Clash of the Sissies

A short story by Graham Parke

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It's often difficult to remember how or why you became friends with someone, especially if you've been friends with a person forever. But because of the very specific set of circumstances, I remember exactly how Barend and I became friends. This, of course, was long before he became famous for inventing the easy-foldable map, and infamous for the series of bodies he'd decided to bury in his backyard.

Barend and I became friends because he had one of the most attractive shadows I'd ever seen.

I remember gazing out over the playground, watching a waning sun scatter its dying light over the monkey bars, the metal skeleton contrasting against the turquoise sky, when I noticed this kid coming toward me. He was one of those mostly invisible characters; faded jeans, dirty jacket, snot caked on his upper lip. I probably wouldn't have noticed him if not for his shadow. For some reason, his shadow immediately caught my eye. Now, I'm not one for noticing shadows in general, never really noticed a shadow before or since, but this kid had the most incredible shadow I'd ever seen.

I cannot even put in words what that means. What specific set of properties make an ordinary shadow into an incredible one, I'm not sure anyone can, but his shadow was like a piece of art; I didn't necessarily understand it, but I liked it. And that's why this boring looking kid and I first became friends.

Our kindergarten games were harmless and boring, but when puberty hit, Barend began to change. We were both expected to change, but I guess some kids just change more than others.

Bared didn't want to kill at first. Like many overachievers in the death game, his first brush with the craft came about more or less accidentally. All the elements had been in place, with all the players and attributes coming together as if gathered by some evil force, but, even then, I really had to push the kid.

"Come on," I said. "Are you a man or a mouse?"

Barend retorted that the exact nature of his species didn't enter in to it, he just didn't feel like killing. Plus, he had to get back to his map folding.

He'd just spent an entire day exploring the world from his dad's maps and now he had to find a way to fold them all properly before his old man came home and beat the crap out of him.

So I had no choice but to put the pressure on.

"Come on," I said. "You're not a mouse, are you?"

Barend explained that he was not, in fact, a mouse, but that there were over fifty maps back at the house and all of them in disarray. He had to get back. Immediately.

There was no talking to him, so I did something unforgivable, the worst thing one teenage male could do to another; I dared him.

"Come on, mouse," I said. "I dare you to cut this girl's throat."

Barend told me there was really no time to play around. He had to get back. In fact, he was already late.

I pointed out the flaw in his logic.

"It will only take a second, man. Just one quick slice, that's it. In fact, if you'd killed her when I first told you to, you'd be home by now, instead of standing here arguing with me. Think about it, you could've been folding your second map already."

This little fact hit Barend hard. I could see his mind working away. The idea of already having successfully folded an entire map, gaining the confidence that went along with it, the experience which would undoubtedly transfer onto a second map, then a third, that idea proved very powerful to him. I decided I was on the right track.

"Think about it," I said, handing him the knife. "This whole mountain of maps, waiting for you. This impossible task. You're father, on his way home. But there's hope. One map is already folded. It's put to the side, all its bits tucked in where they should be, the whole thing nice and flat. The beginning of a solution, what's more, the beginning of an entire stack. A stack of beautifully folded maps. And it can be yours, if you just hurry up and do this one little thing..."

I nudged him forward, bringing him closer to Emily, who sat tied up on a lawn chair with a gag in her mouth. By now she was getting a little annoyed but she was still under the impression we were going to play a cool

game. Which, at least in my mind, we were.

Barend told me he wasn't sure. He'd probably have to wash his hands after, then wait for them to dry, because you couldn't fold a map with wet hands, and you never got your hands all the way dry with a cloth, and his mom didn't let him use the paper towels on his hands, and he might get blood on his shirt, which would be even worse, would slow him down even more, and he really just wanted to go, try to find a way to fold at least the small maps, the ones he'd taken from the car, the ones his dad would miss first.

Now, years later, I remember very little of what followed. I do know that Barend didn't make it. Not even close. Even though I helped him. Even though we did everything in record time, working at the highest speed we deemed safe, he didn't make it by a long shot.

To be honest, when I saw that mountain of maps, I knew we couldn't have cleared it even if we'd gone straight to his place from school. So there was hell to pay, and Barend paid it. I don't think he played with his father's maps after that for over a week.

Soon after that fateful day, Barend and I lost touch. Those things happen to childhood friendships I suppose. My parents moved to the next town over, his map folding took on ever more obsessive qualities. There just didn't seem to be any opportunities to stay in contact.

