Things Blow Up

Michael Weiss
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Even Monty Python gets tiresome after a while.

That’s what Alan Raitt said to himself as he sat on the ragged couch in his sparsely-furnished living room. After three days of nothing but videotapes of *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, British comedy starts to lose its charm. In fact, it starts to really piss you off.

Episode after episode, the same stupid jokes, the same repetitive clichés. The knight in shining armor with a rubber chicken. The men dressed in drag. The stupid animation, the stupid news anchormen, the stupid links, the stupid explosions...

The explosions. Every single episode, something exploded. The penguin on the TV set. The self-defense instructor teaching "how to defend yourself when attacked with fresh fruit." The people, houses and cities in the "How Not To Be Seen" sketch. In one episode, the "Mr. Neutron" episode, the whole world got blown up. Alan didn’t think it was funny. Not at all. He thought it was all too realistic.

"And now for something completely different," he said out loud. "Peace and quiet." He pushed the "off" button on the VCR’s remote control, then hurled it out the window -- neglecting to first open it. The sound of the shattering glass immediately made him regret it; it sounded like a shrill voice, scolding him for his willfulness.

"There you go again," he chided himself. "Translating your anger into an act of physical destruction. What would your mother say if she saw that?"

Of course, he knew the answer to that. The last time he talked to his mother they had gone into it in detail. They hadn’t started out talking about his destructive behavior; actually, it was self-destructive behavior she was concerned about.

"Alan, honey," she had said with an affection that didn’t ring true, "I’m worried about you. All you do is sit in your apartment drinking all day long. Why don’t you go out more?" Her voice over the phone sounded plaintive and whiny. He hated that.

"Why should I go out? I’ve got everything I need right here."
"But it's not healthy, sweetheart. You should find yourself a nice girl."

Great. That again. "Look, Mom, I've told you before I'm not interested in finding 'a nice girl'. Besides, I can't leave my apartment." As soon as he said it he knew it was a mistake.

"What do you mean, you can't leave your apartment?"

Don't ask me that, he thought. "It's too dangerous," he said.

"What do you mean, it's too dangerous?"

Goddammit, bitch, will you just leave me alone? "It's dangerous because if I go outside, I might get mad at something, okay?"

"So why can't you get mad at something? It's not healthy to keep anger bottled up inside. My analyst told me --"

"I don't care what your fucking analyst told you," he screamed. "There's a difference, O.K.? You can get mad at something and not have to worry about the consequences! You can get as pissed off as you want and it doesn't matter because there's a difference! The difference is that when you get mad at something, it doesn't fucking explode! When you get mad at somebody, you don't have to worry about whether or not you might have just killed him! When you -- " Suddenly he realized that his mother wasn't saying anything. Was it simply a stunned silence, or...? Oh, shit. "Mom? Mom! Oh no, Christ, Mom, I'm sorry, please, God, let her be okay..." There was no answer. He hung up and dialed 911. Fifteen minutes later -- it seemed like forever -- he got a call back.

"Mr. Raitt? Officer Galloway here. Your mother seems to have suffered a stroke. The ambulance is taking her to the hospital right now. Would you like us to come and take you to her, or -- " Alan hung up before the officer could finish. He ran to his dictionary and looked up "stroke."

stroke. -- n. 10b an attack of paralysis caused by injury to the brain when a blood vessel ruptures or becomes blocked.

"Rupture." That meant an explosion. He had done it again.

Alan looked at the broken glass on the floor and thought about that night when his world shattered. That was the final confirmation that told him he was too evil to be allowed out. He had known before that he was dangerous, but now it was certain beyond any doubt.

He first began to suspect at a young age. When he was ten he found a copy of The Anarchist's Cookbook in his older brother's room. He didn't know what an
"anarchist" was; he thought it meant something like "gourmet," a word he had just learned a few short days ago. He assumed that this cookbook had some great recipes in it; after all, it was his brother’s, and his brother was perfect. Everybody knew it. Alan loved his brother so much that sometimes it hurt when people told him he wasn’t as good. What really hurt was that it was true. He wasn’t as good, and he knew it.

But here, now, was a chance to do something really great for his brother. He would make one of his brother’s favorite recipes for him. Wouldn’t he be surprised! He opened to a page at random and read it. It seemed like a weird kind of recipe. Most of the ingredients were things he had in his chemistry set, and some of the other stuff was in the kitchen. He assembled it all and followed the directions as best as he could. Then he put it in his brother’s room and waited for him to get home from his date.

