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Alice Stinetorf

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Stinetorf: The Pancakes of Dan

THE PANCAKES OF DAN

Alice Stinetorf

Dan pinned a squirrel to a tree with his knife, once. Dan pinned many squirrels to that tree, actually, but we only witnessed it once. The squirrel was fat and unafraid. The tree was a healthy maple. The knife was a six-inch switchblade.

In the months that we knew Dan, he was never without that knife. It came out at the most random times. To trace wild images into the dirt at the smokers' feet during parties. To cut a loose thread that nobody but Dan would notice. He would stab the papers he occasionally chose to write and transfer them to the professor's hand at the blade's tip. To those of us who knew Dan, it was never strange. Just Dan being Dan.

Now that Dan is gone, we struggle to describe him to our new fraternity brothers. We dive into our accounts with such vigor, such nostalgia and pained celebration. We say "Dan was" and "Dan just" and "Dan always" and "Dan could" and "Dan never," and halt. Our tongues trip in the flood of all that he was. Behind our cigarettes or glasses, lips twitch and revert to "Dan was Dan. You had to know him."

Nobody forgets the night we met Dan. It was our first big event of the semester, a party with a '60s glam theme. The girls loved an excuse to spice up their makeup and hair, and we loved an excuse to see them in miniskirts and vinyl boots. We had the house clean for once, one bathroom roped off for drinks. A keg of beer on the edge of the tub, the sink full of some godforsaken punch the chicks love. We each stuffed at least three condoms beneath our pillows. Some of us anticipated that much luck. Some of us figured we'd be too drunk to get it right the first time.

The girls were no disappointment. The house swam with funky tights and tube tops. Our minds swam with lean thighs, nipped waists, and curves. We high-fived each other between turns on the dance floor. Our reputation as the place to be on

Friday nights was secure. The freshman girls whispered and giggled and winked. Our intentions to get some that night were secure.

It speaks wonders of Dan that he single-handedly altered the course of that night. He entered our house like a modern jester. Dan was small and dark, half Cherokee. His hair fell in frizzy natural dreadlocks. One crossed his right eye. Red-rimmed sunglasses with green lenses, a copper coil about his neck. A crisp blue McDonald's shirt. He stole that, would never work there. Tight corduroys rolled to the tops of worn, steel-toed boots. A belt embroidered with flowers. A little anti-fashion warrior.

So this person entered our house without pause. No evaluation. No hesitation. Dan, as if he fucked a thrift shop and let it ejaculate all over his body. Dan, hands clasped behind his back, strode to the bathroom. He grinned at each of us, made a point to catch each of us. He plunged his head into the sink and came up a mess of sticky pink, shook his head in ecstasy, flung vodka and fruit juice and whatever else onto our white walls in lines and drips.

"I'm Jackson fucking Pollock, cats."

We hated him. We loved him. We wanted him, and he knew it.

Dan stole that night. Away from the girls in their neon wigs. Away from all of us in our jeans and Greek letters. He slipped a collection of Irish music into the player. He called traditional dance steps. A ceilidh orgy erupted in our basement. Dan lorded above the madness, swinging from dusty pipes, kicking the beat out on any echoing surface, riding through the room on our shoulders. The girls sweated, we sweated, our wet limbs executed the dance as he called it. Right hand star, left hand star, cross, turn, clap-clap-clap! Reverse, shake hands, and go again! Dan tossed back his head and howled to an exposed light bulb as he galloped past.

It was insanity.

The girls didn't leave until four in the morning. Dan perched on the picnic table out back. He recounted tales through the sunrise, of fishing trips, power trips, acid trips. He flicked open

his knife to carve illustrations into the wood. We flinched at the metallic snap, the first of two times we ever would. We watched. We listened. Dan abruptly stood and walked off mid-sentence. We called out. Where was he going? When would he be back? Why was he leaving? We recoiled, embarrassed.

“Leave? No. Nine three three, amigos, nine three three.”

