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Before long, Corky Bumberton and Hewlett Stacks were seated at their favorite table at the coffee shop across the street from Thunderwood College. It was the Pac Man table. Hewlett enjoyed playing Pac Man with Corky, because Corky could be easily defeated. But tonight, Hewlett wasn't winning because he had his eye on the Colonel's grandniece. And Corky wasn't losing because he was tangled up in the straps of the Professor's machine, and had his hands full.

"Look at that bald guy sitting at her table," said Hewlett. "What an idiot to only be in college and be bald already."

"Maybe he's her boyfriend."

"She wouldn't have a boyfriend like that. The guy's a freak. He doesn't have any hair on his head, and he's only in college."

Corky noticed several conspicuous grays on Hewlett's head, but said nothing.

"Let's try a little test," said Hewlett. "Go back to when she came into the coffee shop, and see if she came in with the bald guy or not."

"How?"

"I don't know. You're the smart one."

"I am?"

"Yes. Now do it."

Corky looked at the keypad for a button that said "Go back in time to when the brunette came into the coffee shop." However, there were far too many buttons, and none appeared to be so comprehensively labeled. He pressed several of the buttons at random.

"Some of us try switching it on first," said Hewlett, and colored the snide remark with a wink for the cute brunette with lots of eye shadow. He winked in a particular way that he thought made his face look all GQ, and he angled his head so that she'd get the best three-quarter view of his stylishness. Naturally he imagined that he appeared oblivious and unaware of her presence.

In fact, she was oblivious and unaware of his presence. She was quite happy with her bald boyfriend, and if she'd known Hewlett was performing for her attention, she would have enjoyed telling him so. The bald guy's head was shaped all wrong, so that his glasses had to be cocked at about a thousand degree angle across his face to fit right, but the brunette didn't seem to mind, and she let him be her boyfriend anyway. He was actually pretty smart, and was likely to pull down some major bucks some day. It's because his head was shaped wrong. Those guys have all the luck.

"I think I'm getting somewhere," said Corky and touched a few more buttons.

Hewlett was brushing his hair with his arm bent up in a manner designed to exhibit what biceps he had, and Corky's remark retrieved his attention.

Hewlett looked back at Corky, but Corky wasn't there.

"Corky?"

"Hewlett?" said Corky, and was surprised to see not only Hewlett, but a duplicate Corky as well, sitting at the Pac Man table in front of him. Corky marveled at this, and then felt himself to make sure he was the real one. Sure enough, his stomach rolls were as tangible and perky as ever. He then took a step toward the duplicate Corky, who was sitting there with a gob of drool hanging out of his

mouth. "Hey Hewlett," said Corky, "how come you didn't tell me I had a gob of drool hanging out of my mouth?"

"Would you tell me if I was drooling?" came Hewlett's voice from across the dimensions.

"Of course."

"That's the difference between you and me. Now listen carefully: you're back in time, but just not far enough. Try to go back to before we came in."

Corky approached the image of Hewlett in order to stick his tongue out at him, but observed the image commit a very telling act.

"Hey," said Corky. "You didn't put a quarter into your side of the table. That's why the game didn't work. You told me it must be out of order, and made me put in three more quarters, and said it still must be out of order."

"Corky," came Hewlett's voice sharply, "pay attention. Go further back. Do you know how you did it?"

"I think so," said Corky. Actually he didn't have the first clue how he did it, but in light of Hewlett's Pac Man offenses, Corky was not about to admit it. Corky felt much better about himself if he could, once or twice a year, not admit something to someone. He fiddled with the keypad again, until the Pac Man table in front of him became empty.

"What do you see?" came Hewlett's voice.

"She's walking up to the front door. The bald guy's with her, and he's holding the door for her."

"Idiot," said Hewlett. "Doesn't he know about women's lib?"

"Perhaps he's just being polite."

"Shut up. You're supposed to be on my side."

Corky turned the machine off, and his proper seat at the Pac Man table with the real Hewlett appeared.

“The machine seems to work,” said Corky, “but I don’t see how it’s going to make the Colonel’s grandniece fall in love with you.”

