



AN OUTRAGEOUSLY FUNNY AND WICKEDLY RAUNCHY ROMP IN THE WOODS



DAN vs. NATURE

DON CALAME





CHAPTER 1

Charlie and I are getting our asses punched.

That's right, *punched*.

It's the wrestling team this time. The fists come fast and furious—to the back of my head, my kidneys, my shoulders.

And, yes, my ass.

I don't know who the hell's punching my ass, exactly, because I'm rolled up on the gymnasium floor like a pill bug. When you're sickly skinny, in a school rife with steroid abusers and future ax murderers, and you happen to be best friends with a wiseass like Charlie Bungert, you learn fairly quickly to protect your face and vital organs when you're taking a beating.

Particularly if you don't want to be grilled for details when you get home.

“What did you call us, you little snot socket?” someone asks, punctuating his sentence with another stinging slam to my ribs.

I didn’t call them anything. It was Charlie who referred to them as a bunch of “uriniferous homunculi.” I was merely a bystander.

A bystander who made the fatal mistake of snorting at Charlie’s creative slight.

Which they deserved, by the way. Charlie was only trying to take a team photo for the school paper, and the guys wouldn’t cooperate. They kept flipping birds, picking their noses, and flashing their hairy butt cracks just as Charlie was about to snap the picture.

Coach Pullman started muttering stuff about how “artistic types” don’t know how to take command of a situation and that he had “much more important things to deal with.” Then he grabbed his *Sports Illustrated* and headed to his office.

And that’s when things really got out of control.

Charlie lowered his camera and stared at the team. “I wonder,” he said, “if it might be possible to feign—for the fleetest of seconds—a mere soupçon of decorum.”

Of course, no one on the wrestling team had any idea what Charlie had just said. But instead of admitting this, one of them called him a “snobby crotch waffle,” which got a big laugh from the team.

And then someone started chucking tape balls.

And dirty jockstraps.

And ratty wrestling shoes—one of which knocked the lens off Charlie’s camera.

“Stick that up your decorum!” somebody shouted, sending another wave of laughter through the squad.

Charlie’s face darkened. There’s nothing in the world he cares more about than that camera. His parents gave it to him for his tenth birthday—the last birthday they ever got to celebrate with him.

“It’s funny,” he said far too loudly, examining the body of his Nikon. “I didn’t know uriniferous homunculi could actually speak.”

And that’s when I snorted. *Big* mistake.

“Excuse me?” Rick “’Roid Rage” Chuff spat, his caveman forehead jutting. “What was that?”

“I said . . .” Charlie replied. “You’re surprisingly articulate for a bunch of uriniferous homunculi.”

Rick glanced at his nine buds, each of whom shrugged.

“Would you like me to translate?” Charlie offered.

“Aw, fuck, Charlie, don’t,” I begged under my breath, taking a step backward.

“Yeah,” Rick said. “Why don’t you do that for us?”

“Urine. Bearing. Trolls,” Charlie said, pushing his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. “Trolls who carry around sacks of their own piss. Certainly explains the unwashed vagrant smell wafting off of you.”

Then they rushed us. Like lions pouncing on a couple of wounded gazelles.

And now here I lie on the gritty gym floor. Taking yet another beating with Charlie.

“Who smells like piss now, Bungert?” Rick Chuff says,

hauling Charlie up by his camera, the black-and-yellow Nikon strap wrapped around his neck like a noose.

And damn if Charlie doesn't sniff the air through his bloody nose as he dangles there.

"Hard to tell," he rasps. "Your fecal-scented breath is overpowering every other odor at the moment."

Rick quickly yanks the camera higher into the air, lifting Charlie off the ground, the tips of his toes barely brushing the floor. "Not so easy to make jokes when your windpipe's being crushed, now is it?"

Charlie wheezes, his eyes bulging, his face turning blue as he desperately claws at his neck.

I don't have time to think. I quickly roll away from my attackers, reaching out and grabbing whatever's close at hand—a jock-strap, as it turns out. I stumble to my feet and hurl the dirty, limp thing at Rick.

