

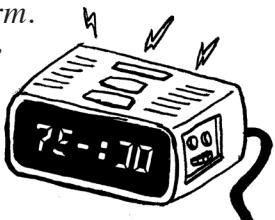
The Account of a Very Awkward Situation or The Reason I'm So Pale

(BEEPONK BEEPONK) *What is that?* (BEEPONK BEEPONK) *Oh. It's just my stupid alarm.* (BEEPONK BEEPONK) *Yeah, good morning to you, too.* (BEEPONK BEEPONK) *How long has this thing been broken, anyway?* (BEEPONK BEEPONK) *I can't stand one more morning waking up to that sound!* I reached over and slammed it with my fist. I felt the plastic crunch beneath my hand and I knew its time had come. Now I *had* to get a new one. *Oh well. No use wasting tears on you, you malfunctioning heap of chrono-crap.* I grasped for my glasses and threw them on, struggling to see the time. The area where it would normally be displayed was a mess of glowing red lines that used to resemble numbers. The downside was that the time was undecipherable. The upside was that it didn't matter because I knew I was late anyway. I was always late.

I sat up and stretched my neck muscles as I turned my head the other way. The morning light was pouring in through my window. It wouldn't be long before the days would start getting darker and colder. I would miss the morning sun. I missed it already. I didn't want to get out of bed at all, but it wouldn't do me any good to stay home so I got dressed and started downstairs. It

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was too late to take a shower. *That stupid alarm.* *As if it wasn't bad enough that it can't wake me up with some pleasant music anymore.* *It goes off later and later every morning!* *That's all right. I'll just put a little extra perfume on.* My aunt gave it to me. I never much cared for it, but it was the only bottle I ever had and the only one I was likely to have. *Grape Seizure?* Yeah, *that sounds appealing...* I took a whiff and smiled. *That should be okay for now.*



When I got downstairs I shoved some granola bars in my bag and went to make myself a sandwich for lunch... I looked at my watch. *Oh who am I kidding? I don't have time for that!* I grabbed a few extra granola bars and ran out the door before my parents even knew I was up. I dashed outside and trotted down the steps, turning only momentarily after hearing something rustling in the shrubs behind me. When I determined it was nothing but a squirrel with a lousy sense of humor I continued on my way, gripping half of my books under my arm and the others in the bag slung over my shoulder. I was late for the bus, but then again I was always late for the bus. That's how I had gotten used to running the whole way and still making it on time... almost. But I'm a good runner. I always was.

I sprinted across the lawn of the school, threw open the heavy metal doors, and ran into the hall, empty and silent. I hated that feeling; getting into the school and realizing that you're late when everyone else is already in class; like you're the only person left on the planet after a nuclear holocaust. With my luck, everyone would get to the bomb shelters and I would arrive just in time for a warhead to punch me in the face. Either that or I would get out too late and be the only one left. I always wondered which would be worse. So far, I hadn't found an answer.

As I ran down the hall, my little black shoes clicked like metal on glass; a sound that cut the silence so sharply, it hurt my ears. They were close to the only shoes I owned, the only ones that were presentable anyway, and even they were getting old. I ran like Death was at my heels, reaching my homeroom and slipping in the door, as if trying to get in without being noticed. Like that's possible when you're ten minutes late. Five is really pushing it. Mr. Stippa gave me a look as I came in. That look; that LATE look, like he was stamping it on my forehead. Then he struggled to grab the attendance sheet from where it was resting, all the way on the other side of the desk (as if he really wasn't expecting me to show up), and marked me down, shaking his head.

I just slipped by and slid into my seat next to Brittany. She turned to me and said, "This is a regular thing for you, isn't it?"

"I'm getting my time down," I said with false confidence. "I'm sure of it!"

"No, you're getting worse, Char, and *I'm* sure of *that!*"

"Well at least I came," I said, cleaning my glasses.

"Yeah, maybe that wasn't such a good idea." Brittany shook her copper curls and let her lips droop awkwardly.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Betta says she's gonna give it to you."

"What," I asked.

"It..."

"Oh, she's just full of hot air! I don't know why she doesn't like me!"

"Brittany, Charlotte," came the reprimanding voice from the front of the class. Mr. Stippa gave us both a scolding frown, though I couldn't imagine



a less important class to disrupt than homeroom.

“Why,” Brittany finally responded, more quietly. “Because she’s a witch! A brat! A punk! Because she thrives on the suffering of those less fortunate than her! Where do I start?”

“... Do you really think I’m less fortunate than her,” I asked, looking down.

