

The Bully

Short Fiction for Guests of the WordFeeder

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Jack knew that Oliver would be coming through the office kitchen door at 3 PM, plus or minus a couple of minutes. Oliver was trying really hard to lose weight, maybe 20, 25 pounds, and had promised himself he wouldn't eat lunch before 12, or have an afternoon snack before 3. It wasn't easy, but the routine was working for him, and Allison – second in command of his five person future projects analysis team, and the woman of his dreams – was beginning to notice.

Jack knew Oliver would be coming through the door, turning right, going directly to the refrigerator, opening the freezer and removing the last of the box of 4 Nestlé Drumsticks which he would proceed to eat right down to the tip, slowly enough to enjoy every bite, fast enough to avoid dripping any of it on the perfect ties he wore every day.

(Oliver preferred the "Classic Vanilla" Drumstick, delicious chocolate and peanut topped vanilla ice cream in a chocolate-lined sugar cone, believing that the newer models with the fudge or caramel core or chocolate ice cream were examples of major corporations tampering with perfection. By far and away, the worst example in this category, as Oliver had pointed out on occasion, was when Coca Cola tried unsuccessfully in 1985 to change the formula of what subsequently became known as "Classic" Coke. Oliver knew his stack foods. FYI, the Drumstick is the modern version of a discontinued product called the "Nutty Buddy," invented years ago by its namesake, Buddy Seymourian – not to be confused with the men's athletic cup of the same name whose slogan, "Protecting the boys," pretty much tells you everything you need to know about that product.)

Oliver would be focused on the refrigerator, thinking about the analysis he was doing on a property his company was considering developing, and wouldn't notice Jack leaning against the counter to his left behind the open door. Jack would wait, wait for Oliver to close the door to the freezer compartment, drop the empty box in the trash can, peel off the top of the Drumstick wrapper and turn to leave while contemplating his first bite. The first bite had to be carefully considered, like a diamond cutter making sure his first strike wouldn't ruin what could be the perfect stone, or the way a Mohel thinks twice, even three times before he circumcises a baby boy. There was no room for error.

"Thanks!" Jack pulled off the surprise and snatched the Drumstick from Oliver's hand. "That was way too easy," he gloated.

Oliver said nothing, just staring at his last Drumstick, wondering what Jack and he would do next, and then raised his eyes to look up, from under his eyebrows, directly into Jack's.

It was the moment Jack had been waiting for. Shoving the Drumstick toward his mouth, he took a huge bite which crumbled the peanut studded chocolate shell, a large piece of it falling to the tile floor. Jack laughed a bit while his free hand salvaged a bit of ice cream that was lingering precariously at the corner of his mouth. "Hey," he said mockingly, "these *are* good."

Oliver thought for a moment, watching yet another piece of chocolate and nuts fall to the floor. Was it worth it for him, he thought, to shove what was left of his Drumstick into the face of the asshole in front of him? Technically, Jack was senior to him, having graduated and joined the firm two years ahead of Oliver. Intellectually, and in every other respect, he was a poor excuse for everything he pretended to be, a coworker whose principal job seemed to be taking credit for everyone else's work which made him the darling of the mid-level management to whom they all reported. Picking on Oliver, the only analyst in their division Jack worried about, had become a regular part of Jack's daily routine.

"Here," Jack extended the ruined cone as if it was a microphone, pretending to offer Oliver a chance to share.

Oliver thought for a moment, deciding instead to be as polite as he could, actually managing a slight, if insincere smile. "No thanks. ..You seem to be enjoying it even more than I would have." And then, looking down at the floor and back up at Jack. "Be sure to clean up before you leave. Company policy." Walking around his nemesis, Oliver headed out of the kitchen at a measured pace, not fast enough to avoid hearing the sound of his Drumstick hitting the inside of the trash can, the image of his wasted delight melting at the bottom with coffee cups and a banana peel swirling around his mind. In all relationships, business and personal, pleasant and adversarial, there are tipping points. However petty – it was, after all, nothing more than a snack – this was one of them. Oliver knew it, and the anticipation of his getting back at Jack once and for all made him feel strangely good about himself.

Unfortunately, Oliver being a good guy and laser focused on his work, Jack's shenanigans continued unabated – including hitting on Allison about whom he cared zero, preferring less intelligent, less driven, more overtly flirtatious slutty types – as the deadline for Oliver's report approached. Oliver and his team would do the research in painstaking detail. Oliver would write the report with Allison's and the other team members' help. Jack would read it and preview its findings with management. He was a quick study, and there was usually no stopping him from demanding and getting access to their work. Depending upon their reaction, he'd either take credit or suggest that there were still elements of the study that, well, "needed work." Not to worry. He'd handle it. When the time came, he'd insist on making the formal presentation, or let Oliver do it and submit a supplementary report based on middle management's concerns – the ones Oliver knew nothing about.

