



You Crushed It A Novel

Jean-Philippe Baril Guérard Translated by Neil Smith

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Translated by Neil Smith

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YOU TOLD YOURSELF NOTHING BAD COULD HAPPEN.

You were warm and comfy in a taxi, your face pressed against the window. Still, you had to hold back from telling the driver to pull over and let you out so you could walk home and fall face-first into bed.

You didn't think you looked presentable enough to go to some party. You smelled like a guy who didn't give a fuck: a mix of cigarettes, three pints of red ale, and the sweat of a pig being led to slaughter, which you always secrete a few minutes before you go onstage and which stays stuck to your skin for the rest of the night.

The show had worn you out. You weren't sure you had the energy to put on a happy face and go fight for attention at a party. But Sam looked away from the road to say, almost threateningly, "You're not bailing on me, are you?"

To have fun at a party, Sam didn't need you, but he planned ahead. He wanted to be sure you'd be close at hand if he didn't find anyone interesting enough to occupy his time. A backup plan so he wouldn't be the dude in the corner alone knocking back his beer and trying to hide that he felt like a little kid lost at the mall.

"No, course not," you muttered. You couldn't hide a yawn, though. Sam took a warm Guru out of his backpack, tossed it to you. You didn't act fast enough, and the can hit you on the cheek, then fell on the seat.

"You're a fucking moron," you said.

"Work on your reflexes, bro." Sam barked a laugh, then

leaned his forehead back on the greasy mark he'd left on the window of the cab.

It'd been barely an hour since you and Sam had gotten offstage. An okay gig. A cold, noisy house, a screwy lineup, a lame emcee, and you were tired, but you'd been present at least, a hundred per cent present despite the conditions, and people laughed and maybe managed to enjoy life a little, so you didn't totally bomb. Nothing embarrassing went down, and you even got big applause when you did your bit on kindergarten class reunions. The crowd was enthusiastic, but just nothing to write home about. You told yourself not to worry. You couldn't kill every night. You got what you wanted at least: your set went over better than Sam's. That was all that mattered.

You often find Sam's routines predictable. His set-ups are so obvious that you see his punchlines coming from a mile away. He also has an unhealthy obsession with high school. Almost all his jokes involve some anecdote about gym class or a house party or necking at the lockers, like his social life peaked at sixteen. And he always closes with a callback that doesn't add much and isn't very clever (though it invariably draws laughs, for the surprise effect, which always pisses you off). Also, Sam needs to loosen up when a crowd's too subdued. Instead of relaxing and not caring, he tenses up, works harder to win the room over, but then starts floundering, everyone senses he's trying too hard, and it's painful to watch. Whenever that happens, you feel great. Whenever you're better than Sam, you feel great. Being better than Sam is what you've wanted since your first day at the National Comedy School. You thought that at least after you graduated, you wouldn't always be competing with him, but the joke's on you. By being around each other so much, you've

become friends, and you work well together, so you collaborate on projects, and you're often booked together for comedy nights. No doubt about it, you guys are joined at the hip.

Sam's charming. People like him right off the bat.

Sam had an earbud in, his iPhone in one hand, open on the Dictaphone playing his set from tonight, his eyes staring into space, his lips mouthing the words to each gag, his eyebrows scrunching up when he wasn't satisfied with his performance or the crowd's reaction.

You felt no need to listen to your set right away. You knew you'd done better than Sam. That was all that mattered.

But things have worked out for Sam, you have to give him that. There's a reason Forand signed him and started managing his career, even before you guys graduated.

But, though you like Sam, you secretly disdain him too. You can't help it. It's almost impossible not to have some contempt for the work of a comic you've knocked around with for two years at school and a few years on the scene. Comedy requires an element of mystery, of the unknown, but with Sam, you know every nook and cranny of his soul even better than he does. You know what makes him tick, turns him on, makes him cry. There isn't any part of him that can surprise you now. Even his new jokes sound to you like you've heard them a hundred times before.

