



OFF

THE

BOOK



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## Intro

Irony fills this world. It informs it. It took a 17th-century physicist to articulate perhaps the most poetic statement defining the human condition. *For every action, there is an equal an opposite reaction.*

The Internet in its vast and powerful grasp on the Planet Earth opened the gates for great potential of good and positive impact. It also gave the seedy forces that dwelled behind the shadows a superhighway to carryout their bidding. Too much light, reflecting upon a sea of information, drowned out the mossy forms of creation and extinguished our divine spark...



## Chapter 1

I was running. Panting, the hard breath from cold night air whipped my throat and churned a tangy iron taste, which salivated the sides of my mouth. I was running late. Finally, I arrived. The Our Lady of the Assumption on Church Street stood regally, ominous, in the black night. I scaled up the 14 granite steps, taking two stone slabs at a time in each leaping bound and heaved myself at the obstinate oak double doors. Tugging the right side with a full-bodied movement that began at my calves and shimmied up my shoulders, my arm muscles cranked to make the giant monolith move. The dark hallway on the other side would have been pitch black were it not for the triangular sliver of light escaping from a glass panel in the door immediately to my right. I peeked in to see the room's freckled, eggshell tiled floor bouncing fluorescent light from ceiling lamps. A white contrast to my current whereabouts. 30- to 50-somethings, all male, were bonding monosyllabically in that primal way most men relate to each other. A jovial bunch. From left to right of the front row: a refrigerator-shaped gentleman had forced himself into the school desk. He wore a worn, green baseball cap and the little white mustache above his lip wiggled as he joked with the bear immediately to his left. This man had muffin-topped over the desk. If he had got up suddenly, just then, the desk would have risen with him. His head was bald, bicked, and he had surrounded his mouth with a dark goatee. The middle man was staring straight ahead



blankly, as he plopped Doritos from a small bag into his gaping mouth. And to the right, nearest to the door, talked two younger fellows, perhaps friends. They dressed sharper than their row mates, wearing slick-backed hair from the overabundance of gel and had each matched form-fitting, white, thermal shirts with pristine work boots and blue jeans. Conscious of my tardiness, I gently turned the handle and inched into an open seat-slash-desk, at the back corner of the crowded rows. At the front of the room, Mr. Bevilacqua's thick-framed Buddy Holly glasses and wild, dark hair, cul de sacked by a bald scalp, sharply contrasted the atmosphere, as large black print on a blank page. The hot light from the projector made sweat run down his forehead and collected in shiny vertical pools filling his temples. Above Bevilacqua's head, the big wall clock, that generic round face smiling in every high school classroom across the contiguous United States, ticked to 8:00 p.m. He tocked.

"Alright, gentlemen. Let's get started."

His simultaneous flicking off of the light switch as he articulated his announcement fizzled the murmurs like a freshly poured Guinness glass clearing into the deep silence of thick, iron-rich stout. Bevilacqua clicked to the first slide on the projector, which hummed as it lifted tiny specks of dust through its conic beam. The 10x10 silver screen read:

*Tonight's topic: Cougars are only the beginning.*

"So begins our fifth meeting of the Men's Alliance for Cougar Hunting Occasions... or MACHO," a few newcom-



ers in the crowd chuckled. “I know. I know. I hear it too. Purely coincidental. Now men, we have to call attention to a serious matter. This matter is of course that there’s a lot more than just cougars out there. There’s bobcats, mountain lions, pumae (or multiple pumas), the Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman phenomenon...” He clicked the small black button on top of his handheld clicker, that governed the tempo of his slide show. The projector displayed a woman in her mid-40s. Her skin sagged with weathering. She must’ve smoked, as evidenced by the yellow-stained teeth and prematurely wrinkled, leathery hide. Her hair frizzled away from the tightly drawn bun. And she’d grown into her more squarish, heftier build that a slowing metabolism can often cause. Her clothes, faded jeans and a plaid shirt, were loose-fitting and gave no feminine quality to the body beneath, which had most likely lost its curves to the stocky frame she now lugged around. She stood, oafish, arms at her side and squinting. Underneath her picture, it just read BOBCAT.

“Now this, gentlemen, is your standard bobcat. We have to watch out for this one. She’s led a rough life and is tough as fuck.”

A little about MACHO. These men were all middle-aged divorcés. They had been cast out onto the dating scene once again. Yet now with Bookface’s® aggregate dating site handling the heavy lifting for the vast majority of eligible bachelorettes, recent divorcées or fresh co-eds, these offline pariahs were forced to scavenge for the scraps. The outliers. They really didn’t have a choice; sometimes the small head



calls the shots.

I was only 29, never married, but I lied about my age and said I had just dealt the ex the axe to get into our weekly Wednesday-night meetings. They thought I was there as a MACHO member, but really I was trying to get the inside scoop on this controversial club, which had risen in the backlash of the online dating site's social monopoly.

Now there's perhaps an infinite number of factors when considering the formation of MACHO, but it's in my humble opinion that their sum total can net to one irrefutable fact. The algorithm failed.

