

## The Asshole

People always ask me why I hang out with the Asshole. “He’s such a creep”, they always say. “Why can’t he just mind his own business”, and “What the fuck is his problem” are also very common.

“He’s really not that bad of a guy”, I generally reply, “you should get to know him before you judge him”. He’s really not that bad, at least when it comes down to some of the real monsters of our time. I mean, he’s no Hitler. Then again, he’s doesn’t have a chance in hell of winning person of the year anytime soon. Unless he comes up with something brilliant, like the paperclip. Even then I can only really see him getting mention in People Magazine, or even worse Teen People Magazine.

People always wonder why I hang out with him because I’m generally considered one of the “nice” ones. That means I don’t get dates, girls talk about their periods in front of me and tell me I’m just like their brother. After all, when are they going to find that nice guy they’ve always been looking for? I’ve never been much of an asshole mainly because it just doesn’t sound right coming out of my mouth. People don’t know how to take it.

Once, in high school, I tried. Being the tough guy. Telling it like it is. My friend Nikki, she had just gotten through breaking up with her boyfriend for the fourth time. This time he had broken her nose, which was “the last straw”. We had just gotten through with lunch and were out back in the woods, smoking a cigarette and talking about the world. Well, she was smoking a cigarette and talking about the world. I was holding her books and trying not to be noticed as my mother had made me wear my purple Champion sweatshirt that day.

“Adam’s such a jerk,” she puffed between drags, “I don’t know what I was thinking going out with him again. Well, if he thinks he can break my nose and get away with it he’s got another thing coming. I just won’t ask him to the Sadie Hawkins dance next month. We’ll see how he likes that.”

“Uh, I don’t think...”

“Men are stupid. They think just because you talk to another boy that you’re going to drop your pants for them. Mike didn’t have a chance with me, he just wanted to think he did. And I didn’t see anything wrong with letting him think he did, I mean, I got a new necklace out of the deal.”

“Nikki, look...”

“If my father ever found out he hit me like that he’d be in a world of hurt. Hell, Mike already wants to kill him. Mike told me he’d have busted him right there except for Sasha doesn’t want her man defending the honor of anyone but her. Why Mike stays with Sasha I’ll never know. I wonder if she’s asked Mike to the Sadie Hawkins dance yet?”

“You see, Nikki, it’s just that...”

“If only Adam wasn’t so damn cute in that cowboy hat. He knows that’s my weakness. Why did he have to wear that today. Why can’t he be a good boy? Why does he have to be such a jerk all of the time?”

“Look, Nikki, he’s not...”

“Why can’t I just find a good guy. I mean Mike seems pretty nice, if only I could get Sasha out of the picture. I’m not really interested in him, but he was paying me quite a bit of attention. And I’ve heard rumors about some of his other features. But how do I know if he’s good?”

“Nikki! He’s not good. Do you know why?”

“What’s that?”

“I said do you know why he’s not good? He’s not good because he’s got a girlfriend and he put the moves on you. Because he knows how to put the moves on you. Do you want to know who a good guy is? Do you? A good guy is someone who hasn’t had eight girlfriends since September. A good guy is the guy who doesn’t know the right thing to say in every situation. A good guy is the quiet fella who’s to afraid to ask you out. Who stands there holding your books day in and day out

and never once brings himself to your attention. The kind of guy who wouldn't break your nose because you were on top of his best friend the night before. The kind of guy who wouldn't make you ever want to hop on top of his best friend, ever."

None of this was true, but it all seemed rather evident at the time. It made sense. At least it did to me. In truth I wasn't a good guy, but everyone had told me I was for so long even I had started to believe it. In reality I would have gotten sick of her pettiness within six months, and tired of the sex in nine, after which I would have found some subtle way to drive her crazy enough to break up with such a "nice" guy because I'd be too spineless to do it myself. But I wouldn't learn that trick for another few years. You see, I'm just not good at being the asshole. Or at least the recognizable asshole in a given situation.

So I was always the nice guy and he was always the asshole. And people always wondered why we hung out together. We didn't look alike. He was in shape, had a full head of hair that was always styled to perfection. He wore these really nice Gucci shoes that cost as much as I made sweeping stairwells in one month's time. He bought his clothes exclusively at the Banana Republic, before that it had been Abercrombie & Fitch. He laughed whenever I bought something from American Eagle Outfitters. He told me it was the Wal-Mart of his world.

