



Brandon Will

CONGO
STANDEE
BIKE RIDE

Gus is fine: swaddled in blanket, he crams Doritos in mouth, greasy-finger grips his two-liter, hits rewind. The VHS clicks, whirs backwards. He scribbles in his notebook:

“The title refers, obviously, to this lady Rosemary’s baby, who she believes is bein’ targeted by a coven of witches which may include her doctor, her hubby, and even a young Charles Grodin...”

If he keeps going he can make this a three, possibly even four movie night.

KNOCK KNOCK – “Guuuuus...”

“Whaaaaaaat?”

“Phone call!”

He slithers out of his blanket (wishing she didn’t sound so excited), steps over a week of clothes (her curious excitement another reminder he’s a loser no one calls), cracks the door so she won’t see him in his boxers.

“Thanks Ma,”

Slides the short chord under the door while shutting it.

Waits... footsteps... walking... away... “hello?”

“Gus?”

Ohmygodit’sJenelle “...Hi.”

She’s never called. This is gonna be awesome.

Jenelle was quiet in class. He made her laugh. She makes braces sexy.

Gus toiled over how to ask for her number.

A couple weeks ago, said it’d be nice to talk over winter break.

He controlled his breathing while she scribbled digits in this lame joke-book he got as a kid. He brought it to school thinking she’d think that that in itself was funny. She did. She gets his jokes,



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Brandon Will is like his name, an action and a question. One time in high school, and for the first couple years after, he made a ridiculously ambitious movie – “Dadbot: The Movie.” Another time, he worked at a storefront puppet theater in Detroit. He also co-directed a rap video somewhere in there. His writing has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In the future, he hopes to be a better man.

and he thinks she gets why he makes them.
Fuckballs – he didn't have time to make a mental list of things to talk about: "Hoooooooooo's it goin'?"
 "My dad's being a piece of shit."
 Gus shifts, boxers ride up, thigh touches cold floor.
 "...He won't stop yelling at my mom. I don't even know what the fuck he's yelling about anymore..."
 They usually talk little things: teachers, movies he's been watching, bands – he doesn't know anything about bands. She does. She's so fuckin' cool. Little grunge rocker girl. Cooler than him (to him). Even though she doesn't have lots of friends either. She's never talked about something this real.
 "Whhhhhhyaaa-why'd he start yelling?"
 "He keeps saying she wasn't respectful, it's starting to be creepy."
 "Whoa."
 "Can we go somewhere?"
 "Um. Like where?"
 "I don't even care. I need to get out of this fucking house."
 Gus picks at the doorframe's chipping paint. He always notices how easy it is to break things. So easy. Paint chips barely hanging on. Its amazing people silently agree to keep things intact.
 Outside Gus's door a scream: "Goddamn!" – chord jerks, phone hits the ground. He picks it up.
 "Sorry, Fuckface-step-dad tripped on the cord. From his dramatic scream you'd think he fell on a landmine."
 She laughs; he can picture her braces: purple wax blocks, sexy white teeth, framed by dimples.
 "Um, want to go to a movie or something?"
 "I just don't want to be in this house. Can you come by?"

"Um. Where do you live?"
 "Ann Arbor trail and Warren."
 In the garage, behind a prison he created of rakes and coiled hoses, lays his bike he's tried to not think of, every day, for seventeen months.
 "Oh man. That's kinda far."
 "Where ya at?"
 "I'm like Ford and Telegraph."
 "Shit... it's okay if you can't," – *but in her voice it's not* – "I understand," *she understands I'm a failure*, "you can't get a ride from anybody?"
 He might talk his mom into letting him go, but have to lie about where, so no ride there.
 His friends – both – neither drive.
 Until seventeen months ago, Gus'd swoop around, worried someone from school who already didn't talk to him would not talk to him more if they saw him riding his bike in public. But with his bike he could go to video stores. Employees talked to him, gave him posters. He had hundreds in his closet, rotating the ones on his walls regularly.
 "Gus...you still there?"

This one day, pedaling in dirty khakis and a pit-stained rock-n-roll Taz with sunglasses and leather jacket tee, he pedaled past Wendy's, smelled it, and thought: *it'd be nice to have a Wendy's*. So he leaned his bike, went in, and got a Wendy's. On his bike he could do things like that.

