

Suburb Roarers

by Hanna Brown

It went something like this:

Xclaim, who is the best and only amateur rapper in Elmhurst, Illinois, lives in a cabinet under the bathroom sink. He doesn't pay rent. Rather, the space is subject to a profitless, triangular agreement between Xclaim himself, Xclaim's mother (owner of the cabinet/the bathroom around the cabinet/the house around the bathroom), and an extra bottle of lilac shampoo. This bottle can't be left lying around; it's got to be stored some place and Xclaim is not very tall or fat so there is space left for the bottle, and for surplus towels, and other things like that. You know, loofahs. Lotions ...

Oh, and it would be rude to discount Fred's role in all of this. Fred — this is Xclaim's boyfriend — keeps the whole arrangement running smoothly by buying weed from a neighborhood dealer every other Monday. This is as per Xclaim's request. It comes at great inconvenience to Fred, as the dealer operates exclusively out of the corner bus stop, and is 15 years old, and so requires Fred to be out of bed and at the transaction site before her bus arrives at promptly at 6:30 AM.

Post-purchase, Fred must roll the weed into joints tight enough to fit through the keyhole of Xclaim's cabinet. As luck would have it, the cabinet is either an antique or inefficiently designed, so the keyhole is approximately a dime's width across, shaped to fit one of those thick skeleton keys. Fred has little experience in the way of drugs, doing them or preparing them to be done, so he appreciates the leeway.

Also Fred has red hair, and buttons his shirts all the way to the collar, and is gay, but is a very nice young man anyway.

Xclaim is gay, too, of course, but this isn't why he stays under the sink. More likely it's because the cramped dark of the cabinet makes an excellent hotbox. That's just a guess, though. You can never be sure of a child's motivations, can you? Especially not once he's hit his mid-twenties.

None of this cabinet business would be cause for worry, except that it's all gone on far longer than anyone expected. A month or two might be within reason, but almost five years? One could assume Xclaim is getting rather thin, is malnourished, possibly even dying. Though, obviously, it's not as if he doesn't emerge from his hiding place to brush his teeth or to pick at the plates of food his father leaves at the base of the cabinet three times a day.

He showers regularly, too. Maybe even excessively. He is a very clean boy.

After all, the cabinet is his home, and who doesn't leave home every once in a while? Who doesn't visit neighbors on occasion? The only difference in this case is that Xclaim's

neighbors are a toilet plunger and a bar of soap, and neither is much in the way of emotional support. Plus, he's been eating less and less lately, so there is some immediate cause for concern.

In short: Please come. Please help.

Sandra, who is Xclaim's mother and Gabriel's wife, sends her best wishes and would appreciate a prompt response, if it's not too much trouble. Gabriel would have sent this e-mail himself, but ... he didn't.

PS Sandra's not trying to schmooze, haha, but Xclaim would love the company. It would make him very happy, not to mention an expert might be able knock some sense into him.

Or ...

That was the gist, anyway. It had been a very strange e-mail — one that had sat, unread, in Uma's inbox until this morning. That was when she'd finally managed the courage to touch her computer again. Sandra, the sender of the e-mail, might be her sister-in-law, but it's been so long since she's spoken to her brother Gabriel she's not sure they're siblings anymore. Uma does remember him mentioning a wife and a kid ... albeit not a kid named Xclaim, but the name might be made up, or chosen, or she might just be misremembering the e-mail.

That's likely, considering she's recalling its contents from memory, from where she's curled on the couch with her face turned in to the seam and her breath stale from the hours it's spent circulating between her mouth and the back cushion. Her laptop battery is in the red, and she won't risk logging into her Gmail in case one of the sites, or maybe more than one, maybe all of the sites, has attempted to contact her today. She might vomit if she sees another caps-locked subject line.

And then she does vomit, just thinking about it all, but that at least forces her off the couch and over to the sink. It's the first time she's moved all day. 4 o'clock now: still early enough that sun lights the whole inside of her apartment, and thank God, because she's practicing for when the landlord cuts her electricity.

