

**The Pea Pod Gambit**  
**By**  
**Joseph Devon**

“You suck,” Seth said. He was lying flat on his back on an old beat up couch that was one step up from a college dorm room. The couch was long enough so that his whole body could sprawl out on it with either his feet or his head up on one of the arm rests. Seth enjoyed either position and alternated back and forth over the course of every Sunday afternoon. He was currently favoring a head on the armrest position, and he was leaned slightly off the couch in an attempt to get the attention of Atticus.

Atticus was on the smaller couch that was at a right angle to the foot of Seth’s couch, with just enough room for someone to walk through, comfortable lounging space being at a premium over things like the ability to walk out of the living room and into the rest of the apartment.

Atticus’s couch was like a dirty marshmallow, the once bright creamy fabric now dingy and tattered. His lanky body was folded into an angle, the shorter couch requiring him to use both armrests as he lounged, his knees slung over one and his head propped on the other, a feat his body had long since learned to manage with maximum comfort while still leaving enough room to manipulate the plastic video game guitar controller in his hands.

“You suck,” Seth repeated, louder.

Atticus ignored him. Their couches formed two sides of a rectangle. The other two sides were composed of bookshelves and windows, all of which seemed like afterthoughts in the cluttered mess of video game and DVD boxes, broken CD cases, piles of magazine and junk mail toppling off of the coffee table, all lit in what little natural light could make it into the awkward alley their windows looked out on.

Determined to get some sort of reaction, Seth leaned out on the couch to get a sight-line on Atticus’s face. He finished his beer and crumpled it up into a little puck, then, trying to stabilize himself as much as possible while leaning as far off the couch as possible, he attempted a throw at Atticus’s head with an awkward right handed side arm. Things were doomed as Seth was left handed, slightly drunk, and overzealous in his assessment of how far he could dangle off the couch. The beer can pulled far left, flying unnoticed behind Atticus to rattle around in the hallway as Seth slid off the couch, his flailing arms unable to stop his fall and only managing to pull a stack of magazines down on top of him. The avalanche of glossy paged bachelor rags and week old newspapers increased in intensity for a second or two before tapering off, an occasional drip of Sport’s Section plopping onto Seth’s head as he curled up where he lay, laughing while wincing at some pain in his leg.

The clacking of the buttons on Atticus’s plastic guitar came to a halt, and he, for the first time, acknowledged Seth’s existence. “High score,” he said, an arm extending out to grab a glass bottle of beer out of the six-pack perched perfectly on its side on a cleared out section of coffee table near his couch.

Atticus turned to look at Seth as he hissed, holding one knee up towards his chest, a pained look in his face even while he continued laughing.

“Oh,” Atticus said. “I thought you were doing the funny kid falls of the couch routine. You actually hurt yourself?”

“Clipped my shin,” Seth answered through tears and a smile, neither emotion quite able to gain control of his face.

“Just how drunk *are* you?” Atticus asked, plastic guitar balanced on his chest he twisted the cap off of his bottle of beer and took a sip before his hand reached out to place the bottle cap neatly in line with the four other caps on the coffee table. “You should stick to just a six-pack on Sundays.”

Seth pshawed him off, making yap-yap motions with one hand he grabbed another empty can with the other, and with an apparently clear shot threw his hardest at Atticus’s head, tongue stuck determinedly onto his upper lip, only to watch the can, odd with the aerodynamics of crumpled aluminum, soar up and over the back of Atticus’s couch to go clattering back into the hall by the kitchen along with his first shot.

“Damn it!” Seth shouted. “You’re like Magneto or something!”

“Fourteen beers into a Sunday afternoon and you’re referencing comic books. It’s astounding we still hang out.”

“Is that why you drink bottles?” Seth shouted drunkenly. “Because they throw better?”

“Yes, Seth. That’s why I drink from bottles. Because they’re easier to throw at your head.” Atticus turned away from the table, relaxing onto his back, a smile appearing on his face as Seth’s half forced inane bantering and the sound of the title screen on the television faded into white noise. A six pack of bottles, Atticus knew, would warm at just the right rate, so that if the first one was borderline painfully cold, by the time he eased into the sixth it would be barely chilled, a perfect beer for beer match of his mood as the day progressed. He knew this because his Sunday routine had been honed and tested and reproduced with a number of different factors until he had discovered the perfect way to ward off the impending crush of the work week while easing himself over his hangover from Saturday night. A six pack of bottles, Seth joking and flapping about on the big couch, and whatever entertainment the television could produce would all slowly be enjoyed over the course of a Sunday, turning a day that used to crack him to pieces into the most peaceful eight hours of his week.