I like Wal-Mart. They had deals. Like my toaster oven. \$13.95 retail. I've had it for over ten years and it still cooks a mini pizza to perfection. One of my problems is I generally eat a whole pizza and not a mini pizza. I, in contrast to the asshole, am overweight. I'm not obese, not like most Americans these days. I don't have a hard time fitting into a McDonald's bench, or struggle to tie my shoes. But I also don't really take my shirt off in public. Or in private, for that matter.

Once a year I splurge and pick up a couple of things from American Eagle Outfitters. My "clubbing" clothes, according to the asshole. Clubbing, for me, consists of drinking a lot in the corner of the bar while the asshole chooses his conquest for the night. Once, when I was really drunk, the asshole got me to talk to some girls. I was having a housewarming for my new apartment the next weekend and had brought extra invitations with me in the hopes that a gorgeous woman would ask me to ask her out sometime. I was on my sixth beer of the night, past courage and into stupidity, when the asshole said there were two "really drunk" girls in the opposite corner.

For the asshole, "really drunk" actually meant "really easy", or "with their panties half down already" as he liked to put it. He pushed me towards them and before I knew what had happened I ran into the first of the two, spilling her drink onto the second.

"Oh, I'm sorry. How clumsy of that fellow," I said, attempting to pawn my own guilt off on a seventies reject gyrating next to me.

The girls giggled and said something unintelligible, and being unable to read their belief in my shoddy story I went ahead as planned. I fished an invitation from my back pocket and said, "my friend over there is having a housewarming and he wanted you two to attend. He asked that I give you this."

They took the invitation, studying it with a certain disbelief. It was not a fresh drink, what could it be? "What is this?" the further of the two asked.

"An invitation. To a housewarming. My friend said he'd like it if you came."

"What? Invitation? To What?"

"A housewarming. Next weekend. At my friend's, he said he'd like it if you came."

"Housewarming? What? Who is this friend?"

"Oh, he's right over there. By the bar. Black shirt, white pants."

"I don't see anyone like that. Are you sure he's over there?"

"Hold on," I craned my neck over towards the bar, pretending to search for a few moments and then turning back, "you can't really see him right now, but he's over there and he'd like you to come to his housewarming."

"OK, sure, whatever", and they turned back into the crowd, rejuvenated and full of dance once again.

I returned to the asshole triumphant. I had accomplished my mission. I had invited two total strangers to my party, and although the invitation fell on shaky ground I felt confident in my abilities and their presence the next weekend.

“Yeah, right”, was all the asshole had to say on the matter.

He worked for a small designing firm in the warehouse district. He had been one of five original employees who started out at the company, I was offered the sixth spot but didn’t want to take the chance on a company that could go bust in six months. That was twelve years ago and the asshole is making just under 100K a year now. I, meanwhile, make 30K a year, just enough to afford the mortgage on a shitty one bedroom condo in the ghetto. There have been eight shootings in my back alley since I moved in. I can’t even tell you how often I hear gunfire.

On Tuesdays we meet at The Luce for pizza and beer. The asshole generally has friends from work with him, although most of them don’t seem to really like him. Over the years they have finally begun to recognize me by face and often tell me what a “nice” guy I am. This comment is almost always followed up with “Why do you hang out with him? He’s such an asshole.”

“Opposites attract”, I respond. This has become a new favorite of mine. It has become a new favorite mostly because people accept it as a reasonable answer and let it go after that. I can’t really explain why I am friends with him to myself, why does everyone think I will be able to explain it to them? Why is it even any of their business?

This Tuesday, the asshole has brought Molly with him again. Molly started at the firm about three years ago and I’ve dreamt about her ever since. The asshole knows this and exploits it. He’s been sleeping with her off and on for just over two years now, never really committing to a relationship but just stringing her along, more as a game with me than for any personal interest. Whenever he brings her out I am torn. She likes to talk to me, she feels like I really listen. This is great. She always wants to talk about the asshole. About their relationship. This is not so great.

Tonight is no different. “Has the asshole said anything to you about next weekend?” she starts. No hello. No how have you been. No hug. Oh, she’ll give me a hug later, when the beer has affected her better judgement and she feels I’ve once again helped her through some crisis, but there are no free hugs in this world. It’s all business. It’s all about what you get, and what you have to offer.