This means no charging her phone. Just as well, since after the first notification she smashed her screen against the corner of her microwave. Just once, because she isn't crazy, and because the cracks across the screen made her sick with guilt the instant she saw them. And it was an old phone, anyway. And she'd lost.

She never lost.

Before last week, notifications from ESPN, TheScore, Team Stream, and dozens of other apps would ping up on her phone 50, 60 times per day, and she *never* lost. These notifications were the final scores of most games of most state and national teams of most sports, though she avoided horse racing out of some misplaced sense of loyalty to human athleticism. Well, that, and the fact that when she was eight years old a petting zoo horse had clopped backwards onto

her foot, crushing her pinkie toe. The toe purpled and shriveled like a raisin, then changed its mind, swelling so large it stopped fitting in her shoe and had to be amputated.

Her parents, before her mother died and her father moved somewhere the Midwest winter couldn't reach him, had teased her about the toe thing. Unfor-toe-nate Uma, they'd called her. So they could go fuck themselves.

Maybe the bias wasn't about human athleticism at all, then, especially considering she knows next to nothing about sports and doesn't plan on learning. Before last week, the notifications had served no other purpose than to remind her of how unbelievably lucky she was. They were proof of how the universe was reimbursing her for her toe, of how the universe was paying her rent, her electricity bill, her Netflix subscription, her everything. The universe had been generous.

She never lost.

She'd placed her first bet five years ago at the insistence of her co-workers. The Cubs were playing in the World Series for the first and presumably last time in years, and everyone had decided to contribute to an office-wide betting pool, hoping a larger bet might mean a larger return. As this was something of a team building activity (or that's how it was described to her), Uma pitched in, and when the Cubs won game two, the pot was split 17 ways. Uma made 30 dollars. In the weeks that followed, she bet here and there for fun or to ingratiate herself in office conversation. Online sites made it easy to wager, easy to win.

And she did win. More than she thought she would, more than probability should allow. It was a long time before she let herself believe that it was more than some blessed coincidence, but eventually the reality of it became unavoidable: every single game turned out in her favor. No strategy, no thought having gone into player stats or trades or records, she always won. It just happened. Soon, her winnings were so great that she quit her office job, liquidized everything she had, left all of her assets to balance like spinning plates on football championships and lacrosse games. All of this because there was no risk, because it was fun, because she never lost. Until last week.

That was when NowTopBet e-mailed to inform her that an afternoon USTA match somewhere in Central Arizona hadn't turned out in her favor. Over the next few hours, notifications began stacking up on her phone screen, none of which she bothered to read or swipe away because she could guess what they said. It was like that first loss cut the taut, inexplicable string between her and whatever divine or ridiculous force had been dictating her success over the past five years. Something in her went instantly slack. It became difficult to move.

Uma is 51, now, and she can't pay her rent this month; her apartment is darkening fast, a shadow line moving down the wall to crush her as the winter sun sets early. It will only set earlier tomorrow. Her mother is dead, and her father is old, and anyway he once had a good laugh over her missing pinkie toe, so he can go straight to hell.

She wishes she had some way to call Sandra, to apologize for her lateness in responding to the e-mail, to say that she'll be over in an hour and that she hopes she might be able to help Xclaim in some small way. But her phone is cracked and dead.

Well. She'll just have to tell Sandra in person. She rinses the vomit out of her sink, then keeps the faucet running to fill a cloudy glass of water. She takes 25 Tylenol and a long drink. Locks her apartment door, ducks into her Toyota, and drives from Chicago to Elmhurst, careful to keep to the back roads in case her fingers start to go numb.

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By the time she reaches the suburbs, it's snowing heavily enough that the white siding of Xclaim's house blurs into the ground and the ground blurs into the sky. Uma parks as close to the house as she can manage, half-breaking, half-sliding into an open space on the side of the road before continuing the rest of the way on foot. The windows of the house cut squares of orange light through the snow, and she concentrates on those squares, follows them until she makes it to the front porch. Closer to the house now, she can make out the sharp white point of its mock-tudor roof outlined against the grey sky, and she's still looking upward when she starts to climb the little stairway to the porch. But the first step disappears as soon as she gets a foot on it and she slips so hard she knocks a front tooth out on second step.

