

Arty

by
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Arty was my best friend

He was short, maybe five foot four, and skinny, I mean boney-maroney skinny. When he stood around in the locker room in his boxer shorts, he looked like a paper bag with four toothpicks sticking out of it.

He had a long neck for a short guy, with an Adam's apple that looked like a big chicken bone got stuck in his throat. His face was covered with freckles.

What really distinguished Arty was his teeth. His four uppers were huge and tilted forward, protruding a full finger width from his lower lip. This earned him the nickname Bucktooth since kindergarten, and the name stuck with him ever since. I wouldn't let anyone call him that when I was around.

I've been defending Arty since the day he was old enough to go outside by himself and play. The neighborhood kids pushed him into a mud puddle and then kicked him around in the dirty water. I punched the biggest one, and he ran home crying.

Winning fights came easy to me, like a lot of things came easy to me ... friends ... football and basketball ... girls. I was used to girls bumping into me, starting conversations, calling me up.

Arty had only one thing going for him, he was funny - falling-down-holding-your-stomach, sides-aching-from-laughing, afraid-you're-going-to-pee-in-your-pants funny. He made fun of himself before anyone else could, and he knew more short jokes, skinny jokes, and bucktooth jokes than anyone alive.

The thing I remember most about Arty is that he set our high school's record for rejection. He asked eighteen girls to the senior prom before he got a yes, and it wasn't even a real yes. The sympathetic girls

said, "Sorry, Arty, but no." A less tactful one said, "Are you serious? Me and you? Stop kidding, Arty!" and left laughing.

One girl said, "Hell no!" and walked away.

The eighteenth girl was Kimberly De Georgio, and she said, "Maybe." Kimberly was dark-haired-green-eyed pretty on the outside, and only-interested-in-topics-that-included-her on the inside. She gave Arty a "maybe" because her boyfriend, Charlie Saunders, just broke up with her, and now she wasn't sure if she was even going to the prom. To her, it was a toss up as to what was worse - going with Arty, or not going at all.

Arty pushed Kimberly for a definite answer every day of the thirty-five days before the prom, but she continued to give only a "Maybe." Two days before the big day, after no one else asked her, Kimberly's "Maybe" turned into, "Probably, but not definitely." The day before the prom, Kimberly made a phone call. It was wasn't to Arty:

"Yes or no, Charles Saunders, are we going to the prom or not ... because if you're not taking me, then I'm going with Arty."

"Is that a threat?" he shot back.

"No, it's a promise!"

"Well, then have fun with Bucktooth," Charlie said before he hung up.

Kimberly made a second phone call, and that's when, "Probably, but not definitely," changed to a sad and pathetic:

"Okay. Artie, I'll go with you."

Arty and Kimberly went with Tiffany and me in my Dad's Lexus. Tiffany looked beautiful with her long blonde hair cascading over her tan shoulders in a clinging silver colored gown. She snuggled up to me in the front seat, while Kimberly made Arty sit all the way over on the other side from her so he didn't wrinkle her new pink dress.

At the prom, we sat at the same table. Arty had Tiff and I laughing like hyenas at his imitation of the school principal, while Kimberly tapped her fingers impatiently on the table. She finally consented to a slow dance with Arty, like a princess to one of her subjects. She made him dance with his arms fully extended.

While we were dancing, out of the corner of my eye, I saw trouble walk in and I knew this special night was going to get ruined. He was wearing a white dinner jacket, with a red carnation. He walked over to where Kimberly and Arty were dancing, and tapped Arty on the back.

"I'm cutting in," Charlie said. Then he did just that.

Kimberly and Charlie talked, shouted a litter ... then they kissed and made up. Arty was left standing there, all alone, watching them, his mouth hanging open. When the music stopped, the dance floor emptied out except for Arty, standing next to Kimberly and Charlie

"What's going on, Kimberly?" Arty asked.

"I'm with Charlie now. We just got back together."

Charlie walked over to Arty, grabbed him by his lapels. "Do you gotta problem with that, Bucktooth?"