Seth, getting back onto his couch, would never have put things that way, he just knew that getting drunk on Sunday was fun, that his couch was big enough to nap if he wanted, and that the pizza delivery guy knew to simply turn the handle and come into the apartment so he didn’t have to get up.

All of this was allowed because of the magical situation that enveloped their third roommate, Elliot. Elliot was the only one who could actually afford to live in their apartment, and he had volunteered to take the master bedroom at a higher rent, which allowed Seth and Atticus to live for cheap in an apartment larger than they deserved. But even that was overshadowed by Elliot’s relationship with his long-term girlfriend, Stephanie, a relationship that resulted in Elliot sleeping at her place almost every night of the week and barely setting foot in his own apartment for longer than it took to pack up a few things and drop off a rent check, leaving Atticus and Seth the run of the place. They had more room than they could ever afford in a Manhattan apartment, separate bathrooms ever since Atticus started using the one in the master bedroom, and a location that was impossible to beat. Atticus referred to their place as a two-bedroom apartment with an Elliot museum in one of the rooms.

Seth opened his eyes to stare at the back of the couch, then rolled himself over and stared at the TV, squinting. “Gimme a turn,” he said, reaching out with a bare foot towards Atticus, who draped the wire of the guitar over Seth’s toes. Seth gingerly drew his leg towards him, open mouthed with effort and balance, cheering at himself when he managed to retrieve the controller without falling off the couch again.

“I love Sundays,” Seth said, starting up a new game, his skill at maneuvering the plastic guitar surprisingly high.

“Yup,” Seth said, holding his fifth beer up and taking note of its level.

There was the sound of a key in the door trickling in from the front of the apartment. Keys jingling, mechanisms turning, then turning back, the doorknob rattling, then finally the door opening. Heavy footsteps tromped into the hallway and they both heard Elliot cursing. “You guys just leave the fucking door unlocked?”

Seth was squinting at Atticus, who had popped up on the couch like a bewildered forest creature to look around, confused but alert.

“What’s Elliot doing here?” Seth whispered. “Is it Tuesday?” Seth asked, looking at his watch.

“Yes, Seth, it’s Tuesday,” Atticus answered, not yet sharing Seth’s concern. “It’s a leap month.”

Seth’s reply was lost as Elliot walked in, his dress shoes hard in the hallway. Elliot came and stood at the foot of the bigger couch. He looked down at Seth’s legs. The television was making horrible error noises and missed button squeals as Seth’s game continued unmanned.

“Make room,” Elliot said.

Seth didn’t move.

“Come on, Seth, stop fucking around,” Elliot scolded, swatting Seth’s legs off the couch before wedging himself into place. Elliot propped up one leg up on the coffee table and grabbed a beer from Atticus’s six-pack, the cardboard container sagging sadly to one side, empty now.

“Stephanie broke up with me,” Elliot said.

Seth was wide-eyed, lying on his side with his legs uncomfortably drawn up to give Elliot room on the couch. Tucked into a near fetal position he watched as Atticus’s hand reached out to the coffee table and rummaged around to pick up the cardboard remnants of his now empty six-pack. Atticus’s hand slapped around on the coffee table a bit more, then his head appeared, wide-eyed like Seth, and he looked at Elliot drinking his last beer.

Seth and Elliot’s eyes met and they were filled with terror as they realized that something had gone horribly wrong with their Sunday.

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“...so that was it really, you know?” Elliot was talking, his posture perfect even on a barstool. Atticus and Seth were seated next to him. Atticus had an elbow on the bar, his hand curled into a soft fist, his face resting on his hand, and his eyes staring intently and with understanding, if not a hint of glassy daze, at Elliot as he talked.

Seth, behind Atticus, mostly hidden by Atticus’s shoulder, was aghast, eyebrows hashed down in utter bewilderment creating a face that was just one spasm shy of actually letting its jaw drop open.

“And I’m just sitting there,” Elliot went on, his dark black hair drooping as he lowered his head, just so, over his perfectly filled glass of scotch, “and I’m listening to these old Jim Croce songs, and it all makes *sense* to me, you know?” He took a sip from his glass. “It wasn’t that she wasn’t there for me, it’s that I couldn’t *let* her be there for me, you know?” He stabbed at the ice in his glass with a stirrer, then nodded his head, agreeing with himself, before announcing that he was going to head to the bathroom.

Atticus moved finally, as Elliot disappeared down the hall. He turned to Seth, his eyes blinking too much as if they were turning back on after a lengthy time spent tuned out. “Well that was fucking excruciating,” he said.

