

Maxine and Marla

by C.J. Renner

8 red, 7 blue, 7 orange, 5 green, 8 yellow, and 11 brown. Not perfect, but good. No...better than good, at home this would have been good. In the car out front of their old apartment building, this would have been good. But here this was great – almost perfect. In fact, as close to being perfect as you could be without actually being perfect; and that meant something. It meant he was on the right track. It meant perfection would come sooner than he thought.

7 red, 9 blue, 10 orange, 9 green, 6 yellow, and 5 brown. That would be perfection – exactly the same number as he had shaken out of the package almost two years ago. Well, closer to a year and a half ago. A year, eight months and 23 days ago actually. That would be perfect, but this bag had a lot going for it. First of all it had exactly 46 M&Ms in it, that was pretty rare in and of itself. It turns out that the bag of almost a year and nine months ago, contained fewer M&Ms than most. It was well short of the average, which was just under 51. If only that bag had had 49 or 50 his task would be much simpler. But its difficulty was what made it worthwhile, and that's what would make it miraculous to replicate.

Before opening that bag just over 500 days ago, they had drafted colors. The idea was that whenever they shared a bag she would have certain colors she could eat and he would have the other colors that he could eat. He had let her draft first, and he knew she would certainly want green and blue, sure enough she chose blue first. He chose red, 'cause: "Hey, that's a grand slam."

“What’s blue then?”

“They didn’t have a blue when we used to play, but since it replaced tan, I guess that would make it a single.”

“It seems like it should be more than that.”

“Yeah, it kinda does, but a single is decee.”

“I suppose.”

“The longer you take to pick your next one, the longer it is until we can open this bag.”

“Good point, I’ll take green.”

“Yellow.”

“Hmmm...”

Everyone knew brown was the worst, so he was sure she would take orange. But in an act of ultimate generosity, she took brown for her third color. He should have expected this. It was stupid of him not to. He shook the first half dozen out into his hand and handed her the two blue and two brown that had come out. She had smiled, put them into her mouth and leaned toward him for a kiss. When their lips touched, she used her tongue to thrust the bits of candy shell and slimy chocolate that were still in her mouth against his teeth. He hadn’t expected this since they usually didn’t open-mouth kiss in public, even in a dim movie theater.

“We’ve only had the M&M rule for two minutes and you’ve already broken it.”

“Hmm?” He was cleaning his teeth with his tongue.

“You’ve got blue M&M shell in your mouth, I see it.”

“Oh, is that what that was all about.”

She smiled at him again. They only got through the first half of the bag before lights went down for the previews. It was exceedingly difficult to tell which color was which, while the lights were down. He had to hold them up one at a time until there was a scene in the daylight or an explosion on-screen to ascertain their color.

Of course that was his first time, and like anything else, you become more skilled with practice. By now, he had come 78 times and from where he sat (sixth row from the front, third chair in from the right in the middle section), he found that he could pretty much tell the color by the glow of the exit light. Of course, he still used the screen to be sure. Sometimes, he was pretty sure he could even taste the color.

This was the third week in a row that *Shrek* had been showing for the Sunday mid-afternoon show in theatre 9. All told this wasn't a bad film to catch. Sometimes it was a blessing to have a bad movie though, because it wouldn't last in theatre 9 for more than a week before it was moved to a smaller screen like 5 or 6.

There was a subtle perfection to the way the world worked. Like how there was seventy-five cents change that came from the purchase of the M&Ms, exactly the amount that the dryers took to operate back at their apartment. Or how, unless you told the phone company that someone should be taken off the account, they remained on it. He had been surprised at how many pieces of mail, like the phone bill, still had her name on them, and at first it felt like a kick in the gut every time he looked through his mail on the way up the elevator from the mail boxes. But now, he thanked god that he hadn't changed the accounts, because for that short ride up the elevator and the rather long walk down the hall, he was able to sort through them one by one and open only the ones that were for

him and think of how he would put the rest on the table until she got home from work at 7:45 or 8:00, depending on traffic.

After he set the mail on their dining table, he walked directly to their kitchen and produced a box of index cards from the cabinet above the microwave. They had purchased the index cards and its plastic container with the intention of using the cards for recipes. The night they brought them home they had put down all of the recipes they could think of. This amounted to three actual meals and a couple more that they had decided would count for now – such as mac and cheese with hot dogs. After their first night of excitement about the prospect of having a recipe box, they put it above the microwave and there it stayed untouched for a month and a half.

