

Neanderthal

I'll call her Lucy. She looked a lot like a Neanderthal. When I first saw her in September she wore sneakers, a long sleeved sweat shirt and roomy gym shorts that billowed out from her thighs when the winds whipped across the campus and swirled the yellow leaves around her legs. The silky shorts were no more than a brief skirt and for that reason I liked them. I found myself dwelling on whether she wore underwear and if it was doing its job. As far as I could tell she was and it did.

Lucy was bushy haired, square jawed, short and compact. She had a deep voice and just a smattering of a mustache. People tended to avoid her, of course, because humans don't like to associate with others who are different, despite what they'll tell you.

As the Lake Ontario winter came upon us Lucy added sweat pants under her gym shorts and a light jacket, then a scarf and watch cap as we headed toward January. Her sneakers continued to suffice even as snow piled up on the sidewalks connecting the various buildings on campus. Many mornings on the lake shore we'd find a foot of the white stuff had fallen overnight. Often enough we'd have storms of three to five feet. Lucy walked through it all, apparently without a care for the snow and cold.

I thought Lucy's raw physicality was sexy, but her personality was off putting. She always seemed angry. I drew her as a lab partner in a chemistry course.

As the January chemistry class began we sat opposite each other in the lab, about to start the first of many boring experiments, this one with

pinches of two ordinary looking powders, a test tube and a Bunsen burner. I noticed her looking at me with nostrils flared, annoyance on her face.

Five minutes before I had played the gentleman and told Lucy I'd go stand in line for the supplies handed out by the lab assistant. When he mentioned there weren't enough of the new burners to go around, I sighed loudly. A boring experiment was now made worse using the old burners that took twice as long to heat things up. Some of the students were less happy than others and a general grumbling ran through the waiting line. A pretty blonde girl named Sally cut in front of me with a touch on my arm and a sweet imploring smile, beamed up at me when I began to object. I relented and made room for her, thinking, *use it while you have it, honey*. She pulled the same trick on another boy farther up. I got an old burner, of course, and brought it back with the test tube to Lucy at our table.

"You're a wimp," she said.

"I'm a gentleman," I said.

"You're a wimp," she said.

"You know," I said, "you could have come over and put Sally in a head lock."

"Generally," she said, "I am non-violent."

Lucy might not have been a fighter, but she had the look of an immovable object, a fire hydrant with arms. I remembered the Neanderthal-like people in the book *Clan of The Cave Bear* who could snap your leg bone with one hand and I wondered if Lucy was as strong as she looked.

"Do you arm wrestle?" I asked her as we opened our lab books.

"You just wanna see how strong I am," she said.

"That's not what I meant at all," I said, embarrassed to have been caught considering exactly what she accused me of.

Her eyes stared over my shoulder from under heavy brows. "Then why do you want to arm wrestle a girl?"

"It's ... it's just that it will be a while before everything heats up and ... well, the thought just popped into my head."

"You're full of crap," she said.

Though I had no plan when I opened my big mouth, this was not going the way I wanted.

"No, really," I said, "I didn't mean it like you took it." The way her eyes avoided mine told me there was something odd here, something amiss. Most girls would have said no and dismissed the notion. Lucy wanted to argue about it.

I laughed. "And I don't want to beat a girl arm wrestling."

"Yeah, right," she said.

"It might hurt my image as Mr. Nice Guy.,"

"OK," she said.

"Or it might hurt *your* image as –"

"OK, shithead," she said. "Put 'er up." Lucy leaned toward me, her elbow placed firmly on the surface of the lab table and her open hand beckoning me. A girl at the next table looked over at us.

"Look," I said. "It was a silly idea. Forget I mentioned it."

She raised her voice. "Put 'er up! I said," staring directly at me.

I leaned forward, put my elbow on the table in front of her and she did exactly what I thought she would do. She sat back, refusing to engage me.

"You're some *man*, picking on a girl," she said.

I leaned back in my chair. She had no intention of showing me her strength.

"You're right," I said airily. "And besides, I sprained my wrist ... both of them ... a week ago ... playing badminton."

"You wanted to test me," she said.

I was hoping she'd forget I even brought it up. I had no desire to embarrass her.

Lucy looked pointedly at the girl at the next table. I glanced around to see a number of students staring at us. When the two at the next table turned away from Lucy's stare, she brought her attention back to me.

"You should talk Sally's lab partner into taking me so you can be with Sally," she said with a sarcastic grin on her face.