Seth gripped his forearm hard enough to hurt. “What the fuck is he *talking* about?!” Seth screamed in a whisper, his voice shooting well past panic into hysteria. “I can’t listen to this any more! You said we’d take him out and we’d get him to meet another girl. He isn’t meeting any girls. He’s turning all of us *into* girls but he’s not meeting any girls. This is horrible. I can’t-”

“Get a *hold* of yourself,” Atticus ordered. “Some time to mourn was to be expected.”

“That’s not what you said. You said we’d have him dating by the end of the week. ‘Elliot has the boyfriend gene,’ that’s what you said. You said we’d have our old apartment back and everything would be just the way it was by the *end of the week*. You said he couldn’t stand being single.”

“He can’t. I just forgot that I can’t stand him being single, either.”

“He’s going to come back here, Atticus, he’s going to come back here and he’s going to take a little sip from his stupid scotch and then he’s going to start *talking* again. And I don’t think I can handle that.”

“Look, you just have to-”

“We watched something called the BBC last night. No basketball. No Guitar Hero. The BBC! Have you *seen* that show? Five guys stand around doing nothing while the audience laughs hysterically.”

“How many rum and cokes have you had?” Atticus said, his attention diverting to the glass in Seth’s hand. “You know you can’t handle the caffeine-”

“The BBC!” Seth pleaded, hand gripping Atticus’s forearm again. “I can’t take it. Look. Women. I’m going over there.”

“Over where?” Atticus said, turning and looking around the bar slowly, not noticing Seth grab his glass off the bar, sloshing cola all over the place, and darting off to the other side of the room. “Over where?” Atticus repeated, finally turning back to see that Seth was gone. He glanced around, like a mother who has lost her child in a toy store, his eyes bouncing around faster and faster as he looked for signs of where Seth was until he finally spotted him walking with wild determined intensity into a group of girls. He made them laugh at first, but Atticus watched as Seth continued to talk and they continued to lose interest, one by one, until they were all smiling blankly at him. Detaching himself with the same earnest energy that he had used when he started talking, Seth came back over to the bar.

“How did that go?”

“I have no idea. I’ve never tried anything like that. I’m totally out of my element. I opened my mouth to say hi and then my blood pressure spiked to 140 over 40 and I just could *not* stop talking. I should go talk to them again. Do you think I should go talk to them again?”

Two girls came through the door and walked past their barstools. “Hey there, ladies,” Seth said, creepily downshifting his energy, a hint of crazy in his eyes.

“Jesus Christ, what’re you, the guy from *Shine*? Get a grip on yourself.”

“I just...it’s just,” Seth picked up his glass and tried to take a drink before Atticus plucked it out of his hands and set it back on the bar, Seth’s hands continuing on up towards his face even without the glass before moving up to nervously tangle in his hair. “I can’t take anymore of him.”

“I had to sneak like a common gypsy into my bathroom this morning, Seth, I don’t want to hear it. Not to mention there were all sorts of strange new hairs in there, so baths are out until we fix this.”

“You take baths?”

“Not really the time nor the place to get into that, Seth.”

“I-”

“Shut up,” Atticus said as he spotted Elliot returning.

“I put some songs on the juke box,” Elliot said as “Time in a Bottle” started playing throughout the bar. “I love this song,” Elliot said, looking up at the music.

“Oh, who doesn’t?” Atticus said. Then when Elliot turned to get the bartender’s attention Atticus leaned back as casually as possible and whispered to Seth, “Go. Go now and bring back anything you can.” As Atticus leaned forward again he heard Seth’s barstool behind him clattering back and forth as Seth hit the floor running.

After procuring a drink Elliot turned back towards Atticus and began talking as if the past ten minutes hadn’t happened and they were right back in the middle of the most engaging conversation ever to take place. “So when she told me that she felt like she was dating me, but *not* me, you know, it came to me...what’s Seth doing?”

“Oh, you know Seth,” Atticus said, terrified to look over his shoulder and see what was happening.

“The guy’s entire life is the Marvel Universe, when did he start hitting on women?”

“He gets around.” Atticus answered, which was true in a science fiction convention kind of way.

“And what about you, man?” Elliot asked, suddenly concerned. “You been dating anyone recently?”

“No one whose name I can remember without my cell phone.”

“You know I wonder about you sometimes, Atticus. When are you going to-”

“This is Janet,” Seth broke in.

“Oh thank god,” Atticus said, breaking away and flagging down the bartender.

“Hi,” Janet said.

“Hi,” Elliot said barely acknowledging her.

Janet stood there, next to Seth, as Elliot continued his conversation with Atticus, who was paying no attention while he ordered a drink. “So anyway,” Elliot was saying, the awkwardness of Janet standing there growing by the second. “I’m just glad you two agreed to come to Dutton and Amy’s wedding next weekend. Stephanie’s going to be there, of course, and I was actually thinking about not going, if you can believe that, but then I thought, no, I have to see those two get married, and after all Atticus and Seth will be there so I’ll get by.” He stirred his scotch a little more and nodded determinedly. “I’ll get by,” he said to himself.

