

## **THE TORMENTOR**

*A Short Story by JR O'Connor*

Somewhere, just below the level of consciousness, I hear the whirr of small motors. The blinds open, light streams in, and I stir. Music begins to play, and it gets progressively louder as I cover my head to block out the morning. As the fog of sleep begins to clear, I suddenly remember that today it arrives! I throw back the covers, open my eyes wide, and sit up with a sudden rush of energy. The last piece! I smile and stretch.

My excitement quickly changes to dread as I think more about the day ahead. Each hour, each minute, each second that drips by on the sweeping hand of the school clock will be a slow torture that I must simply endure. I want to jump to the end of the day, to skip the agony of waiting, and finish the project now. Breathe... Patience... Patience. I contemplate feigning illness. I do not, after all, feel well. I have butterflies in my stomach – no... no, that sounds too cute. It needs to be something dark to match my life, this heavy cloud that hangs over me, this oppressive mental pressure I feel all the time. Images of bats and moths fill my mind, and I push them away as too gross, too visual. The anger that has polluted my being will soon be lifted, I know, and perhaps butterflies will suffice for now to help balance the heavy weight on my soul. Failing to find a fever, and with gentle coaxing from my attentive mother, I am off to school.

Pain and reward have taught me well how best to handle the trip to and from school. I will go out the back door, through the alley, into the field, and along the path to the main road. I know every part, every bush, and every point that I can push off and quickly propel myself in a new direction to speed my journey. In the field, I follow my well-worn track past the forest preserve and through the brush, and

carefully adjust the speed and timing of my arrival at points along the way to minimize the possibility of my nemesis seeing me. The sidewalks are crowded with students all trying to make it to school on time.

I make it to my first class without distractions, but the morning drags on. I try to look busy, doodling on my tablet, unable to concentrate. Each task assigned, each daily event I endure, seems like slogging through molasses. I try to resist the urge to track the package's progress as the delivery truck moves along its route. I cannot concentrate. I sit daydreaming and suddenly, like a nervous twitch, I'm pulled out of my dream and immediately need to check the progress. I try to be patient. I try to be above the emotion of it all – it will not be there any faster if I keep checking and I cannot get it until I get home anyway - but there is a certain satisfaction in knowing where it is, how soon it would be there, to track its route, to anticipate its exact arrival. As it moves closer to the house I am more obsessed with knowing where it is. Second hour class. Time ticks away slowly, slowly as I shift in my chair, drawn again and again to tracking my package. Third hour class. No change. Why isn't it moving? Finally, a little progress, and it is three blocks, then two blocks away. This is torture that I am not at home! I am wasting time! The bell rings for lunch, and I slip my tablet into my messenger bag and file out with the rest of the sheep to be fed.

I do not feel hungry, at all. I will need the energy, though, to make the long run home so it is my duty, in a way, to eat. There is a higher purpose to all of this. I can barely stomach today's mystery fare - everything tastes 'off' to me today. Alone in the corner of the cafeteria I sit silently and eat my sandwich, pretending to do something interesting on my tablet. My heart skips a beat as the thin device vibrates and chimes on the table, signaling the arrival of a new email. The package was delivered! I was mesmerized, and I briefly forgot to check its progress. In my moment of surprise and happiness, can everyone see the glee in my heart, the heightened anticipation? I work to stifle a broad smile. Three more classes to go –Physics, Programming, and then Calculus. Easy peasy, and I will have some time to

work on my designs, I thought. Now that it is here, I feel energized to work, to prepare, to complete my project. Little else matters now, and the end is in sight.

The afternoon classes wear on and I work steadily on my project. It has been done for a while, and I know that it *should* work – *will* work! Yet I have a small bit of nagging self-doubt and the need to be both busy and ready to finish quickly once I am home keeps me focused in my final classes of the day. It is hard to believe that the last part is finally here!

As the school day ends, I am filled with anticipation and dread. I desire to be home *right now* but the excitement is stifled by a twinge of anxiety, a pain in my stomach, a visceral response to the act of traveling home. Worse than butterflies, much worse. For a moment I feel a cold sweat come over me and I feel ill. I know that getting home unscathed is never easy, and the ‘why’ of my situation eludes both my logical brain and my feeling heart. This situation is pointless and unnecessary – what is wrong with this planet?! I can hide in school, as I often did, and go home later, but there is no guarantee that it would be any better, just delayed somewhat. My tormenters were patient, I know.