It whiffles in the air and lands right on Rick's hand, the one holding Charlie's camera, where it dangles for a moment like an ornament, the nut-brown ass stain on the thong in full view.

Everyone freezes.

"What the Christ?" Rick drops the camera like it's on fire and shakes the athletic supporter off his hand.

Charlie crumples to the floor.

Rick turns to me, his eyes full of all the world's hate.

"You've just signed your death warrant, bitch," Rick says. "Grab him!"

The entire wrestling team lunges at once, gripping my arms, my legs, my shirt, my hair, stretching me out like da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*.

Someone wraps the jockstrap around my face, the molded plastic cup covering my nose and mouth like a respirator. Several curly pubes cling to the cloth, tickling my cheeks.

“Breathe deep, shithead,” Owen Rocco says.

I try breathing through my mouth, but it’s impossible not to smell the horrible, farty stink of sweaty sphincter.

I gag and choke back some vomit.

’Roid Rage Rick towers in front of me, his fist clenched and cocked.

I squeeze my eyes shut and brace for a horrible pounding.

“Hey! Screwheads!” Mr. Pullman calls out from somewhere. “Cut the crap already. Save it for the meet.”

Not exactly the response I would have hoped for—a few years in San Quentin would have seemed more appropriate—but at least it’s enough to stop the onslaught.

I peek through one squinted eye. Rick’s fat finger is in my face.

“This is not over, dicktard,” Rick says. “Not even close.” He flicks my nose hard. “I can see the future, and yours is filled with blood and pain.”

And with that, the Willowvale High School wrestling team releases me. I drop to my knees and pull the filthy jockstrap from my face as Rick and his buddies lumber off toward the gym doors.

“You OK?” I ask Charlie, struggling to my feet. I flip my left wrist and check the black face on Dad’s old Timex, make sure the crystal isn’t cracked. It’s the first thing I always do after taking a beating. Even though the thing hasn’t worked since he took off six years ago.

Charlie clears his throat. "I've had worse." He runs his tongue over his blood-rimmed teeth. "No money from the tooth fairy this time, but it was still worth it."

I laugh, which sends a screaming pain shooting through one of my ribs. "Shit." I wince and clutch my lower back. "You've got to stop doing this, Charlie. I don't know how much more my body can take."

"You can run, you know," Charlie says, picking up his camera lens and his glasses. "It's not a precondition of my friendship that you take these beatings with me."

"It's not like I had time to consider my options."

Charlie replaces the lens on the Nikon and checks for damages. "Oh, please. A Magic Eight Ball could have predicted that was coming. And yet you stood by my side. *And* you took a soiled jock to the face for me. I am forever in your debt. If you require something—help with a paper, an adjustment of your report card grades, porn site passwords, anything—you just let me know."

I shake my throbbing head. "You don't owe me anything, Charlie. We're friends. That's what friends do." I rub my sore ass. "Is it really worth it, though? Just to get a dig in?"

Charlie laughs, then coughs, droplets of crimson spraying from his mouth. "I like being the thorn in their collective paw. Besides, it's an adrenaline rush. Makes me feel alive." He pounds his fist against his chest like a warrior, then grimaces in pain.

"Couldn't we just go to Six Flags and ride the Barracuda?"

"Daniel, Daniel, Daniel. Always looking for the easy way out." He pulls out the bottle of Purell that's permanently tucked

into the front pocket of his pants, squirts a quarter-size blob into his palm, then waves the hand sanitizer at me. “Decontaminate?”

I shake my head. “I’m good. Don’t you think it’d be more sanitary not to get beat up in the first place?”

Charlie laughs. “You can’t avoid germs, my good man. You can only destroy them.” He slathers the alcoholic goo all over his hands and then proceeds to dab some on his split lip. “You should really take some of this. I need you alive and healthy if you’re going to be fighting by my side during the coming zombie apocalypse.”

“Right. We can’t even fight off regular people. You think we stand a chance against zombies?”

“It’s all in the planning, my apprehensive friend. With enough ammunition, food stores, and an impenetrable bunker, I’m pretty sure we can handle the undead.”

