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The Last Nice Guy

by

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-1-

Colorado. High Plains. Wind blowing. Hard, Isabella Frangelico crying her eyes out. I hear her howl. Sounds like a coyote. Or a wolf maybe. An injured animal caught in a trap, ready to chew its paw off. Get too close and it will bite you, maybe even kill you.

If Robby the Robot heard a sound like that, he'd shout, "Danger, danger, Will Robinson!"

A thought from way back, pre-Star Wars fan boy days when dear old mom and dad got me hooked on Lost in Space. Watched the whole series. Many times. Two things I took away from it: I wished I had a robot. And 1960s TV was cool in a dumb kind of way.

"Danger, danger, Johnny Boyd!"

I don't have a robot. I'm not Will Robinson. But I am walking straight into danger, toward a howling woman prepared to chew her arm off and kill whatever gets close. So. What's that make me? Cool and dumb like 1960s TV? Maybe. I'd argue, less cool. More dumb. I need all the help I can get, so I look over my shoulder, at the cabin, hopeful but not surprised.

No robot.

I have to do this. By myself. I can't stop. She has the urn.

She runs—away from me, to the cairn, the one we built when we got here, a bloody-up-your-knuckles pile of granite meant to symbolize our love. Big rocks at the bottom, smaller rocks on top. We had to roll the ones at the bottom and we had to do that together. Bigfatstupid rocks. Heavy, let's say.

“It'll stand forever, like the Ángeles de la Guarda Mountains,” she said. “Nothing will knock it down,” she said. “Like our love.” We did that on purpose, of course, made the cairn extra-big. Or rather, she did. I convinced myself I wanted to do it. I did it because she wanted it.

More dumb.

But to be fair, when we built the cairn things had become so blurry I couldn't see the truth from the fiction. I didn't know real from unreal anymore. I did and I didn't believe all the lies she'd been telling me and I did and I didn't believe all the lies I'd been telling myself.

“You're the crazy one,” she said. “You're the psychopath.”

And maybe I am crazy. Maybe I'm as crazy as her. But she was crazy first. She started it.

She cradles the urn, the name etched into the chrome-plated steel buried under her forearm. Like she doesn't want me to see it. Like she can hide it. Like it matters. It's a motorcycle cremation urn, designed for “the ride of your afterlife.” Mount it to the forks and

rider and urn head down the highway, looking for adventure. 12 inches long, about nine pounds filled with live weight, diamond-patterned knurling on the urn cap—looks tough and shiny, something a Hell’s Angel might bash you in the head with, and she holds it like a concealed newborn baby. As if the ash inside was a living, breathing human being and not incinerated human remains.

I have to take it. Can’t let this go on anymore.

“Isabella!”

I walk toward her—no. I advance with determination. Watch out. Here I come.

The hard wind blows from the South today. My back takes the brunt of it, but I’m getting knocked around like a punching bag, whips over my shoulders, sandblasts my eyeballs. I have to squint to see so that I can keep advancing with determination toward Isabella. Pushed is more like it.

On a day like this, be helpful if there were trees, something to hide behind, but this valley does not forgive. Nothing but wide-open high altitude grassland for miles and miles. The cattle ranches have a little protection, homesites walled-in by imported aspen, oaks, and pines, but nothing much exists between them. If you get caught out here in a windstorm, best to lie down and wait till it blows over. If it’s winter, forget it and administer the last rights. The wall of fourteeners on my left (Los Ángeles de la Guardas) and the Weeping Mountains on my right (foothills to the Rockies) don’t help either. In fact, they make it worse, turn the valley into a natural wind tunnel.

The locals say, you can’t handle wind, you shouldn’t be here.

I stumble, look down and see a skull, bleached by the sun. Not surprising. This is free-range land. Cattle roam wherever they want. Sometimes they die out here and ranchers leave them where they fell. People like me trip over them.