He stands, pumps the pedals, like running fast. Like Bastian riding Falcor, he throws his fist in the air, leaves it there, like Neil Diamond in the final frame of the *Jazz Singer* remake when he's manifested his dreams of becoming a soft-rock star and denied his father's legacy of being a Jewish cantor, and: *every time I see Jenelle's face, it takes me away, to a special place* –
 And there's her house: one-story, dark, blurry from the night, and the tears: *if I knock on the door maybe her dad'll be able to tell about wanting to have sex with her, and won't even let me in, and maybe yell at me even, and then at her, but* –
 "Jenelle's got eyes of the bluest skies, like they're thinking about the naaaain" –
 He drops his bike on the frosted lawn...crunchy footprints halfway to the door, muffled yelling looms louder...front door opens – amber inside, from a lamp. He wasn't ready, hasn't caught his breath. Jenelle slides out in her black sweater with holes in the cuffs her thumbs poke through. He wipes away sweat, snort, tears – her eyes meet his, she lifts her finger – *silence is golden* – he stops. Steps backwards. Nimbly swivels, picks up his bike – she's beside him, putting her arm in his arm. She doesn't say anything: just looks at him, smiles, looks away.
 It doesn't feel like she's expecting him to say anything.
 "That's okay. He doesn't know what to say."
 She says "hi."
 He looks over at her: "hi."
 She smiles. The dim streetlight catches her braces.

mounted his bike. The chain dangled like a dead caterpillar. *Of course.*

Blowing frustration out, he dismounted, set burger-bag and standee on gravel, got on his knees, fixed the chain. Fingers got all dirty. *Of course.*

In the garage, Gus slammed the bike into the rakes on hooks. Some fell. One hit his nose – immediate tears. Gus kicked the fucking bike, hit it with each and every rake, arms absorbing the tension, wood hitting metal.

The back door opened. *Great*, his mom, *of course*: "What's going on here?"

"Nothin', ma', everythings fine, fucking fine, okay?"

Gus huffed past her, wiping tears away angrily.

Finally in his room, he thought up snappy come-backs he'd say to those guys, and how to explain the cuts on his face. His burger was cold, *of course*, the tomatoes – soggy, *OF COURSE* – and *whoever* prepared the sandwich didn't even put *ONE IOTA* of care into their job, *NO ONE* could like *that much mayonnaise* or think *ANYONE ELSE WOULD EITHER!*

He swallowed one slimy mouthful. Threw the rest away.

This is fucking pathetic. I should go home. Why show up looking like a fucking loser, fucking it up for sure.

The song that pops in his head helps take his mind off scared, focus on excited: "Jenelle has a smile that seems to me, reminds me of... childhood memories."

Fuck it. This is his movie moment.

Like *Top Gun*, he's going into the Danger Zone.

Like Marty, he'll get up to 88mph.

Gus can't remember many days from being a kid. One's vivid though. He was ten-ish. Before they moved, on a summer day Terry and Nate would've pedaled up, dropped bikes on the grass, knocked on the screen door, and Gus would've had something to do. This day, he dozed off munching lethargically on animal crackers. When he sat up, a monkey cracker slid down his shirt, animal crackers all over. He could've watched *Ace Ventura* or something, but wouldn't laugh at it alone like with little brother Bailey, who had to be at summer camp. He stared at his silhouette reflected in the blank TV, slumped on the plaid couch, hair humidity-frizzy, behind him the picture window, the white summer light. There was nothing exciting in the fridge, their mom didn't keep soda-pop in the house. It was hot, even with windows open, the room filled with that summer clearness that's kind of sad, and...and Gus had an amazing thought: *I can go buy a soda-pop.*

The never realized he could just go buy a soda pop before. He knocked over his change cup. Swept dimes and nickels into his cupped hand.

The wind smoothed through his hair, in his ears, ruffled his rhythmic top. In green shorts, tube socks pulled up, he pedaled dogs shouting, planes zooming, other kids on bikes talking over each other things Gus wished he could hear over their spokes clicking-clacking.

In the store he perused the fridges. So many soda-pops. Daintily picked ninety-nine cents. Slid them over the glass counter.



“Yeah, yeah. I’m here. Just thinkin’ a minute.”

Sipping Moon Mist, steering one handed, he felt free.



“What time is it?”

“Like eight forty-five.”

His school-day curfew is nine.

Gus's *Congo: the Movie* standee, usually unnoticed, looms over his shoulder.



