

## **Brownie Points**

My birth mother tried to microwave half of me.

In her defense, it was 1972 and she probably didn't know much about her new state-of-the-art kitchen gadget, let alone the damage it could impart onto human DNA.

My sperm donor of a father was doing just that. He was living in Manhattan, selling pot, and running a small concert venue whose only claim to fame was that Foghat once played there. Apparently, this job took so much of his time that he was physically unable to make it up to Buffalo to visit my mother—I still to this day do not know what they were doing living in different cities—but she wanted a baby. So, my father would deposit his seed into some sort of test tube analogue, which I wish I never knew because it still creeps me out. He would then pack it in dry ice and ship it upstate. I am unsure of the temperature at which the human seed freezes but my mother must have figured it out. The vials were stored until she thought she was ovulating. Then, she would warm one up in the aforementioned appliance, and off she'd go.

You can see why I never really like to think about it, but my defense team says it is vital background information that explains "psychological vulnerabilities." I tend to disagree, but since I'm the one who woke up with my arm over the lifeless dough of the body lying next to

me, I will have to defer to their judgment. The cops say I did it, but my lawyer says a case could be made for Lithium as the main suspect.

\*\*

We suffered from the same disease, but Renee was manic and I was depressed when we first hooked up in the Bellevue psychiatric ward. She was a little crazier; I was more dependent on pharmaceuticals. However, she was also beautiful and I was hoping to use the hypersexual part of her mood swings to my advantage.

I am not proud, but I am honest. This would get me big brownie points during group session if I was still hospitalized.

We joked about how weird it would be if our manic and depressed roles were reversed the next time we were both committed. I also learned that, great sex or not, I really wasn't all that screwed up compared to your average Bellevue mental health hold, and was planning to never again set foot in that place, voluntarily or involuntarily.

I was able to get out of there before Renee. We pledged our undying love and all that before I left, but I wasn't counting on anything because she had pledged the same to my roommate, her boyfriend.

They hadn't been dating all that long. I had barely ever said anything to her before our mutual involuntary hospitalizations except for one of those awkward early morning bathroom encounters when I didn't know she was staying over.

Each of us knew the other was crazy...excuse me, "disabled with a psychiatric disease process." After all, we were both associated with a third bipolar, the aforementioned roommate/boyfriend. His name was Lionel.

He was pathological to the point where no one was really sure how he was let out of prison. Proof of said pathology resided upon with a crumpled list in his back pocket.

On this medium-sized piece of paper, he kept the names of the several dozen people who had ever wronged him. When he got even with them, he would take the paper out of his pocket, quietly pencil a mark through the name, and apparently forget the transgression. He had few redeeming qualities, but being manic depressives, Renee and I had a limited number of options when it came to acquaintances. You know, burned bridges and all.

\*\*

Now a free man, I was back in a familiar setting. I was looking for a job; not easy with my resume. During my job interviews, I found it imperative to avoid any questions about my last employer. He had called 911 after I broke into his boat in the harbor. He told the police how I was missing from work that morning because I was going to kill myself. That was not totally true. I did bring a gun but I was just going to test it out. I didn't think that one test-fire would really hurt anything. But the deafening resonance, the cloud of smoke rising from the barrel, and the little tiny geyser I created in the floor proved to be addicting. My newfound love of combining Dr Pepper and Jameson whiskey probably also contributed, but I took full, rational responsibility and was surprised to still end up in Bellevue that night.

Apparently, the status of one's driver's license matters more than any previous brushes with the medical and legal establishments. A few days after my discharge from the hospital, I was able to land a job at Big Mike's Pizzeria as a delivery boy. The pay, based on tips, was unpredictable, but I wasn't bad at it. None of the customers seemed to really care about my background as long as I looked hepatitis-free and their pizza arrived when promised.

I didn't think she would ever call me, but she did. She called from the visitors' phone in the hospital lobby to tell me she had just been released. I didn't have to say anything for her to acknowledge what we were both thinking.

"Lionel doesn't know. He thinks I'm getting out this weekend, so we've got two whole days together." She whispered all of this, as if there could be danger lurking right there at the information desk.