“Don’t be so sure,” I say. “Besides, my aunt Agnes says we need to be exposed to lots of bacteria so our immune systems can grow stronger.”

Charlie rolls his eyes. “Sure. Believe that. Then Google ‘necrotizing fasciitis’ and let me know if you still want to take your chances.”



CHAPTER
2

I trudge up my driveway, past Mom's white Nissan, and check my reflection in the side mirror. I tug a strand of hair over my right temple to cover the red welt that's blossomed there. The only conspicuous evidence from this afternoon's thrashing.

The nice thing about being a klutz is that Mom buys my excuses every time. But at this point I'm running out of things I could have "bumped into" at school. With any luck Mom'll be too busy—doing dishes, practicing her fly-fishing cast, or studying hockey box scores—to notice my head wound.

"That you, honey?" Mom calls out the second I step through the front door.

So much for being preoccupied. I sigh and dump my backpack on the floor of the entryway.

“Yeah,” I call back. “It’s me.”

“Could you come into the kitchen for a sec?”

There’s a warm ginger scent in the air. Mom’s been baking. Which means either she’s happy about something or wants to bribe me. Possibly both.

I tug off my coat and hang it up. Kick off my sneakers and proceed to trip over the stupid things as I step into the family room. Typical. I hobble past the couch and TV, this afternoon’s beating settling into a dull, full-body throb.

“Dan?” Mom calls out.

“On my way. I’m a little sore today.” I turn the corner and step into the fluorescent glow of the kitchen. “Stupid me, I fell down the stairs at school again and—”

I jerk to a stop. There, standing next to Mom, is Wolverine. Or a very reasonable facsimile.

“This is Hank,” Mom announces, beaming, her hands outstretched like she’s presenting me with a fabulous prize. “I told you he was coming over today, remember?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Of course I didn’t remember. Otherwise I would have come up with a more manly excuse for my injuries.

“Hey,” I say, stepping forward, swiping my sweaty palm on my pant leg before I extend it. “Dan.”

“Right,” Wolverine says, his voice a radio baritone. “Hank. Langston.” He takes my hand—his palm desert-dry—and shakes it a little too firmly as he meets my eyes with his piercingly clear baby browns. “Great to meet you.”

“You too,” I lie, flexing my fingers to make sure nothing’s fractured.

Jesus. Mom’s flashed me a picture or two on her phone, but I sure didn’t expect this . . . this Men’s Wearhouse model.

“Your mom’s told me tons about you,” Hank says.

“Same.” I force a smile, trying to recall this one’s particulars. Hank Langston. The world’s most attractive dentist. College football star. Mountain climber. And fearless bear hunter. Terrific. I wonder how many scrawny graphic novelists *he* beat up when he was in high school.

“Well, hopefully she speaks as highly of me as she does of you.” Hank gazes lovingly at Mom. “She’s super proud. Brags all the time about what an amazing artist you are. I’d love to see some of your work. I’m impressed by anyone who can draw. I can barely doodle a stick figure.”

Hank chuckles at his little quip, but I’m not buying the chummy act for a second. I’ve seen it *way* too many times before.

It’s unfortunate, really. They actually look halfway decent together, Hank and Mom. They have a sort of Outback Ken and Barbie thing going on. But it won’t last. Hank will turn out to be a deadbeat. Or an alcoholic. Or an adult baby.

Or just a plain old dick.

They always do.

Poor Mom. It started in high school with Dad—a deadbeat *and* an alcoholic—and hasn’t gotten any better in the fifteen years since she birthed me. I feel bad for her. Beyond being not so bad-looking—for a mom, anyway—she’s also good-hearted. She deserves to find someone who appreciates her.

Of course, she doesn’t help her cause any with her chameleon

act—studying up on things she never cared about before, all in an attempt to get a guy to stick. She’s clawed her way through *Ulysses*, tried learning to speak Mandarin, downloaded and listened to hip-hop music, subscribed to *Stained Glass Quarterly*, taken square-dancing lessons. She even got a tattoo of a baby meerkat on her ankle when she was dating some schmo from the Kalahari Meerkat Project.

You’d think she would have learned by now.

