

## A Little Bit of Everything

A short story by Marjorie Desamito

My name is Will Baker. It's a simple name, but I take pride in it. Especially the 'Will' part. Every single day, I try to live up to its glory. Not that I really *have* to. My family's pretty average, and they regard me as that good kid who occasionally loses himself in ... whatever he loses himself in. Screw that. It does little justice to describe my true nature as a person, my dreams in life... no. My mission.

But first, I have to deal with the dinner table. I have yet to perfect that effortless swagger and alpha-as-fuck way of walking. In any case, I take the designated seating area. The food is strategically laid out: melancholic meatloaf huffs and puffs slow steamy breaths upon facing its demise, dinner rolls make love to butter and strong parmesan, water in tall crystal glasses never lies. And there's also salad. There's way too many in this orchestra, so a party breaks off to the side. Bowing our heads for a short prayer my dad bumbles out, I can feel his internal sadistic smirk at our anticipation for the primal ritual of sacrifice that follows this more civilized one. *Not yet not yet. Cultivate that patience. It makes the meal taste so much better. Delayed gratification, kiddos~*

The signs of the crosses follow the Amen's in split seconds. Mom and my younger brother Sebastian reach for the dinner rolls. After everyone takes their share, I laugh nervously and take a dinner roll and other foodstuffs, painting my plate in blobs of color while preferring to leave in some of that white background. Ah, what a pretty picture. I like it almost as much this one girl.... Nevermind.

Chatty, chatty, chatty. Everyone is so chatty. But I can deal. It's simple: A nod to Mom's encounter with the pregnant neighbor who is trying to free herself from her jewelry addiction. I also bro-fist Sebastian who stood up to a bully. Dad talks about his nth plan to invest in gold. Topic. Nod. Bite. Drink. Belch. Something. Damn, what a stupid tv commercial! The occasional 'Mhmm,' 'This is good,' 'Excuse me,' 'Bless you,' and 'Thank you.' It's just another part of day-to-day living necessary to keep us healthy and sane. Necessary and not for leisure. What is leisure anyway? I know nothing of it. Maybe I'll come to know it, but only after doing the things I absolutely need to do.

Anyway, even the most disciplined have their limits. I just so happened to reach mine. There is still unfinished business. I stand up with a serious expression, eyeing the remnants of the plate's pretty picture and dodging everyone else's vulture eyes.

“Scuse me.”

“You're already done?”

“Yea. They served a lot of awesome things in the cafeteria today... no, gosh, I still love your cooking more but... well anyway. Homework. It's important.”

“Oh, studying so hard! Make us all proud but don't kill yourself, ha!” Dad's dopey smile earned a sideways glance from the other two. “No, I really mean it! Geez....”

“Oooh, okay. Go *do that 'homework'!* But don't have so much fun that you're going at it all night like--”

“Can it, Sebastian!” He whines at my choice move of passive-aggressive means of brotherly affection which he calls the scalp-burning hair ruffle. Hmf, kids these days.

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Obviously, everything I said back there was a lie. There is no homework, only the dirty work of cleaning up the evidence. Now, how to put this...? I am a treasure seeker and a fighter. Why do I do this kind of thing? Because I can and life is short. Of course, the thrill of this life comes with a responsibility to restore everything to what it once was. Doing so requires a good deal of air refreshers and sturdy garbage bags.

The night is aging, as is the smell of the garbage bag filled with crumbs, cardboard, and wrappers. I carry it around like Santa's evil twin. Seems really sketch, yeah, but I fancy it this way. A nice, leisurely evening walk (or run) to a garbage dump ought to put me in a mood of reflection and accomplishment. It still had yet to happen, though. With that in mind, I bid the chipping bathroom door sayonara before stealthing through the noir of the living room... only to find something killing the vibe.

The idiot brother's impossibly bright socks do a salsa dance. Or rather, his feet do. The socks do nothing but simultaneously glare with moonlight and smile mockingly at me with freakish cartoon faces. I see this abomination peeking over the main couch's arm. Diversion. Obstruction. Whatever. It annoys me so much I want to laugh. Don't laugh.... Don't laugh...

“Ohonhonhonhon~” a nasally voice does it for me.

*OH MY GOSH.*

“Will-y is that you? Wee wittle will....y....”