I was in no position to really argue with that kind of logic, but I did have to work both nights. She said that she would hang out with me in the car. I couldn't remember any rules on this subject from my incredibly boring pizza-boy orientation. I radioed in and asked for my next run to be on the other side of town.

I double-parked and nervously entered the fluorescence of the hospital's main lobby. She was holding a white plastic bag labeled "patient belongings" and wearing the paper scrubs issued to patients who have no clothes of their own. She looked amazing. Her long dark hair was in a pony-tail tied with a short length of intravenous tubing—a joke or not, I couldn't tell.

I asked about her clothes. She told me matter-of-factly, that her real clothes were cut off in the E.R. when she was put into restraints.

"Oh." What could I say to that?

I carried her bag as we walked to the only car in the hospital parking lot with an orange, blinking pizza light on its roof.

"You sure you want to hang out with a lowly pizza guy for a whole night?"

"Look mister, what you need to realize is that a night, even with a piece of societal dredge-trash like you, is going to be great after that long in the loony bin. See," she smiled that smile that killed me, "you easily win by comparison."

I decided right then and there that I wouldn't bring *him* up that night. As I turned the key in the ignition, she was already leaning between the bucket seats, searching for something in the back.

"Hey, what's in the rusty tool box back here?"

"Why?" I asked, concern about her volatility in the outside world hitting me for the first time that evening.

"I want to find an old carpet knife and slit my wrists open." She paused just long enough for dramatic effect. "No silly, I just have to modify my wardrobe a little. I am going to be waaaay too hot and steamy while sitting here holding pizza boxes for you, and...my skin needs air."

She found the knife and worked carefully to cut off each sleeve of the weird paper/cotton blue material. She made her pants into shorts, and then—the fashion coup de grace—cut a long, plunging V-neck into the front of her shirt.

We pulled up to my first delivery, a frat house. She announced that she was going in with me.

"There is absolutely no way. I would sooner touch a flame to a vat of kerosene! I can't get fired remember?" She pouted, but I'm sure she never actually expected me to acquiesce.

I rang the doorbell and stood between the faux Greek pillars on the front porch. A couple of drunken pledges opened the door. I moved to block their view of the car behind me and the night that lay ahead. I felt like I was hiding buried treasure from these college guys who spoke my same language—minus, of course, the mental disorder.

A friend once asked me what it was like to be bipolar. I told him that the manic and the depressive episodes were pretty self-explanatory. They could be dangerous or even life-threatening, but still self-explanatory.

It was the other times that really tested you. I told him it was like someone blindfolded you, and then a crane dropped you into a roller-coaster car on the steepest part of the track. Problem was, they put you in the car facing sideways and you had to somehow figure out if you were going to be heading up or down, and prepare accordingly.

Renee was obviously on the most dangerous of all mental roller-coasters. Hers had no seatbelts, no lap bars.

“So Richard, when are we going to get the vodka?” She said as I was returning to the car. I didn’t even have the driver’s door fully open.

“Shouldn’t we at least get you some clothes first?” I asked.

“Vodka precludes the need for clothes. Didn’t you learn anything in your year and a half of college?”

I noticed she still had the knife in her hand. She had now extended the cut through to the bottom of her shirt and tied the ends. She exposed her midriff and a belly ring which I had never seen before. How does one get a belly ring while committed as a psychiatric inpatient?

“I was there for a year and a half, but...” I paused to wave an index finger in front of her face, “I packed in at least *two* and a half years of learning.”

She laughed and playfully bit the end of my finger. I knew then that I would give into anything and everything that she wanted that night. So help me God.

I drove us to the edge of the city. She asked me how much money I had. The frat house had paid me in cash so the combined money made by me and the pizzeria was fifty-nine dollars.

“Perfect,” she put her bare feet up on the dash. “That will get us one bottle of Grey Goose or two bottles of Absolut.”

As proof of my aforementioned theorem, I did not even bother to tell her how I most definitely could not spend my employer's money.

"I vote for the two bottles," she continued without me. "I know this place where we can get them in different colors so that we know whose is whose. I have personal space issues as you well know." She leaned into me and pulled a piece of pizza from a box in the back.

I knew then that my job was done for the night; done forever.