But it doesn’t seem like it. Not if the new teeth-whitening kit, copies of the *Hockey News*, and *Man vs. Wild* Blu-ray box set are any indication.

“So,” I say, just to say something.

“So,” Mom echoes.

The awkwardness in the kitchen swells like a septic boil.

I force another smile. Tuck my hands into my front pockets and rock back on my heels.

“I made cookies.” Mom gestures at a platter of marshmallow gingersnaps in the middle of the table. Three small plates and three glasses of milk have been strategically set out on flowered place mats. “Your faves.”

“Cool,” I say, though my stomach tightens. Why do I feel like I’m about to be told our dog just died? Even though we don’t have a dog.

“Shall we partake?” Hank suggests, stepping toward the table.

Mom nods. “Let’s.”

They slide out chairs and take their seats in perfect sync, almost like they’ve rehearsed it.

I don’t want to be rude, but honestly, the last thing I want to

do right now is sit down with Mom and the macho dentist and make small talk over milk and cookies.

But I don't see as I have much of a choice.

"Sounds good," I say, pulling out my chair and plopping down. I grab a cookie and immediately take a huge bite so I don't have to talk.

Mmm. I always forget how they melt in your mouth, Mom's gingersnaps, all sweet-spicy goodness. Definitely bribe-worthy.

Depending on the request, of course.

Hank reaches over and takes four cookies. He places two on Mom's plate and the other two on his own.

How gallant. I bet he's got a wife and brood stashed away somewhere. Or has a prison record. Or likes to sit on your head and rip toxic buck snorts.

"As someone whose whole world is oral hygiene," Hank says, "I should probably be a better example here. But I have a sweet tooth the size of a blue whale. Let's just say we'll all brush afterward." He laughs, and then he does something so unspeakably disgusting that it's all I can do not to bolt from the table and barricade myself in my room: he crumbles his cookies into little bits and submerges them in his milk.

What. The. Hell?

"You'll have to excuse me," Hank explains. "I'm an extreme dunker. I know it's not the classiest thing in the world, but I've done it ever since I was a kid. You let 'em get real mushy and then you drink them down with the milk. Sort of like a cookie shake."

I retch. "Or *baby* food," I say, glancing at Mom for a reaction.

But she doesn't get the reference. Nor does she seem revolted by the desecration of her special cookies.

Instead, she just smiles and says, "This is cozy, huh?"

"Mmm-hmm." I shove the rest of my cookie into my mouth so I can get the hell out of here.

"So, Dan. We have something we wanted to tell you." Mom takes a deep breath. She looks over at Hank. "Do you want to—?"

"No, no." Hank shakes his head and wipes a blob of milk-soaked gingersnap from his lip. "You go ahead. It's your . . . you know."

"OK." Mom laughs nervously, shifting her cookies on her plate. "Well. All right. So. As you know, Hank and I have been dating for a while now . . ."

Oh, Christ. Is that what all this is about? This cookie defiler is going to be moving in with us? That's just what I need—another one of Mom's freeloading man-child boyfriends eating all our food, shedding body hair in the shower, and stealing money out of my change jar.

"I realize this is the first time you're meeting Hank," Mom continues, placing her hand on his woolly arm. "But things between us have gotten pretty serious, and . . ." Mom takes another deep breath.

"*And?*" I say, because, really, I'd like to get this over with as quickly as possible so I can go hide in my room. Maybe search for the earplugs I haven't had to use since the last grunting loser took off, leaving cigarette burns in our couch and a thousand-dollar pay-per-view porn bill.

"And . . ." She glances over at Hank and smiles. "Well . . . we're engaged."

I blink hard. “I’m sorry. What?”

“Hank and I . . . are getting married.”

Her words punch me in the gut. A mass of gingerbread hurl rises in my throat.

I shake my head. “Wait. You guys . . . You’ve only been dating for a couple of months.”

“It’s three and a half months, actually,” Mom says. “I know it seems fast, but I told you from the very beginning that I thought Hank was the real deal.”

Right. Like I haven’t heard that before. “When did this happen?”