So, that fuckin' day he got the Wendy's he went to this mom'n'pop video store. Blue and pink neon lights along the walls - *Comedy-Action-Adult-* While rolling up new poster acquisitions, Terry, the nappy guy behind the counter in a green uniform polo, pointed to a *Congo: The Movie* cardboard standee.

“Pitchin' that, too. Want it?”

“Nah, that movie wasn't that good. Thanks.”

Balancing posters and burger bag outside, Gus looked through the window: the standee was pretty sweet. This huuuuuge ape face. Could be any ape. He liked *King Kong*. Kinda. Knew you should.

The bell on the door dinged. Terry looked up.

“I-i-i-i'll put it in my window, like *King Kong*, where he's looking in the window, but I'll face it out, so people walkin' by'll see this huge *King Kong* looking out the window!”



Double sided, looking out and in the window, the huge ape face stares at Gus: “Is he still yelling?”

“One sec.” Gus listens through the phone into her house: phone fizz...a door creak...“Fuck. He's crying now. He's always being

He picked up the dirty burger bag, the bent Congo standee,



WHY DO I ALWAYS MAKE THE FATAL MISTAKE?

Why didn't I wear gloves? Boots? A snousuit? I coulda hid it in bushes before getting to her house.

Why didn't I wear gloves? Boots? A snousuit? I coulda hid it in bushes before getting to her house.

They weigh forty wet pounds, clinging. It's hard to pedal, his legs burn. Short dribbles to his mouth. Too tired, focused, to wipe

back tire spurts up on his chubby ass.

There's no sidewalk. Cars whiz by, arching streams of slush the ladders, whoosh over it.

game 'Chutes and Ladders' - you click along, get to a chute or doesn't think he was crying-crying. Ice patches are like that board

Icy patches are hard to see through wind-tears - he hopes she

time he got home.

The cigarette - long and thin, tan filtered - in the dirt by his sneaker. He picked it up. Stuck it in his pocket. It'd break by the

screeched away.

Faced the truck. Laughter returned with the song he figured

He rolled up, steadied himself.

Gus pushed the bike away with his feet, the gravel *swoooooosss...*



ding-dong-ding-dong-bear-the-chimes-ting.

3

“I'm gonna put it-”

The guy looked to his friend. Gus couldn't hear them over the music, the wind in his ears. He smiled, friendly. The girls, so pretty: *do they have sex with the guys? The guy who keeps talking that's cute?*

Gus wanted to talk. Didn't know what to say. Maybe if he asked for a cigarette even though he didn't smoke, that'd put them on common ground. His voice cracked: “Hey, can I bum a cig?” The guy was in a laughter huddle with his friends. Gus, louder: “HEY, BUM A SMOKE?”

“...What, little dude?”

“...bum a cig?”

More laughs fluttered out with smoke. The guy shrugged, reached into his brown jacket, Gus pedaling! To keep next to this truck!

Then: a cigarette, held from the window, feet away. If he could get it, say thanks, he likes this song: *but who sings it? I forget...* the truck turned the corner, cement road to dirt...veering closer... if Gus could lift the hand holding the *Congo* standee slightly...if the guy'd work with him a little...the bike - skids - his balance - fucked, a hundred sounds: pebbles flinging from tires, guitar whammy cries, snickers echoing to silence...bam, fuck - chubby ass and legs flip, bike into air, face skids, pebbles crushing in his cheek and temple, bending his neck redpurple, veins, tendons pulsing, stretched more than they ever been, shoulder ground in gravel, cardboard jammed into his side...

His neck, face, everything: numb. Legs intertwined with bike and crushed *Congo* standee. Hopeless paralysis - he could move... just didn't know *how*. The truck idled fifteen feet ahead, song turned off, engine humming, exhaust hissing, church bells ringing in the distance:

Dialtone.
In his head, to pump him up: Eminem. Ominous rising,



Gus wobbled away, braced himself, shook with the drop to the street, re-steadied, crouching/rising with each pedal push.
“Yup. Take care, thanks.”
“Sure?” Terry crooked an eyebrow.
“Nah, I got it.”
“Some friends to pick it up.”
Terry awkwardly helped him situate the eight foot tall, three foot wide *Congo: The Movie* standee under his free arm, “I can put this thing in the back room. It’d be easier if you got a ride with Wendy’s bag.”
Gus re-mounted his bike, posters under his armpit, gripping the



curtains closed, just them.
Her bed. What’s her bed look like? Lying on it, after school, the table. Naked, in her room. He wonders what her room looks like, the result: holding hands by the river, making out on the picnic hang out. He can’t picture all the in-betweens, but he can picture it, he can picture it all: *their future*. This is it. He shows up. They has to think without picturing the look on her face. He can’t help Gus hangs up. There’s no one to call. Lies. No rides. He just “Okay.”
“Let me make a call real quick. Call you right back, ‘kay?”
“Can you make it?”
“Shit. That’s shitty.”
horrible or he’s fucking crying or being creepily sweet.”

churning beats. “*Look, if you only had one shot, one opportunity, one moment... would you capture it, or let it slip?*”

Dialtone.

