

MR. ZEBRA MAN

BRANDON BELL

Megan asks me to hook up after she sees my new Chevy Super Duty in the McDonald's drive-thru. I dated Megan in high school. She stands on the running board, leans into my open window and nibbles my chin. Her breath is a turnoff (smells like McNuggets), but I have no plans for this sticky summer night and am like, "Sure, let's bone, for old time's sake."

We agree to meet at the overlook, our old hookup spot, after she runs home to freshen up. To kill time, I eat my Quarter Pounder Extra Value Meal while driving curvy country roads. I take my eyes off the road for a second to squirt ketchup on my fries and clip a cyclist.

Or the cyclist clips me, right in the Super Duty's wheel well. I hit the brakes and back up to where he landed. He's a twisted heap on the side of the road and his spandex cyclist shirt rides up, exposing his pale belly.

"Hey buddy," I say. No response.

I have so much to do: meet Megan at the overlook, bone and then cuddle ten minutes minimum, drive home, sleep not enough, wake at 6 a.m., and make brownies for the bake sale Mom is throwing tomorrow. Plus, now I have this cyclist to deal with.

But the accident wasn't my fault; the cyclist rammed the Super Duty, not the other way around. Why should I be inconvenienced because of his mistake? Besides, I was rounding a curve and barely going twenty miles an hour when he hit me; he can't be hurt that bad.

I check the road for onlookers. Not a witness in sight.

I speed off and meet Megan at the overlook. When I pull off the road,

my headlights wash over her: she poses against the hood of her Saab wearing an almost flattering blue dress and her red hair covers her long face. She isn't hot like in high school, but now I have a beer gut and shave my head to hide that I'm going bald, so it's not like I can be choosy.

"You ready?" I ask out my window, feeling like I'm placing an order at the drive-thru.

"To bone? Sure," she says.

We climb into the back of the Super Duty, both of us totally ready to bone, but then she starts crying. She sobs something about her dad (a self-made and blind restaurateur) being mean and taking away her credit card. Her crying means no boning. I'm pissed that she led me on, but then I realize not having sex is a timesaver, which is good (see my aforementioned to-do list).

She asks for a rain-check on boning as she climbs out of the Super Duty. "Next time I'll totally bone your brains out," she says, but her eyes are red and she seems awkward.

"Cool," I say and wave. *See ya.*

I avoid seeing the cyclist by taking the long route to my apartment. He'll be fine, I bet, but why learn otherwise if I don't have to?

I oversleep in the morning and don't have time to make brownies for Mom's bake sale. I run to Kroger and buy four boxes of Zebra Cakes and cellophane. Driving to Whole Foods (site of the bake sale) I unwrap the Zebra Cakes and rewrap them in cellophane for a DIY look.

Mom is stationed at a folding table beside the entrance to Whole Foods. She scowls at the Zebra Cakes. "These appear to be Little Debbie's, Wayne."

"Yuppie Whole Foods shoppers won't know that," I say, and I'm right. A few customers even commend me on my "inventive brownie design."

We price the cakes at two bucks apiece and sell out quickly. I run back to Kroger and buy a second batch, and we sell out of those, too.

By day's end, we've earned two hundred bucks more than Mom expected to raise for Children with Cleft Palates Living Someplace Poor (or whatever the charity's called). Mom says the charity won't know if we

pocket the extra two hundred bucks. I'm like, *Bonus*, as I already blew my weekly allowance from Dad and the Super Duty needs gas.

I Google "hit biker, lexington ky, may 18" on my phone and find a local news site that tells the cyclist's name (David Marra), condition (critical), time police found him (12:30 a.m.), his current location (Lexington Regional Hospital), and number of suspects (none). Why would there be suspects? The cyclist hit me and only has himself to blame for the pain he's in.

But what if the cyclist wakes up, remembers the Super Duty, and describes it to the cops?

In need of an alibi, I call Megan.

"Hey girl, what are you doing?"

"Thinking about you," she says.

"Cool, so, last night we met at nine, right? And parted not until one a.m."

"Dude, honestly? Today I've been fighting with my blind-ass dad too much to think. See, I rearranged the living room and he tripped over the coffee table. He didn't see the table because he's blind."

"That's pretty funny. But last night. We were together from nine to one. I'm not asking you. I'm telling you."

"Okay."

"Say it."