The day she died, there wasn't much except pain. He had thought of how and if he could live without her a handful of times while she was alive, but his head was just plain numb after he found out – his body was on autopilot. He simply did not care what his body went around doing, be it crying, calling parents, eating, whatever. It was as if he were in the corner, not really paying any attention to himself. If given a quiz later on what his body did, he may have passed, but not by much.

That night he laid in his bed alone, except for her stuffed ninja turtle, for an unmeasured amount of time before he slowly flowed into a mix of thought and dream. He had needed her all day and it was here that she came. They met now in the laundry room of their apartment building. She had been in there reading while she waited for their comforter to finish drying when he walked in. Usually, they would greet each other with an embrace but this time he just walked in and sat on the sorting table next to her. He sat next to her in silence while she finished her chapter, then she walked over to the

dryer, opened it and felt the comforter for dampness. She then pulled it out and wrapped it around her torso and over her head like a habit and sat atop the dryer. They still did not speak to each other, but he thought of all of the things they he wanted to tell her and she looked back at him as though she were hearing them. She would pause to adjust the comforter and appreciate its warmth. After a minute or so he joined her underneath and she rested her head...

When he woke he tried to relax and stay with the memory so he could once again turn it to dream. Unsuccessful, he felt emptier than he ever had before. At that moment, he decided that he had needed her, and that he still did need her. Still in a bit of a sleep-driven stupor, he walked to the kitchen and pulled down their recipe cards, pulled one out and wrote the specifics he could recall from his memory of the laundry room. When he woke up again a few hours later, he was met by his card on the counter top:

LAUNDRY ROOM: She's already there reading and we don't speak, even when she finishes. She has been babysitting the comforter in the dryer. And when it's done she takes it out and wraps herself with it – and shortly I join her inside the comforter.

And now, this was the card he took out of the recipe box. He placed the “MOVIE THEATER M&MS” card in its spot among the forty-six other cards. He put the recipe card in his back pocket, took the comforter off the bed and walked down the hall to the laundry room.

* * *

“Fiona...box of M&Ms, please.” Fiona – that’s what he called her because that’s what her nametag said, which would have been standard operating procedure for anyone who walked up to the concession counter for the first or second time – anyone who didn’t come here at approximately the same time on the same day of the week thereby purchasing concessions from the same worker on a regular basis.

She wondered why he didn’t notice that she changed her nametag more often than they changed the popcorn. Other customers noticed often enough, but most didn’t. What was strange to her was that he always said her name deliberately: “Laura...box of M&Ms, please.” “Sam...box of M&Ms, please.” “Chris...box of M&Ms, please.” “Janey...box of M&Ms, please.” She hadn’t started changing her nametag to fuck with people, but it did kind of bug her that he so flippantly dismissed her efforts. She wouldn’t have given it a second thought if he was like the 95 percent of other customers who didn’t give the wench behind the counter a second thought or even a first. But, what the fuck? Was he just crazy or was it possible that he could so automatically read off people’s nametags each week that he wouldn’t be able to tell if one of the hundred or so random names changed each week. Or maybe he thought it was different people working each time. She decided that was probably the case. She did change her hairstyle like every goddamn day.

Most people never thought about the concession lady after they were done with her. Most people didn’t realize that there were often long periods of time when there were no movies about to start and therefore no movie-goers reluctantly buy her over-priced wares. Her first few weeks there she would spend this time wiping the glass part of the counter, straightening the large, jumbo, and super cups and pre-filling the jumbo,

super, and ultimate bags with popcorn for the next rush. After the honeymoon period of her job she instead filled the time coming up with her next nametag and reading – magazines or books depending on her mood. Sundays always seemed to be book days though. This Sunday she forgot to bring a new book, and since she had finished her previous book last week, she decided to wipe down the counters and prepare for the rush for old time’s sake.

The cups were in pretty good order so she skipped right to the bags of popcorn. Her almost two years of experience had taught her very little about life and humanity save this: people always want butter on their popcorn. Only about half asked for it, but they all wanted it. Their reasons for not ordering were divided fairly evenly between forgetting to ask, not wanting to pay the extra fifty cents, and dieting. But any one of the people who fit into these categories would be pleasantly surprised to have “accidentally” received butter.

She had thought this before, but it was time to act on this truism. While pre-filling the popcorn bags, she put butter in each, filling each bag halfway, then putting in a squirt and proceeding to fill the rest with popcorn followed by another squirt. She pictured a woman watching the previews eating popcorn with butter for the first time since she was in college because she thought she was five pounds overweight. She pictured an uncle and his nephew sharing buttered popcorn, a smile on the uncle’s face because he saved the fifty cents. It was unlike her to take pride in anything, let alone her job, as she felt it was an unhealthy habit. But, she would have to admit that she felt a tingle of it as she made this one small piece of the world right for once.

