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## Des

Jason Ockert

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## **DES**

"AARGHH," I SAY INTO THE microphone, trying to sound convincing. "A-hoy, Mateys, let's blast them Tigers out of their hides!"

I fire the cannon, Kaboom. The crowd flinches their shoulders in surprise, a few children cover their ears. A man wearing green applauds. The crowd erupts into cheers. Everybody loves football. I say some fiery words into the microphone. My wife, in the bleachers, looks uncomfortable on those metal bench-seats. I am on a makeshift boat wearing a patch and a bandana. I am a pirate, we are the Pirates. My son is on the sidelines where he will be the entire game. He's wearing a baseball hat backwards because he has no real need for a helmet, the coach never plays him. My daughter is in the car in part because of the black cat, I think. I'm not sure about this, she's a tough nut to crack. MaryLou asked me a week ago, in what I want to believe was the waning stage of our affair, "If the apocalypse was now but you and someone could be saved, who'd you choose?" Right.

The Glee Club made this boat, happily. It's pretty sturdy. There is a mast rising from the center of it with rungs. At the top of the mast is a circular platform large enough for a small brass cannon with a big punch, a microphone with a long cord running to a generator down on deck, me, gunpowder, and a fancy silver lighter with an engraved beaver on it. My teeth are large and friends have pointed it out. I keep the lighter in my breast pocket and am quick to light whatever is necessary. I have baggy pants and am overweight. They like me this way, the principal and coaches, but I refuse to grow a bushy beard. I told my superiors that I wouldn't be trivialized by traditional pirates, Blue Beard, Black Toes, whatever. I am simply myself, but a pirate. My family talked about names over dinner tonight before the game. We were eating pork; overcooked pork, not that I could do better: I couldn't, I've scorched soup. My son said Moses. He has turned religious since his grandfather died. My daughter said Des. Des, The Pirate. I had no idea what that meant, she's a tough nut to crack. My wife said she was filing for a divorce. I

told her that name was too long. What about just Chuck, my name, Chuck the Pirate, or Pirate Chuck Meanus? I passed the salt to my son, the pork needed something.

I am not a mascot full-time. I own a cigar shop downtown. I've saved enough money to make a commercial this winter. I have an idea for one: *Meanus, Meanus, Meanus Cigars, the meanest cigars in the whole damn town! Meanus with a junk-yard dog, Meanus with old King Kong!* I don't know. I may borrow the pirate get-up and wear the patch. The patch was my idea in the first place, it isn't one of the requirements. The principal, a woman without much of a mouth, told me the patch would impede my vision and I would topple from the mast and break my neck. She would not be responsible. I signed something in accordance.

I became the mascot out of desperation. My family has been falling apart. I can't relate to my kids. Well, my son is pretty normal, I suppose, but my daughter is a tough nut to crack. And there's the wife problem. I've been having trouble getting it up. We score, I Aarghh, Kaboom. The crowd cringes again, but not my wife, she saw it coming. She works at Bordt's Potato Chip Factory. I know the owner, Bordt, he's a fine man. I tried blaming my wife, mentioned that I can't make love when she smells like Sour Cream and Onions, or Barbecue. They're making Ketchup-flavored chips now but nobody is supposed to know this. It's a campaign secret, a marketing strategy. I asked Polly, my wife, about it. She wouldn't budge, but you can't lie about your odor. I told her Ketchup had no business in the bedroom. She made some snide comment about how I'd rarely been around, how denial didn't get me any harder, I didn't smell so great myself, nag, nag, nag. These things, of course, were true.

The Pirates try to run the option. It works, we score again, I fire the cannon. There aren't any balls in the thing, it's just gun powder and blanks. Below me I see girls twirling batons in scarlet tights. The band plays a fight song, the trumpet is off. I start a chant into the microphone: "Go Pirates, go. Go Pirates, go. Go Pirates, go." Mouths open and close.

Polly, my daughter, is in the car. She's named after my wife, obviously. This gets confusing so I call her PieDoll; my daughter, that is. I just call my wife Polly. We've never had pet names. I should give her one maybe, could spice things up in the bed-

room. My son, Hodge, is named after my wife's father. I haven't been one to argue, but he should have been named after me. Chucky, Chuck Jr., Charles the Second. Something honoring the father. I call him Tiger because when he was younger he was a scrapper. We're playing the Tigers today, so I won't be calling him that now. Could call him Des, Jr. Young Pirate Des? Sure don't know where PieDoll comes up with things.