She doesn't scream, just chokes a bit and puts a hand over her mouth, pulling herself up so she's sitting on the porch. Blood warms her bottom lip. The cold wood soaks through her jeans as she sits and sucks at the pit in her gum, waiting for the shock to subside and the blood flow to stop. After 10 minutes or so, the taste of salt starts to fade into the other (normal, bitter) tastes in her mouth, and she stands up. Her lip is swollen, but no one would dare bring it up in case it was just a raging cold sore. Her family wouldn't embarrass her by asking if she was all right. She just won't smile. When she talks, she'll just open her mouth as little as possible.

Sandra, Gabriel, and Fred The Boyfriend are there to meet her at the door with teeth bared and six welcoming arms that pull her inside and politely shuck her of her coat and shoes before she can so much as knock.

"Hey, long time no see! Oh my god! Did you get the e-mail?"

"It's *freezing* out there. Oh my goodness, oh my god, close the door, someone!"

"Is that Uma?"

"We were just wondering if you'd come!"

Then, someone asks her about the drive up. She doesn't think it's Fred who asks, because his mouth never leaves a smile and she's not sure she believes in ventriloquists. She's never seen one in real life, same as she's never seen a ghost or the Loch Ness Monster.

"My favorite and only sister," says someone else. That's definitely Gabriel. "How's the practice going?"

"It's going," Uma says, then laughs humorlessly, as though exasperated by the rigors of a nine-to-five job in the same way Gabriel must be exasperated by the rigors of his nine-to-five job.

On the off chance Uma finds herself speaking to someone — Gabriel, for example — and they ask after her job, she is a children's psychologist. She's chosen this as her cover because it allows her to avoid talking about her day to day routine, doctor-patient confidentiality being especially sensitive when it comes to screwed-up kids. It's just such a hassle, and so embarrassing, to explain how her main source of income for the past five years has been 'having impossibly good luck.' So she lies. She's a good liar, and this fiction she's built around herself hasn't been an issue in the past, but now Sandra and Gabriel genuinely seem to think that she can help their child.

It's a job Uma is singularly unqualified for, and it's the only one she thinks she might be able to do.

"I think I can help him," she says. When a hard shiver racks her body and her vision goes out of focus, Fred is there to steady her with his strong hands and his red hair — so bright it pulls her focus back to earth.

Fred says, "We were hoping you

aim? Oh, that's so wonderful. Thank you so much for coming," says
Sandra.

Uma ignores the broken sentences and continues to stare deep into Fred's hair, which she thinks must be a dye job or a crown of dying matches. Either way, it flickers.

"His name is ... Xclaim?" Uma says.

Sandra notes her hesitance, and so clarifies: "That's his musician name! Or something. I don't know. Kids!"

"How old is he?" Uma asks.

"26!"

"Can I see him?"

"Yes," Sandra begins, then corrects: "I — maybe." For a moment, her eyes are trained on something just above Uma's head, then they dart to her husband. They are tired eyes, dark, with lines around them. Her mouth hangs open for a few seconds before she says, "It really depends on how he's feeling. You can talk to him, though! We usually make time every night to sit outside his cabinet door and ask him about his day. And he says, 'I live a cabinet. All of my days are the same!' And so the conversation doesn't go very far."

"Having someone new here might make a difference, though," Fred says, before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a few lumpy joints. "Besides, he'll be wanting these."

"Well, I certainly don't know anything about that. Or — *those*," Sandra says, waving her hand dismissively, "but it's just about time for his dinner, so you can bring that to him as well. Come on through, all."

Uma can't feel it when Gabriel puts his hand on her shoulder. He steers her out of the entry way, through the warm living room full of patterned fabrics that set her head spinning, round the corner to the bathroom. She wonders what's happening to her. Or, she knows what's happening to her, but she wonders what it all looks like at the cellular level, wonders if her heart is really beating faster or if she's imagining that in the same way she's imagining Sandra's third and fourth arms, both of which are carrying plates of food. Chicken goulash, or chicken parmesan. Chicken something. Whatever it is, Uma soon finds it thrust into her hands. The smell turns her stomach.