Still on her mini-high, she brought the sponge and No-Streak out around to the front of the counter to finish her bid for employee of the month. Out front of the counter she was met with a score of receipts. She would be the first to admit that it was ridiculous to provide a receipt for Ju-Ju-Bees, but that was no excuse for people to just throw them on the ground; there was a garbage can right there. She put down her bottle and picked up eighteen receipts, three movie stubs, a plastic bottle cap, an index card, a Jolly Rancher wrapper, and a dime. She tossed the receipts and stubs. She examined the bottle cap to see if it was a winner, but you had to enter the code from the cap on a website so she pitched it. She read the index card:

MOVIE THEATER M&MS: 7 red, 9 blue, 10 orange, 9 green, 6 yellow, and 5 brown from Maxine. Open them just before it gets dark.

She sniffed the Jolly Rancher wrapper as a test to see if she could guess the flavor. She tried to wonder about the index card, but there were no logical questions to wonder about – the best she could manage was a sort of long “huh?” She walked about twenty five feet down each of the paths to the theaters near the concession stand to see if she could find any more. Upon returning she threw the Rancher wrapper away, forgetting to guess its flavor.

As went back behind her counter, she heard the door to the theater immediately to her right open forcefully and for a moment the sound of Eddie Murphy’s voice. It was the Sunday afternoon regular. He had his eyes on the floor while we walked in erratic patterns that reminded her of birds flocking. He was mumbling to himself. He flocked toward the counter.

“Say, you haven’t seen a…”

“Nope.”

He paused for a moment and looked up from the floor. “You haven’t seen a little white card, about this big.” He used the thumb and index finger from each hand to make a rectangle.

“Nope. No, I haven’t. Sorry.”

“Okay.” He returned to his search of the floor.

As he made his way toward the ticketing office, she pulled the card out of her back pocket and read it again. She knew whose card it was, but the significance still eluded her. She decided to return it to him...after she copied it down word for word. She knelt below the counter and opened a drawer near the ground and sifted through to find a pen and anything to write on. The pen she could find but there wasn’t anything to write on – just condiment packets and a bunch of their Shrek gimmick straws. She decided to use a napkin. When she stood up, the man was back at the counter still moving his mouth as though mumbling but not making any noise.

“Do you have a pen and paper?”

She handed him the pen.

“Can I use one of those smaller popcorn bags?”

She held it up. “The large?”

He held out his hand and she passed him the bag. He tore off a piece approximately the size of the index card and handed the rest back to her. He began to write on the scrap, as he did so, he dictated his own writing under his breath. She turned to throw the bag away in the trash behind the counter and pulled out the index card and held it in front of her stomach so it would be shielded from him. His dictating was spot

on. There was no reason to give up the card now; he seemed to have been able to remember the information.

“Thanks, Fiona.” He left the pen on the counter and walked back to his theater. That night he would pick up another pack of index cards and make two more sets, one to keep at home, filed with his bill statements, the other he would put in the bottom of his parents’ junk drawer the next time he went over for dinner.

* * *

Ten, ten, ten, twenty, ten, ten, ten...ten. He was beginning to doubt that the hole for the fifty was any bigger than the ball. Of course it had to be. He had gotten four into the fifty slot in one game once. Four out of eight, it was a goddamn miracle – or at least he thought so at the time. If only he had known that he would be here two years later trying to repeat the immaculate Skee Ball game, maybe he would have missed a few on purpose. It seemed like the harder he tried, the worse he got.

“Come on baby, you see that? That’s your home, that’s where you belong.”

Ten.

He took the next wooden ball from the trough and held it with both hands in front of his face. “Your little buddy, that last one, he told me that you couldn’t get into the fifty hole. He said you’ve never done it before...he said it scared you.”

Ten.

He pulled the next ball out and the remaining four made a clap as they slid down the chute to replace it. He took the ball with interlocked fingers, palms on either side and

squeezed it as hard as he could. There was a dull pain in his hands and he quit almost immediately. He turned and sat on the edge of the machine's ramp. He held the ball up in the sunlight from the theater lobby's windows. It really was a beautiful thing, deceptively light. He wondered if new Skee Ball machines used plastic balls or if these wooden balls were still the norm. He suddenly had the feeling that these balls were old friends, friends of his, and once, friends of hers. He wasn't going to crack, not now, not sitting on a goddamn Skee Ball machine.

He stood, turned, and rolled. Ten.