She wrinkled her dark brown little nose. “Honey, we all are. That’s what makes us targets for her wrath. She has resources and she unloads them! Now, say you were attractive, wealthy and had a sense of style, like her. She might be afraid of you, or she might try to compete with you, but she wouldn’t target you.”

“Attractive? Sense of... are you saying there’s something wrong with me?”

“Not you per se, but... let’s start with your shoes.”

“I like these shoes,” I squeaked.

“Well that doesn’t change the fact that they went out of style a decade ago. I don’t really want to dwell on that skirt but... you know, and those glasses.”

I got a little defensive and grabbed the rims of my glasses, as if ready to pull them off and tuck them safely under my arm in case anyone tried to hurt them. “My glasses? What’s wrong with my glasses?”

“You *hate* those glasses,” she huffed. I shrugged my shoulders. She was right, I did hate them. I couldn’t wait to get rid of them and get contacts. They were big and ugly and garish and there wasn’t a moment that I forgot they were on my face.

“Yeah, but I guess it’s kind of hard hearing it from someone else,” I said.

“Sorry to break it to you like this, but you asked.”

“I asked what was wrong with *me*... what’s that got to do with my wardrobe?”

"For someone like me? Nothing," she said in an assuring tone.
"For someone like Betta, it's a license to make a fool of you."

"All right, I get the point." The bell rang just about the time our conversation ended, like it always does for some funny reason. We had different first period classes, but I would always follow Brittany to hers before I headed to mine. We were just leaving homeroom when I ran smack into Betta, who was flanked by Marla and Sharon, her usual minions, all decked out in their cheer uniforms. Hoorah.

She was impeccably perfect, as always, with her golden hair done all prettily with ribbons. Her face beamed with a skin tone that was beyond perfection and she had a designer bag slung over her dainty shoulder... I could've heaved right there.

"Isn't it strange that with those gigantic glasses you can't even watch where you're going," Betta howled. She smiled the way she always did. Even though she had supple, glossy lips, all I could think was...

Crocodile...

"Good morning, Betta," Brittany said before I could retaliate, myself. "You're starting awfully early, aren't you? I thought your skank generators didn't get warmed up until at least 11:00."

"Well," Betta responded without missing a beat. "Aren't you cute. But if you don't mind, I was addressing little Miss Bathory here."

Oh boy I wanted to deck her. I kept fingering my crucifix as a way of tapping into a well of serenity and compassion, because I wanted to tell her what a horrible person she was. I wanted to



remind her that because of the way she treats people, she'll never have any real friends. That for the rest of her life she'll have to look over her shoulder for some kind of treachery, and watch her own back because no one will be there to look after her. I wanted to remind her that she would die cold and alone in a ditch somewhere and that she would be fortunate to be remembered as a tyrant because chances are she wouldn't be remembered at all.

I had a lot to say to her, so I tightened my belt, took off my glasses, stepped up to her and said, "Betta... would you like a granola bar?" *Granola bar? That didn't sound right! What happened to dying cold and alone? What about giving her the business?* Before I was done trying to fathom my own cowardice, I realized that I even had the granola bar in my hand and I was actually giving it to her. *Stop that! Take it back! What are you doing?* She eyed it suspiciously, probably wondering if it had been poisoned. What did I tell you? *Il Duce* was looking over her shoulder for assassins.

"Well, all right." She swiped it from my hand like an owl swooping in for the kill, though I couldn't quite tell if it was an 'I accept your meager tribute' swipe, or a 'this will be my meal for the day' swipe. Whatever the case was, she spun around without saying another word and strutted off to class with her posse/entourage/cult.

Deep down, I was just glad the confrontation ended quickly and without her using a single racial slur, or affront about my standard of living; nor calling unwanted attention to my apparently hideous taste in attire. She was a real stand up gal.

But Brittany was disappointed in me. She



could tell that I didn't say what I had wanted to, like she could rip the words right out of my head and read them like a screaming neon sign. I couldn't hide anything from her. She didn't say anything, but just shook her head at me like I was a dog that had just messed on the new carpet.

I guess I am making a mess of things. Brittany works so hard to knock that girl down a peg (for my sake, even) and what do I do? I give her a pedestal to stand on. One step forward, two steps back. At this rate, Betta will *never* die cold and alone; and I will never achieve my life's dream. I'm just kidding. One thing about me is that I never really wished ill on anyone. Although Betta was a rare exception, even in her case I would've much preferred for her to just be nice to me. But otherwise, the next best thing would be to wish a future of unspeakable harm for her.