This time, Jack was beginning to sense, would be different. This particular project had an especially high profile, and had attracted senior management's attention with an intensity none of them had seen before. Middle management was being tentative, hedging its bets. There was "no-nonsense" in the air, and it was making him uneasy.

Early the following afternoon, Oliver's team was in the conference room engaged in what Jack figured had to be their last meeting before Oliver would put the final touches on the report and write up his recommendations. "Oliver." Jack walked in, not caring that he was interrupting a highly animated discussion, professional, but nonetheless noisy, between two of Oliver's team who were arguing about the pricing they'd recommend. "E-mail me the draft." He was talking to Oliver, but looking at Allison, her auburn hair pulled back with a scrunchy they way she did when she'd been their overnight. "Hey, Allison." (Just two simple words, but there was no way he could say them that didn't sound creepy.)

“Jack,” she answered without looking up from the notes she was making.

“How about dinner tomorrow night, after the presentation?”

“No thanks,” she looked up showing the minimum courtesy she could, short of telling him where to get off.

“Don’t tell me you have plans?”

“She has plans with me.” It wasn’t true, but Oliver had had it with Jack’s crap.

“You’re kidding?” Jack turned to Allison, waiting for confirmation.

“I said she has plans with me. And you’ll get your copy of the report when it’s done, at the presentation with everyone else.” Oliver remained seated, working on draft text and tables he had spread out on the table in front of him.

“You’ll give it to me now.”

Oliver looked up, paused for only a second, before he asked the question he could no longer resist, “Or what?”

No response.

“Or what?” he repeated, more deliberately this time. “...Maybe you didn’t hear me? Just what are you going to do if I don’t give it to you?”

No response, but then, turning back to Allison, his voice uncharacteristically subdued, Jack decided to pursue a different subject. “You’re not really going out to dinner with Chubby?”

“Out?” Allison looked up, taking off her reading glasses. Reaching back to remove the clip, her chest pushing forward while she shook her head just enough to let her hair down. “I’m going to be fucking his brains out at my place over some sangria and cartons of carry out.” And then turning to Oliver, “Crab Rangoon and black bean shrimp, babe, same as last time?”

“Maybe...” He had to stop to swallow. “...maybe some pineapple chicken?” Oliver couldn’t take his eyes off her, while the heads of the other three on the team went back and forth between them as if they had table side seats at a ping pong game.

“Yeah?” Jack was determined to have the last word. “You two deserve each other,” and he left, heading down the hall toward the elevator and the middle management executive offices two floors up.

Oliver and Allison would have probably stared at each other for the rest of the afternoon if one of their colleagues hadn’t interrupted the silence for selfish reasons. “Hey, guys. Can he get us fired?”

“Them maybe,” one of the others answered, obviously kidding, “but not us.”

“You’ll be fine,” Oliver reassured them. “By now, he’s finding out that senior management had us hand in the final draft early, yesterday morning. I’ll e-mail these revisions they requested later this afternoon.”

“What about the presentation?”

“They didn’t need one. I’ve been keeping them up to date for weeks, on a daily basis. ...I’ll be running the project, with Allison taking over here as of the Monday.” Turning to Allison, “You’ll have to hire a newbie to keep the team at five.” (She was pleased that he had recommended her for the promotion. Sure, Oliver liked her, but she was good, really good. He knew it, and so did she, but in a practical, not conceited way.)

“What about Jack,” Allison was wondering if he’d still be getting in their way.

“Not up to me, although I suspect a transfer might be an option.” Checking his watch, “Okay, enough. Good job everybody. It’s only 2:50. Plenty of day to get some work done.”

At 3 PM sharp, Oliver pushed open the door to the company kitchen, heading right toward the refrigerator, his head already busy wrapping itself around the first few project management problems he’d be facing. Opening the freezer compartment, the frosty mist hitting him in the face, it took both his hands to open the new box of Drumsticks his team had bought him, with the big red bow on top, and pull one out. Pushing the freezer door shut, he carefully removed the top of the wrapper, turning without realizing there was anyone standing behind him.

“Thanks!” Allison pulled off the surprise, snatching the Drumstick from Oliver’s hand. “You know, that was way too easy,” she smiled with the corners of her mouth as he watched the freshly applied red gloss on her lips wrap around the peanut covered coating, taking the perfect bite without so much as cracking any of the other chocolate.

Wiping some ice cream from her lips, she told him to, “Get your own,” turned and headed for the door. Pausing just as she got there, Allison looked back, took a second bite, licking her lips clean, rolled her eyes up to look at him, and asked Oliver the question that would make his year. “So,” her tone was matter-of-fact, but her eyes... her eyes were unusually blue, “are we still on for dinner at my place?” A quick air kiss and she left before Oliver regained consciousness and began running down the hall after her.

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Nestlé Drumstick link... <http://www.drumstick.com/flavors/classic.aspx>

Nutty Buddy (the athletic cup) link... www.nuttybuddy.com