I'd all but forgotten about Barend when I picked up a newspaper one day and read about his invention of the easy-foldable map. The guy was rich and famous by then, of course, but not too famous to accept an invitation from a long lost pal.

I packed up a satchel with some barbed wire, duct tape, and a pair of sharpened pliers, then went off to see if we couldn't have an afternoon of good, old-fashioned fun together.

It was always cool to play with a friend who had his own back yard.

No Hope for Gomez!

A bonus story by Graham Parke

Chapter 1

Blog entry: Woke up fresh and early but still didn't make it to work in time. Lost valuable minutes leaving my apartment: couldn't find matching socks. Laid them all out on the bed and spent the better part of an hour trying to find a pair. In the end I had to pretend not to notice matching up a black sock with a very, very, dark blue one.

Note to self: throw out old socks and invest in 15 pairs of black, unpatterned socks. Should speed up my morning routine by 35 to 48 minutes.

Blog entry: Arrived at the store with Hicks already waiting. He paced back and forth looking intense as usual -- hollow eyes, tensed jaw, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his oversized coat. He shot me a pained look. "Where were you, Gomez?" he asked. "We should've opened at nine, at the latest. What'll your customers think?"

I shrugged and unlocked the door. "There were some unforeseen circumstances," I said. "Don't worry, I think I have the problem licked. It shouldn't happen again."

Hicks didn't seem convinced. He stepped inside and hung up his coat. "I just think we should open on time, rain or shine. Your customers will appreciate knowing they can count on you."

"You're right, Hicks," I said. "I'm sorry."

I've noticed that Hicks doesn't react well to me arriving late. Standing out in the street makes him nervous for some reason and not opening up on time leaves him twitchy. Today was not a good day for Hicks.

We got busy carrying some cheap antiques out to the curb to lure customers. Selected a few chairs and a commode. Placed a weathered mirror on top of the commode, put a few expensive looking (but cheap) pillows on one of the chairs. Then, with the display done, we proceeded to clean up the store and get ready for customers.

No customers that morning.

Blog entry: Afternoon was quiet also. Decided to make up for my faux pas by letting Hicks leave early. This wasn't a good idea. Apparently leaving early makes Hicks break out in shingles. Also, it leaves him strangely disoriented. Watched him walk erratic circles out in front of the store, had to bring him back in and make him sweep the storage room. That calmed him down somewhat.

Blog entry: Afternoon remained slow. Spent most of my time updating my blog and reading the paper. Was burning time quite happily until I came across this article about a guy found near-dead in his apartment. Apparently he'd been comatose for the better part of a week.

Normally this kind of story doesn't affect me much. It might tickle the part of my brain in charge of morbid curiosity, it might stir up some momentary apprehension about living alone and dying unexpectedly, but then I'll realize this would bother my neighbors more than it would me, and I'll carry on with my day. But this article had my hair standing up. Not only did I know the guy, I also had a sneaking suspicion about what happened to him. And, what was worse, I might be headed for the same fate!

Scanned the article quickly, looking for phrases that proved me wrong, snippets stating the cause of death to be completely natural and, if possible, even somewhat pleasant. I found no such thing. Had to buckle down and read the entire article carefully. When I reached the end, though, I was still none the wiser. So far, police had yet to release any information on the cause of the guy's collapse. They also declined to indicate whether foul play was suspected. There was nothing in the article to soothe my growing dread.

Blog entry: "Finished the storage room." Hicks came from the back and broke my concentration. He told me he'd done all the sweeping the floor could handle.

"That's great," I said, struggling to tear my attention from the paper. "There are some boxes of administration in the back that have to be moved to the storage room. You can start on that."

Hicks checked his watch and shot me a worried glance. His right eye twitched slightly. "Could I do that tomorrow?" he asked.

"I guess," I said. "It's up to you."

"It's just that it's five o'clock. I'm only supposed to work till five o'clock."

"That's fine, Hicks. You can go." I didn't care about the boxes, and I didn't want to find out Hicks' reaction to leaving work even a minute late, so I bid him good evening. Hicks hoisted himself back into his giant coat and headed for the door. Before he opened it, he turned. "Gomez," he said. "Just one more thing..."

"Yes?"

"Nothing important, really, just something I thought I should mention. I noticed your socks don't match." He pointed at my feet. "I think it's better for customer relations if we all commit to wearing matching socks, don't you?"