Drink in hand, Atticus shook his head in disbelief.

“I think I have to...” Janet said, trying to make an exit.

“Wait,” Seth said in a panic.

“So,” Elliot said, and his demeanor shut everyone else up, like being absorbed by some black hole of misery, to turn and listen to him. “I’ll be having dinner with my parents tomorrow night. I told Stephanie she could stop by and pick up her stuff. There’s a box of her things on the kitchen counter. So, you know, if one of you could be there to let her in and show her where it is that’d be great.” He stirred his scotch one last time, but didn’t take a drink. “Well this has been healing, guys, thanks,” he said, his face honest. “I mean that. I think I’m going to take off now.”

He smiled and nodded around the circle and made his way down from his barstool and out of the bar.

“What just happened?” Janet said.

“I have no idea,” Atticus said, turning to look at her.

“Was that the friend you wanted me to talk to?” she asked Seth, who was still staring at where Elliot had been sitting.

“Yes,” Atticus said, jumping in. “He had noticed you sitting across the bar and...”

“He’s cute,” Janet said.

There was instant and pointless action suddenly in Seth and Atticus as both realized that they should do something but neither had any idea what that something might be. Atticus looked around, smiled, looked around, picked up a cocktail napkin, put it down.

Seth just nodded vigorously at Janet like she was a game show contestant close to solving the puzzle.

“What’s his deal, though? He seemed a little moody.”

“He’s on the rebound, actually,” Atticus said. “Just getting out of a serious relationship but he’s a really great—”

“Oh,” Janet said, her face flipping like a card and shutting down entirely. “Never mind then.” She walked away before either Seth or Atticus could react.

Atticus watched her. “I don’t...what...”

“It’s like they’re possessed or something,” Seth leaned in to whisper conspiratorially.

“I’m so confused,” Atticus said.

“Come on,” Seth swatted him on the shoulder. “Why am I the one out there fishing? You should be able to do this. You’ve talked to plenty of women.”

Atticus shook his head in adamant disagreement. “Not *this* sober I haven’t.”

“Well what is it you do when you’re drunk? Tell me and I’ll go do it.”

Atticus squinted his eyes, tilting his head in thought. “I think I talk about puppies.”

“That’s not helping.”

“Come on, now,” Atticus flagged the bartender and mimed an order for two shots. “Let’s not hear any more of that talk. This was just practice is all.” The bartender clacked two shots of alcohol on the bar and Atticus slid one back towards Seth. “You and me? Working on this together? We’ll have this cracked in no time.”

“Okay,” Seth said, mollified. “Okay.”

They clinked glasses, the sound marble-thick in the nearly empty bar, and drank.

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“I don’t know,” Atticus said, turning the doorknob to their apartment, trying to swing it open, then walking face first into it.

“Keys,” Seth said, unlocking the door.

Atticus tried again and successfully made his way into the apartment.

“I don’t know,” he repeated, “I’ve been thinking about this and there’s really a tiny little sweet spot we’re allowed to hit. She’s got to be an exact type of woman. He’s got to like her,” he watched as Seth opened the fridge and took out two beers.

Seth closed the refrigerator door and looked at a card stuck there with a magnet. “I completely forgot about this until Elliot mentioned it,” he said, awkwardly holding the card in one hand and removing the magnet with his other without putting his beer down.

“Dutton and Amy’s wedding,” Seth said, holding out the invitation.

“Did we say yes to that?”

Seth nodded. "You cautiously weighed the odds of them serving lamb chops as an appetizer and then waved it onto the calendar."

"What was my reading on their likely dinners?"

"Second tier fish."

"Interesting."

"It's this weekend. Stephanie and all her friends and relatives will be there. I guess that really will be rough on Elliot." Seth put the invitation down on the counter next to a cardboard box with "Stephanie's Stuff" written on it with a black magic marker in Elliot's handwriting.

"The thing is," Atticus said, trying to finish his thought from out in the hallway, "let's say we find a girlfriend for him but he likes her *too* much. Then they move in together. And then were does that leave us?"

Seth stared at Atticus, all weddings and boxes gone from his head.

"That's what I'm saying," Atticus said, cracking the cap off his beer and nodding as he took a sip. "Too little and he doesn't spend time with her, too much and suddenly we're worse off than a crowded apartment. Too much and we have to *move*."

"I can't move," Seth said with the finality of someone who has announced that they wouldn't be able to handle prison.

"Driving a moving van around Manhattan."

"Dealing with brokers."

"Those giant side view mirrors."