I bid Brittany goodbye as she arrived at her class and I turned to head the opposite way down the hall. *I am such a loser. I can't believe I let that Betta step all over me. If I didn't have Brittany next to me all the time, I wouldn't stand a chance. Why can't I just stand up for myself?* I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I wasn't looking where I was going. Before I knew it, I had crashed right into someone and squeaked when I saw who it was. Sophie Ernhart. Let me tell you something about Sophie. Betta may have intimidated me, but this chick scared the crap out of me.

She came here from the U. K. last year and was supposed to go back. But her parents must've loved it here so much they decided to stay. I probably don't have to tell you that I was displeased by that news. It's not that there was anything particularly wrong with Sophie. After all, she didn't push me around or take my lunch money. She didn't call me names or embarrass me in front of the other students. She didn't pull my skirt down in front of the entire track team while I was bending over to get a drink of

water, that one time last month. Betta was a constant tormentor, but Sophie just kind of spooked me.

The truth is that she didn't really do anything. She never participated in class (when she went to class, which was rare.). She almost never talked, except to herself. She always wore this black leather coat and wore heavy black make-up. She had this whole twisted school girl look going on, with a plaid skirt that was all white and shades of green, and these heavy, black knee-high boots with buckles all over them. Her dark hair was short like a pixie cut, and was dyed green in the front. So she generally looked scary too, like a witch or something.

There were, of course, rumors that she was a witch and that she regularly practiced black magic in the upstairs girl's bathroom after hours, but I didn't believe in such things. I thought she circulated those rumors herself. Maybe she just wanted attention. Me? I didn't want any attention. I wished I could be ignored, but I was just kind of glad I wasn't Sophie.

"Hi, Sophie," I said with a pathetic little wave. She said nothing, but stared coldly at me. "Sorry about that. I wasn't looking where I was going." Still nothing. *Okay. Maybe it's time to get out of here.* "Well, I've got to be going now." I flashed her a little smile and took off in the other direction as fast as I could. *Just keep walking, just keep walking. Don't turn around, don't make eye contact.*

"Hey, Specs!" I stopped short. She always called me Specs, on those rare occasions that she did speak.

Don't turn around, Char. Just ignore her. But I couldn't ignore her. It was common courtesy. I turned slowly, staring down at the floor. *Whatever you do, don't make eye contact.* Before I knew what I was doing, my gaze was locking with hers. Her eyes were a blazing emerald green. They were so beautiful it was scary.

For a few moments she said nothing. She just stared. Finally she said, "Princess has been pushin' you around again, huh?"

She always called Betta Princess. "Uhh... yeah. Yeah, she has, but it's no big deal, I just..."

"Just nothing," she said. "You should let her have it."

"I did," I replied, thinking she was talking about the granola bar.

"Sure you did, Specs. Sure you did." Clearly we were having two different conversations (as was usually the case when one tried to interact with Sophie) so, on that rather cryptic note, she shot me a sinister grin and continued down the hall, whistling as she disappeared around the corner. Yep. I was really glad I wasn't Sophie. She was crazy.

As I moved on to class, I thought about what had happened and laughed. Sophie was right. Betta *didn't* give *it* to me; I gave *it* to *her*... and she ate *it* on the way to first period. A granola bar can be a powerful thing. I know what you're thinking, 'how pathetic can you get?' But just think about this; for a moment, I had the power. I had something she wanted, and for a moment she had to think about whether she wanted it badly enough to accept it from me. Sure she probably thought that it was something inconsequential; something I was offering her to appease her mighty wrath; something she only took to show she could get something out of me.

But I'm looking a little deeper. I see it as charity. I gave her my granola bar because I was afraid her mommy forgot to pack her slimfast shake for the day, and that she would starve and completely disappear into that hoity-toity princess couture blouse before 4th period. And she sucked it up like a miserable weed. All I have to do now is learn how to make her need it, and to learn when to give it and when not to... also some new shoes couldn't hurt (unless they're the wrong size). This was the start of a brand

new way of thinking for me.

I know what you're thinking now, that it was *her way of thinking*. That *I was becoming a monster of equal proportions!* Yeah well, save it. If I could beat Betta at her own game, I was more than willing to stoop to her level. Let me just give you an example of how much I wanted to beat Betta. If it had just been *her* I wouldn't have minded so much. The problem was she got practically our entire student body in on the joke. Her Fashion Rangers were at the top of her army and just below them were the powerhouses of her humiliation force, the football team.

"Hey, Charlotte," Rick said as I turned a corner. He kind of surprised me. Rick was the captain of the football team and was usually Betta's main squeeze. It made sense. They were both gorgeous and popular. A match made in Heaven, right? Well, I have to admit I was feeling a little flustered right now. After all, I had a bit of a crush on Rick and he was looking at me in a way he never had before. "You look great today," he said, flashing me an ivory smile.