I look up and Isabella's knocking the cairn down. Dismantling it, one rock at a time. Total cairn destruction.

So what? I don't care.

OK, no, wait, maybe I do.

Because she looks like an Olympic shot putter knocking-out some serious record breakers, gold medal winners. Those bigfatstupid chunks of heavy granite look about as weightless as balsa wood. They say anger can make a person stronger, creating bursts of superhuman strength. Olympic shot putters must be angry. Like Isabella.

I think about this as I walk toward her and a mental image forms. Instead of shot putted rocks, I see my head sent spinning into the wind and oh, look. There's Jim McKay, the famous TV sportscaster, on the sidelines wearing the traditional Tweety-Bird-yellow ABC's Wide World of Sports blazer and a groovy 1970s comb-over, eating a vintage microphone as he gives classic play-by-play: "...punching the shot from the neck... elbow high and... here comes the delivery! Isabella's aiming for gold, ladies and gentlemen, pure gold!" My head spins into the record books and the crowd goes bananas: HAAAAAAAH!

Maybe I should rethink this.

I take my advice. I stop and study her from a safe distance.

Even from here, I hear a dragon breathing—sucking in the thin air, hit by altitude.

Leather-clad shoulders heave up and down, lungs straining, maybe even bleeding. Three packs of

cigarettes a day will do that to you when you knock a cairn down at eight thousand feet. I wonder if she'll have a heart attack. Make things easier if she did.

She seems bigger and more superheated than ever now, now that I'm close—like a star ready to supernova and go black hole. That is what's happening here. The dragon star Isabella collapses and takes everything with her, including light.

Her black motorcycle jacket, jeans, and Army boots strengthen the impression. She wears black stuff like this every day, a rare occasion when she doesn't. If the ensemble requires a miniskirt, add black fishnet stockings, but most of the time—like today— black jacket, jeans, boots, and always commando. That way, she argues, sex can happen at the drop of a hat or the drop of a public toilet seat or the drop of whatever happens to drop so that she can have what matters most when it matters most, which is most of the time.

Long Island Trailer Trash. That's what Isabella's biggest fans call her personal sense of fashion and consumerist sexuality. They try to imitate it. And fail. It's not easy to pull off. You need a serious amount of self-confidence and a serious f-you attitude. Isabella has all that in spades. Couple that with a body that makes people wish they had a body like yours—"Now that's a tall drink of water on a cool day," a drooling sycophant once said—and you get the Long Island Trailer Trash version of mixed martial arts fighter Gina Carano. She can't do a Muay Tia front kick to save her life. Or run half a block without hacking up a lung. But she can fight. Learned on the street and she fights dirty.

I loved the bad girl image. I loved that she looked like a well-trained MMA fighter. I loved the greedy, impulsive, ravenous sexual appetite that came with it. I loved Isabella Frangelico.

I don't anymore.

I woke up. I remember the day it happened. Isabella and I were walking on the St. Jonathan's Island Boardwalk. We stopped in front of a carnival mirror. I took a long, hard look at Isabella, and saw her image in the mirror change. It turned into a promiscuous looking Floridian mobile home, the kind with marble vinyl tile in the hallway, golden-speckled mirrors on the walls, white shag everywhere else, and beyond the pressed-wood ebony cabinet, faux-leather curtains, velvet Pompeii frescos and leopard bedspreads. Life-size plaster-of-Paris statues, chalk-white with green fig leaves splayed across bulbous genitalia, linger in the bedrooms. Some stand around the pool in frozen conversation like bored Roman senators. A few lean, Pisa-like, on the manicured front lawn. And a white-eyed bust of Julius Caesar stares at you in the bathroom while you search for a spare roll of toilet paper. "Et tu, Brute?" he seems to say.

I saw her true reflection that day, which, as it turns out, was something like a sluttish mobile home in Florida. The only thing I didn't see was the crazy cat lady living inside.

I would, though.