“What’s next weekend”, I ask, a smile growing on my lips as I order her a beer from the waitress, my only real friend in the place because I tip well and never change my order. I’ve been drinking Newcastle after Newcastle here for close to a decade, and I always have a shot of whiskey after my third beer. I’m familiar.

“Didn’t the asshole tell you? A bunch of us are going up to his cabin for a weekend retreat. How did he put it? Beer, barbeque and bikini’s. No fat chicks allowed.”

It was actually my cabin. Originally it was to be a shared investment between the asshole and I, but he fell through on his part of the bargain. Which makes sense, seeing as he makes over three times as much as I do. But my grandfather had just passed away, leaving me a sizeable inheritance which I blew purchasing a cabin that I saw maybe twice a year. Instead of paying off a chunk of my mortgage. I’m still trying to figure out how he pulled that one over on me.

“No, no, I hadn’t heard about the cabin trip yet. My invitation must be in the mail.”

This was supposed to be a joke, but she wasn’t really sure. She half smiled, looking rather uncomfortable as her beer hadn’t arrived yet for her to hide behind. It’s always much more comfortable when you don’t know how to react to have that beer to quickly drink from. No one frowns on someone who needs a sip of beer. No one wonders why they didn’t react the way they should have, because, after all, they were having a sip of their beer.

“So, is the asshole inviting a lot of people up?” I said, trying to get the conversation going again.

“Well, that’s what I was hoping to find out from you. Originally he had told me it’d be a romantic weekend away for the two of us. But then Jen down in editorial told me she was coming as well, but not to let Fran know. And later Fran told me she was coming, but I wasn’t to let Jen know.

So I'm not really sure what's going on. Then I came across one of his invitations in Marge's mailbox, the one that said Beer, Barbeque & Bikini's. No fat chicks allowed."

"Ever the creative one, isn't he?"

"Well, it got me thinking. Why would he tell me it's our private weekend and then invite Jen, Fran and Marge? And why would he try to keep it so hush hush between all of us. He told me on the way over here not to mention it to anyone, that he would try whittling it back down to just the two of us again, or only a few others if nothing else. That's why I was wondering if you were coming or not, I guess. That'd help quantify the situation for me."

"I don't think you're using the word quantify correctly" I blurted out.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing, nothing. Like I said, I haven't heard anything so he must be keeping it small" I felt the rage of that high school outburst building up inside of me again. I remembered Nikki's reaction, or non-reaction, to my honesty. Her disbelief. Or was it just disinterest? Either way, I did not want something like that to happen again.

"I don't know about small, but at least now I know it's not huge. I'm just worried that something is going on that I don't know about. Jen has been acting strange around me lately. Hell, so has Fran and Marge. We've all been on edge. I can't put my finger on it, though."

I couldn't stand it any longer. She was driving me over the edge of reason. I stood and started to move away from the table, mumbling over my shoulder, "What's taking your beer so long, let me go check on it."

I retreated to the bathroom where I doused my face with handful after handful of cold water. It felt refreshing, invigorating. I could feel my heart thumping in my temples, racing towards my eventual death due to unmitigated anger. I tried to calm myself and list the reasons she wasn't worth my trouble, the things I knew about her that just didn't jive with the things I knew about myself. I was thirty some lines down my list when the asshole walked in.

"Hey, Man, where you been?"

"Hey. Just trying to sober up a bit. Beer went straight to my head."

"Well, molly asked me to come check on you. She said you went to get her beer about twenty minutes ago and never came back."

"She asked about me?" I tried to contain the excitement in my voice, but the asshole knew me to well.

"Nah, man. She just wanted to cancel her order with you. She's over talking to Jen right now. By the way, I need the cabin this weekend. I'm hoping to get her and Jen together. And maybe Marge. And Fran. What would that be, a menage-a-cinco?"

He was fixing his already perfect hair in the mirror and winking at himself repeatedly. I looked to my own reflection, my double chin, the beginnings of a beard I could never fully grow in, a receding hairline that redefined receding.

"You know where the keys are, you can pick them up Thursday or Friday."

"No problem, Man. I just had a set made for myself last weekend when I was up there. So I wouldn't have to stop over all the time to pick them up."