“Last night,” Mom says. “During our Valentine’s Day dinner. It was totally unexpected, but it all just felt so *right*.” She thrusts her left hand at me to display the ginormous diamond ring on her finger. Jesus, how did I miss that? “Isn’t it gorgeous?”

“It’s . . . um . . . big.” And fake, probably. Hank claims he’s a dentist, but a thousand bucks says it eventually comes out that he’s involved in something only *vaguely* dental related.

A receptionist at a dentist’s office. Or a toothbrush sales rep. Or the ever-popular “No, no, no, I never said I *was* a dentist. I said that I *go* to the dentist. Because I’m concerned about good dental health.”

I look over and stare at my future stepdad. College football star. Extreme cookie dunker. Alligator wrestler.

Rick Chuff all grown up and ready to make my life a living hell.

I clutch the edge of my chair, the kitchen becoming a Tilt-A-Whirl.

“I realize this may seem fast to you, Dan,” Hank says.

“What? Fast? No, it’s—it’s great. Three months is . . . plenty of time.”

“The thing is,” Hank says, “when you get to our age, you sort of know what you want in a partner.”

“And what you don’t,” Mom adds.

Hank smiles shyly at Mom. “And you recognize pretty quickly when you’ve found someone truly special.”

“Yeah. No,” I say, the back of my neck sweating. “It’s great. I mean, it’s a little . . . surprising and all, but . . . if you both think—”

“We’d like your blessing, of course,” Hank says.

Now? You’d like my blessing now? What about before you bought the ring, jackass? What about before you freakin’ proposed?!

“No. Yeah. No. I mean, if my mom’s . . . happy, then . . . I’m . . .” I swallow my scream. “Congratulations.”

I glance at the window over the kitchen sink, tempted to make a run for it. Dive through the glass and race all the way down to Mexico or Peru or wherever the hell Dad’s disappeared to, so I can beat the piss out of him for leaving us and making me have to deal with this crap.

“And I’d greatly appreciate it,” Hank says, “if you’d be my best man.”

“Your—” I cough. “Your best man? Why? Don’t you have any friends?”

Let me guess: You’re a loner? A loser? A drifter? The quiet neighbor who buries bodies in his backyard?

Hank laughs. “Of course I have friends. And they’ll be in the wedding party. But I thought . . . well . . . I thought it might be nice if we all stood up at the altar together. As a new family.”

Hank shrugs. “Only if you’d like to, though. No pressure. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“No. Yeah. It’s . . .” I look over at Mom, who’s beaming, all hopeful. “That’d be . . . great.”

Mom swats Hank’s arm. “See. Didn’t I tell you? Dan’s the greatest. You guys are going to get along like gangbusters.”



CHAPTER
3

Hank is making dinner for us. To celebrate the big announcement.

The menu is a surprise—as if I need any more of those tonight. The only hint Mom would give me is that the meal would center on the spoils of one of Hank’s hunting trips. So, rancid game meat, I guess.

And really, should a guy who spends all day with his hands in people’s mouths be allowed to prepare food? Charlie would *not* approve.

I shift the sketch pad on my desk and drag my pencil down the page in a long, swooshing arc, trying to make the cloak of

the Night Goblin flow behind him. The scene is Temple Araxia, home of the Sacred Scarab, one of the seven Bewitching Amulets belonging to Warrior Princess Erilin, supreme and benevolent ruler of Melifluose.

The Night Goblin has already stolen three of the Amulets: Godstone, Noble Birth, and the Onyx OxSkull. If he gets his hand on a fourth, the balance of power will be tipped in his favor.

In this next panel, the Night Goblin is headed for the Temple keep, where he will be confronted by a sword-wielding Princess Erilin, who has been alerted to the threat by Sir Stan Stalwart of Summerhall.

I'm basing my drawing of the princess loosely on this girl I like at school, Erin Reilly. I needed a model, someone who was beautiful and strong but not intimidatingly so, and Erin was the obvious choice. It's been a bit of a challenge getting her look just right because I don't have the balls to ask her to sit for me in person, and I *certainly* don't want to be caught staring at her from across the room for long stretches of time like some creepy stalker. As a result, I have to work off of a combination of memory, stolen glances at school, and Erin's Instagram feed. She really likes to make goofy faces in her photos, which, while super cute, doesn't exactly scream Warrior Princess.