We filed into the house, dazed. Some of us tossed plastic cups into garbage bags, others collected the cards and ping-pong balls of abandoned drinking games. Several of us lumbered upstairs to sleep. Sweaty and awed. Just as Dan’s enchantment began to lift, just as we began to question our fascination, the door opened and closed. In popped Dan. In his arms, a grocery bag fixing to split. Blueberries, chocolate chips, flour, eggs, milk, cinnamon, he stacked the kitchen table with bounty.

“You throw a kick-ass party. I make kick-ass pancakes.”

It was precisely 9:33 A.M.

Dan rushed our fraternity, and we initiated him in the spring. He rarely attended class. We had no free rooms at the house, but Dan said dorms were Tupperware for lost teens. He was not a leftover. He curled up on our spare futons, beneath tables. Catnapped throughout the day, never took a full stretch of sleep. At night, he wandered the streets neighboring campus. Brought back the weirdest trinkets. “Souvenirs of the resident vagrant,” one of us dubbed his loot. That’s what Dan called it, his loot. Dan uprooted the flowers from the Dean’s window planter and relocated them to a hubcap he dragged out of a creek. That arrangement is on our front porch to this day. Nothing but brown stems and thirsty petals.

When we saw Dan wheeling a trampoline down the street one day, rolling it right up the road like a discarded tire, we confronted him on the sidewalk. We told him to take it back to its owner, that the last thing we needed was a theft conviction. And Dan, all lean muscle in his camouflage wife-beater, he braced the trampoline against his five-foot five-inch frame. His mess of dreads beneath us, the twelve-foot diameter of the trampoline above us, neither trembled.

"A trampoline still covered in dead leaves by mid-March is fair game. It's loot."

His eyes winked without moving. He stepped away from the trampoline, and when we moved in to catch it, Dan scurried up the silver rim. He squeezed his yellow sneakers and striped socks against the springs and canvas, climbed higher, higher, to the top. Dan crouched, then stood, extended his arms for balance. We clutched the base of the trampoline. Dan threw his arms to the clouds and let out a great *ay-ay-ay*, a vibrating, triumphant war cry. We caved to our brother's spirit in an explosion of deep, pure laughter, and imitated Dan's *ay-ay-ay* as we rolled him up the driveway on his stolen throne.

We sometimes found Dan tucked beneath our parked cars. Those evenings when the sun lingered too long and the moon came out early. A stray dread or untied lace revealed his hiding place. From a distance, we heard Dan mutter to no one but himself. Muttering in choked phrases. And if we spoke his name aloud, if we kneeled by his side, Dan stopped. He strode off to tread a lake, explore a shed, prepare a strange dish. But we rarely spoke his name. The disjointed words, muffled by tires and pavement, turned our feet in fear. The moon and sun glowed and shone while Dan murmured to the dark, dirty underbellies.

"A world away, a way. The wayward, way of words. The deaf. World away."

On lonely mornings, we sought Dan beneath desks and staircases. Fueled by our own rough breakups. Our own family fractures. We shook him awake with sturdy sticks, the ones he whittled and burned. His favorite loot. Asked him to take walks. Those mornings, he always offered to make pancakes, and we always accepted. Dan whipped up batch after batch as we spat out our worries. Dan spun his wooden spoon. He never measured the ingredients. Knew them by heart. As we speared mouthfuls of syrup and divine fluff, Dan perched on the cooling oven and told his tales. Told us of the tree house he built on a Tennessee

golf course, right on the eighth hole. Dan snuck lumber across the starlit greens for three nights, climbing and nailing. During the regional tournament two weeks later, a man drove his ball into the tree. Walked over, looked up, and there was Dan, grinning madly in his elaborate home of platforms and peaks and footholds. He held a golf ball in one hand, a joint in the other.

“Hit?”