Persuading Sally's partner to pair up with this female lead from Planet of the Apes would not be easy.

"No," I said. "That's OK, Lucy. I can probably put up with you." I didn't say it, but I would have felt uncomfortable with Sally, always needing to impress her and strut my male ego when the other guys stopped by the

lab table to visit with her. Sally wasn't worth the trouble.

Lucy leaned way back in her chair, crossed her arms behind her head and put her feet up on the edge of the lab table. She looked at me. Her heavy brows gave her a formidable appearance.

"Do you think I'm pretty?" she said.

I looked up at the ceiling. "Uh, yes. Honest, you're a ... you're a ... an attractive woman. Really."

It occurred to me I might mean it.

"You'll take all the notes, write up the experiment?" she said.

With an easy smile of surrender I said, "Oh, of course. Be happy to." I began to wonder if I could switch into another section and get out of this class.

"I think we'll get along," she said, making it sound like an order.

I flattened the notebook down on the black shiny surface of the lab table to take notes and then I stood to hook up the burner.

Lucy thumbed through her notebook as if it might contain nothing that interested her. I busied myself with the Bunsen burner.

"Maybe Sally will arm wrestle you," she said.

"OK, knock it off," I said. "I get it. You don't want to arm wrestle."

"You're the one who refused," she said.

"You really didn't want to."

"Bull," she said. "I offered."

"Uh huh," I said.

"I'll arm wrestle you, punk ... when you grow up."

My desire to play it cool evaporated. I snapped at her.

"No, you won't. And I know why."

"You think I'd lose, eh?"

"No," I said. "You'd win."

"You think I'm some kinda Neanderthal, don't you?"

I said nothing.

"What're you, a weakling?" she said.

"No, Lucy, I am not a weakling".

"I think you are."

"I told you," I said, "I am a gentleman."

"Then act like it and leave me alone," she said.

Lucy looked down at the table. She picked up her mechanical pencil and began to twist the lead in and out of the shaft.

“OK, you’re not a weakling,” she said. “So what am I ... an Amazon?”

I continued to connect the gas hose and set up the burner.

“I’ve always been this way,” she said, her voice very small, like a little girl. She kept her eyes down and watched her fingers twist the pencil as if she was performing an extremely complicated procedure. The two girls at the next table were busy firing up their burner.

I felt terrible. I hadn’t meant for Lucy to feel bad about herself. Not when I started this.

“OK,” I said. “I’m all set up, ready to go.”

I sat down, opposite her. She continued to twirl the lead in and out. She ignored me. I put my elbow down hard on the surface of the table with my hand up and open.

“Put ‘er up,” I said, louder than I had intended.

“No,” she said. I could feel several pairs of eyes on us.

“Put ‘er up, shithead,” I said, my voice close to a whisper. “Do what you’re made to do.”

She banged her elbow down in front of me, grabbed my hand and rammed it over backward on the table.

“I wasn’t ready,” I said.

Lucy put her hand in mine again and looked into my eyes.

“It feels like we’re dancing,” I said, surprising myself.

I began to push her hand. It didn’t budge. I pushed even harder and it didn’t move a millimeter. Her face showed only the slightest strain as our eyes locked together. I pushed my full strength up against her, a noise coming from deep in my throat. She began to push back slowly with a low breathy sound, almost a moan. Her front teeth came down over her lower lip. In a moment she quickly slammed my hand down on the table. She let go and sat up straight.

Our test tube had rolled to the edge of the table and lay there waiting for only a gentle nudge to push it over. Five or six students stared at us. The lab was quiet except for the

whoosh of burners, but after a few seconds the normal hubbub returned.

Our youth, our hands touching, eyes meeting and those billowy gym shorts added a dimension to our grappling with each other. We both knew it. I reached for her hand again, but she quickly put both in her lap. We were winded by our effort and her chest strained against her sweat shirt with each breath. I still wondered about her underwear.

“You win,” I said.

“I always win,” she said.

“Only when you’re being yourself,” I said.

“Sometimes I’d rather be Sally,” she said.

“Sometimes I’d rather be Batman,” I said.

Lucy picked up the pencil and reached for the notebook.

“Are we all heated up yet?” she said, gesturing toward the burner.

“I’m pretty sure that I am,” I said and laughed.

“Just remember you’re a gentleman,” she said.

I took that as a hard won compliment.

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The Windswept Press

Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

www.windsweptpress.com