I swipe my phone, click the Instagram app, and find a shot of Erin making googly eyes and a fat tongue at the camera. Not great, but better than the one where she's wearing giant heart glasses and pulling up her nose in a pig snout. At least I can get the shape of her ears and the swoop of her neck.

"Engaged!" I mutter to myself as I draw. Un-freakin-believable. How did I not see that coming?

Well, you never met the dude. Perhaps that had something to do with it?

Yeah, but there must have been signs. I just wasn't paying attention. I got complacent. And why wouldn't I? All of Mom's dates tend to blend into each other. Ryan, Ted, Allan, Jesse, Peter, Hank. Such gentlemen. So funny. So sweet. "The real deal this time." And me nodding, smiling, and zoning out as Mom blathers on giddily.

Until the day the truth comes out—the other girlfriends, the mean streak, the fur suit fetish—and Mom comes home crying.

Unless they've moved in. Then I come home to find her crying on our couch. Or in her bed. Or locked in the bathroom.

But there's always crying. And yelling.

I don't see how she didn't give up years ago. If I were her and my taste in guys was so bad, I'd probably try being a lesbian.

But that's just the way Mom is, eternally optimistic.

Me, I conceded defeat on the surrogate dad front a *looong* time ago. And honestly, it hasn't been such a big loss. All that father/son crap—learning how to shave, tying a tie, dribbling a basketball—you can pick up off the Internet, no prob.

It'd be nice, though, if Mom found someone she could rely on before I leave for college. A real partner. Like you see in the movies or on TV.

Unfortunately, this Hank character is *not* that guy. I can just tell. It's the "too perfect" angle. It's a dead giveaway.

But clearly he's got Mom totally snowed.

I sigh and press my graphite-stained palms into my tired eyes. I pull my hands away from my face and look at my sketch pad.

I blink at the picture I've drawn. What the—? The Night Goblin has a tuxedo on! And Princess Erilin is wearing a wedding dress and is clutching a bouquet of flowers!

And they're holding hands!

No. No way. I snatch my eraser and scrub out both their faces. I start redrawing the heads. We're not at Temple Araxia anymore. Nope. We're in another part of the city completely, a church miles away where Sir Stan's mother, naive physiotherapist Sarah Stalwart, is about to wed the evil Lord . . . Fang Plaqueston.

And now Sir Stan is faced with a dilemma: go help Princess Erilin battle the Night Goblin and save all humanity, or race to the church in order to thwart this unholy union which threatens to destroy his entire family. . . .

"I think you're going to like wild boar, Dan," Hank says, placing two more platters of food on the table. He's wearing Mom's pink cowgirl apron and somehow is able to make it look macho. "It's what pork used to taste like before pigs were domesticated."

"Everything smells delicious. You've outdone yourself, Boogabear," Mom says.

Ugh. Cue the string of sickeningly sweet pet names I'll now have to endure. The last loser was "Crumpkin" and Mom was "Taffy," whatever the hell *that's* supposed to mean.

Mom's broken out her favorite multicolored Fiestaware for the occasion. She takes generous servings of everything: boar chops, stuffed mushrooms, green beans amandine, homemade coleslaw. "My mouth is watering!" she says.

"Yeah," I say. "It all looks so . . . hot." I spear the smallest of

the boar chops with my fork. I add a single mushroom cap, three green beans, and a tiny lump of coleslaw to my blue plate.

“Not hungry, Dan?” Hank asks, reaching for the largest chop.

I shake my head. “Charlie and I hit the deli after school, and we had chips and stuff.”

Mom laughs. “Dan’s not the most adventurous of eaters. His comfort zone is more spaghetti and meatballs than haute cuisine.”

“That’s not true,” I say, my face prickling with heat. “I eat lots of other things. It’s just that tonight I’m not feeling so well.”

“Hey, listen,” Hank says. “Don’t sweat it. I’m honored that you’re even trying it. When I was fifteen, I wouldn’t touch anything that didn’t have ‘burger’ or ‘McNugget’ in the title.”