"We were together from nine to one." She seems to believe this timeline, even though it's wrong. I have nothing else to say and fake like the connection is breaking up, saying, "Hello, Megan, hello," and hang up. My alibi is airtight, but I feel weird about my run in with the cyclist. But hey, I helped anonymous poor people by selling Zebra Cakes. Good deeds negate the bad. I even paid for the Zebra Cakes out of my own pocket.

Now that I think of it, Mom should've split the Zebra Cakes expenses with me.

I head to her house to demand she chip in half. She lives in a shotgun house on the industrial edge of town. I park in her brown yard and knock on the door. She doesn't answer; I let myself in with my key and find her hiding under her bed.

"You owe me eighteen bucks for expenses," I say.

She sticks her head out from under the bed and says, "Finder's fee. I arranged the location and yuppie customers. Besides, it's not like today's sale was our only shot at making money. I'm tied in to bake sales for muscular dystrophy, battered women, bowling for kids. We can sell those Zebra Cakes by the butt load."

I help her out from under the bed. Dad moved out a few years ago, but she keeps their wedding picture on the bedside table. He's an asshole investment banker who lives in New Jersey; the weekly checks he sends to us are sweeter than he is. Mom holds out hope that he'll come home. She's wrong, which bums me out. Feeling sorry for her, I say, "Don't worry about paying back the Zebra Cakes expenses."

"We'll split them going forward."

"Do you have a bake sale schedule?"

"Tuesday night we're at Trader Joe's. Then Kroger on Friday and Magic Bean Roasters on Saturday."

"We can sell Zebra Cakes at yuppie places only. That means no Kroger or anywhere else where the shoppers might recognize the Zebra Cakes and bust us."

She takes my hands and squeezes them, grinning. "Remember that fella at Whole Foods who had on the beret? He said your cakes were cute. And they are cute, but not as cute as you."

I bow my head and she kisses my bald head. It's a touching moment.

My concern that someone will bust us for selling Zebra Cakes comes to fruition at Trader Joe's. A hipster wearing a bowtie and geek glasses stops at our table and picks up a Zebra Cake. He's overweight, and I bet his junk food suburban childhood was a lot like mine.

"Are you just selling Zebra Cakes?" the hipster asks.

Mom's face flusters and she bolts upright, about to flee.

"They're in the *style* of Zebra Cakes," I say, forcing a shit-eating grin, "but they're homemade. And organic."

"Organic," the hipster says, his day made. He buys a dozen.

Mom shakes her head at me after we're alone. "You may have tricked

that asshole, but eventually somebody's going to figure out this is a scam."

"So what should I do?" I ask.

"You could actually bake the things."

I roll my eyes at how ridiculous she sounds.

Megan invites me to the overlook for "take two on our boning rendezvous." We sit in the cab of the Super Duty listening to a morbid playlist she made. She is in a bad mood, because: "My dumb blind daddy's pissed about my C-average at beauty school." I cheer her up by telling about my Zebra Cakes start-up. Apparently hot business ventures make her horny, because she rolls on top of me and licks my face.

"You should sell your cakes at Daddy's coffee shop," she says.

"What's your angle?" I ask.

"I'll pitch them to Daddy for a five percent commission."

Then we're boning and it's so hot that, in the throes of boning, I announce, "You can have a ten percent commission." But I like her less after I finish and wallow in post-boning letdown, regretting the boning-inspired commission bump I gave her.

"Give me a few of those cakes for Daddy to sample," she says.

"Won't he know we're just selling Zebra Cakes?"

"Nope. Blind. There's no way he'll recognize them."

"That's lucky."

I wonder, *Would the cyclist recognize me? Did he get a look at the Super Duty?* I've been too busy selling Zebra Cakes to think about him.

I visit him at the hospital the next morning. A sane dude would avoid the man he hit, but call me a thrill-seeker, a fate-tempter.

The cyclist has a private room in the ICU. He's asleep and has tubes hooked into his nose and wrists. A woman, the wife, who is pasty but cougar-pretty, sits at the bedside scrolling through email on her phone. She gives me a look that asks, *Who the hell are you?*

"I used to work with him," I lie and give a fake name. "And you must be—"

"Anna."

I stand at the bedside and look sympathetic, shaking my head. "Who hit

him?"

"He's in a coma."

"But has he said anything?"

"He's in a coma twenty-four hours a day."

Now I feel weird. While the cyclist has been lying in a hospital bed, I've been making tons of cash. Judging by Anna's stained gray hoodie and pajama pants, she's broke. Perhaps the cyclist was the breadwinner.

