

## **Puncher's Paradise**

by

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I've got a secret to tell.

I've got to tell someone otherwise I'm going to go insane. You're the only person I can tell. Because, sure, by the time this thing is over, you're going to know me plenty well. But, I'm never going to know you. I'll never have to look you in the eye. I'll never hear your words of disgust when mentioning me or suffer your righteous glances. I don't want to know you, but I do want you to know me. You'll be the only one that does.

I love my wife. I adore my kids. I play the dutiful husband and the responsible father. But, truth be told, if you want in on my little secret, I hate my life.

I hate it.

My typical day consist of waking up and getting ready too early for any sane man, putting the dog out, then feeding the dog (I don't so much mind this as I consider him, I call him Ulti-Mutt, my only true friend). I then wake up our ten year old, Helen, and our six year old, William. I get them cleaned up, while my wife, Faye, takes care of Charlotte, our one year old. I get the older kids breakfast and then put them on the bus for school. I then say goodbye to Faye, Charlotte, and Ulti-Mutt and head for work. I put in a full day as a negotiator for a big power company that shall remain nameless, then I leave early to take Helen

to ballet and William to soccer. I then head back to work to finish out my day and try to get caught up, and then it's back out to pick up Charlotte and William. I take them home, get them cleaned up, put out Ulti-Mutt, let him back in, and commence dealing with the invariable chaos of children.

Faye gets home about forty-five minutes after I do, usually. She's a patent lawyer, and her hours are not usually as consistent as mine. She's in charge of dropping off and picking up Charlotte from the day-care.

By the time Faye gets home, I've usually got dinner prepared for everyone, including Ulti-Mutt.

Then, Faye cleans up and puts Charlotte down, I make sure the kids have their homework taken care of, as well as any chores that require tending for the night. Most of which are centered around the kids.

Basically repeat this process day in and day out, except add in recitals and games, as well as going in to work on the weekends, and you've got my life.

I remember just eleven years ago I was married to an adventurous wife and we hit the night scene on a regular basis. Clubs, plays, concerts, musicals, museums, weekend getaways, you name it. I never had as much fun in my life as I did in those two years of marriage. Then, we had our kids, and all that changed.

Including my wife.

Now, she was basically married to her work, and a mother of her children. She was tending to either one or the other at all times.

Most of her co-workers thought she wouldn't be able to balance her work with having children, and she was determined to prove them wrong after Helen was born. At first, I didn't mind. With her always focused on either Helen or the work she obsessively brought home, it gave me some free time to catch up on hobbies of my own. I wanted to take up fly-fishing, but that put me away from the house too much, so I went back to a childhood pastime, model railroads. Half our basement was one giant landscape with papier-mâché hills and valleys and railroad tracks. The east side even had a little town I'd erected. For the first few years, it was fun. After we got Helen taken care of for the day, Faye would start working on her things far into the night, so I'd head for the basement and do my thing.

After a while, however, I began to miss the companionship our marriage had once offered. We tried to work it out, and so we began scheduling "date nights." Long gone were the days of impulsive passion and lovemaking, now everything had to be penciled in. The result of this new practicum was William, my only boy. He was a welcome addition to our family, but it certainly didn't free up any time for Faye and I to be together. Now we were both up to our eyeballs in work and children, as I no longer could stay late at the office if I needed to and meet the needs of Helen while Faye dealt with William.

And, as though we hadn't learned our lesson, those last thirty seconds of spare time we had were too much of a burden, and so we brought Charlotte into the world. We were actually relieved, it was getting to the point there where we

were going to have to act as husband and wife again rather than a mother and father of a newborn requiring constant care and attention.

So, I now am a full time caregiver, and I happen to share a bed and roof with my co-full time caregiver.

I miss my old life.

And, again, while I love my wife and kids, I hate my life.

I know to you that sounds harsh, cold, and contradictory. Well, guess what? I'm that messed up. I'd be willing to bet hard cash that I'm not the only one, either.

Can I tell my wife any of this? Are you kidding? She would immediately think that I wanted a divorce and freak out. I learned long ago that there's certain things I just can't talk to her about unless I want to send her into a breakdown. Can I tell any of my friends? Well, I could tell my one friend, but I doubt he'd have much to say on the matter, seeing as how he still enjoys licking his own butt hole from time to time.

I guess that leaves you, doesn't it?

I don't know you. If I did, I might like you, I might not. But we'll never know, will we? I just need to tell my story. One way or another, it's coming out. If you don't want to hear it, then close the book. Nobody's got a gun to your head, do they? If you want to find out just how messed up I really am, then keep reading. Makes no difference to me.

Anyway, my name's Cass Morgan. Cass is short for Cassius. My parents were really into Shakespeare. I don't know why they chose that name. He

wasn't exactly an inspiring character, as I recall. Whatever. Faye and I were much kinder. Although people think we chose far too formal names for our children, there is a purpose behind it. Charlotte is my mother's name, and Helen and William are Faye's parents' names.

