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### The Toe Sucker

I'd heard horror stories on several occasions about the messes made by friends and family on their 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays. I don't actually remember any of the stories; they've all fallen into blurs of flashing images of puking on bars and showing more genital than the intended leg. So while I slid my way into a skin-tight dress and tried not to giggle at the face my friend made while she put eye shadow on my lids, I told her I was going to keep it under control that night. "Yeah, sure... that's what we all said". Her reply showed the same amount of faith all of my other friends seemed to have in my self-control for that evening, but I'd made up my mind; I was going to tie up my lady gettin' boots, strut into that bar, and hold my martinis like a champ.

The beginning of the evening felt a bit uncomfortable, but after a few drinks and a lot of new friends arrived, things settled into a comfortable flow of conversation and interaction among the variations of people I'd invited. As the night progressed I started to realize that my tongue was just too large and too dry to articulate simple utterances (an issue I also find when talking to attractive women). In feeling the onset of drunken self-consciousness I decided to focus on the intoxicated activities of those around me. I sucked on the tip of my cigarette, forgetting how it'd found its way into my hand, and tried to interpret the body language and slurred conversations of my friends.

A woman with whom I'd had a few writing courses had shown up a bit late with a man I'd never met. I was excited to chat to someone new until he opened his mouth. My friend had introduced him as her 'successful blogger friend'. I was elated to have the opportunity to talk to someone that found some success in writing. The world of publishing and actually creating a career with writing has always seemed like winning the lottery to me. I'd heard so many times that I had a better chance of being struck by lightning than making enough money to live on with a writing career. I didn't want to jump right into picking his brain, so after our introduction I asked him a few questions.

“So I heard you're from New York! How do you like living there?”

He paused, furrowing his eyebrows and gazing off into the distance as if I'd asked him what his philosophical theory of being was.

“Wellllll [pause] I always thought New York was going [pause] to be a lottt of [pause] fun. But being famous there is soooo overrated.”

He had that pretentious, nasal quality when he spoke, and uttered each answer to any question I asked him with unnatural pauses like an over-forced, amateur slam poet that thought he was God's gift to each open-mic audience member.

I knew he was a blogger; I didn't know he was capitol F famous enough to self-proclaim this.

I tried again.

“Do you like writing? How'd you get into it?”

“Oh the actual [pause] writing part is [pause] wellllll [pause] it takes soooo much time. Trust me [pause] you're better off living here and [pause] not writing.”

During these uncomfortable pauses he continued the eyebrow furrowing with almost-impressive intensity. This made him seem less intelligent and more like he had really bad constipation. It forced his face to look unnaturally small and puckered behind his over-sized (but trendy looking) reading glasses. While I allowed him to continue his description of how “it’s so overrated to be famous” I tried to decide exactly what it was that he reminded me of. I was proud of my drunken mind when it finally came to the conclusion that if the most self-involved insect in all of the insect kingdom were given a day to tell humans why they were much farther evolved than us; it would turn out exactly like this guy.

I’d forgotten about him for a while through the movement of the evening, but as I blew the smoke out of my lungs (trying very hard to believe I had the allure of Katherine Hepburn) I could’ve sworn I heard him say two words I’d never actually heard in consecutive order.

When you’ve gotten a bit of alcohol in your system it’s hard to ignore a grown man’s voice say the words “suck” and “toes” in a public place. I looked over to see he’d cornered my good friend and by her closed-off body language and the look that was screaming *save me* I could tell poor Brooke’d become the nasalizer’s victim. I listened to him repeatedly proposition her with different toe-sucking scenarios for at least a good five minutes. I imagine that this sort of proposition from an attractive, well-spoken male might also elicit an uncomfortable response from most women; but the fact that *this* guy was actually trying to convince my most attractive friend to let him suck her toes: well it was just too much fun for me not to enjoy. Brooke and I had actually dated for a brief period of time over the Summer, and so I took an extra moment to enjoy listening to him try to get a woman into bed that I’d successfully courted. *I may not make any money off of my writing, but for this moment I can be sure that I have succeeded where you will definitely fail.* I let this moment of triumph sink in a bit before I decided to check if anyone else had caught onto this interesting encounter.

My eyes darted from person to person; no one else seemed to notice. The fact that he was saying all of this like he was talking about the new dishtowels his mother bought him just confused me more. Brooke tried a few different tactics to remove herself from the lovely monologue this guy was spewing in her direction; she’s always

been a great social navigator, but even her attempts to start a different conversation, or talk with other people, wasn't enough to get her out of this obscene entanglement. She was constantly interrupted by a grab of her arm and a, "you knowwww Brooooooke..." and when she said things like "it's not going to happen" they somehow seemed to form into "tell me more about this scenario" by the time they reached his ears.

Eventually I took pity on Brooke and decided it was time to step in. The thought crossed my mind that I might want to handle the situation with subtlety, but the booze seemed to push that idea out of my mind right before I hollered at him. "Dude! She's not gonna let you suck her toes! Drop it." His face went flat, and he sat back in his chair, looking surprised, but I can't imagine his persistence had ever been well received; someone needed to put mister toe sucker back in his place. The moment passed, though, and the rest of the night swept us all along a path of perfectly strange events.

Later that night my best friend Annie decided to stand up and give a speech.

"I would just like to say a little something..."