“That’s why you’re the sidekick,” explained Hewlett, with a slicing gesture to indicate that his word was the final one. “Because you don’t see things as I can. I’m the guy, and you’re the sidekick.”

“So you’re like Marlin Perkins,” said Corky, “who sits in the tent drinking tea, while Jim Fowler plunges into the river and wrestles the giant crocodile?”

“Exactly.”

“Oh.”

Corky entertained a vision of his brawny self locked in a death struggle with a thrashing beast, the crimson water staining his shredded safari shirt. Hewlett enjoyed a similar vision, except his included opening envelopes containing large checks from the networks, and Corky suffering from appalling wounds inflicted by the reptile, and eventually succumbing, with words of praise for Hewlett on his lips.

Across the room, the waitress dropped a check—or rather, a bill that she deceptively referred to as a check—at the brunette’s table. The bald guy reached for it, but the brunette shook her head and reached into her purse.

“Hello,” said Hewlett. “She’s found something.”

It was a plain piece of note paper. She took it out with curiosity, and unfolded it.

The bald guy, who was wearing a style of sweater that only idiots used to wear twenty years ago, and had one collar sticking out and the other not, tried to take a peek at the letter, but she wouldn’t let him.

Wheels turned inside Hewlett’s head. “Watch that letter she’s reading. If that hairless imbecile is her boyfriend, how come she won’t let him see it?”

The brunette replaced the letter into its envelope, and calmly slipped it into the candle flame. The bald guy was all astonished, and asked her something, gesturing quizzically at what she was doing. She only smiled.

“Hey, she sure blew him off,” said Hewlett. “That letter must have been pretty juicy.”

“Here she comes,” said Corky.

The brunette, coat in hand, was striding toward the door. The bald guy gathered his books and straggled along after her, dribbling yellow sticky notes and important calculations. In a moment they would be within earshot. Quickly, Hewlett arranged his facial expression to demonstrate that he did not approve of bald intellectuals, but was very much in support of things written in letters.

“I know all about quantum gravity,” said the bald guy as he tried to hold the door for her, “and nobody has any theories on modern classicism more advanced than my own.”

Corky listened and watched the girl leaving the bald guy. Mentally, Corky filed the bald guy’s statement under Things Not to Say on a Date.

A string on the bald guy’s sweater had caught on something and partially unraveled as the brunette closed the door on him. He stood there a moment, scratched his head, rubbed his chin, wrinkled his brow, punched some keys on a pocket calculator, observed the results dubiously, then, mumbling to himself, wandered off into the coffee shop, decorating it with the string of his sweater.

Corky gathered up the Professor’s machine and stood to follow the brunette, but Hewlett raised an arm to block his way.

“That letter is the key to her heart,” said Hewlett, but his raised arm accidentally struck the backpack from Corky’s grip. The sound of breaking glass inside made Hewlett shriek.

They opened the backpack and sadly looked inside. Some metal project boxes, elaborately wired together, had crushed and broken one of several large vacuum tubes.

"Vacuum tubes," said Hewlett. "The Professor built it with vacuum tubes. That's what we get for dealing with old guys. We finally get a chance to really be something, and you steal a time machine built by a Neanderthal."

"Perhaps the bald guy can fix it."

The bald guy stood on the far side of the room, winding sweater string around his hand, and climbed back behind a table of people where there wasn't enough room for him, to retrieve more of the string. The people at the table protested, glasses of water were upset, the bald guy whimpered apologetically, more of the sweater unraveled, and someone rose to complain to the manager.

"That's our man," said Hewlett.