Flashback about 90 years ago, in the early 2000s, the birth of a new millennium. The Internet was still new, fresh and shiny. Print media were dissolving into online, electronic platforms—information had liquified into pure energy pulses, packed with digital data... And Bookface founder Darryl Smuckersburg had, at the height of his rise to conquer this Internet still wet behind the ears, just successfully siphoned all known dating websites through his Bookface aggregate. It seemed appropriate, as this was the original plan for Bookface: an online dating community. When the popularity of this modest idea exploded into a worldwide membership, that was said by Smuckersberg himself, to transcend the dating aspect of life and encompass all existence—life, death and everything in between—for each of the Earth's over seven billion constituents, the 20-year-old billionaire had not yet understood the implications of his actions. You see, at the apex of his



pride, Smuckersburg thought he had figured out humanity. He had everyone's info—little Jimmy's 5th birthday photos, the fact that almost 70,000 people liked Uncle Phil from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* or that only 2,300 liked the Carlton Dance of said show, an event reminder for Steve Stanley's end-of-the-year bash, Janey Jennings's hilarious wall posts about traffic on Monday mornings, the little red heart that indicated Cathy Erikson and Jim McDougal were now engaged, while Ryan Thompson and Kelly Flaherty just broke up...and that Sean Skeelo was eating some homemade cookies his mom had made for him. Everyday life multiplied by seven billion. Thus, he went to work on the algorithm, which would solve all lonely hearts' woes. He probably thought to himself, 'For everyone, there must be an equal and opposite, a complement,' pulling the uberfrequent all-nighter to craft his masterpiece of coded equations. His *5th Symphony*. This would end all suffering. OK, Buddha.

In its infancy, the algorithm had an unprecedented 99.98-percent success rate. Soon after, it achieved a perfect 100 percent, as Schmuckersburg relentlessly beta tested version after version in the 11th hour to squash the last of its bugs. This hallmark, once announced on news stations throughout the six populated continents, extinguished all doubt of its reliability. Bookface became the norm. The site's masthead read "Over 2 billion matches and counting..." Newlyweds even got a personally addressed congratulatory card on their wedding day (after all, event planning was handled through the social hub's built-in interactive



calendar)...

*Congratulations. You've just been Bookfaced.*

Everything was hunky dory for a while. Yet after several decades, the honeymoon was over. A success rate, formerly batting a thousand thanks to Bookface, dropped to absolute 0. The algorithm had a shelf life.

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Bevilacqua clicked to slide two.

"This, gentlemen, is Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman."

A striking portrait of Jane Seymour graced the silver screen. Her one blue and one green eye sparkled amidst a waterfall of flowing red hair. She smirked at the all-male audience.

"If you see a beautiful cougar like this, steer clear men. They are crazy as fuck."

You see in the wake of Bookface's colossal failure, these men had been abandoned, inept, past their prime and unable to mate. Bookface had robbed them of the experience necessary for the hunt. Left to deal in drastic measures, many had exhausted their bank accounts on hookers or were just clearing up from a rabid case of herpes, courtesy of a girl they had "casually encountered" on Craigslist. The Internet, site's like Bookface, were like a steady flow of crack that had suddenly been sucked from their veins and left them shivering in sheer dependence in the fetal position. Withdrawal. Backlash. MACHO.



These men, throughout their entire childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and into their middle age, had been spoon-fed the opposite sex. If their libidos could be personified, it'd be a fat guy, soft, out of shape, muscles too atrophied to bear the burden of courtship and further gluttoning themselves on the instant gratification of fast food sex.

So what? These poor bastards had the social intelligence of obtuse cavemen. How did this lead to the weekly meetings? These men had three things in common:

1. They all lived in the quaint backwoods Town of Westchestertonville.
2. Without Bookface, not one horny soul could get laid for his left nut.
3. Despite item No. 2, Bookface no longer had any use for them; and they had been cast out of the online Garden of Eden.

You see, Schmuckersburg began to think, as the 7-year shelf life claimed more and more victims every day, that it wasn't *his* algorithm that was wrong; it was the people. He noticed certain outliers' profiles just didn't add up and, when cleared from the mainframe, vastly improved the interconnected circuitry of his worldwide baby. What's a few broken eggs for the sake of the majority omelet?

The projector exhaled a loud hissing sound, the bulb got exponentially brighter and then burned out.



“Ahh shit,” Bevilacqua muttered. As he went searching for a replacement bulb, he turned on the overhead lights and, in his thick Brooklyn accent, continued the narration of his burnt out slide show.

“Men, much like the harpies from ancient Greek mythology, Dr. Quinns will lure you in with their unparalleled beauty,” he said. “Y’know what I’m talkin’ ‘bout. Then they’ll take the shirt right off your back, so to speak. Don’t listen to the little head on these ones, fellas.”

Misery loves company. More importantly, misery needs collaboration (the unofficial MACHO motto). Left with no defenses of the *fairer* sex, these men banded together. Power in numbers. In this, the fifth meeting of the Men’s Alliance for Cougar Hunting Occasions, they were systematically categorizing this unknown species: women. Without Bookface’s comprehensive dossier of pertinent courting info, these men were helpless to the jungle cats’ feminine wiles.

Now MACHO may not have been the ideal solution to this relational deficit. It was crass and ignorant. Men had legitimately developed a fear for the opposite sex. But these were men of action and action was precisely what needed to be taken. If someone or a group of someones didn’t do something, we would all be Bookfaced.

The minute hand on the round smiling face clicked to 9 o’clock.

“Alright, looks like we ran out of time,” Bevilacqua said. “We’ll continue this discussion next week. We’ll start with



pumae and how they hunt in packs for their prey.”

As the men slowly rose from their school desks and filed out of the door, Mr. Bevilacqua talked over them.

”...and remember: Leave no one behind on the hunt. Power in numbers, men. And if you must break from the herd, by all means, WRAP... IT... UP.”