The boy mutters half asleep, and no, it ain't cute. Why in the world is he down here!? He turns away from me to face the back of the couch while freeing his feet from the socks, the motion tossing them toward me. I dodge the unnatural smileys and their smelly kisses. I nod a

little, respecting the fact that my brother is slowly catching onto the art of ironic displays of brotherly affection.

“Cleaaaaan da bathroom, kay”

“Already di—or wait no! I will. Just used it for a brief while is all. I might do it... on my free time... whenever that is.”

“Mmmhmmmm.... \*snort\*”

*Gah, what was I thinking!?* I could have given myself away! I trudge towards my room, bag over shoulder, kicking away the smiling bastards with my own sockless feet.

By the end of my run to a larger garbage can in the nearby park, I take the opportunity to undergo my secret training. The moonlit trail is a place no one dares to venture into at this time I bet. But at the same time, I’m not a suicidal idiot. So I only use the first third of the trail, the part that juts out of the wooded area and contains a few bars meant to encourage exercise. It’s too dark to read the nearby signs that suggest different levels of exercise per bar. Haha, too bad those recommendations are *below* me.

Somehow, I barely manage through 14 pullups and 5 runs from the beginning of the trail to the wooded entrance then back. Haha, this isn’t quite my day -- er night. But the endorphins still kick in. Focusing on that feeling gets me back home to join the oblivious, civilian sleepyheads.

I reach the spectacle of my room: an incredibly boring site that brings me a sense of consistency without the warm and fuzzy. The small trash bin is full. Nothing new. The dim and worn motivational posters of determination and success have witnessed shameful actions – aftermaths of my failures – which resulted in me stuffing all proof of my crimes into my closet.

My once impeccable tower of shoeboxes remain scattered from the aftermath of me having to transfer the *stuff*. It's a pitiful sight, but a spraying some Lysol makes the scene more agreeable, if not just the air.

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The bell rings. It doesn't even sound like a bell. By this time, we have settled the big square tables. My brain barely processes that I am at the cafeteria of some high school whose name doesn't matter.

“FIND A SEAT FIND A SEAT IDLE STANDERSBY WILL BE ON TRASH DUTY FIND A SEAT...” Overwhelmed by the voice of the “lunch administrator” whose commands do little to disperse the seas of hungry masses forming the lunch blobs that fail to be classified as lunch lines, I almost overlook the two that sit with me on a regular basis.

The first is a well-built dude named Benjamin. He's an okay fellow, maybe a bit too okay. He yawns. Twice. Thrice. How does he even have all that body definition? I swear he must be on steroids! His choice of lunch: a BIG bowl of generic salad that looks like a Subway abomination without the flatbread and some protein bar that fails to resemble a brownie. Talk about false advertising. He carries an equally huge thermos and a chilled energy drink. It's highly likely that he either packed it into a lunch bag with an ice pack or snuck off campus to buy it in the nearby shop. Without bothering to utilize a knife, he scoops a mass of stuff into his fork and proceeds to become a living hamster, dark eyes eyeing me and pausing. He raises a thin eyebrow, points with his fish lips, and gestures to the salad as if to say, “Wanna try some?” I shake my head and sip on the protein shake that I happened to have on me. He blinks twice, accepting my usual answer without further inquiry, and continues to indulge himself.

“Getting ahead on homework again?” Light brown eyes attempt to peer over my open geometry book. The airy voice I recognize is that of the girl named Shirley. In her dainty hands is a huge Hot Pocket. *Get the thing out of my face!* I plead internally, diverting myself by staring at her wrist conquered by endless color, beads, and accessories. “Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to invade your bubble! Um... do your best?” She returns to sitting in the chair to my right. I catch a nervous smile on her freckly face tilted down slightly. It should have been a godly, picture-perfect moment – that slightly flustered face with its light brown bangs peeking out of a beanie. But it kills my soul to contemplate just how her near-holy being manages to thrive on a poisonous arrangement of Hot Pockets, cheese crackers, chocolate pudding, and apple juice. It's so much more than what Benjamin is eating! She spends most of her time socializing with the other guy who talks with his mouth full, quickly biting into her food on occasion.