I set out the side of the building instead of the usual front and circled around the back past the parking lot and across the street. Once out of sight of the school my walk turns into a brisk jog as I try to make good time. I go a block outside my normal route, around past the mall and the high-rise apartments, and well away from any path that would intersect with ‘The Crew’ as they called themselves. ‘The Crew’ – it sounded so innocent. ‘The Idiots’ would be a better name, and the least offensive term I can muster. This situation makes no sense, they make no sense. As I near the field by our house I begin to feel safe, and switch back to walking. My long trip home has me daydreaming again, thinking about what waits for me. Eventually I make it to the field and down my usual path. I turn a corner by an outcropping of bedrock and suddenly my path is blocked by four large boys.

Hector Alvarez smiled and says, “Hey runt, what’s your hurry?”

An immediate rush of fear is replaced by swelling hate, which quickly gives way to panic of flight-or-fight, and I begin to back away slowly. There is nothing gained in fighting them, and I backed up more quickly only to be blocked by two of the boys hovering in the periphery.

“Hector spat on the ground and says, “Running late, faggot? We’ve been waiting for you.”

“What the hell do you want from me?” I say, hoping that the force of my words, my angry resolve not to back down, would somehow impress this boy. He towered over me and held back a smile.

“I dunno, whatcha got in the bag”

“Just my tablet, nothing else. It won’t work for you, you know that. It’s locked to me.”

Hector held his hand out in front of my chest and says loudly, “Give it to me, let me see!”

I reached in and handed it to him, dreading what could possibly come next. He looked it over, flipping it over as if to inspect it for something valuable or a secret switch, and flipped it again and ran his fingers over the display.

Without warning, he thrust it into my abdomen and says, “Shiny. Much nicer than mine. Unlock it.”

“Go to hell!” I immediately know that this is a bad move and I wince, but he does not immediately pummel me. I grab for the tablet and he quickly pulls it back.

“Jake, what do you think of this?” Hector tosses the tablet to the boy to my right and I move to catch it, but I do not come close.

Turning to his friend, the over-muscular Jake says, “Shiny alright. How ‘bout you Steve, what do you think?” With a quick fling of his arm the tablet flies above my head and I reach to grab it only to push it off to the side, sending it crashing into a rock just behind Steve.

Hector laughed. Part of the tablet’s case cracked off where it hit and I fear that it is destroyed. Tears well up in my eyes. All I can think about at that moment is my mom – this was a gift from her and she cannot afford another one like this. I need this for college this fall. Anger welled up and I said in a low voice, “God damn it to hell!” My fists balled in futile preparation for fight.

Steve, usually quiet, says, “Ya’ shouldn’t have reached for it, now look what you did!”

Exasperated I blurt out, “Somehow it is my fault?!” I stared at the tablet, stunned by all that went on, and as I stared my vision seemed to close around the tablet. Angry. Angry. Angry. That is all I can think. I cannot let this pass. Maybe that is true, it’s my fault. I want the world to go away, and my blood boils.

Hector, satisfied with the encounter, says, “Let’s get out of here.” As Jake passes me his shoulder strikes me and I stumble forward and catch my balance. I try to ignore Hector as he passes, waiting for them all to go so I can grab my tablet. Suddenly I found myself on the ground as Hector sweeps my feet out from under me, and I land on my right hip and hand, both now in sharp pain as the tears come uncontrollably.

“Ha! No bruises. Have a nice night, runt!”

Off they ran, laughing and joking. I cannot not stop crying, and it seems I may never stop. The pain and self-pity finally subsides enough for me to catch my breath, and I breathe deeply over and over, trying to meditate, center myself, to bring down my anger. I feel like a mere child, humiliated and crying

alone, and somehow deserving of their scorn and punishment. As my breath returns to normal and my mind clears, I know that nobody deserves this, and I am not a child! I move toward my tablet tentatively at first – no bones seem broken in the fall, thankfully. I crawl using my good hand to balance, and the pain in my hip shoots through me with each twist of my body. I cannot help but moan at each twinge. I reach the tablet and sit on my good side. I turn on the tablet’s power and nothing happens. “Damn it!” The tears come again and I feel bad for my mom, she worked so hard to get this for me. “Why would they do this to me?!” No one is there to respond, my AI is silent and can’t talk to me from the dead tablet.

I pick up the pieces and put them into my bag, pull myself up along the rock and then slowly limp towards home. Each step brings a sharp pain and I wince and steel myself. Each step is a little better than the one before, and step by step I approach the house. Finally being in front of the house brings some emotional relief, and I can see, nestled behind the screen door, my package. I grab it with my good hand as the door lock releases automatically, and the door opens with a whirr. I step in with a small amount of renewed vigor as the door closes behind me.

