

THRILL SEEKER

A SHORT STORY



BY
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It was the most dangerous bungee stunt the world had ever seen. Curtis Rivers clung to the edge of the wavering wicker basket. It seemed so loosely tethered to the colorful hot-air balloon hovering at a heavenly 15,000 feet.

Glancing down at the distant crowd of onlookers, Rivers smiled and stretched out like an Olympic diver. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let his weight carry him off the basket. The slack elastic cord tightened as he darted toward the rising earth.

CLICK!

Arthur stood on the sidewalk outside O'Brien's Irish Pub and watched the bartender change the channel. Manchester United was taking on Chelsea in a grueling football match and the bar's rowdy patrons clearly favored watching the game to some record-breaking bungee stunt.

The rain drizzled down around him, cold and endless. He pushed the bridge of his thick glasses back toward his face and cradled a soaked sack of groceries, mostly white rice, canned beans and pasta. Wearing a white collared shirt and blue sweater vest, Arthur marveled at a group of college-age fellows chugging beers and flirting with girls inside.

Why not him...? He could be in there, worriless, living in the moment. Couldn't he?

He knew the answer. Arthur didn't have a daring bone in his body. He couldn't even muster the courage to enter a bar he passed by every day. The effects of alcohol made him nervous (even though, at 26, he had still never tried it), and the thought of a fight breaking out shivered his spine.

He sighed and glanced to the right. A slender woman with sunshine blonde hair and turquoise eyes stood several feet away. She couldn't have been older than 27 and was wearing a blue nurse's uniform. She, too, was watching the TV sets and raucous bar scene from outside.

For a fleeting moment he thought about speaking to her.

"Hi, my name's Arthur. What's yours?"

He said nothing, of course. That would be too risky. Instead he lowered his head and strolled toward his maroon 1986 Volvo. Besides, he had Sam, and she was a considerate roommate, clean and quiet. That was about as close to intimacy as Arthur was willing to get.

He carefully placed his bag of groceries in the Volvo's backseat and used the safety belt to keep the bag secure. He turned the ignition, fiddled with the rearview mirror until it was just perfect, shifted into drive and slowly pressed the accelerator.

Passing motorists blared their horns and flipped him the bird as Arthur cautiously cruised down the freeway. He never drove faster than 50 miles per hour, and always in the right lane. It irritated the hell out of other drivers.

Arthur pulled up to his modest suburban home. He was eager to surprise Sam with a homemade dinner to celebrate their six months as roommates. The menu was dutifully planned: Grilled salmon with lemon butter, potatoes au gratin, Greek salad with a hint of lime, fresh garlic bread, New York cheesecake for dessert and an expensive bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon (for her – he would drink water).

Rusty metal numbers reading "639" hung loosely on his gray front door. He went inside and put the wet groceries on the kitchen counter. After setting the dining room table and tidying up a bit, he picked up the phone to call Sam.

"Hello?" she said shyly.

"Sam? It's me, Arthur. Are you ... are you okay?"

"Oh, Arthur. Um, yeah, I'm fine. But I'm glad you called. We kind of need to talk," she said, taking a breath. "Listen. I'm moving out. I mean, you're a really nice guy and all, but I just can't live with you anymore."

The phone trembled in Arthur's hand.

“What do you mean? I ... I thought you liked it here,” he said.

“I did, at first. But ... and please don’t take this the wrong way ... it’s just kind of boring there. It’s always the same with you, day in and day out. I need some adventure.”

“What are you talking about? I like adventure.”

“Arthur, no offense, but that’s bullshit. You’re dull. You’re the guy who always picks ‘truth’ in a game of ‘truth or dare.’ All you ever do is sit on the couch and watch movies.”

“I....”

“I’ll be by to get my stuff on Monday,” she said, and hung up the phone.

Arthur stood still for a moment. His chin quivered. He could hear Sam’s voice pounding endlessly in his skull.

“All you ever do is sit on the couch and watch movies. All you ever do is sit on the couch and watch movies. ALL YOU EVER DO IS SIT ON THE COUCH AND WATCH MOVIES.”