"Every ad you see is a bait and switch."

"Some hot shot in a cab behind you who's been driving since he was born honking and getting pissed off at you when you hesitate trying to get past a double parked car."

Seth's terror was firmly in place at this point. "We can't move."

"No," Atticus agreed. "No, it's got to be the exact same type of woman as Stephanie."

"And we need to know where Elliot went wrong, too," Seth said, staring at the invitation sitting on the counter next to the cardboard box. "We need to know what it was she was looking for and how he failed to live up to that."

"We need to recreate her. We need to craft a prototype woman so we know what we're looking for." Atticus stared at the cardboard box containing Stephanie's belongings.

Seth nodded.

"And we need to take this knowledge and apply it in an area that is rife with women who are all from the same mold." And now Atticus was following Seth's gaze, staring at the wedding invitation.

They stood and they stared, one taking a sip of beer every now and then, neither one making any sudden moves, both unconsciously allowing the idea to ripen between them, not even wanting to risk words lest the idea prove wispy and without foundation. Then slowly they risked glances at each other, the silence needing to be broken, the idea needing to be acknowledged as real.

"Go to his door and tell me if you hear sounds of the rainforest," Atticus said.

Seth tiptoed down the hallway and put an ear to Elliot's door. He waited, straining, until finally, "I hear a frog," he whispered.

"Then he's out," Atticus said, fingers dipping into the corner of the box and, sliding it off the counter into his arms, he plucked up the wedding invitation for good measure and walked into the hallway. "Living room," he said.

Seth led the way, shoving magazines and newspapers off the coffee table before Atticus stepped up and emptied the cardboard box, old lipsticks and CDs and books and sleeping clothes filling up the empty space.

“She’s in here somewhere,” Atticus said as Seth started to pick his way through.

“Joni Mitchell?” Seth said, picking up a CD.

“Put it on,” Atticus commanded.

Seth walked over to the stereo and put the CD in. He stood thoughtfully next to the speaker as the first few bars of music filled the room.

“Turn it off,” Atticus commanded.

The initial burst of excitement was slowly fading and now Seth and Atticus looked down and contemplated the task at hand.

“Where do we start?” Seth asked.

“Anywhere I guess,” Atticus said. “Tonight we just familiarize ourselves with the material.”

“Okay,” Seth nodded, staring down. “Okay.”

“She’s in here somewhere,” Atticus repeated.

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Seth stood outside Elliot’s door the next night, ear pressed against the wood. He waited, verifying, then nodded. “Tree frogs.”

“Okay,” Atticus said, and they both walked into the living room, Seth grabbing the cardboard box from behind the TV while Atticus set the large sketch pad up on the easel to display their notes from the previous night.

“Okay,” Atticus said, “where did we leave off?”

“We made some good progress with the Stephanie prototype, but I’d be happier if we set down some hard and fast rules and strategies for our behavior.”

“You don’t think we need more work on our target female?”

“I think that will come with time,” Seth said, sipping a Diet Coke as he sat in his flannel pajamas. “Sifting through this cardboard box is an organic process. But it will happen, Atticus. It’s how we put that data into play that has me worried.”

“Okay,” Atticus nodded. “Okay...I can see that. So we put some hard and fast rules into place.”

“We’re looking for a woman for him not us,” Seth said.

“Yes. We’re not to be nearly as charming as we’re capable.”

“Or drunk.”

Atticus swore but then conceded. “Yes, or drunk. We use the bar as a social tool.”

“Good.”

“And time limits, we need time limits. No finding a girl it’s easy to get a background on and sticking to her the whole time. That means you have to constantly be introducing yourself to new people. No finding one person you can talk to and clinging to them the entire night.”

It was Seth’s turn to hesitate. Then he too nodded sadly. “That is how it should be. Yes.” Suddenly he perked up. “Hey, can I be Dream Seth?”

“I don’t think this is the time for you to act out your fantasy professions.”

“Atticus, we’re going to have to initiate conversations,” he began ticking off points with his fingers, “completely sober, with any number of strange women, then steer that

conversation to foster an aura of trust and emotional sharing in order to really get to know them.” He scratched the back of his head. “I’m pretty sure being ourselves isn’t the answer.”

Atticus pulled thoughtfully at his lower lip while he stared at the sketch pad. “Point taken,” he nodded, “Dream Seth it is.” He reached forward and flipped the top sheet of the pad over. “Possibly some Dream Atticus will be thrown in as well.”

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“I can’t,” Seth said the next night. The sketch pad was full of notes and scribbles and drawings and the contents of the cardboard box were starting to have a picked over look. “I can’t,” he said, despair and exhaustion starting to well up inside of him. “Seriously, Atticus, I can’t do this. There’s no way we can do this.”