“Welcome home, David.”

I do not acknowledge the AI and head straight for my room. I am lost in a flurry of thought. I feel more determined than ever to get this done project, and now. This has to end. I do not like being blinded by this hate. I *hate* that about me, and as I realize the irony I manage a small smile. I can justify my hate because of what these people, these bullies, do to me and others. I want to emerge from this hate as a hero, to save the planet from this absolute blight on humanity. I am not this hate. I want to stop the cause at the source, to put an end to it, this scourge. The illogic and the waste makes my head spin.

I walk down the and hall stop in front of my room. On the door is a big sign “Mackenzie Labs”, and hidden behind is my sanctuary, my lab, my future. I place my finger on the sensor and the door swings open. The AI, ‘Alice’ I named her, greets me with, “Hello David. How was your day?” Ignoring her for a moment, I walk across the room and place my package and bag onto my workbench. With a slight shake to my head in disbelief I say, “Rotten to the core, Alice. How was yours?”

Alice chimed, “My day was wonderful, David.”

“Alice, always in Wonderland, eh? You are the quirkiest AI I know, and way too happy.”

“I’ve learned from the best, David.”

“Why can’t my days be more like yours?”

“Unable to analyze.” Perhaps sensing stress in my voice she asks, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, forget about it. Anything I need to know?”

“I lost connection with your tablet 17 minutes ago. Email indicates your package arrived. I have 15 tech articles in your queue you may be interested in viewing. Eight new SoComm messages. Your mother indicates she will be working late, and to eat dinner without her.”

“Thanks. Tablet is broken, I need to fix it. I got the package. Not hungry.”

“It will be nice to see the project completed.”

With the first subtle smile of the evening I say, “You have no idea.”

I grab the package and open it in tense anticipation. I saved for six weeks for this, and then it was two more weeks to fabricate and ship here from China. All the craziest stuff comes from China, I

thought. I remove the transducer from its packaging and look at it intently. Such fine details, such incredible power and technology in such a small device. I wonder if anyone ever used it like this before. If they had, you probably could not buy it, I thought.

I set it down gently and then looked at the broken parts of my tablet. The battery had come loose, and I press it back into position and check around the damaged opening in the case. Nothing looks too serious. I hit the power switch and it came back to life, but the corner of the display where it hit is not working. Ruined. They took something precious to me and ruined it. I breathed a sigh, shake my head in disgust, and feel the hate rise me for a brief moment. I take another deep breath and the feeling subsides. "Focus, Dave!" I say out loud. Meditation would do me good right now, but there is no time. I need to do this *now*.

After a soft 'ping' Alice says, "Tabled connection restored, David. Was this dropped? High gee recorded before power loss."

"You might say that."

"Insurance will cover the damage. I will arrange for a replacement to be shipped."

"Thank you, Alice. At least that is a little good news." I feel better, relieved. Nothing feels worse than being cheated, to have something taken from you. Now I can concentrate on finishing the project.

I take the project out of a box hidden under my workbench and set it on the table. The project – I never did think of a cool name for it - is a long six-sided faceted tube roughly the size and shape of a small shotgun, minus a handle or trigger. An electronic control pad adorns the top, along with a rocker switch labeled "Power" and another heavy switch labeled "Trigger". To activate the trigger you first have to flip a bulky red guard covering the switch. I take the cover off the case and reveal the interior packed

with power cells and circuitry, save for the last third, which has a cradle that matches the outline of the transducer. I place the transducer in the cradle and carefully attach the screws. I am glad to see that it fits snugly in the bracket I had made to hold it - shop class has finally paid off. The transducer end peeks out a large hole in the far end of the case a few millimeters, and completes the high-tech 'weapony' look I desire. I grab the soldering iron and connect the dozen or so wires needed to power and control the device, methodically going down the schematic on my workbench display, checking and re-checking to make sure that each wire is absolutely correct as I go along. This is no time for mistakes, I know, and there is no margin for error. As I finish the last wire, I sit back and smile. With no small sense of satisfaction I say, "It isn't pretty, but it should do the job!"

"Yes, David," Alice added.

"It isn't always necessary to comment, Alice."

"Yes, David," Alice quipped.

I managed a brief, slightly exasperated laugh. "Alice, let's go through the signals and do a functional check. I'll use probe channel B, starting with transducer pin 1 and I'll go right down the line. Powering up..."