He swallowed hard and glanced over at the perfectly set table with its perfectly folded napkins when something caught his eye. It was the bottle of Cabernet peeking out from the kitchen. He wandered over to it.

Arthur never really knew why he walked through life so apprehensively. No alcohol, no speeding, no danger of any sort, really. Sam was right – he was not an adventurous man.

He picked up the bottle and pulled an opener from the silverware drawer. His hands were trembling, but he managed to peel off the silver label and pop the cork. The wine smelled floral and fruity.

He lifted the bottle to his dry lips, drinking a mouthful of the expensive Cab. The fluid flowed from his mouth to his gut, filling the hollow pit with a fire he had never felt.

It hurt that Sam had decided to move out, but the worst part was that she was right. Why had he never had the nerve to swim in the deep end of the pool, or go running at night, or ... brave a crowd of critics and drunks?

Before his timid self could intervene, he was outside holding his car keys in a determined fury. He jumped in, slammed the door and made his way to one of the places he never had the courage to enter: O'Brien's Irish Pub.

He tore off his sweater-vest and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. Street signs and quiet shops swept by as he merged onto the freeway.

45 miles per hour.

His foot pushed down on the gas and he felt the Volvo force itself forward angrily.

50.

The steering wheel was glue in his sweaty hands. His eyelids narrowed and the stained concrete passed beneath him.

55.

Headlights flickered in his rearview mirror. He rolled down the window to let the wind lick his face. The Volvo grumbled and growled.

65.

Other cars fell behind him, like injured runners in a race they couldn't win. A U-Haul truck, a Dodge mini-van, a 1980s Corvette. He looked down at the speedometer.

90.

He was in the left lane, barely realizing he had moved across three lanes of steady traffic, well away from his comfort zone on the right. For a moment he considered slowing down. He contemplated merging back to the right. But there was something about this new direction that fueled him. This was different – this was adventure, this was literally life in the fast lane.

And he liked it.

By the time he got to the pub, the Volvo's engine was piping hot and his foot was as heavy as wrought iron. He parked, walked briskly toward O'Brien's daunting door and yanked it open.

The place was packed. A group of slack-dressed men cluttered around a table to his left and shouted at the television set. Three girls garbed in short skirts and lacquered in too much makeup huddled around empty shot glasses to his right. He sat at the bar beside a heavysset fellow wearing a Pittsburgh Pirates hat. A handsome young bartender strolled over.

“What can I get ya’?” he asked.

Arthur surveyed the assortment of beer taps behind the bar. “What’s the best beer?”

“Well that’s a matter of taste, friend,” the bartender replied. “If you like lighter beer, Corona is a good way to go. Medium folks tend to drink Sierra Nevada.”

“What’s the strongest?”

The bartender smiled. He pulled a tall glass from beneath the bar and poured what appeared to Arthur to be diluted tar or melted rubber. Maybe it was chocolate, he thought. That doesn’t sound bad.

“Here you go,” the bartender said. He placed the glass in front of Arthur. “Six dollars, friend.”

Arthur pulled out his wallet and dropped a ten on the bar.

“Is it chocolate?” he asked.

The bartender laughed. “It’s Spiked Stout, from Guinness. Twelve percent. Ireland’s finest.”

“Keep the change,” Arthur said. “And thanks.”

“Thank you,” the bartender replied with a wink.

Arthur took a deep chug of the Guinness, which he thought tasted sour but didn’t really care. It was his first beer. As Arthur surveyed the bustling pub, another thought dawned on him.

Should it stop here? Does stepping into a bar and buying a drink make him any less mundane than yesterday? He had an idea.

“Excuse me?” he asked the bartender.

“Yeah?”

“What’s the scariest thing you’ve ever done?”

“Scariest?”

“Yeah, you know, the most daring.”

“Oh. Well, probably when I went bungee jumping, out by Reno.”

Bungee jumping. Boy, that would push the envelope. Sam couldn’t really say he shirked adventure if he bungee jumped off a bridge or something.

“You don’t know of any places nearby, do you?” Arthur asked.