Wow, patronizing much?

Mom raises her water glass. “To new beginnings,” she says. “And to togetherness and family.”

Hank grabs his glass and clinks Mom’s. “Cheers to that.”

They hold their glasses out toward mine, which remains on the table. “Sorry,” I say with an apologetic smile. “It’s bad luck to toast with water.”

“Oh.” Hank looks at me, then at Mom. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah,” I say. “It’s from Greek mythology. They thought the dead left their physical bodies behind after drinking from the rivers of the underworld. So a toast with water is basically a toast to death.”

“Huh. Interesting. Well.” Hank laughs. “Uncheers, then.” He does a little reverse motion with his water glass.

“Uncheers,” Mom echoes, waving her glass in the air.

“I don’t think it works that way,” I say. “It’s like trying to unbreak a mirror.” I scrunch up my face, like I’m embarrassed at having to be the bearer of such bad news.

“Well, I don’t believe in superstitions,” Mom says. She takes a big bite of boar chop and chews with her eyes closed, a look of rapture on her face. “Oh my God, Boogabear, it’s so tasty.”

“Oh, good.” Hank sits up tall and proud, a goofy smile dimpling his stubble-covered cheeks.

I cut the skinniest sliver off my wild boar chop. Examine it on the end of my fork. Sniff at it. Dab it on the tip of my tongue. Then, finally, slip it into my mouth and chew.

I so want to hate it. I want it to taste like rancid pig slow-poached in an old man’s colostomy bag, so I can make a show of “furtively” spitting it out in my napkin.

But it actually tastes good. Really good. Like, the best pork chop I’ve ever eaten. It’s sort of sweet and nutty and smoky.

Goddamn it.

“So, what’s the verdict, Dan?” Hank asks. “Is it yea or nay on the wild boar?”

I knew he was eyeing me. I hate it when people watch me eat. I should have grimaced a little as I swallowed. Gagged a bit.

“It’s . . . um . . .” I trail off. “Interesting.”

Hank grabs his heart like I just speared him. “*Interesting?* That’s the kiss of death right there.”

“Sorry. I’m sure it’s great. It’s just that I’m not that hungry, like I said.”

Hank wipes his mouth with his napkin. “No apologies necessary. If you don’t like it, you don’t like it. I’m not one of those clean-your-plate kind of guys. My father was like that.” He

shakes his head. “Had to finish everything you were served or he wouldn’t let you leave the table. He liked to give you extra when he knew it was something you really hated. True story, I once fell asleep in a giant plate of liver and wilted spinach. Nothing you ever want to eat. But it does make a pretty comfy pillow.”

Mom chuckles at his joke.

I push some food around on my plate, trying to ignore the siren call of the boar chop. *Eat me, Dan. Eeeaaat meee.*

I turn to Hank, eyes wide with innocence. “Is it true that dentists have the highest rate of suicide in the world?”

“*Dan,*” Mom admonishes.

“What?” I shrug. “It’s what I heard.”

Hank laughs, nods, takes a bite of mushroom. “It’s OK. I’ve heard the same thing. Everyone has. People think because nobody likes coming to the dentist that we have an inferiority complex. But actually, psychiatrists have a much higher incidence of suicide than dentists.”

“But dentists are still pretty high up there,” I say. “Right?”

Mom gives me a cold stare.

“If you look at the data,” Hank explains, “which most dentists have, I guess you’d have to admit there is a slightly elevated percentage of suicide. Though not by much. Certainly no higher than other doctors. And in reality, we tend to live several years longer than the general population.”

“Huh,” I say. “Interesting.”

Guess I can’t count on Hank taking himself out of the picture.

“So, Dan,” Hank says, after chewing and swallowing a piece of meat. “That’s a nice watch you’ve got there. You don’t see many kids wearing watches these days.”

I glance at Dad's scratched-up Timex, wondering if he's making fun of it. "Thanks," I mumble, taking note of the gargantuan man-watch Hank is wearing.

"Maybe that's what I can get you for your birthday," Mom says. "A new watch—one that actually works!"