On our walks, we trailed Dan through backyards, over splintered fences, around rusty swing sets. Property lines meant nothing to Dan. Cops meant nothing to Dan. He led, a limb of birch or oak in hand. We followed. He knelt to wipe dirt from the forgotten action figures of young strangers. Our eyes darted a tad and our brows grew moist. Some April morning was warm, the moon still high when we came across a high school football field. Dan produced a ball. He sprinted to the center line, shedding clothes. Threw himself to the ground, traced his cheekbones in dirt. We wrestled, we ran. We invented a new sport, then walked home in jeans and bare chests caked in muddy grass.

Behind his bright eyes, behind the sunglasses shielding them, Dan was more. More than his adventures, than the life of the party, than we ever tried to know. We let him rock our world in all his Dan ways. We passed his joints. We joined his spontaneous road trips. We lapped up his bank of anecdotes. There was never an extra pancake, we left only crumbs and drying syrup on our plates. And under the full moon, Dan cried. He cried and went a bit crazy.

We noticed the red stains on the tree, the big shade maple out back. We hypothesized vomit. Some girls drank too much strawberry punch. Got sick on the tree. We liked this explanation, but it happened when parties didn't. Our hypothesis didn't explain the fur. Or the notches. We forgot about it. Threw a huge party to wind down before final exams. Mixed the punch extra strong, packed our mini-fridges with handles of vodka and rum. Dan created a dance mix for the basement. Layers of techno,

African chanting, and thrash metal erupted out of the speakers, crashed off the stone walls in waves. The violent beat shook the house, shook its foundation to roof, and everyone fought back with wild dance bursting from a primitive core.

We took a smoke break. Dan perched atop the picnic table. A fat squirrel edged down the maple tree. It sniffed the air, shuffled its feet on the bark. Dan lit a clove. He dove into a story, and we listened. Dan had spent an entire summer on the road, a few years back. He had met this trucker at a breakfast diner. They had sat next to each other at the counter and got to talking. Hours melted, and by the end, Dan had an invitation to spend the next months with the man, trucking coast-to-coast. Just Dan, the trucker, and his trained squirrel. We all laughed as Dan described the squirrel's tricks. How it collected coins at rest stops and learned to buy them snacks from the vending machines. How that squirrel had saved the two time and again.

"That squirrel cracked his beers for him. Lit his cigarettes. Shelled his walnuts."

In a quick twist of bicep and wrist and shoulder, Dan's switchblade flew out of his boot and into the air. And just as soon, Dan's switchblade was through the fat squirrel and in the tree. We couldn't react. The squirrel's tail twitched. Its feet pawed madly for a second or two. We saw death in its black eyes, and red crept down the maple's bark. Dan smiled, his teeth big, white. He yipped mightily. He rushed to the maple. Shook the lifeless squirrel from his knife, retracted the blade, tucked it into his boot. Dan mounted the maple's lowest branch. He maneuvered as he did many nights. Through the limbs, out, and into a second-floor window of the house. We lost sight of his plaid pants. His steel-toed boots.

We stared at the bloody squirrel. The messy corpse, nuzzled amongst roots and moss. The fresh stain on the maple. We all added it up. We all ran from conclusions in bouts of nausea and disbelief. We wondered why. And finally, we spoke these words aloud. None of us knew. And all of us hurt.

Not as much as Dan. He climbed into the house that night

and swallowed a bottle of prescription pain pills with a handle of rum. And one can of Coke. He crawled beneath the dining room table. The one we used twice a year. The formal table. That's where he convulsed, spat blood, soaked the carpet, and died. Drips and lines of his fluids. Like a Pollock painting. Behind a stack of his favorite books. Mostly poetry, some philosophy, a few of the edgier classics. Clutching a little wooden doll he'd been whittling. Modeled after an action figure he found. It was packed into the dirt by a seesaw. Dan extracted it. His own archeological dig. He washed the toy in the bathroom sink. Gentle, with a toothbrush and unscented soap. The wooden doll is incomplete. Rough edges, undefined features.

The note pinned by the switchblade to the tabletop read simply.

"Eat up, cats."

It was a recipe for pancakes.

Just Dan being Dan.