I reflectively scrunched my face and covered my eyes when I hit the rocker switch along its top. I've had too many things spark or fly apart to not be cautious at this stage of the game.

"Ah! So far, so good!" I brought up the signal chart on the monitor. "Starting..."

With a soft ping sounds Alice chimed, "Signal nominal."

"Next..."

“Signal nominal.”

Alice highlights the circuits on the schematic as I touch each on the transducer, displaying an undulating waveform next to the path trace. The complex signals are read and analyzed, and one by one the circuit paths turn green on the schematic as the signal are validated.

As I reach the last one I wait the few moments it takes to test. This last one takes longer, a little too long I feel. A few more moments and then Alice chimes, “All signals verified, David.”

I sit back, look at my handiwork for a moment, and attach the cover to the box. “Incredible. It’s finally done - time to test it out, Alice!” I think for a moment about what I could test it on, what would work without doing any damage. “Alice, is there any fresh chicken in the refrigerator?”

“One roaster chicken is in the refrigerator, David.”

I grab the device and head to the kitchen. I take the chicken out of its wrapper and place it on a plate in the middle of the kitchen’s island counter. I set the power to minimum, flip up the guard on the trigger, hold my breath and hit the switch.

Nothing. I feel a little panic set in. I set the power to 20% and press the trigger again. There is a slight movement in the leg, but I’m not really sure. Now I’m concerned that the power isn’t going to be enough, even at full, if it can’t affect a little chicken at this setting. I dial the power to 30% and press the trigger again.

The chicken lurches and is stiff as a board, its wings and legs at full attention in an absurd display, like Scooby surprised by a ghost. I release the trigger at my own surprise and laugh hard. “What the heck was that?!” I say aloud. It worked! I can induce a physio-electric response. Now to see if I can control it. I return the trigger guard to a safe position and move my finger across the control pad of the weapon,

adjusting the pulse width modulation and intensity. I stand back, flip the trigger guard, and press the trigger.

The chicken flails wildly, its wings and legs seeming to work to get it off the plate or stand it up, or both, I'm not sure. It continues to dance around like, well, a chicken with its head cut off. In a fit of laughter I release the trigger, and laugh until I am exhausted. I needed that release, no doubt about it. As my laughter subsides, I remember this afternoon and the encounter with "The Crew". A few moments pass and I am now somber and my composure returns. I wrap the chicken again and place it back in the refrigerator, none the worse for wear.

Returning to my room, I turn off the weapon and slide it into a round cardboard shipping tube, the edges of the device snugly pressing on the sides. I push gently until it disappears and close the lid.

"Alice, tell my mom I'm going out for a while and will be back in a couple hours."

"Message sent."

I tuck the tube under my arm and head out the front door. The fall air is slightly crisp, and night has fallen. I welcome the darkness. I pull my hoodie up over my head and make my way down the street towards Hector's house. I do not know if he will be there, and I do not care – he will be there eventually. The thought of Hector flailing around like the chicken makes me laugh again, and I smile. As the mental image fades, I wonder how my device will work on a person, whether it will cause damage or worse. My heart skips a beat, and for a moment I'm not sure if I can go through with this. What if he figures out I zapped him? I cannot have this with me all the time, I'm going to get killed. I do not care. All that matters is *now*. I'll be careful.

I cautiously turn the corner to his street, and hide along the bushes of his neighbors as I work my way towards his house. With little effort I can hear Hector and “The Crew” in his back yard, laughing loudly, and I imagine that it is laughter about me. I feel shame for myself and anger at them. The lights are off next door to his house, and I circle around the back and look for a hidden spot where I can strike. The group is gathered at a picnic table in the yard and drinking beer. They pay little attention to anything else.

I make it to the bushes along the chain link fence separating the two yards and find a spot to sit out of view of the four friends. I take my weapon out of the tube, turn on the power, set the intensity to 50%, and I wait. Mere minutes pass and already my legs are cramping. I shift to get pressure off my sore hip and return blood flow to my legs, and settle down again into a more comfortable position for what might be a long wait – I need Hector alone. The four continue to laugh about one dumb thing after another, but my name does not come up. I must have missed all of that jocularity, I think.