I instinctively slide my left hand off the table, like Mom might actually rip Dad's watch from my wrist.

"I didn't know you have a birthday coming up," Hank says.

What you don't know could fill a book, buddy.

"Next week," Mom says. "The big one-six!"

"We should celebrate!" Hank says, like he's just invented the idea of birthday parties. "Maybe you guys can come over to my place for a movie night or something."

A movie night with my mother and her boyfriend? I'm not sure I'm ready to party quite that hard.

"He *does* have the most incredible media room," Mom gushes. "Just wait till you see it, Dan!"

Suddenly, another terrible thought drops into my mind.

I look at Mom. "We're not going to have to move, are we? When you guys get married."

"Oh, honey." Mom says gently. "We can't stay here. There's barely enough room for the two of us."

"What are you talking about? We've made it work before," I insist. "With Randy and Steve and Frank and Tony and—"

"We get the point," Mom says, laughing nervously. Hank puts a reassuring hand on her arm. "But Hank's house is a *home*, Dan. We were thinking that I could move my physiotherapy practice to the studio in the backyard. Plus, you'll have a much bigger bedroom—"

“The second-biggest room in the house,” Hank cuts in. Obviously they’ve talked about this at length.

“And there’s not only a studio in the backyard,” Mom continues. “There’s also a tree house in one of the big elms. You’re a bit old for tree houses, maybe, but it could be a nice place to sit and work on your graphic novels. We could have offices side by side.” She laughs. “Anyway, it’s a really great neighborhood. Very family-friendly. Not like here with Mrs. Nosy-Body next door.”

My stomach drops. “Where is it?” I ask.

Mom glances at the table. “It’s . . . east of here.”

“How far east?” I ask, my heart racing. Silence. “Would I have to move schools?”

Hank forces a smile. “We don’t have to discuss this right now. We’re celebrating, right? Why muddy it up with details we can work out later?”

“I’m not moving schools,” I insist. “No way.” I can’t imagine finishing up high school without Charlie. And then there’s Erin. I’m the closest I’ve ever been to actually talking to her, which means there’s a chance that by the time graduation rolls around, I might have worked up the nerve to ask her on a date. I’ll be damned if Hank “Fang” Plaqueston is going to stand in the way of me and my dreams.

“Let’s talk about this another time,” Mom pleads. “Tonight I just really want to focus on our happy news.”

I nod numbly, but my mind is whirring. This isn’t just an assault on my life, it’s a full-out nuclear explosion. I need to stop this thing before it’s too late. “So,” I say, a heavy pulse in my right temple. “When are the nuptials, anyway?” Translation: Just how much time do I have to disarm this bomb?

Mom looks over at Hank. “We were thinking . . . mid-May, right?”

Hank nods. “No reason to put it off too long.”

“Wait. *May*?” Jesus Christ, three months? “Hold on a second.” I turn to Mom. “Are you pregnant?” I ask, fairly sure that she isn’t. Mom has made it pretty clear she isn’t interested in having any more kids.

“What? No.” Mom’s cheeks flush. “I mean . . . why would you think that?”

I give her a look. “Why else would you be hurrying to the altar?”

“Not because your mother’s pregnant, certainly,” Hank blurts a little too fast. He coughs into his fist. “Not that . . . it would be a . . . bad thing . . .” He furrows his brow at Mom, obviously trying to gauge her feelings about this.

“No . . . I mean . . . yeah,” Mom says, laughing nervously. “But I’m not, so . . .”

“Yeah,” I say, waving my hand. “Well, I wouldn’t worry about it, anyway. I’m sure no one else will suspect that you’re having a baby. And really, who cares what other people think. So what if everyone’s watching everything you eat and drink from now until the big day. Or if, you know, people are whispering behind your back. It’s none of their business, am I right?” I raise my glass of water high in the air. “To a joyful marriage in May.”

Dan Versus Nature

Don Calame

Buy online from
an indie bookstore 

Buy on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

BARNES & NOBLE
BOOKSELLERS [BUY NOW](#)



CANDLEWICK PRESS
www.candlewick.com