We made it to the liquor store. The Ethiopian guy—she explained the ethnic family tree en route to the store—recognized her when we walked in. He did a short double-take at her paper wardrobe as he stepped from behind the desk to hug her.

"Where have you been missing, young lady? May I presume another business trip?"

"You are exactly right, Berihun. I'm trying to cut back though." She winked at me over a shoulder. "Can you kindly guide us to the vodka collection?"

We walked to the wall of bottles. She pointed to two of them. I dug into my pockets as we walked back to the counter.

"Do you know, Richard, that according to government regulations, vodka is a spirit without distinctive character, aroma, taste, or color."

"Do you know how much trouble you are getting me into in just one night?" I retorted.

"Don't go digging in the dirt where your sins are buried," she sighed as she took my hand that was clasping the cash and pointed it across the counter to Berihun. "Were you not paying attention during our group sessions?"

We walked outside into an exposing nightfall. Renee had the top off of the first bottle and handed it to me before we reached the car.

The radio was yelling at me, first in a subtle, managerial way, then—as we pulled out of the parking lot—in a fevered tirade, laced with expletives. Renee reached between her legs and found the knife on the floor. She cut the radio wires and engulfed us in silence, but also managed to cut the wiring to the car's interior lights in the process. This made us giggle.

We giggled more as we sang to replace the songs of the deceased radio. We downed our bottles in the dark sarcophagus of my car and drove beneath the city's lights that sporadically illuminated our guilt.

I drove us away from the city. The distance between lights became greater as the weight of the bottles became lighter. We stopped on a dirt road that appeared to lead only to an abandoned farm. It was void of any lights, void of even colors.

I'm sure I suggested that we go back to her apartment. But she didn't hear...or maybe I didn't say it, I'm not sure which—our memories and instinct for peril having been diluted by the vodka.

Somehow we made it back to my apartment instead. At least Lionel wasn't home. We were in my room when she asked where my pills could be found. I actually had none. I had been prescribed a few different medicines upon my release from the hospital, but hadn't filled them yet due to the cost and due, even more, to the limitation of freedom they imparted. I showed her the printed prescriptions as proof of my non-pharmaceutical status.

She told me to wait just a minute. She ran into Lionel's room and started rummaging beneath his bed. I was going to stop her, but I was nursing my bottle and forgot where she was going or even where we were.



She came back with several small plastic bottles. Some were the regular orange cylinders, but others were a transparent red and were shaped like an urn. All of them had Lionel's name printed on the label.

She mixed a few different pills together in her palm.

"Hey look, trail mix!" Renee exclaimed happily while showing me the mixture.

I looked up, trying to make sure she had closed my door, but my eyes could no longer focus. I lay back on the bed and opened my mouth. She fed me the pills and drowned them with the last of our bottles. She told me to keep my mouth open so that she could "see the pills swim."

I did the same for her and we laughed into the night. At some point, I remember an angry voice from the hallway, but I was unable to respond or even know if it was real. Soon after, I passed out.

\*\*

I am wearing a borrowed suit and tie, the first I have worn in many years. I am sitting on an uncomfortable wooden chair within the enclosure of the witness stand. I am looking at my court-appointed defense attorney. He is speaking, pacing, and wearing a suit more expensive than my own. He often stops speaking, sometimes dramatically in mid-sentence, to look thoughtfully from me, to the jury, and back.

We have been doing this for two days already—all the buildup of my "troubled upbringing," like that will excuse my actions.

Everybody is anxious for him to get to the conclusion. Hell, we would even settle for a denouement at this point.

He looks up from his notes and walks over to rest an elbow on the side of the jury box. He looks back at me.

“Richard, isn’t it true that Ms. Renee Carlino was killed by your roommate, Mr. Lionel Thomas, who is also known by his nickname, Lithium?”

Every word and action of mine in the courtroom had been scripted and rehearsed. I had performed perfectly up to this point. I looked out to the jury and the people crying in the gallery.

“No sir, that is not true.”

My attorney’s eyes widened. I took in one long breath and every other sound in the courtroom fell away.

Everyone focused on me as if I was on a stage. But I wasn’t on a stage; I was on my roller coaster. All I could do now was tell the truth, and start working on my brownie points.