*(this sounded so eloquent from the crazy girl that had once explained that the blues clues tattoo on her ass had the important effect of being able to exclaim the puppy's famous tune of "bow bow bowww!" Every time she dropped her pants.)*

"Twenty-one years ago today, my good friend entered this world by coming out of a vagina..."

*(oh O.K. here we go...)*

"And now, twenty-one years later, she is following the quest to get into one."

There was a roar of laughter. I blushed and thanked Annie, letting her know that her speech was utterly heart-warming.

After she sat back down I headed over to her side of the table and she fulfilled her self-proclaimed title of a 'loving drunk' by telling how proud she was to be my friend. We reminisced about the hours we spent at the local *Village Inn*, smoking cigarettes and eating dino-fries in high school. She told me how glad she was that we were still friends.

About five minutes and three hugs into this conversation we decided it was time for a run to the ladies room. We invited Brooke along; I'd hoped to introduce the two to one another, figuring their shared excitement for just about everything would bring them together.

Five minutes later we were all groping one-another's breasts in front of the sinks in the women's room.

After telling this story on several occasions I've found that my male friends are always baffled by the simple question of how the hell I managed to get myself into this situation. I never really know what to say... Brooke and I were talking about how we'd never been with someone with nipple piercings (I cannot for the life of me remember how this topic came up) and Annie proclaimed from inside her stall "Heyyyy! My nipples are pierced!" She came bounding out of the stall and washed her hands. "It didn't hurt a bit; they're a lot of funny actually! Here, feel!" she grabbed my hand and pressed it up against her boob. "You wanna feel too Brooke?"

So there we were.

Me, awkwardly standing there with my hand on Annie's breast thinking that I've never had such a scientific experience with boob; and Brooke feeling around and asking questions like this was absolutely no big deal at all. I decided to try and take the attention off of the fact that my hand was on Annie's boob.

"Hey Brooke has like the most amazing boobs I've ever seen in my life. Women pay for breasts like hers!"

So then Annie was grabbing around Brooke's chest.

This was when another woman walked into the bathroom.

She stopped for a minute and looked at all of us, standing there awkwardly with our hands on each other's breasts, and then she giggled and walked into a stall.

This created our collective decision to return to our table.

When I walked back to the table I noticed that a girl I'd been obsessing over for months had found her way over into my chair. I looked at her with my best Clint Eastwood scowl; she giggled and said she wasn't leaving so I'd have to hold her "sorry ass". I was more than happy to fulfill the request, even if I spent the majority of the time with her sitting on my lap thinking about where the hell I should put my hands; it was still exciting and fun and well...awesome.

Around one, the party started to wind down and my friends began to shuffle their way from the wire furniture on the patio out onto the sidewalk to head home. I'd purposefully chosen Charlie Browns as our spot because they were notorious for covering the tab for people on their twenty-first birthdays, and it was also within walking distance from most of our homes. I'd already offered to share my bed with Brooke; we'd created a sort of ritual of spooning at night without making anything of it the next morning.

As we finally stumbled our way through the door to my apartment we were both shivering from the cold of a late September-night's walk through Capitol Hill. I ran the bath and we both dropped our clothes (I hadn't even had the sobriety to consider the possible sexual implications of this moment; we'd been naked before and had moved past the sexual tension phase). I was so excited about the idea of a bath I could hardly contain myself.

"Ohhh do you want bubbles?"

She looked at me with a mocking stare, her hand resting on her hip.

“Duh I want bubbles.”

I giggled.

“Alright.”

I lit a couple of tea-candles that I keep on the ledge and we both hopped in. After all of the whining about how hot the water was we settled in on opposite sides of the tub. I awkwardly scrunched my body up so I could dunk my face in the water and when I came up Brooke started giggling at me.

“You look like Santa Claus!”

I laughed and decided to pursue the image by adding the bubbles to my face; Brooke followed suit, making a long, hanging beard, like one of the members of ZZTOP I remembered seeing on the cover of one of my Dad’s albums as a kid. After we hopped out, we threw on some pajamas, went out for one last smoke, and then settled into bed. The last thing I remember before falling asleep was Brooke putting a glass of water on the nightstand next to my head.

“You’re going to need this.”

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In the weeks following I’d decided that this was exactly what a twenty-first birthday should look like. I’d had playful moments of awkward sexual tension with friends; I got to pretend the girl I’d been chasing was mine for the whole entirety of the ten minutes that she sat on my lap; I even got to finish the night off with a simplistic friend-spoon that would leave me feeling loved (instead of dirty) the next morning. The problem, though, is that while the memory of that evening has faded as time has passed, I can not get the image of that god-forsaken toe sucker out of my mind.

I keep thinking about how the woman who brought him to my party had been telling people that she was choosing to surround herself with “successful people”. I’m sorry, but successful or not, that guy was a combination of forced eccentricities and unoriginal projections of what “trendy” looks like. Throw the whole toe-sucking incident into the picture and I’ve got a problem. How could this guy ever be the image of success?

The simple truth is that this blogger degenerate represents everything that terrifies me most at this stage in my life; maybe I don’t understand the rules, or the world, of what it takes to be “successful”.

So whether I like it or not, I know that my first night of public alcohol consumption will not latch to my mind as a night of perfect debauchery (even if it was). Instead, the thing I will always remember most about my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday will be the toe-sucking success story that embodies all that worries me about my future as I step into my adult life.