"Yes," I sighed, "you're right."

"And your left sock is black, while your right sock is clearly very, very dark blue."

"I know."

"Just thought I'd mention it."

"Thank you, Hicks. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Gomez."

Blog entry: Finished my blog and locked up the store. On the bus ride home I tried to take my mind off the coma-guy by re-reading the article about the apples and the oranges. Couldn't find it. Went through the entire paper three times but it just wasn't there. Wondered if I'd imagined the whole thing. Wondered also if this might have something to do with my condition. Made a mental note to ask Dr. Hargrove about this during my next appointment at the clinic.

Chapter 2

Blog note: They asked me to keep a blog. They told me to be meticulous and exact in reporting my experiences. Leave nothing out, they said, no matter how mundane or unimportant it may seem.

I have no idea what kind of drugs I'm on. It may be some new medicine, an anti-psychotic, or just a pain reliever. I have no way of knowing what kind of experiences would constitute effects or side effects. I update my blog daily, then let them sift through the mess to decide what's relevant and what's not. What's out of the ordinary and what expected.

Just write down everything, they said.

Blog entry: Slow day at the store. Had a few crooners in but that was it. You can spot crooners a mile away; they like to touch and browse, but not to buy. They amble into the store with their eyes all sparkly and then they proceed to say things like, "Oh, this is just what I need!" or, "Henrietta would simply adore this!" Then they smile some more and amble right back out again.

I assume they go on to croon over clouds or sidewalk gum or something.

I really don't care. All my stuff is old junk anyway.

Blog entry: Checked the calendar and realized it's a clinic day. Gave Hicks the keys and told him I had to run. Hicks wasn't happy. I explained the alternative was waiting for me to return, which could be well after five. Hicks relented and said he'd close up.

Blog entry: Hurried over to the clinic and actually arrived early. There was a new secretary at the desk and I gave her my project number. She found the appropriate sign-in sheet and said, "Name please?"

"Gomez."

She looked up from her clipboard and raised an eyebrow. "Gomez? You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I'm Gomez."

The secretary shook her head. "Funny," she said, "you don't look Swedish."

I shrugged and signed next to my name. As I had some time to kill, and the secretary's low cut dress semi-unintentionally offered me a 'panorific' view, I decided to hang around and explain the origins of my 'Swedish' name. I told her how my parents hadn't expected a baby and how, when it was time to name me, they could neither think of a nice name nor agree on a plain one. In the end my mother put her foot down and said it was going to be Albatross. My dad gave her the finger, went down to town hall, and took the name of the person in line ahead of him. He wasn't aware he'd overheard a last name.

So I was stuck with the name Gomez.

As I've grown up with this name, it's always been the names that *weren't* Gomez that sounded strange to me.

The secretary rolled her eyes and asked me to please move along to the waiting area.

I gave her the finger and moved along to the waiting area.

Blog entry: One of the things about blogging for the sake of identifying experiences that may be out of the ordinary and could, therefore, be effects or side effects of the drugs, while not knowing what kind of drugs you're on and thus not knowing what to expect as effects or side effects, is that you start noticing so many things being out of the ordinary.

Blog entry: So. Many. Things.

Blog entry: Waited my turn in the waiting area. Browsed some old magazines. Made a mental note to bring my laptop next time. When it was my turn, I went in, and Dr. Hargrove gave me some pills. I had to swallow them in front of her, then she ran down her list of questions.

"Any dizziness, nausea, or headaches since your last visit?"

"Nope."

"Difficulty swallowing?"

"Nope."

"Unexpected feelings of elation or euphoria?"

"Not really, no."

The list went on. When she reached the end, she asked, "Anything else that's not on the list?"

I told her about the strange, tingling sensation I'd experienced after our previous session. She wrote it down and asked, "Is that all?"

"I felt a bit flushed too. Warm in my face. There were some red marks on my skin but they disappeared after a few minutes."

"Right." Dr. Hargrove made another note. "Did they return at any point?"

I shook my head.

"I see." She browsed her forms to see if she'd missed anything. "Are you still updating your blog, Gomez?" she asked.

"Of course," I said. "Daily."

"Good." She flashed me a warm smile. "I can always count on you, can't I, Gomez?"