I looked around, dumbfounded and said, "You mean me?"

"Yes, you. Is that a new dress," I blushed a little as he spoke. "or are you just renting it from the antique shop?" Okay. I think the fantasy was officially over by this point. I took a deep breath and walked away as he and the other jocks burst into a fit of laughter.

"Yeah," Jerry chimed in. "Your hair looks especially nice today too. You must be washing it with a different brand of cooking oil!" They could laugh all they wanted. I didn't care; something that was diminished only by the fact that I did care.

I was so flustered, I almost tripped as I entered my first class. Almost. I'm happy to say that I'd been practicing walking into rooms without spilling, falling, slipping, or breaking something, and I had gotten quite good at it.

This one time had been an exception to a nearly perfect record. But luckily no one was even in the room to catch it. It seemed that, despite my altercation with the lovely Betta Danue, the freaky Sophie Ernhart *and* the jerk squad, I was early. Gripping my books in my arms like a puppy (because it hurt my shoulder to keep them all in my bag), I made my way to the desk I always took at the back of the class, looking down the whole way. It was then that I realized I wasn't alone after all. Freddie had already sat down on the other side of the room.

Stupid, messy hair. Hanging in front of my eyes all the time! I might've made a fool of myself in front of him, after all, and wouldn't even know it! I got a little flustered at this point because... well... I liked Freddie. I'm not sure why exactly. I mean, I thought he was cute, but he was kind of quiet, too. Like me.

He always tried to help me with my books when he saw me struggling, and I always got the feeling he had kind of a crush on me. Don't get me wrong, it was nice to finally get some attention, but I just couldn't understand why he would pick me when he could have been pining over *Princess Vixen* or one of her demented fashion rangers. Given, Freddie wasn't exactly anywhere near their social circle, but why look over to me? Why be realistic? No guys ever do that! Nobody ever goes for someone in their own league! I wouldn't! That's just too easy! Trust me, I would've loved to go out with Rick. Despite the earlier display, the truth remained that he was incredibly good-looking and, at the time, that still meant something to me. I dreamt of a magical reality where we were engaged due to the pretext that he, for some reason, didn't think I was a guttersnipe.

But for now, it would be best if I set my sights a little lower, like somewhere around... eh, Freddie, I guess. I turned my head in his direction just slightly. He was looking at me again. He always did that; smiled a little, then turned away in embarrassment.

Right. As if *he* had to feel nervous flirting with *me!* He probably could've gotten any girl in the school if he talked a little more and was a better dresser. Like *I* was gonna turn *him* down! That would be like turning down water in the desert because you don't have a glass... and yet I still wouldn't say yes. Here was a once in a lifetime opportunity, one that would probably expire as soon as the planets fell out of alignment, and here I was thinking about Rick and the imaginary world where I was cool. Get real, Char!

Before I knew it, the other kids were piling into the room and taking their seats, hardly even taking notice of either of us. I didn't mind that. That was why I always sat in back. As an unfortunate side effect, however, I was often called upon by the teacher to provide the wrong answer to their very important questions about *x* and *y* and what they're both up to. After that, someone else would proceed to give the right answer, and I would feel like an idiot. But it didn't really matter to me. I was more concerned with just getting to the end of the day. The time passed relatively quickly (something that never happens when you want it to) and, before long, I was on my way to the next class. This is how every day was. I moved on, sat, watched the clock, got up, moved, rinse, repeat; and this continued until lunch. Lunch was our only break after a morning of ughhhhhh.

I found Brittany at our usual table; the one where just we two sat. I opened my bag and sighed. "What've you got," she asked.

"Six granola bars..."

"Is that all?"

"Well, I had seven but... you know."

"So buy something," she urged me, impatiently. It seemed she had expected this from me.

"What," I asked.

"Anything! Anything but granola bars! Get a hamburger or something!"

“I can’t.”

“Why not? What, all of a sudden you’re vegetarian?”

“No. I’m Catholic.”

“So why can’t you get a hamburger,” she asked.

“I don’t have any money!”

“So I’ll give you some money! Jeez, why do we always have to go through this?”

“I don’t want anything,” I quietly insisted. “Granola bars are good for you!” I sat down with a finality that Brittany apparently felt because she didn’t pursue the point any further. I shoved a granola bar into my mouth and chewed like it was the most wonderful thing in the world. It wasn’t.

“Betta is giving you the eye,” she whispered.

