

## Rage Stranger Dot Com

I don't know what obsessed me to think there might even be such a thing as a hating site. Perhaps Sherry's suggestion that I check out some dating sites; hating rhymes with dating. Or maybe—like so many other things that followed the accident—it had something to do with my injuries and foggy resignation. It felt like maybe I needed a dose of hatred or anger to shake me out of the murky mayonnaise of my acquiescent and almost pleasant acceptance of forever changed circumstances.

Eitherwise, there *were* such things as hating sites and it only took a simple search to find a bunch of them. I picked the one that looked most promising: RageStranger.com.

At Rage Stranger, I could go to the chat rooms: Attitudes, Bitch Slap, Shut Up and Listen, I Could Just Thumb Your Eyes Out, and a bunch of others. Or I could browse the member profiles, which I did. I found myself particularly drawn to MsHardOn, a “perky gal from rural Colorado” looking for “some liberal jackass to whip into shape.”

I wasn't too sure what my politics were anymore, but the verb held my attention.

I told Sherry about it the next morning. We were in the kitchen of my small apartment sipping instant coffee, the kind that tastes like you just reused someone else's Keurig cup at the welfare office. Sherry had brought over a couple tuna sandwiches and a small plastic Christmas

tree, one with permanent decorations that didn't require much, if any, manual dexterity in order to reap the full benefits of its splendor.

Sherry took a look at my open laptop. "Rage Stranger?" She set her mug on the table. "It's just your guilt-ridden attitude that's attracting you to this site," Sherry said. "I keep telling you, the accident wasn't your fault."

"You're getting replicative again, Sherry. I simply asked you for help coming up with a user name, so I can sign on and create a profile."

"Well I don't think this site is good for you, Danny. For one thing, it will add to your frustration about your verbal skills. And I certainly don't think BurroBuster is much of a handle."

Sherry and I had been married ten years earlier, when my life had been whole. She'd taken to checking in on me since Angela moved out. The Angela-moving-out-thing had happened maybe three months after the accident, about half a year ago in May.

Sherry was a good woman. She had put on some weight in her late thirties and early forties, but her bowling average still hovered around 240, and she could pick up a seven-ten split like nobody's business.

She owned the Sorry Seagull, a year round breakfast and seafood shack about a thousand miles from any ocean, washed ashore here in central North Dakota. Town of Harmon, about ten miles north and west of Bismarck, along Highway 36 where the mileage markers have been replaced by dinged-up hubcaps or shards of plastic bumpers. Originally it had been called Sherry's Sorry Seagull, but a windstorm in '09 blew away part of the sign, and she saw no point in replacing it. "It's a small town," she'd said. "Everyone knows it's mine."

She'd given me a job washing dishes after I'd been let go from my job as bookkeeper for Wallaby Construction Company in Bismarck. "The numbers just aren't crunching right anymore, Danny," they'd told me. Admittedly my arithmetic had been a little challenged after—you know—the accident.

Sherry had always been really nice to me. Except during the divorce when she was so pissed she couldn't see striped. After the accident she acted even nicer. I guess she felt sorry for me. She knew about pain and loss. Her parents had both died before I met her; their fishing shanty sunk through thin ice. Her dad couldn't get the door unlatched, or so the story goes. Sherry identified the bodies. Hard, she said, given their prune-like faces.

Sherry said goodbye and left. I uncapped a Zero Cal Tiger Juice and flippered open my laptop on the kitchen table Angela and I purchased the previous year at a fly market in Cannon Ball, on the res. I worked on my profile for most of the afternoon, suppering on a large bag of Cheetos and a couple Mountain Dews.

I got hung up on the age thing for a bit. I mean, should I be honest and say forty-six? I started thinking of how no one would want to date a guy between forty and fifty, and mid-way into the internal argument, a third voice interrupted. *It's a hate site. Not a date site, Dummies. They're not supposed to like you. They're supposed to hate you.*

Of course. So, forty-six it is, both of me agreed.