But like her, truth goes commando, and when you see it there's no way to unsee it. Hairy, in-your-face truth changes everything. I see her psychosis now, wide open and exposed, and I see mine. It cuts both ways. Johnny Boyd, dumb nice guy. Isabella Frangelico, crazy cat lady.

My fiancé—ex as of a few minutes ago. Cue the destruction of the cairn.

Which no longer exists, by the way. Other than an unusual amount of rocks scattered around her feet, the granite symbol of our love is gone. Just like us. Isabella and Johnny, knocked down like the Tower of Babel by the Hand of God. When it happens, it happens fast.

That makes me mad and my anger surfaces, but it's not because our relationship has been destroyed. It has nothing to do with what she did to the cabin, all the broken glass, or anything else she did for that matter. I'm angry because it's true. I am the dumb nice guy.

"Isabella...!"

She turns and looks at me.

A gust of wind slams into my back. I manage to keep my balance, but I stagger forward a little, trying to hold my ground. Then it hits Isabella. I have to close my eyes and turn away, shield my face from the debris cloud blowing around her. She's caught in a small dust devil. I half-expect her to scream. Going to knock her flat on her butt.

But she doesn't scream. She isn't knocked down. A black mass of hair swirls around her head like a halo of snakes, but everything else, even her skin, seems immovable and monstrous. Medusa. In the flesh.

So a scary, perhaps reasonable, thought crosses my mind, although, let's be honest: nothing reasonable about any of this. Unlike the cairn, maybe she will stand forever like the Los Angeles de la Guarda Mountain Range. Maybe nothing will ever knock her down.

Isabella's hair is a bottomless crow-black, a woven pile of secret springy knots that, on the surface, look like flowing Michelangelo barrel curls, but deny it all she wants, somewhere in her Moretti ancestry there were Italians and Africans. The wind changes direction and the dust devil comes at me, screaming and pulling her hair with it. That's when I see it: each spinning African knot releases its hidden energy, extending to its full Italian length, grasping, clawing, biting.

I wonder what those locks of hair will do to my face if they reach me.

I step back. I step away. “Danger, danger, Johnny Boyd!”

But even as I do, I want to correct myself and take a step forward, drawn to her olive-colored skin and wide, full features. She appears more powerful and sexualized than ever. I can’t help but think, My god, she’s beautiful.

Even now.

Even after everything she’s done.

Even as her eyes turn into concrete drainpipes overflowing with sewage and dirty stormwater—tears meant to soften my resolve that, unknown to her, reveal a polluted heart and madness. Even then I see beauty.

That’s a problem. I have a problem. I have to be careful.

A second later the dust devil’s funnel collapses, blown into a thousand different directions. It leaves the two of us facing one another, fighting to stand in a debris field of dust and wind.

“You don’t swear-smoke belong here!” she shouts and I see a puff of black smoke come out of her mouth. One, little black puff with golden sparks in it, ripped out of her mouth by the Weeping Valley wind.

“You don’t belong heeeeeerrrrreeee!”

That’s funny. My property. My cabin. I built it. And the Long Islander from Florida tells me, the guy born and raised in Colorado, I don’t belong here.

That settles it.

I close the distance between us. She reacts by hiding the urn behind her back. Something a child would do. Squares her shoulders, ready to fight, all MMA street fighter.

A pocket of air—12 inches of windswept nothing—is all that separates us. I lean in, so close I could kiss her. If I wanted to. I don't. But I could.

“Give it to me.”

She shakes her head, chin stuck out, daring me. To take it. Thinks this is a game. Well, if it was, I have stopped playing.

I reach around and snag the urn. Hard to believe, but I've surprised her. A brief tug-o-war ensues, but I tighten my grip and pull, fingertips digging into the name etched in the steel. I have it. I have it in my hand. And she doesn't.

Knocked the fight right out of her.

“Don't,” she says.

I scramble back, a good ten feet. Unscrew the cap.

“Don't you dare!”