My hands were gripping the sides of the porcelain sink tighter and tighter. The color of my skin was beginning to match that of the dirtied sink ledge. I could feel my lip twitching, faster and faster.

"Hey, Man, you really aren't looking so good. Do you want me to call you a cab?"

"Am I invited this weekend?"

"No, Man. Didn't Molly tell you about the flyer? First of all, you wouldn't look to good in a bikini. Second of all, No fat chicks allowed." The asshole exited the bathroom laughing heartily. "J/K, Man, J/K", he yelled as he moved off down the hallway.

I fucking hate it when he says that. When he abbreviates things. J/K? That sounds so Goddam dumb. He has all kinds of abbreviations. Thinks like LOL, which I always assumed meant lots of laughs but actually means laugh out loud. Some kind of net talk. If it's a net thing, then why are you using it here, in the real world? What the fuck is that? God, I hate abbreviations. Not

contractions, those are great. They save loads of time. But abbreviations. They just make me think about them even more. Hang on them. Analyze them. Why would someone use that? Why couldn't he have said Just Kidding? Why did he have to go and make it "easier"? And why use it twice? That's spending just as much time to abbreviate something as it would to just say it.

I splash some more water on my face. I need to calm down. I need to stop thinking. I go into the shitter and sit for a bit. Shitters always make me nervous when they aren't my own, but when I've had a few beers I can sit in one, close my eyes and pretend I'm home. The smell of the water sitting in the bowl refreshes me. Reminds me of the comforts of home.

By the time I return to the group it has dwindled down to four or five of the regulars. There are two types of happy hour crowds. There are the two beer kind. The Oh, I have to get home to my kids kind. They make it through the real happy hour, the happy hour written on the little cards at each of the tables. The two for ones. Then there are the drinkers. The people that would be out whether it was happy hour or not. The people who hide behind the pretense of happy hour because they fit into society better that way. The kind of people that will close the bar. The Asshole and I are these kind of people. One of the reasons we may have stayed friends all of these years. Molly is another.

She spies me sneaking out of the hallway to the bathrooms and up to the bars but she doesn't really make note of it. I can't really tell if the others have seen me or not, either way they're doing a fine job of ignoring my presence. Usually I'd be hurt, feigning injury and wrongdoing by downing as many beers as I can in as short a time as possible while saying none of this. Instead I am content with my solitude. I still down as many beers as I can in as short a time as possible. To much change is a scary thing, after all.

I don't quite remember how I get home that night. I remember Molly attempting to talk to me again a little later, something about Fran and her and a joke they plan on playing on The Asshole. I don't remember it, but luckily by the time she approached me I was beyond words and said none of the things I'd been thinking all night. You see, some people when they get drunk can't shut up. They spew everything they've been thinking out of their lips, and usually to the only person they would never want to say those things. I've seen it all go down. It's horrifying. I have never had this problem. No one takes issue with my silence, and I take no issue with them when it comes to intoxication.

This is another thing I share in common with The Asshole. I'm not sure of his own reasons, but he always stays on top of his game when it comes to public intoxication. He's never had issue with it. In college, about two years after I met The Asshole, we were pulled over for weaving down a backroad at three in the morning. We had come up with the brilliant concept of racing our fellow denizens of the night, and gone out looking for competition. We managed to get lost about six blocks from our home near some railroad tracks, and were in the middle of determining our best course when we saw the cherry's flash at us.

The Asshole immediately sat up straight and pulled some breath mints out of his pocket. He turned to me sternly and said "keep your mouth shut, I'll handle this". I'm not sure why he had said this as I hadn't spoken in over two hours. I had given some nods of agreement in regards to the directions home, but I think those mostly came from an inability to keep my head up more than a true understanding of our location at that time. Not even the cherry's scared me, as I had drank past the point of reasonable response.

"What seems to be the problem, Officer?" asked The Asshole, rather intelligibly if you ask me.

"You appear to be driving the wrong way down a closed one way road, and you are having a little trouble staying in the only lane on this one way road."

Shit. She was hot. She didn't stand a chance. I had never seen a female officer before, I didn't know what they were like. But I'd also yet to see a female that The Asshole couldn't tame. We were off. Now I just had to stay awake long enough to get to my bed.