“Hey!” Atticus barked. “I don’t want to hear talk like that.”

“I can’t,” Seth said, starting to shake his head.

“Hey!” Atticus yelled again, rapping the yardstick he had been using as a pointer down on the table in front of Seth. Seth stopped talking but his body seemed to be caving in on itself as he grew in timidity.

“Okay,” Atticus said. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. Did that make you nervous?”

Seth nodded.

“Well we’re just going to take a little breather here, okay? Just relax, forget about all of this for a minute. Okay? Seth?”

Seth nodded again, starting to calm down.

“All right. So now we’re calm again. Right? And now I’m going to talk to Seth, the Human Resources guru, okay? Seth’s been spending his entire professional career talking to women, right? Isn’t that right, Seth?”

“Yeah,” Seth said, coming around, his head starting to lift higher, “yeah, that’s right.”

“And the Seth I know can certainly handle a series of ten minute interviews, right?”

“Yeah!” Seth said with determination. “That’s right! I’ve interviewed women...never attractive ones and never in a social setting...” he started to fade but caught himself. “But that’s all this really is, isn’t it? Just talking? We can do this.”

“There you go,” Atticus beamed.

“I’ve ‘talked’ to hundreds of women.” He turned to include Atticus. “And between the two of us we’ve talked to thousands of women.”

“Absolutely,” Atticus said, feeding off of his energy, gaining some momentum himself. “It’s not like they’re any huge mystery. It’s not like they’re unapproachable. After all I’ve slept with dozens of women.” And he turned to include Seth. “And between the two of us we’ve slept with dozens of women plus supposedly one in San Diego.”

“That’s right!” Seth said, charged up now.

“All right,” Atticus said, turning back to the easel.

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“You know,” Seth said the next night, looking at the giant pad, “call me crazy, but I’m starting to think the prototype inspiration herself would be the ideal here.”

“Yes,” Atticus said, squinting through the reading glasses perched on his nose. “I think we’ve been circling around that for awhile now. It’s an idea...but we have to be willing to try all angles and accept all submissions. But yes, I don’t think we should mince around it, if you

get a chance to do repair work with the prototype inspiration, you take that chance. Stephanie is our white whale.”

“Okay,” Seth said, his eyes tired. “But should we have some sort of plan in place to take out Stephanie’s date if she brings one?”

“I like it,” Atticus said. “No,” he held up a finger with solemn thought on his face, “...no...wait. Seeing as how the reception is not being held aboard The Orient Express maybe we don’t do that.”

“I can’t tell when you’re joking anymore.”

“Let’s just put a rule into place that anything that could be described as nefarious is probably best left on the cutting room floor.”

“Okay,” Seth said, running a hand over his face. He closed his eyes tight and shook his hands out, flexing them and stretching them before picking up the marker again and standing to look at the easel.

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“Now,” Atticus was saying, a pointer in his hands. “What *don’t* we discuss? Let me hear you say it loud and clear.”

“Comic books.”

“And?”

“The history of comic books.”

“And.”

“My love of comic books.”

“All right then.”

Seth stared up at Atticus, waiting. Atticus sighed. “And physics,” he added on his part.

“And?” Seth asked.

“And the history of physics, notable people in physics, the impact physics has on our daily lives.”

“And?”

“Come on, Seth.”

“And?”

“I teach physics, Seth, I don’t love physics.”

“*And?*” Seth insisted.

“And at no point am I to mention that I love physics.”

“Okay then.”

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“Now *we* know that we’re trying to talk to as many women as possible, but they won’t know that.”

“No.”

“So what if one of them starts to like one of us?”

“We’re gay or engaged.”

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Seth sat back on the couch and contemplated the box's contents from a new angle. Then he chuckled to himself. "I wonder what Dutton and Amy would say if they knew our plans for their wedding."

"I'll be honest. I'm still not entirely clear on who Dutton and Amy are."

"Oh come on, you've met them a thousand times. They're the ones who have a Christmas party every year."

"Not ringing a bell."

"She makes spiced rum?"

"Nope."

"She makes those little cupcakes? With red and green frosting?"

"Oh!" Atticus's face lit up. "The cupcakes with the Christmas frosting? With the little sprinkles?"

"Yup."

"I love those," Atticus said, happy.

They both resumed reading their notes before Atticus looked up a minute later. "Wait, so who the hell are Dutton and Amy?"

"It doesn't matter," Seth pushed the heels of his hands into his closed eyes and stretched. "It'd be nice if we had a journal or diary or something," Seth said, sitting up again and rummaging through the coffee table. "Why do we have her high-school yearbook?"

"She brought it over one night so they could giggle and read it."