I'm thirty-eight, Faye's thirty-seven. We met in a political science class at the University of Illinois. I was nineteen at the time, she was eighteen. We got to know each other, started hanging out. We were just friends at first. It wasn't unusual for us to hook up after partying. We never formally called each other our boyfriend or girlfriend, but I would have gone along with such a thing in a heartbeat. She was one of the coolest girls I had ever known, brilliant in discussion and wild in the sack.

Unfortunately, Faye eventually met some guy her senior year that wound up going to the same law school as she. I heard less and less from her, until we eventually broke off all contact.

Then, one day, years later when I was twenty-six and living in Chicago, I got a telephone call from her. She told me she had called my mom to get my number, that she'd been missing me. I was floored! Turns out she was living in Chicago as well, so we made plans to meet for a drink after work one day.

We've been together ever since.

But, she's not the same Faye anymore, and I'm not the same Cass. Now we're a lawyer and negotiator who happen to have three children to take care of. All aspects of our personal selves are gone.

Is this normal? Does this happen to everyone? I just don't know. We long ago lost contact with our friends, all of which remained childless. I don't know what other parents go through. I'm selfish; I know I'm selfish. I want my old wife back, the one who'd stay out late at a jazz bar having martini's with me. I know I'm selfish, but aren't we all?

I love my wife and kids.

I hate my life.

Every year, I have to go to a conference for my work in Las Vegas. It's not always Las Vegas, it just happens to be Vegas this year. Last year it was New York. The year before that it was Tampa Bay. I love these excursions. It's what keeps me going. I go with several of the other negotiators, and whoever they happen to be that year, we all pretend like we're old friends gamble and drink together like a bunch of frat boys back in college. Three of them are not much more than frat boys in college, actually, and one of them is a man who lost his wife to a rare heart disease years ago. Then there's me, the only dad in the crew, just trying to forget about the prison he calls home.

The guys all call me "Puncher" because whenever anyone at work asks me how I'm doing, I always return with, "Punchin' the time clock." Truth is, I work on salary, I haven't punched a time clock since I worked for recreation services in college. They all think it has something to do with work and the stresses thereof. But, since I'm being so honest about everything with you, when I say that little phrase of mine, it's a reference to how I always have to be somewhere, doing

something, in regards to my home life. There's always, and I mean always, something that needs to be done.

Dinners to cook, groceries to buy, clothes to wash, a lawn to care for, things to fix, errands to run, and on, and on, and on.

But, in Vegas, none of that exists.

We go to a few meetings, we hobnob with some VIP's, and then the rest of the day, and night, is ours.

Our first night there, Thursday, the guys and I decide to eat at the hotel restaurant and then hit the casinos. I'd love to give you a play by play of how the evening went, but I lost four hundred dollars, and that about sums it up.

It's the second night I'd like to catch you up on.

The guys and I, and again, we're not really friends so much as accomplices, hit the casino in the early evening. This time, I was up eight hundred dollars. It was pretty hard to feel bad about that. And best of all? I could keep playing if I wanted to. No obligations, no schedules, no pick-ups or drop offs to worry about.

It got to be about eight at night when I asked the guys if they wanted to go across the street with me and grab a drink. They'd all been having bad luck, so they instantly agreed. I'd had the bad luck yesterday. When I woke up this morning, though, I knew my luck would change. Tonight was my lucky night.

We headed across the street. It'd been about a year since I had a drink and I'd forgotten how much I occasionally enjoyed it. I started off with a

Manhattan, then had a Cosmopolitan, and I was in the middle of a Whisky Sour when a strange woman approached me around nine o'clock.

She was tall, had long dark hair, wore black-rimmed glasses, and was a nice mix between being quite pale and slightly tanned. By her clothes I could only assume she was a businesswoman of some sort, perhaps here for a conference as well. Although her skirt went almost down to her knees, it fit her leanness that made her all the more sensual.

"Hi," she said.

I put down my Whiskey Sour and replied, "Hi."

She started giggling before she flirted, "You come here often?"

"No, I'm here on business, in fact. You?"

"Same." She paused to look me over from head to toe. She then grinned seductively, "Where you from?"

"Chicago," I answered promptly. "How about you?"

Here she paused for a moment, looking slightly caught off guard. It was as though she didn't know how to answer. I saw her blue eyes dart back and forth, and then she replied, "Tampa Bay. You know, in Florida."

"Right, I've been there on business before."

"It's nice, isn't it?"

She took a step and a half in closer to me so that I could practically feel the heat coming off her chest. Her perfume was intoxicating. I could feel my head swoosh after the sweet scent of her body mixed with the drinks I'd had. It was euphoric.

“What’s your name?” she asked me, her face so close I could feel her breath against my chin.

“Cass.”

“That’s an interesting name.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m Faye.”

Imagine my surprise.

“You don’t say,” I quipped.

“Buy me a drink?” she asked.

I glanced over at the guys I traveled to Vegas with standing several paces off from me. They’d seen me talking with a beautiful woman and had decided to give me some space. They knew I was married, but my actions didn’t seem to bother them whatsoever. I think I’d had friends at some point in my life that would have stopped me from doing something like this, but those days were long gone.