His brother came home, stinking drunk. "Hey, you little shit," he said, "What the hell are you doing up? It’s way past your bedtime. Boy, is Mom gonna whip you when I tell her."

Alan’s eyes grew wide. "Please, Dave, don’t tell her!"
"Yeah, she’s gonna beat the crap out of you. With a belt. I’d be shitting in my pants if I were you."

"Come on, Dave. Hey, look, I made a present for you. It’s in your room."
"Present? What could you give me that I would want? It’s probably something you made yourself, or something dumb like that. Right?"

Alan was confused. He had never seen his brother this hostile before. "Yes... I mean no." His eyes filled with tears. "I mean, I made it myself, but it’s not dumb. You’re really gonna like it. Honest you are." A note of pleading entered his voice. Even as he said it, he knew it wasn’t true.

"Oh, now you’re crying. You total wimp. Hey, you know I never really liked you? I just pretended to so you wouldn’t cry. ’Cause I knew you were a crybaby. And here you go again. Upset ’cause I don’t want your stupid present."
"I am not a crybaby," he screamed, his tears belying his words. "And I don’t care whether you want my present or not. I hate you! I wish you were dead!" He ran into his room, sobbing.

He listened for a while. He heard his brother walk into his own room and close the door. He heard him say, "Jesus Chri -- " Then he heard the explosion and the breaking glass.

It wasn’t until later that he pieced it all together. His brother had blown up because Alan was mad at him. What else could it have been?

That was when the first cracks appeared in his world.
Alan swept up the broken glass. That was a mistake, he said, throwing the remote control through the window like that. He shouldn’t have gotten angry. The TV might have blown up, and then what would he do to kill the time?

Music hath charms to cool the savage breast, he thought. He picked up his walkman and popped in Pink Floyd’s *The Wall.* The excitement and energy of the tape built and built, from "The Thin Ice" to "Another Brick In The Wall Part II" to "Young Lust." As always, when he reached the apartment-destroying scene in "One Of My Turns" he had to turn off the tape. He was afraid he’d get too deep into it and blow up his apartment building.

"Okay. Music’s out. Monty Python’s out. What’s left?" He drummed his fingers against the couch. "Food. I’ll order food, that’s what I’ll do!" He picked up the phone and ordered a pizza. The voice on the other end said it would be there in thirty minutes. Alan made sure that they got his address and order correct -- he repeated it twice, and had the voice read it back to be sure. He didn’t want to take any chances. He knew how dangerous that could be.

It was his sixteenth birthday, the age his brother had been when he got blown up. Alan remembered his youthful delusion about the cause of the accident. Of course, he knew now that he didn’t really cause the explosion. It was just a freak accident -- the wiring, or something. His parents never told him what the fire department said was the cause. But it certainly wasn’t him. It was just his guilt feelings mixed with his anger that made him believe that. He took a psych class; he knew these things. He was more mature now.

Knowing was one thing. Feeling was something else. Try as he might, he couldn’t shake off the feeling of guilt.

His parents were upstairs, talking about Dave. He knew that’s what they were talking about because his mom was crying, and she only cried when they talked about Dave. Alan wasn’t important enough to waste tears on. If only he could have blown up instead of Dave. He could hear snatches of conversation if he listened hard enough.

"-- course you miss him, honey. I miss him, too. But you’ve got to stop blaming Alan." That was Alan’s father.

"But the fire department said -- " That was his mother.

"I know what they said about the cause of the accident. And I know the chemicals were missing from Alan’s chemistry set, and that we found that book in his room. But -- " the rest of the sentence was too quiet to make out. Alan strained, and a few seconds later he heard his mother again.
"--know I shouldn’t, but I just can’t help it. I can’t forgive Alan for what he’s done."

"Well, for god’s sake don’t say anything to him about it. He still doesn’t know, and I hope he never finds out he’s responsible for his brother’s death."

The cracks in Alan’s world widened and spread. The guilt came flooding through them. It was true. He killed his brother simply by becoming angry.

His parents came downstairs and informed him that they were going out for dinner -- without him. Alan nodded dumbly. They left him money to order pizza, and left without looking back.

His mind awhirl, he ordered two smalls with green pepper.

Half an hour later, he got a call.

"Mr. Raitt? Romanik’s pizza."

"Yes, I was wondering where you were. You’re late, you know. That means I get the pizza free."

"Well, actually, Mr. Raitt, it seems that the address you gave us doesn’t exist. You must have misspoken over the phone. So since it was your fault, the thirty-minute guarantee doesn’t hold."