I raise the urn like I'm about to toast someone in an Irish pub, pint glass held high.

I dump the ashes.

Thick, heavy clouds have been piling up on the western side of the valley for most of the afternoon, the sun sinking behind the mountains now. The moment I dump the ashes, a beam of setting sunshine punches through and time slows down. It's like my eyes snap digital pictures at such a high speed I see the wind take nine pounds of dry, grey, powdery material made of human bones and swirl it around Isabella—like the dust devil—but in slow motion, every particle of ash lit up by the sunbeam. It silences everything, allowing me to witness the event in a kind of sacred awe: the ash glows. All around Isabella's body. Like death's golden aura.

She tries to catch it in her arms, spreads her fingers out and claws at it. She opens her mouth and inhales. The collapsing dragon star Isabella, trying to swallow it whole.

As I watch, all I can think is, I'm glad I'm not him.

Half-second later, the wind-tunnel-roar breaks through the silence, normal time and space returning with it as the hole in the clouds closes like a fist. The sunbeam is cutoff, amputated, and the ash-glow vanishes. It's sudden, and suddenly much darker. The ash is scattered into oblivion. No evidence it ever existed.

He is gone.

But I did it. It's over, and she's staring again—storm culvert eyes, wide open and draining terrible, dark waters. I hold my ground, stare right back, angry, triumphant, vindicated. I did it.

Hallelujah.

I'm smiling—no, it's an opened-mouthed jack-o-lantern grin. I'm proud of myself. I look over my shoulder, at the cabin.

I dun good, huh?

But no one's there to approve. No robot. No nothing. Not a soul.

That leaves Isabella and me face-to-face in the middle of nowhere. Got the Los Angeles de la Guarda Mountains to the West, the Weeping Mountains to the East, no way to proceed or retreat. Our messed up version of a Mexican Standoff. Windstorm or no, we could do this all night.

Maybe we will.

Her wounded animal has returned. I hear the growl, a low vibration caught in her vocal cords. Like a coyote or a wolf maybe, ready to chew its paw off or kill whatever gets too close. I see the hate in her eyes, and it's hard and crazy like the Weeping Valley wind.

Staring into those quivering irises, I think, She is beautiful. But dear God Almighty, she is totally insane.

I dare to take my eyes off her for a second, a quick look at the mountains behind her. They could be cardboard cutouts with a big, fading spotlight behind them, featureless except for size and shape. The sun has gone for good today. Ice-cold stars appear in a blue-black arc of creeping twilight.

Beautiful. Such a cold and beautiful light.

But darkness is coming.

-2-

The Howling Coyote Café, beachside, St. Jonathan's Island. See the place for the first time and feel Mos Eisley on planet Tatooine, the spacesport from Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope. Not that it looks anything like anything in the movie. But it has the Mos Eisley vibe, what Obi-Wan Kenobi called “a wretched hive of scum and villainy.” If you shape that into a beachside café on St. Jonathan’s Island, it’ll look (and feel) something like the Howling Coyote Café.

Ugly flat-roofed, two-story concrete-block. Greek Island White back in the day, burnt dirty by the Florida sun. Hasn’t been repainted in forever and the constant sea-salt wind and corrosive humidity has eaten into the substrate. The paint blisters, cracks and, in some places, peels from the walls in giant skin-like swaths. Exposed undercoats reveal years of paint, layered like solvent-based tree rings, dotted black with mold. Two rectangular picture windows face the

Atlantic, and it's a terrific view—if you could see it. Crappy sunglasses found on the beach, lenses scratched and smudged with sunscreen, would do better. Roof tiles fall out like irradiated hair follicles and you can find some of them on the beach. And then there's that serious lean to the south. Serious. To the South.

Who in their right mind would walk into a place like this?