I walked over and took Charlie's hands off Arty and he backed off.

Someone tapped me on the back, and when I turned around, hands clenched into fists ... Arty grabbed me and started dancing the tango. He said the beats out loud - "Dum dum dum dum ... da dada dum dum."

Then, in a high pitched voice, so everyone could hear, he said, "Oh my, Mr. Buddy, what a divine dancer you are!" Our classmates laughed as we took a few turns around the dance floor. When we returned to our table, I sat down with Tiffany. Arty excused himself.

A half hour went by, and Arty didn't return, so I went looking for him. He wasn't in the hallway, and he wasn't outside, and he wasn't

waiting in my Dad's car. By this time, I was dripping inside that monkey suit, so I made a pit stop at my gym locker.

When I passed the locker room bathroom, I heard sobbing coming from one of the stalls. I looked down and saw Artie's black and white saddle shoes. I tapped on the door of the stall.

"What?" he whispered.

"Are you okay Arty?"

"No."

"Oh ... well, do you think you'll be coming out anytime soon?"

"I don't know."

"Okay ... well, I'm going down to my locker to spray on some deodorant because I'm starting to smell ripe. Let me know when you're ready to go back inside."

When I returned, Arty was splashing water on his face. He dried off with some paper towels, and then reached out for my comb, which I handed to him. First he combed his hair straight back and did an impression of Don Johnson from "Miami Vice."

Then he combed it like Eddie Murphy in "Harlem Nights" and gave that Eddie Murphy laugh.

Then he combed his hair like Charlie Saunders and mimicked him perfectly when he said, "Do you gotta problem with that, Bucktooth?" I thought the old Arty was back, until he asked:

"What do you think about when you look in the mirror, Buddy?"

"What?"

"Do you give any thought to the fact you're so damn tall and good-looking? I mean, how does your reflection make you feel?"

I studied Arty, to see if he was serious. I never saw this side of him.

“I really don’t think about it, Arty.”

Arty waited awhile, and then said, “Go ahead and ask me.”

“Ask you what?”

“You know what – ask me what I think about when I look in the mirror?”

“Okay, what do you think about, Arty?”

Arty gave me one of his geeky-looking, Alfred-E-Newman-What-Me-Worry kind of smiles, and then he handed me my comb back.

“I think ... that sometimes life is a crap sandwich ... and no matter what I say or do, I have to take a bite.”

We walked back to the prom in silence. When we arrived at our table, Jennifer Sanchez, the hottest girl in school, was sitting in Kimberly’s old seat. Jennifer’s prom date was arrested for drunk driving on his way to picking her up. She called Tiff, hysterical, and Tiff told her to come over and take Kimberly’s place – she didn’t think Arty would mind.

Arty definitely didn’t mind – he was thrilled to sit next to the hottest girl in school, and he made us laugh with his impression of our Math teacher, Mrs. Gillespie, one of the prom chaperones.

Then we heard a thumping on the microphone.

“Boys and girls,” Mrs. Gillespie began, “we have the results of the voting for the King and Queen of the prom. The Queen of the Elmwood High School Senior Prom is ... Jennifer Sanchez.”

Jennifer jumped up screaming and crying, hugging onto Tiff, who was also screaming and crying.

Mrs. Gillespie then announced the King of the prom, and I felt a little weird when I heard my name. Arty, on the other hand, jumped up and down and screamed and cried for both of us. He posed outrageously for pictures, hugging Jennifer, a big Clark Gable smile on his face.

That weird feeling I had when they voted me King of the Elwood High School Senior Prom was a premonition – that the crown was going to be the last thing I ever won ... and it was.

My life turned out fairly ordinary, except for my friendship with Arty. He and I are still best friends, and whenever I have a problem I can't handle, I go to him. Arty always makes me laugh and shows me how to get over it.

The End

**** Dedicated to my friend, Gersh**

Gift Section

Dear _____

This Story is a special Gift for a Special Person
on the occasion of your _____ .

I love you,

Person Giving Gift

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