Blog entry: Decided to show Dr. Hargrove the newspaper clipping about the guy found comatose in his apartment. She read it with interest, then looked at the picture. "That looks like Joseph Miller," she said, confirming my suspicion that he was part of the trial, and giving me his full name. "Haven't seen him in a while," she said, "but I'm fairly sure it's him." She shook her head. "It's a real shame... he was a nice guy."

"So you don't think his condition had anything to do with the trial, then?"

Dr. Hargrove looked up with a start. "What? No, of course not!" She gave me a soothing smile. "Don't worry, Gomez, we're not testing anything dangerous here. Not by a long shot."

Blog entry: Made a new appointment with Dr. Hargrove and left the clinic. On my way home I seriously considered quitting the trial, just to be on the safe side. Then I remembered Dr. Hargrove mentioning she hadn't seen Joseph in a while. Maybe quitting was the opposite of what I should do. The trial might not be the cause of Joseph's condition, he could've been involved in a million other dangerous activities. Plus, what if Joseph tried to quit the trial cold turkey, just stopped showing up for his appointments? For all I knew, *that's* what made him pass out!

Chapter 3

Blog entry: Haven't been sleeping well. There's this strange sound coming from the apartment below at approximately 4:22 a.m. It's a sound I've never heard before and I can only describe it in terms of other sounds that might combine to be mostly identical: it sounds like my neighbor is stir-frying hamsters in a large enameled wok.

Strange, I know. You can imagine how this would mess with your ability to blissfully drift away.

Blog entry: Dragged my tired body to work so I could open up in time, then realized I needn't have bothered; Hicks had the keys. Slept on the counter for an hour.

Hicks moseyed around in the back, rearranging the inventory. I've noticed he's happiest out of sight. When I woke up I asked him if he'd mind opening up every morning. He had a severe reaction.

Mental note: find out what's wrong with Hicks.

Blog entry: Rest of the day was slow. Had some potential customers in but couldn't get them enthused. Sometimes I wonder why my parents left me this antiques store.

Blog entry: Couldn't sleep that night. Awoken at 4:22 a.m. by downstairs neighbor. Decided I'd had enough and went to confront him. He politely introduced himself as Warren Baxter and he told me he was just about to turn in, just had one more batch of gophers to stir-fry in his enameled wok. Decided I could probably wait it out. Mused on how the eternal mysteries of the night could make one thing sound so much like another, completely different thing.

About to bid Warren Baxter farewell when he told me how happy he was to finally make a friend in the building. I didn't get the chance to enquire exactly what it was about me telling him to stop making so much noise that gave him the impression we were now friends. He disappeared into his apartment to return moments later, carrying a neatly printed manuscript.

"It would mean a lot to me if you could read this," he said. "Maybe give me some feedback?"

I tried not to take the manuscript.

I failed.

"It probably isn't very good," Warren said magnanimously, "but any help would be appreciated. And, who knows," he gave me a conspiratorial wink, "you might end up really liking it."

I mumbled something about seeing what I could do and turned to go.

"I don't get along with most people in the building for some reason," Warren told my receding back, "but you, dear fellow, you seem alright."

Blog entry: Dropped Warren's manuscript somewhere in the hallway and trundled off to bed. Wasn't long before Warren stopped doing whatever he was doing (he must've been joking about the gophers), and the world was quiet once more.

Still couldn't sleep.

Blog entry: Saturday. Decided to do a little detective work. Headed over to the hospital and queued up at the front desk to ask if there were any visitor's hours that day.

"Sure," the nurse told me. "We have visitor's hours daily, including weekends and national holidays."

"What time do they start?"

"Visitors hours are from ten till three daily. They've just started."

"Great. Can I just walk in?"

"You can," she said. "Who did you want to see?"

"A Mr. Miller. Mr. Joseph Miller. He was brought in two days ago."

The nurse consulted her computer, frowned, then shook her head. "No, I'm sorry," she said. "Mr. Miller is dead. He died late last night." She looked up from her screen. "Would you like to see somebody else?"

"What? No! I really need to talk to Mr. Miller. Are you absolutely sure he's passed away?"

"I can recheck if you want." She typed away. "Sometimes this program mixes up some of the... ah, I see what I've done now." She gave me an apologetic smile. "Stupid little me," she said. "I had the stats of several files mixed up."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "So, he didn't pass away?"

"Oh, no," the nurse said, shaking her head, "he's still dead, but he died this morning rather than last night." She held up her hand with a small amount of space between her thumb and index finger. "You missed him by *that* much."

"I see," I said. "Does it at least say what he died of?"