But I want a cup of coffee—my first as a St. Jonathan's resident—and where better than a coffee shop that radiates a certain Mos Eisley charm? I can't think of any. I imagine the place filled with drunken bounty hunters, treacherous aliens, green-skinned women, Han Solo and maybe even the weirdest cantina band in the galaxy. I push the double glass doors open, prepared for any and everything.

Except Isabella.

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The Pillsbury Doughboy stands behind the counter. Big, shapeless guy wearing chef whites, top to bottom, scarf concealing a copious amount of neck. He even has the round, happy Doughboy face. All he needs is a chef hat, cocked to the side. Make him the living image of Poppin' Fresh. I resist the urge to poke him in the stomach and hear him giggle.

He shoots me a sideways glance and I immediately stop thinking Poppin' Fresh. Tells me everything I need to know: he may look like the Pillsbury Doughboy, may even have his round face, but he is not happy. Do not poke.

He's making a cappuccino on an old, monster-sized espresso machine. One giant boiler, encased in silver and covered in ornate carvings, La Pavoni mounted on top like a flagpole. Polished so hard and often the thing all but blushes. Someone's pride and joy—the unhappy

Poppin' Fresh's, I imagine. The machine hisses and gurgles. When he turns the steamer on, the sound is so loud and of such a haunting pitch, images of Francis Bacon's Screaming Pope come to mind, and he has to step away from the machine—as far as he can—arm held out, coffee cup in hand. It's that hot. He even whimpers as it spits steam and scalding water on his arm. When he's done, his hand looks red as a fresh cooked lobster.

A little bell jingles. Entrance door behind me, closing. He ignores it, like he's ignoring me, concentrates on finishing the coffee (and controlling the pain). I continue to study him, fascinated that a guy would scald his hand just to make a coffee drink. Dedication. Suffering for his art. Impressive. Most impressive.

He mops up. I wait. Polite. Raised that way. He glances at me again, unhappier than before, then it's back to the cappuccino. A minute passes, maybe more, then he reaches for a biscotti cookie and tosses it at my face. It hits in me the forehead. The Pillsbury Doughboy points to a sign that says "seat yourself."

Oh. Got it.

I give him a smile and a two-fingered salute, pick up the cookie and offer it to him. He turns his formless body in my direction, a slow, deliberate turn. When he stops, it's full-on Pillsbury belly, meatpacker arms crossed and resting on top. He's wider than I thought. Bigger. And much, much unhappier. He stares at me as if I'm Lennie Small.

I haven't learned island protocol yet, and I don't want to offend this guy, so I shove the cookie in my mouth. Yummy. Chocolate morsels. Hint of hot red pepper. Crunchy. And... something else. I look down and see cracked tile plastered with beach sand footprints, some of them wet. I try not to think about what the Something Else I'm tasting might be. But I see it.

I look back up and his expression remains the same: I am Lennie Small.

I lean across the glass countertop and read his name tag: Harry. Howling Coyote
Proprietor.

“Thanks...” munch, munch, much, “...Harry. I’m new here.”

His face cracks. A smile—just the corner, sharp and pointy like a handlebar curl on a
waxed mustache. Not so unhappy now and I feel he has hope.

I wander to a seat, swallowing the last of the biscotti. Look out the window soon as I sit.
See the Boardwalk and beach through baked, smudged glaze, a headache waiting to happen if I
keep trying to see through it better. I give up and turn away. Open my book instead.

I am warm and content and—the kicker—not in cold Colorado anymore.

“What you reading, sailor?” She pops her gum, gets my attention.

Black combat boots, fishnet stockings, mini skirt, and the kind of legs that make a mini
skirt sensible. Rock and roll image of Bon Scott on a scoop neck half-tee—the whole getup
promising a wild ride. The body inside guaranteeing it.

Black fingernails place a plastic water cup and menu on the table.

“Oh, uh...” Eyes on her bare, flat abdomen—six pack abs, that’s what they call those—a
sparkly bellybutton ring rising and falling, kind of like a hypnotist’s watch, except this one
rises... falls... rises... falls... breathe in... breathe out...