"Now, now. There's no reason for hostility here, officer. What can I do to make this right?"

How did he get so good? That wasn't even a good line but I could already see her starting to melt in his hands. Her knees looked a bit more wobbly than when she had first approached. I could see the flush in her cheeks growing. The way she was quickly glancing at her appearance in our back window. The Asshole noticed this as well.

"Now honey, you look great. Don't think you have to impress us fine gentlemen anymore than you already have. I've never been able to resist a woman in uniform. Or a woman out of uniform, for that matter."

He had it. I don't know how. When you think about what he was saying it was boarish. It shouldn't work. Yet it did. Every God Damn time. I fell asleep to the car bobbing up and down, the moans of officer whateverhernamemaybe, on a deserted road not six blocks from my bed.

I woke the morning after happy hour feeling like I did the morning after that night on the deserted road. I couldn't exactly remember where I had put my socks the night before. I am very much a sock person, and I had a pattern to my sock use. There was a rotation, a place for every pair of my socks every day of my life. And it always drove me crazy when I couldn't remember where I had put my socks the night before. Nine times out of ten I had placed them in their appropriate locale, being driven by instinct in my inebriated state. But this morning I couldn't find my socks for the life of me. And what had Molly said?

It had been Molly. She always made me forget where I put my socks. Well, that sounds a little more romantic than it should. What I mean is that whenever I've forgotten where I put my socks, it usually involves her in some way. Something she had said the night before. Something I had agreed to. What had it been?

I dug through my pants pockets hoping for some clue. I kept little pieces of paper in my pockets and a pen. When asked why I kept them there I told people it was to write down girls phone numbers, a little joke I found extremely amusing. People only seemed to feel sorry for me after I told them this, and then never believed the real reason I kept them there when I tried to explain. They were to write down my ideas. My ideas for a better life. For a way out of the monotony of everyday life. I was 32 and I still had delusions of grandeur. But perhaps there was a clue to the nights promises somewhere in those papers.

I tossed aside sheets with brilliant plans on them. Things like *start working out slowly, then build it up, do it for an hour every night after work, what do you have to lose?* and *Ask her out, just do it man. Stop being such a pansy.* These notes never proved very useful, and usually they only made me feel worse the day after. I rarely wrote them sober, and had a hard time getting back to the feeling I had when jotting the thoughts down originally.

But then I came across the golden egg. Handwriting that was not mine. Handwriting that could only be Molly's. It was just like I imagined it, elegant and exact. Actually, it was hardly intelligible and half of it was smeared away, but I held it up to my nose to see if I could catch a whiff of her scent before I devoured her words. I got the stale stench of cigarettes and moldy beer and vomited into my wastebasket, atop my favorite pair of socks that I had apparently stored in my nearly empty waste basket the night before to protect them from any potential puking. The irony did not fall short on me.

But I was willing to sacrifice the socks for some small chance with Molly. Some small glimmer of hope. I studied the note carefully and assessed what had been given to me. I took out a pencil and a piece of paper and began to transcribe what I understood on the note to actual paper, for safe keeping. After twenty minutes of hard work here is what I came up with:

Fran, Marge, & [I think this name is Jen] are all bitches!!!

hairy nose cut dujour

Closed Mondays

[6]12-555-4036

OK. Well, I had a phone number. At least, I hoped I had a phone number. I picked up the phone and dialed The Asshole straightaway. A phone began to ring in my front room. I heard him shuffle and crawl off my couch, over to his unbelievably hip shirt in which his cell phone was buzzing away.

"Hello," croaked The Asshole, sleep still thick in his voice.

"Hey, it's me, I need some help."

"What the fuck, Man. Let me sleep. And don't call me from your kitchen when you know I'm asleep on your front couch."

"This is important. Come over, I'll make eggs and coffee."

"You're so fucking weird man. Make the eggs, I'll get up when they're done."

He hung up and slouched back over to the couch. I could see his shadow moving across my front room. Too excited to control myself but knowing I wouldn't get him up again without the eggs I began to beat up my signature omelette. I made some of the fluffiest eggs around. Do you want to know my secret? Butter. Lots of butter. Enough to stop your heart, or at least make it stop when I tell you how much. But nothing beats them. Nothing.