My daughter is in the car because she crossed a black cat the other day before it was hit by our neighbor's car. She's convinced she is bad luck. She didn't cry and doesn't. Not even about the divorce. My son sobbed a little about that, thankfully. I told him, "There there." Then we arrived at school. Polly said she was staying in the car, we were all doomed. She is in the back seat of our cream car, passenger side. My wife slammed the door a little when she got out. Hodge hustled to the field for high-fives and the bench. I put my patch on and climbed to my roost, sullen.

My daughter is probably staring at the headrest in front of her in the empty car. She is counting to some specific number like fifty-five and then counting back to zero. She'll skip the number three because she doesn't like it. Her hands are in her lap. If there were an apocalypse and I could save someone else it would be Polly, my daughter. Practically, she's youngest and has the most life ahead of her. When she grows out of her bad luck phase she will do something important. She's bright. She once did a project on bees for her science class. The bees flew in concentric circles. They did tricks. One of the rowdy bees stung her on a cloudy afternoon. She had opened her umbrella by accident in our foyer that morning. It had just popped open. Polly is smarter than me, she's over my head, I seem to miss things. She came home from school and mentioned the sting. I found the tiny stinger and yanked it out, what else could I do? I told her it was just nature, or something. She said, "Bad luck." I said, "O.K., yeah, the umbrella this morning, but you're fine, aren't you PieDoll?" "Not bad luck for me," she said, "bad luck for the bees." The bee died, that's what they do after they sting. "Besides," she said, "I was angry and killed them all with a nasty insecticide. I was bad luck for them."

A hand off to number twenty-five, Alvin Hoagie, he sweeps

around the outside, breaks a tackle and scores, Kaboom; nobody flinches. I say into the microphone, "Go Pirates, go. Go Pirates, go." My son scowls up at me.

"What?" I say into the microphone.

He quickly turns around. It would be nice if his coach, Zan, was sleeping with my wife. Once she made cookies for the team. Oatmeal, I believe. Zan nearly ate them all. She didn't mind, even pointed out a crumb on his lip. It's not that I want my wife to be boinking the coach, I just think maybe we'd be even that way. I would feel better about MaryLou.

I met MaryLou at my cigar shop, almost two years ago. I don't smoke cigars myself, I just like the smell from other peoples' mouths. She bought a real whopper from Honduras, eight years old. I lit it up for her right there in the store. She introduced herself as Mary, mumble. She mumbles. She meant MaryLou, I learned later.

"Chuck Meanus, how do you do?"

I offered my hand for the shaking. She was working the cigar in her right hand so she stuck out her left hand. I took it with my left hand and mid shake she placed her pinky on my wedding ring. She mumbled something smoky.

"Yeah," I said, "yeah, I got one of them."

It, the relationship, evolved. I don't dance and we went dancing. I like her a lot and deny it. There's no other choice. MaryLou always understands, no pressure. She's got glasses and bobbed hair. She is not too thin and doesn't seem concerned. I know she is smarter than me, she graduated from college, and is a fine conversationalist. She allows me to think out loud. She'd make a fine psychologist but she works for a law firm. She doesn't smell like anything but herself. We've done seventy percent of the hotels in this town, almost always in the day. She said maybe she'd show up to the game later to see me in my cute uniform. I started to tell her no, my wife, but confrontation between them might help me sort things out somehow. If my wife turned psycho on MaryLou it would show she cared. MaryLou cares, I know, she chooses her undergarments to my liking, but I've let things come too far. I started a family, I want to finish it.

Pass to number eighty-eight Todd Friddle, touchdown, Kaboom, "Go Pirates, go. Hodge, keep your chin up, son!"

My son looks at the ground, I think. I just see his back, his shoulders slump.

"It's all right, Tig! Zan, play my son." This could be a chant, I realize. "Zan, play my son. Zan, play my son. Zan, play my son." The crowd doesn't participate. A man in a green shirt applauds. Our team is winning handily so people ignore me and focus on our good fortune. Half-time passes. The damned trumpet. I click the microphone off. If my wife had a rifle and aim the situation would unfold differently. As is, she seems to be willing me to fall from my perch.