"Here," I say, handing her three ten dollar bills and a couple of fives. I expect her to ask why I'm giving money to her, or at least pretend-refuse it ("No, I couldn't possibly"), but she pockets it.

"Thanks," she says.

"No big deal."

"Must be nice to say that about money."

Her comment sounds tacky, but makes me feel weirder and I give her another five. I hurry out of the room before I go broke donating money to her.

I deliver a white box containing two Zebra Cakes to Megan for her sales pitch to her dad. We chat in her kitchen. Her dad's coffee shop must make crazy money for him to have afforded all these sweet chrome appliances. She tosses the box on the counter.

"Careful. They aren't just Zebra Cakes." I pick up the box and open it. "See, I added an icing bowtie, eyes, and a mouth to the Zebra Cakes. The originals are plain black and white hexagons, but my enhancements give us a character. I call him Mr. Zebra Man."

Megan pushes me against the fridge. "Daddy ain't home," she says, fondling me while making porn noises.

"I'm in a hurry," I say, but of course we bone. By the time we finish I'm running late for this morning's bake sale at Fresh Market. I sneak out of the house when Megan goes to "clean up."

Mom bitches at me for being late, but cheers up after I unveil Mr. Zebra Man. "How cute," she says, and makes me pose with one for a photo. She loves Mr. Zebra Man even more after I say we're jacking the price to five bucks apiece. Our yuppie customers love Mr. Zebra Man, too, and buy

him by the dozen.

“We have a mondo hit on our hands,” Mom proclaims.

“Duh,” I say, fanning my face with a stack of twenties.

I stay up each night making Mr. Zebra Men, sell them at morning bake sales, and sleep in the afternoon. Mom and I earn a few thousand bucks over the next few weeks; that’s pure profit, counting expenses for Zebra Cakes and the show-money we donate to charities. Bonus: Megan’s dad loves Mr. Zebra Man. He places an initial order for a hundred cakes and promises to buy more after he sells the first batch.

So, *chuh-ching*. I spread the cash on my bed and roll around in it, a total high, but something nags at me. I feel weird about that guy, the cyclist. I visit him in the hospital again. Now he’s in recovery, sharing a room with an elderly man who mutters in his sleep about taxes. The cyclist is asleep, out cold. Anna is curled up in a chair in the corner, watching a movie on her laptop.

“He snapped out of his coma?” I ask.

She takes out one of her ear buds and stares at me. “Yeah, he woke a few days ago, but the nurses zonk him on horse tranquilizers.”

The roommate laughs and coughs up something wet.

Anna shudders. “I need cash.”

I fidget with my belt loops, thinking, *If you want money, go make some*, but then the cyclist clears his throat in his sleep as if to say, *Do you remember running me over? Giving money to my wife is the least you could do*. I whip out my money clip and hand over two hundred bucks.

“I couldn’t possibly accept this,” she says, but pockets it.

I feel like I’m being watched, and I am: the cyclist has opened one of his eyes. “Who’s he?” he murmurs blearily, like his tongue weighs twenty pounds.

“You don’t recognize me?” I ask, relieved.

“He works with you,” Anna says.

“Oh yeah,” I say, remembering the lie I told her. “Do you have amnesia?”

“Perhaps,” the cyclist says. His eyelids flutter and then he passes out.

"The hospital is kicking us out," Anna says. "They say he's doing well enough to go home. Plus, we're broke."

Another plea for money. I'm so happy the cyclist didn't recognize me that I hand her a fifty.

"Thanks, doll," she says.

Doll? Does she want me to be her sugar daddy? No. She returns to the bedside, replaces the dangling ear bud, and resumes watching the movie on her laptop. I pose in the doorway, hoping she'll think I look sexy, but she ignores me. I slink out of the room.

Talking to cyclist got my adrenaline pumping; now I'm horny; I head to Megan's house. I stop at Kroger on the way and pick up some white roses. Megan answers the door wearing a rumpled hoodie and pink pajama pants. She rolls her eyes at the flowers and tosses them on the couch. I follow her to her bedroom. A suitcase is open on her bed.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"I leave for Paris tomorrow."

"Wait. Did I know this?"

"Yeah, Wayne. I'm doing a semester abroad, remember?"

She never mentioned this to me. Besides, she's in beauty school. What good will a semester abroad do? I think she used me for sex and a ten percent commission on Mr. Zebra Men. My heart sinks.

She frowns at my reflection in the mirror above her purple vanity.

"You haven't visited me all week."

"I've been busy. It's time-consuming being a confection mogul."