"Really?"

"Yes. Then they fed each other pancakes."

"Really?"

"I was in my room, I have no idea. Maybe."

Seth scratched his ear, then started flipping through the yearbook. "Here...her best friend wrote, 'Never forget Friendly's nights.' That means something."

"Absolutely, Seth, absolutely," Atticus said, staring sleepily into space.

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They stood in front of the giant sketch pad, one with arms folded across his chest, the other's fingers thoughtfully rubbing the stubble on his chin. There had been no formal agreement, no official decision, they just both knew.

"I think we're there," Seth said.

"Yeah," Atticus agreed, the flow chart drawn in magic marker, the contents of the box, now neatly arranged by category, the various pages of past nights' notes taped up on the walls, the mass of information that had been culled, sorted, and analyzed, all of it suddenly speaking with absolute clarity to both of them. "I think we've done all we can." He turned to look at Seth. "Tomorrow night is game night, you realize."

"I know."

"You ready?"

"Yeah," Seth said. "Yeah I am."

"Then let's get some sleep."

"Atticus?"

"Yeah?"

"If all else goes wrong, I want you to know I'm proud of us tonight."

Atticus didn't answer, only stared around the room savoring the emotion.

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They stood at the entrance to the banquet hall, the ceremony over, the crowd in front of them. A grandfather of someone walked past them, looking elegant in his suit, and somebody's aunt gave them a friendly nod as she passed them the other way headed towards the bathroom.

"You ready?" Atticus asked as the bass player for the band began warming up.

"I think so."

"I'm a little nervous myself, to be honest."

"Me too," Seth said overexcitedly, happy to be agreeing.

"It's okay; we've drilled this a hundred times. We know the signals."

"And we keep in constant contact on the phones."

"And we watch each other, we back each other up and we keep each other in line."

"Absolutely."

"Okay."

"Okay."

They stared out and listened to the spiked range of voices and noises coming in from the crowd.

"Let's go," Atticus said, and they stepped out into the banquet hall.

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"So," Atticus was saying to a short blond girl in a deep blue dress, "you really don't think that it matters if a man has long term goals in their life?"

"Well," she started to answer when Atticus felt his phone vibrate. He pulled it out and flipped it open. "New Text Message From Seth," it said, "Blonds are out. Move on."

"It's really more a matter of whether the guy knows—"

"Oh God fucking *damn* it," Atticus cursed at himself. "Where's your A-game?" He walked away, swearing some more under his breath.

"Excuse me?" the girl asked after him.

---

"Well," Seth was saying to a tall thin brunette with a flat face, "the main thing you have to worry about when designing a roller coaster is balancing what the customer wants with what you can deliver."

"And what does the customer want, usually?"

"You know it's funny, whether they're a county fair or a major theme park, they always want the same thing." He paused and let this sink in, letting the silence hang until the brunette was just about to ask him what that was before he broke in. "More loops."

"I could see that."

"How about you?" Seth asked. "Would you say you're the adventurous type? Do you like to take impulsive vacations?"

“You really start talking to me by asking if I want to have children?” a short little girl was saying to Atticus, and her shoulder length hair was framing eyes that had an interesting flavor of intensity.

“I didn’t mean to pry; I was just making small talk. Sad to say it’s job related. I design toys.”

“Really?” she asked with a nip of incredulous laughter. “And what’s that like?”

“It’s got its rough moments. Like anything else you have to stay centered. I find it helpful to always keep the sound of a child’s laughter,” he thumped his hand on his chest, “right in here.”

She smiled at him over her drink, making it obvious that she wasn’t sure she believed him yet, but that this also didn’t matter hugely.

Atticus felt his phone vibrate, then took it out and glanced at it. His lips pursed and a flash of anger crossed his face, then he looked up. “I’m gay, by the way.”

---

Seth set an empty glass down on the bar. “Maker’s Mark,” he said, holding his fingers up to nearly the top of the glass, “Ginger Ale,” he added, moving his fingers up to cover the rest of the distance to the rim.

Atticus appeared next to him. “What was that?”

Seth drummed his fingers on the bar, his face grimacing with effort. “Actually, bartender? Make that all Ginger Ale, please?”

“There we are,” Atticus said, slapping Seth on the back as he walked away.

The bartender set Seth’s drink down. Seth looked around, then leaned in. “Are you serving shots tonight?” he whispered.

---

“What *was* it like growing up in the mid-west?” Atticus asked a happy girl with an olive complexion.

“No, really? You have how many brothers?” Seth asked one of the bridesmaids.

“I can’t think of anything I take more seriously than music either,” Atticus said to a blond girl with big white teeth.