Usually, I wouldn't question this dynamic between us three. But who would while befriending the textbooks so intimately? It's not that I dig the material or am in love with analyzing the different angles or whatever. It's all for the bigger purpose of making time – the kind of time that others waste away with their televisions. Ah, how great it is to feign compliance and enthusiasm. It's an interesting life, to skim, to lie... and then to lie. When used in an example, it is me being so absorbed in my numbers and lines that I fail to take notice of the other two who appear to be a lot more than friendly. Whether it's the arrangement of food or the two hands placed across the table and nearly touching each other: a symptom of (RED FLAG INCOMING!) dating, I decide that my textbook would have to deal with the fact that I'm only pretending to be invested in it.

“Okay, maybe it's a schedule thing. That's how he's ...some people are wired y'know?”

“But why? Life isn’t all about.... Or is it?”

“Who knows?” A not-so-subtle glance from my left apparently catches me in the geometric zone. The idiot keeps on talking. “Whatever. What are we supposed to do?”

“Well, y’know... It’ll be for the best, I’m sure...” Shirley’s voice drops and Benjamin attempts a killer smile. Maybe it succeeded, because I am now unable to distinguish between the noise of my heart and my stomach. I force out a cough against my will, reminding the two of my presence. They jump back a little. *Not slick! Not slick at all!*

“Oh, um, Will! Are you finished yet? If you’re up for it, we can sign up for *FlightEternal* tonight!” He pauses, as if expecting something, before continuing to give a half-assed pitch for *FlightEternal – With a new and improved real-time-strategy system! FreeToPlay MMORPG. For LIFE! The maps are so good....* As if trying to entice me further, he presents me his not-a-brownie abomination. I grimace.

“I’ll take it!” But before Shirley could reach for it, I intercept the transaction. My hand comes milliseconds and millimeters away from colliding with hers in my merciless snatch. I internally praise the heavens that my hand didn’t smack into hers while cursing my missed shot at the good ol’ accidental handhold.

“No actually, I’ll try it.” Both mouths gape open. The noise of both individuals simultaneously stomping the ground and leaning forward make me shrink back like a cornered guinea pig. Holding the unusually warm food product as they anticipate me eating it like someone in an online video certainly makes me feel like one too. It ends up being a slight struggle, due to the wrapper’s moistness and due to my shaking hands. I would like to imagine that the sweat and indescribable odor belonged to Benjamin. My labor reveals a melting,

chocolate-coated lump. I couldn't help but liken it to poop. But before I could examine this thing further, I take note of Shirley and Benjamin's eager eyes and decide not to keep them in suspense for too long. Against my better judgment, I down the visual poop in one go. It doesn't take long for me to sense the happy feelings all around.

“Not bad. Not bad at all,” I hear myself saying flatly. The subject under discussion continues to be about this *FlightEternal* (which appears to hype up climbing the online social ladder through custom-made avatars bought via gaming time or money) as if to divert me from what I overheard earlier. But maybe there's no need to overthink that anymore. I set aside the textbook and decide to actually tune in for once.

“My CD and registration key arrived just last night, but I have dance lessons today. You guys go on without me... I'll get to it in a few days. No spoilers though, please!” Benjamin looked to Shirley with slight disappointment (it resembled a pug) before turning to me.

“What is it?”

“Join me,” he said simply. I look to Shirley who shrugs as if to say, *Why not! Go for it! Two is better than one.* The itch for escape and the way to do so sneak up on me. “I'm not sure... they really aren't my thing. You should *know* by now how much I suck at multiplayer games and ... and role-playing!” A firm hand finds my shoulder. When did that get there!

“We all suck when we start out! Look at you breezing through your geometry! I know you're not an idiot. You'll be fine!”

“W-what about your other muscle friends! Aren't any of them interested?”

“Don't call them muscle friends, that sounds like some cast on a kiddie show! Besides. You're the freest.” Benjamin huffs with pride and gestures to my geometry notebook, which to

my horror, contained my notes from last semester. “Or are you? I wonder... What other things do you have going on?”

The remnants of protein shake punish me by charging the trachea. Clearly, with the way they conversed, they were onto something from the very start!

“I.... well....”

“You could just say you don’t want to.” Shirley whispered to me.

“Hm? What’s that? Why is that?” I curse Benjamin’s improbably specific hearing abilities. He decides to continue talking for some reason. “You can just do a bunch of tutorials before getting into those *missions and quests*.” *No*

“And c’mon! None of the stuff in it is actually *real-real!*” he stresses the last word. *No!*

“It’s time consuming, I know. But I believe in you. And this game. Will change. Your LIFE!” *STOP....* The guy chuckles, as if realizing how his spiel might have looked.