I told my wife about the affair, finally. I sort of thought she knew, but she acted surprised. Like acting surprised about a funeral—I mean, come on, you know he's dead, the funeral part doesn't just sneak up on you. She lost her father, a nervous man who stared, a couple of years ago. We were late to the funeral because Polly, my wife, was cross-stitching in the foyer. I said, "Hello, we've got some place to be. Let's get moving." She wept. She was the only one. My son sobbed a little bit, but nothing big. My daughter drew a picture in her sketchpad. I peeked and noticed she was drawing our family. I had huge brown ears. Then we went home and had tea. My wife didn't want to talk about it, just stitch. She is taller than me by an inch and younger than me by four years. She is thin with thick hair and the reason our daughter is beautiful. Our son, like me, is timid and pudgy. My wife practices some form of karate I can't pronounce and it hurts. I thought maybe she was stitching some funeral shawl because all the yarn was black, but when she was done she just tossed it over the birdcage so our nervous bird Skinny could sleep at night.

"I'm not going to fall," I say, but the microphone is off. I'm thinking about clicking it on and giving her a piece of my mind when the crowd thunders. I turn back to the game. We've scored, Ben Jr. on a reverse. I Aarghh, but forget the microphone is off. I click it on, Aarghh. This comes late, people notice. "Go Pirates go. Go Pirates go. Go Pirates go." They realize my cheer is uneasy. It seems simple, just express commendation when something good happens to our team. The principal wasn't going to let me be the mascot at first. She said someone more jolly should do the job. I wanted to bring the family unit together

through sport so I begged her to let me give it a try anyway. I told her I used to be a male cheerleader for my high school, which is something I don't mention often. Besides, my voice is deep like a pirate. I snap the microphone off and tell myself to do better.

The black cat had come around purring and hungry. My son fed it tuna and talked to it. Pie Doll named it something like Tweeker. They got to know the thing. Then it occurred to her that Tweeker didn't have a single spot on her and was thereby solid black and bad news. She avoided it when it came around. Hodge grew bored of it, distracted by his awkward body, his ghoulish pimples, his tummy rolls. Walking home from the bus stop a couple of days ago PieDoll saw Tweeker sleeping under a tree. She passed the cat on the sidewalk, crossed it so to speak. Tweeker was hit by my neighbor's car yesterday and we found out about it before dinner this evening. I saw Ben cleaning it from his Volvo grill. He was whistling a western tune until I approached him and then he tried to look somber.

"Tweeker?"

"Damned thing just seemed to fall from the sky."

"More likely a tree."

"Yeah. I heard you've been sleeping around."

"Yeah, you?"

Ben chuckled and hit me in the shoulder. "Sure hope we stomp them Tigers. Ben Jr.'s going to be returning kicks, playing wide receiver, covering for Jo-Jo Jr. at free safety—"

"Oh, yeah?" Ben wasn't done.

"I wasn't done."

"My apologies."

"Gonna fill in as tackle, nose-guard, might be back up to Brady at quarterback—"

"Her name is MaryLou, she has a perfect nose."

"I figure he'll put in about twenty-one, maybe twenty-eight points tonight."

"I think I'm falling in love with this woman, finally, which isn't at all what I want and something I can't rationalize, not that I'm the type that needs to rationalize my affair to you, Ben, you killed a cat and probably will screw up my daughter's sense of self."

“Just between you and me, Chuck, I’ve introduced my son to steroids.”

I tried to tell my family about Tweeker before dinner. The pork was already overcooked and they were sitting. My son sobbed a little. My daughter didn’t seem too surprised. Then we tried to name me as Pirate. Des, I guess. Certainly not Moses, I can’t even part my hair neatly.

I think that I’d not take myself if there were an apocalypse. I’d give that space to MaryLou. She and my daughter. They would make a good mother/daughter duo. Polly needs someone to challenge her, God knows I’ve failed in that regard, and my wife has just seemed sad ever since her father died. I’m sure my affair hasn’t helped her out of the funk. I’ve told MaryLou everything about my daughter, they are similar in their confident demeanor. Both of them have a quiet smile that sharpens their eyes. They have identical laughs. I imagine them chuckling lightly over a black-and-white movie nobody understands. Let them be saved, I’ll take my wife and son, embrace them and lift my chin to Kingdom Come.

I catch my wife looking at me. “Ah-ha!” I say, clicking on the microphone. She stares at her knees. “I saw that. There was longing in that look, Polly. Sweetheart.”

A man in a green shirt applauds.

Ben, in the audience, tells me to shut up, his son just made an interception. Actually he says, “Hey, shut up you dumb-ass pirate, my son just picked one off.” This is problematic, me being a dumb-ass pirate. That’s no name.

“My name is Des, Ben, Des the Pirate. Call me that. By the way, you make a lousy father.”

People in the crowd turn to Ben. He’s red. “You make a lousy husband, Des,” he shouts.