"What do you mean, I misspoke? Dammit, I told you 4827 Riverside, and that’s what it is!"

"No, Mr. Raitt, you said 4837. I have it written down right here."

"I don’t care what you have written down! I know what I said!"

"Look, Mr. Raitt, rules are rules. You misspoke, and you’ll have to accept that."

"I did not misspeak! Listen, you jerk, you better get me my pizza here fast or I’ll have your head on a platter!" He slammed down the phone.

Twenty-five minutes later the doorbell rang. It was the pizza man.

"Mr. Raitt?" said the delivery boy. "Here are your two larges with pepperoni. That’ll be $8.95."

All his anger and frustrations exploded inside him. "NO!" screamed Alan. "Can’t you assholes get anything right? It was two smalls with green pepper! God damn it!" He slammed the door with all his strength in the delivery boy’s face, accidentally breaking the window. He looked at the broken glass for a minute before he marched to the phone. He dialed Romanik’s. The line was out of service.

Off in the distance he heard sirens. He went to the window and looked out over the city. Off in the distance -- in the direction of Romanik’s Pizza -- he saw flames crackling toward the sky.
This time they got his order right, and on time, too. As he ate, he stared at the broken glass in the dustpan. The light was reflecting off it in brilliant swirls of color. It was like a million rainbows locked inside his room. It reminded him of the stained glass in the church where his brother and mother had their funeral services. He reached out to touch it. The dark crimson of his blood made a striking contrast with the soft colors in the glass. It was very pretty.

After eating he read the TV listings in the newspaper. (He never read anything but the "Lifestyle" sections and the comics. The news might make him angry.) There was a political debate on CBS. He used to love politics. He followed world affairs with a passion. But not anymore. It was too risky.

One night, furious over one political issue or another, he went to sleep and had a nightmare. In the nightmare, he had gotten angry at President Reagan and blew up the White House. The Pentagon, assuming it was an act of the Soviets, launched all their missiles. The Soviets responded in kind, and the world got blown up -- like in "Mr. Neutron." Alan woke up in a cold sweat. That was when he decided he was too dangerous to roam around free. He was like a rabid dog -- you never knew when he might go crazy and kill somebody. From that moment on, he never left his apartment. He was too filthy to associate with decent people.

He noticed a strange sensation in his right hand and looked down to discover that he was squeezing a piece of the glass. He dabbed at the blood with a napkin and returned his attention to the TV.

The saccharine-sweetness of The Cosby Show made him want to retch. He had to change the channel, or else he would get mad. The same was true of the artsy-fartsy Days and Nights of Molly Dodd. He caught, for a brief second, a news report, and then quickly changed the channel before he could see what it was about. No sense in taking chances. He finally turned off the TV altogether. He looked at the blank picture tube for a while and thought about how different glass looked when it wasn’t broken.

He tried listening to a different tape on his walkman, but he had heard it all before -- the same songs, over and over, were really starting to get on his nerves.

He flipped through his sparse collection of reading material -- a few comic books, a couple of science fiction magazines, and the Douglas Adams Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy novels. Hey, now. He used to love those books. Maybe they would be safe.

He started to read it and couldn’t get past the introduction. It was too silly; what did this stuff have to do with real life? He couldn’t understand why he had ever liked it in the first place.
He was growing desperate, now, for things to do. He didn’t have the talent to paint (although he found himself absent-mindedly doodling with the blood on his hands), or write, or compose a piece of music. He didn’t have the smarts to invent something. He was worthless. He couldn’t listen to music, or watch TV, or read. He had ruled solitaire out long ago -- it was too frustrating when he lost.

Madly, he started to pull at his hair, smearing the red on his forehead. What was he to do? He had to stay in this apartment for the rest of his life -- he had to find something to occupy his time. What was he to do? What? What?

"AAAAAAAAARRRRRRGGGGHHHHH!!!" he screamed. He couldn’t take it. What would be his salvation? How could he redeem himself? Was there to be no absolution for his sins? No. No. There had to be a way out. There had to be.

And, of course, there was. Finally, he realized what it was that he really hated the most of all. The one thing that he had always truly, truly despised more than anything else in the world.

He went to the oven and turned on the gas. He stuck his head in it.

A few days later, the police, alerted by a neighbor who noticed the smell, broke down the door. It made a spark.

The explosion could be seen for miles around.

The glass in his apartment windows fell to the ground below.

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