“Why, look,” Seth tried to say naturally to a girl whose name he couldn’t remember, “here’s my roommate Elliot. Elliot didn’t you once want to play chess professionally?”

“I’d never looked at it that way,” Atticus said, “I suppose we do all come from eggs.”

“I wouldn’t exactly classify dynamiter as a profession...more of a calling really,” Seth was saying.

“Yeah, I hate ABBA too,” Atticus was saying.

“I’d love more champagne.”

“You are *so* right.”

“I took intensive classes to lose my Moroccan accent; they insist that all members of the Royal family do so.”

“Geometry or algebra?”

“Didn’t I talk to you earlier?”

“I need to get some air, excuse me.”

Atticus burst through a double French door and onto a patio, the stones damp with the passing night air. He was shaking and worn, the night was not going well, all attempts were failing and Seth appeared to be getting drunk.

“Hi,” a voice said to him, and he turned to see Stephanie leaning up against the wall, a cigarette in her hand.

“Oh, well hello, Stephanie,” he said, his heart thumping in his head. He saw Seth through the window, walking quickly around to where the door was, saw him about to burst out, then hold up short as Atticus tried to casually give him the “White Whale” signal they had worked out earlier, tugging at his ear as if it were a common habit.

Seth hung back and listened to their conversation from the other side of the doors.

“So,” Stephanie said, “have you boys been burning me in effigy?”

“What? No? Nothing like that. We wouldn’t do anything like that. And it’s not like Elliot would even think of such a thing. Just the other night we were talking and he said that you were-”

“You guys talk?”

“Well...” Atticus stammered, caught up short he opted to go with the truth. “No. We’re guys. We don’t talk; we sit around with the television on and make fun of each other.”

Stephanie smiled.

“But you don’t need to talk *directly* about something to know what’s up, do you? I’ve known Elliot for years. I can tell what’s on his mind.”

“And what is on his mind?”

“You. Most definitely you.”

She smiled again, her fingers flicking the ash off her cigarette. She walked back towards the wall and took a champagne flute off of a window sill. In one gulp she finished the contents. “Well,” she said, and Atticus could tell she was a little tipsy, “if you must know, I’ve been thinking about Elliot quite a bit as well.”

“Oh?” Atticus said, frantically flashing signals whose meaning he could no longer remember to Seth listening at the window.

“I have been trying,” she said with mild drunken drama, “to figure out why we were together in the first place.”

She seemed sad.

“Why? You really can’t remember why?” Atticus stalled, his mind flashing from word to word, image to image, knowing this was a pregnant moment and that the right words could lead it where he wanted it to go. He saw Seth’s eyes light up in the window when he heard the question, saw Seth open his phone and frantically text him a message. “Why?” Atticus said, still stalling, opening his phone.

“New Text Message From Seth,” the phone said. “You suck.”

Atticus flipped his phone shut and starting speaking. “Because he’s a really good guy,” he spit out, surprised at how much he believed it, “and you were a good couple.”

“Were,” Stephanie agreed. She tilted her champagne flute back again, then realized she had already emptied it. “Were,” she set it back on the windowsill and walked inside.

Atticus watched her go, her words still lingering on the cold patio stones. With a tired hand he rubbed at his eyes, then gave up.

Inside, Seth was at the bar when his phone beeped.

“New Text Message From Atticus,” it said. “Game Over.”

“Maker’s Mark,” Seth said, indicating most of the way up the glass. “Ginger Ale,” he said, finishing off the rest.

---

The next morning Seth was lying on the couch when he heard keys in the apartment door, then heard the door open and someone come shuffling down the hall. He thought about sitting up, felt his head throb, then decided against it. He closed his eyes and listened to the television for a few seconds until he heard someone sitting down on the other couch. He opened his eyes and saw Atticus putting a plastic bag down on the coffee table.

“You were out?” Seth asked.

“Got up a few minutes before you did. Went down to the bodega.”

Atticus withdrew a few packets of aspirin from the bag, took one for himself, then threw one to Seth. A bottle of Gatorade came out, then another one which also got tossed to Seth. They both administered to their hangovers.

Atticus sat back with his Gatorade and looked at the television. “This the BBC?”

“Yeah,” Seth said. “They do improv. It’s not bad.”

There was the sound of a door opening in the hallway and they heard Elliot come into the room.

Seth swung his legs off the couch and sat up, making room by burrowing into the far corner.

Elliot sat down.

Atticus reached into his plastic bag, took out a packet of aspirin and handed it to Elliot. Then he took out a bottle of Gatorade and handed that over as well.

“You get bacon, egg and cheeses?” Elliot asked.

“Fuck off,” Atticus said, settling back into his couch and smiling.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at [www.JosephDevon.com](http://www.JosephDevon.com). You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.

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