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Abstract

Everything becomes hilarious after Samantha, my wife, says she's in love with a ping-pong player. Suddenly, everything seems like a joke...

Cover Page Footnote

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Everything Strange and Unknown

Fiction by Joe Meno

Everything becomes hilarious after Samantha, my wife, says she's in love with a ping-pong player. Suddenly, everything seems like a joke. The ping-pong player is a boy from Nigeria, nineteen years old, a foreign exchange student who came here to become a ping-pong-playing prodigy. His English isn't all that good, so I don't blame him. He was a cashier at the upscale supermarket where my wife did her shopping, which is how they met. Who leaves her husband for a ping-pong player? I don't know. Someone who really likes small orange balls. And someone who doesn't mind having sex in the back of a Volvo station wagon, our Volvo station wagon to be exact, which is where they did it before they ran off. People call to give their condolences, but I can hear it's hard for them not to laugh. Sometimes I put the children to bed and walk around our neighborhood, staring up at the night sky. The way the streetlights punctuate the air with a glow of delight, the children asleep in their rooms, their expressions betraying a subtle giggle, the moon like an enormous pie in the face, all of it seems sort of funny. It's the worst thing that's ever happened, but it all sounds like a punch line.

*

I try as best I can to keep it together. The kids are all good sports. There are three or four of them, and every one of them is a different age, if you can believe that. I make

most of their meals in a blender. Sometimes it's scrambled eggs; sometimes it's just margarita mix. I try to be open to suggestions and not take their criticism personally.

*

The hardest thing is their schedules. All these children have these places to go, at these different times of the day. Some of them go to school, some don't, but who can keep track? Let's be honest; mistakes have been made. The thing I like best is going with the kids to their classes. Maddie, who's two years old, has this music class I really like. The moms there all look like they've been through hell. They look like refugees. Some of them don't even wear make-up. It took me a while to realize that's because they were impostors, babysitters and nannies. Which is why I felt right at home.

*

The girl who teaches the music class is named Nicole. She's in her late twenties, with shoulder-length blond hair and a very spirited personality. She always has weird things stuck in her hair: barrettes, pieces of string, rubber bands. She seems like she probably does drugs, but not too many. The first song she always plays is "Yellow Submarine," and it just about kills me. I used to sing that one in the bath with the kids. My wife would sometimes join in. It touches me deeply hearing Nicole sing that song. Also, she doesn't wear a bra, which is sort of appealing.

*

After class I tell Nicole, "Hey, that was a lot of fun . . . I really like your voice."

She smiles, brushing the hair from her eyes, and says, "Thanks. I have some CDs for sale. They're ten bucks each." She takes a few CDs out of her guitar case and hands one to me.

"Cool." I search in my wallet, but all I have is five bucks. Nicole looks down, shrugs, and takes the money. "Is there somewhere I can come see you play? Like an adult venue or something?" I ask.

"I don't really play anywhere. I . . . I'm trying to start my own business, and so I'm really focused on that."

"Wow. Your own business. That's amazing."

“Yeah, it’s like . . . a service. For like kids’ birthday parties, that kind of thing. It’s like for kids who are afraid of clowns. I come and sing and play games and do balloon animals, that kind of thing.”

“Wow, that sounds . . . that’s really great. So you’re like a . . . a professional . . .”

“I’m a professional celebrator,” Nicole says.

She digs into her purse and hands me a business card. On the card is a picture of a clown and a child crying. “Here. I had like a thousand of these printed.”

“This is great,” I say. “I should be . . .” And it’s then that I notice my daughter is missing.

*

Maddie is by the water fountain. I put her over my shoulder. We drive around in the station wagon listening to Nicole’s CD until it’s time to pick up her siblings from school. Then we all eat dinner in the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant. Believe me, it’s just easier this way.

*

For breakfast the next morning, there’s ice cream. It’s got freezer burn, so it’s not that much of a treat. Still Maddie looks up at me and says, “Daddy. You and I will always be best friends.” I want to hug her to death, it means so much to me. Later we all listen to Nicole’s CD as I drive the kids to school. Nicole sings a song about a tortoise with diabetes. We all sing along. For the moment, everybody is in a good mood, like we are not a family on the verge of collapse. I find myself thinking about this person Nicole and look at her business card and decide to give her a call while Maddie takes her nap.

“Hello, Nicole? Hey, this is Paul. No, Paul. We talked the other day; my daughter’s in your music class. Yeah. No, we’ve been listening to your CD, and I was wondering, I don’t know if this is too weird, but . . . maybe you’d like to meet sometime?”

Nicole says okay and then asks if I have a car. I say I do, and then she asks me if I can drive her somewhere.

*

The next day, I drop the kids off at my sister-in-law, Mary's. Mary owes me a favor. After my wife left, I gave Mary all of my wife's Xanax, of which Mary is an enthusiast. Then I go pick up Nicole. Nicole is out in front of her apartment building, oddly dressed with a glass tiara, an enormous tutu, and lots of plastic jewelry. She is carrying a small boom box and a guitar case. She climbs in the car and I say hello and she says hi and I say, "You look . . . great."

"I know it's over the top. But I have a gig."

"You do?"

"I'm supposed to go play some kid's birthday party. I really appreciate the lift."

"Oh. Sure. No problem."

"Most of my friends work during the day, so." Then she looks at me and asks, "Do . . . do you have a job?"

I smile and say, "I'm a teacher. I teach ESL at the Learning Center. I'm supposed to teach poetry to ESL students. But no one ever takes the class. It's a pretty terrible idea."

"Did you always want to be a teacher?"