By midnight I had my profile pretty polished with some catchy phrases like "loves to argue over soggy cereal or three-day-old pizza," "able to flip the bird with the toes on both my feet," and my favorite, "don't give a cold crap what Mother Theresa did."

I trolled around for an hour or two, not prepared to get into any discussions on the first night. MsHardOn had posted in the Bitch Slap chat room and was into it big time with NoRightWingShit. I chuckled at a few posts then wandered to bed.

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The accident had happened on a snow machine weekend in Teddy R. National Park last February. My best friend, Rocky Despire, and his new girlfriend, Rosie, invited me and Angela to join them. Rocky and I'd been best friends pretty much forever except when he'd gone away to college at NDSU.

We rented snow machines just outside the park.

If we'd stuck with beer, I figure we might have been okay, but Rocky insisted on breaking open the brown hooch early Friday afternoon. By two-thirty all of us were hooting and carrying on like meth-crazed hillbillies. Angela and Rosie got into a crazy game of snow machine chicken, pretty tame at first, but growing more insane as the booze seeped into their cranial capillaries.

In my altercated state, I tried to intervene, angling my sled into the duel. Rosie overcompensated, veering away from a head-on collision with Angela and plowed into me broadside at what must have been forty miles an hour. She flew over me, all flailing arms and legs. My sled overturned on top of me, tracks spinning over my upper body and head. Snow shot off the lower track, spray the unnatural color of peppermint mouthwash. There was screaming all over the place.

In the hospital two hours later, Rosie was pronounced dead from a broken neck, and, well, I ended up like this.

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The morning after picking out my user name, I walked to my first morning of work. It was 5:30 on December 15. Barely enough blue in the sky to make a pair of cop's pants. Even the Christmas decorations looked glum, twinkling half-heartedly. The haze turned to sleet just before I got to the Seagull.

An old black man named Amos was the second-shift dishwasher and had Mondays off, so Sherry had arranged for him to show me the roads. He taught me to stack the breakfast plates with a spray of water between each.

"Let'm set like that for five minutes and the only scrubbing you'll be doing is the pans."

I nodded.

He looked at my face for a long minute. "How'd that happen?" he asked, as if he might just as easily been asking about a stain on my shirt.

I told him, ending with some obvious statement about what a bad accident it had been.

He ran a clawed gnarly hand through the gray stubble on his head. "My momma used to say, 'There are no accidents. Still, doesn't mean anyone's to blame. Just the way the planet script reads.'" He lifted the dishwasher door. "Maybe so. Maybe not. But it has sure made me a man who looks for meaning in whatever meager places I can find it."

That trick—the one about soaking the fossilized egg-yolk plates—really works.

On the way home that afternoon wind blew in from the north. It had fangs and talons that clawed at my face. Luckily there was not a lot of feeling left there. That was the day I realized the blue plastic bag had apparently been designated our state flower, as dozens of them blew about the streets with abandon. Somewhere in the murky months of my healing the world had

made some lopsided spins. I was straggling to keep up, but realized even then, if it hadn't been for that job and Sherry's kindness I'd have ended up swallowed whole. Since then I've come to accept my adulthood as something that is always just getting underway.

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That evening I decided to make the leap and messaged MsHardOn.

*BB: Hey Ms. I just checked out your profile. Why does your photo not include your face?*

When I returned home from work the next day, Ms. had answered my message.

*Ms.: Hey yourself, BurroBuster. What's it to you? And what are you so clandestinely fired up about? Some kind of passive aggressive pervert? Go fuck yourself.*

I immediately responded.

*BB: Fired up? You mean like angry? I don't think I'm angry.*

*Ms.: What, you're trolling? Get angry or get the hell off this site. You're wasting my time.*

*BB: You have better things to do?*

The screen went white for an hour. I shut it down and heated a can of chicken noodle soup.