She backs her ass against my thigh and grinds. "Better get used to the fact that I'll be a million miles away."

We have a sad goodbye bone standing up beside her bed. I feel like I should savor this boning, but how? The climax is rushing at me like a horror movie killer who I can't escape no matter how fast I run or how slow I bone. I'm making no sense. My world feels shaky. It's been nice having a boning companion. I wonder who I'll bone next.

We finish boning and hug goodbye and then Megan walks me out. "I'll send you a postcard," she says.

“Cool,” I say. I’m going to stop paying her a commission on the Mr. Zebra Men I sell to her dad. I’m losing my bone buddy, but cutting her commission will put extra money in my pocket. It’s best to look on the bright side.

This morning, I sit in my air-conditioned Super Duty, parked on the street next to the cyclist and Anna’s house. I found their address online. Being close to them makes my heart race. Their house is small and vinyl-sided.

The cyclist must’ve been the mower, because the yard sucks.

Anna pulls into the driveway around noon. She gets out of her Tercel, wearing kinky knee boots, skinny jeans, and a low cut top. I bet she bought these nice clothes with the money I gave to her. She helps the cyclist out of the passenger seat. I guess the hospital evicted him. He’s skeletal and wearing a summer scarf. Using a walker, he shuffles into the house.

Over the next week, bored, I sit outside their house. Each day the cyclist shuffles onto the porch with his walker and grabs the mail; Anna makes a fast food run at lunchtime; nothing else happens until, a week after I started spying on them, the cyclist confronts me.

The confrontation happens early in the morning. I’ve stopped by their house on my way to deliver Mr. Zebra Men to Megan’s dad’s coffee shop. “Goddamn it,” I hear him yell. He has traded his walker for a cane, is wearing a drab robe, and scowls at me as he hobbles across the street.

“Are you having sex with my wife?” he shouts through my driver-side window. His eyes are sharp and angry.

“Who’s your wife?” I ask.

“Don’t play dumb. You park here every day and watch my house.”

“Who died and made you President of Where I Can Park?”

He lifts his cane to crack my hood. “Okay, okay,” I say, start the Super Duty and coast away. In the rearview I see him get into their Tercel.

Next, I deliver a tray of Mr. Zebra Men to the coffee shop. The barista pretends like he is happy to see me, but I can tell he resents that I’m a confection kingpin while he is merely a coffee pourer. The cyclist stumbles into the shop. He barely has the energy to walk to the counter.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

"I followed you here," he says, shuffling toward me. "Didn't you hear me honking?"

No, I didn't, because I was focused on driving and stalking Megan's Instagram page on my phone. I can't believe how many selfies she has taken of herself making out with Parisian assholes.

The cyclist lifts his shaky hand and grabs a Mr. Zebra Man from the tray. He can't seem to control his grip and accidentally smashes its edges.

"The delectable treat you're fingering costs five dollars," the barista says.

"Who would pay five bucks for a Zebra Cake?" the cyclist asks.

Recognition creeps onto the barista's face. He lifts a Mr. Zebra Man from the tray and smears away the face and bowtie with his thumb.

I flash my warmest salesman smile. "These are organic versions."

The barista doesn't buy my story. His face is bright red and he's breathing madly through his nose. "I'm calling the copyright police."

"Is there such a thing?" I have no clue, but great businessmen know when to cut their losses. I bat the tray, spilling Mr. Zebra Men, and split.

I seek comfort at Mom's house. When I get there, she's watching a reality show in which orphanages compete for grant money. I flop beside her on the couch and announce, "Mr. Zebra Man is dead."

Mom mutes the TV. "Oh well. Bake sale season ends soon, anyway. Besides, the whole affair was becoming a bit like work."

"Did I tell you about this cyclist who hit the Super Duty?"

She stares blankly at me, visually admitting she never pays attention to my stories. "Um, yes?"

"Well, he rammed my truck like an idiot and wound up in the hospital. Then, to add insult to injury, he tattled on me for reselling Zebra Cakes."

She pats my shoulder, watching TV. "It seems like karma."

"How do you figure?"

"You ran over this bicycler and now he killed your business. I'd say you're even."

"The cyclist hit me, not the other way around."

“Shh.” She unmutes the TV.

I’m too sleepy to argue. I dig my phone out of my pocket and stage a selfie in which my head rests on Mom’s shoulder. In the picture my eyelids are heavy; I’m about to pass out. I post it to Instagram with the caption: “Goodnight, summer. I rocked you.”