"No. I was in college for a long time, and I just couldn't make up my mind."

She nods. I ask, "How many of these birthday parties have you done before?"

"None," she says. "This'll be my first."

*

But Nicole ends up charming everybody. The birthday party is for a three year old who has his arm in a cast, and Nicole wows him by making up a song about a flamingo with a broken wing. I stand in the corner and watch her sing, feeling as if I am somehow cheating on my kids. I drink punch from a juice box and have a slice of cake and think maybe this is not such a bad first date after all.

*

Later I drive Nicole home, and we sit in the car in front of her apartment building, talking.

“I had a nice time,” I say.

“Me, too. It’s nice to be around someone you don’t hate.”

“That is almost always true,” I say.

“My roommate is driving me nuts right now. She keeps taking my stuff without asking. I might have to mess her up.”

“Wow. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Are you dating anyone right now?” Nicole asks.

“Who, me? No, my . . . my wife left me a few months ago for a ping-pong player, so no.” Nicole nods as if she’s heard this sort of thing before. She’s the first person I’ve told who doesn’t begin to laugh. “What about you?” I ask.

“I’ve been out on a few dates, but I’m not seeing anyone.”

“No?” I ask. Nicole points down at her plastic jewelry and tutu. “Right, but that’s just part of your job,” I say.

“I’m 110 percent fun. Most people can’t handle it. I also have some father issues. Maybe that’s a little too much information. I’m going to shut up now.”

We both smile, waiting to see if we will kiss each other or not. Finally we both lean in and bang our foreheads together.

“Ow,” she says.

“I’m sorry. I’m a klutz,” I say.

“Me, too,” she says. Then she asks, “Listen, there’s a park across the street. Do you want to go for a walk?”

“Really?” I ask. “It’s dark out. It’s like nine-thirty.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Nothing,” I say. But I think, *Everything*.

*

We sit down in a pair of empty swings. The park is abandoned though still possesses an air of menace. Nicole leans over and attacks me, covering me with a flurry of awkward kisses. We both fall out of the swings.

“Wow,” I say, “That was . . .”

“Sorry,” she says. “I’m a little nervous.”

“No problem,” I say and pat down my hair. Nicole begins to unbuckle her pants.

“Hey. Wow,” I say. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

“I like you; you like me. What else do you need to know?” she asks, and we begin kissing again.

“Nothing. I just. I mean I don’t even think I know your last name.”

“It’s Goosenberg,” she says, and we go back to kissing.

“Nicole Goosenberg?”

She says, “People used to laugh at me all the time. Grade school was hell for me.”

“I bet,” I say, and we kiss again. The way she kisses—it must be the way people kiss in this new century, the way people who grew up with the Internet kiss. She licks one side of my face and then the other. Somehow it’s sexy and altogether not sexy. Then she looks at me and says, “I’m going to give you a hickey.”

“Yeah? Really? I’m not so sure about that.”

“Come on. Let’s give each other hickies. It’ll be fun.”

“I’m thirty-nine. I’m a father. I have at least three or four children.”

“So? That’s what’s fun about it. It’s fun to pretend the best times of your life aren’t over.”

I look at her and frown and let her proceed. A few moments later, my cellphone rings. I check it. Mary has sent me a text that says, “BABY = ANUS Trouble.” I look over at Nicole, interrupting what she’s doing, and say, “I’m sorry. I have to go. But . . . this was great.”

“Wait. Where are you going?”

“One of my kids is . . . I have to go. I’ll call you.” I kiss her on the forehead like an idiot and then hurry toward the car.

*

I’m embarrassed to admit that I am happy to get away. I pick the kids up. I have never missed them so much. The baby has diarrhea. She relieves herself in the backseat of the Volvo on the way home, so everything is a mess. I forget to call Nicole the next day. The day after that one of the older kids has an allergic reaction to soap. He breaks out in hives everywhere. I put calamine lotion on him and wrap him in gauze like a mummy. We parade him around the house and call him King Tut. He asks us to put him down, but we don’t. Somehow it’s a week later already, and still I haven’t called.

*

Maddie and I head to her music class, but Nicole isn’t there. I wonder if I have done something terrible, if she won’t show because of me. But then she does. She has a soft white t-shirt, which shows off her slender frame, and her left eye is bandaged up. Somehow I feel responsible. Today she starts class with the Beatles’ “Octopus’s Garden.” It’s like she’s playing the Beatles just to punish me. After class, I gather my nerve and ask Nicole what happened to her eye.

“My roommate,” she says. “She stole my deodorant. Then we got in a fistfight.”

“Wow,” I say. “I’m sorry to hear that.” I scratch my chin. “Listen,” I say, “I meant to call you, but . . . I don’t know if this, us going out, is such a good idea.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to be weird about it. To be honest, all I needed was someone who could drive me. I was just looking for a friend.” I tell her I feel the same way, and then we hug awkwardly. I go out into the hallway with my daughter. The next class begins. Nicole starts to sing. We both listen quietly at the door. It’s the ABCs, but the way she’s singing, it’s so soft, so distant, kind of like a ballad. It captures the way I have been feeling. Suddenly it’s like the world is no longer

laughing, like the joke might be over. We stand there and listen for a moment. Somehow the alphabet never sounded so sad.

Joe Meno is a fiction writer who lives in Chicago. He is the winner of the Nelson Algren Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Great Lakes Book Award, and a finalist for the Story Prize. The bestselling author of seven novels including *Hairstyles of the Damned* and *The Boy Detective Fails*, he is a professor at Columbia College in the Department of Creative Writing. His latest novel, *Marvel and a Wonder*, was published in September 2015.