor and you are merely unworthy.” The Sphinx swelled with pride over her cleverness.

“Wrong, you fetid obscenity” The Brain argued with logic and the absolute surety of someone holding an ace-high straight. “And if you are the best of your kind, then I weep for your entire species. For while the pickle is a condiment, you gorgon wanna’ be, and was used in the jingle-a pickle is but an ordinary condiment and can be found on any number of burgers. However, it no more a necessary one on a Big Mac than it is on a Whopper, you vile abomination.”

The Sphinx blinked. She stepped back and The Brain followed her-his logic overwhelming the beast.

“Every day millions of Big Macs are sold-world wide-at least half of which are ordered as *hold the pickle*, you hideous skank. And THEY ARE STILL BIG MACS!”

The two were mid-court now and the Sphinx was looking around furtively. Brian continued his onslaught. “Everyone knows it is the special sauce that makes a Big Mac and that fact makes me victorious and you unworthy, you grotesque atrocity. Now take your wretched fat ass off our basketball court and impale yourself on the spiral of yon house of worship, you *minor-at-best* petulance.

And damned if The Brain didn’t have her there. The special sauce was the key to a Big Mac. Without it, there was no Big Mac. With a thunderous cry, the Sphinx flew up into the air and we all burst into applause. We watched to see her impale herself on the church steeple, but this did not happen. The Sphinx, just circled high above our basketball court and then pooping once, she flew off. We watched until she was no longer even a speck.

We started to grumble about the Sphinx cheating us on her end of the bargain, but The Brain silenced us with an impatient wave of his hand.

“Was there a contract” he asked. “Did she sign a contract for this deal?”

“Well no” I said “But it was a well witnessed verbal agreement. That’s got to count. Right?”

“Yes” said The Brain “And she is fulfilling her end as well. She has moved on and let you be.”

“But what about her death?” Rita whined “She was supposed to go Hari-Kari on the steeple.”

“Well you *geniuses* didn’t put it in writing” The Brain said “therefore you set no specific *time* for her to perform this act. She can offer to do it a hundred thousand years from now and still be honoring the pact she made on the riddle game.”

Well that was a let-down. But we did have our court back. Cindy Jo walked up and gave Brian a kiss-*and not on the cheek either*. The poor kid's glasses fogged up and when the kiss was over, he was forced to use his inhaler. You could tell Cindy Jo set his world on fire, but The Brain played it Steve McQueen.

"Thanks babe" Brian said as he straddled his bike. I do believe this move and his attitude caused Cindy Jo's heart to flutter. Cocky kid.

"Hey Brian. How did you know the Sphinx would honor the rules and not just eat you anyway?" I asked.

"Oh my God!" The Brain lectured us "Don't you guys read? Tolkien? Remember Smaug? How about John Gardner's take on Beowulf? Joseph Campbell? Dragons and Sphinxes are creatures of the ancient world and very bound by its rules. Besides, the riddle game is sacred. It would be welshing a bet not to honor it."

"Yeah, but how did you know you could answer her riddle?" Greg Boy piped up.

"Easy" Brian had a foot cocked on a pedal, ready to ride home. In the distance, I could hear a tractor in a field. "I read. And because I read, I have a broad base of knowledge. It's an adventure to read. Lots of cool stuff in books. You guys should try it."

Maybe we would at that Brian.

"Besides" he continued, this time pointing up towards heaven "I believe in the All Mighty. I believe he is my pal-my best pal really, and today I put on his armor. The armor of God. It's right there in Ephesians. Don't' you guys ever read anything? Oh never mind."

The Brain turned to Cindy Jo. You could tell she was smitten. She was seventeen and her breasts would have won blue ribbons in the category of wondrous and Brian was feeding her the ultimate aphrodisiac. *Confidence*.

"We'll pick you up at eight tonight Cindy Jo. I hope you like Sonic. See you later fellas."

I wasn't sure if he was talking to us or Cindy Jo's lady bumps. We watched as he pedaled off. Cocky kid. You had to love him. We picked sides and had a good game. From time to time, deep within the baptismal pool area, we heard the squeals and shrieks of laughing neophytes, and the bellows of the Minotaur as he enjoyed the wives and daughters of the elders of the Macedonia Baptist church.

"Pickles" said Greg Boy "Who the hell would have *thunk* it?"

The End