"Just take that to him," Sandra says. "If he doesn't open the cabinet door, you can leave it sitting on the floor or on the vanity and he might eat it later."

"Take these, too," Fred says, handing Uma the joints.

"*Ahem*." Sandra's mouth tightens, but she doesn't protest.

Gabriel says, "If you need us, we'll be watching TV with Fred."

He claps an arm around Fred's shoulders, and the three leave Uma alone with the food and drugs, facing the closed bathroom door.

Uma opens her mouth, shuts it again, then knocks. No response. Putting her cheek to the door, she says, "Xclaim?"

Nothing. She takes the plate in one hand and slips the joints into her pocket so she's free to try the door handle. It turns, and the door opens slowly, soundlessly.

Other than the reflection of a hallway sconce in the mirror, it's dark in the bathroom, and she wonders if Xclaim ever turns the light on. Though why would he, if he spends most of his time below the sink?

"Xclaim?" she says again, closing the door behind her so the darkness is once again complete.

Something thumps inside the cabinet.

"Who is that?" a voice asks from behind the closed doors. This is Xclaim, muffled, but noticeably alarmed.

"It's Uma. Or, it's your aunt, I guess?" Uma kneels to the ground, setting the plate down near the wall and feeling her way over to the cabinet on her hands and knees. It's difficult to do in her present state, and her body is not as young as she wishes it were, but the sight deprivation actually helps calm her dizziness. Less sensory input to worry about. Her knees ache, but they would ache anyway, crawling around like this.

"Oh. I think I remember you," Xclaim says, and Uma follows his voice. "Or maybe I've just heard about you."

Uma tries to laugh. "It's been a long time, hasn't it?" she says. "I don't think I've seen you since you were a baby, if I've seen you at all. You had a different name — it's been years. I was wondering if I could come in and talk, just to catch up."

A beat passes and there is some hollow scraping from within the cabinet. A thunk, then: "Sure."

The cabinet door swings open. Uma can tell because the inside is somehow even darker than the rest of the bathroom, and she can make out the vague outline of Xclaim's body. He's curled up, but not uncomfortably so, with his hands wrapped around his knees and his head leaning up against the back wood of the cabinet. When he turns to make room for her, he fits easily on one side. Uma's nowhere near as tall as him, so she figures the other side will more than fit her. She feels out the door, opens it, climbs in, and creaks the door closed again.

For a minute, they sit in cramped, but comfortable silence.

"Oh," Uma says eventually, feeling out Xclaim's hand and pressing the joints into his palm. "I think I got these from Fred"

"Thanks," he says. There's movement and a rustling sound on his side of the cabinet, then a flash as he lights the end of one of the joints, the flame from his lighter illuminating his face for a moment. It's hard for Uma to tell what he looks like, though, with the smoke and the way the flame wavers.

"Your hands are really fucking sweaty," Xclaim says, snapping his lighter closed.

"Thank you," Uma says, genuinely, too fixated on his face to hear what he'd said.

He laughs.

And Uma laughs, because she's confused, and her head is pounding, and she doesn't know what else to do.

She says, "I'm surprised you let me in. You parents made you sound like some sort of hermit."

"Oh, I am, but I'm fine with other people coming in, if they fit." Xclaim exhales, and Uma coughs at the smell of smoke. He continues, "Plus, you asked. No one else asks. They all just want me out. Do you want some cough syrup? I'm going to drink some cough syrup, since it's in here."

"Um. No," Uma says. "And it's not so terrible for people to want you out, is it? There's a lot more to do outside. I think Fred wants to see you."

She thinks, offhandedly, that Fred could move into her apartment. Someone should. Fred could sleep in her bed, like he must be sleeping in Xclaim's bed now. But she was getting ahead of herself, too far into herself.

"Your parents want to see you," she adds.

"Did they ask you to come here?" Xclaim asks, not defensive, just curious.

Uma hears the thick glugging of the cough syrup leaving its bottle, and she nods, though she knows Xclaim can't see. "Yes. They think I'm a child psychologist."

"Are you a child psychologist?"

"No. I'm not anything," she says. "But I do think you should try and get out once in a while. It's not healthy to stay in a place like this for so long, doing the same thing every day. Don't you get tired of people just bringing you things?"