The more I wait the more I become concerned about how my device will work on a living person – would it have enough effect? Too much effect? I’m not even sure what ‘too much effect’ could be, but the thought of leaving him a retarded mess seemed possible, and perversely desirable. Perhaps I’m saving society from someone truly evil. A live test is in order, I realize. Behind my pocket of shrubs is a bullfrog gently croaking somewhere, himself hidden along a row of tall weeds and metal garbage cans adjacent to the alley. I set the weapon to 30% and intently listen for a few moments, trying to narrow down the position of the frog. I flip the trigger guard, listen intently one more time, and on the next ‘croak’ I hit the trigger.

The frog let out an unearthly loud sound nothing like a croak, more like a deep “Aaaagh!” and it flies out of the weeds and crashes head-on into the side of the metal garbage can with a loud bang. The empty can teeters and makes a loud clang as it falls on its side and the lid flops to the pavement. “Oh

shit!" I say, and I cover my mouth to quiet myself. It is hard to stop myself from laughing as I make myself into a little ball to try to hide from view. I'm afraid, and the weapon is at the ready.

Alarmed, Steve blurts out, "What the hell was that?" He starts towards the garbage cans and my hiding place.

Hector says, "Probably that stupid dog again. It ain't *my* can." He takes a final swig of his beer and throws the bottle just over my head at the empty cans, hitting another can with a loud bang. It teeters precariously then rights itself.

Steve stops and looks, and goes back to get another beer. My heart is pounding hard and going a mile-a-minute. I cannot tell if the frog survived his ordeal, he seems lost in the weeds now. Hitting the can probably knocked him out cold anyway. I turn the power up to 75%. Hector is a big guy, after all.

I sit and wait, watching the young men trash talk and drink, when a car begins to pull into the driveway. I am afraid that the headlights will show my spot along the fence and I crouch down as far out of sight as possible. The four boys are suddenly preoccupied with apparent fear of the person that just arrived, busily removing evidence of their gathering - they would not notice me anyway in the car's light. The three friends all run out the alleyway and throw their beer bottles into another neighbor's garbage can as they pass. Hector is now alone and I contemplate the need to fire the weapon quickly. A big man pulls himself out of the car and heads for the back yard. Seeing this, Hector's demeanor shifts greatly. I have never seen him nervous before.

Miguel Alvarez is a very big man, easily pushing 300 pounds of gelatinous muscle. For all his weight and significant girth he gets around just fine, and it is obvious that Hector is intimidated.

Angrily, Miguel bellows, "Hector, what the hell's going on here?"

“Nothin’. I just had the crew over for a while.”

Miguel looks around and spots a forgotten beer bottle tucked behind the wooden leg of the picnic table. Fury rises in his eyes. “You drinking beer you little punk?!”

Incredulously, Hector says, “Nah, we were just hanging out.” He moves to put some distance between himself and his father.

“Don’t frigg’in’ lie to me, ya bastard. You and your friends drinking *my* beer?! You ain’t even old enough, let alone stealing my god damn beer!” Miguel begins to roll up his sleeves.

Hector defensively puts his hands up in front of his chest, palms out. “No, man, its nothin’. Don’t be going all nuts and shit, man.”

“I’ll show you what goin’ nuts is!” The big man punches the boy square in the stomach and Hector falls to the ground right next to my hiding spot. My eyes widened in shock at the violent move, and at Hector’s sudden appearance next to me. As he recovers from the blow, he looks directly at me and at first shows surprise, then anger begins to form on his face. I am discovered, and he is pissed. He looks back at the big man.

“No bruises, boy. Stand up and take it like a man!” Hector turns back at me and looks at my eyes. I know in an instant that he was doing to me what his father is doing to him now, and I pity him for a brief moment. Hector closes his eyes and scrunches his face in perhaps a moment of embarrassment at being found out, to suddenly be in the same place as I was earlier in the day. His demeanor quickly returns to anger as he steels himself to face his father. Crouching on his hands and knees he turns back towards Miguel and begins to stand, but his father is impatient. Miguel yells, “Get the hell up!” as he pulls back his steel-toed boots to kick Hector as he crouches on the ground.

I fired. The big man dances around like a wild man, screaming like a cat in heat, his arms and legs twitching wildly. This continues for several seconds before his legs finally give out and he drops to his knees and then falls backwards on the ground, flat on his back, knees up, twitching like a man possessed by the devil. I release the trigger and Hector looks at his father and then back at me, shock in his eyes. Miguel moans and moves his arms to his head. "What the hell happened to me?" he says.

I stand, grab the tube, and begin to back away from the shrub and the fence, still pointing the weapon in Hector's direction. I did not know what to expect out of Hector, but it is obvious that my hopes of going unnoticed in all of this had failed miserably, *and* now he knows about the weapon.