By the time the omelette was ready the coffee had brewed and The Asshole was awake once again. He was in the bathroom getting ready for breakfast, which meant at least another ten minutes. He'd already been in there for fifteen. I tried a taste of the omelette and felt another year suck off the end of my life. Perfect.

"Egg's are up, get em while they're hot."

"That's never been funny, you know." He said as he exited the bathroom.

"Wow, under half an hour, I'm impressed."

"That's never been funny either."

He sat down and started devouring his omelette, not even really taking the time to savor it the way he should have. But I was too excited this morning to bring this point up to him. I had Molly on my mind.

"Aren't you going to ask what I wanted to talk about?"

"Jesus Christ, I guess if I have to. What the fuck did you want?"

"I met a girl. I think I've got a shot with her. You don't know her, so don't bother asking."

"How do you know I don't know her?"

"You just don't, OK. But I met her none the less. And I need some advice."

"When did you meet her?"

"The other night, but it's not important. I need some help with my next move."

"What other night? Where were you the other night?"

"Out. And I met this girl." I was growing impatient with his reluctance to let me move forward.

"At the Luce?"

"No, no, not at the Luce. I go other places."

"Hah!"

"I do, all the time. My life doesn't revolve around The Luce and hanging out with your friends. Can I get to my point?"

"Whatever, Man."

"Thank you. So I met this girl, and I've got her phone number, and it was the other night. How long should I wait before I call her?"

"Man, you should have called her the next day."

"What!?! No! I mean, you never call the next day. Do you?" He thought he was being so coy, fucking with me like this. Playing with time. He knew I couldn't call her the next day as that had already passed in the story I was giving him, but really it was only the next day for Molly now, so I was still safe depending on how this played out.

"No, Man, I'm just fucking with you. Wait at least eight days. That's if you like her. If you just want to get laid, you've got about eighteen before the scent goes cold."

"Eight days. I can't wait that long."

“Well don’t call within two days, Man. That’s just crying out desperation. That’s just crying out pathetic. Didn’t all this get covered somewhere else already, Man? Some movie with those retro dudes. A party in the Valley. Swingers, or something like that.”

“What movie? I don’t watch movies. You know that. So I should really wait eight days.”

“At least, Man. What’s her number, I have a thing with numbers. I always remember them, I’ll tell you if I know her.”

“The fact that you have a thing with numbers is the exact reason why I am not about to tell you her number.”

“So are you going to call her?”

“I guess. We’ll see how I feel in eight days time. Maybe I’ll have met someone else.”

“Keep on dreaming, Man. Why don’t you make me another omelette while you’re at it.”

By the time I got him out of the house that afternoon I was ready. I called in sick to my Janitorial duties and phoned up Molly straightaway. She picked up on the third ring, sounding a little bit worse off than The Asshole did when he first woke this morning.

“This better be fucking important if you’re calling this Goddam early.”

“Hey, Molly. It’s me.”

“Who is this? How did you get this number?”

“Molly, it’s me. From last night.”

“What’s from last night. Who are you?”

“It’s me. The Assholes friends. You gave me your number.”

“Oh, hey, Man. Why are you calling me now? I told you to call me Friday afternoon and leave a message, that I’d get back to you.”

“I’m sorry, Molly. The minds a little slow today and you’re not was rather unintelligable. I was glad I could decipher your phone number out of it. Anyway, my memory of last night is a little hazy and I was wondering if you’d like to fill me in over coffee this evening?”

“Coffee? What for? Why are you calling, Man? I told you to leave me a message with your number on my cell on Friday. That I’d call you if I needed a ride home from the cabin. The Asshole would find it real funny when I found a way out of his little plan’s for the weekend. You agreed. Why are we talking today?”

“Oh, Oh, you must have misunderstood. I just wanted to make sure I had your cell number right, didn’t want to wait until the last minute and have the wrong number. That may have proven disastrous. Anyway, I’m not so sure on the directions up to The Assholes cabin, perhaps we could meet for coffee and go over them briefly.”

“Christ, Man. It’s off Hwy 8, exit 101. It’s the only damn cabin on that road. You said you’d been there before.”

“Right, Right. I’m just a little groggy still. Sorry for the trouble, Molly. Anyway, all this talk about coffee has got me craving some. I think I’ll head out for a cup in about an hour, down at Pandora’s Shop. Do you know where that is?”

She had already hung up on the other end.