The next morning, I flapped open the I-pad. The site was still up, and there was a new message.

*Ms.: BurroBuster, where the hell is your picture? You're such a big photo guy, let's see it.*

I didn't have a current picture. Why would I? I thought about sending her an old photo, but what was the point?

*BB: I think it's not a good idea. I think it would gross people out.*

That afternoon, I posted again.

BB: *Okay. I've decided to post a photo. It's in my profile.*

Long pause.

Ms.: *Whew. Yeah, that's a little rough.*

Thirty minutes later.

Ms.: *An accident?*

BB: *Yeah. A crash.*

Another fifteen minutes.

Ms.: *Mine was a fire.*

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As I mentioned, Angela had moved out about two months after I returned from the hospital, sometime in May. Rocky helped her; he had a pickup truck. Rocky rarely got off the sofa anymore. In his heyday, he'd been the star linebacker at Harmon High. He even got a scholarship to NDSU but failed out second semester. Too much weed, too many pills. Since then he'd mostly been in between jobs.

She'd set an armful of clothes on the kitchen table and leaned on the counter top. "I'm leavin' the frogs for you, Danny." A mournful expression befuddled her eyes.

"Oh. Sweet. Thanks, Angie." I gazed over to the window where the glass frogs hung in the gray afternoon light. "Why is it you're leaving again? Is it this?" I gestured with lazy fingertips to my face.

"Of course not, Honey. That's mean of you to say. And sad."

"Sorry. Thanks for leaving the frogs."

She left, her earrings clattering like dog tags. All I could think of watching her disappear into Rocky's beater Ford F-250 was how her legs had gotten even skinnier, poking out from under her slight beer bulge like two sticks sharing a popsicle.

I wandered over to where the multicolored glass frogs, suspended from threads and cords, dangled in the living room window, prismatically casting hues around the room. Angela had said each one was a wish, a promise of what we would one day be. I spun the orange one gently with my thumb then stopped it with two fingers when the light landed on my eyes.

"Which promise are you?"

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It was pretty smooth sloping my first couple weeks at the Seagull. I kept my nose down, head to the grindstone, and did my work. Once the waitresses got over my appearance, most of them were friendly enough. They didn't have to see me that much.

Christmas week, things got really busy. The gals were a little slow with the bussing, so I figured I could help out and see if any of the bus carts were full. As I teetered into the multi-colored-bulb-decorated dining room I realized my mistake. Too late.

I got a talking-to at the end of my shift.

"I thought I'd been clear, Danny, that your place is in the kitchen."

"I'm really sorry, Sherry. I've said so a dozen half times already."

"One party—a four top—left part way through their meal. They stiffed us."

"You can dock it out of my pay."

"Shit, Danny, I don't want to do that. But you have to promise me you won't do it again." She pushed a big bang of black hair out of her right eye. "Promise me."



“No problema. I promise.”

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After she moved out, Angela and Rocky stopped over once a month or so to pick up a few more of her things, so it was no big surprise when they came by the day after Christmas. She had a Gator Aid with me at the kitchen table while Rocky sat in the F-250 smoking cigarettes. I could see him from the kitchen window, his pale white forearm dangling from the window, occasionally disappearing into the cab like a turtle’s head, followed by a flume of smoke. Then the turtle’s head would reappear, nodding some ashes off its chin. I thought back to when I used to smoke. I could no longer hold a cigarette between what passed for my lips. I pondered for a second how that was just another good outcome of the accident. Better for my health and all.

In the silence, I felt Angela was winding me up for something big. Then one and a half cigarettes into the non-conversation, she finally engaged my stare, thumbing one of her podgy cheeks. “Look, Danny. Rocky and I have decided to get married.” Toking hard on the cig, her pursed red mouth looked like the collapsed entrance to an amusement park tunnel of love.