Still, you like him. You like the guy. It's just kinda complicated because, like you, he wants everybody to like him, so you're always competing. And it's kinda complicated because deep down you envy him. You wish Forand had signed *you*. Forand not signing you is Forand telling you you're crap, Forand telling you you're worthless, Forand telling you you're unlikable.

Your phone vibrated in your pocket. It was that girl again.

The one you'd slept with a dozen times and hadn't seen in two months.

"Whatcha up to?" she said in the voice of a five-year-old. "Wanna come over?" she went on, slurring a bit because after seven p.m., she liked her wine.

"Um, I...what? No, I can't."

Sam's hand moved up to his earbud, pulled it out.

The girl started pleading: "*Pleeeeeease* come over. I need to see you."

"You need to see me? But we...I mean we haven't seen each other in like a really long time."

"Exactly! I never hear from you."

"I, um, yeah...no."

"No?"

"I'm not coming over. I don't feel like it."

"Oh, come on!"

"Why?"

"I really wanna see you."

"Your timing's not great."

"Oh, come *ooooon!*"

"I'm serious."

"I've already opened a bottle of wine. I can't drink the whole thing myself."

A lie: she could easily down that bottle—and probably a second one too.

"No, I can't make it."

"I'll pay your taxi."

"I'm not at home. It's just not a good time. I'm on my way to a party."

"Can I come?"

"No."

"After then? Come over after your party, and I'll be waiting

in bed naked.”

You saw a flicker of interest in Sam’s eyes. Not sexual interest, more like morbid curiosity, rubbernecking to see a car accident in the other lane on a highway. You realized you should’ve put in your earphones because even though you weren’t on speaker, Sam could hear everything.

“I’m gonna hang up now, okay?”

Something like a sob on the other end of the line. Then a deep breath.

“You’re a MOTHERFUCKING ASSHOLE!”

“Alright, okay. Good night.”

You had no time to recoup before the messages started flooding in on Messenger:

Really you treat me so shitty

Just fuck off

You need to get over yourself

ok

ok

ok

ok

Raph it’s all good, I’m calming down

But just come by

Come

Come over ok

Please

Alright?

It’ll be fun

That girl could type fast. It was all over in three minutes. Normally, that meant you’d have some peace for at least a month, till her next meltdown. It was fun at times to turn up at her place at three a.m., polish off a few bottles of wine, and screw till morning, but it’d become less fun once you realized

she'd toss back the wine every night of the week and should never be trusted with a cellphone while under the influence. No matter—we all have our strengths and our weaknesses. She can't hold her liquor, and you don't have the guts to block her.

“You okay, bro?”

Sam had watched you deal with the situation without saying a word. Now he cocked an eyebrow, held back a smirk.

You know Sam. You can decipher every little inflection in his voice, read every subtle variation in his expression.

Sam relished his question. By saying, “You okay, bro?” he was telling you he thought, as usual, that you were sleeping with a total bitch, that you'd gotten tangled up in some ridiculous drama, probably to get attention. By asking if everything was alright, he was questioning your ability to interact with other human beings. He was making you look like an irresponsible teenager. He was dumping on you.

You felt you should explain yourself. “I swear I hadn't spoken to her in two months. She's crazy.”

“Mm.”

“It's the same old story every time.”

“Get your shit together, dude. It's not normal.”

It would've been worse to defend yourself, so you just hunched over and made do with a shrug. Sometimes, you wished you knew Sam just a little less. There's a point beyond which we know people too well to really appreciate them.

To change the subject, you said, “Is Forand's assistant gonna be there?”

You'd spoken in a tone that suggested you were joking, to hide the fact that you weren't at all. You're not the king of subterfuge.

You'd pretended you'd forgotten my name.

You thought you were being so smooth, reducing me to my job title: assistant to his manager. You didn't want it to be obvious you'd set your sights on me.

I hadn't been a fantasy of yours, not really, but Sam had seen you look at me too long one night after a gig, when I was sitting with you guys and Forand, and before you even wondered anything about me, Sam said, "She's single, y'know." That threw you for a loop. You know your place in the world, and you know that guys like you don't end up with girls like me. But Sam had set a trap, and so you started thinking of me as a possibility.