“Yeah, actually. I think there’s a place about 20 miles south of here. What’s it called...? Oh! That’s right. Bungevity. Do a search, it should pop right up,” he said.

“Thanks a lot.”

Arthur pulled out his outdated cell phone and searched for Bungevity. The phone plodded along until the number flashed up, 412-775-JUMP. Arthur dialed with butterflies waking in his stomach.

Since it was well into the evening, he figured all he would hear was a recording. But maybe he would get lucky.

“Thanks for calling Bungevity,” a man said with strained enthusiasm.

Arthur was taken off guard.

“Oh, um ... hi. I was just wondering about bungee jumping. Can anyone do it?”

“Pretty much. There are a few safety tips we go through before the jump and, you know, pregnant women can’t do it, people with heart conditions, that sort of thing. But as long as you’re healthy, you should be all right.”

Arthur heard raised voices and turned to his left. Two men were shouting and shoving each other. Glass shattered somewhere and voices surged around him.

“How soon can I go?” Arthur asked.

“Well, if time isn’t on your side, you’re kind of in luck. We had a midnight cancellation, if you can get here that quick.”

“You do it that late?”

“Sure, that’s usually a busy time. We’ve got bright lights all over the drop zone. Makes for an exciting jump.”

“Okay. I’ll be right there,” Arthur said.

“Hold on. Let me get your name so I can put you down.”

“Oh. Arthur. Arthur Abrahms,” he said.

For the first time in many years, he said his name with pride.

The brawlers were being herded outside, many glancing wayward punches off drunken bodies. The six-foot-something Samoan bouncer took umbrage at one such assault and made sure the assailant hit the ground harder than the others.

Arthur stood silent for a moment, absorbing the wild sight. Here he was in O’Brien’s, watching a fight after drinking a beer. It was official – he had turned over a new leaf.

He slipped out the back door and headed toward Bungevity.

The drive went quicker than he thought it would, which was good, because he was able to get there in time to see another person jump before him. If there ever was a chance to chicken out, this was it.

Bungevity seemed very safe. Jumpers leapt off a high crane and the gear was “the best in the business,” as the brochure stated it. Arthur checked in and stood below the lofty crane, waiting for a 20-something blonde girl to take her turn.

She stood on the edge and her legs wobbled. She must have been standing there for some 15 minutes before crowd encouragement egged her off. Her frenzied shout did little to calm Arthur, but he was determined, and the bungee crew was ready for him.

All of the safety devices felt firm and secure. The what-to-do, what-not-to-do lecture sounded like so much legal nonsense, but he listened intently before stepping toward the edge.

He could see the ground and specks of people below him. This was much higher than he expected. The old Arthur would not have jumped off a two-step ladder. But this was not the old Arthur. This was Arthur Fucking Abrahms.

He closed his eyes, took a trusting breath and stepped off the metal platform.

The air zipped past. An unfamiliar, intoxicating thrill washed over him. He released a wild, joyous scream that made his normally timid voice seem like a dying whimper.

Maybe that's what it was.

As the cord began to stretch, he could see the ground gently expanding before him.

SNAPT!

The cord broke. Arthur's slow descent suddenly accelerated. Onlookers wailed in horror when his body hit the ground with a violent thud. He landed on his shoulders, his chin colliding with the top of his chest and his knees crashing into his abdomen. The impact broke six ribs, punctured a lung, dislocated his ankle, fractured his scapula and gave him a concussion.

He could only hear distant sirens and a girl sobbing uncontrollably as his vision went black.

When he came to, he was lying in a soft hospital bed, bandaged from head to toe. He heard a faint television nearby. An episode of "Happy Days" was on.

He could feel the weight of someone else on the bed, sitting beside him. He struggled to see. As the haze drifted, he realized it was a young nurse.

She had sunshine blonde hair and turquoise eyes.

"Good, you're awake. How are you feeling? I heard about your accident. I'm not sure how much of this you can hear, but I have to tell you how brave I think you are. To go up there and jump from that high ... that's so daring," she said. "All I ever do is sit on the couch and watch movies."

Arthur smiled.

"Hi, my name's Arthur. What's yours?"

-FIN-