He spoke under his breath. "You little fuckers." He took each ball from the chute with crazed meticulousness and placed them one by one in the bottom of his t-shirt, which he held like a basket. Upon collecting all four, he stepped up onto the ramp and walked up to the scoring area. He took a ball, bent down to reach under the netting and placed the ball into the fifty slot. Anti-climactically, it slid in, he leaned back to make sure his score jumped to ninety. It did. He gently placed the remaining three balls into the hole and waddled back down the ramp to collect his tickets. He half expected there to be whole gathering of children, perhaps a boy scout troop on field trip waiting at the bottom for him, their entire paradigm of the Skee Ball challenge crushed. But to his slight disappointment, no one seemed to pay attention to his triumphant waddle back to the realm of mortal men, who were but pawns at the whim of the Skee Ball fates.

He walked away, leaving the tickets behind for some kid to find, as he always did. His mind was still with that wooden skee ball as he queued up for the concession stand. Remembering it, it felt not like his hands were around the ball, but instead it was himself wrapped around it – not his body exactly, but also not exactly his mind. The feeling was

fading and he struggled to hold onto it. Trying to keep his mind from straying away from the feeling, trying not to let any of the senses of his current body intrude, he soon was distracted by the trying to focus itself and he found himself faced with the concession lady.

“Marla...box of M&Ms, please.”

“I’m sorry sir, we’re out.” He looked down through the glass counter, sure enough there was nothing but duds and skittles. He raced to count the number of colors represented on the cover of the skittles box. Quickly abandoning that idea, he checked his watch.

“Ah...When did you guys run out?” He kicked into conversation auto-pilot while he weighed his options. Going to the gas station next door would be pointless as they didn’t have the M&Ms in the box package. Somehow it was determined that the paper box was only to be used by the movie crowds. He could go to the Oakview theater. He took out his recipe card, it didn’t say...

“Hey wait. I think I saw...” Marla started opening the cupboards beneath the popcorn machine and rooting around. She closed those and moved over to the next set. “I thought so.” She stepped back to the counter and brandished a box of M&Ms.

“What were they doing down there?”

“Ohh, these?” She shook the box like a maraca. “I was gonna have these for lunch the other day, but I had some Sour Patch Kids instead.”

He reached his hand toward his back pocket.

She clomped the box onto the counter. “This one’s on the house.”

He continued to pull out his wallet. “Oh, thanks, but that’s okay.”

“No, no, it’s cool...seriously.”

“Nah, I’d feel better.” He put three bucks down on the counter.

“Kay, enjoy your film.” She handed him his three quarters.

* * *

She had been giddy, or as close to giddy as she ever got, about her altered box of M&Ms all day. Part of her excitement was the end to the mystery of the meaning behind the index card she had found. And another, perhaps bigger part, was wondering if her ruse would hold up. There were so many things that could go wrong. What if he didn’t show up? Would her manager catch on to the sudden disappearance of the M&M boxes in the counter that she had stashed? Would her patron open the wrong end and be able to tell that it had been glued shut? Would she be able to lie to his face?

These things had consumed her mind all morning, but she had gotten through it all without a hitch. All that was left was to slip into the theater and watch his reaction. There were no customers at her counter and the only non-employees in the lobby were a couple of kids playing the skill claw game. She walked to the shut doors of his theater. She was adept at moving through the aisles without making a noise. It always annoyed her when she was at a movie and someone left to go to the bathroom, tromping down the aisle the whole way. She found the secret was to give a little half jump at the end of every step – right as her foot hit the ground. She looked for her man as she walked. She almost walked past him before she saw him; he was sitting very near the back of the theater. She stopped abruptly and turned into the row two behind his.

As she walked behind him, she had the overwhelming feeling that she was a stranger here. He was shaking out a handful, she could hear as she tried to choose her seat. She had passed the seat directly behind his and now she was getting farther and farther away, but she did not sit. Each seat seemed too close – she had wanted to observe the scene and each seat felt as though it were part of this set. She was the director in her mind, not an actor. She continued all the way to the aisle and out of the theater.

She reflected on her trip through for the next hour and a half. She decided that she didn't regret doctoring that box. But there was some enigmatic feeling that she soaked up while walking past him, something that was drying off now, but still lingered. There was just too much in that place and time. She was glad to have escaped it, but now curious as to whether she could have endured there longer.

As the people filed out of the doors, she watched for her man. He did not come until well after all of the others had left. She tried not to look at him as he passed. He did not look at her.

“Hey, thanks for the candy. It was...perfect.”

“Anytime.”