You figured I probably wouldn't remember you anyway. You were still too "junior." The night we all shared a table at Le Bordel, you weren't even on the bill. At one point, you tried lightening the mood so it'd seem a little less ridiculous that you had to count your change to pay for your beer. I ended up paying for you, not out of pity but because you were wasting my precious time. It was less annoying to treat you to a pint than sit there while you counted your dimes and tried making me laugh. By the next day, I'd forgotten all about you.

I work for a talent agency, so I'm used to young comedians trying to make me laugh to cover up their shortcomings. It takes more to impress me. You weren't even unpleasant enough to leave a lasting impression. But that was a good thing because I still had an open mind about you.

And you wanted to make a good impression. Ever since Sam told you I was single, you'd been stalking me. You hadn't managed to find out much because I'm one of those people who've learned they have more to gain by lying low than by standing out. But you found out what you needed: that I'm as pretty in pictures as I am in a dimly lit comedy club.

Information is governed by supply and demand. If we give

less, it's worth more. Show just a bit of skin, and a naked ankle is enough to trigger whole nights of erotic dreams.

So in an exaggeratingly casual and detached tone, you said, "Is Forand's assistant gonna be there?"

If I was there, you figured you could go up to me, make some comment about my trip to Iceland—because that was one of the only things you'd found out about me, that I'd gone to Iceland last year—and you then could maybe start forming a more complete picture of me.

"Uh, yeah, I did invite her actually. Why?"

You'd asked as a joke. You didn't expect me to really be there. But knowing I would be, you suddenly became flustered. You didn't know why you were going to the party or why you'd asked that question or what your intentions were toward me. Or what Sam thought of your interest in me.

Sam was probably not a rival since I work for his manager. He doesn't have many principles, but he knows it's not good for business to fuck the payroll. But Sam doesn't necessarily want what's best for you. Telling him you fantasize about seeing the ankles of his manager's hot assistant would be exposing yourself too much and giving him your heart to cruelly rip to shreds. Being mean is good for a laugh, and getting a laugh is all you guys know how to do.

You shifted in your seat and tried to appear nonchalant. "Oh, I dunno," you said. "Just wondering."

It was a long shot whether I'd be at the party. I had no reason to be there, but I had nothing to do tonight, and Sam invited me almost as a joke, when I'd called earlier to work out the details for a corporate event he'd be doing in Mont-Laurier in two weeks.

You pressed ahead: "So what's she up to?"

"Laurie?"

“Yeah.”

Sam didn’t understand your question. “Well, she’s coming to the party,” he said.

“No, I mean what does she do?”

“Well, uh, she’s Forand’s assistant.”

“She must do other things.”

“I think she told me she writes.”

“Oh yeah?”

“She wants to be a comedy writer, I think. Or anyway, she’s trying, she’s starting out.”

“She any good?”

“I’ve never seen anything. But she’s smart, so it must be good.”

Sam lifted his eyes from his phone, looked into yours.

“She’s cool, Laurie. Very cool.”

It wasn’t weird, how he said that. It was more like a truce, or an apology. *She’s cool, so it’s good you’re interested in her, I think it’s great, I’d warn you if there were any red flags.* He would’ve said that out loud if you guys could talk other than through jokes.

The taxi slowed down in front of the apartment building. Sam took out his credit card. “I’ll get it, Raph,” he said.

“No, no, it’s fine.”

“Okay, I’ll give you a beer upstairs.”

You had forty dollars left in your account. By forking out twenty for the ride (your credit was maxed out, of course), you knew you’d need to find a way to survive on your remaining twenty till you got paid for tonight’s gig. It wasn’t so bad. You’d rather go hungry a few days than let Sam pay and rub it in that he made way more money than you.

As you went up the stairs, a thrill slid down your throat, ran down your spine, then warmed your belly. Jitters, maybe.