"Yeah. I wish they would stop." Xclaim must take another drag, because smoke billows, growing thick again before seeping out through the keyhole and the thin crack between the cabinet doors.

"You'd leave if they stopped bringing you things?" Uma asks.

"No."

"But then you'd die."

"Maybe," Xclaim says. "But it's too bright outside. I've been in here so long, I think that if I left I'd die anyway, or, you know, go blind or something."

"That's ridiculous," Uma chastises. She's having a hard time feeling her arms and legs, but she feels her age acutely.

"It's what I think," Xclaim says.

"Well, what you think is ridiculous."

"The people in here agree with me," Xclaim says, moving around again, restless. Uma can see the orange tip of his joint bobbing up and down in the dark and the back of his shirt scratches against wood. "The people in here, they get what I'm trying to say — with my music and stuff."

"The people in here don't —" Uma falls silent, stiffens. "The people in here?"

"The people in here," Xclaim repeats.

"The people in here can hear you talking about them," says a voice that belongs to neither Uma nor Xclaim.

"*Jesus Christ*," Uma hisses, starting violently. Suddenly, there is a presence around her, the feeling of a solid body near her, of solid bodies near her, their fingertips brushing her and an energy buzzing between her skin and theirs like the feedback off microphones held too close together.

"See?" Xclaim laughs.

"No, I can't," says Uma. A hand wraps around her throat, squeezes, then is gone. "Who was that? Or — who are they?"

"People like me who thought it might be easier to live inside a cabinet than outside a cabinet."

"Yeah, we heard his music and we liked it. So we live here now." This voice comes from somewhere above her, and its owner reaches out to touch Uma's face. There are three inches between the top of her head and the top of the cabinet, and she's not sure she believes in ventriloquists.

"How did they hear your music in the first place if you never go out and perform?" Uma asks.

"Obviously, I have a SoundCloud," says Xclaim.

"Yeah. Obviously, he has a SoundCloud," echo the new voices.

"You have to get out of here," Uma breathes out, reaching through the dark to grab at Xclaim's shoulder. Her eyes are finally starting to adjust, and she can just make out the straight line of his mouth, the bottle of cough syrup cradled in his hands like someone's going to try to take it from him. There is no one here to take it from him.

"There are so many of us," Xclaim says. "Why would I leave?"

"Because you're dying in here. Because people can't survive in places like these. Cabinets aren't meant to sustain life, that's why we keep towels in them!"

"I'm not dying," he snaps at her — the first time he's raised his voice.

"You will be."

"You don't know that," Xclaim says. "You can't prove it."

"I can. I will," says Uma.

And he laughs at her.

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She sleeps in the cabinet with Xclaim. No one comes to check on her or to ask her when she'll be going home, which is fine. She knows she won't be going home. Halfway through the night, the Others leave, but Uma feels their presence come and go like a wave, back and forth and back again, until there is a constant churning deep inside of her. Her forehead begins to sweat, and she wipes at it every so often to keep the drops from falling onto Xclaim, who has since turned his face into her shoulder and fallen asleep.

Hours later, just as the first rays of light start to filter through the cabinet's keyhole, Xclaim lifts his head.

"This is the best part," he mutters. His internal rhythms must wake him at this time every day. In the half-dark, Uma can finally see the whole of his baby face, with its round cheeks and glassy eyes and white drool crust around its mouth, which hangs open as though sleep still has hold of it. In her own mouth, Uma touches her tongue to the pit where her front tooth used to be, still sore and stinging but already congealed over to staunch the bleeding, to prevent bacteria from getting inside. These are wonderful bodies, she knows somewhere in her fluttering heart.

"This is the best part," Xclaim repeats.

Uma watches the pink, dime-sized sunrise. Looks around to see that sunrise reflected in one, or two, or twenty pairs of eyes, and she finds herself wishing — despite herself — that she were outside, where the air was colder and the view better. But she's chosen the wrong time to become sentimental. Her stomach starts to burn and her hands start to shake in full force and, for the first time years, maybe in her life, she has something to prove.