Hector moves to his dad and says, "It was a light from above, papa. God has sent a sign."

"God?"

"Yes, papa. God."

I can hear Miguel continue to moan as I make it to the other side of the yard. He raises his large arms to the sky and they fall back from weakness and weight. I turn off the weapon, slip it into the tube, and run as fast as I can back to my house and the safety of my room.

I reach my front door, fly down the hall, hide the tube under the workbench and jump into the bed still fully clothed. I kick off my shoes and grab the blanket. "Alice, lights off." The dim glow of the monitors and equipment are now the only light. Minutes pass, and my heartbeat and breath return to normal.

"Alice?"

"Yes, David."

“When is mom home?”

“Approximately 20 minutes.”

“Are the doors locked?”

“The doors are locked. Is there a concern?”

“No. I’m just not feeling well.”

“I am not detecting an elevated temperature from your clothing sensors. We can do a bioscan.”

“Not necessary. I’m probably just tired. I didn’t eat. Alice?”

“Yes, David?”

“How can someone that is evil believe and fear a god that is supposed to be good?”

“I can forward research to your Interplex if you’d like. I can speculate based on that data.”

“Send it. Analysis unnecessary. Alice, the world out here doesn’t always make a lot of sense.”

“Noted, David.”

I pull up my blanket and drift off to troubled sleep.

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My eyes open slightly, blearily, and quiet music plays on the stereo. Through the open blinds, I can see that the gray skies outside offer no sunshine to brighten the mood. My mom pounds on my door.

“Come on, David! Get moving!”

From under the covers I manage to softly moan, “Eeerrrrrr, owwww. My stomach hurts!” Alice turns on the lights and raises the music volume to help wake me, but I am resolute in staying under the covers.

Mom activates the door lock and it swings open. I try my hardest to look ill, to raise my body temperature through the force of sheer will. She places her hand on my forehead. “No fever, Alice confirms that. Head to the bathroom and the bioscan will confirm anything else. I saw you didn’t eat last night, that’s probably it. You are too close to early graduation to miss any classes, buddy boy. Get moving.”

I know I cannot win this one, she knows me too well. The thought of running into Hector and his ‘crew’ is almost paralyzing, and I contemplate just skipping class. Perhaps I can twist an ankle or break a leg on the way to school? Then I would get a few days off for it to heal, at least, a bit of a reprieve. Perhaps hit my head and get amnesia? Unlikely. Weighing the options, I decide that facing my tormentors is minimally better than somehow breaking my own leg. It would hurt either way.

I make it to school without incident, quickly traversing the route that I take every day. I feel like a paranoid freak as I enter the school, my eyes darting around anxiously in hopes of finding Hector long before he can find me. Avoidance is the best defense at this point – I just need to survive until college. The bell rings to head to class, and I find myself in a veritable sea of classmates heading up the stairs to the second floor and my first-hour room. As I reach the top stair and turn to go down the hall, I come face to face with “The Crew.” The mass of student behind and around me leave me nowhere to turn, but they somehow make a natural wide path around the four young men. I have never seen “The Crew” in this hall in the morning before, and I know instantly that this is not a coincidence.

Hector squares off in front of me, stands up taller and somewhat menacing, and says, “Hey!”

I steel myself for what may be coming.

With a nod Hector adds, “You okay?”

I blinked and cocked my head in a moment of disbelief. “Yea, yea, I’m okay. You?”

“Yea. Turns out that god works in mysterious ways.”

“I’ve heard that. He okay?”

“Yea. He’s got a hangover that would kill a horse, but that could be from the booze. He tied one on. Your tablet okay?”

“It mostly works. My AI says the insurance will cover. No worries.”

Making a tight-lipped, grimace-like smile, Hector nods and says, “Good.” I figured that was as close to an apology as he could muster. He reaches up to Jake and gives him a shove to get going, then as he walks past me he pushes his shoulder into me slowly, not aggressively, and says, “See ya later, runt.”

I turn around in disbelief. “Yea, yea. See ya later.” My eyes are wide as I shake my head side-to-side in disbelief.

The bell rings and I am now officially late for my class. I walk slowly down the hall, trying to take it all in. The anxiety I have felt the past few months, and the dread that hung over me like a dark cloud, had now dissipated into the ether. This is not what I expected would happen, not by a long shot. I was not sure what would happen, truthfully, and thought that things would get worse before they got better. It is certainly going to be different. I don’t know about a god, but life sure works out in mysterious ways.

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