The crowd volleys their attention to my perch. I shift weight from foot to foot. I Aarghh, fire the cannon, Kaboom. This surprises them, distracts, shoulders lift. But not Ben, he isn’t done.

“Des the Pirate, that’s desperate. We’ve got a desperate man for our team mascot. That’s fitting, considering fatso up there.”

The crowd erupts in laughter. Ben gives someone a high-five and starts a “Des, Des, Des” chant. The bleachers rock. This



stings, coming from my daughter and all. She had to know what the name meant. It isn't nice to call your father a name he doesn't even know he's being called. It's cruel, I'll have to talk to her about it. I know I've been absent from her life, she does deserve better than me. In an ideal world MaryLou would convince her that I was a decent man. I'd patch things up with the wife. Then MaryLou could bring the respectful PieDoll back to the family. We'd thank MaryLou as she drove away and always think of her fondly. My wife and I could refer to these times as the "Turbulent Years" that made our marriage stronger. The chanting crowd is loud enough to reach the parking lot, where my daughter might hear and feel ashamed.

My son, on the sidelines, has sympathy in his eyes, God love him. My wife picks up her pocketbook and starts on down the stands. She doesn't look at me. The crowd stomps their feet.

"Yeah, sure, I'm desperate, but I'm up here trying, aren't I? I'm supporting the team, I'm not afraid to admit that I've made some mistakes. I love my wife and family, I know that my daughter might be better suited elsewhere, I've found someone I think could better understand things."

Nobody is listening to me, they've gotten into a zone. My wife is having trouble getting out. Somebody starts a wave and it works. People go this way and that way. I'm getting seasick watching. I'm sure it's against protocol, but I turn the cannon around and aim it at Ben. He is less red now. I have no idea how our team is doing. I fire the cannon at him, symbolically, of course, there aren't any balls, Kaboom. He flinches and colors again. Take that, Kaboom. The wave pauses momentarily.

MaryLou appears by the stairs. She's picked a fine time to show up. My wife freezes not far from her. I guess she just knows. Something passes between them. I fire the cannon at Ben again. I mention that he's pathetic, everyone hears. The wave breaks up, the chant turns to just loud mumbling. I hear a child say not to point that thing at him. He has a lot of growing up to do. My wife is moving towards MaryLou. Ben is angrily stepping over people to the boat. The game goes on, we're late in the fourth quarter. People are filing out into the aisles and following Ben down the bleachers. They come two by two.

My wife approaches MaryLou. They are standing close to

one another with folded arms. The fence between the stands and the field falls under the weight of the oncoming crowd. They are rushing my boat. My wife untucks an arm and I wonder if she is going to karate-chop MaryLou. She doesn't. She scratches her nose. They shake hands. I fire up the microphone.

"Polly, Buttercup, it's not her fault. I'm the one to blame, I'm bad. I want us to work this out, regardless. Let's not make this a total waste." I take out my car keys and fling them at MaryLou. They arc over the crowd and land near my wife's feet. Not a bad pass. My son is looking up at me, or maybe gazing past me on up into the blue yonder. I'm proud of him for being a trooper. Ben is on deck, others are not far behind. Our team is still scoring viciously, it's got to be over soon. The trumpeter is tone-deaf.

"Pick up the keys, MaryLou. Take them and go to the parking lot. Look for the cream sedan with the little girl in the backseat. It's near the tennis courts. She's our daughter. Take her away, she'll like you, just be yourself."

The microphone is yanked out of my hands by someone below. It squeals all the way down and when it lands the din is amplified. A group of kids find it and start saying "Fuck, fuck, fuck" happily. They giggle. My wife picks up the keys. MaryLou refolds her arms. Ben is coming up here to kick my ass. There isn't enough room for that. The boat is teetering. I fire the cannon because it seems right to do, Kaboom.

My wife and MaryLou are discussing something. Is MaryLou laughing? "Give her the keys, Polly, there's no time!" Without the microphone, I cannot be heard. I lose sight of them. The patch is impeding my vision.

Ben climbs to the top of the perch and punches me in the mouth. He is bigger than me, this will be easy for him. He cracks me in the chin. The crowd erupts into cheers. I don't know if our team just scored again or if they are glad I'm getting beat up. I do the unexpected. I leap up into Ben's arms. He doesn't want me there. We are unsteady on his feet. He whispers for me to get down, we'll fall like this.

I take my patch off and see that my wife is standing alone. Her arms are folded. She untucks them. I wonder if she is going to give me the finger. She puts her hand to her lips and blows me a kiss.

I reach out for it, that's all I wanted.