After all, these guys were just co-workers. They didn’t even know what my wife, who also happened to be named Faye, looked like. Of course, I kept a picture of she and the kids on my desk, but no one ever takes the time to look at things like that. That would require a degree of caring that doesn’t exist in the workplace any longer, if it ever had.

I love my wife. Of course I keep a picture of her on my desk. I love my kids.

I hate my life.

I kept turning until I faced the bartender. He was a middle-aged guy with thinning hair and a potbelly. He looked like he'd been doing this for a long time, if the bags under his eyes were any indication. Of course, I had matching bags, so I don't know what I'm picking on him about. I also had a nice little belly of my own. Hey, at least I still had a full head of hair, that's something, right?

I ordered her drink, "Dry martini."

"My favorite," Faye approved over the loud music, blowing her hot breath into my ear. "How'd you know?"

"Gut instinct," I returned, meeting her lustful gaze with my own.

She grinned even wider.

Hour passed, as did many drinks. My co-workers eventually headed back to the casino to lose what little money they had left, hoping to finally get lucky. Way I saw it, I was about to get lucky without taking any sort of chance at all.

I paid my tab to the bartender with Faye standing behind me, her hand riding up the inseam of my pants. Needless to say, I told him to keep the change.

In a slightly drunken stupor, we trotted across the busy street and into my hotel, which was right above the casino wherein my associates were losing a months salary.

I didn't even bother to turn on the lights when we burst into the room and started peeling off clothes. I wasn't surprised to find Faye wearing a rather provocative piece of lingerie beneath her business clothes. I had a feeling she'd been planning on this little escapade.

We fell into the king bed, clutching each other in our arms, and I spent the rest of the night in paradise.

The next morning, I awoke to find my bed empty, save for the lingerie Faye had been wearing strewn about it, and a few of her dark hairs that had come loose upon the pillows and sheets in last night's melee.

I got up to take a whiz and found a note left from her on the bathroom counter. It said simply, "See you next year. Love, Faye." She even went so far as to press her newly painted lips against it. I cleaned up and met the guys in the lobby. We had one more meeting we had to go to before we could head home.

"Hot little number last night, Cass," one of them said to me.

"You don't know the half of it," I replied smugly.

"Score?" one of the younger guys asked outright.

"Yes," I answered.

They all started giving me high fives and fist knocks, telling me that my secret was safe with them. I told them that I did this every year, no matter what city the annual conference happened to be in, and they could tell anyone they wanted.

In my mind, I'd done nothing wrong.

I love my wife. I love my kids.

I hate my life.

That's the only secret I have. That's the only thing I feel ashamed of that I'm sharing with you. By all accounts, I've got everything a man could want.

Great wife, awesome kids, a well paying job, and the most loyal dog a man could ever dream of. But, it's the constant and mundane madness of it all that drives me crazy.

What's wrong with spicing things up every once in a while?

We finished out our last, tedious meeting, then hopped a shuttle to the airport. Seeing as it was Saturday and I'd been away from my kids for a few days, I opted to forego a trip to work in the hopes of catching up with a pile of papers that never stopped multiplying and headed straight home.

I was excited to see Faye, after all.

When I walked through the door, I dropped my bags and looked for the kids to come running down the stairs or out of the TV room to greet me. The only one that bothered was Ulti-Mutt. He knew enough not to bark anymore; after Helen alone, he'd been scolded enough after waking her up on several occasions to be properly conditioned against such outbursts. He did, however, wag his tail madly and sucked in and blew out air to the point I thought he might hyperventilate.

I patted, rubbed, and petted him sufficiently as to appease my only pal and then went about the house, searching for my family.

Complain as I do, I don't *really* hate my life. That's another secret for you. I told you I was messed up, didn't I?

When I go on those little trips, I realize that the alternative to not having Faye, Helen, William, Charlotte, and Ulti-Mutt would be unbearable. I hate the

constant chaos of my life, but I love my wife and kids. I wouldn't trade my life for anything, as much as I sometimes get annoyed with it.

After all, everything in this house is my paradise.

I'd be a fool to ever give it up.

I pick up my bags and head up to the bedroom, only to find my wife on our king, working, as usual, on some paperwork. As soon as I entered she set all of her work on the floor, then sat up on her knees.

"Hi, stranger."

"Hi, baby."

"Good trip in Vegas?" she asked.

"Very good," I said with a smile.

"You didn't screw any women out there, did you?"

"Just one," I replied.

I removed her black-rimmed glasses so I could see those beautiful blue eyes of her and pulled her black hair loose from its ponytail.

"Where are the kids?"

"Charlotte just went down for the night, and Helen and William are both at slumber parties."

"You don't say," I mumbled as I pulled her shirt off.

"Hey," she began, "you didn't happen to grab my lingerie did you? I think I left them in the room."

"No, I got them," I answered.

And then we revisited paradise once more.

Actually, twice more, and then we woke up Charlotte, followed by a call from William, who'd gotten scared and wanted to come home.

And then the chaos resumed.

Paradise.

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