She browsed her screen, bit her lip, and mumbled, "Yes, no, wait a minute. I saw something about.... Ah, yes. Yes, it does." She looked up again. For a long moment we stared at each other. When I finally arched an eyebrow, she said, "Are you a relative? I'm not supposed to give out this kind of information to just anybody."

I tried to think fast. I really needed that information but I didn't know Joseph other than from the clinic waiting area. We'd never even spoken. Then, out of nowhere, the perfect answer just occurred to me. I told her, "Yes."

"Okay then." She was about to tell me when her face clouded over again. "You really should be getting this information from his doctor, though."

I waved it away, told her it would be okay.

"Well," she said, reading from her screen, "it says here he died of dehydration and malnutrition."

"He was found passed out in his apartment," I told her. "Apparently he'd been out for a while. Does it say what caused him to lose consciousness in the first place?"

The nurse perused the file for a long time, then shook her head. "No, sorry," she said. "I'll have to get the doctor for that. Just a moment." She reached for the phone.

"That's okay," I said, not wanting to get into trouble for impersonating a relative. "I need to go. Pressed for time. Thank you."

As I turned to leave, she called after me, "Are you sure you don't want to visit anyone else? There are some really nice people up on the second floor. Much nicer than Mr. Miller. They'd love to talk to you."

Blog entry: None the wiser, I returned home, spent the remainder of the weekend wondering what all this meant. It was possible something unrelated to the trial had knocked Joseph out and caused him to die of dehydration, but my mind was still not completely at ease. I'd rather have found some conclusive evidence. I resolved to ask Dr. Hargrove a few more pointed questions next time.

Blog entry: Monday. Slow day at the store. Had some customers in but couldn't get them enthused. Probably helps if you know at least a little about antiques.

Blog entry: Monday night. Couldn't sleep. Sounded like my downstairs neighbor was drilling thousands of tiny holes in his ceiling.

Blog entry: Tuesday night. Couldn't sleep. Sounded like my downstairs neighbor was dancing the meringue on an overturned bathtub in stiletto heels.

Blog entry: Wednesday night. Slept like a baby. But, upon awakening, noticed there were thousands of tiny holes in my floor.

Think I might have to give Warren some feedback on his manuscript.

The novel: "No Hope for Gomez!" will be available from Amazon starting January 2010.

Visit Gomez on the web at: www.NoHopeforGomez.com.

Or at: www.GrahamParke.com

Stick around for the final bonus story. (Totally complete and shockingly short, I promise...)

Sunday Brunch

A weird dream I once had

Sunday brunch; the table overflowing with food and drink, the fine china and silverware laid out, maids buzzing around making sure everything is in order. The clock ticks away painfully slow minutes before father finally speaks. "Well son," he says, "isn't it about time you got yourself a job?"

John looks up from his plate, surprised. "But dad," he says, "I *have* a job."

His father nods thoughtfully, chewing his medium rare steak. "I guess it's about time you moved out then," he says. "Found yourself a place of your own. Planted some roots."

John is baffled. "Dad, I moved out five years ago. In fact, this is the first time I've been back." He looks over at his mother, who shrugs and says, "You know dear, your brother has his own business now. He set up an accountancy firm."

John rolls his eyes. "That's me, mom. I set up an accountancy firm. John Williams and Associates."

"That's good to hear," his father says. "Always said you should run your own business. You have a keen business sense. Always had. Who needs a boss anyway?"

"I just wish he found himself a girlfriend," his mother complains.

"What do you mean?" John smiles apologetically at Annabel. "I *have* a girlfriend, mother, she's sitting next to you. She gave you flowers at the door, remember? You put them in water." He points at the vase. "They're right in front of you."

His mother waves it away with a warm smile. "Sorry dear, I meant a *proper* girlfriend." She squeezes Annabel's hand softly. "You know what I mean, don't you dear?"

Annabel opens her mouth but can't think of anything to say.

"Didn't you used to have dark hair," John's father suddenly says. "And not quite so many arms?" He looks John over carefully. "Yes, yes," he says, "you definitely look different. Did you get shorter?"

"That's enough!" John gets up, gestures Annabel to do the same. "If you cannot behave like civilized human beings, we're going! I can't believe you'd treat Annabel and myself this way. It's appalling!"

His father throws down his napkin and stands. "Serves you right, young man," he says. "Serves you right for not going home for five years and then ending up in the wrong house!"

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