Better wake up.

“Moby Dick,” I say.

“Moby-Swear-smoke-Dick,” she says and pops her gum again and blows a pink bubble.
She sucks the bubble in before it bursts. “Never swear-smoke read that one before.”

An accent like that can sandpaper your ears until they bleed. East Coast, I think, but I don't really know. Heard accents like that in the movies or on television. So... New York maybe?

“Color me a swear-smoking macaroon, huh?”

An unexpected silkiness follows the accent, after every word, and I like it. Sandpaper hits you first. Deep, smooth, seductive resonance comes after. Manages to put you at ease after having your ears sandpapered raw.

I wave the swear-smoke away so that I can see her face better. When it clears, I think, Oh. Wow. Wowie-wow-wow-wow. If Greedo looked like that, Han Solo wouldn't have blasted him first.

Her beauty is hard to look at. You want to stare, your natural inclination—because it's so hard to believe it's real. But you want to look away too—because it's so hard to believe it's real. You want to look and you want to look away at the same time and for the same reason. And you don't want to get caught staring.

I've been caught.

Big eyes. All you see at first. After that, her wide mouth with a generous amount of lip coated in a generous amount of red lipstick. And then her teeth. Lots and lots of teeth that, at first glance, look cookie-cutter perfect, the All-American smile. But if you looked closer, if you were brave enough to get in really, really close, you'd see that they actually resembled the snaggletoothed Western handsaw. Sharp. Broad nose with wide nostrils and a perfectly round, suckable Lollipop tip. Skin the color of olives—not green, not black, southern-Italy-tannish. And then that mass of long, black hair. In other words, mixed martial arts fighter Gina Carano, if she were trailer trash and came from Long Island.

Robby the Robot would have summed her up in two words: “Danger, danger!” And then added, “Hot, hot, hot!”

“Oh, swear-smoke. Sorry,” she says, “forget not everybody’s from Long-Swear-smoking-Island, huh?”

Ah... Goodfellas accent. Makes sense.

I smile—way too big. For some stupid reason, I think the right thing to do is cover the way-too-big smile with a joke, so I put on a bad Long Island accent.

“I’d kill for a lobster roll and an ice cold beach,” I say.

Her big, dark eyes snap open, wide, a deer in the headlights. The order-book slips from her fingers. I see absolute vulnerability for half a second, no stopping it, and I’m the oncoming car.

Then tears.

“Aw...” she says, a few seconds later, wiping the tears from her cheeks with her knuckles. Her voice shivers, cold and glacial, like a mass of ice flowed over her heart. I feel compelled to wrap her in a blanket and comfort her.

I did that. I caused that. I’m not funny and I’m not smiling anymore.

But she warms right back up. Like it didn’t even happen. “Aw, swear-smoke, look at me. Sorry. All thumbs today.”

“My accent that bad?” I say apologetically.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I think I have and I that was not my intention.”

Our eyes connect and boom! Pheromone exchange. I feel sexual possibility, my brain swimming with chemically induced primal hunger, the first stage of love, otherwise known as lust.

Wow. This feels good and she seems to agree. Might as well check for a wedding ring, so I do.

And lo! And behold! Turns out, it’s my lucky day: just a dent in her ring finger, a circular imprint, a ghost from the past.

I catch her staring. At me, and I see a hint of wonder there, distant, like starlight bent by heavy gravity. She sees something in me, I sense it. A distorted mirage. A false image. Hope.

And I’m OK with that. Women like her don’t often stare at me, not like this.

Harry hits the steam on the La Pavoni. The Screaming Pope returns, so loud I want to cover my ears. We turn and look, annoyed at the intrusion. But that’s it, all it takes. A second later, she smiles and shrugs, the wonder gone, tear-stained cheeks dried up, looking at me like I’m a wet and pathetic ewok.