I gritted my teeth in what I hoped would pass for a smile. “Really? The guy I’ve grown up with? Little League, me the pitcher, Rocky behind the plate.” I kept going even though it was apparent I was speaking entirely to myself. “Rocky on bass, me on the drums, beating away in his family’s garage in eighth grade. Working together after senior year at the Goodyear Tire Change on Fourth and Church. Best man at my wedding. *That* Rocky?”

We both stood, studying each other like one of us was a reflection.

“Try not to get worked up, Danny. You know how you can get. And the doctor says it’s still hard on your brain when you get worked up.”

I started toward her and she moved her palms up vertically like a traffic cop, as if to press both hands on my chest like she used to, only this time her hands remained an inch or so away as if touching me might be contagious. She had seen my body at its worst, just after. In the hospital. It was some better now, but she had never looked at it since. Still, there was no missing my face.

She conveyed a series of looks like scorn, then shocking disappointment. “Try not to take it personally,” she bleated. “You know he always had a thing for me. You met me at the same time, remember? That night in The Pony.”

How could I forget? The Stoned Pony. A strip bar over on Mexico and Ninth where the curbs are adorned with dog shit. She’d been a dancer, recently from Aberdeen.

“It was just a matter of chance that you and I ended up together. And, well, now with things like they are...”

One thing. Me. The physicality of me.

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On the afternoon of December 28, the streets were quietly content. Winter clouds bunched the sky directly overhead, but the late afternoon sun lit up the west in a dull shade of salami. My miseries were winding down, and I felt like maybe I was getting a grip on things, a sense of accomplishment, like I’d finished sorting out a barrel of bungee cords. The bafflements I’d recalled about my life when it was still whole didn’t seem to matter much anymore. I didn’t need to catastrophize every setback.

I arrived at the apartment and lifted the lid of my computer.

Ms.: *I read that the biggest causes of violence are shame and isolation. Are you ashamed?*

BB: *Maybe. But I'm not isolated. I work forty hours a week.*

Ms.: *Work? What can you possibly do for work?*

BB: *I work the morning shift doing dishes in a restaurant. Then I mop the floors.*

Ms.: *Don't you know they make fun of you behind your back? You, Elephant Man. Me, Twisted Sister.*

BB: *Maybe. But that's their problem.*

MS.: *What about the pity? Doesn't that piss you off?*

BB: *I pretend it's genuine caring. Maybe, in some cases, it is.*

Ms.: *You're living in Lala Land. Oblivious to the quiet terror of being alive.*

BB: *Lala Land is a big place. There's room for more.*

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Sherry and I had taken to having coffee together in her small office after my shift ended at three. I stirred and stirred, hoping all four sugar packets would dissolve. "I've got this friend coming to town."

She edged forward on her old swivel chair. "A friend?"

"Yeah, well, more of an acquaintance. Anyway, she's going to need a job. I thought maybe, with Amos about to retire, you could use a second shift dishwasher."

"Hmm. Maybe." She sipped and nested her cup onto the desk among all the clutter.

"Who is this friend?"

“Sarah Wiest.”

“Never heard you speak of her. Must be a *new* friend.” Sherry tugged a strand of hair from her mouth, thinning her lips into a smile. “It’s MsHardOn, isn’t it?”

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I worked all day Sunday cleaning the house. Washed the sheets and made my bed. Scrubbed the kitchen floor on my hands and knees. I’d gotten really good at cleaning since taking the job at the Seagull. At four-thirty, I flopped on the couch, exhausted. Thirty minutes.

I blew a long breath between what would have been ballooned cheeks a year before, then, fists on the soft couch cushion, pushed myself to my feet, shuffled to the kitchen tool drawer, then to the window with scissors, where I snipped the frogs from their tethers, and shuttled them to their final resting place in the kitchen recycle bin. In their descent, they clattered together the way glass and plastic comeingle, and I heard at least two of them say, “Best wishes in the new year, Burro Buster.”