Across the room, the manager came out and went straight to the bald guy. The manager looked like he'd been drawn by a bad cartoonist, with a swoopy mustache that was too big, and all kinds of different colored stuff smeared all over the front of his white apron, even though it was just a coffee shop and didn't serve anything that matched any of the colors. In order to speak, he had to gesture appealingly with both hands, as if physically lifting the words out of his gut; so he'd take a big heave of breath, lunge forward, turn his palms up and say something the bad cartoonist would have written like "Whassa matta you?" So he'd stand there, turn to one side and hunch himself up with a "Whassa matta you?" Then he'd turn the other way and go "Whassa matta *you*?" and punctuate it with another thrust of his body. You could say something like "What time is it?" and he'd turn to you, wrinkle his brow, raise his palms and shrug, and say "Whassa matta you? Issa four o'clock," and you'd wonder what that stuff is all over his apron because it sure ain't coffee; or you could be introduced and say "Pleased to meet you," and he'd hunch up

again and go “Whassa matta you, shake a my hand,” and he’d crush your little bones in his fat fist, and shake your elbow joint apart, and you still wouldn’t know what that stuff is all over his apron. Or why he runs a coffee shop. Or how he could possibly think people still wear mustaches like that.

The manager rattled on at the bald guy, gesturing wildly, and getting closer and closer to the bald guy’s face all the time. The bald guy stammered for words, took out his pocket calculator and began to type but the manager struck it to the floor, said something and shrugged his palms heavenward. He ushered the bald guy toward the door as he jabbered on. Better than sixty percent of the bald guy’s sweater was now wound around his hand, and as he stumbled toward the door with pens and paper clips scattering from his person, he suddenly fell flat against someone’s legs.

The whole coffee shop got quiet and everyone turned to see who the bald guy had run into. Even the manager stopped and let his arms hang by his sides.

It was Hewlett, standing proudly in front of the door, arms akimbo, steely eyes fixed sternly upon the oppressive manager. He laid a comforting hand on the bald guy’s head, but the shiny skin felt weird so he yanked it away and wiped it on his pants.

No one said anything for a moment; all was still. Until the manager shrugged with his palms up, as if to say “Whassa matta, you gonna say something or what?”

“Corky,” hissed Hewlett, “give me something profound and impressive to say.”

Corky looked around, picked up one of the bald guy’s pens and scribbled something on a napkin. He handed it to Hewlett, who cleared his throat and read like an orator:

“Hold, brutish man, and let fly this forsaken waif.”

If it was quiet before, it was even quieter now.

“What the hell was that?” said Hewlett, and threw the napkin down.

“Forsaken waif? You made me look like an idiot.”

“It’s from Shakespeare,” said Corky. “No one calls him an idiot.”

“Who reads Shakespeare anymore? He was like five hundred years ago. Get with it.”

The bald guy collected his things and stood up. “Excuse me, buddy,” he said, and pushed his way past Hewlett out the door. The murmur of the customers returned and the manager returned to the kitchen shaking his head and wiping his hands on a towel.

“So much for that freak,” said Hewlett. “Guy’s completely ungrateful. What are you doing?”

“Trying to see about this machine.”

“It’s only one vacuum tube. It probably still works anyway. I say we test it...let’s go back ten minutes and see if we can read that letter.

The test seemed reasonable. Corky had no intention of returning the machine in a damaged condition, and was eager to learn whether the machine would still function. He raised a finger over the keypad.

“Wait wait wait,” interrupted Hewlett. “How do we make it so both of us go?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps if we hold hands.”

Hewlett stepped back and looked at Corky contemptuously.

“Fag.”

“Well then, maybe we should each hold a strap on the backpack.”

“Next I suppose you’ll want to go skipping merrily through a field with me, sharing a handle on a basket of flowers.”

Corky looked bewildered.

“Never mind,” said Hewlett, “we’ll each hold a strap. Hit those buttons, Corky. Ten minutes ago, here we come.”

Corky danced his fingers on the keypad. There was a flash, and they were gone.

Corky and Hewlett stood on the poop deck of an old sailing ship. Perhaps a Federal revenue cutter of the late eighteenth century, thought Corky, then recalled that he knew nothing about such things, and dropped that idea. The sails were full, the lines strained in the fresh wind, and happy spray danced from the bows. Rough, unkempt sailor guys tugged on capstans, climbed aloft, beat on each other, and did all sorts of sailor things. 200 yards behind their ship...or 200 fathoms, or knots, or whatever they use...another vessel was racing along, trying to catch them. From the top of its foremast flew the grim death's head of the Jolly Roger.

“Just an educated guess, Corky, really only a speculation...but it seems to me that we're no longer in the coffee shop.”