I want to yell, “I’m no ewok! I hate ewoks! They just about ruined Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi. I’m not wet and pathetic!” But I don’t. I don’t do anything. I just sit there.

Like a wet and pathetic ewok.

“Beecha wawa!” That’s what an ewok would say in a moment like this. The fact that I know this makes the moment even worse.

I have to do something, so I reach for the notebook. She reaches for the notebook at the same time. Our foreheads collide, crack!

I overreact, my face a red X on a fixed pin. Couldn't hide my embarrassment if I wanted to. I quickly sit up and knock the glass of water over. I go for a napkin. Hit the curled end of the fork, catapulting it toward the ceiling. It shoots up like a rocket, blasts off, and pierces the ceiling. Stuck there good and solid, wobbling.

We look up at it, necks bent, jaws open, frowning in disbelief and not-quite-smiling. Not quite so sure we should. But we want to. I mean, what are the odds? Near impossible for something like that to happen. It feels spooky in a funny kind of way, and then we realize that something unique, maybe even extraordinary, has passed between us. We burst out laughing at the same time. Because we get it and we're no longer strangers—exactly.

“Order up, Isabella!”

She curtsies, all smiles. She bats her eyelashes. Her name is Isabella.

Her name is Isabella.

I sneak a look at her ring finger again. Watch her pick at the circular imprint with her thumbnail, black and sharp, tearing away a dry layer of skin.

“Oleander!” Harry, the Proprietor, belting it out.

Her name is Oleander.

Before she goes, she flashes me a smile, teeth and red lipstick and potential returning. She races toward the service door in the back and she's gone, baby, gone.

My eyes follow, stealing as much of her as I can. I'm not alone. Everyone's doing it. Everyone in the café watches her go, pretty much thinking the same thing I am. Danger, danger or hot, hot, hot or both. Isabella disappears down a hallway full of shadows.

“Hey, you! Swear-smoke-face with the fork!”

A mean little dude from the back, black boots, black socks, Bermuda shorts and an aloha shirt so shockingly bright and colorful I find it offensive—all I see coming at me like a chunky, squat bulldozer I want to shield my eyes from.

“Get your swear-smokin’ hands off my swear-smokin’ wife, you swear-smokin’ -tard!”
He’s going to hit me. I mean, right here and now.

“I’m, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...” Scrambling—for words, to move, to whatever. No stopping him. Everyone looks at me like I’m crazy. Like I’m guilty of something.

I back away, hoping for a quick exit. This has turned bad fast. Get out and put this behind me just as fast. The door swings open and I hit the Boardwalk and run, my flip-flops struggling to keep up. The Howling Coyote Cafe got a little more Mos Eisley than I bargained for. Screw this place.

The mean little dude follows me outside. Can’t believe it. The guy is relentless.

I don’t want any trouble and I know I can outrun him. I’m a rock and ice climber with seven percent body fat, gone to serious lengths to develop upper and lower body strength, muscle endurance, lean and mean. He’s forty pounds overweight and, by the looks of it, a smoker. Sweating and wheezing already. Guy’ll be dead by forty. And as for those big black boots? Well, he might think they look cool, but running in them is going to be like hockey in heels.

I kick off my flip-flops and hightail it down the concrete, the ocean, the beach, and the Blue Gill Pier whizzing by on my left. Thinking, OK, I screwed up, she’s married, I get it, I get it. No hard feelings, but geez, dude, let it go.

I check behind me.

He's still coming, trailing clouds of swear-smoke. He looks like a battered, old steam locomotive, coughing and choking, chugga-chugga-chugging along the tracks.

“You ever swear-smokin’ look at my wife like that again, you sick swear-smokey-smoke...”

I kick it up a notch. Bare feet slapping, arms pumping. Skid around a corner and shoot one last look back.

“...I’m gonna rip your - swear-smoke!”

He’s knocked flat on his butt—like he slipped on a banana peel. Or ran into a wall.

Deserves it, I think. What a loser.