I threw my hands down on the table and said, “Can’t we go for two minutes without bringing Betta into the conversation? I don’t care what Betta is doing!”

“Calm down, I was just warning you... if you start to feel your brain turning inside-out... that’s why.”

“The *Evil Eye*,” I asked. “Does that Voodoo stuff really work?”

“You bet it does,” she assured me. “And it’s not Voodoo... it’s Zoodoo!”

“There’s no such thing.”

“There sure is, my dad made it up!”

Brittany’s dad was Doctor Motumba, a former voodoo-weaving super-villain who had since reformed and now helped the police deal with other super-powered criminals. It was weird, I know, but if there’s one thing I’ve learned it’s that the world is a weird, weird place.

“What’s the difference,” I asked.

“Well, Voodoo is an actual religion... Zoodoo is just a cool way of making people sorry they messed with you. My dad does

it all the time, and he's a doctor!"

"What is your dad a doctor of anyway?"

"...Zoodoo. He taught me a little."

"Right, well you don't have to teach me anything," I said, turning my attention away from her. "I don't wanna have anything to do with Zoodoo or whatever it is!" She gave me a wicked smile as I was opening my second granola bar.

"Are you suuuuure?" She pulled a doll out of her backpack and showed it to me, holding it like a precious treasure.

"What's that," I asked, already worried I knew the answer.

"It's Betta!"

"It doesn't look anything like Betta."

"It looks enough like her," Brittany said, running her finger over the dolls body in some sort of pattern. Then she said some mumbo-jumbo. It was then that I noticed how stupid the face looked, with a stitched smile and these mismatched buttons for eyes. "Watch this," Brittany said with a smirk, peering at Betta sitting at the table behind her. She bent the leg back... Betta started laughing about something Carrie said. "Hmmm... maybe that was a little too subtle... watch this..." She started spinning the doll around in a circle... Betta leaned under the table to scratch her leg.

"Too subtle," I suggested unsurely.

"Stupid thing!" Brittany started slamming the doll against the table while I continued to eat my granola bars. Finally, she gave up and dropped the thing in front of her. "I just need practice, is all."

I ceased my chewing momentarily to say, "I told you it didn't look like her. Granola bar?" After a pause, she nodded and accepted part of my lunch, and gave me some of her tater tots in exchange. For the rest of the period we tried to ignore Betta as much as possible and just enjoy lunch.

"The school's throwing another Halloween Dance this year," she said with an echo of hope in her voice. "You going?"

"I don't see why I should. You remember what happened last year."

"Yeah. Did that stain ever come out?"

"You know it didn't. Betta doesn't fool around when she plays pranks. She used the good stuff."



"Yeah," she nodded somberly.

"Besides, I'd have no one to go with."

"So, you can go with me," she said. "So what?"

"I didn't know you *were* going."

"Sure! I have my Halloween costume all picked out and everything."

"What're you going as?"

"A witch doctor," she said, cheerfully.

"Oh... you're a witch doctor every year..."

"Well, that's the only costume my dad will let me wear. He says the family business needs as much PR as it can get. I keep telling him that going door to door demanding candy isn't PR, but he's kind of old-fashioned."

"Well, even still, I feel weird going alone," I told her.

"Like I said, we can go together."

"I mean *alone* alone."

"You mean like a date," she asked with a little laugh. "We don't need dates. Besides it'll give me a chance to try some new hexes on Betta!"

"No! No hexes, Brittany, please!"

"Oh, c'mon, I'm just kidding. Besides, it wouldn't be anything big... and being Halloween, nobody would think twice

about dear Betta's costume up and leaving her in the middle of the dance floor... oh, can you imagine!"

"Oh, just leave her alone..." I didn't mean that. "She may be bossy but she doesn't deserve to be humiliated like that." I *certainly* didn't mean that!

"Well then, if you're going to defend the queen of the harpies, I guess I won't need this anymore!" She was spinning the doll around in the air now, like a propeller. Then she tossed it into the trash. "Let's get a move on." As we were passing Betta's table we heard some commotion and turned to see what was going on. It seems Betta had been struck with a sudden dizzy spell and proceeded to vomit on the cafeteria floor, her handmaidens attempting to help before realizing the full extent of their uselessness. I looked at Brittany in disbelief and together we peered over at the trashcan, looking down at the doll, covered in garbage. When we looked over at Betta we finally began to see the resemblance, and couldn't hold back a laugh. Not that anyone would connect us to Betta's accident by saying, "*Clearly, it was Zoodoo,*" but, given our current standing with her, we decided it would be best to make ourselves scarce.