Fuck, I hope her dad doesn't pick up.

“Hello?”

“Jenelle! So ahhh, yeah, I’ll be there in a half-hour.”

“Great.”

He’s never been to her house, but she is telling him how to get there.

He pulls sweatpants on, opens his door. His mom and Fuckface watch *Americas Funniest Home Videos* in the living room, like always. Fuckface’s eyes don’t leave the screen. Gus’s mom looks at Gus so hopefully he wants to fuckin’ die – so many people look at Gus sad for him. He’s fucking sick of it.

“Who was it?”

“Just this friend.”

In the bathroom, doing the getting-ready-for-bed routine as decoy, he brushes his teeth, leans forward. His pores are dirty. Damn.

Fuckface laughs loudly with the TV’s studio audience. *Cops* is on next. They’ll be up another hour. If he can convince them he’s going to bed, she won’t try to say goodnight later. Maybe.

He walks through the hall, back to his mom’s look: sad love.

“Alright, goin’ to bed ma. Got a test in the morning.”

“Oh, okay. Good. Goodnight, honey.”

“night.”

“Goodniight.” Fuckface, sarcastic: he can’t even say goodnight normal.



day he could ride around listening to that song.
If Gus can make them laugh, maybe they’d talk more, and one
The guy, bemused: “What the fuck you gonna do with it?”
“Just this thing I got.”
pointed at the ape’s face.



“What the fuck is that, little dude?” a nicotine-yellowed finger
like a freighter. The tires grow tight.
The gas station: clink, clink, quarters in the air pump. It hums
at him hurrying away. No one. Thank God.
He watches for his mom and Fuckface looking out the window
In the garage: the tires – flat. He feels in his pocket. Quarters.
and check on him.



The car jerked forward erratically, laughing with them.
“Nothin’, man. Wachu doin’?”
laughing with cool flannel and long hair whipping in the wind.
to everybody: Gus, the guy, the driver Gus couldn’t see, the girls
of whiskeys, to smoke, know what this song is, ride in a truck with
didn’t go to his school, and was old enough to have the beginnings
“What the fuck you doin’, kid?” asked this guy, who thankfully
friends laughing at people who don’t have m(any) – which was clear



yes. Over it, his best worn blue hoodie.
Planet of the Apes shirt – no! No, fuck it. *Planet of the Apes* shirt –

Pedaling furiously, nervous eyes, that smile people get when they’re happy but still want to cry a little, Gus’s right hand held the handlebar, posters under armpit, Wendy’s bag fwapping with each pothole, his other sweaty hand pressed the gorilla’s nose steady against his thigh. Somewhere far behind him, guitars wailed sweetly – he tried to catch a lyric. Always liked this song... *ohhhhhhh, sweet child a miiiiine...*...didn’t know what it’s called, who sings it, anybody that listened to it. So he always got excited when catching a patch of it. Like blaring out of this rapidly approaching rattlin’, rusty truck.

“Hey, Congo-boy!”

Great. If they’re from his school they’d call him “Congo-boy”, like in his last school they called him “That Old Zack Magic.” One time from a Troll book order he got a *Saved by the Bell* book, Mark-Paul Gossaler on the front, arms sassily folded. Gus also bought *Roots*. But it wasn’t funny to call him “Roots,” it was funny to call him “That Old Zack Magic.”

He understood, but not until he made the fatal mistake.

He never understands anything until he’s made the fatal mistake.

How do people know how not to make the fatal mistakes all the time?

He didn’t even care about *That Old Zack Magic*, it was \$1.99, an impulse. He thought he’d be able to make a joke about it.



“You only got one shot, do not miss your chance to glow, opportunity comes once in a lifetime, yo000.”

Gus pulls khakis on – no. She wears jeans. He puts on jeans that make his legs somewhat defined. *Clockwork Orange* shirt – no.