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Last Call (aka The 400-Pound Ninja)

by Dale Bridges

"Where do you get those weird ideas for your column?" my friend said during a recent phone conversation. I told him that my ideas come from the same three Muses that inspire all writers: sex, rum and cheeseburgers. He asked me to elaborate...

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It's 1:36 a.m. on a Friday night/Saturday morning and I am sitting at a bar on Pearl Street, gently stirring a double Rum & Coke, sort of half-watching Ultimate Fighting on an old television set that is bolted to the wall in front of me and sort of half-watching a young man at the other end of the bar who is masticating the straw that came with his drink in a way that seems to indicate that he has some pent-up Freudian issues involving his mother. He is one of those impossibly beautiful people whose hair always looks perfect, even in the middle of hurricane-like winds, and he's talking to a girl who also has hurricane-proof hair, and they smile and they laugh and they generally look like a toothpaste commercial — except for the fact that this impossibly beautiful boy is drunk and this impossibly beautiful girl is also drunk, and it's quite clear that they will soon be going home together to have impossibly beautiful drunken sex, and this knowledge somehow makes me both happy and depressed at the same time.

I finish my drink and order another one, because Last Call is looming around the corner like a 400-pound ninja with a grudge, and I don't know karate. My drink has too much ice in it and the soda is flat and the bartender slipped a lime wedge in there even though I told him not to and I take a sip and think, *Ah, just the way I like it*. On the television, the Ultimate Fighter in the white shorts is now beating the ever-loving shit out of the Ultimate Fighter in the black shorts, and across the bar, the impossibly beautiful boy and girl are asking the bartender for their check, and, at that exact moment, Michael Jackson's "Billy Jean" comes on the jukebox and you can almost see everyone in the room smile at the same time (even though "Billie Jean" is an incredibly sad song when you think about it).

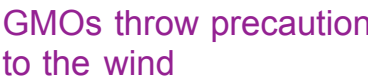
I have now reached the perfect level of drunkenness: warm and sort of swimmy, but not stumbly. Of course, this is the moment that I choose to text-message all the people I should not be sending text messages to while I'm drunk (ex-girlfriends, ex-girlfriend's friends, ex-girlfriend's ex-friends, etc., etc.). While I am trying to spell "It wasn't my fault" on my cell phone, a girl sits down next to me and asks if I like Michael Jackson. This girl has cornflower-blue eyes and blonde corkscrew-like hair, and I tell her that I definitely do not like Michael Jackson. I tell her that the word "like" is not sufficient to describe my feelings about the music created by the King of Pop. His bass lines are groundbreaking. His hooks are transcendent. Michael Jackson is a genius. She says that she likes Michael Jackson, too ("No matter what he did or did not do to McCulley Culkin"), and then we have an intense debate over what was his best album, *Thriller* or *Bad*, and I lose the debate because she brings up M.J.'s collaboration with Paul McCartney on "The Girl is Mine," which is not really fair because it's impossible to argue against a former member of The Beatles. I'm trying to work up the courage to ask this blonde girl for her phone number, but suddenly some guy wearing a They Might Be Giants T-shirt swoops in and beats me to the punch, and I curse the little birdhouse in his soul.

The walk home takes about 45 minutes, and it's the best 45 minutes of the whole year. The stars are bright. The air is charged with nocturnal romance. And I find a quarter.

McDonald's is three blocks from my house and their drive-thru window is open 24 hours, and even though I don't have a car, the 15-year-old Night Manager lets me order a double cheeseburger from the dollar menu and I go home and sit on my balcony and eat my delicious, un-healthy, un-organic food product, and I think about all the things in the world I truly love that no one else really cares about: zombie movies, Billy Joel, Sky Mall, documentaries about serial killers, documentaries about religious cults, documentaries about aliens, *ThunderCats*, Hot Pockets, *Footloose*, Michael Landon, Spider-Man, Miles Davis, Jacques Derrida, Scott Baio, the *Rocky* movies (except for number five), *Rambo*, pretty much Sylvester Stallone's entire career, literary theory, *The Dukes of Hazzard*, Bill Hicks, Spaghetti Westerns, *The Karate Kid* movies (except for number four), Netflix, interviews with prostitutes, taxidermy, books about Scientology, Christian rock and tater tots.

And that's when I write my column.

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