“Well. It kind of sucks that, since it happens in real time, you can’t pause it. But if, say, you ever had to take a food br--”

***SHUT. UP. NO!***

I’m not running. I’m seeing things. I’m seeing the implied rage of the lunch administrator pass me. I’m hearing them scream my name. The scenery changes from cafeteria to hallway to stairs, then to hallways again. But I’m not running. I don’t need to. Not from opportunity and not from the truth. What do they know! They won’t ever. I can acknowledge that now. I know. I’m a chicken.

A chicken...

Chicken...

Tonight, this chicken flies.

I strip my humanity from the top. Unashamed of my chicken body, I become one with the draft that embraces my armpits and chest. I follow my body's compass. It inevitably leads to my locker. I open this magical vault. The contents hold more power and value over the mythical money tree. That shit was only for the masses who were willing to deny paradise for an unnecessary element of difficulty in their lives. But you know what? I am willing to consume that shit until it no longer exists in the world. It could probably kill me, but who said it wasn't worth trying? As I said before, life is short. So do it right!

Somehow, everything I had in my room during those days of shame and failure has made its way into my locker overtime, multiplying, maybe replicating. It's all here. It can be everywhere and anywhere I willed it to be. It's what I consider the best part – better than the cleaning, the swapping trash bags, the going incognito, the running, and even my efforts of making time. The best part is about to begin, the very heart of the mission.

Every packaged treasure reveals itself shyly. In an instant. Gone. Satisfying. Fulfilling. Filling. Lick. Mmf, very. I choke a little. I stare up at the ceiling as my spoils rain down on me. I am jumping, no. *Flying* to grab one at random. A shiny, well arranged presentation of carbs and consumables, seized from their humble abodes. An earthquake! A chasm! All and the bits of wrapping paper enter a saliva-coated chasm, thrashed by some evil pink serpent that is simply too uncivilized to be even considered a snake. The snake is one with the chicken. At one point, it's chicken leg and thigh. It all happens so fast, like delightful cannibalism. *You are what you eat*, they say.

*I AM A TREASURE SEEKER. A FIGHTER. WHO UNDERGOES SECRET TRAINING.....*

*GAINS.... I LIVE FOR GAINS!*

The Twinkie train, the city of Lays, the grapes of wrath. Apples down to the core. There is even a clump of spaghetti that's been packed so tightly into 12 ounce Tupperware and for so long that it plopped out, looking like a bloody brain telling me to "reflect, child. Reflect," a pesky likeness to my father. Bloodied by the tomato, my hands grasp a cute dinner roll until it tears, a dry sponge that fails to absorb the moisture in my mouth and the sauce before dissolving into an acidic abyss somewhere. Conquer, control, consume. Until there is nothing left.

The masses protest from within. But I'm not too concerned. Balance is the first thing to conquer. I rise up from the cold tile and plant a foot down, but then I realize: There is no tile. There is only the crunch of wrappers and the moss on a blueberry muffin wrapper – the dead among a sea of my sins. I am drowning. I hold my breath, and the rowdy apparitions – victims to my gluttony – are roused within my belly and using it to grunt a loud, powerful, and foreign kind of battle chant. Is this what it feels like to be stabbed in the abdomen? Is this how Mom felt going into child labor and bringing me out into the world? If she saw me like this, how would I face her? It hasn't happened yet, but soon. Very soon. I find myself. Kneeling and doubling over. I find a bunch of other things too. Before me is nothing but melancholic collage. Perhaps it'll last an eternity. I shall call it Mindless Massacre. It even has moving parts. The blobs... the blobs start small and far away in the corner. Their echo-y sounds suggest feet. This is confirmed as they become bigger and bigger. Somehow, their parade is able to steer clear of

the pitiful world I am trapped in. Two of them stop, revealing a person. This person bends down.

"Baker, your parents are on the way--" is all I can hear from someone resembling an administrator. The rest is a gurgle in my throat, the splat of the devoured reconciling with their dump town, and the panicking of other humans, students, feet. I wish to skim for the faces of the two who probably no longer want anything to do with me. With such a thought in mind, I can leave them and everyone else, if only for a bit. So tired... Lead by the colorful splotches of fragrant vomit, I prepare to descend into my own destruction and maybe maybe I can I can leleave mysel.....